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# Ohio Skills for Life Evaluation: Final Report

## Executive Summary

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## **Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

*Skills for Life* (SFL) is a collaborative effort between the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, and the Inner Resilience Program. The program aimed to assist the two academically challenged<sup>1</sup> Ohio school districts of Youngstown and Warren in developing a sustainable districtwide implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) during the 2010–2011 and 2011–2012 school years. SFL consisted of two primary components: the 4Rs (reading, writing, respect, and resolution) curriculum—a research-based approach for developing students’ social and emotional skills—and the Inner Resilience Program’s mindfulness and self-care (e.g., stress management) strategies for teachers and students. Staff received extensive and ongoing training in both components. The program aimed to achieve the following seven objectives:

1. Increase the knowledge and ability of teachers/school staff to deliver an evidence-based SEL curriculum/approach.
2. Promote the SEL competence of staff through professional development.
3. Support the launch of weekly implementation of an evidence-based curriculum and approach.
4. Increase the knowledge and ability of school administrators and other school leaders to support schoolwide SEL through training and coaching.
5. Increase the knowledge and ability of district administrators and other district leaders to support districtwide SEL through training and coaching.
6. Build the capacity of schools to involve parents in supporting student SEL by providing SEL train-the-trainer workshops.
7. Build local capacity (district and school) to support high-quality, sustainable SEL programming

### Study Design

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted an implementation and outcome evaluation of the SFL program. The evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to gather information from participants in each district. This final evaluation

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<sup>1</sup> At the start of the grant, Youngstown City Schools was in Academic Emergency. Districts with this designation failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress for at least 4 consecutive years. Youngstown improved its rating to Academic Watch for the 2011–2012 school year. At the start of the grant, Warren had a designation of Academic Watch and improved its rating to Continuous Improvement for the 2011–2012 school year. In addition, based on data from the 2011–2012 school year, both districts rank among the lowest with regards to student performance on state tests (<http://stateimpact.npr.org/ohio/2012/10/17/ohio-school-district-report-card-data-2011-12/>).

report presents key findings from Year 1 and Year 2 of the SFL grant and examines the extent to which the program met its objectives during the 2 years of implementation. Findings are organized by the seven program objectives and are reported across cohorts and districts except for instances where there were key differences between groups. The report also offers recommendations for addressing the challenges and promoting sustainability. The data represented in this report reflect grant activities from the period of August 2010 to June 2012.

### Data Collection Methods and Sources

Data were collected from key stakeholders in each district through multiple methods, including:

1. Training evaluation forms.
2. Online surveys
3. Interviews and focus groups
4. Document review

The Skills for Life Program was implemented in 11 schools across the two districts (7 in Youngstown, 4 in Warren). Table 1 shows the number of staff and administrators trained and parents and students served from the start of the grant through June 2012.

Table 1. Total Participants Served				
Teachers and School Staff	School Administrators	District Administrators	Students	Parents
240	28	15	4997	294

## Key Findings

### Objective 1: Increase the knowledge and ability of teachers and school staff to deliver an evidence-based SEL curriculum/approach.

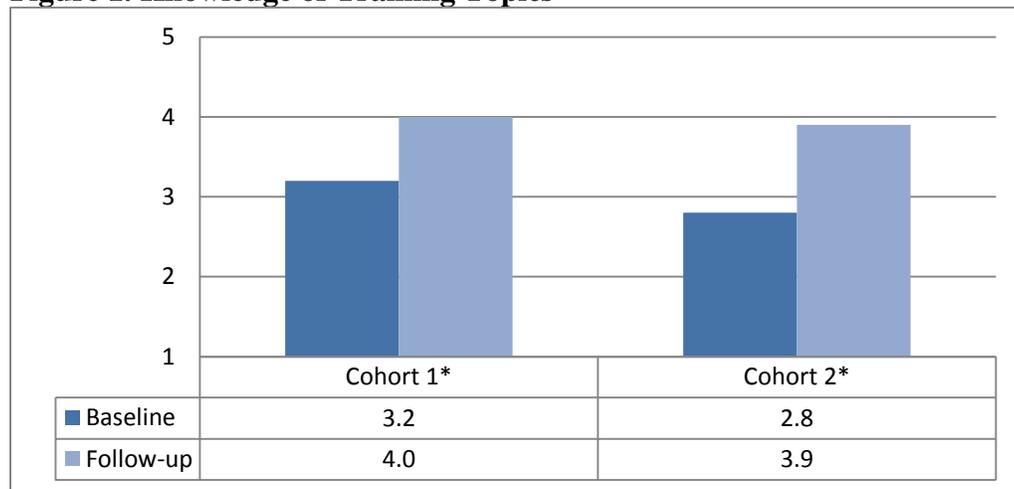
#### Key Findings:

