

## Introduction to the SEL Challenge

The SEL Challenge is a partnership among the Susan Crown Exchange (SCE), staff teams from eight exemplary out-of-school time (OST)<sup>1</sup> programs, the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (CYPQ), and technical consultants. The partnership was created for two purposes: (a) identify promising practices<sup>i</sup> for building social and emotional learning (SEL) skills with vulnerable adolescents, and (b) develop technical supports for use of these SEL practices at scale in several thousand OST settings. The promising practices are featured in an SEL Field Guide, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning* (Smith, McGovern, Larson, Hillaker, & Peck, 2016), companion website, and a suite of tools and technical assistance (SELpractices.org). This Technical Report, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Methodology and Findings from the SEL Challenge*, describes how the partnership completed the work of the Challenge and what we learned as a result.

Although there are many ways to define and discuss the importance of SEL skills for vulnerable adolescents, a great deal can be summarized using the terms *self-regulation* and *agency*. In general, an adolescent's ability to self-regulate—to manage emotions, attention, motivation, and behavior to achieve specific purposes—is related to a wide range of positive outcomes. Perhaps more importantly, the ability to intentionally shift focus away from environmental cues that cause reactive or negative emotional responses, or to choose to be in environments already free from these cues, is a powerful step toward transcendence of contexts that limit potential. When adolescents use self-regulatory powers to ignore distractions, inhibit impulses, or choose environments that have higher developmental potential, they are often referred to as having agency.<sup>ii</sup> SEL skills are action skills for navigating and negotiating complicated real-world situations.

Although we have much to learn about social and emotional skills, we also have a great deal of evidence. For example, meta-analyses<sup>iii</sup>—studies that summarize across findings from many prior studies—have suggested that SEL skill-building curricula delivered in both OST and school settings have substantively important impact on a wide range of skills and outcomes (Durlak & Weissberg, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). Further, the wider literature on SEL suggests that SEL skills transfer across settings and improve skill learning in other content areas (Durlak, 2015). In particular, this literature is consistent with the idea that SEL skills are also learning skills as both SEL interventions and SEL skills are

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<sup>1</sup> The term out-of-school time is used to refer to settings variously labeled afterschool, expanded learning, extracurricular clubs, summer camps, and sports; many mentoring, tutoring, apprenticeship, and workforce development programs; programs for disconnected and homeless youth; and some alternative schools.

associated with successful outcomes in settings where learning academic and other content is the central purpose.<sup>iv</sup>

There is growing consensus about the many positive effects of SEL, but access to settings that build SEL skills are not equally available to all youth (Putnam, 2015). Because these skills are critical for healthy functioning across the life course, lack of access to environments that build these skills constitutes a developmental risk factor (Bailey, Duncan, Odgers, & Yu, 2015; Cunha & Heckman, 2006). Many American youth are vulnerable in ways similar to the Challenge participants: relentlessly exposed to a popular culture of violence and aggression; experiencing social exclusion, poverty, and instability in their neighborhoods and (sometimes) households; attending substandard and stressful schools; and exposed to environmental contaminants (Murphey et al., 2014). Chronic exposure to these stressful and traumatic experiences can produce negative effects across the life course (Blair & Raver, 2012; Evans & Fuller-Rowell, 2013; Jaffee & Christian, 2014). These are precisely the young people who most need settings designed to foster SEL skills - and for whom they are often least available. The SEL Challenge was designed to help address these unmet needs.

In the SEL Challenge, we focused on descriptions of practices used by professional staff and performance benchmarks demonstrated by exemplary SEL organizations and offerings. These critical aspects of implementation are often not adequately described in the aforementioned SEL impact literature (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). By focusing on granular descriptions of adult behavior and youth experience at the point-of-service level, the Challenge content supports point-of-service level application in OST programs, regular school-day classrooms, mentorships, residential treatment, apprenticeships, workplace, families, and other contexts where the quality of adult-youth interaction is a primary concern. We hope that local policy makers and funders will use the SEL Challenge as a template for identifying local networks of expert practitioners and their exemplary programs, forms of social capital already available in many communities, and make sure that they are adequately recognized, resourced, and replicated.

### *Science of SEL Practice*

In the Challenge, and in this technical report, we address the complicated issue of how settings can be organized for the purpose of youth's SEL skill learning. Recent treatments of this subject matter cover the broad developmental arguments and evidence linking participation in OST contexts to youth skills and outcomes (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, 2015; Corcoran & Slavin, 2016; Farrington et al., 2012; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Li & Julian, 2012; Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, & Heath, 2015; Yoder, 2013). Herein, we focus more narrowly on proximal descriptions of youth SEL skills that are demonstrated in the OST context and staff practices and curriculum features

that help to structure the OST context for skill learning. We then use those descriptions of practice and skills to guide selection of performance measures for use in a continuous improvement cycle in organizations trying to improve the quality and effectiveness of their SEL practices.

