



LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIPS FOR
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

VOLUME 2, PART 4

Jointly Prioritizing Time for Social and Emotional Learning in Denver

One of Six Case Studies of Schools and
Out-of-School-Time Program Partners

ANDREA PRADO TUMA, CATHERINE H. AUGUSTINE,
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HOW ONE DENVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND ITS OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PARTNER WORKED TOGETHER TO FIND TIME FOR SEL AND TO PROVIDE CONSISTENT SEL INSTRUCTION DURING AND AFTER SCHOOL

About the SEL Case Studies

The SEL case studies feature partnerships between elementary schools and out-of-school-time (OST) programs in six communities. Each case study spotlights a specific approach to implementing social and emotional learning (SEL). A cross-cutting report briefly summarizes each case and highlights shared themes among them. That report can be found at www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4.

Although there is no consensus definition of SEL, most of the school and OST programs relied on the following widely used definition at the time: SEL is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”¹

The six school–OST program partnerships that we feature belong to 76 total school–OST program partnerships involved in the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). Half of the 76 partnerships started their SEL work in 2017–2018, and the other half could choose to start their work in 2019–2020. PSELI is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their OST programs partner to improve SEL, as well as what it takes to do this work. The six communities that participate in PSELI are Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities and producing a series of reports that share useful lessons with the broader field.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

This case study highlights the work of Cowell Elementary School in Denver and its co-located after-school partner, the Discovery Link program, over four school years (2017–2018 through 2020–2021) to implement social and emotional learning (SEL). The elementary school serves approximately 375 students, most of whom are Hispanic or Latino. Most qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Cowell also hosts a Transitional Native Language Instruction program, which means that about half of Cowell students in grades Pre-K–2 learn English by receiving instruction in their native language and then transitioning toward English proficiency during their later elementary years.

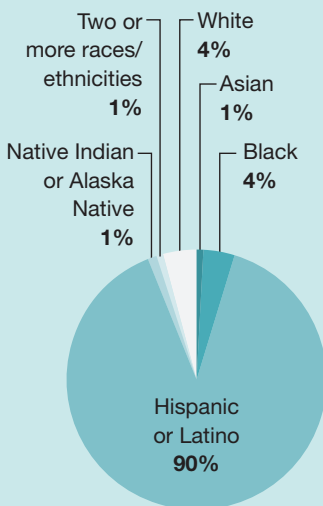
Discovery Link programming takes place on the school’s campus. It provides enrichment activities such as sports, arts and crafts, and homework help to approximately 100 students on any given day and to a total of 250 students throughout the course of the year. The afterschool program at Cowell is one of 40 Discovery Link programs in Denver. Denver Public Schools directly runs the Discovery Link programs; Discovery Link staff are district employees, and afterschool program directors at each site report to the district office.

Cowell Elementary and Discovery Link were one of six school–out-of-school-time (school–OST) program partnerships working on SEL within Denver as part of the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) grant. As such, they received SEL professional development (PD) and coaching support from both the Denver Public Schools and from Denver Afterschool Alliance, the out-of-school-time intermediary (OSTI), in Denver.² For more information about PSELI, see the text box at the beginning of the report and the appendix.

As shown in Figure 1, starting in 2017, the Cowell principal and Discovery Link’s director partnered to jointly prioritize time for SEL by making SEL instruction and

Cowell Demographics as of 2017–2018

Percentage of students by race/ethnicity



58%

Percentage of English language learners



3 years

Median years of experience (teachers)



Cowell Elementary School students sit in a circle with a teacher.

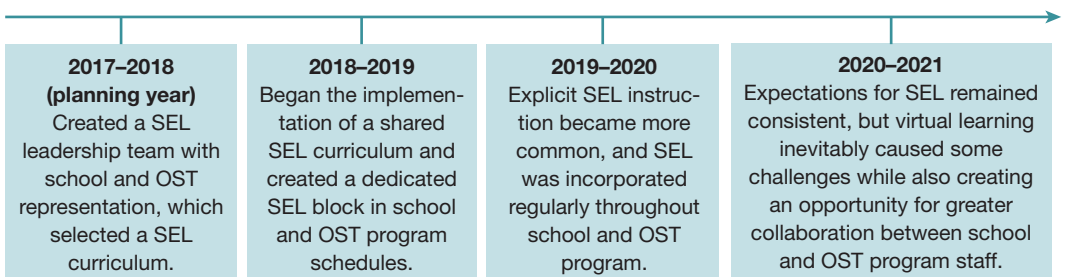
use of SEL rituals a part of their daily routines. The school and Discovery Link coordinated their efforts to achieve this goal by (1) investing in joint planning, collaboration, and PD about SEL to put the school and OST program on equal footing; (2) dedicating time for SEL in each of their respective schedules and in different activities and events; and (3) sharing a SEL curriculum and short SEL rituals to get school and OST program staff on the same page.

