

## **SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

# **Education Leaders Perspectives on Social & Emotional Learning**

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The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs, funded in part by Youthprise, is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2014, the Extension Center for Youth Development in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) conducted surveys of education leaders in both school and out-of-school time (OST) settings in Minnesota. At that time, the Center's initiative around social and emotional learning (SEL) was in the early stages. The survey was used to help guide the initiative as well as gather information about attitudes, beliefs, and practices around SEL in Minnesota. This brief summarizes the results and includes observations on its implications. It is important to recognize that this data reflects perspectives from 2014 and that there may have been significant changes since then in part due to national and local efforts to better understand and enhance SEL and its implications.

## **METHODS**

The first survey was sent via email to school administrators both at the district and school building level. For school leaders, the survey garnered 120 district level responses and 350 building level responses. These school leaders worked with over 250,000 Minnesota youth or roughly one in four Minnesota students.

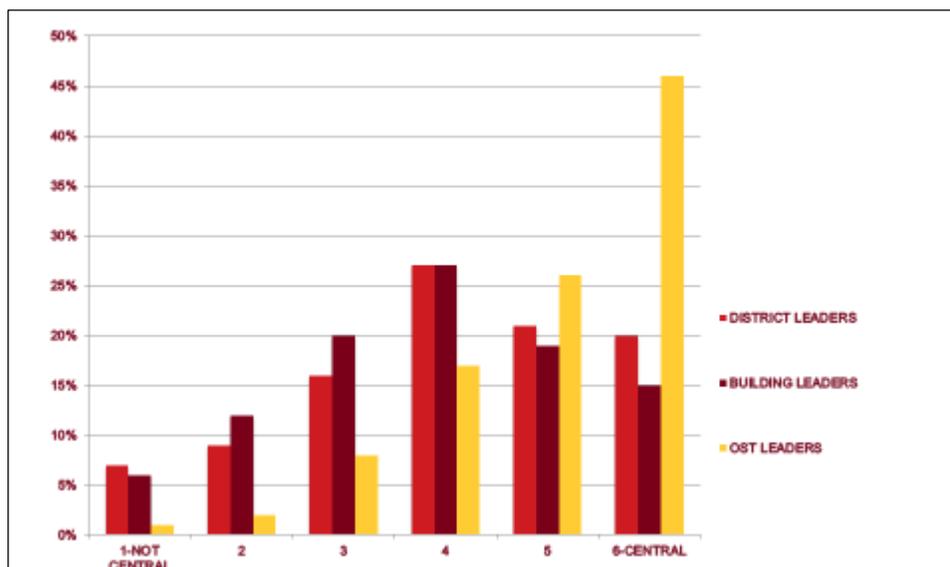
The second survey designed specifically for OST educational leaders was sent several months later and contained a more elaborate set of questions focused on specific SEL practices. The audience for the OST survey was broad and included program managers, funders, and youth workers. Responses were received from 940 OST professionals from all across the state in numerous roles. Approximately one-third of respondents were program managers, one-third worked directly with youth, and the final third were program coordinators or worked in other roles. Both samples were geographically diverse with about half the OST responses representing the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. In total, the OST respondents represented programs that serve approximately 1.5 million youth from economically and ethnically diverse backgrounds though much duplication in youth served is possible.

## EDUCATION LEADER PERSPECTIVES ON SEL

A major section of the survey focused on the attitudes and beliefs of education leaders towards SEL, including the importance and centrality of SEL, its teachability, and cultural nature. There was widespread agreement between both types of educational leaders with over 90% agreeing that SEL could be taught and it is critical to academic performance. A clear majority of both types of leaders (72% of OST leaders and 69% of school leaders) also believe SEL skills are culturally-specific and not universal. Such high agreement that SEL is teachable and important for academics between both types of leaders is encouraging and supported by research (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). In this sense, education leaders seem to share a broadly accurate view of SEL.

Interesting differences between the two types of educational leaders emerged, however, when they were each asked to what extent teaching SEL was central to their organization's mission. Only 41% of district leaders and 34% of school building leaders saw teaching SEL as central to their missions compared with 72% of OST leaders (Figure 1). These findings confirmed a sense that while both groups see the importance and critical role of SEL in supporting academic performance, school leaders still do not see it as central to their educational mission as OST program leaders do.

