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Social and Emotional Learning Is the Cornerstone

Exploring Integrated, Schoolwide SEL in Two Innovative High Schools

This report provides an illustration of two Opportunity by Design (ObD) high schools in which practices for supporting students' social and emotional learning (SEL) were implemented schoolwide and integrated into teachers' academic instruction. Although definitions of SEL vary, it is generally conceptualized as the knowledge and skills to manage emotions, achieve goals, feel and show empathy, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions (adapted from Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, undated).

SEL is critical for preparing high school students for college and career success. Developing students' social and emotional skills can have positive impacts on students' well-being and academic achievement and are necessary for postsecondary and career success (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2019; Carmeli, 2003; Durlak et al., 2011; Kanopka et al., 2020).

KEY FINDINGS

- Two schools participating in the ObD initiative stood out for their positive SEL implementation.

- Four key school-based factors facilitated integrated, schoolwide SEL practices in the two ObD schools:

    - A SEL-focused school mission and clear structures provided opportunities for teachers to support students' SEL skill development.

    - Personalized learning approaches helped teachers build positive relationships with students and cultivate students' self-awareness.

    - Mastery-based learning offered teachers a structure in which they could regularly assess SEL competencies and encourage students' growth mindset.

    - Professional development offered before the school year began focused on helping teachers understand students' experiences.

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2019) identified three important elements for supporting students' SEL: (1) setting a positive climate by establishing safe, relationship-based, and equitable learning environments; (2) teaching and practicing social, emotional, and cognitive skills (i.e., offering explicit SEL instruction); and (3) embedding social, emotional, and cognitive skills into academic instruction (i.e., integrating SEL into academic instruction) (Schwartz et al., 2020).

Integrating SEL into day-to-day academic instruction in meaningful ways is critical for supporting students' SEL development. It provides an opportunity for teachers to reinforce SEL skills over time and allows students to understand and practice SEL skills in context (Jones and Bouffard, 2012; Kendziora and Yoder, 2016). However, research indicates that many high schools have not yet implemented SEL programming that offers explicit SEL instruction and integrates SEL into academic instruction (Young et al., 2020). Recent nationally representative surveys of teachers and principals indicate that formal SEL-focused programs and curricula are commonly used in elementary grades but rarely used in high schools, which tend to use more informal practices (Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019).

During a four-year, in-depth research study of ObD high schools (Steiner et al., 2020), we observed substantial variation in how schools implemented SEL. Some schools emerged as exemplars in establishing relationship-based and equitable learning environments, offering explicit SEL instruction, and integrating SEL into academic instruction. We present examples from two innovative ObD high schools in which each of the three elements for supporting students' SEL were present.

Abbreviations

CCNY	Carnegie Corporation of New York
ObD	Opportunity by Design
PD	professional development
SEL	social and emotional learning

Social and Emotional Learning Was a Foundational Design Principle for Opportunity by Design Schools

Integrating formal SEL practices into comprehensive high school design was a foundational premise of the ObD initiative. This initiative was launched by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) to support the design and creation of a network of small, innovative high schools of choice in large, urban districts in the United States. The 16 ObD schools, which were located in seven school districts, enrolled primarily students of color and students experiencing poverty. The ObD schools were smaller than traditional comprehensive high schools, serving about 400 students each at maximum capacity, and were schools of choice, open to any student in a district to attend.

The ObD schools were charged with developing a school model that was based on ten integrated design principles. CCNY intended these principles to encompass all aspects of high school management and performance, from school culture to instructional practices to continuous improvement. The ObD initiative was implemented and evaluated over the course of four years, from fall 2014 to spring 2018.

Box 1 provides a snapshot of the ObD initiative; more details about the implementation of the ObD schools, the design principles, and the impact of the initiative on student academic and behavioral outcomes is available in Steiner et al., 2020.

The ObD design principles were guidelines, but they were not prescriptive. Each school team designed an initial model that fit their local context, students, and goals, then refined the model over time.

One of the design principles that each school incorporated into their model was positive youth development. The ObD guidance closely linked positive youth development to SEL. Schools were encouraged to ensure that students had a voice in their learning and access to experiences and relationships that would help them develop the skills and mindsets to succeed, with an emphasis on integrating SEL skills into academics (CCNY, 2017).

Because the school design teams developed unique models to fit their contexts, positive youth development was implemented differently across the

16 ObD schools. This variation provides in-depth cases that can help us identify school-level factors that can facilitate the implementation and integration of SEL practices in high schools. Understanding these factors is essential for building school capacity to prepare high school students for success—especially in the wake of coronavirus disease 2019 setbacks (Hamilton et al., 2020).

