Strategies for Social-Emotional Learning in COMPASS Programs

Colleen E. McCann
Christina A. Russell

December 2015

Executive Summary

The term "social-emotional learning" (SEL), defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as "a process for helping children develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness," is a current buzzword in education, highlighting the important role that both practitioners and researchers believe social-emotional skills play in youth development and preparation for success in school and in life. Skills such as managing emotions appropriately, goal-setting, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and responsible decision-making are important for youth to thrive. High-quality youth development programs, and afterschool programs in particular, have traditionally been an important avenue for teaching youth these skills.

There is still much to learn about local efforts to implement strong programs that build SEL skills in youth. To help build this knowledge, the New York City Department of Community and Youth Development (DYCD) asked Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to conduct a study of promising practices in Comprehensive After School System (COMPASS) programs implementing SEL programming. As a funder of over 340 COMPASS programs serving elementary-grades students throughout New York City, DYCD has great potential to have a big impact on SEL development for the thousands of youth who participate in COMPASS programs each year. The findings from this study are also applicable to other afterschool programs that are interested in strengthening their approach to SEL.

The PSA study team visited 10 COMPASS programs that served elementary-grades students and implemented various approaches to SEL in spring 2015. The study explored the ways that these COMPASS programs addressed SEL, including identifying youth needs and strengths; designing and delivering programming; hiring and training staff; determining the success of SEL programming; and using this information for program improvement.

Directors of programs focused on implementing SEL programming had developed an **overall vision for SEL** at their program as an important first step before designing or making changes to programming. All decisions related to SEL programming were grounded in this vision, and this vision was used to guide continuous improvement processes. Directors developed this vision by considering the following questions:

- What is the overarching program goal for SEL?
- How does SEL fit with existing program activities and the mission of the provider organization?
- What are the SEL needs of the youth served at the program?
- What approach (e.g., developing or purchasing curricula, offering a certain activity) to SEL makes sense for the program? Why?
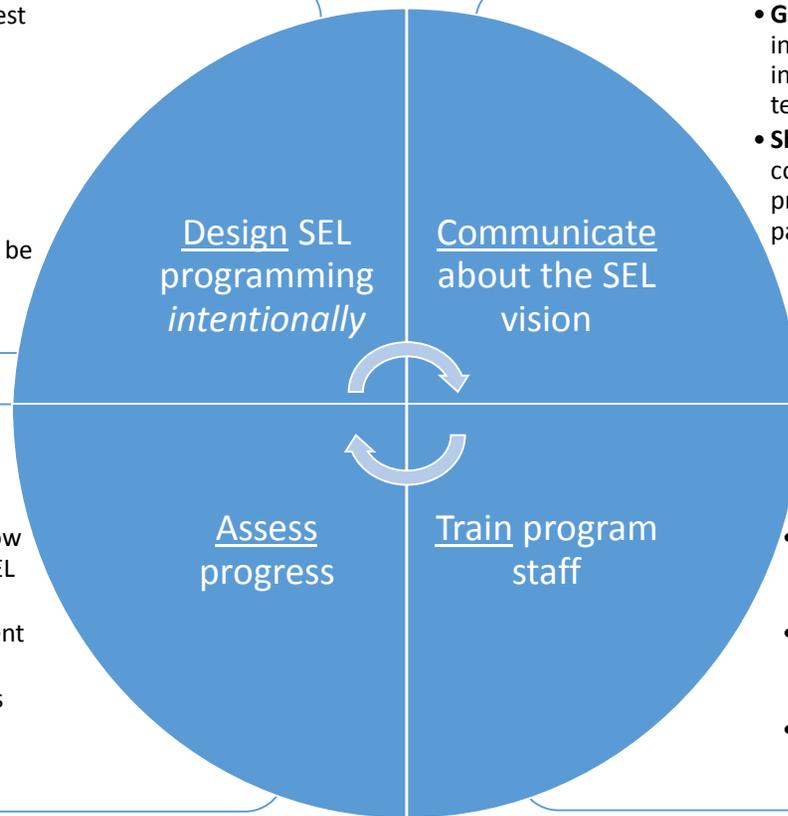
Program directors used this vision to plan and continuously improve the quality of their program, as illustrated in the *Developing an SEL Plan* exhibit on the next page.

Developing an SEL Plan:
Lessons Learned from the Study of Promising Practices in COMPASS Programs

First: Develop a GUIDING VISION for SEL. ASK: What is the goal for enhancing SEL at your program? What SEL approach fits best with your existing programming and your CBO's mission? **Then**: Use the questions below to PLAN and CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE the quality of SEL programming to ensure it meets that vision.

II:

Design SEL programming *intentionally*

- **Choose SEL approach:** What activities will best support SEL development for the youth you serve? Does SEL programming need to be targeted by grade, gender, other need?
- **Create an SEL culture:** Where are there opportunities to infuse SEL *throughout* the program (vs. in specific activities)?
- **Scaffold SEL:** How can SEL skill development be sequenced and built over time?

Communicate about the SEL vision

- **Get input**: Which program stakeholders have insight into youth needs and strengths that can inform SEL programming (e.g., program staff, teachers, principals)?
- **Share vision:** What *mechanism* can you use to communicate the goals and plan for SEL to program staff, CBO staff, school staff, youth, parents, and others?

Assess progress

- **Identify signs of success:** How will you know if your program is helping youth develop SEL skills?
- **Document progress:** How will you document and communicate your SEL success?
- **Use the information:** How will you use this information to improve your SEL programming?

Train program staff

- **Encourage staff to model SEL:** Do staff know what SEL skills are, why they are important, and how to model these skills and behaviors?
- **Determine staff needs:** What new skills do staff need to support SEL behaviors and skills in youth?
- **Identify resources:** What resources and opportunities are available to train and support staff?

After developing this vision, program directors engaged in a cycle of four promising practices for designing and implementing SEL programming. As they engaged in these processes, they continually checked their ideas and choices against their guiding vision to ensure they were aligned with the goals they had set for their program.

Promising Practice: Plan an SEL approach deliberately **grounded in the overarching vision** with activities, skills, and design strategically integrated into the program to support that goal.

Program directors designed their SEL programming intentionally. This meant that they identified youth needs and enhanced existing programming or offered new programming to focus specifically on developing those skills. They looked for opportunities to build SEL skills in every activity and use the language of SEL throughout the program. They designed activities to build SEL skills in a sequenced way over time, but also with the understanding that SEL skills are not mastered and completed– they need continual attention and reinforcement.

•**Choose SEL approach:** What activities will best support SEL development for the youth you serve? Does SEL programming need to be targeted by grade, gender, other need?

•**Create an SEL culture:** Where are there opportunities to infuse SEL *throughout* the program (vs. in specific activities)?

•**Scaffold SEL:** How can SEL skill development be sequenced and built over time?

Design SEL programming *intentionally*

Promising Practice: Communication around the SEL vision and plan is a **two-way street**. It is important to both get input on youth SEL needs and progress, and to clearly articulate the program goals of and approaches to SEL to program stakeholders.

Program directors considered communication about the SEL vision a two-way street. They not only shared information about the SEL goals and their vision for the program with stakeholders, but also sought and integrated input about program approach, youth needs, activities, and ways to grow the program from program staff, CBO staff, school staff, youth and parents. They also were proactive about providing information back to school staff about youth SEL skill development so they could work as a team to support the student.

