

# A Time for SEL Innovation: **IS EXPANDED LEARNING THE ANSWER?**

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# Executive Summary

School districts are increasing their focus on children's social-emotional learning (SEL) following social isolation during the pandemic. SEL investments yield improvements in academic performance.<sup>1</sup> Expanded learning programming (before and after school, summer and school break programs, sometimes referred to as out-of-school-time) offers a unique opportunity for children to practice SEL skills they are learning in organic, play-based settings.<sup>2</sup>

Relationship-based SEL is an evidence-based program that meets Tier II standards of evidence under the Every Student Succeeds Act.<sup>3</sup> This approach targets the practice children need to build friendship skills and increase resilience.<sup>4</sup>

This whitepaper outlines research on relationship-based SEL, and calls upon school districts to innovate by seeking expanded learning providers with research-driven, relationship-based SEL programs.



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<sup>1</sup> (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017)

<sup>2</sup> (*An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning | 2 More Opportunities to Develop Social and Emotional Skills and Competencies Are Needed*, n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> (WWC | *ESSA Tiers Of Evidence*, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> (Hanish et al., 2016; J. Morrison et al., n.d.; Reilly et al., n.d.)

# What Is Social-Emotional Learning?

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”<sup>5</sup>

A simpler way of thinking about CASEL’s definition is that SEL is instruction in the lifelong art of getting along with others. It is the process through which children develop confidence, communication, and decision-making skills.<sup>6</sup> It is a type of learning that happens in children’s homes, schools, after-school programs, and in every setting invested in the care of children. Schools and care providers have opportunities to draw families in as partners in SEL growth. Research has shown that when children receive early support in developing these essential life skills, the impacts can be far-reaching.<sup>7</sup>

SEL is essential for removing barriers to student achievement. 94 percent of teachers report that students do better behaviorally and academically when children’s SEL needs are addressed in school.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, since the top three qualifications that employers seek in applicants touch on relationships (collaboration, communication, and problem-solving, all of which depend on social-emotional skills), schools seeking to prepare students for success later in life serve their students best when they offer explicit training in social-emotional skills.<sup>9</sup> Schools have undertaken strong efforts to integrate SEL, and most schools now have some component of SEL woven into the school day.<sup>10</sup>



Source: (What Is the CASEL Framework?-CASEL, n.d.)

Aside from the academic benefits,<sup>11</sup> SEL is a powerful tool to disrupt systemic inequities such as the well-documented preschool-to-prison, pipeline affecting some of the most underserved members of our communities and particularly students of color.<sup>12</sup> Expanded learning providers can play a critical role in helping to support SEL as well as assisting families with understanding the value of SEL.

<sup>5</sup> (The CASEL SCHOOLWIDE SEL ESSENTIALS A Printable Compilation of Key Activities and Tools for School Teams, 2021)

<sup>6</sup> (As Terms Like “SEL” Draw Fire, Organizations Supporting Schools Sharpen Their Message, n.d.)

<sup>7</sup> (Darling-Hammond et al., n.d.)

<sup>8</sup> (State of Education National Survey Findings Highlight Teachers’ Perspectives on Delivering Social-Emotional Learning. MAY 2022 Key Findings for School Leaders At a Glance: The State of Education and SEL 4 How to Support Teachers in Addressing SEL Teacher Insights On the Current State of Education On Social-Emotional Learning Survey Methodology About This Report Introduction, n.d.)

<sup>9</sup> (The 10 Skills Employers Most Want In 2015 Graduates, n.d.)

<sup>10</sup> (Ready to Lead-CASEL, n.d.)

<sup>11</sup> (Jones & Kahn, 2017)

## The CASEL Framework

CASEL is widely recognized as a prominent source for the best practices and tools to support SEL in schools. CASEL has identified five broad, interrelated SEL competencies that are industry standards for supporting students' emerging sense of self:

- **Self-awareness**
- **Self-management**
- **Social awareness**
- **Relationship skills**
- **Responsible decision-making**

CASEL advocates a systemic approach—SEL should be consistent across settings, whether between students and students, students and teachers, students in classrooms, students in school, children with their families, or children in communities.<sup>13</sup>

Research suggests that children best learn social-emotional skills when a consistent approach is applied across age groups in all settings.<sup>14</sup> School principals agree that systemic SEL is their goal, but feel they need more support to engage this kind of learning program.<sup>15</sup> Expanded learning programs that extend schools' SEL approaches into after-school and summer settings can be a key support for students and schools by offering children consistency and low-stakes opportunities to practice the social-emotional skills they learn during the school day. While many schools have thoughtful, evidence-based SEL programs, the structured setting of a school day can limit opportunities for real-time practice of the SEL skills children are learning. During expanded learning programs, children receive immediate, organic, meaningful feedback on their friendship-building abilities through their social interactions with their peers.

## The Efficacy of SEL

Schools have historically seen the benefit of investing instructional time in social-emotional skills. In 2011, a landmark meta-analysis of SEL programs in schools reported students showed an 11 percent gain in academic achievement, in addition to significantly improved social and emotional skills, improved attitudes, and improved behavior.<sup>16</sup> Students in the SEL programs also showed significantly lower levels of emotional distress.<sup>17</sup> Three further meta-analyses replicated these results, providing additional evidence that where children made large initial social and emotional gains, their academic growth tended to be retained over time.<sup>18</sup>

**SEL programs in schools yield an 11% gain in academic achievement.**

**99% of principals believe an increased focus on SEL would improve school climate.**

In a national survey of school principals, 99 percent believed that an increased focus on SEL would improve their school's climate.<sup>19</sup> Schools are making investments because SEL works, particularly when engaged district-wide. Expanded learning settings that put social-emotional skills into practice in a fun, low-stakes environment where children can try, ask for help, and try again have a multiplying effect on children's development of those skills.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> (What Is the CASEL Framework?-CASEL, n.d.)