**Figure 1. Centrality of SEL to organization's mission**



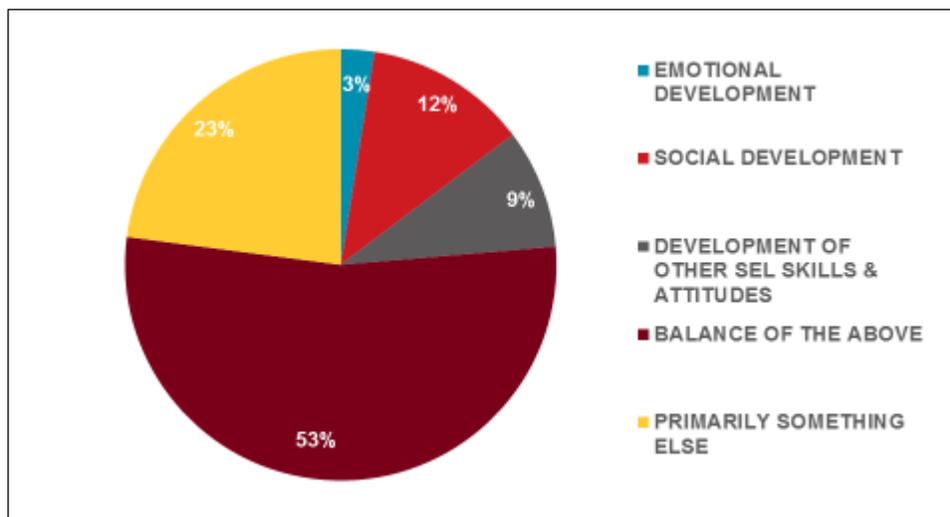
Strong consensus also emerged around who leaders thought had the responsibility for SEL skill development in youth. Although a slightly different set of questions were asked of each group, almost 100% of both groups saw families as responsible (98% of OST leaders and 97% of school leaders moderately or strongly agreeing) and over 80% saw schools as responsible (88% for OST leaders and 86% for school leaders). OST leaders were also asked about the responsibility of the entire community and OST programs in particular. Roughly 90% of OST leaders also thought these two groups had important responsibility for teaching SEL.

The widespread agreement that all players have responsibility for SEL makes it an interesting area to build more balanced approaches to supporting youth than might be true in other areas such as mathematics where more responsibility might reasonably lie primarily with schools. This finding is also critical because while it reinforces the importance of families for SEL growth it also underlines the roles and responsibilities of others in this task. This also poses a unique challenge for education practitioners in terms of how to meet the SEL needs of youth from diverse cultural, racial, ethnic and family backgrounds. Overall, however, these leaders seem to recognize that SEL and skill growth occurs across many contexts and is not only taught or caught in families or schools.

One key difference between school and OST leaders was their current perception (in 2014) of community interest in SEL and how it has changed over time. Seventy two percent of OST leaders indicated that there was increasing interest in SEL compared with only 53% of district leaders and 50% of school building leaders. Twice as many school leaders indicated that interest in SEL had largely stayed about the same as compared to OST leaders (44% versus 22%). While this difference might make sense based on how highly central SEL is seen to OST program’s mission but both popular press reports and emphasis by leading figures in education have likely further increased community interest in SEL since 2014.

OST leaders were also asked about their primary focus of work with young people (Figure 2). 53% of OST leaders report their work as a balance between emotional and social development as well as other SEL skills.

**Figure 2. Primary Focuses of OST Programs**



Surprisingly, only 3% primarily focus on emotional development and 23%, almost one of every five programs, did not have a primary focus on SEL skills. It is interesting that emotional development is not a primary emphasis in most programs. OST leaders seem to shape their programs around the combination of social and emotional learning or around social dimensions much more than focusing on emotions and self-regulation per se. This may have implications for the role OST programs can play in this area as schools try to deal with self-management and disciplinary practices. It may also reflect the smaller number of emotional and self-regulatory problems that occur in OST programs that are voluntary and engaging.

## INTENTIONALITY AROUND SEL

The survey also asked OST leaders about how intentionally their programs targeted 15 different SEL skills. These 15 skill areas were identified by a task force on social and emotional outcomes of out-of-school programs. Survey respondents were asked to indicate to what extent their program “intentionally focuses” on each specific SEL skill or attitude.

