

# Assessing *SEL Curriculum Design*

Part of the *SEL Strengths Builder*

[www.SELpractices.org](http://www.SELpractices.org)

January 2016



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CENTER FOR YOUTH  
PROGRAM QUALITY

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June 24, 2016

Produced by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality at the Forum for Youth Investment

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## About the SEL Challenge

The Social and Emotional Learning Challenge was designed to (1) identify promising practices for building SEL skills with vulnerable adolescents and (2) develop a method for taking these practices to scale in thousands of out-of-school time (OST) settings. The promising practices are called standards for SEL practice and the method is called the SEL Strengths Builder. The SEL practices that were the focus of the Challenge were organized around adolescent skill growth in six areas: Emotion management, empathy, teamwork, responsibility, initiative, and problem solving.

The Challenge was a partnership between expert practitioners (youth workers, social workers, teachers) delivering exemplary programs in eight unique communities, a team of researchers, and a national funder. The findings are published in a Field Guide and website ([SELpractices.org](http://SELpractices.org)) launching in January 2016. A Technical Report describing the SEL Challenge method and additional findings will be available in March 2016.

## The SEL Strengths Builder Method

The SEL Strengths Builder Method is an extension of the evidence-based *Assess-Plan-Improve* continuous improvement sequence ([YPQI](http://YPQI)). The Strengths Builder method includes three areas of assessment designed to focus OST staff on a program's SEL strengths:

1. **Assessing SEL Curriculum Design:** Build a better understanding of your curriculum sequence in two parts – the youth-driven learning project at the heart of the offering (e.g., build a boat), and the parallel SEL content sequence that fosters SEL skill growth.
2. **Assessing SEL Practices:** Reflect on the intensity and quality of the responsive practices you implement to support youth in building their social and emotional skills.
3. **Assessing Youth SEL Skills:** Create a baseline profile of the social and emotional skills of the youth you serve and what it looks like when these youth are demonstrating SEL in your program.

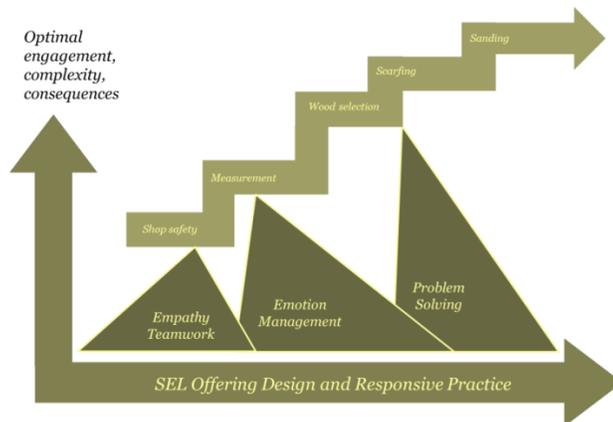
See the **Using the SEL Strengths Builder in a Continuous Improvement Cycle** section at the end of this document for how to use the assessments to improve your program's focus on SEL. Visit [cypq.org/SELchallenge](http://cypq.org/SELchallenge) for guidance on implementation including additional resources available for training and technical assistance.

### Guidelines for Mapping your Curriculum Sequence

<b>WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE?</b>	Staff (and volunteers, if applicable) who are responsible for designing, planning, facilitating, teaching, supporting, or are otherwise involved in the program offering. A group of four to five participants is a good start.
<b>HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?</b>	Steps 1 through 3 are recommended to prepare you and your team. Steps 4 through 7 could be completed in a one to two hour meeting. You may wish to complete Step 8 in a separate one to two hour meeting. Deeper follow-up conversations on specific standards are recommended over the several weeks and months following these initial conversations.
<b>WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?</b>	You may be surprised by the amount of conversation and ideas that are generated by focusing on practice. Don't try to tackle everything at once. Focus on one domain at a time, identify a few standards that your team really wants to focus on, and explore those deeply.