<sup>14</sup> (J. R. Morrison et al., 2019)(Jones & Kahn, 2017)

<sup>15</sup> (Ready to Lead-CASEL, n.d.)

<sup>16</sup> (Durlak et al., 2011)

<sup>17</sup> (Durlak et al., 2011)

<sup>18</sup> (Taylor et al., 2017)

<sup>19</sup> (An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning | 2 More Opportunities to Develop Social and Emotional Skills and Competencies Are Needed, n.d.)

<sup>20</sup> (An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning | 2 More Opportunities to Develop Social and Emotional Skills and Competencies Are Needed, n.d.)

# The COVID-19 Pandemic and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Research is revealing that the pandemic's impacts on children's social-emotional growth are not only far-reaching, but perhaps lifelong:<sup>21</sup>

- **Increased rates of anxiety and depression among school-age children**<sup>22</sup>
- **Increased interpersonal conflict between children**<sup>23</sup>
- **31% increase in suicide rates, even among the very young**<sup>24</sup>
- **Increased school shootings**<sup>25</sup>

A national survey found that 90 percent of teachers said students' mental health and social-emotional needs have increased since the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> Before the pandemic, children learned social-emotional skills through play in school settings, in after-school care settings, and in their neighborhoods with their peers. Without these venues for building SEL competencies, educators agree that children's emotional growth has suffered:

“ We take calls from dozens of schools per day. Many of these are about children who were doing fine socially and emotionally before the pandemic, and are struggling now.”

—Taunya Banta,  
Inclusion Services, Champions®

The effects on schools and districts are equally worrisome:

- **Decreased opportunities for learning**<sup>28</sup>
- **Decreased graduation rates**<sup>29</sup>
- **Decreased attendance rates**<sup>30</sup>
- **Struggling student engagement**<sup>31</sup>
- **Decreased enrollment**<sup>32</sup>

The fact that educators are asked to do more on every front isn't new. Schools are under enormous pressure due to “COVID catch-up.” “Zoom School” (as many referred to it) was particularly hard for all children. Though not the focus of this paper, it is important to note that remote learning looked different for a lot of students, and data is starting to clarify the impacts of disparate educational opportunities. Specifically, minorities and children of color disproportionately lacked adults who could support them throughout the day with their schooling, struggled to access the internet and technology devices, and often lacked quiet spaces in which to work.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the demands to close achievement gaps and recover academically come at a time when challenging behavior in schools is increasing, putting schools in the tenuous position to simultaneously make up lost ground on academic learning and social-emotional development.

School administrators do not need to choose between

<sup>21</sup> (Bradshaw et al., 2021; *COVID-19, the Educational Equity Crisis, and the Opportunity Ahead*, n.d.; *Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups* | CDC, n.d.; *Risk of Exposure to COVID-19* | CDC, n.d.)

<sup>22</sup> (*Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health* | CDC, n.d.; Loades et al., 2020)

<sup>23</sup> (*WA SMART Center Return to School 6.2.20 Final*, n.d.)

<sup>24</sup> (Yard et al., 2022)

<sup>25</sup> (*Suicide Is Rising Among Younger Students. Here's How Schools Can Prevent Tragedy*, n.d.)

<sup>26</sup> (*School Shootings Over Time: Incidents, Injuries, and Deaths*, n.d.)

<sup>27</sup> (*State of Education National Survey Findings Highlight Teachers' Perspectives on Delivering Social-Emotional Learning. M A Y 2 0 2 2 Key Findings for School Leaders At a Glance: The State of Education and SEL 4 How to Support Teachers in Addressing SEL Teacher Insights On the Current State of Education On Social-Emotional Learning Survey Methodology About This Report Introduction*, n.d.)

<sup>28</sup> (*The Rise of Classroom Disruptions in Early Grades and How Districts Are Responding* DISTRICT LEADERSHIP FORUM, n.d.)

<sup>29</sup> (*Graduation Rates Dip across U.S. as Pandemic Stalls Progress-Chalkbeat: Essential Education Reporting across America*, n.d.)

<sup>30</sup> (*Quarantines, School Climate Drive down Student Attendance-Chalkbeat: Essential Education Reporting across America*, n.d.)

