



## COACHING BUILDS TEACHERS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

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**A**s research on the benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL) continues to grow, schools across the country are using formal SEL curricula to boost students' skills. Such curricula have benefits for students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, and the effects can last for up to three years post-intervention (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2018; Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, &

Gravesteyn, 2012).

Yet, as with any type of instructional intervention, SEL materials and lessons are only part of the equation. Fully realizing robust SEL implementation and optimizing students' social and emotional development require that school leaders support teachers to understand, model, and implement high-quality SEL practices in an ongoing way.

Unfortunately, however, professional learning related to both children's and teachers' SEL skills is

often not given enough time, care, or attention (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2016). Teachers report limited training and confidence in supporting students' social and emotional development (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011; Walter, Gouze, & Lim, 2006), with 82% of teachers saying they need additional professional learning on the topic (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013).

In a nationally representative survey, half of pre-K-12 principals agreed with this desire for additional

teacher professional learning on SEL (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017). But school leaders' capacity to provide professional learning on the topic is understandably limited.

Coaching is a promising approach to filling this gap. Building on a growing number of coaching approaches, the EASEL Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education recently developed an SEL coaching model and partnered with an urban elementary school on the East Coast to pilot it as one component of a schoolwide approach to SEL.

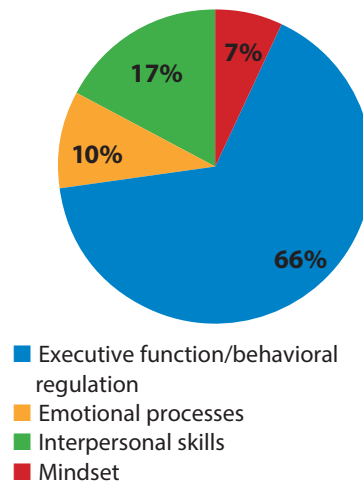
This pilot study found that participating teachers increased their use of SEL practices and found the strategies effective. It also underscored the need for school policies and structures to enable coaching.

### OUR SEL COACHING APPROACH

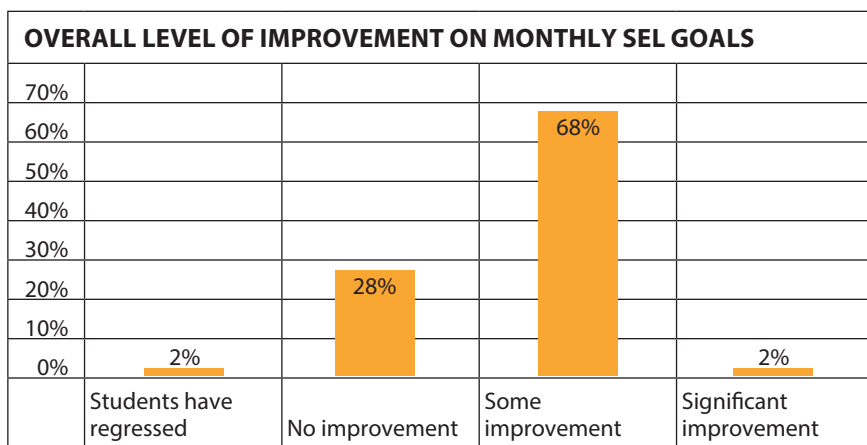
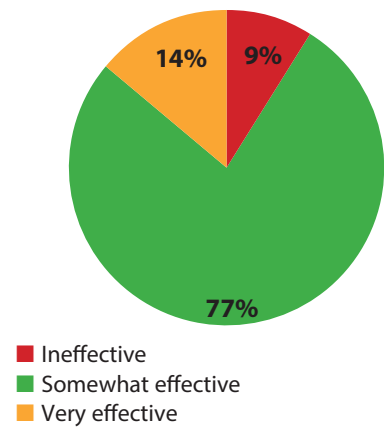
The coaching approach we developed was a hybrid of two categories of SEL coaching available in schools today: models that support the delivery of formal SEL programming and models that provide coaching to support teachers' own social-emotional competence. Although we have long known about the benefits of instructional coaching, research on SEL coaching is scant. Here is an overview of what is known about each approach.