# Curriculum Sequence in SEL Challenge Programs

In the SEL Challenge offerings, there are two content sequences at work. The figure below illustrates how the two interact. The stair-stepped arrow represents the *project content sequence*—a content sequence that youth are guided along (e.g., the skill sets necessary to build a wooden boat) during the offering cycle. Meanwhile, the *SEL content sequence* is implemented in parallel to foster skill growth in each of the SEL domains. The figure below provides an example of how the project sequence, which is designed to build the technical skills of carpentry as youth build a boat from scratch, presents opportunities for developing social and emotional skills as youth work together towards shared goals, deal with frustrations and setbacks, and tackle problems together.



An offering is characterized by the same group of youth and adults meeting over multiple sessions for a planned learning purpose. The target offerings in the SEL Challenge are those exemplary offerings using SEL practices and curriculum to grow youth SEL skills.

## PROJECT CONTENT SEQUENCE

Each of the offerings has a project that youth are setting out to complete. For example, at Voyager Outward Bound School (VOBS), the project content sequence includes youth learning to set up camp—pitch tents, start a fire, store their food—a set of skills that at first staff model and, over time, youth complete on their own. At Youth on Board (YOB), youth are trained in public speaking, speech writing, and communications strategies and employ these skills across the campaigns they work on in the Boston Public Schools. At the Philadelphia Wooden Boat Factory (PWBF), youth serve as apprentice boat-builders and learn the tools and techniques to build a boat from raw materials. The project content sequence feature includes three practice indicators:

- Staff shape the offering work with youth input, often requiring youth ownership.
- Staff shape the offering work with complex goals and/or a complex sequence of operations.
- Staff shape the offering work with repetitive skill practice in diverse contexts.

## SEL CONTENT SEQUENCE

By design, the project content sequence presents opportunities for parallel social and emotional learning to occur. In fact, many of the Challenge programs have identified specific places in the project sequence where opportunities for SEL are likely to occur and, sometimes, where learning these skills is necessary to progress in the project. SEL Challenge program staff communicated that flexibility is imperative. All of the programs told stories about times they had adjusted their project content sequence in order to effectively respond to the emotional needs of the youth—e.g., because of a traumatic event a youth faced, a conflict between teens, or an individual's emotional breakthrough—demonstrating their responsiveness. The SEL content sequence feature includes three practice indicators:

- The offerings follow a progression through the SEL domains.
- Offerings are structured for youth to engage their community.
- Youth master social and emotional skills and experience increasing agency.

# Assessing Your SEL Curriculum Design

1. **Watch the video and review the guide *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning*.**

Visit <http://SELpractices.org> and view the video *Mapping Your Curriculum Sequence*. This will give you an overview of the process and how it connects to a larger conversation about improving your program's focus on SEL.

Review the Curriculum Features in section 2.1 of *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning*. You may also wish to review the Case Narratives. Each contains a written description of the Offering Curriculum, including the Offering Content and the Offering Sequence, and a map of the Content Sequence over time for each program.

2. **Select a program offering.**

Select one of your organization's program offerings to focus on. By *offering* we mean the same group of youth with the same staff over a sequence of sessions for a clearly stated learning purpose. Further, select a program offering that is designed and run with the aim of facilitating social and emotional skills. As part of the program design, the offering may explicitly address social and emotional skills or intentionally embed SEL training or experiences within another content focus such as the arts, boat-building, or civic action.

3. **Gather a team.**

Invite a group of staff (and volunteers, if applicable) who are responsible for designing, planning, facilitating, teaching, supporting, or are otherwise involved in the program offering. A major objective of this exercise is to have a conversation with colleagues about the work you do. Besides, everything's more fun with a team! Reserve up to two hours for a first conversation.

4. **Identify the main goal or "work" of the offering.**

Describe in a sentence or two what the goal of the offering is. This is different than the organization's mission statement. It's something concrete that the youth are working towards throughout the program offering. It's what the individual sessions culminate in.

Review the section above labeled Project Content Sequence for some examples from the SEL Challenge programs.

