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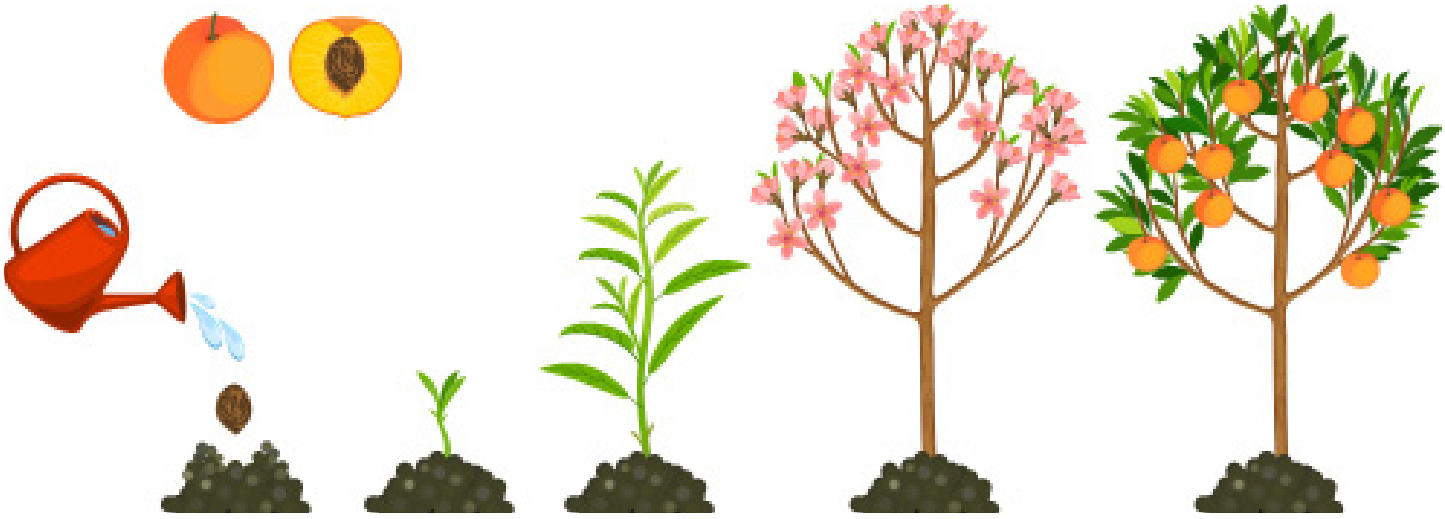
Seed Model Campus Cohort Program Evaluation

Early signs of campus improvement in social and emotional learning



Department of
Research and Evaluation
AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Executive Summary

Austin Independent School District (AISD) subscribes to a working definition of social and emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL). Research on proactive SEL practices shows many positive effects for students, including higher academic performance, more positive attitudes about the self and others, increased prosocial behavior, and reduced conduct problems and emotional distress (Mahoney et al., 2019). AISD has supported the district-wide acquisition and development of students' SEL skills since the 2011–2012 school year. During that time, program leaders have verified the essential contribution of campus-led SEL initiatives. Campus leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of their school communities and are best positioned to set up, lead, and reflect on strategic SEL goals.

While every school works with a district SEL specialist to set a yearly goal related to improvement in SEL implementation, some schools join an elective program called the Seed Model Cohort Program, or often called the Seed Program for short, to support their improvement process. The Seed Program began in 2017–2018 and just concluded its third year of implementation. This report looks at the impact of that program in the first few years of implementation. Admittedly, based on the program's design, this evaluation is earlier than expected. The program set ambitious goals, some of which could not be evaluated yet (Table 1). However, with looming changes on the horizon, we thought it would be valuable to peek under the hood now with the data already available. **The preliminary evidence in this report suggests that the Seed Program already positively contributes to SEL implementation, particularly through increased coordination of the SEL leadership efforts, and increased adult SEL skills.**

Table 1.
Summary of early results on Seed Program goals

Program-level goal	Timeline	Summary of results
1. Support 30% of schools to become a Seed school across each level	By 2019–2020	Achieved and surpassed in 2019–2020, serving 50% of schools
2. Increase equitable representation of AISD among Seed schools	By 2019–2020	Achieved in 2018–2019 and sustained
3. Use data to identify best SEL practices from Seed schools	By 2019–2020	Achieved throughout in various ways
School-level goal	**Timeline**	**Summary of results**
4. Improved program fidelity on SEL implementation rubric	By 2019–2020	Achieved in 2018–2019, particularly improvement in SEL leadership, but not across all areas of implementation.
5. Improved ratings on teacher climate and satisfaction (TELL and Employee Coordinated Survey) in Seed schools	By 2020–2021	Achieved in 2018–2019, particularly around increases in adult SEL skills, but not extending to general teacher satisfaction; however, trends at the secondary level hint at climate benefits for teachers.
6. Improved ratings on student climate in Seed schools	By 2020–2021	Not clearly achieved through 2018–2019, though trends at the secondary level hint at climate benefits for students.
7. Improved staff retention in SEL Seed schools	By 2020–2021	Not included in this report, too soon to expect outcomes at this time
8. Improved student outcomes in SEL Seed schools (academic performance, attendance, disciplinary referrals)	By 2020–2021	Not included in this report, too soon to expect outcomes at this time

Source. SEL 2.0 logic model written in the fall of 2017

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Introduction

Austin Independent School District (AISD) subscribes to a working definition of social and emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL). Many school districts try to address SEL by implementing a stand-alone program, but AISD takes a different appraoch. AISD's SEL Department supports a systemic implementation of SEL throughout the district, aligning their effort with the natioanl conversation on SEL, with other departments within the district, and with local community service providers.

At the campus level, however, there is great variation in how SEL implementation manifests. Part of the systemic appraoch to districtwide SEL implementation is the core belief that campus leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of their school communities and are best positioned to set up, lead, and reflect on strategic SEL goals. Therefore, each school works directly with a SEL specialist from central office, setting yearly goals related to improvement in SEL implementation appropriate to the needs of that campus. Since 2017–2018, the SEL Department has grown the Seed Model Cohort Program, which campus-level personnel are invited to join for additional support toward their campus-bsaed SEL implementation goals. Usually called the Seed Program for short, this report examines the first few years of its implemetnation.

Program Outcomes: An Expanding Path Toward Inclusion, Collaboration, and Sustainability

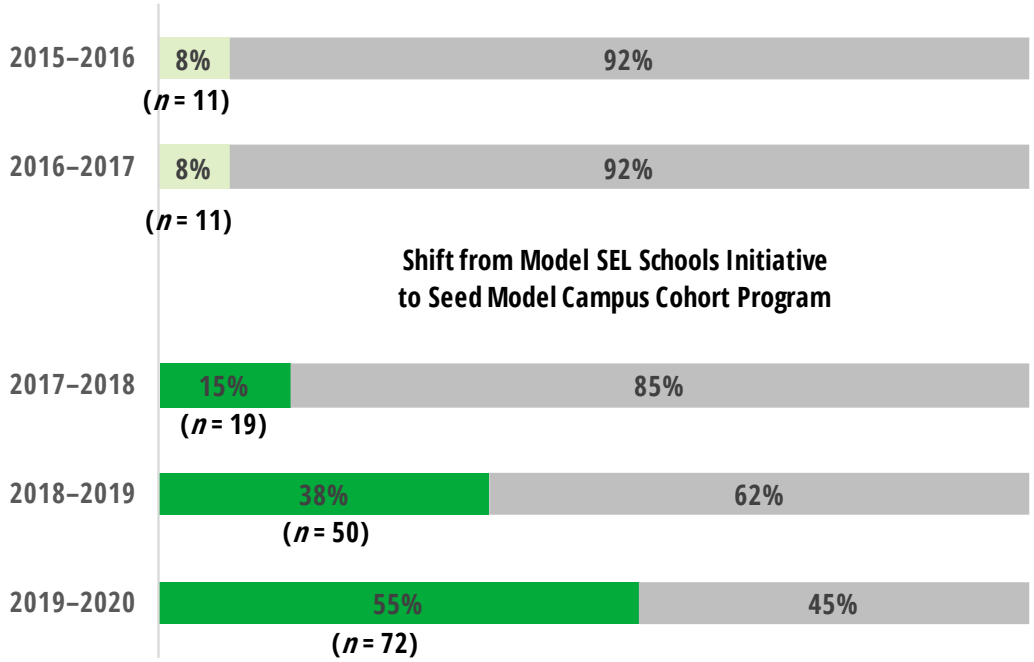
How many schools did the Seed Program support?

One goal of the Seed Program was to support 30% of the AISD schools by 2019–2020. The program actually met that goal in 2018-2019 and surpassed it in 2019–2020, serving 55% of the district's schools by the third year of implementation (Figure 1). Behind the simple increase in numbers, however, is a richer story about the strategic reframing that explains how this elective program became desirable to half of the district's schools within 3 years.

The Seed Program we have today was born out of an earlier program, called the Model SEL Schools Initiative which started in the 2015–2016 school year. Program leaders designed that initial program to identify and highlight the best in SEL implementation across the district. Program leaders chose the initial schools to participate in the 2-year cohort and highlighted them as "model SEL schools" for their achievement in SEL implementation. Once selected, these schools welcomed campus visits from district stakeholders, community members, and other school districts interested in effective SEL implementation (Lamb, 2017). In total, 11 schools participated over 2 years, representing approximately 8% of the district's schools and approximately 13% of the district's students.

Figure 1.

By 2019–2020, 55% of AISD schools participated in the Seed Program.



Source. AISD demographic data

Note. The total number of schools in this figure is 131 per year, including all special campuses, however, some campuses are not included in the outcomes analyses in this report due to missing or irregular data. See side bar on methodology on page 17.