Several SEL programs offer coaching or consultation from their staff as part of their teacher training

**TEACHERS' SEL GOALS FOR STUDENTS BY SEL DOMAIN**



**OVERALL PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF SEL KERNELS**



package. A recent report looking at 25 leading elementary school SEL programs found that many offer this type of support (Jones et al., 2017). Characteristics of the coaching vary

(e.g. number and length of sessions, face to face vs. remote coaching, cost), but the models share a goal of providing teachers with support to implement student-focused SEL lessons and

curricula with fidelity.

Although not much is known about the efficacy of supports these programs offer, some preliminary research has emerged. One study found that a high-quality coaching relationship can contribute to teachers' fidelity of program implementation (Wehby, Maggin, Partin, & Robertson, 2011), and others have found that teachers who are coached have higher confidence and increased motivation to use the program (Ashworth, Demkowicz, Lendrum, & Frearson, 2018).

Coaching models focused on teachers' own social and emotional development offer general support — unrelated to specific SEL curricula — to boost teachers' social and emotional skills and overall well-being. A recent study of a train-the-trainer model grounded in emotional intelligence theory suggested that coaches helped teachers become more aware of their emotions, understand the connections between emotions and behaviors, and apply this learning to the classroom (Patti, Holzer, Brackett, & Stern, 2015).

Emotional intelligence training also appears to improve teacher well-being and reduce work-related stress (Vasely, Saklofske, & Nortstokke, 2014). Teachers who engaged in phone coaching through a mindfulness program called Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education reported an increased use of mindful practices and more resilient attitudes toward stressors (DeWeese et al., 2017).

Working closely with our pilot school's counselor and social worker, we designed the coaching model to incorporate both of these aspects: building teachers' social-emotional competence and providing support to implement short, targeted SEL strategies we refer to as SEL kernels of practice (Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Kahn, 2017). Kernels are practices teachers can use flexibly throughout the school day, typically in 10 minutes or less, so that SEL is implemented in a deeper, more ongoing way than with a once-a-

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week curricular program.

The principal, school counselor, and social worker selected five teachers to take part in our SEL coaching, and all teachers agreed to participate. Every month between November 2016 and March 2017, an SEL coach from the EASEL Lab conducted one classroom visit and observation.

Observations took place during academic instructional blocks. The coach focused primarily on understanding the classroom environment and observing interactions between teachers and students. Each month, the coach met with teachers before and after the observations to discuss progress, reflect on their social and emotional skills, help teachers identify SEL goals, and select SEL kernels to use over the course of the next month.

After each visit, the coach sent a follow-up email to the teachers, school counselor, and social worker with observation notes, as well as any SEL kernels selected by teachers during the visit.

Throughout this period, the EASEL Lab collected data to document the process and teachers' progress from month to month. Specifically, we documented teachers' SEL goals and classroom challenges, teachers' use of SEL kernels and perceptions of their effectiveness, and the coach's observations.

In addition, the EASEL Lab conducted interviews with all coaching participants and the school's counselor and social worker in April 2017 to better understand their experiences with the SEL coaching model.

### **WHAT DID WE LEARN?**

Our data indicate that teachers

found SEL coaching beneficial for both their students' and their own social and emotional growth.

Each month, teachers set one or two SEL goals for either themselves or their students. Teachers selected student-focused SEL goals 71% of the time and teacher-focused goals 29% of the time.

As shown in the pie chart "Teachers' SEL goals for students by SEL domain" on p. 2, student-focused SEL goals targeted executive function/behavioral regulation skills 66% of the time. Within this domain, teachers chose goals focused on helping students pay attention, follow classroom rules, and exhibit appropriate classroom behavior.

Teachers chose goals targeting interpersonal skills, such as prosocial behavior and teamwork, 17% of the time, while identifying goals focusing on emotional processes, including emotional regulation and empathy/perspective-taking, 10% of the time.