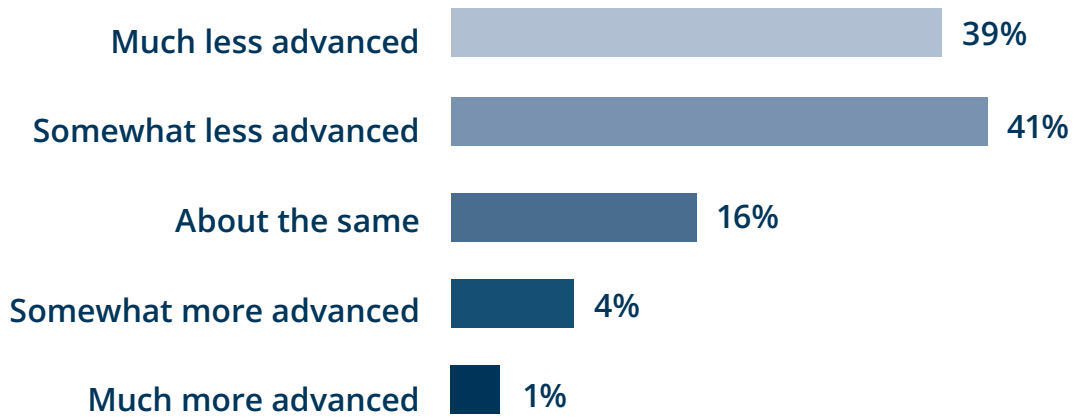
<sup>31</sup> (*Cognia ID\_SES\_Reports-Results\_District\_Webinar\_PART-1\_5322*, n.d.)

<sup>32</sup> (*Press Release-Nation's Public School Enrollment Dropped 3 Percent in 2020-21-June 28, 2021*, n.d.)

<sup>33</sup> (*COVID-19, the Educational Equity Crisis, and the Opportunity Ahead*, n.d.)

strategies that support SEL and strategies that help overcome learning disruption. Expanded learning offers an opportunity to do both.

**Compared to prior to the pandemic in 2019, the social skills and emotional maturity levels of my current students are:**



Source: *Educators See Gaps in Kids' Emotional Growth Due to Pandemic*. (n.d.). Retrieved June 13, 2022, from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/educators-see-gaps-in-kids-emotional-growth-due-to-pandemic/2022/02>

# Expanded Learning—An Untapped Opportunity

Schools still only have between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. to address both academic needs and whole-child well-being. Schools that are intentional about COVID catch-up are tapping into hours of potential opportunities for student growth, including before school, after school, and during school breaks. For children who are at risk or those with achievement gaps, additional learning time outside of the traditional school day represents an unparalleled opportunity to make substantial gains in closing those learning gaps. Moreover, children in winter, spring, and summer break programs are in the care of educators for *11 hours per day*. In high-quality expanded learning programs, children engage in activities in ways that are connected to the subjects they learn during the school day, but that do not feel like more school.

**Expanded learning programs include 4 hours of the school day and 11 hours of time during full-day breaks.**

Play-based activities allow children to construct their own growth,<sup>34</sup> and accredited expanded learning programs provide structure that brings academic and social-emotional skill-building to the hours outside of school.<sup>35</sup> According to Cognia™, a leading international nonprofit organization advancing excellence through accreditation, accredited expanded learning programs “significantly focus on teaching and learning; incorporate 21st century skills related to child and youth development; embed high expectations for professional practice; and focus on developmentally appropriate cognitive, emotional, social, creative, and physical growth and development, as well as shared values and beliefs about teaching, learning, development, and care for school-aged children and youth.”<sup>36</sup>

Research-based expanded learning programs, particularly accredited programs, provide opportunities for hands-on enrichment activities that children experience as fun, allowing them to engage in literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking in settings that apply academics to areas based on children’s interests. In 2018–2019, annual reporting from nationally recognized high-quality expanded learning programs saw teachers report that their students in expanded learning programs:

- **Improved math grades (48% of students)**<sup>37</sup>
- **Improved English grades (48% of students)**<sup>38</sup>
- **Increased rates of homework completion and class participation (69% of students)**<sup>39</sup>
- **Improved behavior (62% of students)**<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding the academic benefits, expanded learning programs are also natural settings for SEL, where children of all age groups and backgrounds encounter one another in the relative freedom of play-based, free-choice time. Children in after-school programs and summer camps are in near-constant collaboration with their peers about things to build, games to play, projects to work on, and rules for fair play.

Notwithstanding the academic benefits, expanded learning programs are also natural settings for SEL, where children of all age groups and backgrounds encounter one another in the relative freedom of play-based, free-choice time.

Structured, play-based SEL brings benefits that carry over into the school setting. A meta-analysis of after-school programs found that students in expanded learning programs showed significant improvement in feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance, as well as reduced aggression, noncompliance, conduct issues, and drug use.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> (David-Whitebread---Importance-of-Play-Report, n.d.; Opinion | Let the Kids Learn Through Play-The New York Times, n.d.)

<sup>35</sup> (Cognia Standards for Quality Extended Learning Programs, n.d.)

<sup>36</sup> (Cognia Standards for Quality Extended Learning Programs, n.d.)

<sup>37</sup> (Promoting Academic Growth, n.d.)

<sup>38</sup> (Promoting Academic Growth, n.d.)

<sup>39</sup> (Promoting Academic Growth, n.d.)

<sup>40</sup> (Promoting Academic Growth, n.d.)

Teachers with students in high-quality after-school programs reported that their students showed improved:

- **Ability to get along with peers (59% of students)**<sup>42</sup>
- **Classroom attentiveness (57% of students)**<sup>43</sup>
- **Classroom behavior (55% of students)**<sup>44</sup>
- **Attendance (46% of students)**<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, principals agreed that the programs improved:

- **Attendance**<sup>46</sup>
- **Student behavior**<sup>47</sup>
- **Social skills**<sup>48</sup>

93 percent of principals agreed that expanded learning programs increase school safety.<sup>49</sup>

School districts that work with an accredited expanded learning provider with a strong SEL curriculum and whole-child approach find that they have support in several areas where they need help. One such district is Cedar Rapids Community School District in Iowa. Cedar Rapids opted for a sole expanded learning provider to deliver a systemic, district-wide approach to SEL, regardless of the school a student attended. According to Nicole Kooiker, Deputy Superintendent, “They are providing turnkey programming for our students and

families along with quality care, including a focus on student learning, diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as social and emotional learning. We are excited that we now can serve all of our students with consistency, quality care, and no waiting lists.”