In 2017–2018, the program was reborn as the Seed Model Campus Cohort Program, more commonly referred to as the Seed Program, with a shift of intention and tactics. Instead of highlighting achievement in SEL implementation, program leaders designed the solutions-based program to support growth in SEL implementation, even from the tiniest "seed" of a beginning.[1] Unlike in prior years, program leaders invited all campuses to participate, whether SEL was a point of campus pride or not. The focus shifted from exhibiting SEL achievement to fostering a growth mindset toward SEL implementation and a strategic shift in the functional definition of the word '*model*'. The program relaxed the previous rigor of the application and opened the program to all AISD schools, while reinforcing structures around mutual sharing and provided a small monetary incentive for participation. In this new format, schools had to create a goal in SEL implementation and set a plan and budget for how they would accomplish that goal over the year, and then reflect on their work at the end of the year.

In 2017–2018, 19 schools elected to participate in the program, representing 15% of the district's schools and 24% of the district's students. The proportion of the district's schools and students was still relatively small but was well divided between school levels and also large enough to develop the program. In 2018–2019, 50 schools participated in the program, representing 39% of the district's schools and 46% of the students. At that level, they reached a program goal to support at least 30% of the district's schools. The following year they exceeded that goal. In 2019–2020, 72 schools elected to participate, representing 55% of the district's schools and 54% of the district's students.

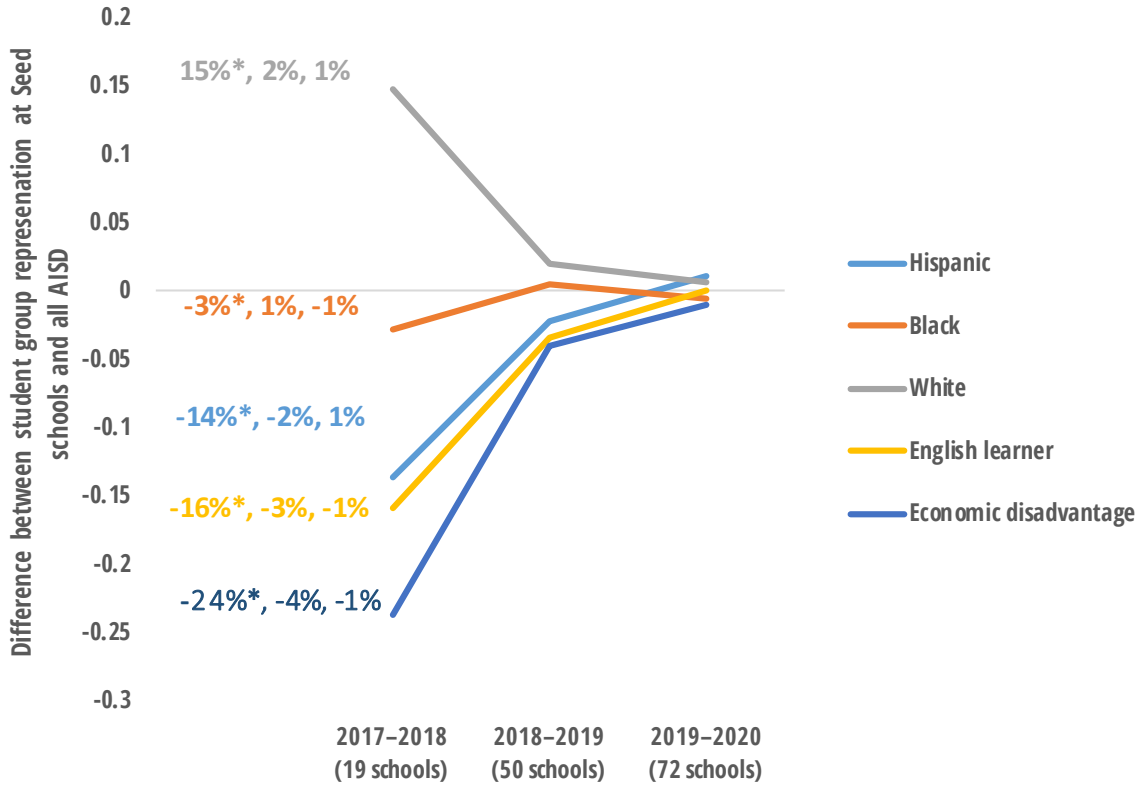
[1] Many people incorrectly assume the word 'Seed' is an acronym. However, the name 'Seed' is a symbolic reference to potential and growth.

How representative were Seed schools of AISD?

Another program goal was to increase the equitable representation of AISD among Seed schools within 3 years. Demographic analysis comparing Seed schools with non-Seed schools in the first year of the program shows that the 19 participating schools did not reflect the same demographic profile of the district, showing significant equity-related issues. The initial Seed schools were different in their average number of White, Black, and Hispanic students, English learners (ELs), and students with economic disadvantage (Figure 2). However, by the second year of the program, the Seed schools were reflective of the rest of the district in each demographic group.

Figure 2.

In 2017–2018, the average demographic representation of Seed schools was statistically different from district averages, but by 2018–2019, those differences had decreased and the program was representative of the district as a whole.



Source. AISD demographic data

Note: * represents statistically significant difference from district average ($p < .05$). All five primary indicators of demographic representation were significantly different from the district in 2017–2018, and none were significantly different in 2018–2019 or 2019–2020.

How to Read Figure 2:

The zero line in Figure 2 shows the average representation for a certain student group across all campuses in that year. For example, in 2017–2018, the average representation of White students across all standard AISD campuses was 23%. In that same year, the average representation of White students at the 19 Seed campuses was 37%. The difference of representation of White students between Seed schools and AISD's overall population was different by approximately 15 percentage points and statistically significant ($p < .05$). The next year, the average representation of White students across the district schools was 23% and the average representation of the White students at Seed schools was 25%, which is a difference of 2 percentage points, and was not statistically significant.

While a convergence toward the mean is likely in any program that goes from supporting 15% of a district's schools to 55% of its schools, it could have gone differently. This program was always optional, and disproportionally White schools could have characterized the program in the following years as they did in 2017–2018. The program could have failed to be culturally relevant to schools that had more disadvantaged populations. The program could have continued to focus on exceptionalism instead of support, or achievement instead of improvement. Instead, program leaders were tracking equitable representation of the program from day 1 and exploring concrete actions they could take to make the program more inclusive.

During these same years, a collective discussion emerged about the White-centeredness of many SEL initiatives across the country (Simmons, 2019). Practitioners, both in AISD and nationally, had communicated back to SEL leaders that many of the evidence-based resources they had been given were not relevant to their minority students, and when SEL leaders went looking for better materials, they could not find any that were already evidence based. During this time, AISD made the organizational change to merge the SEL and Cultural Proficiency and Inclusiveness (CPI) teams, along with the Families as Partners Program, to create one collaborative department.

Practioners became clear that SEL would be stronger if informed by cultural proficiency and cultural proficiency would be stronger if informed by SEL. When Seed schools wanted to set goals that explicitly linked SEL and cultural proficiency, they were encouraged to integrate the two objectives. Although no statistical analyses have been conducted to prove which of these actions caused the shift to more inclusiveness for the Seed Program between year 1 and year 2, it was likely the results of some constellation of these intentional efforts.

Concrete actions that contributed to the shift to equitable representation for the Seed Program that might be transferable to other initiatives include the following:

- **Setting and tracking specific program goals related to equitable representation**
- **Shifting from an achievement-based to a growth-based application**
- **Providing enough funding so supplies and direct costs are not a barrier**
- **Increasing the amount of cross-pollination between schools**
- **Recognizing that resources and strategies offered at the district level might need to be modified to be culturally relevant to each school**
- **Supporting campus goal setting that integrates cultural proficiency and equity**

How did Seed schools share what they were learning?

Throughout its 3 years of implementation, the Seed Program used a variety of methods to identify and share best practices in SEL implementation. These methods have taken many forms, including hosting tours for outside visitors; creating semesterly Seed cohort gatherings in which teachers could informally toss around ideas in process; gathering everyone for an end-of-year formal sharing; and even a formal case study of best practices, which resulted in a published report.

Each year, AISD's SEL Department gets many requests from outside the district to share what it has learned about districtwide SEL implementation. While the SEL Department tries to offer a big picture response, they also want other stakeholders to understand how campus-based implementation can vary at each school. Through the Seed Program, AISD is able to provide a window into SEL implementation at the school level. One requirement of the Seed process is that a school be willing to host a SEL tour for outside visitors. In the first year, 10 to 15 visitors took each tour, and by 2019–2020, approximately 25 visitors took each tour, representing many districts in Texas, across the nation, and internationally.

While every school in the district has the support of a SEL specialist from the central office, Seed schools have supplemental opportunities to get support for their SEL growth. In addition to an optional online course in SEL leadership, all Seed schools send campus-based SEL leaders to participate in a cohort process which involves talking with teachers at other schools about SEL implementation work. This peer-to-peer cross-pollination has been a key feature of the Seed Program since its beginning. There are fall and spring cohort gatherings and an end-of-year event for reflecting on the year-long process. That event, called a Share Fair, happens in coordination with the SEL Symposium each summer. Each school presents on its work that year, and teachers from other schools can circulate and look for inspiration for their next year of SEL growth. At this event, Seed campuses are grouped into seven areas of focus include student voice, explicit instruction, equity/CPI, family and community engagement, adult SEL through teacher leadership or professional learning, and integration through either conflict resolution strategies or development of a common language.