Communicate about the SEL vision

• **Get input:** Which program stakeholders have insight into youth needs and strengths that can inform SEL programming (e.g., program staff, teachers, principals)?

• **Share vision:** What *mechanism* can you use to communicate the goals and plan for SEL to program staff, CBO staff, school staff, youth, parents, and others?

Promising Practice: Because SEL is effective when infused throughout programming, it can be most effective for programs to **build capacity in all staff** to understand and model social-emotional skills throughout their work, rather than relying on SEL-specific experts.

Train program staff
- **Encourage staff to model SEL:** Do staff know what SEL skills are, why they are important, and how to model these skills and behaviors?
- **Determine staff needs:** What new skills do staff need to support SEL behaviors and skills in youth?
- **Identify resources:** What resources and opportunities are available to train and support staff?

Rather than hiring SEL experts, program directors focused on building the capacity of their current youth development professionals to model SEL skills and implement programming. They identified the skills and knowledge that staff needed in order to support youth and helped them to build those skills.

Promising Practice: Keep continuous quality improvement goals in mind! Program leaders should determine how they will **know** if your SEL approach is effective, and how available information will be **used** to make changes and improvements. Data that can't be used doesn't need to be collected!

Program directors identified what progress towards or success in SEL goals meant. They looked for program-embedded ways to gauge success, which often meant thinking outside of the box about what information to collect and look for. They thought carefully

- **Identify signs of success:** How will you know if your program is helping youth develop SEL skills?
- **Document progress:** How will you document and communicate your SEL success?
- **Use the information:** How will you use this information to improve your SEL programming?

Assess progress

about what it is they wanted to know, how they could answer those questions using information they already had or that could be collected through a low-burden process, and most importantly, how that information could be used to improve the program. They asked themselves questions such as: What does the program need to know? For what time period?

Takeaway Lessons

Developing a guiding vision for the role SEL will play in an afterschool program is an important first step towards strengthening SEL programming in that program. This vision should drive decision-making and continuous improvement processes. This study of promising practices in SEL in COMPASS programs funded by DYCD in New York City identified four core practices: intentional program design, two-way communication with stakeholders, training staff to model SEL, and collection of information about progress that will improve programming. These practices are feasible for any afterschool program to implement. None require programs to buy special curricula, add or drop activities, or hire new, specialized staff. Rather, existing activity plans can be adapted to more explicitly integrate SEL supports for youth.

Contents

Page

The term "social-emotional learning" (SEL), defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as "a process for helping children develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness," is a current buzzword in education, highlighting the important role that both practitioners and researchers believe social-emotional skills play in youth development and preparation for success in school and in life. Skills such as managing emotions appropriately, goal-setting, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and responsible decision-making are important for youth to thrive. High-quality youth development programs, and afterschool programs in particular, have traditionally been an important avenue for teaching youth these skills. Research has shown that afterschool programs that incorporate SEL can improve youth self-perceptions, social skills, and interest in learning (Durlak et al., 2010). Schools have also become increasingly more interested in the intentional development of these skills, as research has shown that having positive social behaviors and peer relationships, fewer behavior issues, and expression of emotions healthfully among children in a classroom can bolster academic performance (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

Due to pressures to prioritize academics, many school-day efforts for incorporating SEL have been focused on creating systems for positive behavior management, with the goal of creating environments conducive for learning. However, intentional development of SEL skills goes beyond managing behavior to helping youth understand, articulate, process, and better manage emotions in proactive ways. Addressing the holistic needs of youth through an SEL lens requires time and attention to addressing a range of developmental issues. Afterschool programs offered by community-based organizations (CBOs) have traditionally brought strengths in addressing these developmental needs, and CBO partners with a strong vision for SEL are well positioned to influence SEL culture throughout youth's learning environments, including the school day.

The Comprehensive After School System (COMPASS) operated by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) emphasizes the importance of "environments that support social and emotional learning" in afterschool programming. DYCD funds CBOs that operate over 340 COMPASS programs serving elementary-grades youth across the five boroughs of New York City. This broad reach gives DYCD great potential to have a big impact on SEL development for the thousands of youth who participate in COMPASS programs each year. To help maximize this impact, DYCD asked Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to conduct a study of promising practices in COMPASS programs implementing high-quality SEL programming.

Study Approach

PSA conducted this study of the strategies for implementing SEL in COMPASS programs serving elementary-grades youth during the 2014-15 school year. As summarized in this report, the study team explored the ways that COMPASS programs approach SEL; identify youth needs and strengths; design and deliver programming; hire and train staff; determine the success of their SEL programming; and use this information for program improvement. The study also explored the benefits of SEL programming to youth from both the adult and youth perspectives. The goals of the study were to identify promising practices in designing and

implementing SEL programming, to identify ways in which DYCD can support COMPASS programs, and to document these practices for dissemination across COMPASS programs.

While there are many different definitions used by academics and organizations to describe SEL, the study team chose to ground the study in CASEL's definition for SEL: "a process for helping children develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness." This definition is consistent with the expectations for SEL in COMPASS programs. First, development of social-emotional skills is indeed a process. Social-emotional skills must be built deliberately, through multiple approaches and in an ongoing fashion. Second, CASEL has identified the following five domains of skills and mindsets developed through social-emotional learning, all of which reflect COMPASS program goals:

- **Self-awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and having a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

- **Self-management:** The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward personal and academic goals.

- **Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures; to understand social and ethical norms for behavior; and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

- **Responsible decision-making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

This report opens with the research questions that guided the study and the methods used to collect data. A brief overview of the literature related to social-emotional learning and its relationship with youth life outcomes follows. The majority of the report consists of a discussion of the key findings from the study, with illustrative examples from the COMPASS programs that contributed to the study, and ideas for program providers and directors to consider when thinking about how to strengthen SEL in afterschool programming. The report then summarizes youth experience of SEL programming in COMPASS, and concludes with recommendations for DYCD for how to better support programs with SEL implementation as well as takeaways for other afterschool programs interested in more explicitly focusing on SEL.

Study Methodology

The PSA study team examined the strategies and outcomes of SEL programming in a sample of 10 COMPASS programs serving elementary-grades youth in 2014-15. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do COMPASS programs approach SEL? How do they define SEL, identify the needs of their participants, and provide SEL programming that meets the needs of their participants?

2. How do COMPASS programs design and implement SEL programming? What resources support the implementation of high-quality SEL programming (e.g., training/professional development for staff, curricula, partnerships with the school or other organizations, etc.)?

3. What metrics do programs use to determine the success of their SEL activities, and how do they use this information to ensure and improve program quality?

4. How do youth experience and benefit from SEL activities offered by COMPASS programs?

5. What actions can program directors and staff, technical assistance providers, and DYCD take to make SEL activities more effective in enhancing student mindsets, behaviors, and dispositions?

The study team used a multi-step process to identify the 10 COMPASS programs for the study sample:

■   ***Program director questionnaire.*** The study team administered a brief online questionnaire to directors of COMPASS programs serving elementary-grades youth, in collaboration with a PSA team conducting a study of literacy in COMPASS programs. COMPASS directors were asked to choose to respond to questions about either their literacy- or SEL-focused programming. The SEL questionnaire asked directors to provide information about their approach to implementing SEL, including an example of an activity or lesson that best exemplified SEL in their program. Each PSA study team randomly selected five respondents to receive a $25 Amazon.com gift card as incentives for COMPASS directors to complete the questionnaire. In total, the questionnaire was administered to 309 elementary program directors, and 49 questionnaires were submitted for the SEL study.