### **93 percent of principals agree that expanded learning programs increase school safety.**

*(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

As schools and districts contemplate both the widening equity and opportunity gap created by the pandemic and explore how to get the most impact from their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) dollars, one consideration is investing in high-quality expanded learning programs offering SEL that children find organic, integrated, and accessible. These opportunities should be provided alongside those for homework support, additional hands-on learning (e.g., through play, through child-conceived project-based activities, and through teacher-led activities), STEM, and other enrichments that can help recover lost instruction time and narrow the achievement gap, particularly for children of color and traditionally underserved populations.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>42</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>43</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>44</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>45</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>46</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>47</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>48</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>49</sup> *(The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations, n.d.)*

<sup>50</sup> *(Promoting Academic Growth, n.d.)* (Darling-Hammond et al., n.d.)



## SEL Skills and Relationship-Based SEL in Expanded Learning Opportunities

Classroom-based SEL programs often focus on social-emotional skills (i.e., self-regulation, building self-awareness, etc.).<sup>51</sup> Skills-based training is both a common and effective modality of development. However, for decades in education settings, traditional beliefs were that social-emotional skills were innate and could not be taught (e.g., students either came to class knowing how to behave or they did not), and only discipline could drive the behavior that teachers wanted to see.

In light of the important work on neuroplasticity driven by Carol Dweck and others, classroom social-emotional skill-building has become the rule rather than the exception.<sup>52</sup> In 2006, Dweck found that children who were taught that ability is innate—that you either had ability or you did not—did not persist on tasks or show as much learning as students who were taught that effort and perseverance would “grow” their brains. She famously termed these countervailing perspectives a “fixed mindset” versus a “growth mindset.”<sup>53</sup> Only a few years later, educators everywhere are applying these learnings to SEL. Children are now taught that they have the ability to learn and grow qualities like self-management, making responsible decision-making, and relationship skills.<sup>54</sup>

Skill-building is an important part of the equation, but practice in real-world settings is what brings those skills to life. Since the school day is structured and limited from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., play-based real-life settings like expanded learning environments before and after school are ideal contexts for students to get the practice they need to put their skills into action. The highest quality expanded learning programs, particularly accredited programs, give children low-stakes opportunities to practice their social-emotional skills in a setting where they are supported by caring adults.

## Relationship-Based SEL

According to CASEL and others, schools and school districts should have consistent, systemic SEL that includes explicit instruction in social-emotional skill-building.<sup>55</sup> One whole-child approach to social-emotional skill-building is through intentional relationship-building. Relationship-based SEL practices are proven and effective,<sup>56</sup> and directly address the SEL needs for which children require additional support: getting along with their peers.



**We recommend the use of relationship-based SEL all the time. Using relationship-based SEL helps teachers create learning environments where children feel seen and valued, and in turn, learn how to see and value other children. While valuable for all children, it's particularly valuable for children who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color or children with special needs.**



—Taunya Banta,  
Inclusion Services, Champions®

With a limited number of hours in the school day, expanded learning settings are an ideal environment for relationship-based SEL, as they offer children unlimited access to their peers in both structured and unstructured activities. During the school day, class time is structured and recess is brief. Yet expanded learning settings offer hours each day for children to build a community with their peers. Relationship-based SEL flourishes in well-supported, play-based settings like those provided in accredited expanded learning programs, allowing children to develop relationships in the context of activities that are important to them.

<sup>51</sup> (Miller et al., 2017)

<sup>52</sup> (Dweck, 2003)

<sup>53</sup> (Carol Dweck, 2015)

<sup>54</sup> (*Social and Emotional Learning and Neuroplasticity: Why It Matters*, n.d.)

<sup>55</sup> (*CASEL Releases Updated Guide for High-Quality Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs; 48 Programs Receive Highest Designation-CASEL*, n.d.; *How Does SEL Support Educational Equity and Excellence?*-CASEL, n.d.; *The CASEL SCHOOLWIDE SEL ESSENTIALS A Printable Compilation of Key Activities and Tools for School Teams*, 2021; Jones & Kahn, 2017)

<sup>56</sup> (DeLay et al., 2016; Hanish et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017; J. Morrison et al., n.d.; J. R. Morrison et al., 2019; Nick Yoder, n.d.; Reilly et al., n.d.)

# What Is Relationship-Based SEL?

In “The Efficacy of a Relationship-Building Intervention in 5th Grade,” Miller et. al (2017) frame relationship-based SEL as “a universal school-based intervention for elementary school children, consisting of structured activities designed to promote classroom environments that are collaborative, inclusive, and conducive to the development and maintenance of positive peer relationships and academic success.”<sup>57</sup> Grounded in intergroup contact theory, cognitive theories of development, and empirical research on intergroup relationships, intervention science, education, and child development, “[t]he activities in [relationship-based SEL] consist of a series of developmentally appropriate, teacher-facilitated experiential exercises that promote relationship-building skills such as empathy, communication, problem-solving, diversity appreciation, and friendship formation and support.”<sup>58</sup> Put simply, relationship-based SEL is structured friend-making.