Teachers selected goals targeting mindset 7% of the time. There was less variation in teacher-focused goals. The most frequently identified teacher-focused goal was "trying to be positive," followed by "limiting frustration" and "moving with efficiency."

When asked about students' overall level of improvement on monthly SEL goals (see the bar chart "Overall level of improvement on monthly SEL goals" on p. 2), teachers reported that 70% of the time, they saw either significant improvement or some improvement, with the majority of these reports indicating some improvement.

Throughout the coaching period, teachers were asked to rate the SEL kernels as ineffective, somewhat effective, or very effective (see the pie chart "Overall perceived effectiveness of SEL kernels" on p. 2). Teachers reported that kernels were very effective 14% of the time, somewhat effective 77% of the time, and ineffective 9% of the time.

The data also revealed that teachers who consistently used kernels and

actively worked on reaching their SEL goals reported higher rates of perceived effectiveness than teachers who used the strategies only sporadically or forgot to use them.

End-of-year interview data revealed a set of consistent themes about the impact of coaching on teachers' work with students. Teachers said that the most impactful goals were those linked to creating a positive classroom environment, such as maintaining and exhibiting a positive mindset, positively narrating students' behaviors when they were on-task and demonstrating exemplary behavior, and using positive reinforcement strategies, such as celebrations, to acknowledge student success.

They also acknowledged how their students' SEL skills had grown over the year. Teachers commented that students began to adopt SEL language and use SEL strategies independently, such as using nonverbal signals to help their friends refocus, taking deep breaths to focus and regroup, treating each other with kindness, and using additional focus strategies when needed. Teachers also commented that conversations with the coach were beneficial and provided them with an SEL toolbox.

## A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Data from our study underscore that SEL coaching cannot succeed in a vacuum. Teachers reported a set of schoolwide factors, policies, and practices that must be in place to optimize it.

First, teachers said that the academic pressures at school often felt in conflict with the school's stated approach to SEL. One symptom of this may have been that teachers overwhelmingly selected strategies targeting executive functioning/behavior regulation skills.

Although these skills are important, at times we found teachers using SEL strategies in service of developmentally inappropriate goals (e.g. ensuring all students were completely silent with

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their hands folded for extended periods of time or focusing on self-control exclusively to help students prepare for end-of-year testing).

In these cases, school leaders' insistence on strict codes of behavior prevented teachers from establishing positive and consistent SEL practices. If organizational priorities do not shift to include social and emotional well-being — a process that requires dismantling some of the more compliance-based rituals — then trying to add an SEL approach may be challenging for teachers and could send damaging mixed messages to students.

Second, teachers indicated that they could have benefitted from more comprehensive professional learning on SEL in addition to coaching. Some of the newer teachers said they didn't realize that SEL skills needed to be explicitly taught and that they needed to talk with students about these skills. One teacher initially believed SEL skills would naturally transfer to students as a result of her modeling.

Veteran teachers also talked about struggles to incorporate SEL strategies effectively. One teacher said she created a desk for students to calm down, but acknowledged that she sent students there as a punishment when they misbehaved, thus sending the message that the desk was functionally a time-out chair and undermining its purpose to support the development of student's self-regulation skills.

This lack of consistency — sometimes using SEL strategies as designed, other times using them in ways that contradict or undermine social and emotional development — was a common thread in our data. It

highlights the importance of systemic professional learning on SEL for teachers and administrators.

On the positive side, teachers appreciated the in-house support from the school counselor and social worker. While the external coach visited the school each month, the counselor and social worker visited more often, participated in team meetings, created SEL lesson plans for teachers to use every morning, and featured exemplar SEL strategies they saw in classrooms through text groups and weekly email.

Teachers reported that this support improved their SEL implementation and helped school staff be more mindful of how they interacted with one another. This internal capacity is important because schools do not always have the time or resources to implement an SEL coaching model.

School and district leaders play an essential role in building capacity through policies, structures, and support. Ultimately, SEL functions through building strong relationships among all adults and employing ongoing support and feedback. We encourage school leaders to create and prioritize policies and practices that support coaching as one component of their school's overall approach to SEL.

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