- **Trainings were generally implemented as planned and were well received by participants.**
- **Participants demonstrated statistically significant improvement in their knowledge of training topics after one year of implementation. The greatest gains in knowledge occurred in topics related to improving social emotional competencies.**
- **Both cohorts increased their perceptions of the positive relationship between SEL and academic achievement. However, this increase was only statistically significant among Cohort 1 participants.**

**Summary:** 240 teachers and school staff were trained on the *Skills for Life* program. These participants were offered a number of professional development opportunities to increase their knowledge, ability and comfort with the implementation of the SFL curriculum. Trainings

included five days of introductory training, adult SEL competency workshops, and ongoing support through afterschool workshops and classroom coaching sessions. By providing this comprehensive training on social and emotional learning and how to implement the program, the SFL team succeeded in increasing participants’ knowledge and capacity to implement the curriculum. Trainings were generally delivered as planned and were well received by almost all participants across cohorts. After the training, many participants were concerned about having the time to implement the curriculum, but all reported being comfortable with and excited about implementation. They also reported increased knowledge of implementation and training topics (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Knowledge of Training Topics**

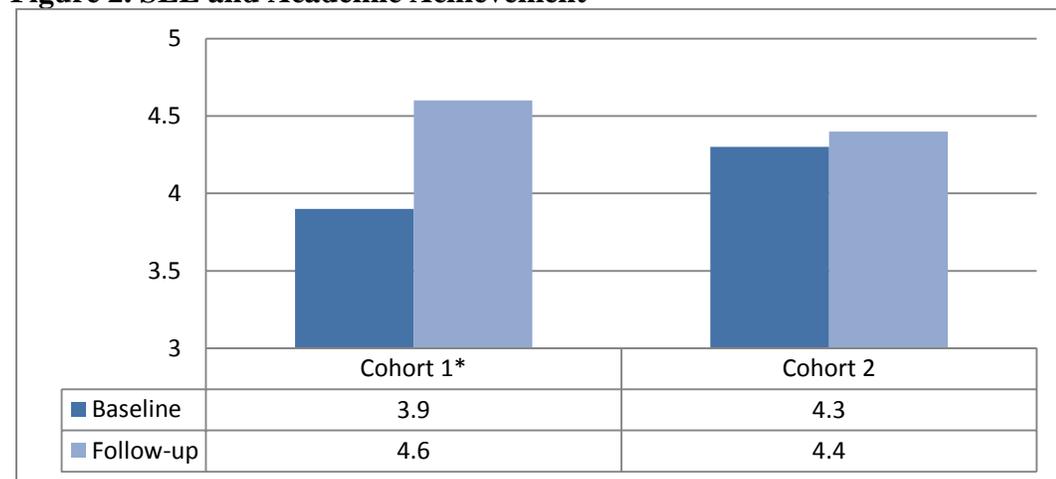


*Note:* Higher scores reflect greater knowledge.

\*The change between baseline and follow-up scores was statistically significant.

By the end of the first year of implementation, Cohort 1 participants reported significantly higher perceptions about the effect of SEL on academic achievement (see Figure 2). There was no significant change among Cohort 2.

**Figure 2. SEL and Academic Achievement**



*Note:* Higher scores reflect stronger attitudes.

\* The change between baseline and follow-up scores was statistically significant.

Participants also benefitted from the coaching conducted by staff developers. The coaching was identified as a strength by the majority of participants with many wanting more of this personalized support. Data suggest that the staff developers were able to motivate teachers and build strong relationships, which helped to make the interaction a positive experience. Staff developers were described as “*relatable*” and “*non-judgmental*.” They were also described as being “*insightful and practical—sympathetic to the struggle to implement a new plan*” and “*wonderful for support*.” The positive relationship with the staff developers extended to the students as evidenced by reports that students responded well to them and looked forward to their visits.