In the sections that follow, we describe the trajectory of the partners' work shown in Figure 1. In so doing, we highlight the strategies they applied to enact their vision, lessons learned, and the outcomes of their work. We also note how they adapted their SEL work during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. We conclude by highlighting their successes, the challenges they faced and how they worked to overcome them, and the factors that enabled their successes. The appendix summarizes the data we collected and how we analyzed them for this report.

The composition of the SEL leadership team that led the work:

- The school principal (Two different people held this role over the four-year case study.)
- A teacher who was on full-time special assignment as the SEL lead for the first three years and was then part time in the role in the fourth year
- The director of the Discovery Link program, who worked full time on the school campus
- Other members of the team varied by year, but the team always included teachers and one or two OST instructors.

FIGURE 1
Timeline of Cowell and Discovery Link's SEL Partnership



THE FIRST STEP FOR THE PARTNERSHIP WAS TO PUT THE SCHOOL AND OST PROGRAM ON EQUAL FOOTING

A persistent theme across all six communities working on PSELI has been the unequal power dynamic between schools and OST programs. In short, school staff are paid more, are larger in number, and turn over less frequently than afterschool program staff. At Cowell, the school and OST program started from a positive place of an already amicable relationship but then deepened their ties over the course of their SEL partnership and improved the power dynamic.

Although they had not previously embarked on a shared initiative involving coordinating the content of their work, the school principal and OST program director each felt at the outset of their SEL partnership that they already had a strong working relationship. They knew each other well, because the OST program director had worked at the campus for the prior seven years. They planned to leverage the strength of their relationship to deliver complementary SEL instruction and provide a better and more consistent experience for students throughout the day. During that first planning year of their joint SEL work (2017–2018), the principal and OST program director met regularly to plan for the implementation of SEL in both settings.

“All the [SEL] practices that we have in place throughout the school day, the [OST staff] also have them in the afternoon.”

Liliana Melendez,
principal, Cowell Elementary
School, spring 2021

One of their first actions was to provide the OST program with dedicated space in the building. In the first year of the partnership (2017–2018), the principal provided the OST program director with a large office that allowed her to store OST program materials and hold meetings. Equally important, this move made the OST program director feel valued by the school.

In 2018–2019, the principal also provided Discovery Link with a dedicated classroom. The classroom served as a space for students during the afterschool program, and it served as a shared office for both the Discovery Link director and the school’s SEL lead during the school day. Previously, Discovery Link instructors had mainly used only the cafeteria and gym for its OST activities, breaking students into groups that carried on simultaneous activities in separate areas, which led to high levels of noise. This noise required OST program instructors to yell for the children to hear them. The new classroom space provided a quiet environment, and it lowered the number of students in those spaces. By extension, it also lowered the noise level in the gym and cafeteria.

The OST program classroom was also an important venue for collaboration between school and OST staff. It served as a space for Discovery Link staff to gather and meet with each other before the start of afterschool programming, which led to regular interactions with the school SEL lead, who was often there when OST program staff arrived. Whereas few OST program instructors reported talking to school staff about SEL in their first SEL partnership year, several reported doing so regularly by spring 2020 as a result of sharing this space. As one Discovery Link instructor put it in spring 2020:

We have really great communication with the SEL lead at the school. We share the classroom . . . [so we can talk about] some of the SEL things that they’re doing that are working for the daytime that we might be able to incorporate within afterschool [programming].

Staff from both the school and the afterschool program also began to meet in monthly SEL leadership team meetings held after school, which allowed for staff from both organizations to be on equal footing in terms of decisionmaking about SEL. The principal and the Discovery Link director formed the SEL leadership team during their planning year (2017–2018) to lead sitewide implementation of SEL and school–OST

Lesson Learned

The disparity in power that favors schools over OST programs can be reduced by taking concrete steps to provide OST programs with physical space in the building for student activities and collaboration and to increase two-way communication and opportunities for school and OST staff to collaborate with each other.



Cowell Elementary School students engage in an activity using puppets.

program coordination. The OST program director, school principal, and SEL lead steered this team over the four years of the initiative that we examined in this case study. Together, the team developed shared goals for the initiative and made ongoing implementation decisions. As the OST program director stated in spring 2018, “[By creating this team,] the school really offered me the opportunity to be an equal player.” As an “equal player,” she helped decide, for example, the content of PD about SEL for school and afterschool staff and then led part of it.