About Our Analysis

Our goal is to illustrate what the implementation of integrated, schoolwide SEL practices can look like in practice to inform practitioners and school leaders. Therefore, we do not attempt to draw conclusions about factors that could have enabled successful implementation.

Some of these factors are discussed in Steiner et al., 2020. In this broader study, we found that ObD high schools implemented SEL to different extents: SEL was a core aspect of the design in some schools and was less of an emphasis in others. In addition, we found that the ObD schools used a variety of practices to implement SEL and integrate it with academic content. For example, some schools provided professional development focused on SEL, some schools defined SEL competencies through classroom or schoolwide rubrics, and some teachers provided explicit instruction in SEL competencies.

The high degree of variation in SEL implementation across ObD schools inspired us to take a closer look to see if there were schools in which school leaders, teachers, and students' accounts converged to suggest that SEL was being implemented in a schoolwide and integrated manner. These accounts included interviews with teachers and school leaders, teachers' and students' survey responses, and student focus groups.

We relied on data collected in spring 2018 across the 16 ObD schools to identify the one to two schools that showed the best results for schoolwide, integrated SEL implementation—compared with other ObD schools in the broader study—to highlight as illustrative cases. First, we reviewed teacher and student survey data to get a sense of which schools stood out in terms of SEL implementation. The teacher survey questions we examined (available in Steiner et al., 2020) were related to various aspects of SEL implementation: SEL professional development (PD), perceptions of students (e.g., obstacles to student learning, respect, motivation), SEL classroom practices (e.g., building positive relationships with students), and SEL topics addressed in instruction. The student survey questions we examined were related to support from teachers, sense of belonging in school, and SEL topics teachers addressed in instruction.

We then examined the survey data by school to discern whether teachers' or students' responses at any school indicated more extensive SEL implementation than others. Two schools, within the same district, stood out as having more positive teacher and student survey responses for SEL implementa-

> I feel like [SEL is] one of the cornerstones of our school and makes us different and separates us from other high schools.
> —Teacher

tion. We then reviewed transcripts from student focus groups in which students were asked about their experiences in the school and perceptions of their teachers and the schools' instructional and SEL approaches.

Through this examination, we identified two ObD schools—International High School at Largo (hereafter, Largo) and International High School at Langley Park (hereafter, Langley) in Prince George's County, Maryland—that stood out for the positive consistency between student focus group accounts and teacher and student survey responses. (In the other ObD schools, student focus group data was not as positive as survey response data.) We then deeply examined SEL implementation in these two positive outlier schools by analyzing 2018 interview transcripts from four teachers and one school leader in each school. When we needed more information or clarification on specific topics, we supplemented this analysis with interview transcripts from prior years of the ObD initiative.

The two ObD schools highlighted in this report, Largo and Langley, provide a unique perspective on what implementation of schoolwide, integrated, explicit SEL instruction can look like when it is a core design feature from school inception. Our report draws from rich qualitative data that we triangulated across students, teachers, and school leaders; each school had high survey response rates (about 75 percent for teachers and students in both schools)

and consistency across survey and qualitative data sources. Although the findings are not nationally representative and our discussion is limited to a descriptive account of SEL implementation in Largo and Langley, the findings provide descriptive insight into the school-based factors that may promote schoolwide, integrated SEL implementation. The findings may provide valuable insight for leaders of other small high schools seeking to strengthen their own focus on SEL. (We caution that we are not able to address why SEL implementation may not have been as successful in the other ObD schools.)

In Box 2, we briefly discuss school and district context in Largo and Langley. Although these schools' SEL implementation certainly was influenced by district context and bolstered by the additional technical assistance that these schools received through the ObD initiative (as discussed in Steiner et al., 2020), in this report we focus on school and classroom implementation within the control of school staff.

Social and Emotional Learning Was "Baked Into" the School Mission and School Structures

Across the first three years of school operation, the principals of Largo and Langley prioritized creating a school mission that emphasized SEL, integrating it into all school structures, and incorporating student input. One principal explained that building this culture was an important foundation for students' academic success:

> So it's all based on positive youth development. We have built the social-emotional structure. I think it's key to our students being successful . . . And I think that we're able to build a lot more on the academic experiences because we invest so much time on the social emotional piece.