The vast majority of leaders (from 68% to 91%) said they focused on all of the 15 skills to a moderate amount or a great deal. This might suggest either the lack of differentiation by OST leaders between these SEL skills or a very broad definition of “intentionally focuses”. Eight skill areas had more than or close to 80% of programs saying they were at least moderately intentional. These areas include relationship skills, collaboration and teamwork skills; youth engagement; belonging and connections; responsible decision making; critical thinking and problem solving; self-management; character development; social awareness, empathy, and caring skills.

Somewhat less intentionality was reported around skills areas such as active citizenship and contribution; hope/optimism; self-awareness; growth mindset or sense of mastery; resilience; sense of agency or self-efficacy; and perseverance and grit.

The high levels of self-reported intentionality across so many different SEL areas might raise questions about just how intentional OST programs actually are compared to what they could be. A more accurate interpretation might be that these 15 SEL skill areas are highly compatible with OST programs and approaches.

To examine this distinction between claimed intentionality and actual intentionality, we can examine the specific approaches that OST leaders indicated they used. The survey asked about eight different approaches respondents might use to intentionally infuse SEL into their program. Here is the percent of respondents who moderately or strongly agreed they use each approach:

- Creation of a climate that supports the development of SEL skills (84%),
- Integrating SEL into everything they do (61%),
- Using specific routines, pledges and activities (55%),
- Staff being free to do instruction in SEL (54%),
- Providing professional development around SEL (44%),
- Reporting to stakeholders about SEL efforts (46%),
- Using specific curriculum to teach SEL (39%), and
- Measuring SEL skills (30%).

It is clear that OST programs seem to be putting more emphasis on the culture and climate of their program rather than more explicit strategies. This perhaps indicates that in general OST programs are focused on SEL being *caught* rather than *taught*. See the issue brief on [Intentional Practices to Support Social Emotional Learning](#) for more information on this distinction. This may also be seen in the amount of professional development programs say they provide in the SEL area (see below).

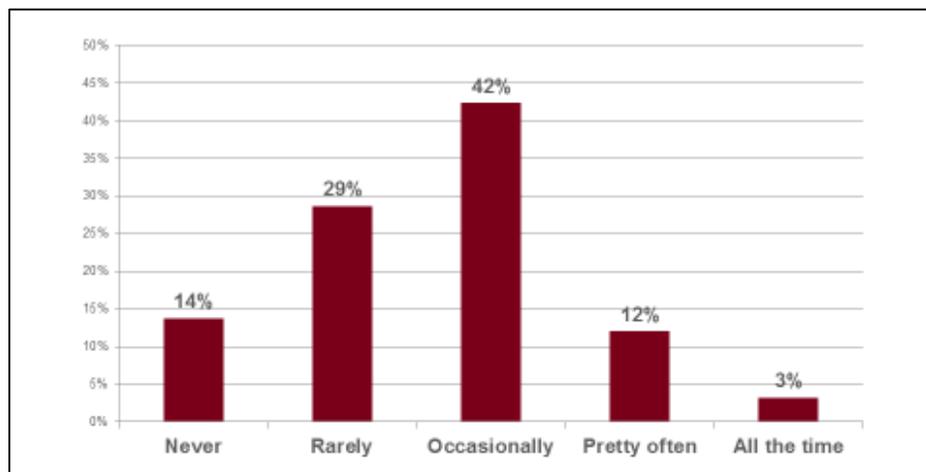
Back in 2014, approximately half of OST programs said they were working on enhancing and improving their work around SEL while 31% indicated they are continuing their current level of work on SEL. Eighteen percent said they are not currently emphasizing SEL. All of this data on approaches and perceived intentionality in different SEL areas suggests that there is considerable room to increase intentionality by both expanding and strengthening the approaches used – especially but not exclusively in the intentionality around ways SEL is actively taught.

## BARRIERS TO THE EXPANSION OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Another area of inquiry was perceived barriers to expanding SEL in education programs. For both school and OST leaders, time, resources, and funding were seen as moderate to great barriers to SEL expansion (77%, 78%, and 69% respectively). Finding useful measures (69%) and useful curriculum and resources (55%) were also seen as barriers by a majority of OST leaders. Interestingly, a majority of OST leaders did not see the following three areas as more than minor barriers: SEL seen as a distraction from academic priorities (59%), SEL being seen as a parent not program responsibility (55%), and the challenges of doing SEL in culturally appropriate ways (52%). It is worth noting the even split on the extent to which presenting SEL in culturally appropriate ways is a moderate or large barrier. This makes sense since well over half of school and OST leaders agreed to some extent that SEL skills are culturally specific. This indicates a particular opportunity and need for more work on how to talk about and make SEL skills culturally appropriate and not just a Western, white middle class approach to development.