Norman-Sims Elementary

O'Henry Middle

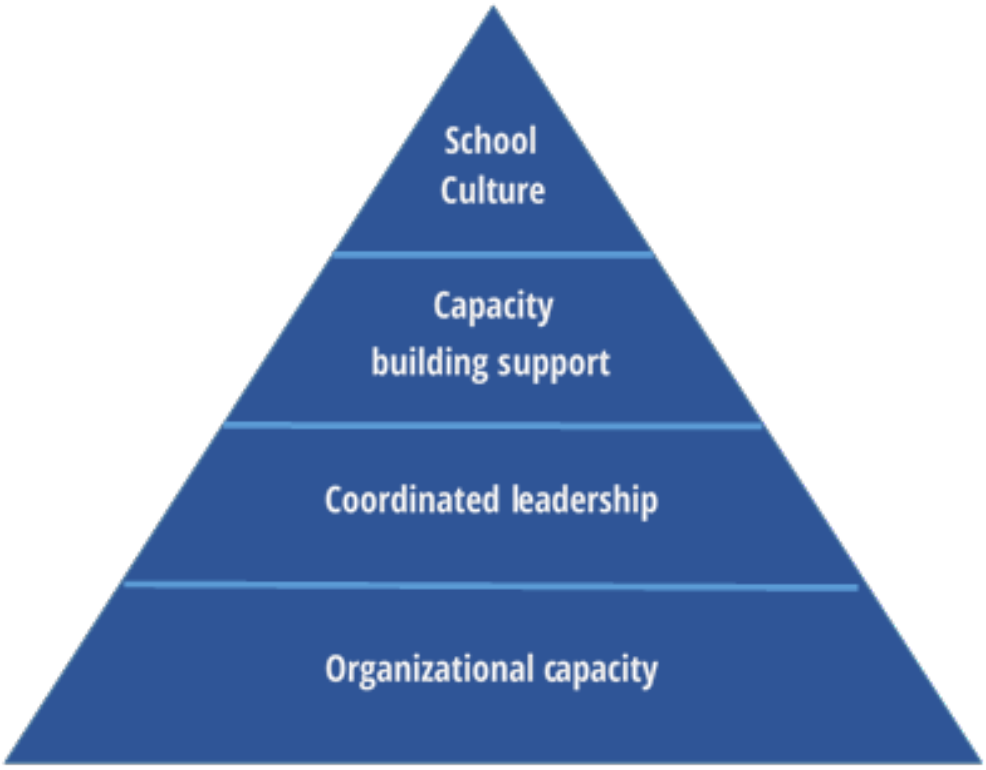
Barrington Elementary

Seed Program Share Fair at the SEL Symposium on June 11, 2019

Also, in 2018–2019, researchers in the Department of Research and Evaluation selected six schools at which to perform an extended case study to understand the best practices and barriers to SEL implementation. Two schools were chosen from each level; one Seed school and one non-Seed school. For each school, researchers conducted focus groups with students and teachers and interviewed the SEL facilitator at that school and SEL specialists from the district. In addition, researchers interviewed some parents and administrators. Researchers identified four themes that contributed to SEL implementation (Figure 3). Best practices in campus SEL implementation were contingent upon (a) the campus's organizational capacity, and then (b) the coordination of the campus leadership, then (c) the capacity building done on the campus, and finally (d) the school culture (Fayles, 2019).

Fayles laid out a system of interconnected SEL-related processes that either foster or hinder SEL implementation. He noticed that campus-based SEL leadership was more likely to be empowered when a school had enough organizational capacity to run smoothly than when it lacked that capacity. Factors such as staff turnover and inadequate support from the district hindered a school's ability to operate smoothly. When a school had enough capacity to operate without constant disruption, campus SEL leadership could devote time, space, and resources to creating and executing a plan for SEL implementation. However, Fayles noted this leadership needs to be coordinated in order to be successful. When campus leaders had different ideas about what defined SEL, how SEL should be used, or who should be using SEL, he noticed challenges to progress in SEL implementation. However, when the leadership was coordinated, they were able to be consistent, which, in turn, led to successful capacity-building activities with the staff, and eventually to improved SEL skills for both students and adults; healthier relationships in the community; and consequently, a better school culture. To bring this research full circle, the research team presented these themes to campus-based SEL facilitators the following fall, stimulating a robust discussion among all.

Figure 3.
Foundations of campus SEL implementation



See the full report on best practices and barriers to SEL implementation at https://tinyurl.com/BestPracticesSELimplementation

How has the program moved toward sustainability?

The Seed Program has been consistently dedicated to growth and improvement. Each year, it gathered feedback from participants and adjusted how it provided support the following year. This type of responsiveness is usually useful, but it is especially important to a program in which participation is optional. To attract participating schools, the Seed Program had to provide incentives that were actually meeting the school's needs. However, the program leaders did not want to build a program that only addressed immediate needs. They were also interested in building capacity at the school level, where SEL improvement was sustainable in the long term.

While participation always remained elective, program leaders incentivized participation with celebration and financial support. When a school joined the Seed Program, it received a banner to display on campus, and with each year of participation, the school received a patch for being a part of the cohort. In addition, funds were provided from the St. David's Foundation and other local benefactors to support the SEL implementation goal set by the school. Program leaders distributed the funds among the participating schools each year. While the number of schools increased during the 3 years, the funding stayed the same. In 2017–2018 elementary schools could spend $1500 and secondary campuses could spend $2000. In 2018–2019 and 2019-2020, funds were allocated in amounts that aligned with each campus's student enrollment. For example, in 2018–2019, if a campus had fewer than 500 students, it was allocated $750, while campuses with more than 1500 students were allocated $2000. In 2019–2020, funds were reduced a bit further to allow more schools to join the program. Though these funds represented increasingly fewer dollars each year per school, they certainly lifted barriers to participation in the program and provided important financial support for the planning of these school-based initiatives.

For 2020–2021, the initiatives being implemented across the district have increased, ranging from cultural proficiency and restorative practices, trust based relational interventions, a neuro-sequential model for education, Families as Partners, and more. SEL is woven into all of these initiatives. While the financial support directly tied to the Seed Program is expected to decrease in 2020–2021, the program's goal is to adjust the Seed process to empower campuses to consider how they might coordinate their efforts around those initiatives and create a Seed implementation plan that produces a collaborative and meaningful experience for their staff and students.

Elementary Outcomes: Stronger SEL Implementation Through Improved Adult SEL Skills and Coordinated SEL Leadership

In 2018–2019, the Seed elementary schools had several data points that served as evidence for increased levels of SEL implementation in those schools. In three areas of investigation, our analysis showed statistically meaningful differences between elementary schools that participated in the Seed Program and those that did not: (a) the overall SEL implementation score, as measured by the SEL implementation rubric (see Appendix B); (b) the specific SEL implementation goal of empowering campus leadership; and (c) teacher responses to targeted questions about adult SEL skills on their campus. In all three cases, the results are primary evidence of successful program implementation. There was little evidence to suggest that participation in the Seed Program for one year (2017–2018) led to meaningful improvements in campus climate (as measured by student, parent, and teacher climate surveys). However, those changes in climate were intended as long-term outcomes (see Table 1).

This analysis compares the 36 Seed elementary schools with the 46 non-Seed elementary schools in the same year. Only eight of the 36 schools had participated in the Seed Program the prior year, so 78% of the elementary schools were new to the Seed Program in 2018–2019. In 2018–2019, Seed schools were demographically similar to non-Seed elementary schools in term of percentage of Hispanic, Black, White, and EL students and those who qualify as economically disadvantaged. In 2017–2018, the 36 Seed schools were similar to non-Seed schools in many respects: the percentage of students who met State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) reading and math standards; discipline rates; attendance rate; how parents, teachers, and students responded to most of the questions in their respective climate surveys; and how they scored on the SEL Implementation Survey.

Methodology

The nature of this analysis was exploratory, not experimental. The various analyses generally used an alpha of .05 to determine statistical significance. In cases of a small sample size, we report some results as marginally significant if the *p* value is between .05 and .1. However, in the case of surveys with 20 plus items, we restrict the alpha to .01 to account for the repeated measures. We also restrict data based on effect size, which is a measure of strength of the relationship. Results from all figures have an effect size of at least .2, which we consider still weak but noteworthy. Effects sizes from .4 to .6 are moderate, from .6 to .8 are strong, and above .8 are very strong.

Input Data Sources

We used student attendance, discipline, STAAR, and demographic data to compare the characteristics of Seed schools with characteristics of non-Seed schools.

Outcomes Data Sources From Spring 2018 and Spring 2019

SEL Implementation Survey: This school-level survey of measurable actions to enhance SEL implementation each year is filled out by the SEL specialist in collaboration with the campus SEL facilitator and principal. It has 18 items, worth 1 to 5 points each, for a summed range of 18 to 90.

Teacher Climate Survey (Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning [TELL]): Responses to 20 plus survey items related to SEL and climate range from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (1 to 4). We identified teachers working at the same school both years and calculated the change between their individual responses over 2 years.

Employee Coordinated Survey: Responses to 15 survey items related to adult SEL skills and school culture, range from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1 to 4). There was not a sufficient response rate to match individual teachers across years.

Student Climate Survey: Responses to 20 plus survey items related to SEL and climate ranging from never to all the time (1 to 4). We identified students attending the same school both years and calculated change between their individual responses over two years.

Parent Survey: Responses to 20+ survey items related to SEL and school climate, range from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1 to 4). We could not match individual parents across years due to data not being identified.

Seed school SEL implementation goals (2018–2019): Forty-one out of 50 schools submitted defined SEL implementation goals in 2018–2019. We coded those based on themes to understand the qualities of implementation.

All schools and students were included in demographic and program-level analyses, but analysis of school-level outcomes was restricted to a smaller group of schools that had consistent data availability. The removed schools were Dobie Prekindergarden, Webb Primary, AISD Child Development Center, Mainspring Schools, MCMS Education Center, Austin State Hospital, Rosedale*, Clifton, Garza, Travis Grad Prep, Navarro Grad Prep, Alternative Learning Center*, Travis County Day School, Travis County Juvenile Detention Center, Phoenix Academy*, Leadership Academy*, Juvenile Justice Alternative Educatoin Program*, and District Alternative Education Program*. Most of these unique schools still received support from SEL specialists and several (indicated by *) participated in the Seed Program at some point. Some descriptive calculations in this report may be slightly different from results published in other places due to differences in which schools were included at the time of analysis.

Data sources from 2019–2020 were not available due to the coronavirus interruption.

What did the elementary Seed schools do?