A 2017 relationship-based SEL study conducted by Arizona State University focused on Harmony SEL, a relationship-based SEL program designed to foster communication, connection, and community among students by providing opportunities for children to experience inclusive and positive peer environments throughout the day.

In the aforementioned study, fifth grade students participated in “experiential activities designed to promote inclusion and a positive relational environment.”<sup>59</sup> Children in the study’s experimental classrooms had daily meetings to create and check in on community agreements. These meetings included opportunities for students to share their goals and accomplishments, and to respond to questions from peers and their teacher. Students also “buddied up” with another student throughout the week and used question prompts to spark conversations and collaboration, ensuring that all students had opportunities to get to know each other throughout the year.<sup>60</sup>

Students in the relationship-based SEL groups reported liking school more and felt a greater sense of belonging and inclusion compared to control classrooms. Moreover, in another study, students in the relationship-based SEL classrooms reported having a more diverse group of friends, and they earned better grades in writing and math. In fact, researchers suggest that course grades improved due to peer influences.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, in a quasi-experimental study of pre-kindergarten students who participated in relationship-based SEL, researchers found that those students who participated in “buddy up” activities, compared to those who did not, increased their peer interactions and were more likely to engage in play with a wider array of peers.<sup>62</sup>

Additionally, research now supports what teachers have known all along and described anecdotally: “class meetings,” “class-building exercises,” “circle time,” and other welcoming rituals foster a positive classroom climate.<sup>63</sup> Starting relationship-based SEL with these foundational practices instructionally aligns with Tier I for SEL within the Response to Intervention or multi-tiered system of support frameworks in the form of explicit classroom agreements established and reinforced during daily routines.<sup>64</sup>

## Harmony SEL meets ESSA evidence standards at the Tier II level: Moderate Evidence.

(WWC | ESSA Tiers Of Evidence, n.d.)

Taking advantage of opportunities to build peer relationships and communication, collaboration, and community skills through relationship-based SEL instruction can be a powerful tool for teachers to help children develop valuable life skills and, in turn, boost their academic learning. Children generally do not conceive of themselves as needing to acquire

<sup>57</sup> (Miller et al., 2017)

<sup>58</sup> (Miller et al., 2017)

<sup>59</sup> (Miller et al., 2017)

<sup>60</sup> (Harmony SEL also includes skill-building lessons which doubtless contributed to success rate of the study, but our focus is on the experiential activities as a primary focus of the program.)

<sup>61</sup> (DeLay et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017)

<sup>62</sup> (Hanish et al., 2016)

<sup>63</sup> (Reilly et al., n.d.; Schwartz et al., n.d.)

social-emotional skills. They do understand that they need to decide whose turn it is, negotiate whether to use unwritten or written rules, express differences of opinion while still keeping the game going, cope with frustrating feedback, keep trying in the face of disappointment, and thousands of other emotional stepping stones common throughout childhood. To make social-emotional skills relevant and meaningful, children need to see them applied and working in real-world settings. Expanded learning settings, with child-led activities and virtually unlimited occasions for interaction, offer an ideal context for making significant SEL impacts.



## Relationship-Based SEL, ESSER Funding, and ESSA Evidence Standards

In many cases, ESSER funding is encouraged or even required to be spent on programming that meets ESSA evidence standards. ESSA's standard for Tier II moderate evidence includes:<sup>65</sup>

- **At least one quasi-experimental study with comparison groups that are similar at the baseline**
- **Statistically significant positive effect**
- **At least 350 students**
- **At least two educational sites**

The fifth grade study meets these requirements, establishing that the Harmony SEL relationship-based SEL qualifies as a Tier II program with at least moderate evidence.

The Wallace Foundation, a philanthropist nonprofit organization seeking to foster improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children, conducted a six-year study to explore whether or not (and if so, how) children benefit when schools and expanded learning programs partner to foster SEL and improve school climate. During a time when the expansion of SEL is outpacing research, this study identifies recommended practices that yielded stronger SEL growth and are practical to implement in the context of constraints educators face every day. They recommend SEL rituals aligned with CASEL signature practices, including welcoming activities and students working together, both of which are at the core of relationship-based SEL.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> (Center on PBIS | Classroom PBIS, n.d.)

<sup>65</sup> (WWC | ESSA Tiers Of Evidence, n.d.)

<sup>66</sup> (Schwartz et al., n.d.)