With the afterschool workshops, participants reported that they appreciated the opportunity to role-play, share successes and challenges, reinforce self-care strategies, and receive immediate support from their peers. For those who found the afterschool workshops less useful, scheduling was identified as a challenge and low attendance impacted the usefulness for participants who did attend.

## **Objective 2: Promote the SEL competence of staff through professional development**

### **Key Findings:**

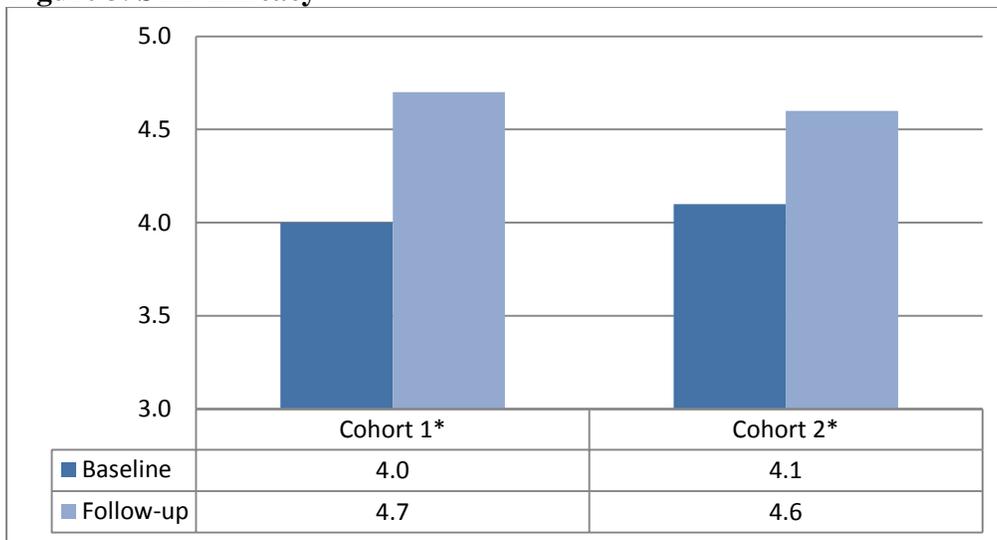
- **The Inner Resilience Program’s adult SEL competency and diversity workshops were well received by almost all participants.**
- **Participants significantly increased their social and emotional learning efficacy and became more mindful about their interactions with students, suggesting an overall increase in SEL competence.**
- **Cohort 2 participants reported statistically significant change in their classroom behavior management efficacy after the first year of implementation.**

**Summary:** Along with improving students’ social and emotional skills, the SFL program included a focus on promoting the SEL competence of teachers and other school staff through professional development. This was done primarily through the adult SEL competency and diversity workshops. It was found that most staff members were pleased with these trainings. Some participants were not accustomed to taking time out to focus on themselves, and a few participants were uncomfortable with the meditation piece. However, most reported that they would make an effort to incorporate the self-care strategies into their daily routine. When participants were asked how the workshop influenced their personal and professional growth, responses suggested that they planned to apply the skills in the classroom, and in their personal lives.

Participants also increased their understanding of how students’ social and emotional issues may impact their behavior in the classroom and learned self-care techniques to help manage their own

stress. They reportedly became more confident in their ability to teach SEL skills to their students (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. SEL Efficacy**



Note: Higher scores reflect greater efficacy.

\*The change between baseline and follow-up scores was statistically significant.

Participants responded positively to the diversity training. Many reported that the workshop influenced their personal/professional growth by increasing their awareness of diversity-related issues, including how diversity impacts their work in the classroom. For example, one participant stated that the training helped her *“understand how to think more compassionately about my diverse student population.”* Another commented about the impact on her relationship with colleagues stating, *“I see my colleagues more as human beings not just useful resources.”*