■   ***Follow-up phone calls to program directors.*** After reviewing the SEL questionnaire submissions, members of the study team identified 15 COMPASS sites that fit criteria for possible inclusion in the study, including having provided a thorough and clear description of an SEL-focused activity. Members of the study team conducted brief follow-up phone calls with the directors of these 15 programs

3

to gather more information about elements of the program related to SEL, which assisted the team in narrowing the list of sites for in-depth visits to ten.

The PSA study team chose 10 COMPASS program sites that were implementing varied and interesting approaches to implementing SEL programming for one-day visits. The team intentionally included programs with a mix of characteristics such as program size, length of time they had implemented SEL-focused programming, and borough. However, the 10 sites in the final study sample are not representative of all COMPASS programs or even of those focusing on SEL–the team ultimately chose programs that exhibited potentially promising practices in order to learn from these programs and share their practices.

The visits to programs occurred between mid-March and early May 2015 and were each conducted by one member of the PSA study team. While on site, the PSA visitor interviewed the COMPASS program director; staff involved with implementing SEL-focused programming; a small group of youth; the education specialist; and, if the program was housed at a school, the host school principal. The study team also observed SEL-focused activities and coordinated administration of a brief youth survey to participants in grades 3-5.

The youth survey was not designed to measure growth in SEL skills, behaviors, or mindsets over time, and youth responses cannot be solely attributed to participation in SEL-focused programming. Rather, the survey was intended to explore youth perceptions of how the COMPASS program helped them to develop SEL skills and mindsets. A total of 483 surveys were completed by youth in grades 3-5 across the 10 study sites, out of 724 youth estimated to be enrolled in those grades at those sites at the time of administration. Surveys completed were distributed roughly equally across each of the three grades surveyed: 36 percent of responding youth were in third grade, 37 percent were in fourth grade, and 27 percent were in fifth grade. The full youth survey instrument is included as an appendix to this report.

Literature Review

Youth research has long focused on key developmental skills that are linked to positive life outcomes, though the term "social-emotional learning" has only more recently come into the lexicon. Elias et al. (1997) defined SEL as the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, empathize with others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively. CASEL organized these SEL competencies into five major interrelated domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). Developing these skills is vital for youth social adjustment and success in life in the short- and long-term, including academically.

Research has shown that programs that focus on SEL development can improve youth self-perceptions, social skills, and interest in learning (Durlak et al., 2010). A review of 317 studies on the impact of SEL programs on elementary and middle school students by Payton et al. (2008) found that SEL programs were effective in both school and afterschool settings. Youth who

participated in these programs experienced growth in positive attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behavior, and academic performance. Payton et al. (2008) also found that SEL programs reduced behavior issues and incidences of youth emotional distress.

While a growing body of research has identified the skills necessary for academic and social success, there is still much to learn about local efforts to implement strong programs that build SEL skills in youth. The goal of this study was to explore promising practices that programs implement in order to support the development of these skills in youth.

Promising Practices for SEL Programming

Through this study, we identified a series of promising practices for implementing a social-emotional learning plan in afterschool programs. As illustrated in the *Developing an SEL Plan* summary on the next page, these practices form the basis for a decision-making and continuous improvement process related to program offerings, communication with program stakeholders, hiring and training staff, and assessing progress and success.

We discuss in detail below each of the promising practices included in this continuous improvement and decision-making guide, including examples of how the practice was implemented in COMPASS programs visited. Each promising practice is accompanied by a recommendation for implementation where we present concrete suggestions for how programs can strengthen their SEL programming.

Promising Practice: Develop a Guiding Vision for SEL

Determine a vision for SEL that aligns with the CBO and program mission.
COMPASS program directors described developing a "big picture" vision for what SEL would address at their program as a critical first step in thinking about how best to implement SEL programming. Having a guiding vision or core set of principles for SEL grounded in their program's identity drove their decision-making about their approach to SEL and the types of activities they offered. Directors developed their vision by thinking about important questions such as:

■   What is the overarching program goal for SEL?

■   How does SEL fit with existing program activities and the CBO mission?

■   What are the SEL needs of the youth served by the program?

■   What approach (e.g., developing or purchasing curricula, offering a certain activity) did they want to take, and why?

Developing an SEL Plan:
Lessons Learned from the Study of Promising Practices in COMPASS Programs

First: Develop a GUIDING VISION for SEL. ASK: What is the goal for enhancing SEL at your program? What SEL approach fits best with your existing programming and your CBO's mission? **Then**: Use the questions below to PLAN and CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE the quality of SEL programming to ensure it meets that vision.

•**Choose SEL approach:** What activities will best support SEL development for the youth you serve? Does SEL programming need to be targeted by grade, gender, other need?

•**Create an SEL culture:** Where are there opportunities to infuse SEL *throughout* the program (vs. in specific activities)?

•**Scaffold SEL:** How can SEL skill development be sequenced and built over time?

• **Get input**: Which program stakeholders have insight into youth needs and strengths that can inform SEL programming (e.g., program staff, teachers, principals)?

• **Share vision:** What *mechanism* can you use to communicate the goals and plan for SEL to program staff, CBO staff, school staff, youth, parents, and others?

Design SEL programming *intentionally*

Communicate about the SEL vision

Assess progress

Train program staff

• **Identify signs of success:** How will you know if your program is helping youth develop SEL skills?

• **Document progress:** How will you document and communicate your SEL success?

• **Use the information:** How will you use this information to improve your SEL programming?

• **Encourage staff to model SEL:** Do staff know what SEL skills are, why they are important, and how to model these skills and behaviors?

• **Determine staff needs:** What new skills do staff need to support SEL behaviors and skills in youth?

• **Identify resources:** What resources and opportunities are available to train and support staff?

The process of considering these questions helped program directors determine how to holistically integrate SEL into their program and weave the language and lessons of SEL throughout their activities. They mentioned returning to this vision consistently when they were making decisions about activity offerings, hiring or training staff, and how to assess student progress with SEL skills. In doing so, they built on the process that programs are required to go through when submitting workscopes to DYCD, but with a particular eye towards the SEL components of programming.

Program directors also emphasized that developing this vision did not mean redesigning everything about their program; rather, developing this vision for SEL helped them to identify specific areas of their current program and mission to build on and expand in ways that would intentionally strengthen the SEL components of the program.

Allow for flexibility in the vision to adapt to local context and needs. The PSA team visited several programs operated by CBOs that had long histories of focusing explicitly on SEL. Directors at these programs mentioned the need to think about how to adapt their provider organization's vision for SEL to fit the context of their program and the specific needs of the youth they served.