# Relationship-Based SEL and Better Performance

A third study conducted by the Johns Hopkins Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) suggests that in several areas, children’s assessment of school climate improved the longer they used relationship-based SEL:

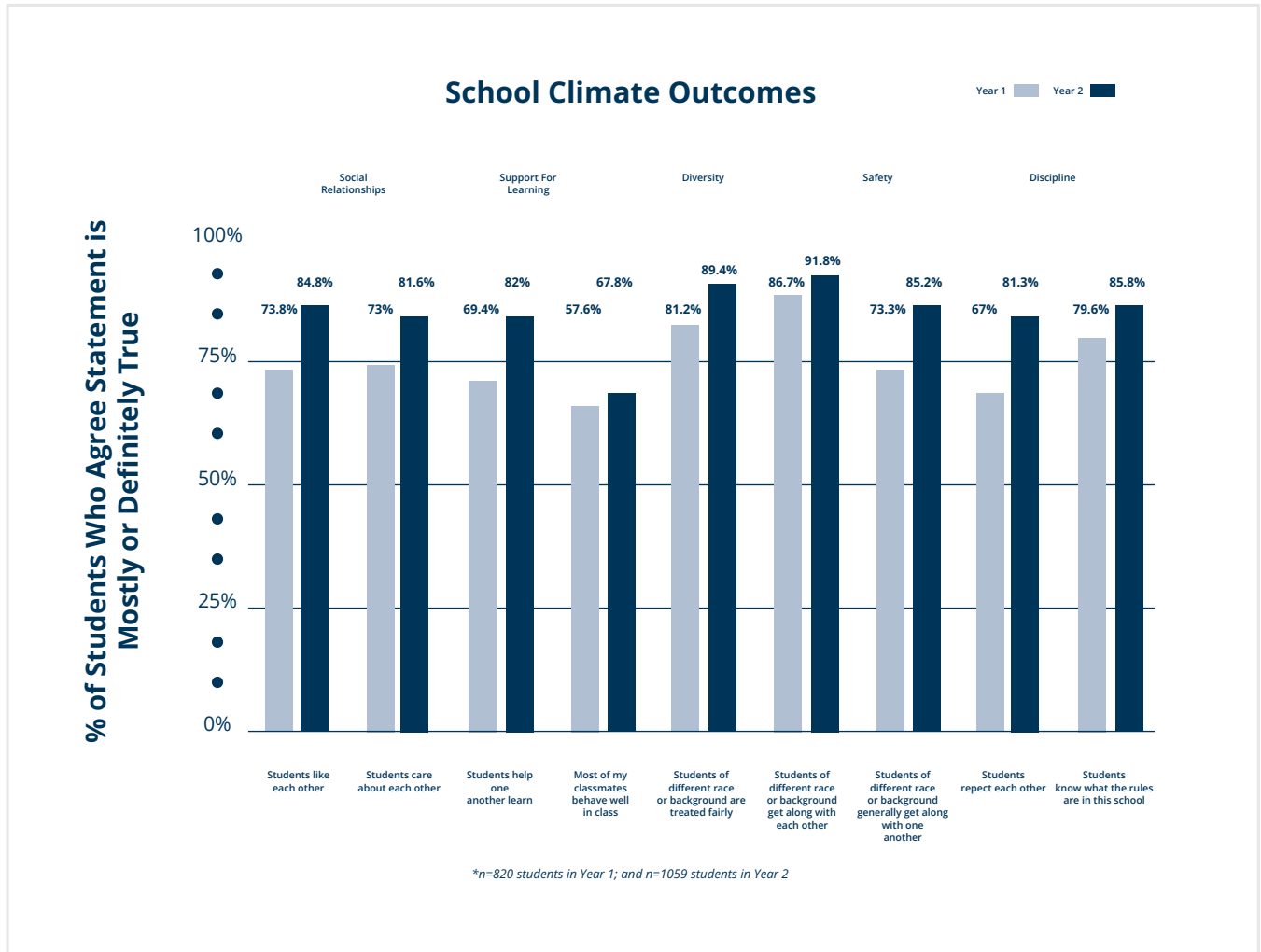


Figure 3. From year 1 to year 2, student perceptions of school climate improve across multiple domains\*

Source: Morrison, J., Zoccola, M., Yoder, N., Ross, S., & Reilly, J. (n.d.). *Year Two of Harmony SEL Demonstrates Increased Implementation and Improved Student Outcomes Research Brief of the Evaluation Study of the Harmony SEL Showcase Schools.*

Moreover, their findings suggest that teachers' perceptions of their students' progress also increased between year one and year two:

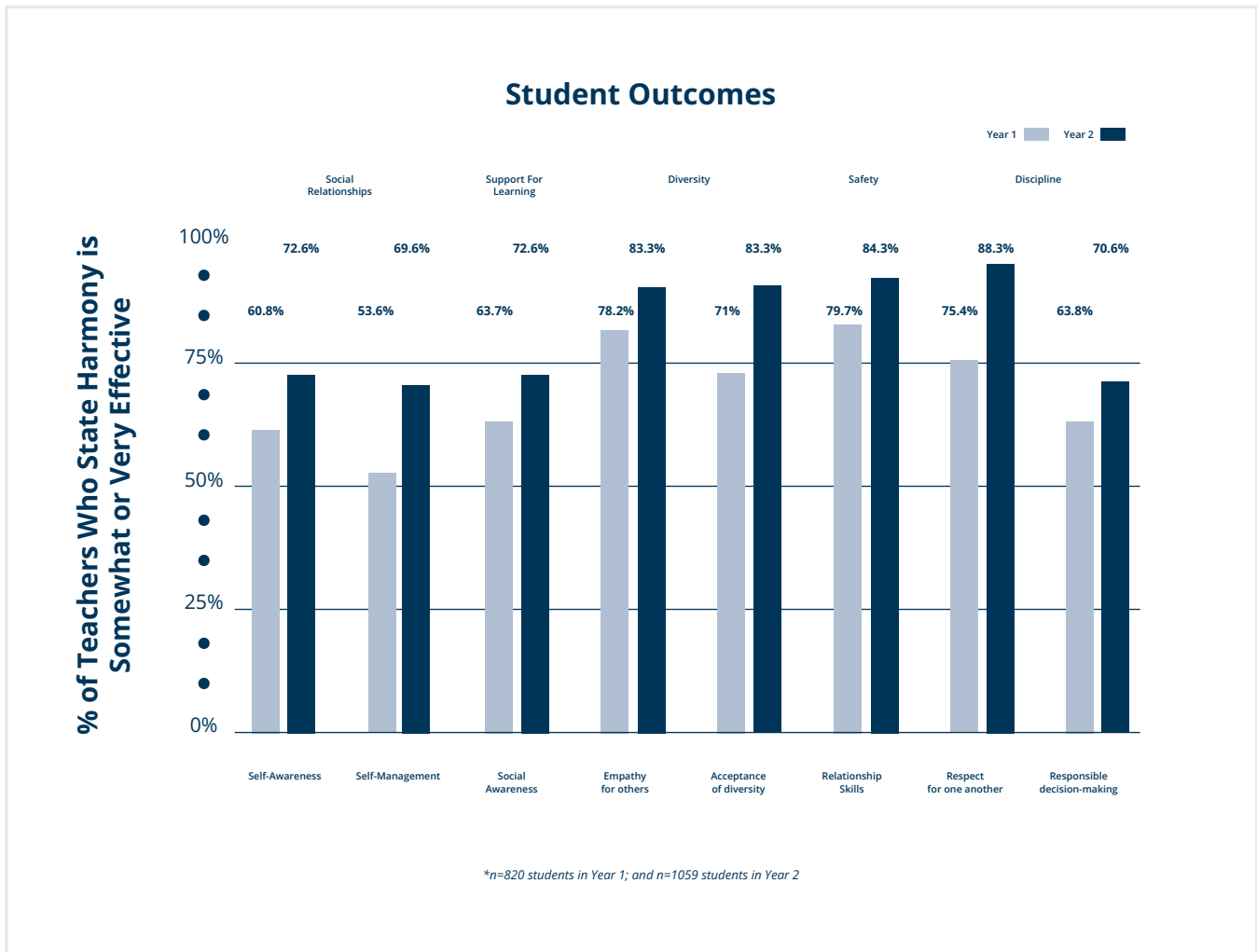


Figure 4. Teachers believed Harmony improved student social and emotional outcomes more in year 2 compared to year 1\*

Source: Morrison, J., Zoccola, M., Yoder, N., Ross, S., & Reilly, J. (n.d.). *Year Two of Harmony SEL Demonstrates Increased Implementation and Improved Student Outcomes R-research Brief of the Evaluation Study of the Harmony SEL Showcase Schools.*

Schools are always looking for opportunities to recover lost learning time, whether over summer breaks or after the pandemic, when learning gaps that have existed for a long time are exacerbated. Carefully constructed expanded learning programs can be a true partner as schools investigate the most impactful decisions they can make to close achievement gaps and provide equitable opportunities for all students in a community. There are millions of children that would benefit from explicit and intentional relationship-building after so much time at home these past few years, and expanded learning is the setting that affords low-stakes SEL practice and support.

# The Pandemic and Relationship-Based SEL: Children and Community

Much has been said about lost time in formal educational settings during the pandemic, candidly referred to by many as “interrupted learning.” What is often missed is what children did learn through the pandemic—in many cases, some of life’s most difficult lessons. Children learned about dealing with their own stress even as the adults around them struggled. Thousands of children coped with the death or illness of a loved one, and many endured one disappointment after another as things they took for granted or looked forward to before the pandemic became off-limits due to social distancing, lockdowns, and restrictions. Children learned grit and perseverance through these difficult life circumstances, knowing that they can do hard things, whether it’s coping with loss or managing their own learning.

## Relationship-based SEL solves a unique challenge of the pandemic: How do children get to know and care about each other again?

An explicit goal of relationship-based SEL programming is to bring together peers who would not normally self-select to interact, and relationship-based programs are structured to increase intergroup contact. By organizing these interactions in a play-based setting, relationship-based SEL programs offer opportunities to practice social-emotional skills children missed over the past few years when they were unable to play with friends in their neighborhoods, after school, and during school playtime.

Extensive research on intergroup theory supports the idea that bringing diverse people together to learn about each other is an effective way to improve an individual’s opinions about people external to their group.<sup>67</sup> In an increasingly polarized time where intergroup touchpoints are less frequent,<sup>68</sup> relationship-based SEL

programs create safe settings for children to learn about each other and broaden the diversity of peers they consider friends.

Children need a low-risk environment, guidance, and structure that allows them to flex their relationship muscles. Relationship-based SEL is uniquely well-suited to target the SEL areas where children need the most practice—interacting with their peers. By extending this exercise to expanded learning settings, school leaders create an environment for increasing connections throughout the school community beyond the walls of the classroom. Expanded learning settings (before school, after school, summer camps, etc.) allow children to interact with their peers across classrooms, ages, and demographics.