The SEL leadership team also included frontline school and afterschool staff, whose participation waxed and waned. Initially, the principal worked to have broad representation of teachers, paraprofessionals, cafeteria staff, and Discovery Link instructors. However, the meetings were held after school, when OST program staff were providing programming, and cafeteria and paraprofessional staff had ended their workdays. Membership therefore mainly consisted of the three leads along with one teacher from each grade level in the school and, occasionally, one to two OST program instructors. The Discovery Link director made consistent efforts to rearrange schedules to allow more-frequent participation by OST program instructors, but this was an ongoing challenge—one that was never fully resolved—because of the small number of afterschool staff.

Over time, OST program staff assumed a greater role in the school community. Starting in school year 2018–2019, the school hired two Discovery Link instructors as school paraprofessionals. Their new role allowed OST program staff to attend daytime school staff meetings, work with teachers, and become more familiar with classroom expectations and routines. In addition to hiring Discovery Link staff, the school also began involving OST program staff in its parent engagement efforts. For example, school and Discovery Link staff worked together to plan and organize family nights and to relay important information from teachers to parents during afterschool pickup. School staff also started involving OST program staff in the planning of sitewide assemblies. For example, OST program staff were able to nominate students for awards at the assemblies.

Finally, the school and OST program scheduled some joint SEL training for both school and OST program staff to attend. At first, the principal began inviting OST program staff to all school PD offerings. However, most OST program staff were unable to attend given the OST program schedule, and some also had second part-time jobs. Accordingly, in spring 2019, only 31 percent of Cowell school staff reported “participating in PD experiences together with my colleagues in my partner OST program.” In response, the school decided to invite OST program staff to its summer learning days, which occur before the start of the year. To pay for staff to attend, Discovery Link used grant funding to start their jobs a few days early. The grant also paid for the OST program director and three of her staff to attend an additional school-based training during the winter. After these changes, by spring 2020, 70 percent of school staff indicated participating in PD with OST program colleagues.

DEDICATED TIME LED TO MORE SEL

One way in which school and OST staff made SEL a part of their regular programming was by dedicating time for SEL within their schedules. The OST program added a 15-to-30-minute SEL block in its schedule two to three times per week in the 2018–2019 school year. In that same year, the school scheduled a 15-minute block each day for morning meetings in which the classroom

teacher was to offer SEL instruction to students while they ate breakfast. Teachers reported coordination challenges and insufficient time for delivering full SEL lessons during morning meetings given the need to allow students enough time to pick up their food, eat, and clear their tables. In response to this teacher feedback, the principal extended morning meetings to a full 30 minutes in the school's 2019–2020 master schedule to make sure that teachers had time for both breakfast and SEL instruction.

The principal, OST program director, and SEL lead believed that having a dedicated SEL block made clear to teachers and OST program instructors that they should be making time for SEL. Our own observations suggest that teachers and OST program instructors did indeed make more time for explicit SEL instruction in the 2019–2020 school year than in the previous years (see Figure 2).

“SEL is incorporated every day into every classroom. Be that team-building time or specific SEL blocks of time, we’ve really tried to incorporate it every place that we can put it in.”

Sara Ulricksen,
program director, Discovery
Link, spring 2021

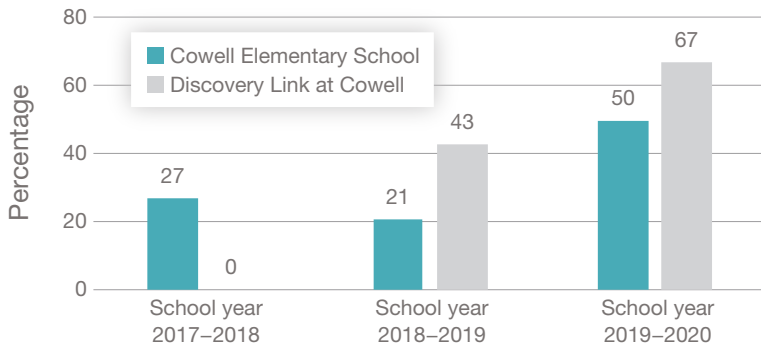
On top of scheduled time for stand-alone SEL lessons, teachers and afterschool instructors also dedicated time throughout the day to use mutually reinforcing short SEL rituals. When students arrived at school or at the OST program, they often participated in a warm welcome ritual and a student sharing circle. Teachers and afterschool instructors also implemented additional SEL rituals, such as calming transitions (in which the instructor would preview what was coming up as they changed activities), brain breaks (for example, playing Simon Says between lessons), and optimistic closures (during which students reflected on what they had just learned or planned for next steps).