> **Program Example: Tailoring CBO vision for SEL to local context**
>
> The study team visited two school-based COMPASS programs run by CBOs with reputations for SEL expertise that have developed comprehensive SEL curricula and that provide SEL guidance and training to site directors and program staff. Even with these resources, one program director noted that in order to make SEL programming most effective, implementation needed to be tailored to fit the context of the school community. For example, the director decided to only use the CBO's curriculum with the kindergarten through second-graders and to leverage the expertise of an afterschool staff member with a social work and guidance counseling background to design a more customized approach to SEL for youth in third through fifth grade. Program staff had observed that these older youth had difficulty calming themselves down when stressed and with identifying and talking about the emotions they were feeling. The staff member designed several activities for older youth that would teach mindfulness and self-awareness through meditation and calm breathing. These activities were not prescribed by the program's provider organization, but were aligned with the overall mission of the CBO and created a continuum of SEL skill development for youth that best fit their needs.

At all programs visited, directors who were successfully implementing SEL emphasized that the program needed to be flexible enough to accommodate change or be tailored to fit local context. Just as development of SEL skills in youth is an incremental and ongoing process, so is development and adjustment of a program. Over time, youth needs may change; certain staff members may move on; leadership of a program's host school may turn over. Each of these things may require program directors to rethink their strategy for SEL and identify opportunities for additional or different programming that may help build needed youth skills. One program director noted that she was constantly thinking about continuous improvement for her program in order to best meet the needs of youth:

> *It's always a continued work because we are consistently checking to see if what we're doing, if what we're providing needs to be improved in any way. It's not just thinking 'okay, we did*

it, great'–it's always checking yourself to see if your model works. If you need to change the model to continue to be effective, do it. Then be consistent with it. You want to make sure the team that you have working for you is putting in practice the system and following through with all the pieces of the puzzle.

> **Recommendation for Implementation:**
> **Engage in a thorough visioning process for SEL before making any changes to programming.**
>
> Time is a resource that always seems to be in short supply. However, carving out opportunities to engage in a thorough visioning process where SEL principles and guidelines are laid out will help save time and other resources in the long run. This does not have to be a process completed by one person or take extensive time. For example, consider discussing how SEL fits in with the CBO mission during staff meetings or orientations. Do some research about possible approaches and structures on the Internet instead of trying to develop a vision from scratch. Start by thinking of small and manageable goals for the vision for SEL, perhaps by identifying one or a few skills that are of particular need for the youth your program serves, and follow through with that. The goal of the visioning process is to have a clear idea for what you want to accomplish through SEL at your program, the ability to communicate this vision to stakeholders, and develop ideas about what that looks like and requires in practice.

Promising Practice: Intentional Design of SEL Programming

Once an overarching vision for SEL is established, a next stage in the SEL development process is to strategically choose or design skill-building activities to support that vision.

•**Choose SEL approach:** What activities will best support SEL development for the youth you serve? Does SEL programming need to be targeted by grade, gender, other need?

•**Create an SEL culture:** Where are there opportunities to infuse SEL *throughout* the program (vs. in specific activities)?

•**Scaffold SEL:** How can SEL skill development be sequenced and built over time?

Design SEL programming *intentionally*

__Choose an SEL approach__: Design SEL programming and activities that reflect and respond to youth needs. Directors reported that their SEL activities were most effective when they reflected and were responsive to the specific SEL needs of youth in the program. This goes beyond offering youth choices in activities based on their interests. It means identifying SEL needs; offering activities specifically designed to build skills that youth in the program need to develop, and revisiting programming to help youth develop other skills as needs arise. It also means identifying the current SEL skills of youth in order to design programming that allows youth to capitalize on strengths as they build other skills.

Program Example: Intentionally offering activities that address specific youth needs

One program director wanted to add a new physical education activity. He specifically chose to offer Tae Kwon Do because it not only provided youth with a physical outlet, but also addressed certain social-emotional needs he saw in youth such as self-control, conflict resolution, and the ability to handle stressful situations. He explained, "I always knew martial arts was a great way to build things like that [SEL skills]…You need something that will be able to help build up their confidence and things of that nature."

A common approach for addressing SEL skills was through gender-based discussion groups (e.g., Girls Group). The general goal of these activities was to provide a safe space to discuss issues that may impact one gender more than another, or differently. Common topics for Girls Groups included body image or self-esteem, and for Boys Groups, peer pressure or what it means to be masculine. These groups did not typically follow set curricula and thus were able to be extremely responsive to youth needs. For example, one program director had recently noticed a lot of infighting among the fifth-grade girls, likely driven by anxieties about going to middle school and being separated from their friends the following year. In response, she dedicated several Girls Group sessions to a discussion about these transition issues.

__Build a culture of SEL__: Infuse SEL strategies and language throughout programming. CASEL's research on SEL-focused school-day programs concluded that teachers who incorporated social and emotional skills into all school topics and infused it throughout their instruction were most effective. The COMPASS programs visited for this study did the same by

---

Program Example: Building a strong SEL culture

At one program, the foundation of SEL programming is a set of five core values that are posted around the program space and well known to staff and all youth. Approximately every two months, the program emphasizes a new core value. For example, the April value of "showing love and being compassionate" was integrated into activities ranging from literacy to music. For literacy, youth read books that focused on this value, and, in music, staff talked to youth about exploring music from other cultures as a way of understanding and relating to them. The value was also integrated into Earth Day celebrations as youth planted trees in the surrounding neighborhood, which showed love for community as well as the environment. Each of these activities addressed the core value in different ways, offering youth multiple ways of engaging with the same idea. Although the program emphasizes one value at a time, youth know all the core values and all are intertwined throughout the year. The program director reported that introducing these core values a few years ago brought more cohesiveness to how everyone at the site defines, implements, and talks about SEL.

---

establishing strong SEL cultures that were woven throughout all parts of the program, including those elements that were less explicitly focused on SEL.

   Scaffold SEL: Build SEL skills deliberately and over time. Program directors described the development of SEL skills as an ongoing process. SEL skills are not learned and mastered, but rather require constant attention and reinforcement. Directors noted, in particular, how important it was to be flexible with respect to time and the scheduling of activities. The majority of program directors interviewed implemented programming in cycles (e.g., youth participate in the same schedule of activities for three weeks and then a new round of programming is implemented) or at least planned several weeks' or months' worth of programming at a time. However, many described instances in which they needed to adjust programming mid-cycle to allow youth to spend more time working on a certain skill. This was usually because the same SEL needs were still apparent even after they had been addressed through an activity, so a different approach was necessary or youth needed more time to work on the same skill.

   To nurture development of social and emotional skills, staff need to be patient and recognize that it may sometimes be a slow process. Just as youth have different academic learning styles and paces, some youth may develop SEL skills through different avenues than others or progress at different rates. One director shared: "The thing is, the more you're flexible, and give them more options, then the child will change. Behavior, you cannot change it in one day. It is a process. It goes slowly, slowly."

**Program Example: Adjusting time spent on activities as youth needs dictate**

One program director said that although she had designed a scope and sequence and timeline for SEL skill development throughout the year, there were many occasions where some youth progressed quickly while others needed more time: "I'm the person who really looks at whether we are ready to move on; let's make sure we really cover the topic first. There are some groups that did nonstop self-management for three or four weeks even though other groups only did it for a week." Because she knew during pre-planning that she likely would need to adjust later on, she was able to think ahead about lessons to skip or cut back to provide all youth the time they needed to develop the important skills they were working on.