These two leaders reportedly designed school models in which SEL permeated every aspect of daily operations. Leaders reported emphasizing SEL in teacher PD, ensured that teacher committees and teams addressed SEL in their meetings, provided a dedicated time during advisory periods

Box 2. Prince George's County District Context

International High School at Largo and International High School at Langley Park opened in fall 2015—the second year of the ObD initiative—following one year dedicated to school design. Both schools are located in Prince George's County School District, a large, urban public school district composed of students from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Largo and Langley served a higher percentage of English learners than other district schools and were specifically designed to support immigrant or refugee multilingual learners. In addition to the supports provided by the district, both schools received supplemental supports from the Internationals Network, which partners with schools to aid immigrant and refugee students who are learning English (Internationals Network, undated). The Internationals Network provided leader and teacher PD and curricula and, according to school staff, helped school leaders articulate a mission and design school systems that prioritized the inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Both schools also were supported by Springpoint: Partners in School Design. Springpoint, which CCNY helped establish in 2013, partners with schools, districts, and communities to create innovative schools that enable all students to succeed in high school, college, and beyond (Springpoint, undated). During the initiative, Springpoint provided teacher and leader PD and technical assistance through walkthrough visits, targeted follow-up support, and facilitating visits to other innovative schools. Internationals Network and Springpoint both helped to build leader and teacher capacity for supporting students' SEL. Throughout the course of RAND's study of the ObD initiative, Internationals Network, Springpoint, and the district worked together to coordinate and streamline their support efforts for the two ObD schools.

for teachers to explicitly teach SEL competencies, adopted schoolwide expectations for SEL competencies and a common rubric to assess those competencies in academic instruction, and promoted student voice through student government associations. One teacher described the school's focus on SEL as "community-building" and said that "[w]e are SEL . . . [it's] everything."

In addition, student voice was a key dimension. Students, teachers, and administrators said that student government associations provided a formal structure for soliciting student input and that teachers and administrators used this input to drive key decisions, such as school uniform and grading policies. Students who participated in focus groups agreed, stating that teachers and school leaders valued their input.

The teacher interviews and student focus groups from Largo and Langley suggest that SEL was "baked into" school structures and operations; it was not an additional task that teachers had to implement. In the following sections, we describe how this approach helped teachers in Largo and Langley support students' SEL by building positive relationships with students, offering explicit SEL instruction, and integrating SEL into academic instruction.

Personalized Learning Practices Complemented SEL, Helping Teachers Integrate Relationship Building and Self-Awareness into Academic Instruction

Largo and Langley used instructional models that emphasized personalized learning. These models reportedly complemented their emphases on SEL. In the context of ObD, *personalized learning* was defined as tailoring students' learning experiences to their individual learning interests and needs (Steiner et al., 2020).

Teachers reported that several elements of their personalized learning approaches also reinforced SEL competencies, allowing them to integrate SEL into academic instruction. First, getting to know students' interests and strengths to personalize learning experiences reportedly reinforced positive teacher-student relationships as part of SEL. Teachers described using such methods as informal conversations and classwide surveys to get to know students' strengths, interests, and goals. This gave teachers a deeper understanding of their students' interests and helped them tailor assignments and instructional approaches accordingly.

> I like to give [my students] surveys and ask for their feedback about what type of instructional tools are the best. I really think that [students] are the people who can tell us what works and what doesn't.
> —Teacher

For example, several teachers described designing units or lessons around topics that were interesting to their students. At the same time, these strategies helped teachers and students feel more closely connected and gave students the sense that their teachers cared about them as individuals. One student in a focus group explained how relationships with teachers in this school felt stronger than in other schools: "The teachers here know you individually, and know how you act, and help you out. Even if they don't have time, they make time for you."

Second, teachers' methods for personalizing classroom tasks and assignments to support students' individual learning needs complemented teachers' efforts to cultivate self-awareness among students as they sought to integrate SEL into academic instruction. Teachers described offering scaffolded assignment choices at varying levels of challenge and encouraging students to choose assignments at their preferred difficulty levels. Teachers designed these assignment choices to require varying levels of English language proficiency and self-direction. For example, some assignments were more open-ended while others provided more prompts to guide students in their work. Teachers encouraged students to practice self-awareness and select the assignment that was at the right level of challenge, and continually encouraged students to select increasingly advanced options as they felt ready.

Mastery-Based Learning Offered Teachers a Structure to Regularly Assess Student SEL Competencies and Encourage Growth Mindset

Mastery-based learning—an instruction and assessment approach that allows students to demonstrate deep knowledge of clearly defined content—was another core ObD design principle and an important tool through which Largo and Langley reinforced SEL. Teachers in both schools described how mastery-based learning helped them to focus on SEL competencies.

First, both schools defined academic and SEL competencies and aligned their instructional models to these competencies. All teachers and students at Largo and Langley used the same rubric to articulate SEL competencies. Specifically, both schools had adopted the Summit Public Schools' Habits of Success (Summit Public Schools, undated) rubric to assess students' SEL skills daily. In interviews, teachers referenced this rubric when describing the SEL competency development feedback that they shared with students. In addition, students reported using this rubric when assessing their own level of SEL mastery and receiving feedback from teachers.