Overall, two-thirds of the OST program activities and over three-fourths of the school classes we observed in 2019–2020 included at least one of these SEL rituals. Staff also began to use warm welcomes to open staff meetings.

By 2019–2020, the work of the school and OST program staff had come together to create consistent SEL throughout the day. For example, during a daylong observation at Cowell, we saw fifth-grade students lined up outside their classroom as the bell rang for

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Observed Instructional Sessions with Explicit SEL Instruction



school to start, and their teacher greeted each by name and with an elaborate handshake that made some students laugh. After finishing their breakfast, one teacher asked her students to gather in a circle and share how they were doing and what they did over the weekend. Throughout the day, all staff wore lanyards that displayed four steps that staff and students could use to calm down when upset, starting with naming one’s feelings. After the school dismissal bell rang at 2:30 p.m., some students filed into the school’s cafeteria, where afterschool staff warmly greeted them by name and asked them how their day was.

School and OST staff also dedicated time to SEL during sitewide events. For example, at school assemblies, teachers and OST program instructors recognized students who had demonstrated SEL competencies such as social awareness or responsible decisionmaking. Students were also encouraged to nominate staff for similar recognition at assemblies. In addition, school staff collaborated with OST program staff to plan family nights that included SEL-related activities. For example, at one such event, students were asked to showcase some of the practices they had learned related to self-regulation and emotion management.

Lesson Learned

SEL can become a part of normal day-to-day routines by making time for it in class schedules, meetings, assemblies, and family nights.

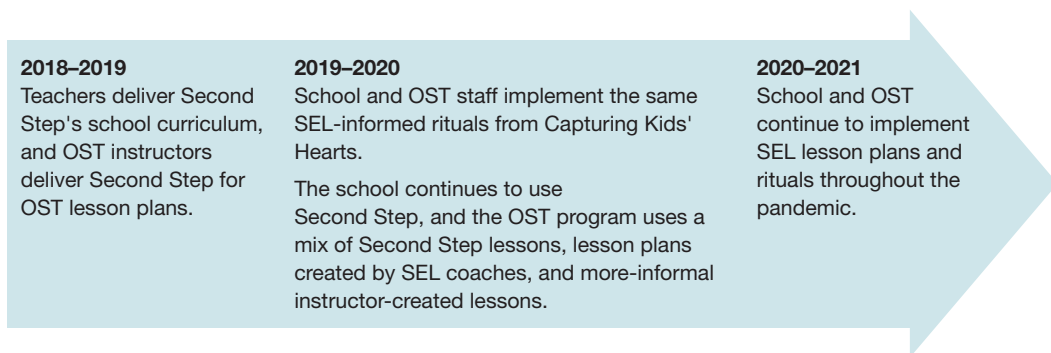
USE OF THE SAME SEL CURRICULUM AND RITUALS MADE IT EASIER FOR STAFF TO INCORPORATE SEL, ALTHOUGH CONSISTENT IMPLEMENTATION PRESENTED CHALLENGES

Starting in their first SEL partnership year in 2017–2018, Cowell and Discovery Link worked together in their SEL team meetings to select a curriculum that would allow both school and OST program staff to implement the same curriculum. Figure 3 shows the chronology of the school and OST program’s collaboration to select and refine mutually reinforcing SEL lessons and rituals over three years.

The team selected Second Step’s school curriculum, partially because the Second Step developers were in the process of creating SEL lesson plans for OST programs based on their school curriculum. Discovery Link and the other five Denver afterschool programs in the Denver PSELI initiative piloted these OST-oriented SEL lessons. The principal also noted the availability of Spanish materials as a key advantage of the school’s curriculum. Second Step focuses on directly teaching students skills to strengthen their ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems.

Throughout the hallways, in the cafeteria, and in classrooms (including the OST program classroom), there were posters in both English and Spanish that referenced ideas or words from the Second Step curriculum, such as empathy or perseverance. In our three days of observations during school year 2019–2020, there was evidence of the SEL curriculum, such as posters, cards, and worksheets, in 93 percent of the classrooms that we observed. In addition, most classrooms included a “calm corner,” where students could use their calm-down strategies or take a brain break when they needed it. These spaces were usually located away from the front of the classes and had a small couch or

FIGURE 3
Implementation of SEL Curriculum and Rituals over Time



comfortable chair for students to sit on, toys or books, and materials related to SEL, such as a poster with calm-down strategies.

In addition to delivering Second Step lessons, starting in 2019–2020, both school and OST program staff began to implement the same SEL-informed rituals from a program called Capturing Kids’ Hearts (CKH). CKH focuses on strengthening positive relationships, fostering prosocial behaviors, and improving behavior management. CKH rituals include sharing activities to connect and engage, such as asking students sitting in a circle to talk about their weekend; social contracts created by staff and students that outline classroom expectations, such as being respectful toward others; and activities akin to optimistic closures, which ask students to reflect on their learning.