Recommendation for Implementation: Enhance existing programming to make it more intentionally focused on SEL

Making the approach to SEL more intentional does not necessarily entail an overhaul of programming. Directors of programs who were intentional about their SEL focus were always looking for opportunities to build SEL culture, infuse SEL throughout all programming, and tweak non-SEL-focused activities to build SEL skills in some way. Some commonly used afterschool curricula, such as the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility's 4Rs Program, KidzLit, or TASC's Comic Book Club build SEL through literacy or the arts, but programs interested in strengthening their SEL approach do not necessarily need to buy new curricula or add new activities. Any strong afterschool activity can be strengthened to build SEL skills more explicitly by staff thinking outside of the box and integrating the language of SEL in instruction.

Promising Practice: Two-Way Communication with Stakeholders

Communication about the SEL vision, approach, and plan should be a two-way street between program leaders and program stakeholders, including program staff, youth, parents, and school staff. It is important to clearly articulate the program goals and approach to SEL to all stakeholders. It is equally important to get input from these stakeholders about youth SEL needs and progress.
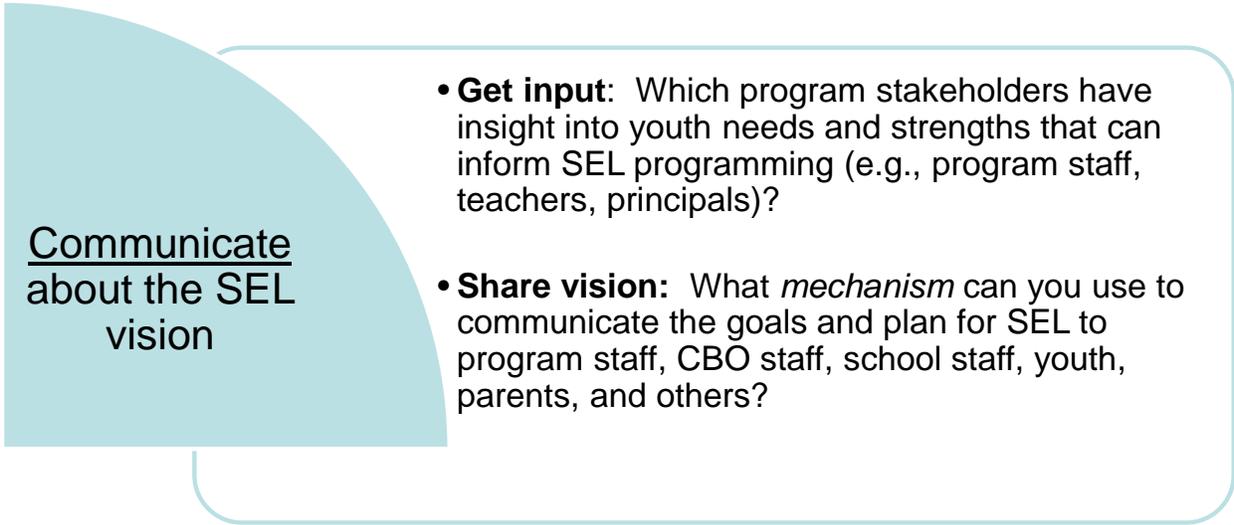
Communicate about the SEL vision

- **Get input**: Which program stakeholders have insight into youth needs and strengths that can inform SEL programming (e.g., program staff, teachers, principals)?

- **Share vision:** What *mechanism* can you use to communicate the goals and plan for SEL to program staff, CBO staff, school staff, youth, parents, and others?

Get input: *Facilitate frequent and open communication about the SEL behaviors and needs of youth.* Each program stakeholder—whether program staff members in different roles, the principal of a host school, or parents or school-day teachers—brings a different perspective to the needs and strengths of youth collectively and individually. The afterschool program can best support youth and address their needs if it does not operate in isolation, but rather opens up lines of communication, shares information, and welcomes the insights of these stakeholders.

For many afterschool programs, schools are an especially important partner. Good communication between program and school leadership can be a boon for SEL programming, and it also allows many CBOs to showcase their strengths. Maintaining frequent and open communication about SEL strategies implemented in afterschool, and how well they are working, allows staff to demonstrate how the program complements the work done by school-day staff. In addition, if school staff are aware of what afterschool staff are doing with SEL strategy or curricula, they can determine how best to structure their teaching to build on or reinforce the instruction from afterschool staff.

Program Example: Sharing knowledge with school partners

One COMPASS director and host school principal met during the summer to discuss how the afterschool program supported students' SEL needs. This conversation led to the school implementing during the day new strategies learned from the afterschool program, in particular during lunch periods when a lot of youth were acting out and getting in arguments with one another. Said the program director, "I know that [the school has] been working very collectively in trying to create a more sound, a more strong culture throughout the day. Especially with the lunch periods because they've been struggling a lot with behavior overall…Something that they have adopted from us is to really listen to the children, their feelings and try to make a more cohesive culture and align them with what we are already doing in the after school." The afterschool staff worked with the school to provide resources about how to mediate conflict between youth at lunch time, and how to listen to youth about the reasons for their actions and their feelings about the situation in the moment before prescribing a particular disciplinary action.

For example, in three of the programs visited for this study, the 4Rs curriculum developed by the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility was used both during the school day and after school. The education specialist, a DYCD-mandated position that helps to plan programming and often serves as a liaison between the school and the afterschool program, was key in ensuring that the way that the 4Rs curriculum was used after school complemented the school-day instruction instead of being redundant. The education specialist at one of these sites, a kindergarten teacher at the school, worked closely with school-day teachers to understand how youth were progressing in their 4Rs lessons during the day, both in terms of their SEL development and literacy skills. Youth who needed additional attention in these areas then participated in smaller group instruction after school that reinforced their school-day lessons, while those who were further along in development were grouped separately for instruction that supplemented and built upon their lesson. The education specialist passed along this information to the program director and afterschool staff so that youth would be grouped appropriately.

Center-based programs can also foster relationships with school partners. The study team visited two center-based programs that had made communication with participants' teachers or other school staff, such as guidance counselors, a priority. Directors and staff at these programs said that it was important to know what was going on with youth while they were in school, both academically and socially, because that is where youth spend the majority of their day. Both programs had designated a staff member to keep in contact with schools. Having knowledge of issues faced by individuals or groups of youth helped afterschool staff figure out how best to address those problems through an SEL lens. They in turn communicated what they were doing and observing afterschool back to teachers and other school staff. Said one program director, "We get to find out a lot of information as it relates to behavioral outbursts in school, or academic deficits, or stressors the family might be facing…the best way to really know if the work that we're doing here is productive is being able to really assess what their experiences are like eight hours a day at school by making outreach to the teachers, principals, social workers, and guidance counselors."

Promising Practice: Staff Hiring and Training

SEL is most effective when infused throughout programming. In order to do this well, programs need to build capacity in all staff so that they understand and model social-emotional skills throughout their work, rather than seeking out staff with particular expertise to hire for SEL-specific activities.

Train program staff

- **Encourage staff to model SEL:** Do staff know what SEL skills are, why they are important, and how to model these skills and behaviors?
- **Determine staff needs:** What new skills do staff need to support SEL behaviors and skills in youth?
- **Identify resources:** What resources and opportunities are available to train and support staff?

Multiple program directors said that the strength of their SEL programming hinged on the staff who were delivering activities, and that it was important for staff themselves to possess and demonstrate an SEL mindset. An SEL mindset is more than having strong youth development skills; it requires staff to understand what SEL skills are, why they are important, and specific strategies for helping youth to develop them.