5. **Describe the project content sequence for the offering.**

Name the parts of your offering curriculum. Start with a list of the major activities, lessons, and milestones for the project. List these in approximate chronological order. You don't need to get as specific as you would for a lesson plan. It is likely that there are types of activities that occur in a regular and repetitive way, so group activities common to a theme together. Represent this as best you can at this point.

For an example, review the Offering Sequence section of one of the Case Narratives in *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning*.

**6. Describe what skills each element of your project content sequence is designed to build.**

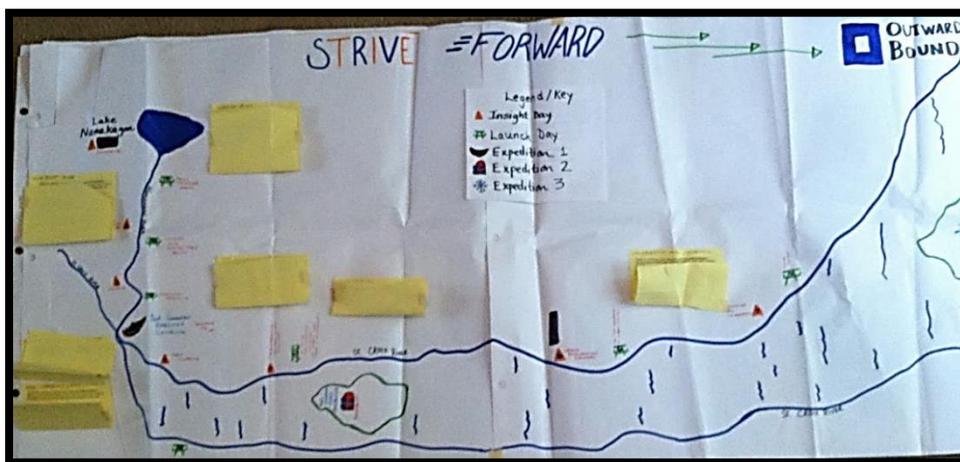
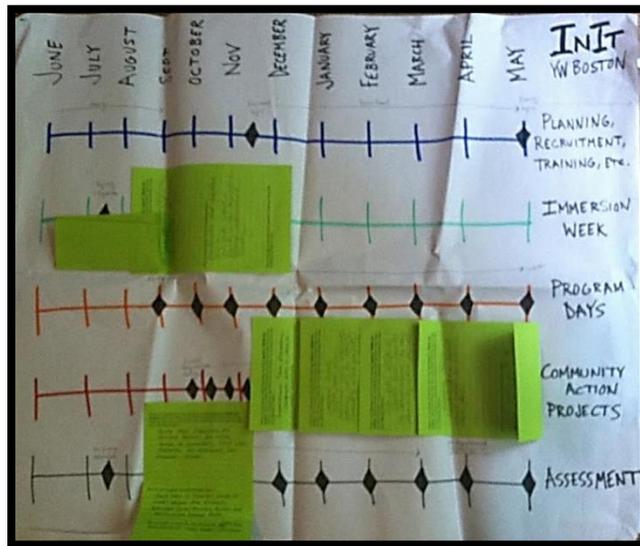
Now that you've got the major parts of the project sequence named, consider what skills or learning each element is designed to build. Identify the skills or learning objectives as they are covered over time by the activities. There may be skills that youth practice at multiple points across the offering, so note these as such.

For an example, return to the Offering Sequence section of one of the Case Narratives in *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning*.

**7. Represent the project content sequence visually.**

Choose a visual representation of your project content sequence. It can be as simple as a timeline that covers the full length of the program offering, or it can be more creative. Use large sheets of easel paper, a white board, a computer screen, sidewalk chalk, or any media that work best for your team.

Below are a few examples from SEL Challenge programs. See more on <http://SELpractices.org>.



## 8. Describe the SEL content sequence for the offering.

Next, identify specific places in the project sequence where opportunities for SEL are likely to occur. Sometimes these are places where learning these skills is necessary to progress in the project. We've broken this step into several sub-steps:

- a. Review the Standards for SEL Practice in *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning*. This may also be a good time to pause and work with your team through **Assessing SEL Practices** (available at [SELpractices.org](https://SELpractices.org)) before returning to your map.