The principal and OST program director decided to make the implementation of Second Step and CKH rituals one of their partnership’s common goals, which would provide staff with a concrete way to address SEL and use shared terminology such as “warm welcome,” “social contract,” “empathy,” and “perseverance” in like ways. In interviews, the SEL lead, teachers, and OST program instructors reported that Second Step and CKH facilitated coordination on SEL between school and OST program staff and helped them provide more-consistent SEL instruction.

Lesson Learned

Using the same SEL curriculum and rituals helped the school and OST create common goals and shared terminology, reinforce each other’s SEL lessons, and incorporate SEL into daily routines.

The shared Second Step materials and CKH rituals also made it easier for school and OST program staff to incorporate SEL into their routines. For example, both school and OST program staff knew the Second Step calm-down strategies, so these became part of an approach to addressing conflicts between students that was consistent in both the school and afterschool parts of the day. Similarly, shared understanding of CKH made it easier to work together to plan meetings, family events, and student assemblies that incorporated SEL-informed rituals. As one school leader explained in spring 2020:

[We worked with OST program staff to incorporate] strategies from CKH [during our family nights], like affirmation tables where parents were encouraged to write affirmations [positive and encouraging messages] to their children, and their children would write to them.

To facilitate coordinated Second Step implementation across the school and OST parts of the day, the SEL lead created a pacing guide for school staff. A pacing guide is a document intended to support consistency in SEL instruction by outlining the sequence of SEL topics, typically by unit and weekly focus. While Second Step's school curriculum includes guidance on unit and lesson sequencing, the SEL lead developed a Cowell-specific pacing guide that sequenced and added SEL topics based on teacher feedback about students' needs. For example, the pacing guide incorporated an additional unit on bullying prevention because teachers felt that this was an important issue to address at the beginning of the school year. The pacing guide also helped OST program staff plan for the delivery of their own Second Step lessons so that teachers and OST instructors would cover the same topics in the same time frame. As the OST program director explained, "one of the greatest pros about using Second Step was that we could really easily connect our work to the school's work."

The implementation of Second Step was not without challenges, however. During the first year of curriculum implementation (2018–2019), teachers we interviewed reported that there was some lack of buy-in for the curriculum and that some teachers were not using it. Teachers' reasons for lack of buy-in included not enough time in the day to deliver SEL lessons, having competing priorities (such as making sure that students were prepared for standardized testing), and feeling like some of the Second Step materials were not meeting all their students' needs. For example, one teacher



Two students show the drawings they made during an afterschool activity at the Discovery Link program at Cowell.

believed that some of the songs were too fast for English learners, and another said that some of the activities in the lesson plans were not engaging for older students.

The principal and SEL lead worked to build teacher buy-in for the SEL curriculum by making time for SEL lesson delivery in the schedule during longer morning meetings (as described earlier), providing professional development, and helping teachers adapt curriculum materials to better fit student needs. Although our observation data show that there was an increase in the amount of time spent on explicit SEL instruction overall (as shown in Figure 2), the percentage of teachers who reported using written SEL lesson plans on our survey stayed flat at 50 percent in both 2018–2019 and 2019–2020. This suggests that while teachers delivered more explicit SEL instruction over time, about half were not using written SEL lesson plans to provide that instruction. In 2021, the new principal and SEL lead indicated wanting to continue to work on improving teacher buy-in for the SEL curriculum.

The OST program staff, meanwhile, were unaccustomed to using scripted, formal lesson plans like the ones being piloted by Second



A Discovery Link instructor works with a student.

Step. When they started using the pilot Second Step OST program lesson plans in 2018–2019, instructors struggled to find a balance between following a lesson’s script and adapting the material so that delivery felt authentic to them and engaging for students. Because the lessons were still under development, the OST program instructors did not always receive the materials early enough to prepare their lessons. Furthermore, the OST lesson plans were not available in Spanish, which was a challenge given the number of younger students at Cowell who were just beginning to learn English.

Given these challenges, the SEL coaches at the Denver Afterschool Alliance developed their own written SEL lesson plans for OST programs to use in 2019–2020. During that year, the OST program instructors at Cowell implemented a combination of coach-developed written lesson plans, Second Step lesson plans, and informal instructor-created lessons. Our observations captured this change, as we saw less use of formal, written SEL lesson plans (i.e., Second Step or coach-developed lesson plans). Meanwhile, we also saw an increase in the OST program sessions that included explicit SEL instruction from about 43 percent in 2018–2019 to 67 percent in 2019–2020 (see Figure 2). However, given the shift to more informal, instructor-driven instruction, it is plausible that what was happening in the OST program was not as synchronized with the school as had been the original plan. School and OST staff also mentioned that once the SEL lead role became part time during the fourth year of the initiative, it was harder to find time for coordination on SEL lesson delivery.