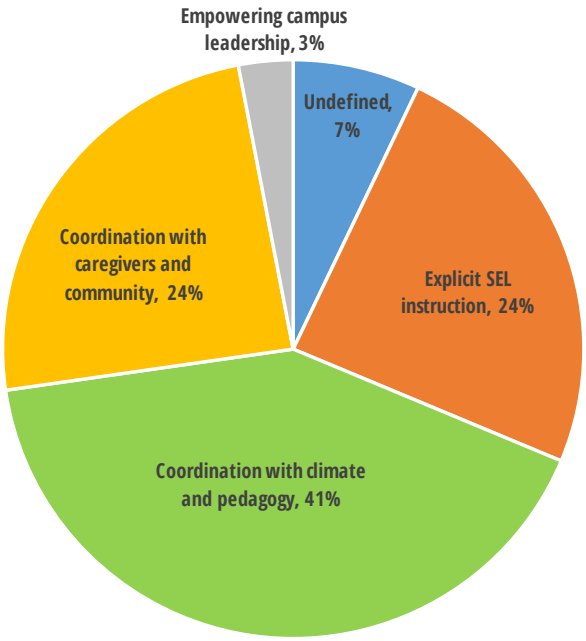
The basic structure of the Seed Program is to support schools as they set a progress goal related to SEL implementation, act on it, and reflect on it. Their goal is supposed to fall into one or two areas from the SEL Implementation Survey taken by every campus at the end of each year: empowering campus leadership, coordination with climate and pedagogy, coordination with families and caregivers, or explicit SEL instruction. In 2018–2019, Seed elementary schools set 41% of their goals in the area of coordination with climate and pedagogy (Figure 4). Of these, nine schools incorporated peace areas into their goal. Interestingly, very few goals were categorized by research staff as empowering campus leadership (3%) but when we look at the goals themselves, we see that they often necessitated a highly empowered and coordinated approach to SEL leadership. Here are two examples:

> "We've conducted a survey concerning the Peace Areas and the Peace Path process. We currently have 88% of classrooms with Peace Areas, 72% of which are functioning. 50% of our teachers said they were very familiar with the Peace Path process and 50% said they were slightly familiar… This survey informed PD for January."

> "The first goal we have focused on during fall semester is that of teachers receiving training on what a peace area should look like and how it should be used. Teachers are now implementing peace areas and peace area calm-down strategies in 100% of [our] classrooms. One of our campus SEL Facilitators led a training on peace areas and peace paths during one of our fall faculty meetings."

Figure 4.

In 2018–2019, the majority of elementary Seed schools focused their goals on coordination with climate and pedagogy.



Source. Seed school applications, *n* = 29 Seed elementary schools

How did SEL implementation at elementary Seed schools compare to non-Seed elementary schools?

Overall, Seed elementary schools were 4.8 times more likely to be in the top quartile of SEL implementation scores than non-Seed elementary schools ($p = .0031$, $n = 82$) (Figure 5). AISD approximates a measure of SEL implementation each year through a collaborative survey completed by the district SEL Specialist supporting that school, the school's SEL facilitator(s), and the school's principal (See the SEL Implementation Survey in Appendix A and the sidebar on methodology on page 17 for more information). In 2018–2019, the top 25% of elementary schools scored an 80 or higher on the SEL Implementation Survey.

Figure 5.

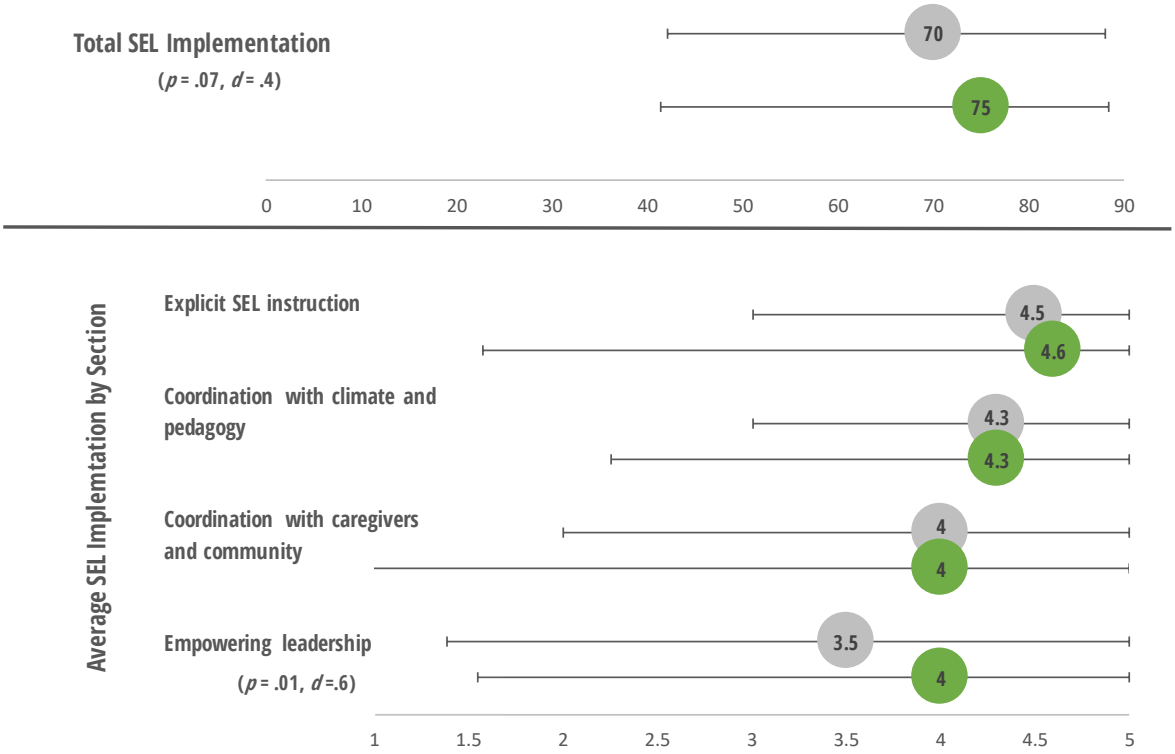
In 2018–2019, Seed elementary schools were 4.8 times more likely to be high implementers of SEL than were non-Seed elementary schools.

Source. 2018–2019 SEL Implementation Survey
Note. $p = .0031$, $n = 82$ AISD elementary schools (36 Seed and 46 Non-Seed)

While Seed schools were more likely to be in the top quartile of SEL implementation (Figure 5), it is interesting to note that the total range of SEL implementation scores for Seed and non-Seed schools was nearly identical (Figure 6). The lowest score of a Seed school was 1 point lower (41/90) than the lowest score for a non-Seed school (42/90). The highest score for each group was the same (88/90). Being a Seed school does not necessarily mean the school is excelling in SEL implementation, it just means the school is *trying* to grow in its SEL implementation. On average, the difference in overall implementation scores between Seed and non-Seed elementary schools was marginally significant in 2018-2019. While non-Seed elementary schools scored an average of 70 points out of 90, Seed elementary schools scored an average of 75 ($p = .07$, $d = .4$) These same groups had similar SEL implementation scores in 2017–2018, which suggests that participation in the Seed Program in 2018–2019 helped improve their SEL implementation that year.

Figure 6.

In 2018–2019, Seed elementary schools had higher overall SEL implementation than non-Seed elementary schools in 2018–2019, particularly in the section focused on empowering campus leadership.

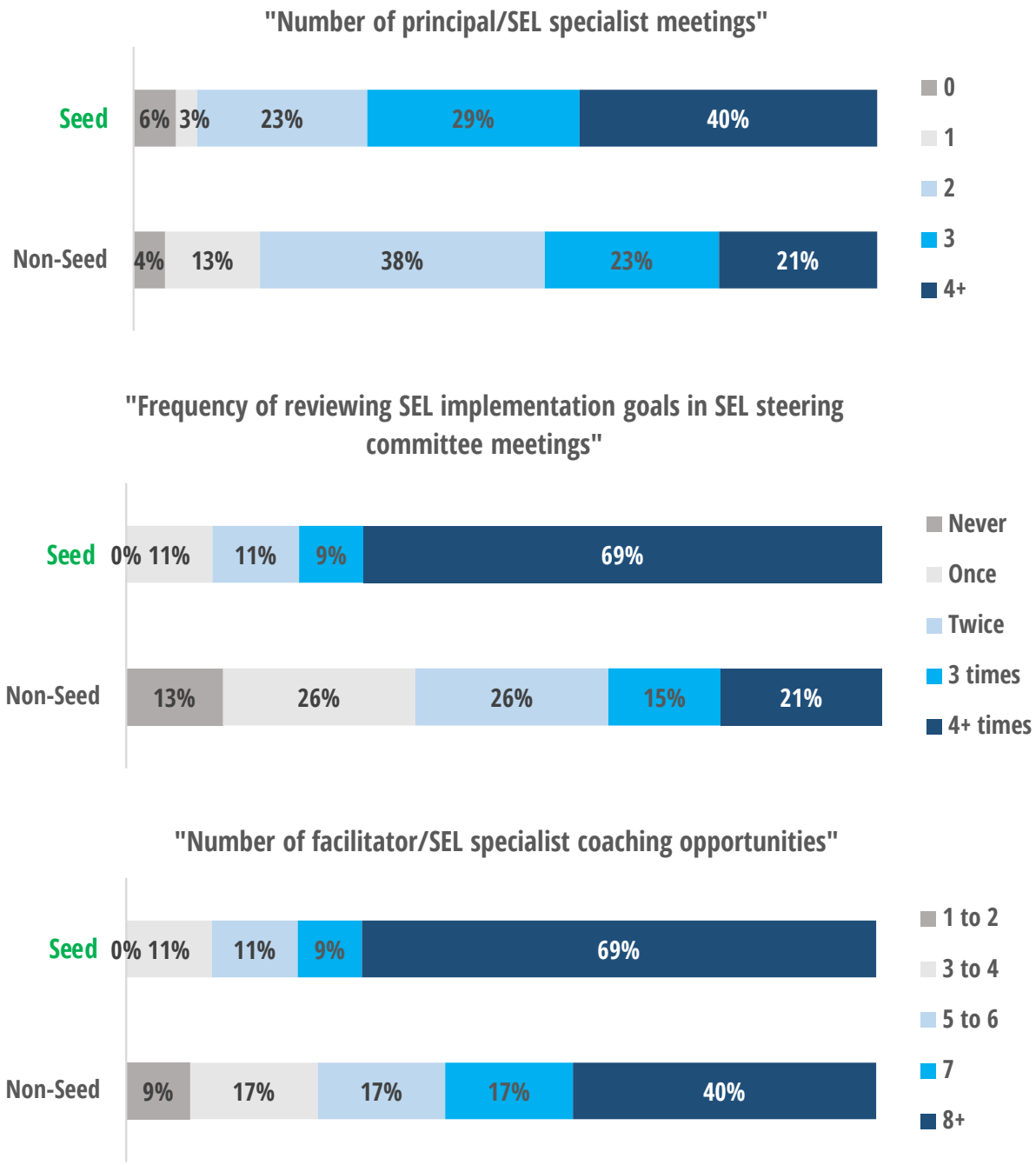


Source. 2018–2019 SEL Implementation Survey
Note: The number in a circle is the average; bars extend to the minimum and maximum score. *n* = 82 AISD elementary schools (36 Seed and 46 non-Seed)