The elementary-grades programs visited for this study had varied approaches to staffing. At many, the majority of the line staff were young adults, typically high school students (some of

whom had previously attended the program themselves) or younger college students. Some programs employed paraprofessionals or other staff that worked in the host school during the day. While staff across the programs differed in age and background, program directors all sought, first and foremost, staff who were passionate about helping youth, who were able to connect and communicate with youth, and who fit into the culture of the program. They were not necessarily looking explicitly for staff with prior experience of knowledge of SEL, but, in general, for staff who would be good afterschool program workers and who could be trained in SEL practices. One program director said he hired people from the local community who were interested in education as a future career. He said, "I see where my employees are at mentally, in terms of being an educator. At the end of the day, we're supposed to help [youth] to become better. If that's not achieved, then I feel like there's no purpose. That's supposed to be the purpose every day. Just make sure you have people on your team that's carrying that message out."

Recommendation for Implementation: Identify resources and allocate time for building SEL capacity in staff

Program directors noted that a SEL mindset was not necessarily something staff had when they were hired, and so they spent time helping staff develop this mindset. Provider organizations or program leadership largely are responsible for training COMPASS staff and can offer training to staff specifically around SEL to address any gaps. As one program director said,

> *Training… It's such an important piece because a lot of times, you'll get at the beginning, for example, when you hire staff, some are very cynical about it. They're like, "I don't understand [SEL]. Why are we doing this this way?" It's a different language when you're talking about using 'I messaging' or talking about positive reinforcement–how you speak to students, not using "no" or negative words to have them do something. You have to learn a lot of stuff. […] That's something that DYCD can do, is provide training or resources for programs.*

Promising Practice: Program-Embedded Approaches for Tracking Progress

A key component of continuous quality improvement is determining the success of programs, and making informed decisions for program refinements. The COMPASS programs included in this study used available information to assess their effectiveness at supporting the development of SEL skills in youth and to adjust programming. Importantly, assessing youth progress does not necessarily involve a formal evaluation or new data collection method: programs creatively relied on information that was already embedded in program operations, therefore minimizing the burden associated with this practice.

- **Identify signs of success:** How will you know if your program is helping youth develop SEL skills?
- **Document progress:** How will you document and communicate your SEL success?
- **Use the information:** How will you use this information to improve your SEL programming?

Assess progress

Embed measurement of SEL progress in program approaches, rather than impose an additional data collection burden. Identifying the specific SEL needs of youth is an important component of intentional SEL program design. Similarly, it is important to develop mechanisms to know whether programming is succeeding at helping youth build those skills. Often, this assessment component can be perceived as overwhelming or burdensome by afterschool program staff who envision a formal assessment or evaluation process (e.g., a survey or diagnostic assessment) that can be time-intensive for staff to administer and analyze, and often challenging to use in practical ways for program improvement. In contrast, sharing only anecdotal information about program success or growth for individual youth among staff may not be considered sufficient to document and make decisions about program improvement.

**Program Example: Documenting referrals and individual plans
for learning self-management skills**

One COMPASS program created an "IMPACT Room" (which stands for Intervention, Mediation, Productivity, Action, Commitment, Trust) as a first step for discipline and conflict resolution, designed to "teach the children to take responsibility for the choices that they make." Youth can choose to go to the room if they are having a bad day or they might be referred there in an effort to avert more serious disciplinary action. For instance, the program director also runs regular classes in the IMPACT room for fifth-graders focused on addressing feelings of jealousy and insecurity. Youth who are referred to the IMPACT room are tracked and receive an individualized IMPACT plan. The program collects information on use of the IMPACT room to make refinements for the program. The director said: "My plan is to figure out how many children are visiting the IMPACT room, what are the age ranges, what are the typical problems that are coming up? Is it conflict with other students? Is it meltdowns? I found with the little ones, a lot of times it's not so much conflicts with other students, a lot of times it's a meltdown. They're just done for the day." In this way, the measurement approach is embedded within the program operations, creating a clear link between measurement and program improvement for program staff.

The study team identified several promising approaches used by COMPASS programs that did not create an additional data collection burden on staff and that had a clear connection to program design. For example, programs can document the number of referrals of youth to mediation or behavior supports offered by the program or the number of rewards that youth earn for positive behaviors.

Youth Experiences with SEL Programming

The youth who participated in focus groups at each of the study sites were overall very positive about their experience in the COMPASS program. They spoke highly of the activities in which they participated, their relationships with other youth participants and the adults at their program, and the impact participation had had on them socially, emotionally, and, often, academically. The majority of youth were able to articulate specific SEL skills they had gained and how they had applied them to life or academic situations. Because each program implements a unique approach to SEL activities that develop different skills, the examples of skills gained shared by youth and program staff varied.

For example, in one program visited, all youth in the focus group were fourth- or fifth-graders who had been trained as peer mediators. Program staff pointed out that not all the peer mediators were natural leaders. They had specifically targeted some youth who often acted out or caused trouble and trained them to become peer mediators because staff felt these youth lacked self-confidence and would benefit from being trusted with responsibility and leadership opportunities. This was the case for one fifth-grader in particular who had previously had difficulty processing emotions appropriately and would cause fights with other children on a regular basis. During the focus group, this youth shared that training as a peer mediator and working closely with program staff who cared about him and showed him that he could use his experience dealing with difficult emotions to help other youth had made a big difference for him. The staff member who had worked most closely with this youth commented on the change in his behavior and attitude towards himself and other students in the few years she had been working with him; she said how he was now a popular child who was thriving academically.

Another site visited offered MicroSociety, a program that aims to develop leadership, teamwork, responsibility, and learning about community by creating a microcosm of society in which youth hold jobs and elected office. By holding a job in MicroSociety, youth learn about real life, the value of money, and how to work well with and communicate with others. One youth talked about developing skills through MicroSociety: *"By letting us work together, we communicate with others. I'm the library manager. I have some assistants. We communicated*

together because we're working together, so the more that we work together the more that we communicate and become more friends together." COMPASS staff at this program said they had observed positive changes in youth, including building confidence, leadership skills, and changed behaviors. Staff described the importance of placing youth with behavior issues in positions of leadership and giving them responsibility. For example, the education specialist described placing one boy who used to become easily agitated in a leadership position, as *"it rounded him to be more efficient and effective in doing his things…all my leaders, they all have come to the point where we can sit back and watch them conduct the class and then they take their leadership and enforce it on someone else and try to train someone else to be like them."*

Youth perceptions of the program. Youth were also mostly positive about their COMPASS program in survey responses. Fifty-nine percent reported it was very true that they liked their afterschool program overall, and 65 percent reported that it was very true that they liked the activities at the program (Exhibit 1). Youth also felt the afterschool program was a place they belonged (55 percent) and where it felt like they mattered (58 percent). However, youth expressed less positive feelings about their relationships with other youth at the program; less than half (43 percent) of youth said it was very true that other youth at the program cared about them. This suggests that while youth are generally happy with their program experience, there is room for improvement in program culture and for intentionally fostering positive relationships among participating youth.

Exhibit 1
Youth perceptions of the afterschool program (N=481)

How true are the following statements about this afterschool program?