ADAPTING TO COVID-19

In mid-March 2020, Denver Public Schools and OST provider organizations closed schools and OST programs due to COVID-19. The district transitioned to remote learning in April 2020, and OST programming shifted to an online platform as well for the remainder of the school year. In 2020–2021, the district

launched the school year with a combination of online learning and in-person options. However, the district prohibited in-person instruction for some periods of the school year. During those times, Discovery Link staff operated an in-person learning center for students who could not stay at home. When school was open for in-person instruction, Discovery Link provided normal OST programming for a smaller number of students than usual given social distancing guidelines.

Despite uncertainties and challenges, the school and OST program worked to adapt their routines so that they could continue to prioritize time for SEL. During both remote and in-person instruction, teachers were expected to conduct morning meetings that included SEL strategies or content. The principal also organized “check-ins,” which often included SEL rituals such as warm welcomes, with smaller groups of students who were struggling with distance learning. The principal and SEL lead reported that teachers were already used to implementing SEL rituals routinely, which made it easier for them to learn how to incorporate SEL into their remote instruction. The OST program continued to use CKH rituals, such as creating a social contract, with the students who were attending the in-person learning center and created opportunities for students to talk about their experiences and feelings.

Nevertheless, teachers encountered several challenges when trying to adapt SEL lessons and instruction to a virtual format. Many Second Step activities involve conversations within small groups of students. When conducting class virtually, it was a challenge to create opportunities for small groups to have conversations. Another challenge was inconsistent attendance. One teacher reported that, while it was somewhat easy to do warm welcomes in the morning, attendance dwindled toward the end of the day, so optimistic closures were not happening regularly with the whole class. When in-person instruction was allowed, teachers and OST program instructors continued to deliver SEL lesson plans and use SEL rituals. However, both reported new challenges. For example, they were no longer able to shake hands or hug students during their welcoming rituals. Relatedly, social distancing guidelines made it challenging to conduct sharing circles.

Because of the in-person learning center that Discovery Link ran during virtual learning, teachers relied on OST program staff in a way they had not before. In interviews, teachers indicated having

new appreciation for the work of their OST program colleagues. As one teacher explained:

I definitely talk with [OST program staff] often, and especially during virtual learning this year, they were super awesome and were able to have kids in the building with them while we were teaching virtually . . . they're able to communicate with us, and help solve problems, and get kids the help that they need.

The OST program director and her staff also indicated noticing a change in how school staff viewed their role:

[The in-person learning center that we were running] gave [school staff] an opportunity to connect with my staff in a way that they hadn't before, and they were like, "Wow, you guys are doing so much." . . . The level of respect and communication [between school and OST program staff] strengthened.

CONCLUSION

This case study is an example of how one school and its OST partner coordinated their work to address SEL, jointly prioritized time for SEL, and worked toward providing consistent SEL instruction. They accomplished this by creating opportunities



Cowell Elementary School students collaborate on a class activity.

for collaboration between school and OST staff, dedicating time for SEL in each of their respective schedules and in meetings and events, and sharing a SEL curriculum and rituals. It is one of several systematic approaches to enacting SEL for elementary age students. To see other approaches to enacting SEL for elementary age students, view the case studies summary report, *Strengthening Students' Social and Emotional Skills: Lessons from Six Case Studies of Schools and Out-of-School-Time Program Partners* (www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4), in which we describe activities such as developing an effective SEL committee, focusing on adult SEL first, and incorporating equity into SEL, among others.

There are notable **successes** in this case study:

- Explicit SEL instruction became increasingly more frequent over three years, and a large majority of school and OST instructors used the intended SEL rituals.
 - The school and OST program identified protected time for SEL instruction in each of their schedules. By explicitly including SEL in their schedules, it became clear that teachers were expected to deliver SEL instruction daily, and OST program instructors were expected to do so two or three times per week. These clear expectations likely contributed to the frequent SEL instruction that we observed in both school and OST settings.
 - Both the school and OST program incorporated SEL content in sitewide routines, such as recognizing students for demonstrating SEL competencies during monthly events. These routines made it easier for both school and OST staff to make references to SEL topics and use shared SEL rituals on a daily basis.
- The school and OST program created a strong partnership that included staff from both organizations in decisionmaking about the implementation of SEL.
 - Stable leadership helped start the partnership off on the right foot. Throughout the first three years of the initiative, the SEL leadership team was headed by the same individuals: principal, OST program director, and SEL lead. Their joint work provided continuity for the initiative. In addition, the OST program director had a

long tenure working at the school, which facilitated her relationship-building with school staff and leadership.