When we look at the four sections of the SEL Implementation Survey, we notice significant differences between scores on the goal regarding empowering campus leadership. While the non-Seed elementary schools scored an average of 3.5 on that section, Seed elementary schools scored an average of 4 ($p = .01$, $d = .6$). These differences are even more meaningful when we dive into the particular items in the leadership section. In 2018–2019 teachers in Seed schools reported more engagement by their SEL leadership than did teachers at non-Seed elementary schools in three areas: the number of meetings between principal and SEL specialist ($p = .05$, $d = .44$), the frequency of reviewing SEL implementation goals in SEL steering committee meetings ($p = .0002$, $d = .89$), and the number of coaching opportunities between facilitators and the SEL specialist ($p = .01$, $d = .57$) (Figure 7). These data are evidence of the program effectiveness at meeting its primary objectives, particularly in the area of empowering campus leadership towards SEL implementation.

Figure 7.

In 2018–2019, elementary schools in the Seed Program had more engagement in SEL implementation by their principals, SEL steering committees, and SEL facilitators than did non-Seed elementary schools.



Source. 2018–2019 SEL Implementation Survey.
Note. n = 82 AISD elementary schools (36 Seed and 46 non-Seed).

Did elementary Seed schools show improvement in climate?

To analyze whether Seed schools were experiencing early improvements on long-term outcomes, we looked at the changes in responses on teacher and student surveys between 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 based on a school's participation in the program during 2018–2019. At the elementary level, there were significant differences on the six items related to adult SEL skills (Figure 8). Five of the six questions had significant increases for teachers at Seed schools between years (indicated by a solid green line), while only one question had a significant increase at non-Seed schools (indicated by a solid grey line). Overall, we can interpret a trend of larger growth in adult SEL skills at Seed schools than at non-Seed schools.

We also analyzed other survey items that reflect on student and teacher climate, but found no meaningful differences between Seed and non-Seed schools for these 2 years at the elementary level. While the survey items directly related to adult SEL are a tight fit with the implementation of the Seed Program, these other indicators are more globally concerned with a teacher's or student's impressions of their school climate. It is not surprising that no statistically meaningful improvements were found between the first and second year implementation of the Seed Program, as these are long-term program goals. Other long-term outcomes stated in the logic model (e.g., changes in discipline rates, attendance rates, and academic performance) were not analyzed for this report, since it is too early in implementation of the Seed Program to expect significant changes in these metrics.

How to Read Figure 8:

Figure 8 and others like it in this report are designed to compare the difference in change between Seed and non-Seed schools. Here are some guiding points to help you interpret them:

Grey is always non-Seed average.

Green is always Seed average.

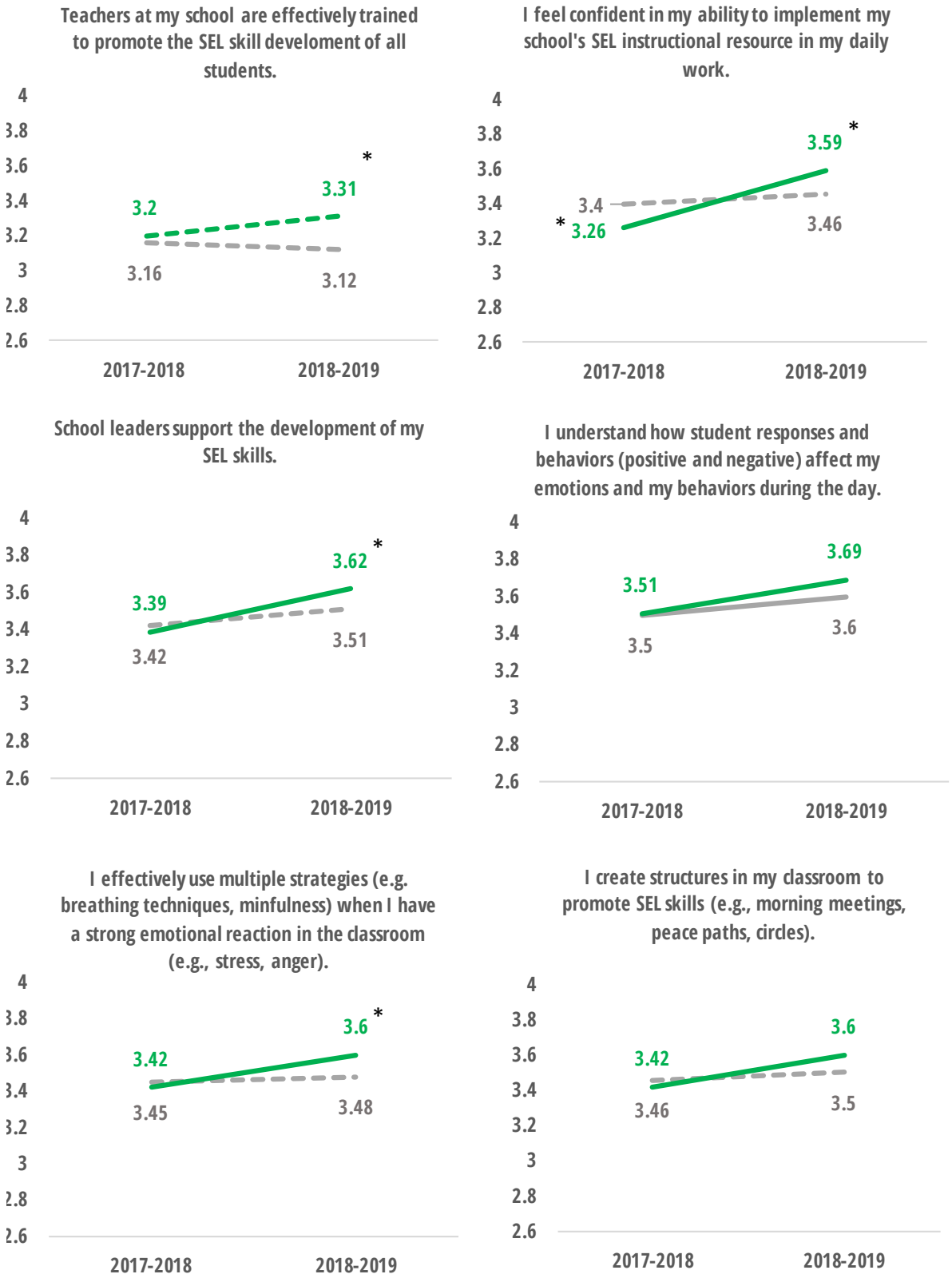
When there is an asterisk beside the Seed average, that means the average Seed response was significantly different from the average non-Seed response within that year.

The line indicates the change between 2 years

- **A solid line means the change is statistically significant.**
- **A dashed line means the change is not statistically significant, so technically there was no change.**

Figure 8.

In 2018–2019, elementary teachers at Seed schools reported increases in their own SEL skills and observed improvement in SEL skills on their campuses.



Note. A solid line indicates statistically significant changes between years. An asterisk beside the Seed number in green indicates statistically significant differences between Seed and non-Seed schools within that year. 2017–2018 *n* = 462 (192 Seed and 270 non-Seed. 2018–2019 *n* = 429 (232 Seed and 197 non-Seed). All Seed designations are based on 2018–2019 status.

Secondary Outcomes: Stronger SEL Implementation Through Improved Adult SEL Skills and Leaders Investing in Their Own SEL Skills

In 2018–2019, the Seed secondary schools had several data points that served as evidence for increased levels of SEL implementation in those schools. In four areas of investigation, our analysis showed statistically meaningful differences between secondary schools that participated in the Seed Program and those that did not: (a) overall SEL implementation scores, (b) the amount of SEL-related professional development opportunities school leaders participated in, (c) teacher responses to targeted questions about adult SEL skills, and (d) climate survey results. In each of these cases, results are primary evidence of successful program implementation. There is also some preliminary evidence to suggest that being in the Seed Program was related to climate benefits for secondary schools.

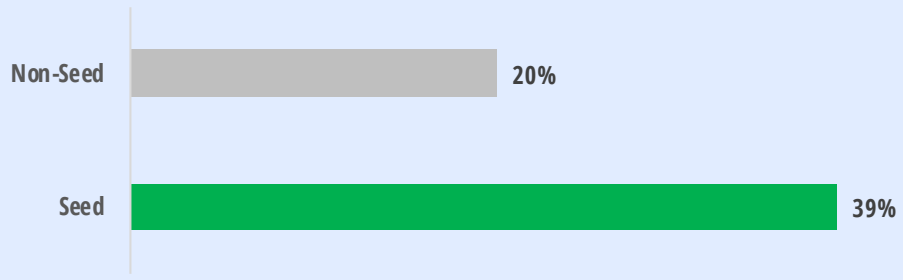
In 2018–2019, the 14 Seed secondary schools were demographically similar to the 18 non-Seed secondary schools in terms of percentage of Hispanic, Black, and White students, and those who qualify as economically disadvantaged on each campus. Seed schools were not similar to non-Seed schools in terms of the percentage of ELs on each campus (see side bar on methodology for more information). Eight of the 14 Seed schools had participated in the program the prior year.