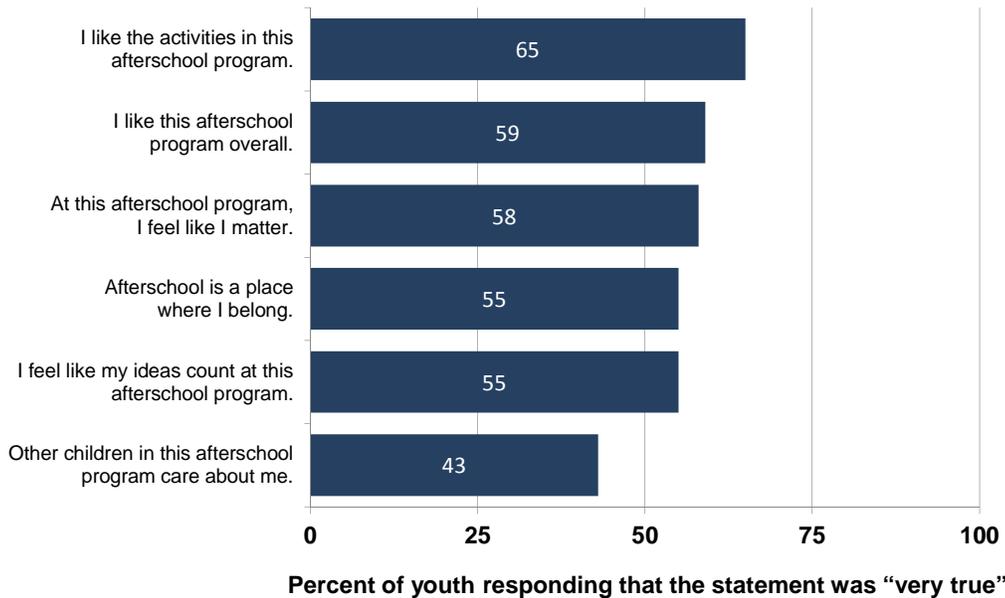**Percent of youth responding that the statement was "very true"**

Exhibit reads: In response to the question "How true are the following statements about this afterschool program?" Sixty-five percent of youth reported that it was very true that they liked the activities at the afterschool program.

Youth development in the program. Another survey question asked youth about various areas of SEL growth they had experienced by participating in their afterschool program (Exhibit 2). For all items but one, 52 percent or more of respondents answered that the statement was "very true."

Exhibit 2
Youth reports of SEL growth in the afterschool program (N=481)

How true are the following statements about how this afterschool program has helped you?

Statement	Percent
Make friends	75
Believe that I can be good at what I do	73
Be comfortable with who I am	72
Listen to what other people have to say	65
Be responsible for my actions	64
Be nice to other children	62
Take turns or share things with others	62
Work well in groups	61
Think before I speak	61
Make smart choices	60
Be a leader	60
Be a good role model	59
Try things that are hard	58
Offer to help other children in my class	56
Walk away from bad situations	55
Understand how other people feel	52
Disagree without fighting	52
Talk about how I am feeling	39

Percent of youth responding that statement was "very true"
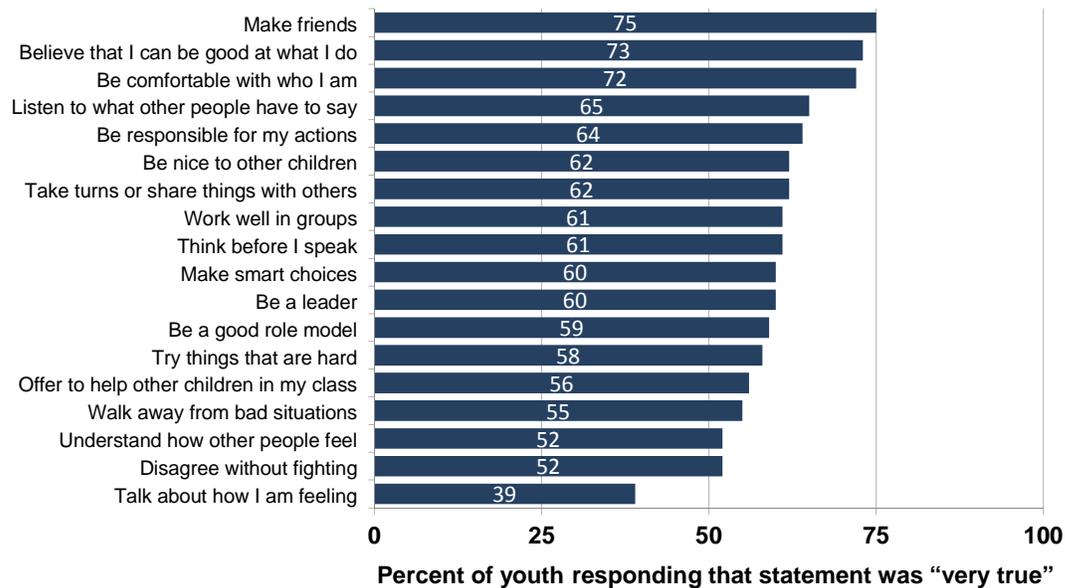
Exhibit reads: In response to the question, "How true are the following statements about how this afterschool program has helped you?" Seventy-five percent of youth responded that it was very true that the afterschool program had helped them make friends.

The statements with the highest percentage of youth reporting that it was very true that their afterschool program had helped them in that area pertained to interpersonal relationships and self-image. More than two-thirds of youth reported it was very true that their program had helped them:

- ■ Make friends (75 percent)
- ■ Believe that they could be good at things (73 percent)
- ■ Be comfortable with themselves (72 percent)

The high percentage of youth reporting that the program had helped them to make friends and build important skills for interpersonal relationships is somewhat surprising in light of the relatively low percentage of youth reporting that other youth cared about them. This may suggest that youth get along with one another at the program but that some elements of program culture may need to be reexamined in order to help youth foster deeper relationships with other youth.

18

Youth were less positive in their responses to a statement that their program had helped them to talk about their feelings; just 39 percent said this was "very true" and 22 percent of youth said this was "not at all true." This was a surprising finding, given that many of the SEL-focused activities at the programs visited involved youth self-reflection and discussion groups, and youth spoke very articulately with the study team about their experience at their program. Because program directors identified youth for participation in the focus group, these youth may not have been representative of all participants.

Youth relationships with adults. Youth also reported positive relationships with adults in the program (Exhibit 3). Seventy-two percent of youth reported that it was very true that they felt safe and comfortable with the adults in the afterschool program, and 68 percent reported it was very true that the adults in afterschool programming cared about them. Youth were slightly less positive when reporting that they felt they could talk to the adults in their afterschool program about things that were bothering them; 55 percent reported that this was very true.

Exhibit 3
Youth reports of relationships with adults in the afterschool program (N=481)

How true are the following statements about the adults in this afterschool program?