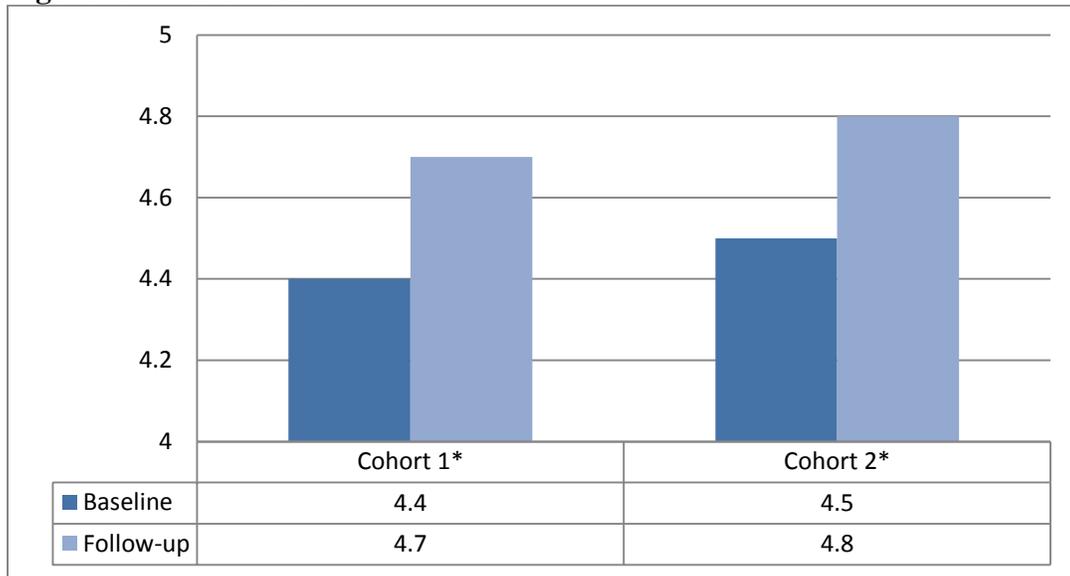
Participants also reportedly improved their interactions with students as evidenced by the significant increase in scores on the mindfulness measure (see Figure 4) which assessed teacher’s social and emotional competence in the classroom. For example teachers stated:

*“I look at my students and the way I teach differently. I now carry part of the SEL program in the back of my mind before saying and reacting to my students’ behaviors.”*

*“It has helped me to become more mindful and I have learned how to deal with personal stress and anger better.”*

*“It has helped me to react differently to stressful situations and problem behaviors.”*

**Figure 4. Mindfulness**

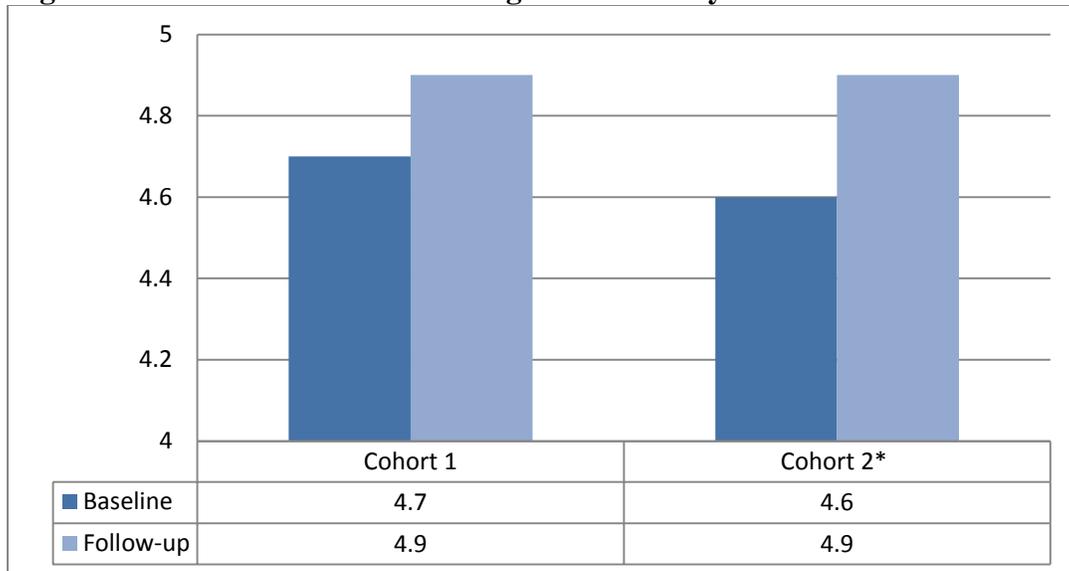


*Note:* Higher scores reflect greater mindfulness

\* The change between baseline and follow-up scores was statistically significant.