To learn and thrive, children of all backgrounds need a sense of connection and a sense of belonging, or they cannot achieve their optimal level of growth. As demonstrated by the work of A.H. Maslow<sup>69</sup> and continued by Benjamin Bloom,<sup>70</sup> children who feel unsafe and disconnected are simply not ready to learn. By investing in relationship-based SEL, particularly in highly social settings like expanded learning programs, educators can accelerate academic and social-emotional recovery in two ways:

- **By creating caring settings where children are nurtured, feel supported, are physically and emotionally safe, motivated to achieve more, and networked with peers and adults who can expand on their opportunities for achievement.**
- **By exposure to educational experiences through research-based curriculum, hands-on activities through play, and project-based learning.**

<sup>67</sup> (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011, cited in DeLay et al., 2016)

<sup>68</sup> (Bliuc et al., 2021)

<sup>69</sup> (Kurt, n.d.)

<sup>70</sup> (*Bloom’s Taxonomy* | Center for Teaching | Vanderbilt University, n.d.)

## For Further Action

Districts have a plethora of tools currently at their disposal to help recover time during the school day. With no shortage of assessments, curriculum, learning management systems, and academic interventions, a fundamental problem schools face is a lack of time in the school day to do it all. Under ever-increasing pressure to bring up test scores and close achievement gaps (or risk losing funding), many administrators are forced to make a difficult choice of how much to invest in SEL. Despite a historical de-emphasis on the impact of SEL, an undeniable connection between SEL and positive long-term outcomes for children remains. As schools search for more time and opportunities to teach and for students to practice social-emotional skills, a natural setting for consideration is expanded learning programs. The best expanded learning programs combine relationship-based SEL with a high-quality, research-based, whole-child curriculum in a setting that feels like fun.

**One solution to improve academic performance and provide opportunities for SEL is to consider offering consistent district-wide expanded learning opportunities that embrace integrated practice with relationship-based and skills-based SEL.**

Research supports the link between teaching social-emotional skills and improved academic outcomes, and evidence is clear that expanded learning opportunities can accelerate student achievement.<sup>71</sup> One solution to improve academic performance and provide opportunities for SEL is to consider offering consistent district-wide expanded learning opportunities that embrace integrated practice with relationship-based and skills-based SEL. Ideally, this would happen in a setting that integrates learning

with enrichment programs, provides students time to complete their homework, engage in physical activity and STEM activities, and other fun pursuits. Schools need an accredited expanded learning provider with a comprehensive and evidence-based SEL curriculum that marries SEL with play-based activities that enhance academics. As schools seek expanded learning partners, they should research programs to uncover whether the SEL curriculum is intentional, explicit, and relationship-based.

**Spending on expanded learning programs—particularly accredited programs that offer a research-based curriculum—extends learning into hours that come back to the school classroom. When an expanded learning program uses relationship-based SEL, the benefits are increased further.**

In a recent educational survey, 54 percent of respondents reported that they are planning on shifting their priorities for ESSER III funds from equipment like HVAC and PPE to activities that directly address lost learning time.<sup>72</sup> Many districts are shifting toward a model that offers expanded learning opportunities through a district-funded model or a hybrid, district-supplemented/scholarship model in a move to direct extra support mechanisms to their highest-need families. ESSER funding creates a unique opportunity to extend research-based expanded learning to more children than ever before. There is monumental impact to adding 650+ hours of SEL development time annually, particularly where relationships are the focus. The research in this paper demonstrates that schools have an opportunity to think differently: to have a stronger impact on the social and emotional growth and the academic growth of their school population.

<sup>71</sup> (*ExpandedLearning&Afterschool\_Infographic*, n.d.)

<sup>72</sup> (*ESSER Spending Decisions Influenced by Changing Demands | K-12 Dive*, n.d.)

<sup>73</sup> (DeLay et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017; J. Morrison et al., n.d.; Reilly et al., n.d.; *The Landscape of Afterschool Evaluations*, n.d.), n.d.)

As evidenced, spending on expanded learning programs—particularly accredited programs that offer a research-based curriculum—extends learning into hours that come back to the school classroom.<sup>73</sup> When an expanded learning program uses relationship-based SEL, the benefits are increased further. Students in programs with integrated SEL have access to more hands-on learning in varied contexts or environments, which they bring back into the classroom along with improved peer relationships that positively impact the whole school climate. Not only are students individually ready to learn, but they also support their peers in being ready to learn.<sup>74</sup> School districts can meet academic needs right alongside SEL needs with social-emotional skill-building

in carefully developed, research-based programs that educate the whole child.

The SEL crisis is real, and the data is compelling. Parents, teachers, school boards, and state boards of education demand results. School districts need help, and they cannot be expected to do it all alone. The only question that remains is how to look at innovative approaches to support the solution. Quality expanded learning programs with a comprehensive relationship-based SEL component give administrators an innovative solution to address growing questions around this ever-increasing priority.

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<sup>74</sup> (DeLay et al., 2016)



## About the author:

Champions<sup>®</sup> Before- and After-School Programs, part of the KinderCare Learning Companies<sup>®</sup> family of brands, is a community partner for schools and families across the country. Champions provides research-based expanded learning programs before and after school and during school breaks in local schools for children from preschool to eighth grade. Champions is corporation-accredited by Cognia<sup>™</sup> (formerly AdvancED<sup>®</sup>), the largest education improvement organization in the world. Champions uses a research-based curriculum that emphasizes hands-on development led by child voice and choice. Champions partners with Harmony SEL, the relationship-based SEL program studied in this paper, and includes a strong focus on SEL throughout daily routines and interactions in all of their programs.

For more information about Champions, visit [DiscoverChampions.com](https://www.discoverchampions.com).



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