There were inconsistencies in responses regarding the extent professional development is part of how programs are intentional or see it as a barrier. Around 70% of OST respondents agreed to some extent that they provide training for staff in SEL skill development as an approach to being intentional about SEL. In another question specifically about how often professional development on SEL is provided (Figure 3), only 3% provide training all the time, 12% provide training pretty often and 42% provide training only occasionally. Fully 43% rarely or never provide training specifically around SEL. These findings may indicate that OST respondents are overestimating their current level of intentional professional development in SEL. Professional development is an identified need that the Extension Center for Youth Development has been focused on meeting in recent years with the development of a new three-hour and longer-term trainings as well as online resources (visit our [website](#) to learn more).

**Figure 3. Frequency of SEL Training for OST Staff**



Professional development in SEL also appears to be an area of growth for OST programs moving forward. It was the top rated of nine possible strategies for where the OST field should go in the future with 85% of OST leaders calling for strengthening SEL professional development. Also highly rated as strategies were building stronger community OST systems (81%), strengthening the evidence linking quality improvement and SEL outcomes (78%), defining a clear set of SEL outcomes (74%), encouraging OST programs to measure SEL (70%) and selecting a specific set of SEL outcomes to collect data on and report impact (65%). Three of these strategies for the field specifically call for assessing and using data around SEL outcomes moving forward.

## MEASURING SEL SKILLS

While fewer than half of OST respondents reported measuring SEL outcomes in their programs, 47% report they are likely or extremely likely to expand measurement of SEL skills going forward (with most of the rest, 40%, not knowing what will happen with measurement going forward). The majority of respondents also strongly or moderately agreed SEL assessment is essential to helping programs improve approaches to SEL (79%); understanding how youth participants are doing (74%); making OST programs more fundable (73%); being aligned between OST and school efforts (67%); and getting OST to use a common set of indicators (59%).

Those indicating they were measuring SEL in 2014 used the following measurement tools: 1) Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), 2) Survey of Academic Outcomes (SAYO), 3) Problem Oriented Screening Instrument for Teenagers (POSIT), and 4) Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

The status of SEL measurement in OST is far behind and in sharp contrast to the momentum behind measuring program quality as part of a continuous improvement effort. The relationship between quality improvement and SEL intentionality and SEL outcomes is discussed in a separate forthcoming issue brief. Here we simply note that there is less consensus about the dimensions of SEL that matter than there is on what quality looks like and that no one measure or set of measures is as dominant as the YPQA. The clarity of program quality measures such as YPQA makes them more accessible and motivational for education leaders. SEL itself is multifaceted which makes it difficult to develop measurement tools that are exhaustive and agreed upon. Additionally, SEL is both a process and a set of outcomes while program quality measures look solely at processes rather than outcomes. As interest in SEL grows, it is inevitable that more SEL measurement tools will be developed and tested as witnessed by the growth in the pilot work around the Holistic Student Assessment in the state.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The survey results confirmed that SEL is on the radar of education leaders in school and OST and there is considerable consensus between both groups on its importance for academic learning and success as well as its teachability. Based on their positive responses, it is clear that most education leaders do not have to be convinced of the importance of SEL. The next step for education leaders is to make the leap between positive attitudes about SEL to greater intentionality in SEL practices. The results suggest that finding ways to increase intentionality – perhaps as another part of continues improvement processes, is need. In a separate brief we noted four ways to increase intentionality (Blyth, Olson, & Walker, 2015). These include staff development and use of data that are noted as important strategies and needs in the field. Just as we used these 2014 results to shape our SEL initiative, we hope others will use them to explore where their efforts are at and where they might go. The Extension Center for Youth Development continues its SEL work and is increasingly focused on enhancing professional development opportunities to learn about and become more intentional about SEL. By improving professional development and encouraging the wise use of assessment, we hope that SEL can be more fully and effectively incorporated into OST settings in ways that prepare youth with the skills needed for successful futures.

## REFERENCES

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