Methodology Note for Secondary Schools

Secondary Seed and non-Seed schools were demographically similar in 2018—2019, except for one student group that was statistically different. On average, ELs represented 39% of the students at secondary Seed schools and only 20% at secondary non-Seed schools (Figure 9). This difference had a strong effect size (d = .81, p =.02). Because we know EL status is often associated with many other outcomes, each analysis at the secondary level had to consider the possible interaction of the different proportions of ELs. All presented results meet one of the two conditions: the outcome was not associated with EL status, or the outcome was associated with EL status and the methodology controlled for its predictive value.

Figure 9.

In 2018—2019, secondary Seed schools had, proportionally, almost twice as many ELs as did non-Seed schools.



Source. AISD student records
Note. n = 34 AISD secondary schools (14 Seed schools and 18 non-Seed schools). d = .81.

What did secondary Seed schools do?

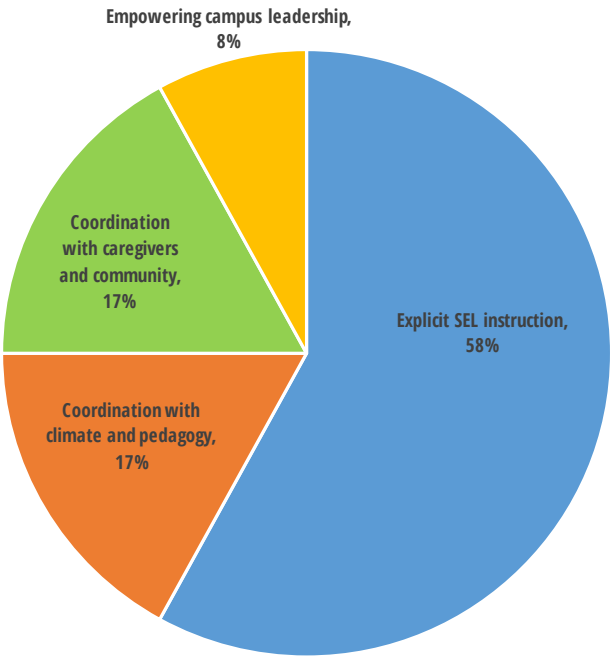
As with elementary schools, the basic structure of the Seed Program for secondary schools is to support schools as they set a progress goal related to SEL implementation and reflect on it. Their goal is supposed to focus on one or two sections from the SEL implementation rubric: empowering campus leadership, coordination with climate and pedagogy, coordination with families and caregivers, or explicit SEL instruction. In 2018–2019, 58% of Seed secondary schools focused their goals on explicit SEL instruction (Figure 10). All but one of the schools that selected explicit SEL instruction as a progress goal focused on instruction for staff (rather than just for students). Similar to the Seed elementary schools, very few goals were in the area of empowering campus leadership (8%); however, when we look the goals themselves, we see that they often necessitated a highly empowered and coordinated approach to SEL leadership. Here are two examples:

> "Thus far, the goal we have primarily worked on is beginning to fold and familiarize our faculty with SEL practices. In the fall, we began slowly rolling and developing a professional development program that hoped to expand our faculty's working knowledge of SEL practices. We delivered an initial "welcome back!" PD for our faculty that deepened their understanding of SEL practices beyond circles."

> Our goal is to "increase observational abilities of teachers across campuses to be cognizant of students' actions in the classroom with the connection to their brain development and by having teachers respond to questionnaires at various times during the year and reading, 'Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain'"

Figure 10.

In 2018–2019, the majority of secondary Seed schools focused their goals on Explicit SEL instruction.



Note. n = 12 Seed secondary schools

How did SEL implementation at secondary Seed schools compare to other secondary schools?

Overall, Seed secondary schools were 4.7 times more likely to be in the top quartile of SEL implementation than were non-Seed schools ($p = .04$, $n = 32$)(Figure 11). Like in elementary schools, SEL implementation in secondary schools is measured each year by a survey that is completed in conversation between the district SEL specialist who supports the school, the school's SEL facilitator(s), and the school's principal. Some of the questions are adjusted to be appropriate to the secondary school context, but the sections are organized in the same manner. The survey has 18 questions about measurable actions a school can take to improve SEL implementation. The 18 questions are scored from 1 to 5, resulting in a total score that falls between 18 and 90. In 2018–2019, the top quartile on the SEL Implementation Survey scored at least 72/90 (high school) and 73/90 (middle school).

Figure 11.

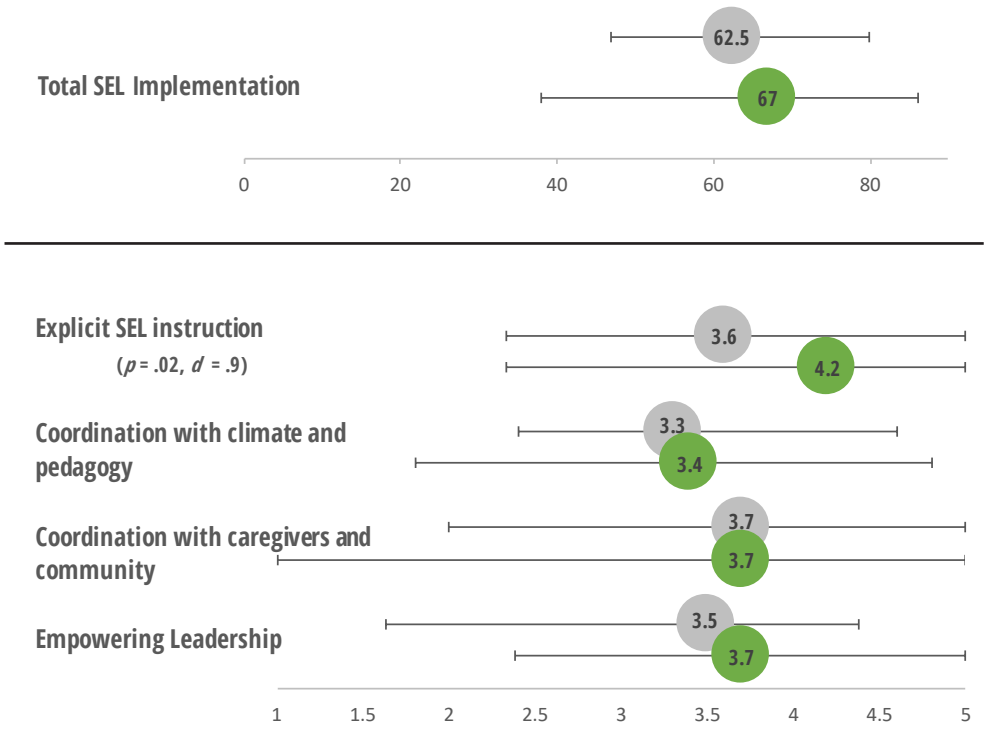
In 2018–2019, Seed secondary schools were 4.7 times more likely to be high implementers of SEL than were non-Seed secondary schools.

Source. 2018–2019 SEL Implementation Survey
Note. $n = 32$, $p = .04$; high implementation is defined as being in the top quartiles of the school level

While Seed schools were more likely to be in the top quartile of SEL implementation (Figure 11), it is important to note that the range in scores was much larger for Seed schools than for non-Seed schools (Figure 12). Once again, we see evidence that being a Seed school does not necessarily mean the school is excelling in SEL implementation; it means the school is *trying* to grow in its SEL implementation, and is more likely to have high SEL implementation. On average, the difference between Seed and non-Seed elementary schools was not significantly different in 2018-2019. While non-Seed secondary schools scored an average of 62.5 points out of 90, Seed secondary schools scored an average of 67.

Figure 12.

In 2018–2019, overall Seed implementation in Seed secondary schools was statistically similar to that of non-Seed secondary schools, but Seed schools had much higher rates of explicit SEL instruction.

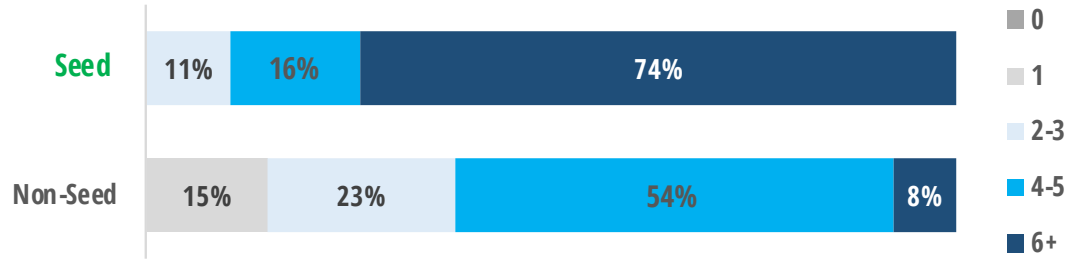


Source. 2018–2019 SEL Implementation Survey
Note. The nubmer in each circle is the average; bars extend to the minimum and maximum score; *n* = 32 secondary schools (14 Seed and 18 non-Seed)

In Figure 12, Seed schools scored significantly higher in the Explicit SEL Instruction section. That section asks about the amount of explicit SEL instruction received by three groups: school leaders, teachers/staff, and students. In all three of those groups, the Seed averages trended higher than the non-Seed averages, but the only statistical difference was for the school leaders ($p < .05$, $d = 1.2$). Figure 13 shows the dsitribution of responses from Seed and non-Seed secondary schools regarding the number of hours school leaders spent in SEL related training in 2018–2019. This is one more indication that participation in the Seed Program is related to increased SEL implementation via adult behavior and leadership.

Figure 13.

In 2018–2019, school leaders at Seed schools spent more hours in SEL related training than did school leaders at non-Seed schools.



