

Abstract Title Page

Title: Collaboration to Achieve Whole School SEL Across a Large, Urban District

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Abstract

Background

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been shown to increase achievement test scores in reading and math by 11 percentile points; improve social and emotional skills by 23 percentile points; improve attitudes about self, others, and school by 9 percentile points; improve pro-social school and classroom behavior by 9 percentile points; decrease conduct problems by 9 percentile points; and decrease emotional distress by 10 percentile points (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). This study involves a rigorous process and impact evaluation to learn about district-level SEL implementation for Kindergarten through Grade 5 in a large urban district using the evidence-based SEL program Open Circle.

Research on SEL has largely focused on classroom interventions and student- and classroom-level outcomes. Few studies have examined whole-school and district-level SEL implementations, or how to ensure that SEL programs are implemented effectively and sustained over time.

Objective

This study examines both process outcomes and program impact as Open Circle is rolled out across a large, urban district over a three year period beginning in June 2012. It includes a large sample of over 7,000 students, 400 classrooms and 23 schools, and is measuring program implementation, school climate, and social and emotional development at the student, classroom, school, and district levels. The study investigates the following research questions:

- What are the critical factors to successful implementation of a whole-school, comprehensive SEL program as it is scaled up across one third of elementary schools serving grades K-5 in a large urban school district over a three year period?
- How will the implementation of the *Open Circle Curriculum* and corresponding professional development influence school climate, teacher practice, and students' social and emotional skill development, and behavior?

Intervention Program

Open Circle is an SEL program for Kindergarten through Grade 5. The grade-differentiated *Open Circle Curriculum* proactively develops children's skills for recognizing and managing emotions, social awareness, positive relationships and problem solving. It also helps schools build a community where students feel safe, cared for and engaged in learning. See Table 1 for a list of Open Circle's SEL skills and practices.

Open Circle involves a comprehensive whole-school approach in which all adults in a school's community – teachers, administrators, counselors, support staff and families – learn to model and reinforce pro-social skills throughout the school day and at home (see Figure 1). Classroom teachers implement the *Open Circle Curriculum* during twice-weekly, 15-minute Open Circle Meetings. Students form a circle of chairs, including an empty seat to symbolize that there is always room for another person, voice or opinion. Open Circle lessons are highly interactive, incorporating large and

small group discussions, role playing, community-building activities, and high quality children's literature. Families are engaged through Open Circle workshops and letters introducing the *Open Circle Curriculum* and key vocabulary (available in eight languages). Schools sustain and improve Open Circle practice over time by developing Open Circle peer coaches and leadership teams. Open Circle's professional development for teachers is spaced across the school year to align with best practices in adult learning (multiple cycles of experiential learning, practice, and reflection). See Table 3 for a list of Open Circle teacher development practices.

Setting

The participating large, urban school district faces challenges shared by many districts of similar scale and socioeconomic profile: high rates of suspensions (8.5%), high rates of repeating grades (7.4%), and dropout (8.9%), coupled with low scores on standardized reading and mathematics assessments and low graduation rates (57.9%). Nearly three fourths of students are characterized as low-income, about one fifth have limited English proficiency, and a slightly higher percentage receive special education services. The district serves over 28,000 K-5 students (36% Black, 40% Hispanic, 13% White, 9% Asian, 2% Other/Multi-Racial). Since the project began in June 2012, the district has undergone significant transitions, including: a new city mayor, (interim) superintendent, network model for school oversight, teacher evaluation system, teacher hiring process, and Common Core curriculum. Among the 23 participating schools, nine had principal changes during or between Years 1 and 2. Research partners include researchers at the Wellesley Centers for Women, Open Circle, the Violence Prevention Department of the city's public health commission, and the implementing district and schools. There has also been significant turnover among partner contacts: the lead contact at the city's public health commission changed twice due to maternity leaves and the lead contact at the district changed three times due to reorganizations.