Select one or two of the SEL domains that your program offering is particularly well suited for.

- b. Examine your project content sequence. Where and when do the social and emotional skills surface? Are there particular activities that present opportunities to practice social and emotional skills? How do the project and SEL content sequences interact over the course of the offering?

For this step, it may be helpful to think about challenges that youth might face when they are learning skills. Consider your experiences working with youth in this offering. Think in terms of individual scenarios or cases that are important or meaningful in some way. You might describe the challenge and the staff response on a Post-it® Note, and affix it to your map at the place in the project content sequence where it is likely to occur. The green, yellow, and blue Post-its attached to the maps in the pictures above represent samples of these instances of social and emotional learning.

## 9. Share your map at [SELpractices.org](https://SELpractices.org).

## 10. Use the Curriculum Features Reflection on page 6.

The standards for the four Curriculum Features have been converted into a self-assessment tool. For each standard, you will be asked to rate your program on how well you provide the feature described. You will be asked about how important each experience or practice is for your program and to what degree the practice or experience is present.

Read each standard and the practice indicators that describe it. For more information, or to go deeper, consult the relevant section of *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning* to learn more. Answer the questions based on your experience and knowledge of your program. Be as honest as you can – the goal of the assessment is to begin a conversation about your practices with your colleagues. You may want to first do a cursory pass of all of the standards, and then go back and pay more attention to those that raised discussion.

# Curriculum Features Reflection

The SEL Curriculum Features include the Content Sequence (Project and SEL), Safe Space, Responsive Practices, and Supports for Staff. We define the term **curriculum** to include both (1) the sequence of content and experiences fit to the developmental and learning needs of youth, and (2) the supports necessary for the instructional staff to plan and implement that sequence.

**Below, you can rate your program on each of the standards to reflect how well you implement important curriculum features for social and emotional learning.** Visit section 2.1 in *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning* for examples and ideas on how to implement these features.

CURRICULUM FEATURES	How important is this to your program?  1 = Not important 3 = Moderately important 5 = Very important	How well do you implement this feature?  1 = Not implemented 3 = Implemented moderately well 5 = Implemented very well	How often do you implement this feature?  1 = Monthly 3 = Weekly 5 = Daily
<b>PROJECT CONTENT SEQUENCE</b>			
Staff shape the offering work with youth input, often requiring youth ownership.			
Staff shape the offering work with complex goals and/or a complex sequence of operations.			
Staff shape the offering work with repetitive skill practice in diverse contexts.			
<b>SEL CONTENT SEQUENCE</b>			
The offerings follow a progression through the SEL domains.			
Offerings are structured for youth to engage their community.			
Youth master social and emotional skills and experience increasing agency.			

<b>CURRICULUM FEATURES</b>	How important is this to your program?  1 = Not important 3 = Moderately important 5 = Very important	How well do you implement this feature?  1 = Not implemented 3 = Implemented moderately well 5 = Implemented very well	How often do you implement this feature?  1 = Monthly 3 = Weekly 5 = Daily
<b>SAFE SPACE</b>			
Staff cultivate ground rules for group processes (e.g. listening, turn-taking, decision-making) and sharing of emotions.			
Staff cultivate a culture around the principles that all are different, equal, and important, in which people actively care for, appreciate, and include each other.			
Staff cultivate a culture where learning from mistakes and failures is highly valued.			
<b>RESPONSIVE PRACTICES</b>			
Staff observe and interact in order to know youth deeply.			
Staff provide structure for check-ins to actively listen to and receive feedback from individual youth.			
Staff coach, model, scaffold, and facilitate in real time as challenges occur.			