The barriers to attaining these objectives—taking SEL practice to greater scale—are high because much of the available information about SEL practice is difficult to use. There are many ways to talk about SEL practices and skills, making it difficult to know if we are focused on the same thing when we use the same words. This is particularly true of the language of skill-building and the many definitions for words that describe how people and contexts come together to produce individual skills (e.g., situations, transactions, ecologies).<sup>v</sup> Further, intervention designs are often privatized in specific curricula and tools that do not support translation and adaptation. Finally, much of the scientific description of SEL is focused on individual youth skills and outcomes rather than the SEL practices necessary to initiate and scaffold skill growth.<sup>vi</sup> In short, we lack a cumulative base of scientifically-organized expertise about SEL practice.

The lack of a cumulative base of expertise about SEL practice has hindered the development of useful theories about practice which, in turn, has hindered development of useful tools for practice (e.g., standards, curricula, logic models, clinical checklists, performance measures) that can be applied by both expert and novice practitioners over wide variations in local context.<sup>vii</sup> More useful theories about practice can be used by professionals to align generic SEL practices with the unique profiles of youth experiences and community resources in which their offerings “make sense” with and for youth. With an adequate theory of practice, performance measures can also be aligned to help leaders understand how well the SEL practices are being delivered and how the youth are responding in terms of engagement and skill growth. One of the primary aims of the Challenge Study was to assemble suitable theory—theory about how youth develop skill, how specific aspects of context (i.e., standards for SEL practice) support skill development, and how organizational systems promote use of SEL practices in the many settings they are accountable for—so that more powerful tools could be designed and applied in the work of creating more effective SEL offerings.

### *SEL Skill, SEL Practice, and the Continuous Improvement Intervention*

*SEL Skill.* In our use, *youth skill* refers to mental content and processes that (a) structure mental engagement with the context and (b) influence behavior enacted in relation to context. These basic elements—context, mental processes, and behavior—are reflected in a definition from Fischer and Bidell (2006) that “skill is the capacity to act in an organized way in a specific context” (p. 321), where the terms *capacity* and *organized* imply the centrality of mental content and processes. Mental skills are also often described in behavioral terms, as behavioral indicators of the application of mental skills to

the context. The final definitions for the six domains of youth SEL skill, which are addressed in the Challenge, describe both *mental skills* (e.g., ability, disposition) and *behavioral indicators* of mental skills enacted in relation to the OST context (e.g., take action, persevere):

- *Emotion Management* – Abilities to be aware of and constructively handle both positive and challenging emotions
- *Empathy* – Relating to others with acceptance, understanding, and sensitivity to their diverse perspectives and experiences
- *Teamwork* – Abilities to collaborate and coordinate action with others
- *Responsibility* – Dispositions and abilities to reliably meet commitments and fulfill obligations of challenging roles
- *Initiative* – Capacities to take action, sustain motivation, and persevere through challenge toward an identified goal
- *Problem Solving* – Abilities to plan, strategize, and implement complex tasks

Youth are active builders of their own skills, and the language of the standards includes many descriptions of active mental engagement, such as practice, identify and name, explore, own, articulate, develop, share, work together, manage, build knowledge, plan, brainstorm, think strategically, etc. The implications of this language, and the literature on skill development,<sup>viii</sup> is that the individual youth is the ultimate and only skill-builder and that self-regulation occurs when youth self-organize their mental skill (Fischer & Bidell, 2006).

As described in Chapters Two and Three of this report, we assemble theory that emphasizes youth's experience of self-regulation, which we refer to as *agency* and which we see as a primary purpose for building contexts that focus on SEL. Consistent with more and less volitional modes of self-regulation, the term *agency* can be thought of in two senses (see Endnote i): First, youth can experience increased agency because they enter a context that elicits positive emotion and offers opportunities to use existing skills (e.g., playing to youth's strengths and interests). Agency in this sense is more automatic, unconscious, and fast moving. In the second sense, youth experience increased agency as they train the conscious focus of their attention and awareness on specific aspects of (a) the context, (b) their own mental engagement with the context, (c) their own behavior in relation to the context, and (d) the wide array of meanings that accompany each of these parts of youth experience in an OST setting.

Young people who have been exposed to traumatic or chronically-stressful experiences may require more intensive supports for successful skill building in either the more passive or more active senses of agency. In particular, mental processes related to emotion may block or enhance (i.e., mediate)

skill learning, as cues in the context trigger emotion-laden responses that may deactivate mental skills that could be engaged by the context, or disrupt the process of focusing attention on what the context has to offer. These concerns with regulation skills, and the corresponding experiences of agency that result, are particularly germane to OST contexts that are intentionally designed to help youth feel safe and interested so that attention can focus on the task at hand, motivation can emerge around task success, and skill learning and mastery can occur through repeated practice (Smith, Hillaker, & McGovern, 2014).