- Cowell and Discovery Link found concrete ways to foster collaboration between frontline school and after-school staff. These included (1) paying school and OST program staff to attend joint SEL training on several occasions; (2) hiring several OST program staff members as paraprofessionals to work during the school day; (3) involving OST program staff in school-based activities, such as parent nights, PD for staff, and student assemblies; and (4) co-locating the school-based SEL lead and the OST program director in a classroom dedicated for the OST program's use.
- School and OST program staff developed common goals and shared terminology about SEL.
 - By establishing a SEL leadership team in the first year of their partnership, school and OST staff worked together from the beginning to create common goals and find ways to provide consistent SEL instruction throughout the day by, for example, using shared terminology and short SEL rituals.

Cowell and Discovery Link also experienced some **challenges** that the partnership worked to overcome:

- At first, teachers struggled to make time for explicit SEL instruction. After listening to their feedback, the principal rearranged schedules to create an SEL block that allowed sufficient time for SEL lesson delivery.
- Teacher buy-in for the delivery of SEL lessons using the school's selected curriculum was an ongoing challenge at the school that was never fully resolved. The school tried to address this challenge by helping teachers adapt SEL lessons to better fit student needs and providing professional development.
- OST staff were new to using formal SEL lesson plans and struggled to find a balance between following a lesson's script and adapting the material so that delivery felt authentic to them and engaging for students. To address this challenge, SEL coaches from the OSTI created their own SEL materials that better fit the needs of Denver OST programs and were easier to use for staff.

Despite some of the challenges faced during the pandemic, Cowell and Discovery Link’s expectations for SEL remained consistent, and they continued to work to prioritize time for SEL instruction during virtual learning. The pandemic also created an opportunity for greater collaboration between school and OST program staff as they worked together to support students attending Discovery Link’s in-person learning center during school district closures. Both school and OST program staff agreed that this opportunity had led to greater appreciation for OST program staff.

Key Takeaways to Ensure Sufficient Time for SEL Instruction and to Deliver Consistent SEL Instruction in Both School and Afterschool Settings

- Explicitly including SEL lessons in school and OST program schedules resulted in more frequent SEL instruction.
- Gathering and listening to teacher feedback led to scheduling an SEL block that worked for teachers.
- Incorporating the use of short SEL rituals into daily routines (e.g., starting class with a warm welcome) and in events (such as celebrating the use of SEL competencies at a sitewide assembly) increased the delivery of SEL instruction throughout the day.
- Jointly creating goals and defining terminology facilitated consistent SEL instruction during both the school and afterschool day.
- Co-locating the school based SEL lead and the OST program director in a classroom improved logistics and coordination on SEL.
- Paying school and OST program staff to attend joint SEL training improved consistency of SEL approaches.

APPENDIX

Background on Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning

Recognizing the importance of SEL and the potential contributions of both schools and OST programs to youth social and emotional development, The Wallace Foundation launched PSELI. Through PSELI, The Wallace Foundation seeks to explore whether and how children will benefit if adults in schools and OST programs collaborate to improve climate³ and to foster SEL that is mutually reinforced during and outside the school day, as well as what it takes to do this work.

Starting in summer 2017, The Wallace Foundation awarded annual implementation grants to each of the following six communities: Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. These grants were awarded jointly to school districts and OSTIs in each community. These districts and OSTIs then allocated some of these funds to a cohort of schools and OST programs—ranging from five to seven partnerships in each community—to collaborate to improve climate and to foster SEL that is mutually reinforced during and outside the school day.

Altogether, 38 school–OST program partnerships worked to implement SEL programming throughout the school and after-school day during the first four years of PSELI. Another 38 demographically similar school–OST program partnerships from the same six communities continued business as usual and could elect to implement any new SEL of their choosing in the fourth year of PSELI and beyond.

Although each PSELI community designed and implemented its own approach, all 38 school–OST program partnerships in the first four years of PSELI were supposed to focus on the following four approaches to providing SEL for students:

1. Set a positive climate.
2. Offer explicit SEL instruction to students during the school day; SEL instruction during OST programs was optional.
3. Integrate SEL into academic instruction and OST activities.

4. Pursue school-OST partnerships that mutually reinforce SEL practices across the school and OST program day.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities. These case studies are part of a series of reports RAND will publish about PSELI. The first report of the series, titled *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* (www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1), provides more detail on the PSELI initiative.

