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Linking Schools and Afterschool
Through Social and Emotional Learning

Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field

American Institutes for Research (AIR) is pleased to release the third brief in our series *Beyond the Bell: Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field*. Practitioners do amazing work to help young people grow and learn every day. Researchers study this work and learn about how it helps youth, families, and communities. These briefs are designed to connect the dots so that we can learn from one another.

How can we better support young people as they develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in school, work, and life? That is the question facing in-school educators, afterschool providers, families, policymakers, and the general public. Increasingly, there is a recognition that all of the settings in which young people learn and spend time need to work together to create aligned pathways for youth success. Schools, community organizations, cities, and families around the country already have formed afterschool systems that provide young people with access to arts, sports, and academic enrichment to complement their in-school learning. Likewise, afterschool programs and schools are teaming up to develop engaging, hands-on summer programs to stem summer learning loss. All across the country, partnerships are forming with the understanding that we can accomplish more together than alone. One area in which there is room for an increased level of partnership, and potentially a leadership role for afterschool, is social and emotional learning (SEL).

In this third brief in our series *Beyond the Bell: Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field*, we share the policy context reflecting a growing interest in SEL, talk about how afterschool and in-school educators differ in how they implement SEL practices, and, finally, offer suggestions for how afterschool and in-school educators can work together to support the social and emotional development of young people.

Policy Context for SEL

In the first and second briefs in this series, we have highlighted research that has shown again and again that social and emotional competencies and skills are important contributors to youth success.[1] That research has led to a variety of policy developments during the past several years, for both in-school and afterschool settings. Specifically, policy changes for the education sector (or schools, districts, and state education agencies) include:

- The recently (signed into law December 10, 2015) reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), now renamed as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires states to spend 20 percent of their funding on "well-rounded" educational opportunities

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and 20 percent on activities to support safe and healthy students. The new legislation also supports school and community partnerships; continued funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program; and increased support for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and family engagement.[2]

- Two federal acts that support SEL as a core component of schooling were introduced in early 2015: (1) The Supporting Social and Emotional Learning Act calls for greater research on the impact of SEL and greater training and professional development for teachers on how to implement SEL practices, and (2) The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act defines SEL and calls for greater training and professional development for educators.[3]

- States have adopted SEL standards as an important component of education. Four states (Illinois, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia) have developed comprehensive K–12 SEL standards, and another seven (Idaho, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Tennessee, Vermont, and Washington) have developed some type of SEL standards at some grade levels (e.g., for kindergarten or up to Grade 3).[4]

- The California Office to Reform Education (CORE) launched an SEL pilot in February 2014 designed to determine how best to measure key SEL competencies in students as part of an ongoing effort to improve quality, engage families, and provide additional social and emotional support services across the district.

At the same time, afterschool researchers, funders, and practitioners also have demonstrated a growing interest in the importance of supporting social and emotional development in programs that take place outside of school. For example:

- Every Hour Counts released a measurement framework for afterschool systems, developed in partnership with American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the Forum for Youth Investment in 2014, that included key social and emotional competencies. Then, in early 2015, Every Hour Counts launched a study to look at the implementation of the framework in several of their partner cities. The study has a particular focus on examining how sites can better measure and use data on these social and emotional indicators.

- Expanded Learning 360°/365 in California is a project bringing together afterschool intermediary organizations across the state to partner with researchers, policymakers, and schools to promote training on and implementation of SEL programs and practices in multiple settings.

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- In January 2014, the Susan Crown Exchange launched the SEL Challenge to "explore how youth are best supported in cultivating grit, resilience, agency, and empathy skills in informal learning environments."[5]

- The Wallace Foundation commissioned a report by The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium), titled *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*, released in June 2015, that focuses on the nonacademic skills that young people need to succeed in school and life.[6]

- The Raikes Foundation in Washington State is working to develop a toolkit of resources for educators to help youth develop learning mind-sets and strategies. As part of that work, they funded the Youth Development Executives of King County and the Road Map Project to develop the Student Engagement and Motivation Survey (SEMS) designed to measure how students' skills and dispositions relate to their school attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes.[7]

How Is SEL Implemented in School and Afterschool Settings?