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CURRICULUM FEATURES</b></p>	<p>How important is this to your program?</p> <p>1 = Not important 3 = Moderately important 5 = Very important</p>	<p>How well do you implement this feature?</p> <p>1 = Not implemented 3 = Implemented moderately well 5 = Implemented very well</p>	<p>How often do you implement this feature?</p> <p>1 = Monthly 3 = Weekly 5 = Daily</p>
<p><b>SUPPORTS FOR STAFF</b></p>			
<p>The organization recruits youth who will benefit from the offering.</p>			
<p>There is more than one staff member in every program session with the ability to implement responsive practices.</p>			
<p>Staff work together before each program session to plan and collaborate on the session activities, and regularly debrief following each session to discuss youth progress, staff response, and adjustments for future sessions.</p>			
<p>Staff are supported to grow professionally and rejuvenate energy for the work.</p>			
<p>Staff are supported by their organization to reflect on and improve their practices through a continuous improvement process.</p>			

# Using the SEL Strengths Builder Method in a Continuous Improvement Cycle

## 1. Assess your SEL Curriculum Design.

Follow the steps for **Assessing SEL Curriculum Design** (assessment and video available at [SELpractices.org](https://www.selpractices.org)). Hold a conversation with program staff and create a visual representation of the sequence of content in your program. This process should also start to build a common vocabulary around SEL. As you use *Preparing Youth to Thrive* to get a better understanding of the curriculum features, consider the following questions:

- a) What is the project content sequence for your offering? What is the main goal or “work” of the offering?
- b) What is the SEL content sequence for your offering? Where and when do the SEL practices surface?
- c) How do the project and SEL content sequences interact over the course of the offering?
- d) What staff supports do you provide to encourage staff’s own SEL and their ability to support youth’s SEL?

## 2. Assess your SEL Practices.

Follow the steps for **Assessing SEL Practices** (assessment and video available at [SELpractices.org](https://www.selpractices.org)). Engage the staff in your program to complete the assessment independently to identify practices that are prominent in your program and those that are missing. Hold a meeting for program staff to discuss their results, and have a conversation about what is most important in your program. This process should also start to build a common vocabulary around SEL practices. Use *Preparing Youth to Thrive* to get a better understanding of each of the practices. Consider the following questions:

- a) Which of the youth key experiences and staff practices implemented by the SEL Challenge programs are similar to what you do in your program?
- b) Which could you do more of?
- c) Which are high priorities for you, based on the youth you serve and the goals of your program?
- d) Which are less of a priority, and why?

### 3. Assess Youth SEL Skills.

The conversation can be extended by asking staff to **Assess Youth SEL Skills** (assessment and video available at [SELpractices.org](https://SELpractices.org)). Have staff complete the SEL staff rating survey for a few program youth and produce a performance report. With these ratings in hand, staff can ask a number of important questions:

- a) Who are our youth and which social and emotional skills could help them achieve greater agency in their lives? What does it look like when these youth are demonstrating these skills in our program?
- b) Are there opportunities for these youth to practice these skills in our program? What changes to the curriculum would increase opportunities to practice these social and emotional skills?
- c) How do our current youth experiences and staff practices compare to those described in the standards? Which standards do we perform well on? Where are our weaknesses? Given the needs of our youth, where do we need to do better?
- d) Are we biased? Is there any systematic reason why we might rate one youth lower or higher than another?

### 4. Implement an Improvement Cycle.

The assessment conversations feed into a cycle that can lead to an improvement plan focused on modifications to the offering curriculum and clearer thinking about moments in the curriculum where opportunities to use responsive practices occur. Watch the video **Planning for Improvement** (available at [SELpractices.org](https://SELpractices.org)) for guidance on creating an improvement plan.

It is important to return to the improvement plan and to check in regularly on progress towards goals. Watch the video **Reflecting on Progress** (available at [SELpractices.org](https://SELpractices.org)) for guidance on how to keep staff focused on improvement year after year.

### 5. Identify System Supports.

For sustainable change, professional development and assessments should be aligned and integrated into the annual cycle. Visit [cypq.org/SELchallenge](https://cypq.org/SELchallenge) for guidance on implementation including additional resources available for training and technical assistance.