Recruitment

Participating schools received free schoolwide training and curriculum through a grant to the city's public health commission from a local healthcare organization. At the outset of the project in the spring of 2012, the district included 73 schools serving students in Kindergarten through Grade 5. Of those, ten were ineligible to participate because they were already using Open Circle. More than half (34) of the remaining 63 eligible schools expressed interest in the project. Interested schools were prioritized based on location with and/or student population of predominantly low-income families. Selection of an initial cohort of 19 schools was conducted by the district's superintendent for elementary education with input from the superintendent for K-8 schools as well as other project partners (including representatives from the city health commission, the project funder, and Open Circle). Three of these 19 schools did not continue in the second year due to principal disengagement/retirement or competing demands from other initiatives. Seven schools joined in the second year (with similar criteria and selection process), bringing the total number of participating schools to 23.

Participants. A total of 793 staff (413 teachers; 332 counselors, specialists, paraprofessionals; 48 administrators) received professional development directly impacting 7,434 students.

Research Design

This study includes primary data from the first two years gathered through classroom observation and student surveys in grades 3 and 5, Open Circle fidelity checklists completed by coaches and observers, semi-annual online surveys completed by teachers, administrators and school support staff, and focus group and individual interviews with staff. Data also includes training attendance and coaching logs. Future studies will include student and school climate data collected by the district for all schools serving grades K-5, enabling matched comparison grouping.

Measures. Open Circle fidelity checklists were recorded by coaches for 162 teachers in Year 1 and 182 teachers in Year 2. Observations using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; LaParo, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004) were conducted in the fall (pretest) and spring (posttest) each year at 12 schools. We targeted recruitment at all schools, however, teachers were not required to participate, thus decreasing our compliance rate. Within each school, one grade 3 and one grade 5 classroom was chosen at random for observation. In observed classrooms, 431 students completed four subscales of the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS; Elliott, Gresham, Frank, & Beddow, 2008), including: Cooperation, Empathy, Self-Control, and Bullying.

Annual pre- and posttest online survey respondents included 324 teachers, administrators and school support staff. Surveys recorded school, role, years of experience, perceived impact of Open Circle training and coaching, self-rated Open Circle implementation fidelity, perceived impact of Open Circle programming, perceptions of school climate, and observations of students' demonstration of pro-social skills and negative behaviors. One focus group and additional individual teacher interviews (total participant n=15) were also conducted in the years 1 and 2 of implementation.

Analyses. Descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted using SAS. Open-ended survey and transcribed focus group and individual interview data was analyzed for evidence of the processes underlying the statistical associations. Analyses of posttest CLASS observations and student surveys over time will be included in the fall conference presentation.

Implementation

Of the 23 participating schools, 78% trained all/nearly all teachers, 17% trained a majority and only 4% trained less than half. Training participation for specialists and paraprofessionals was slightly lower: 43% trained all/nearly all, 39% trained a majority, and 17% trained less than half. Every school trained at least one administrator and all behavioral health staff. Overall, 74% of schools achieved high training engagement (training most school staff), 22% demonstrated mixed engagement, and 4% had low engagement. Among trained teachers, 89% attended all four training sessions, 7% attended three training sessions and 4% attended only the first two training sessions. A majority (79%) participated in two coaching visits, 18% participated in one and 3% participated in zero. The most common reasons for incomplete training and coaching were: teacher left school or changed role (i.e. no longer a grade-level teacher) and scheduling challenges to accommodate training sessions and coaching visits during the school year.

Coaches rated 63% of teachers as skilled implementers and an additional 30% as somewhat skilled. Most teachers reported implementing the *Open Circle Curriculum* two or more times (56%) or once (25%) per week. Nearly half of teachers (46%) reported completing all or nearly all of the *Open Circle Curriculum* lessons, while 37% completed approximately three-quarters, 10% completed half, and 7% completed less than half. A majority of teachers reported frequently or very frequently infusing Open Circle by: integrating Open Circle skills, vocabulary and concepts throughout the day (75%); modeling Open Circle skills and vocabulary throughout the day (69%); and posting visuals reflecting Open Circle concepts (60%). Nearly all teachers agreed that their principal (94%) and colleagues (95%) supported their use of Open Circle.