Now that we see how both in-school and afterschool policies and funding are honoring the importance of supporting social and emotional development, let's look at how that manifests itself. How do in-school and afterschool programs support social and emotional development? Of course, the answer is that it varies. Both use a variety of approaches to teaching and supporting social and emotional development. Schools may be more likely to use specific evidence-based SEL programs than afterschool programs, largely because these programs have been designed for and marketed to school settings.

In contrast, afterschool programs typically promote SEL through practices and approaches but not explicit evidence-based curriculum. One exploratory study of afterschool providers found that practitioners were most likely to report creating a climate that supports the development of social and emotional skills, while a much smaller number reported using an evidence-based curriculum or activities to teach social and emotional skills.[8] Much of afterschool's approach to SEL comes from its foundation as a field in positive youth development (PYD), a strengths-based approach that acknowledges young people's contribution to their own development and success.[9] As long ago as 2002, long before afterschool programs were talking about SEL, the National Research Council identified core features of programs that support youth development. Based on rigorously evaluated community-based programs, all of the core features or practices they identify align with SEL frameworks being discussed today.

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So, the question remains, which approaches are best? The jury is still out. Some evidence suggests that using an evidence-based stand-alone curriculum with specific SEL lessons is one effective way to develop SEL skills.[10] Other researchers are starting to call for a continuum of approaches to implementing SEL that includes both curriculum and easier to implement strategies and structures with the understanding that some schools and programs may not be able or willing to implement more comprehensive approaches.[11] Afterschool programs likely are best served by using blended practices that honor our roots by focusing on practices and strategies that support social and emotional skill building while recognizing and aligning with the curriculum schools are using.

How Can Schools and Afterschool Programs Work Together to Promote SEL?

Research conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota Extension in 2014 examined the perspectives of both afterschool and education leaders toward SEL. In responses to a survey, approximately 1,400 afterschool and school leaders from across Minnesota revealed that although they generally agreed that social and emotional skills can be taught and are an important part of a young person's success (although as we discussed earlier, their approaches to teaching differ), they differed dramatically in how central they see SEL to their school or program's mission. Afterschool leaders were much more likely than education leaders to say that teaching SEL was central to their mission.[12]

Taken together, these study results, combined with afterschool's inherent flexibility, policy changes outlined earlier in this brief, and a recognition among researchers that for SEL to take hold it must include approaches that go beyond evidence-based curricula, suggest that afterschool may be the ideal place to fulfill the SEL promise in collaboration with schools. However, we still do not have all of the information we need as a field to propel this work forward. Therefore, in order for this to happen, we recommend the following concrete steps that researchers and practitioners can take to support implementation of SEL across multiple settings.

Recommendations for Afterschool Practitioners

Although schools are increasingly recognizing the importance of social and emotional competencies as key to accomplishing their academic goals, the study findings described earlier highlight the fact that not all in-school educators are ready to make SEL a central part of their mission. In contrast,

the majority of afterschool programs do see it as central and already have a lot of the skills and capacity needed to support SEL. Now is the time to take a leadership role and collaborate with schools to create a shared vision for SEL in school and afterschool. Afterschool programs should:

Consider the Policy Context

- *Support ESSA.* As we noted earlier, ESSA has several components that relate to SEL, and schools will be scrambling for the next few years to figure out how to address the new components of the act. Afterschool programs can use this opportunity to connect more deeply with schools by offering to run activities or programs that fall into the categories of "well-rounded" educational activities or those that support "safe and healthy students." According to ESSA, these types of activities might include:[13]

  - "Arts and music programs to support student success through promotion of problem solving and conflict resolution"
  - "Programs or activities that help prevent bullying and harassment"
  - "Programs or activities that improve instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills"

Create Conditions for SEL

- *Learn how program quality and school climate contribute to SEL.* Another key point to learn is that schools and programs can promote the development of social and emotional skills through a positive climate and high-quality practices. There are a variety of excellent quality assessment tools that help outline practices that contribute to quality improvement. Staff can also reflect on their own SEL practices using the self-reflection tool that accompanied our first brief in this series.