In terms of classroom behavior management, both cohorts had similar means on this efficacy scale at the end of their first year of participation in the program, but by the end of the year, Cohort 2 participants felt significantly better able to manage students’ classroom behavior (see Figure 5). For Cohort 1, the baseline mean for this scale was relatively high suggesting that teachers in this group already had relatively high efficacy around their ability to manage students’ behavior in the classroom. Although there was a slight increase in efficacy at the end of their first year of implementation, this change did not achieve statistical significance.

**Figure 5. Classroom Behavior Management Efficacy**



*Note:* Higher scores reflect greater efficacy.

\* The change between baseline and follow-up scores was statistically significant.

## Objective 3: Support the launch of weekly implementation of an evidence-based curriculum and approach

### Key Findings

- **The program was implemented at least once a week in many classrooms and nearly 5000 students were served through the grant.**
- **Participants in both cohorts reported positive changes in student behavior and in their classroom climate.**

**Summary:** Once teachers were trained, the goal was to encourage weekly implementation. However, with Youngstown being designated as a district in academic emergency, Warren in academic warning, and staff from both districts reportedly feeling threatened by a potential state takeover, principals and teachers were under a significant amount of pressure to improve student academic achievement. As a result, teachers experienced the tension between balancing the academic curriculum and the SFL curriculum. Despite these challenges, in both districts, most teachers were able to implement the curriculum on a regular basis.

In both cohorts staff reported positive outcomes among their students and in their classrooms, including:

- **Improved peer interactions:**

*“The children were able to handle more conflicts by themselves between peers.”*

*“I believe the Skills for Life Program improved my classroom climate, encouraging students to get along and resolve their own problems.”*

*“I see the children are less aggressive and take more steps to independently care about others. They give each other more positive interactions, such as compliments, hugs, rounds of applause, etc. I don't have to prompt it, it just happens.”*

- **Improved class climate:**

*“The program made a significant change in my classroom behavior and overall climate/mood amongst the students. Once the behavior changed the students spent more time engaged in active learning.”*

*“It helped my class build a sense of community.”*

- **Increased awareness of their own feelings:**

*“I think it had a very noticeable effect on my students. They were so much more aware of how to channel their emotions. They also did their own problem solving and were getting better at “listening” to the other person and not jumping to conclusions.”*

*“The Skills for Life Program has impacted my classroom in many ways but one of the most impactful ways would be that it has allowed students to think about their emotions more and calm their bodies. The calming techniques were very successful with this class!”*

- **Students engaged in independent problem solving:**  
*“The students in Kindergarten who had the SFL worked into their curriculum seemed much more calm and able to work out some of their problems themselves.”*

#### **Objective 4: Increase the knowledge and ability of school administrators to support schoolwide SEL through training and coaching**

##### **Key Findings:**

- **The SFL team trained 28 school administrators in 11 schools and during Year 2, created more opportunities to provide guidance and support to these staff. Administrators found these sessions to be useful.**
- **School administrators could benefit from additional training to increase their efficacy around supporting SEL programming in their schools (i.e. translating knowledge into practice). However, changes in leadership have posed a challenge for maintaining the momentum created during the initial trainings.**
- **School administrators support SEL programming. However time, academic pressures, and staff buy-in were most often identified as the biggest challenges to supporting implementation and perceptions of administrator support varied by school.**

**Summary:** All stakeholders agreed that the support of school administrators is necessary in order to promote schoolwide SEL implementation. With both districts facing significant pressure to improve their academic standing, school administrators dealt with competing priorities that often made it difficult for them to be involved in certain SFL activities. In addition, changes in school leadership, also posed a challenge to maintaining consistent, ongoing support for the SEL implementation. Understanding these challenges, the SFL team made a concerted effort to build the capacity of school leaders to support schoolwide SEL implementation.

School administrators were introduced to the SFL program during a half-day administrator training session that occurred at the beginning of each school year. During year 2, the SFL team also increased their interactions with school leaders through additional professional development, consultations, and coaching, most of which focused on providing support and guidance around developing their school’s SEL steering committee (e.g. Sustainable Schoolwide SEL workshop) and developing plans for sustaining SEL programming in the schools. These sessions were generally well received by school leaders, but school administrators acknowledged that there were a number of barriers to promoting schoolwide SEL implementation. These

included: competing priorities (i.e. other after school meetings, academic pressures), high staff turnover, and a general lack of buy-in among some teachers and district administrators.