Our Methods for This Case Study

For each of the six case studies in this series, we use with permission the actual names of schools, OST programs, and, in some of the cases, individuals. The case studies are part of a larger mixed-methods study of PSELI over four years in six cities. To select the cases, we first identified sites with unique, high-quality approaches to their SEL work based on interview and observation data from fall 2017 through spring 2019. We then proposed these as candidates for case studies to the district and OSTI leads of PSELI, sometimes changing the site in response to the district and OSTI leads' suggestions. In fall 2019, we finalized the six case study sites, each highlighting a particular aspect of the initiative (e.g., explicit SEL instruction, strong school-OST partnership). We then expanded our data collection activities at each of these sites to get a more in-depth understanding of their approaches to SEL implementation.

Note that all six cases are in large urban districts that primarily serve students from historically disadvantaged populations. As such, the lessons we glean from the six case studies may not generalize to all elementary schools. Table A.1 documents the types of data we collected for the PSELI study at large and at Cowell Elementary and Discovery Link specifically. Although we did survey Discovery Link instructors each year, because the number of respondents was less than ten, we are unable to report on survey data from only Discovery Link respondents. Details about the survey instruments, observation protocol, interview protocols, and how we analyzed the data we collected are found in the technical appendix of our report here: *Early Lessons from Schools and*

Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1).

TABLE A.1

Data We Drew on for the Case Study at Cowell and Discovery Link

Data Category	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Winter 2020	Spring 2020	Spring 2021
Observations of instructional time	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
Extra observations related to case study topic (e.g., staff meetings, additional classes)				✓		✓	✓
Staff survey (Cowell school staff response rate)	✓ (65%)	✓ (76%)	✓ (84%)			✓ (82%)	✓ (40%)
Interviews of principal and OST program director	✓	✓	✓	✓+		✓+	✓+
Interviews of teachers and OST program instructors	✓	✓	✓	✓+		✓+	✓+
Interviews of additional SEL roles (e.g., coaches, SEL leads)			✓	✓		✓	✓
Interviews of non-instructional staff (e.g., cafeteria worker, secretary)				✓		P	✗
Documents related to SEL			✓			✓	✓

NOTES: The OST survey response rates are shown in parentheses. Blank cells mean that the data category was not part of the planned collection at that given time point.

— = not allowed to collect due to COVID-19 restrictions.

P = partial data collection. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we were unable to complete some of these interviews.

✗ = dropped to reduce burden on sites during COVID-19.

✓+ = extended data collection focused on case study topic.

ABBREVIATIONS

CASEL	Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning
CKH	Capturing Kids' Hearts
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
OST	out-of-school-time
OSTI	out-of-school-time intermediary
PD	professional development
PSELI	Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative
SEL	social and emotional learning

ENDNOTES

¹ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “What Is SEL?” webpage, undated. As of February 23, 2020: <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>. CASEL has since updated this definition as of October 2020 to emphasize how SEL can advance educational equity and excellence. Our report uses the earlier CASEL definition, because it was the foundational one which most PSELI communities used at the time of the case study work. Equity is a growing focus for many PSELI communities, but this is in the early stages for most, and equity was not a foundational definition of SEL at the outset of PSELI.

² OSTIs can take a variety of forms, including a single nonprofit organization or a network of agencies that work together. They carry out such functions as allocating funding, setting standards, monitoring programming quality, and communicating with the public. Some of them directly fund OST programming, but many do not and instead serve a coordinating and organizing function for a community’s OST programs.

³ In this context, *climate* refers to the features of a school or OST environment that youth and adults experience. *School climate* can include aspects of the physical space, culture, norms, goals, values, and practices. See David Osher and Juliette Berg, *School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches*, State College, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, January 2018; Amrit Thapa, Jonathan Cohen, Shawn Guffey, and Ann Higgins-D’Alessandro, “A Review of School Climate Research,” *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2013, pp. 357–385.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

RAND Education and Labor

This case study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking.

This research was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices to improve learning and enrichment opportunities for children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit its Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this case study should be directed to Andrea Prado Tuma at apradotu@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

The Wallace Foundation’s Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their out-of-school-time programs partner to improve social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as what it takes to do this work.

According to the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning, SEL is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” This case study explores how Denver’s Cowell Elementary School and its out-of-school-time (OST) partner, Discovery Link, worked together to find time for SEL and to provide consistent SEL instruction during and after school.

Explicit SEL instruction became increasingly more frequent over three years, and a large majority of school and OST instructors used the intended SEL rituals. The school and OST program identified protected time for SEL instruction in each of their schedules. The school and OST program created a strong partnership that included staff from both organizations in decisionmaking about the implementation of SEL. School and OST program staff developed common goals and shared terminology about SEL.

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