Statement	Percent "very true"
The adults here care about me.	72
I feel safe and comfortable with the adults in afterschool.	68
Adults and children treat each other with respect during afterschool.	57
I feel that I can talk to the adults in afterschool about things that are bothering me.	55

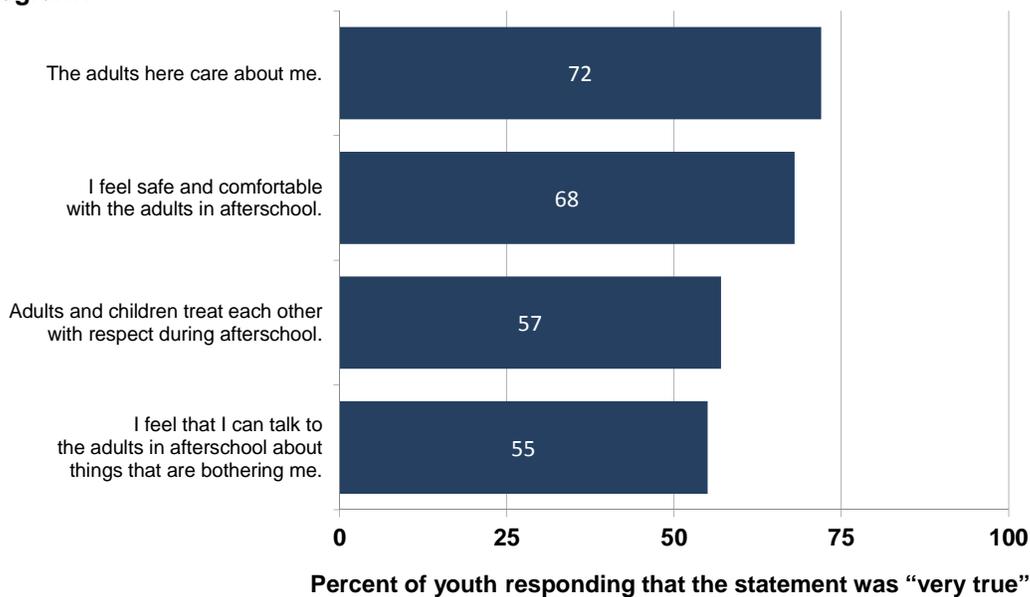**Percent of youth responding that the statement was "very true"**

Exhibit reads: In response to the question, "How true are the following statements about the adults at this afterschool program?" Seventy-two percent of youth reported that it was very true that the adults at the program cared about them.

19

Conclusion

Based on visits to 10 DYCD-funded COMPASS programs serving elementary grades youth in New York City, the PSA study team identified a set of promising practices for designing and implementing strong SEL-focused programming in afterschool programs. These practices include:

- Defining a program-wide guiding vision for SEL as a key first step that drives decision-making and continuous improvement practices;

- Grounding program design in the guiding vision, and intentionally designing programming to:
  - Reflect and respond to youth needs;
  - Create an SEL culture by infusing SEL throughout programming rather than as a sole activity; and
  - Build SEL skills deliberately and over time;

- Proactively communicating and soliciting input from stakeholders about the SEL approach, vision, and goals;

- Building capacity in staff to model SEL skills; and

- Tracking youth progress towards learning and being able to apply social-emotional skills by collecting information that is useful to the program for improvement.

As the examples in the report show, each of these practices are feasible for any afterschool program to implement. None of these practices require programs to buy curricula, add or drop activities, or hire different staff. Existing activity plans can be adapted to more explicitly integrate SEL.

One area in which DYCD may be able to help programs strengthen their SEL programming is by providing more resources and training to program leaders and staff around the specifics of SEL, particularly in the ways in which it differs from behavior management. Many program directors mentioned in interviews that their own knowledge of and materials related to SEL either came from their provider organization (if their CBO was specifically focused on SEL), or they had come up with it on their own by doing research. Program directors mentioned that it would be very helpful to have more DYCD training and resources for line staff around SEL. Directors and staff both mentioned that while they had received training from DYCD in general youth development topics, they would appreciate more direct instruction on SEL: what it is, what it looks like in afterschool programming, and what resources, such as curricula or examples of activities, to use.

References

Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2013). *The missing piece: A National Teacher Survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools.* Chicago, IL: Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates for the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2005). *Safe and sound: An educational leader's guide to evidence-based social and emotional learning programs - Illinois edition.* Chicago, IL: Author.

Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *45*, 294–309.

Elias, M.J., Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Frey, K.S., Greenberg, M.T., Haynes, N.M., Kessler, R., Schwab-Stone, M.E., & Shriver, T.P. (1997). *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Jones, S.M., Bouffard, S.M., & Weissbourd, R. (2013, May). Educators' social and emotional skills vital to learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *94*(8), 62-65.

Payton, J., Weissberg, R.P., Durlak, J.A., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., Schellinger, K.B., & Pachan, M. (2008, December). *The positive impact of social and emotional learning for kindergarten to eighth-grade students: Findings from three scientific reviews.* Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning.

Appendix: Youth Survey Instrument

Study of Social-Emotional Learning in COMPASS Programs
Youth Survey – 2014-15

Dear Student:

To learn more about how afterschool programs are helping children like you, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) has asked Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to collect information about students' experiences in the program.

This survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. **Please make sure you complete all pages of the survey.**

This survey is voluntary. If you do not want to fill out the survey, you do not have to. However, we hope you will take a few minutes to fill it out because your answers are important.

This survey is private. No one at your program, school or home will see your answers.

This is not a test. There are no right or wrong answers. Choose the answer that you feel best describes you or your program.

Thank you for your help!

- **Use a pencil or blue or black pen.**
- **Fill bubbles completely.**
- **Do not mark answers with ✗s or ✓s.**

Like this: ●

Not like this: ⊗ ⊘ ◑

Fill in the bubble to continue:

○ Yes, I agree to take this survey.

○ No, I do not agree to take this survey.

---

1. What grade are you in? (Fill in one circle.)

○ 3rd grade

○ 4th grade

○ 5th grade

Please continue on the other side ➡

2. How true are the following statements about how this afterschool program has helped you? (Fill in one bubble in each row.)

		Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true
a.	Be nice to other children	O	O	O
b.	Think before I speak	O	O	O
c.	Take turns or share things with others	O	O	O
d.	Work well in groups	O	O	O
e.	Make friends	O	O	O
f.	Make smart choices	O	O	O
g.	Be a leader	O	O	O
h.	Disagree without fighting	O	O	O
i.	Be a good role model	O	O	O
j.	Be responsible for my actions	O	O	O
k.	Talk about how I am feeling	O	O	O
l.	Walk away from bad situations	O	O	O
m.	Listen to what other people have to say	O	O	O
n.	Be comfortable with who I am	O	O	O
o.	Offer to help other children in my class	O	O	O
p.	Try things that are hard	O	O	O
q.	Understand how other people feel	O	O	O
r.	Believe that I can be good at what I do	O	O	O

3. How true are the following statements about the adults in this afterschool program? (Fill in one bubble in each row.)

		Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true
a.	I feel safe and comfortable with the adults in afterschool.	O	O	O
b.	The adults here care about me.	O	O	O
c.	I feel that I can talk to the adults in afterschool about things that are bothering me.	O	O	O
d.	Adults and children treat each other with respect during afterschool.	O	O	O

4. How true are the following statements about this afterschool program? (Fill in one bubble in each row.)

		Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true
a.	Afterschool is a place where I belong.	O	O	O
b.	Other children in this afterschool program care about me.	O	O	O
c.	I like the activities in this afterschool program.	O	O	O
d.	I like this afterschool program overall.	O	O	O
e.	I feel like my ideas count at this afterschool program.	O	O	O
f.	At this afterschool program, I feel like I matter.	O	O	O

Thank you!