- *Partner with a local school.* Talk to the teachers and administrators at your partnering school. Find out their goals for supporting social and emotional development and what approaches they are taking. Offer ways you can support these goals or supplement their approaches. For example, if they are using a curricula with stand-alone lessons, find out if that developer has an afterschool version or if there are ways your program can support what is being taught in schools.

- *Provide support for professional development in SEL practices.* Both school-day and afterschool staff are interested in training and support for how to implement SEL in their programs and classrooms. One study found that although afterschool leaders agreed that professional development was an important step that afterschool could take to improve SEL instruction, very few of these practitioners reported having the resources and capacity to train their afterschool staff on

SEL practices.[14] Capacity building on how to implement SEL is needed, but programs need the funding and expert trainers to make it happen.

Define Your Approaches and Practices

- *Understand different approaches to SEL.* It is important that afterschool program providers understand the various approaches to SEL outlined in this brief, from stand-alone lessons focused on explicit skill building to practices that facilitate a more positive school and program environment.

- *Be clear about how you are supporting social and emotional development.* Although you may feel that you have been implementing SEL practices in your program activities for years, now is the time to be concrete. Try to identify how your SEL strategies fit into an overall SEL framework (e.g., CASEL's five SEL core competencies; UChicago Consortium's Foundations for Young Adult Success), and share these with school partners. The clearer you are about how your program is implementing SEL, the better you will be able to align and work together.

- *Suggest approaches for working with a school partner.* Discuss ways you can partner or complement each other's efforts through joint professional development, collaborative events and activities, and/or afterschool program activities (e.g., a mentoring program) that can support the school's goals. If you are using a specific SEL curriculum (e.g., Second Step), be sure to identify it and share it with school or program leadership and funders.

Recommendations for Researchers

To determine how best to implement SEL strategies and collaborate, afterschool programs and schools will need additional information from the research community. Researchers should consider further study of the following key questions:

- How do afterschool programs access and implement evidence-based practices and/or SEL frameworks? We know from previous research what kinds of practices staff can take to support SEL in afterschool programs,[15] but we do not know the extent to which staff are implementing these practices and how they relate to the various SEL frameworks developed by researchers. What are the barriers to understanding and using evidence?

- How does SEL occur across settings? What are the connecting and confounding factors that influence the process of skill development as youth move from one learning setting to another?

- What are the best approaches to social and emotional skill development? Which staff practices are the most important? Are evidence-based programs, environmental practices, leadership supports and professional development, or a combination of all of these the best way to promote SEL?

- How has the passage of ESSA influenced the relationship between schools and afterschool programs? What implementation factors have contributed to greater partnerships concerning supporting SEL?

Acknowledgments

Notes

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[5] Information on the SEL Challenge on the Susan Crown Exchange website. Retrieved from http://www.scefdn.org/what-we-do/social-emotional-learning/#sel-challenge

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About Beyond the Bell

Today's afterschool and expanded learning programs provide enriching activities that support academic, social, emotional, artistic, and physical growth. Research shows that these programs work best when they are high quality and evidence based. *Beyond the Bell: A Toolkit for Creating Effective Afterschool and Expanded Learning Programs* (4th Edition) takes the guesswork out of designing, implementing, and evaluating your program by translating the latest research into accessible information and tools. Whether you are a program leader or staff member, whether you are new to the field of afterschool and expanded learning or a seasoned veteran, whether you want to fine-tune a successful program or design a new one from the ground up—*Beyond the Bell* can help you provide enriching programming that supports youth development.