Data from surveys and training evaluations suggested that principals believed in the importance of SEL programming and were interested in the schoolwide expansion of SEL, but they were relatively less confident about their ability to actually carry out this work and integrate SEL into their school policies and procedures (e.g. integrating SEL into their school improvement plans). Although the SFL staff developers increased the number of consultations with school administrators to help build their efficacy around these activities, the administrative changes meant that staff developers sometimes had to start over with new leaders instead of building on the progress that had already been established.

### **Objective 5: Increase the knowledge and ability of district administrators to support districtwide SEL through training and coaching.**

#### **Key Findings:**

- **Changes in district leadership may have impacted the SFL team’s efforts to build the capacity of district leaders to support districtwide SEL implementation.**
- **District SEL liaisons were identified as a primary source of support at the district level. They attended many of the professional development opportunities offered by the SFL team, were knowledgeable about the program, and their involvement was key in encouraging participation and support at the school level.**
- **SFL program staff initiated ongoing discussions with district leaders about sustaining SEL programming and during Year 2, provided new opportunities for them to learn more about the program.**

**Summary:** Efforts to increase knowledge and support at the district level have been met with challenges that, in some ways, parallel those seen at the school level. Specifically, both districts have experienced changes in superintendents. The superintendents who endorsed efforts to implement SEL programming through the *Skills for Life* program left their positions during the first year of the grant. Youngstown has had two superintendents since the district started implementing SFL. Warren has experienced even greater turnover, and has had three different superintendents during the 2-year grant period. Thus, changes in leadership at the district level may have had an impact on the momentum that the SFL team tried to build through their work with district leaders.

Despite the reported need for more district-level support, district SEL liaisons, who remained the same during the two years, supported districtwide SEL implementation. During both years, they attended many of the professional development workshops and were therefore knowledgeable about the SFL program, learned what was required of teachers and staff, and developed buy-in. As such, they were better able to provide support to both the staff and SFL team. In addition, at a time when resources are scarce, district liaisons have been instrumental in helping to secure

district funds (approximately \$200,000 in each district) for additional training and implementation.

There is still a need for additional support at the district level and the SFL team has had ongoing discussions with district leaders. A primary goal of these discussions was to get districts to move towards creating an SEL sustainability plan for the next school year.

### **Objective 6: Build the capacity of schools to involve parents by providing SEL “train-the-trainer” events.**

#### **Key Findings:**

- **The implementation of parent SEL workshops has become a sustainable aspect of the program. Parent trainers have taken ownership of this program component and implemented workshops without the assistance of staff developers.**
- **Workshops were well received by parents/caregivers and their feedback suggested that there is a need for SEL programming for families.**
- **Parent engagement was a challenge. However, participation increased by about 40% from Year 1 to Year 2 and by the end of the 2-year grant period nearly 300 parents had attended at least one parent workshop.**

**Summary:** Another goal of *Skills for Life* was to extend SEL programming beyond the schools and engage parents and families. This involved training local school staff and parents to deliver workshops to parents so that they could become more knowledgeable about SEL and increase their own social-emotional competence. Across districts, 27 school staff and parents were trained to lead the workshops and there appeared to be significant buy-in for this component of the program. Trainers saw the value in teaching parents social and emotional skills, built on lessons learned during the previous year to develop new strategies for reaching out to parents, and were actively thinking about how they could continue the workshops the following year.

Parent feedback about the workshops suggests that the sessions were beneficial and that there is a need for SEL programming for families. Parents reportedly learned a lot about social and emotional development, stress management, and new skills to improve communication with their children. They also appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences with other caregivers.

Engaging parents was a challenge during both years of implementation. Trainers worked to find creative ways to engage parents and in some cases were successful. During Year 2, all but one school conducted parent workshops, and most schools increased parent participation.