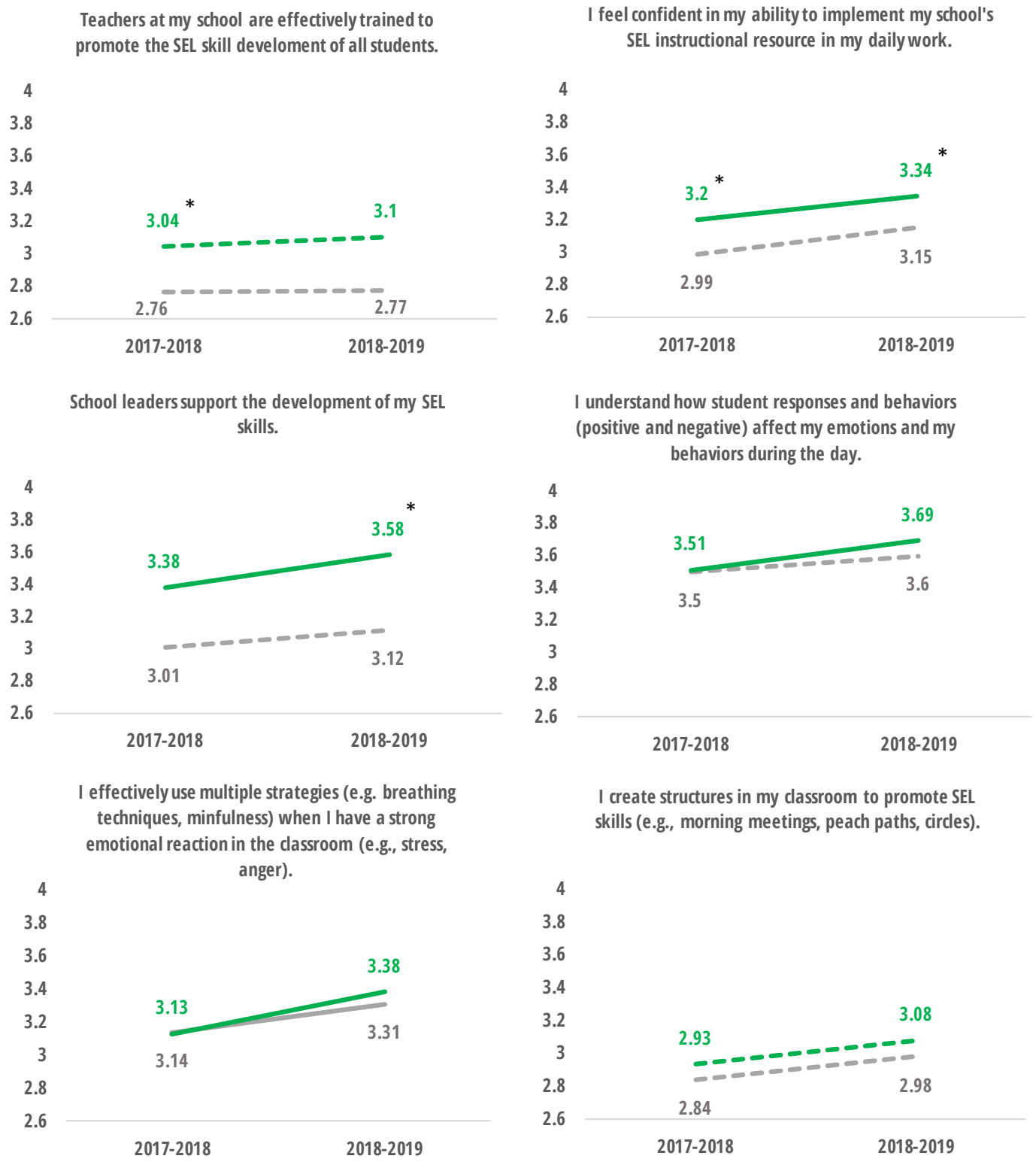
Source: 2018-2019 SEL Implementation Survey.
Note: n = 32 secondary schools.

Did secondary Seed schools show improvement in climate?

Like at the elementary level, we noticed differences between Seed and non-Seed secondary schools in teachers' responses to specific questions about adult SEL implementation at their school and in their own SEL practices (Figure 14). In 2018–2019, secondary teachers at Seed schools were more likely than secondary teachers at non-Seed schools to say that they felt confident in their ability to implement their school's SEL instructional resource and that their leaders supported their development of their own SEL skills. Four of the six questions had significant increases for teachers at Seed schools between years (indicated by a solid green line), while only one question had a significant increase at non-Seed schools (indicated by a solid grey line). Overall, we can interpret a trend of larger growth in adult SEL skills at Seed schools than at non-Seed schools.

Figure 14.

In 2018–2019, teachers at secondary Seed schools reported more increases compared with the previous year in adult SEL skills than teachers did at secondary non-Seed schools.

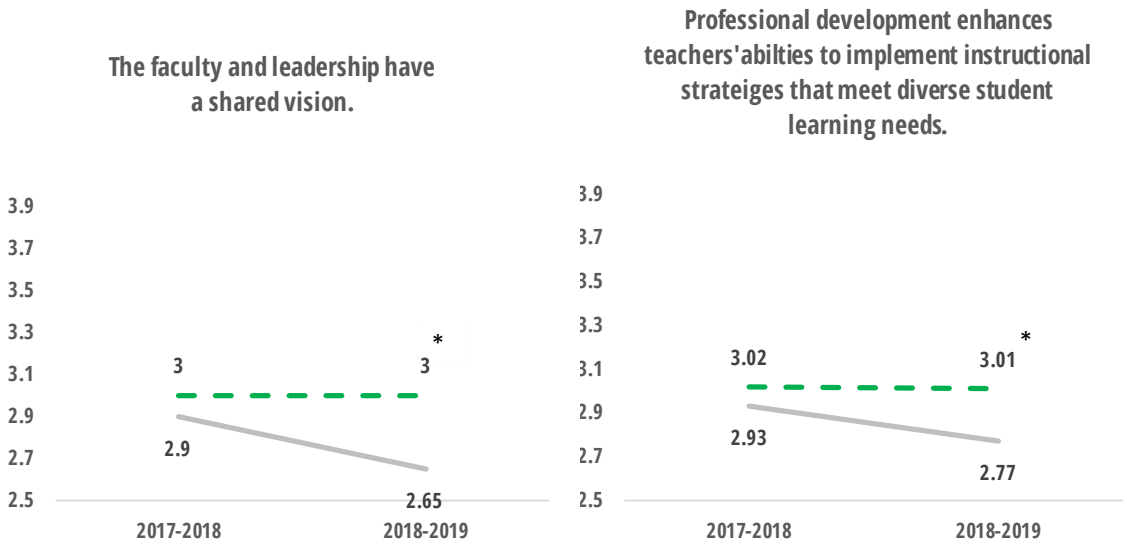


Note. A solid line indicates statistically significant changes between years. An asterisk beside the Seed number in green indicates statistically significant differences between Seed and Non-Seed schools within a year. 2017–2018 *n* = 410 (211 Seed and 199 non-Seed. 2018–2019 *n* = 323 (169 Seed and 154 non-Seed). All Seed designations are based on 2018–2019 status.

We also explored differences between Seed and non-Seed schools on other survey items related to parent, student, and teacher climate (TELL) but found only two meaningful differences on the teacher climate survey at the middle school level (Figure 15).

Figure 15.

While teachers at non-Seed middle schools in 2018–2019 reported significant decreases in the shared vision between faculty and leadership and the degree to which professional development opportunities met the diverse learning needs of students, teachers at Seed middle schools did not.



Source. TELL Spring 2018 and Spring 2019. *n* = 747 teachers who stayed at the same middle school for both years and completed the TELL survey both years.
Note. A solid line indicates statistically significant changes between years. An asterisk beside the Seed number in green indicates statistically significant differences between Seed and Non-Seed schools within a year.

These two items from the teacher climate survey showed that teachers at non-Seed schools reported significant decreases from 2017–2018 to 2018–2019 (as indicated by the solid grey line). Teachers at the Seed middle schools, however, did not show a decrease during the same time (as indicated by the green dashed line). That is, in 2017–2018 teachers from Seed and non-Seed schools had similar responses to these questions, but in 2018–2019 their responses were significantly different (as indicated by the asterisk beside the Seed average). Only these two items out of 130 items on the teacher climate survey that are related to climate or teacher satisfaction showed a change that we determine to be meaningful and while they may be related to SEL initiatives on the campus, there is no way to confirm that. Six other items related to climate or job satisfaction on the teacher climate survey were statistically significant ($p < .05$) at the middle school level. Seven items were statistically significant ($p < .05$) at the high school level. The effect sizes for those items, however, were between .1 and .2, which is lower than the threshold researchers use to report meaningful differences. It is interesting that, in this case, all 15 of these very weak differences were favorable for Seed schools. In a similar fashion, nine items on the student climate survey were also statistically significant, and favorable for Seed schools, but did not reach a sufficient threshold of strength to merit individual attention. Collectively these survey results suggest that between the Seed Program's first and second year of implementation there were hints of improvement in climate results, but it is too soon to assert those results were meaningfully related to Seed status. Further research is in order as the program develops.

Takeaways from the first 3 years of the Seed Model Campus Cohort Program that may transfer to other district initiatives:

- **Programs can be successful when participation is optional. It may take longer than if the program were mandated, but the elective engagement of the school brings with it a more authentic motivation on the school's end and encourages the leaders of the initiative to provide supports that incentivize participation.**
- **Financial support is important for lifting barriers to implementation, but schools continued to join, even as the amount of funding available per school was less. Funding is essential, but schools are able to be creative with how they use funding when other supportive incentives are in place.**
- **Taking a growth approach over an achievement approach starts from step one. Instead of an application, seek participating schools by asking for a plan.**
- **Once schools establish their goals, program leaders can identify themes in the goals to streamline support and cross-pollination.**
- **While schools are supported in an individual growth path, cross-pollination between schools is an important incentive for joining an initiative.**
- **Equitable representation can be a challenge for a program that has optional participation, but equity can be achieved through conscious goal setting in this area, deliberate actions to this end, and patience.**
- **Don't be afraid to make changes to your program based on participants' feedback. Especially when leading an optional program, this feedback can be very helpful.**

