

Methodology and Findings from the Social Emotional Learning Challenge Executive Summary

The SEL Challenge was designed in pursuit of two ambitious goals: to identify promising practices for building SEL skills with vulnerable adolescents, and to develop technical supports for use of these SEL practices at scale in thousands of out-of-school time (OST) settings. The study design included a qualitative methodology, expert practitioners, and performance studies at each of eight exemplary programs. The products of the Challenge—standards for SEL practice and the suite of SEL performance measures—is designed to help OST programs focus deeply on SEL practice, assess their strengths, and improve the quality and effectiveness of their services using a continuous improvement approach.

By focusing systematically at a granular level of adult and youth behavior, the Challenge content supports use in practice-oriented settings and systems—youth programs, school day classrooms, mentorships, residential treatment, apprenticeships, workplace, families—where the qualities of adult-youth interaction and learning are a primary concern. We hope that local policy makers and funders will use the Challenge as a template for identifying the exemplary SEL services already available in their communities and make sure that they are adequately recognized, resourced, and replicated.

The promising practices are featured in a Field Guide, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social Emotional Learning* (Smith, McGovern, et al., 2016), a companion website, and a suite of tools and technical assistance (SELpractices.org). This report, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Methodology and Findings from the SEL Challenge*, describes how the partnership carried out the work of the Challenge and what we learned as a result. Findings from the SEL Challenge include:

- (1) The Challenge methodology successfully identified exemplary SEL offerings and produced 34 standards, 78 practice indicators, and 327 vignettes for building SEL skills with vulnerable youth.
- (2) The suite of performance measures developed for the Challenge is feasible to implement and demonstrates sufficient reliability and validity for both continuous improvement and evaluation uses.
- (3) The performance studies indicate that the exemplary offerings were exceptionally high quality compared to other OST programs and that youth skills improved in all six SEL domains. Skill growth also occurred for the higher risk groups. Benchmarks for SEL performance include:
 - (3.a) Diverse staff and youth, intensive participation, and expert adult guidance;
 - (3.b) Collaborative organizational cultures;
 - (3.c) Exceptionally high quality instruction and youth engagement;
 - (3.d) A consistent pattern of positive SEL skill growth across measures, offerings, and risk status.
- (4) The offerings shared an OST-SEL intervention design: *project-based learning with intensive co-regulation*.

The Discussion section addresses generalizability of findings, cautions about SEL measurement, and study limitations.