## Objective 7: Build local capacity (district and school) to support high-quality, sustainable SEL programming

### Key Findings:

- **SEL school liaisons were key in leading SEL work in the schools and there is evidence that they are helping their schools move toward schoolwide expansion of some program components. However, some liaisons would like more support from administrators and teachers.**
- **SEL steering committees were established in each school and reportedly made the most progress toward developing a shared schoolwide vision for social and emotional learning. However, inconsistent participation and ongoing changes in the composition of some committees may have had an impact on their progress.**
- **Districts and schools demonstrated a commitment to sustaining SEL programming beyond the life of the grant.**

**Summary:** This last objective involved building each district's capacity to support and sustain high quality SEL programming. To examine the extent to which this objective was met, the analysis focused on components that were emphasized during Year 2 of the program: the SEL school liaison and the SEL steering committee. These two interrelated components were added with the goal of developing a school-based system that can function independently to support SEL implementation once the SFL grant has ended. Steering committees were charged with identifying ways to integrate SEL philosophies and strategies schoolwide (e.g., in school discipline or behavior management policies) in order to improve school climate and create a sustainable school culture that promoted students' positive social and emotional development. The hope was that schools would have an existing system in place so that when funding becomes available, SEL is considered a viable option.

**SEL school liaisons** served as leaders of the steering committee in addition to other responsibilities involving SEL implementation in their school. Responsibilities included: co-teaching and modeling SEL lessons, leading parent groups, and coordinating staff developer visits. Some liaisons have made progress towards reinforcing SEL work with trained teachers and expanding this work schoolwide. For example, they conducted professional development sessions with all teachers, organized informal opportunities for trained teachers to get together to share ideas, conducted lessons in classrooms where teachers were not trained, and helped to implement building-wide routines (e.g. having all classrooms do a morning relaxation exercise). The SEL school liaison position was not without challenges, especially around their role on the steering committee. As mentioned above, several liaisons reported a need for more administrative support of their efforts to expand SEL programming in their school.

**School SEL steering committees** were established to help schools promote schoolwide SEL implementation. The majority of steering committee members who completed an end-of-year survey reported that they had made moderate or significant progress towards developing a shared schoolwide vision for SEL.<sup>2</sup> However, at some schools the progress of steering committees may have been hampered by inconsistent attendance and ongoing changes in the composition of the group.

Finally, there was evidence of efforts to sustain SEL programming at both the district and school levels. Both districts, allocated district funds to train additional teachers, and decided to make investing in the SEL school liaison position a priority when deciding how to allocate funds next year. At the school level, some schools worked to get more teachers involved with implementation by conducting in-house professional development of the SFL components for teachers who were not trained. Surveys administered at the end of Year 2 also revealed that many teachers, in both cohorts, remain committed and motivated to continue implementation in their classrooms and a number of teachers expressed a desire to see more widespread implementation. Furthermore, through a no-cost extension of the grant, the SFL team has continued to work with the district to provide training, consultation and support and districts are actively seeking out new funding to continue supporting SEL work in the schools.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

During the past 2 years, the SFL team has been able to meet all program objectives, with some objectives remaining a work in progress. This has been accomplished despite challenging situations in both districts. Despite these challenges, the SFL team has succeeded in increasing staff knowledge about the important role that SEL plays in their schools, encouraged ongoing weekly implementation of the SFL curriculum, and established systems within the school to continue this work after funding ends. In addition, there was evidence of efforts to promote schoolwide SEL practices.

Furthermore, by engaging in an ongoing dialogue with school and district administrators, SEL has remained at the forefront. District SEL liaisons continue to be a key source of support for school staff; however their support alone was reportedly not sufficient to promote district- or schoolwide sustainability. There is still a need for the engagement of other district leaders. School staff may also need to see more concrete support from the district in the form of a policy change (e.g., integrating SEL into the school improvement plan) or a mandate in order to feel more secure about making a long-term investment in SEL programming.

Finally, the findings suggest that developing sustainable SEL practices requires more than 2 years. Through their work with the SFL team, both the Youngstown and Warren districts have built a foundation upon which they can continue this work.

The following recommendations are based on the evaluation findings and are designed to help SFL and the districts continue to promote SEL sustainability:

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<sup>2</sup> These findings are based on responses from the subset of steering committee members (n = 26) who completed the end of the year survey. This group was made up primarily of teachers and support staff.

**Work with schools and districts to integrate SEL strategies into existing policies and procedures.** To help staff move away from the notion that SEL is just one more thing that they have to do, or that SFL is just another intervention that will not last, SEL needs to be integrated into existing school policies and practices. Program staff could start by demonstrating how SFL strategies can work with existing student behavior management procedures. This will help to show support for SEL, improve understanding of how these practices will benefit staff and students, and promote a more cohesive way of conceptualizing student learning and school and classroom climate.