Conclusion

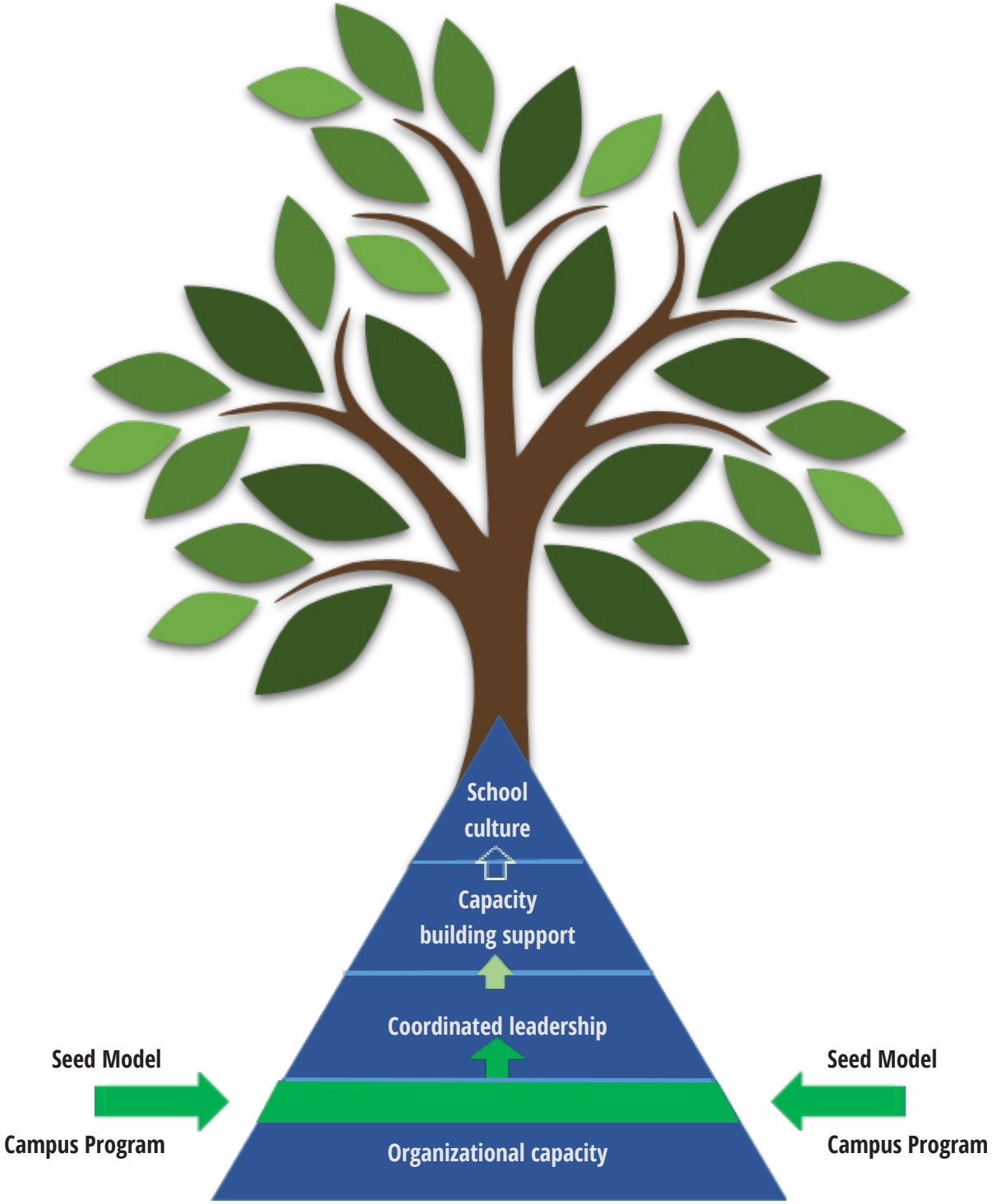
In summary, the Seed Program was an optional program that went from serving 15% to serving 55% of the district's schools in 3 years. It started with a challenge in equitable representation but overcame that through deliberate actions. Schools that chose to participate received a small amount of financial support and a large amount of guidance and structured opportunities to share and reflect. By going through the process of setting a goal, aligning leadership, setting a budget, and reflecting on the process at the end, schools could increase their own leadership capacity around SEL implementation.

Long term, the program was designed to improve school culture over 4 years by providing increased support for campus-based strategic planning. At this point, we only have 2 years of campus climate data, and cannot confirm that the Seed Program has already had a meaningful impact in that way. **This report does find substantial evidence that participation in the Seed Program has already led to higher SEL implementation, more coordinated campus leadership around SEL goals, increased capacity building for staff, and ultimately improved adult SEL skills.** We would need to give the program more time to see if the effects of improved leadership and adult SEL skills eventually "trickle" down to student and parent climate improvement. That outcome seems like a logical expectation. However, when looking at 2019–2020 and 2020–2021, we anticipate that making those climate data points might not be meaningful due to the coronavirus interruption which will undoubtedly characterize data from the third and fourth year of implementation.

The data suggest an alternative interpretation of the program's name. In metaphorical terms, the program itself is not the seed, but the farmer. The campus-based leaders are the seeds. The program structures the process of setting SEL implementation goals, much as a farmer picks the best land and prepares the soil. The campus-based leaders —those who know their campus best—are the seeds that get planted. Throughout a supported process, they grow as SEL leaders, and as the data suggest, learn to coordinate with other campus leaders and develop the SEL capacity of their colleagues. Each year that a school participates in the Seed Program, it does something new for its campus. The school might start a book club focused on courageous conversations about race, build peace corners around the campus, or facilitate talking circles among staff. Each year the project is small, but like saplings in a forest, the projects accumulate and begin to cover the forest floor. In these last 3 years of the Seed Program 141 SEL projects were initiated by the Seed campus leaders. In addition to sharing the best practices of these projects with other districts, the program leaders consistently fostered peer-to-peer learning so that lessons learned about SEL implementation at the campus level could be multiplied across the district. While it is still too early in implementation for us, as researchers, to declare the project a final success, it is clear that a metaphorical forest is growing.

Figure 16.

Evidence suggests the Seed Program supports campus SEL implementation



Appendix A SEL Implementation Rubric

Explicit SEL instruction ***Every school leader, teacher and, student receives high quality, explicit instruction in SEL in order to maximize learning and optimize life experiences.***					
A) Number of hours **school leaders** participated in **SEL-specific training**	0	1	2-3	4-5	6+
B) Number of hours teachers/staff participated in **SEL-specific training**	0	1	2-3	4-5	6+
ELEMENTARY C) Percentage of teachers explicitly teaching SEL using **evidence-informed curriculum and resources** for 30 minutes per week.	0-10%	11-30%	31-50%	51-70%	71-100%
SECONDARY C) Percentage of students regularly participating in **evidence-informed SEL programs, practices, and approaches** for approximately 30 minutes per week	0-10%	11-30%	31-50%	51-70%	71-100%

Appendix A SEL Implementation Rubric (page 2/4)

Coordination with climate and pedagogy ***SEL concepts, skills, and tools permeate the school, reinforcing comprehension of SEL core competencies and creating a positive place to learn and work for students, staff, and community***					
A) Availability of **places and/or processes that support students to self-regulate and/or practice self-management**	Students have no place/process to practice self-regulation/self-management	Students are given a place/process to practice self-regulation/self-management	Students are given a place/ process to practice self-regulation/self-management and are taught when and how to use the process	Students are given a process/ multiple places (e.g., classrooms and common areas) to practice self-regulation/ self-management that are promoted and utilized	Students are given a process/multiple places to practice self-regulation/self-management that are promoted and utilized and are incorporated into policies and procedures in a consistent manner
B) Frequency of **intentional community building among staff**	Zero times to once a year	Once a semester	Twice a semester	Once a month	Once a week
C) Percentage of teachers consistently **aligning classroom management practices with social and emotional practices**	0%-10%	11%-25%	26%-55%	56%-75%	76%-100%
D) Percentage of teachers consistently **embedding SEL with academic content and instructional practices**	0%-10%	11%-25%	26%-55%	56%-75%	76%-100%
E) Percentage of teachers consistently **embedding an SEL-informed conflict resolution process** that fits with the specific needs of the school	0%-10%	11%-25%	26%-55%	56%-75%	76%-100%

Appendix A SEL Implementation Rubric (page 3/4)

Coordination with caregivers and families and community partners ***SEL concepts, skills, and tools are shared with families and caregivers in an effort to integrate SEL language and concepts into the home.***					
A) Frequency of **campus communication about SEL** with caregivers and families	Zero times to once a year	Once a semester	Once a quarter	Once a month	Once a week
B) Number of **SEL learning opportunities** for caregivers and families	0	1	2	3	4

Appendix A SEL Implementation Rubric (page 4/4)

Empowering campus leadership ***The campus leadership team is strategically engaged in SEL implementation and improvement. They align the whole community towards common SEL goals.***					
A) Frequency of **principal engagement in SEL with staff**	Twice a year or less	Quarterly	Every six-weeks	Monthly	Weekly
B) Number of **principal/SEL specialist meetings**	0	1	2	3	4+
C) Degree of **strategic planning** in principal/SEL specialist meetings	Principal and SEL specialist did not discuss SEL implementation goals	Principal and SEL specialist discussed SEL implementation goals, but no goals were agreed upon	Principal and SEL specialist established SEL implementation goals based on campus needs/ data	Principal and SEL specialist established SEL implementation goals based on campus needs/ data and revisited once	Principal and SEL specialist established SEL implementation goals based on campus needs/data and revisited twice
D)Number of **steering committee meetings**	0-1	2-3	4-5	6-7	8+
E) Frequency of **reviewing SEL implementation goals** in SEL steering committee meetings	No review of goals	Reviewed goals once a year	Reviewed goals twice a year	Reviewed goals three times a year	Reviewed goals four or more times a year
F) Number of **facilitator/SEL specialist coaching/ collaborative meetings**	1-2	3-4	5-6	7	8+
G) Number of **collaborative school visits**, where campus representatives visit areas of the school (initially with an SEL specialist) and discuss noticings and wonderings	0	1	2	3	4
H) School leadership allots consistent time in the schedule for all students to receive **explicit SEL instruction**	There is no expectation for timing of explicit SEL instruction by school leaders	Time for explicit SEL instruction is expected by school leaders, but practiced at teachers' discretion	School leaders allot time for explicit SEL instruction, but days and times may vary between students	School leaders allot time for explicit SEL instruction, which occurs on the same day for all students	School leaders allot time for explicit SEL instruction, which occurs on the same day at the same time for all students

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