*SEL Practice.* We identified the critical components of context by asking experts who have been designing SEL contexts for many different youth over many years. These experts have developed practices that both focus on an identifiable set of SEL skills and help manage necessary individuation as staff respond to youth's different experiential histories in each program cycle. Our definition of SEL practices is broad and includes descriptions of (a) staff behaviors that occur in the moment (e.g., modeling appropriate use of emotion), (b) program structures that the staff put into place and that endure through time (e.g., curriculum), and (c) youth key experiences (e.g., taking on roles and obligations) that point to the developmental experiences of youth, the mental models that staff have for youth experience, and the practices and structures that staff use to reliably initiate and scaffold those types of experiences.

Although our choice to include *youth key experiences* in a set of standards for SEL practice adds additional complexity (because youth's mental content and processes are different from context), the descriptions of youth experiences from the perspectives of the staff include many cues about the practices implemented by the staff to initiate and scaffold SEL skill learning. This basic insight was reflected in many of the standards: Staff have to know their youth and their youth's communities so that SEL practices can be organized in such a way as to engage youth's store of prior experience.

We use the broader term *context* to refer to the physical, social, and informational features of an OST setting that are proximal to an individual youth. Perhaps most importantly, in this work, context refers to places where adults and youth come together and where SEL practices are implemented. The participating adults and other youth are also part of the context for a given youth. Descriptions of context are frequently referred to as setting, environment, situation, ecology, treatment, and many other terms.

*Continuous improvement intervention.* Because OST settings are uniquely positioned to build SEL skills with vulnerable youth, the tools and technical assistance developed through the SEL Challenge are designed to help OST programs focus deeply on SEL practice, assess their strengths, and improve the quality and effectiveness of their services over multiple cycles. If the opportunity to have a desired skill-building experience is dependent upon the power of the context to activate prior knowledge and skills (and deactivate mental contents that may block engagement), then the exact features of the context that optimize skill growth almost certainly vary within each group of individual youth and between groups of youth from different communities and with different histories. The continuous improvement approach

supports expert practitioners to review a repertoire of SEL practices in order to select practices that are most likely to activate previously-developed skills in the youth they serve so that skills can be extended, practiced, and eventually mastered. Continuous improvement intervention directly develops staff expertise to design curricula to reliably initiate and scaffold skill development for youth with different experiential histories and to allow the work to take novel turns that keep the youth highly engaged. Appendix A provides additional detail on the continuous improvement intervention elements, validation evidence, and scale of use.

### *Overview and Use of the Report*

This report is organized in four sections, reflecting the four primary aspects of the work: (a) selection of expert practitioners and exemplary offerings, (b) developing the standards for SEL practice, (c) describing a suite of SEL performance measures, and (d) identifying performance benchmarks for exemplary SEL organizations and offerings. A final section discusses findings from the Challenge and how to take SEL practices to greater scale using the standards and performance measures.

This report has several purposes. First, the report presents detailed methods and findings for each of the four parts of the work so that readers can, for example, understand how we selected expert practitioners or how we decided which practices were important enough to call standards. Second, the report provides validity evidence for the standards for SEL practice. The exemplary offerings were of exceptionally high quality, and this lends credibility to the standards for SEL practice that were developed by studying them. Finally, the report assembles information about reliability, validity, and feasibility for a suite of SEL performance measures, including performance benchmarks for normative use in deciding what it takes to promote SEL skill growth.

For efficient use of this report and the other SEL Challenge materials, we provide the following guidance to users:

- For readers interested in the overall findings from the SEL Challenge, they are summarized in Chapter Five.
- For readers interested in locating expertise in their own communities, Chapter One describes the process we used to locate expert practitioners and summarizes the characteristics of organizations, offerings, staff, and youth who participated in the Challenge.
- For readers interested in the standards for SEL practice, the SEL Field Guide, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social and Emotional Learning*, provides a detailed description of the standards, with supporting content. The qualitative methodology used to derive the standards and practice indicators is described in Chapter Two and Appendix B.

- For readers interested in the suite of SEL performance measures, Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the measures, procedures, and staff time necessary to replicate the Challenge data collection. Chapter Four presents performance results for the SEL Challenge organizations and offerings. Appendix E provides detail for reliability and validity of SEL skill measures. Sample performance reports that were produced for each participating Challenge organization at baseline and end-of-cycle are available at <http://cypq.org/SELChallenge> along with complete codebooks, permission forms, and other supporting documents for all measures used in the Challenge.