Second, teachers reported examples of integrating SEL into academic instruction. According to teachers in both Largo and Langley, classroom assignments focused on at least one SEL competency, along with several academic competencies. Teachers in one school said that most of their assignments required students to demonstrate collaboration and interpersonal skills. They gave students feedback and grades on their mastery of these skills as well as their mastery of academic content.

Third, mastery-based instruction reportedly helped students develop a growth mindset, self-

awareness, and responsibility. Teachers said that they framed SEL competencies as skills that students could improve over time instead of as static traits. The process of tracking their mastery of academic and SEL competencies helped students develop a growth mindset about their SEL and academic progress. As one student said, "I feel like [tracking my SEL grades is] a good thing because I can see what I need to work on in order to bring my grade up."

Professional Development Before the School Year Began Focused on Understanding Student Experiences

Our survey and qualitative data suggest that, although most of the ObD schools' teacher PD addressed SEL to some extent, Largo and Langley provided more-consistent SEL PD than the other ObD schools. Teachers reported that this focus was in keeping with their schools' missions, which were grounded in SEL. Leaders at Largo and Langley devoted time before the start of the school year to PD that helped new and returning teachers support students and build relationships with their students. Teachers reported that their PD was educator-focused and empowering. They felt prepared to enact the school mission instead of feeling that they were simply being told what to do. As one teacher said, "The way they teach us is not, 'You should do this,' but the same activities they would use for our students is how they teach us."

In addition, Largo and Langley's PD offerings emphasized understanding student trauma. One teacher said,

> Over the summer, our professional development has been really helpful in framing our minds for the types of students we teach and how much they need positive youth development. A lot of times you don't think about the trauma and experiences that these kids have gone through, but over the summer that's broken down and you're able to get a good picture of our kids and what they need, and strategies for handling some of that.

> I give constant in-class feedback on what students are doing so that I can say, "Right now this response is a 1.5. Here's what you can do to get it to a 2 or a 2.5."
> —Teacher

Principals reasoned that teachers needed to establish how to connect with students and build trusting relationships before they could focus on instruction. Teachers' interview comments and survey responses echoed this point.

Recommendations

Largo and Langley, two schools that were part of the ObD initiative, illustrated that aligned school leader and teacher actions can promote the schoolwide implementation of SEL that is integrated into academic instruction. These illustrative cases suggest recommendations for the integration of SEL into school design. Our recommendations are intended for high school leaders and teachers in all school contexts, but they may be most applicable to those that work in small high schools similar to the ObD schools.

School leaders should embed SEL into the core school mission. The leaders of Largo and Langley designed SEL as part of their schools' essential missions, embedding SEL into all school structures and operations. These leaders conveyed the importance of SEL by making it the cornerstone of the school, consistently emphasizing SEL in teacher PD and send-

ing the message that SEL should be a key focus of instructional time, student assessment, and teacher-student relationships.

School leaders should develop a clear, well-defined vision for SEL and build a shared understanding of SEL within the school. Largo and Langley school leaders adopted an existing SEL framework and assessment rubric to define and clearly communicate their vision for SEL. PD opportunities at external organizations can help school leaders define their SEL vision and communicate it to teachers. Clearly communicating the SEL-focused school mission to teachers and providing the necessary tools for consistent implementation—such as assessment rubrics, lesson plans, and ongoing PD—is critical for helping teachers implement and integrate SEL.

High school leaders and teachers should incorporate SEL competencies into the school's expectations for students and teach and assess SEL competencies alongside academic competencies. Teachers in Largo and Langley used the schoolwide SEL rubric to articulate specific SEL competencies for students to work on during classroom tasks and to assess and provide feedback on SEL competencies. The mastery-based instructional approach appeared to help teachers center SEL in instruction and offer ongoing feedback on SEL development, just as they would with academic skills.

Teachers should use complementary instructional models—such as personalized learning—that complement and reinforce SEL practices as part of academic instruction. In Largo and Langley, the emphasis on personalized learning and SEL reportedly were mutually reinforcing. Teachers built positive relationships with students while getting to know their learning interests and academic needs. Teachers used this knowledge to personalize learning topics and the level of challenge to individual students' needs, and to cultivate students' self-awareness as they encouraged students to select the most appropriate assignment for their needs and goals.

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About This Report

In this report, we draw on data collected as part of RAND's comprehensive evaluation of the Opportunity by Design Initiative (Steiner et al., 2020), which was funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and conducted from fall 2014 through spring 2018. We draw on survey, interview, and focus group data collected in that study examine the school- and classroom-level practices that supported integrated, schoolwide implementation of social and emotional learning.

RAND Education and Labor

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More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to esteiner@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

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