A majority of trained specialists and paraprofessionals reported frequently or very frequently infusing Open Circle in their work by using Open Circle vocabulary in interactions with students (61%) and encouraging students to practice Open Circle skills (59%). Many also reported occasionally to very frequently using Open Circle community-building activities (70%), posting Open Circle visuals (55%), and using Open Circle approaches and vocabulary in school-wide activities such as assemblies (66%). Among principals, 100% agreed that SEL was an integral part of their schools' programming.

Outcomes

Results from staff surveys showed strong endorsement of Open Circle by almost 90% of staff: 47% "agreed" and 40% "strongly agreed" they would recommend Open Circle to a colleague. On average, staff at post-test reported positive outcomes of implementation directly related to their observed students' social and emotional outcomes.

Observations showed positive correlations between teachers' fidelity of implementation of Open Circle and quality of teacher-student interactions in the CLASS domains of Emotional Support and Classroom Organization and with student engagement, attention, and respectful behavior in the classroom.

Analysis of interview data suggests ways that Open Circle has an impact on student SEL outcomes. The most common successes named were the various ways in which students individually and as a class learned to "calm down," which was described by one participant as the first step in problem-solving. One teacher reported that the increased speed of her students' quieting down and transitioning in her class probably gained her about 15 minutes of academic learning time each period.

Conclusions

Preliminary results indicate that this whole-school SEL program is highly scalable, reaching over 7,000 students with training for nearly 800 staff members at 23 district schools in a two-year period. Teachers, students and administrators are responding favorably to the program and the format of twice-weekly, 15-minute classroom meetings appears highly feasible. Key success factors have been robust whole-school professional development, high quality implementation, initial and ongoing principal and district administrator support and teacher buy-in. Teachers also need ongoing support from administrators and peers. Forthcoming data will enable further conclusions about outcomes and impact.

Appendices

Appendix A. References

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Appendix B. Tables and Figures

Table 1: Open Circle’s SEL Skills and Practices

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listening ● Being Calm ● Positive Self-Talk ● Building Positive Relationships ● Giving & Receiving Compliments ● Cooperating ● Speaking Up ● Expressing Anger Appropriately ● Responding to Annoying Behavior ● Understanding Tattling vs Telling ● Responding to Teasing ● Addressing Dangerous & Destructive Behavior ● Recognizing Bullying Behavior ● Being a Responsible Bystander ● Recognizing Discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding Feelings ● Reading Body Language ● Developing Empathy ● Problem Solving ● Setting Positive Goals ● Brainstorming & Creative Thinking ● Reaching Consensus ● Evaluating Solutions ● Overcoming Obstacles ● Leadership ● Classroom Meetings ● Getting to Know Each Other ● Establishing Classroom Rules ● Understanding Non-Negotiable Rules ● Community-Building Exercises ● Encouraging Student Voice
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Figure 2: Whole-School Approach

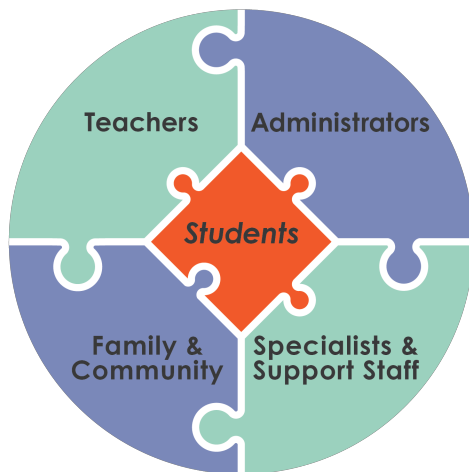


Table 3: Open Circle’s Teacher Development Practices

<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Wait/Think Time● Lesson Pacing● Tone of Voice● Body Language● Empathic Listening● Turn and Talk● Whole Group Responses● Non-Judgemental Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Reflection● Managing Self● Modeling● Dialog Facilitation● Coaching the Problem Solving Process● Group Theory & Development● Infusing SEL Throughout the School Day
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