**Identify additional strategies to increase school administrator’s efficacy around SEL work.** Some staff members continue to report that administrative support is a challenge to schoolwide sustainability of SEL programming whereas schools’ administrators report support for SEL. Thus, it may be helpful to identify additional strategies for how administrators can *demonstrate* their support. This needs to go beyond a broad endorsement of SEL. For example, SEL school liaisons, viewed by all as key to promoting sustainability at the school level, have taken on informal leadership roles. Staff developers could work with principals to identify ways to make their support of the school liaison and SEL more visible throughout the school. They could also work with principals to identify concrete ways to support the SEL steering committee (even when they are unable to attend meetings), as well as opportunities for administrators to become involved in SEL implementation. Similarly, it would also be helpful for program staff to continue discussions with district leaders to identify ways that the district can provide visible support for principals and schools.

**To the extent possible, the SFL staff should be involved in the recruitment of program participants; however, in instances where this is not possible, there should be a clear protocol for disseminating information about the program when others (e.g. districts) are responsible for recruiting staff.** SFL has a protocol for introducing participants to the program. This includes a clear description of the program and what their participation will entail. Although most participants received this information at the start of the program, there were a small number of teachers who did not. To address this issue, the SFL team should develop a clear protocol for disseminating information about the program. This could be used in instances where the district leads recruitment. The messaging should include a description of program components, what will be expected of staff once they agree to participate (e.g., implementing lessons at least once a week, coaching, teacher logs, etc.) and potential benefits of implementing the SFL program. It can also be tailored to address unique district contexts. This would increase transparency, allow teachers to make an informed decision about participating, and ultimately promote stronger commitment and buy-in.

**Work with SEL steering committee to clarify goals and objectives.** The data suggest that steering committee members may not have a collective understanding of each overarching goal. Therefore, staff developers can work further with committee members to identify concrete objectives of each goal and specific indicators to demonstrate progress. Putting these steps in place will help to ensure that committee members have a shared understanding of what they need to accomplish and how much progress they have made.

**Develop a formal network of support for staff members who have taken on the role of promoting sustainable schoolwide SEL implementation.** Participants often cited the ability to meet with and share experiences with their peers as a strength of the SFL program. Moving forward, school liaisons and parent trainers will require continued support in order to make progress toward the goal of sustaining SEL programming in their schools. While administrative support is important, the staff would also benefit from a forum in which they can connect with staff from other schools to share their successes and challenges and brainstorm ideas for improving their work. This could be done in a number of ways, for example, through in-person sessions (e.g., twice a year or more if possible) and/or an online teacher support forum where teachers can share ideas and resources and solve problems. At the onset, staff developers could help to facilitate this forum, with school staff taking over once the support network has been established.

**Continue to work with parent trainers and parents to address low parent engagement.** Over the past 2 years, schools have built the capacity to involve parents in SEL programming. Staff members at each school were trained to lead the parent workshops, and data suggest that the trainers are motivated to continue this work. In order to expand the impact of the parent SEL programming, there needs to be an intense focus on increasing parent engagement. SFL staff developers and parent trainers have already put some thought into developing strategies to encourage participation and have seen positive results (e.g., an increase in participation during Year 2). Since neither district has prior experience implementing this type of parent programming, next steps should involve moving beyond identifying strategies for increasing parent involvement to gaining a better understanding of the underlying causes of this lack of involvement and identifying ways to address them. To accomplish this task, schools can start by leveraging the knowledge and experiences of the small group of parents that are already involved in the workshops and other school activities. This could also be included as an agenda item for the SEL steering committees.

**Continue to focus on defining the role of the SEL school liaison and the role of the SEL steering committee.** SEL school liaisons were a part of the program both years, however there was more emphasis on this position during Year 2. There is a need to continue to define this role so that all of the staff is clear about what the expectations are. It is also important to consider which school staff members are selected to be liaisons. During the past year, having guidance counselors take on this position reportedly worked well. However, in instances where this is not possible and other personnel must be selected, it is important to consider the individual's role in the school (e.g., does this person have influence in the school that would help them promote change, influence with teachers, and a strong relationship with school administrators?). Similar steps should be taken to define the role of the steering committees so that all school staff members are aware of the existence and goals of the group.

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