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Social and Emotional Learning, School Climate, and School Safety

A Randomized-Controlled Trial Evaluation of Tools for Life® in Elementary and Middle Schools

Sponsored by The National Institute of Justice
Teachers and administrators across the United States struggle to maintain safe, civil, community- and achievement-oriented schools. Disciplinary actions (such as school suspensions) and security measures (such as school resource officers/security guards and security cameras) are some approaches commonly used in schools to try to improve school climate and safety. Another approach is to improve the socioemotional skills of students and educators to foster a more positive school climate and build positive relationships among all individuals in schools.

The purpose of this project was to implement a social and emotional learning (SEL) program in a school district and evaluate its effects on school climate and safety throughout the district. Jackson Public School District, in Jackson, Mississippi, partnered with the Tools for Life® Corporation to implement its SEL curriculum in randomly selected elementary and middle schools in the district in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. The RAND Corporation served as evaluators for the project, documenting the implementation of Tools for Life and its costs and assessing the program’s impact on school climate and safety. This study represents the first district-wide randomized controlled trial of the Tools for Life program.

This research report has an associated technical appendix, available online at www.rand.org/t/RR4285.

This study was undertaken by two divisions of the RAND Corporation: RAND Education and Labor and RAND Social and Economic Well-Being.

RAND Education and Labor conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. For more information, email educationandlabor@rand.org.

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted under the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.

This research was generously supported by a grant in 2015 from the National Institute of Justice (2015-CK-BX-0005) as part of its Comprehensive School Safety Initiative.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to the lead author, Gabriella C. Gonzalez, at ggonzal@rand.org.
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Teachers and administrators across the United States struggle to maintain safe, civil, community- and achievement-oriented schools. During the 2014–15 school year alone, 12-to-18-year-old students experienced more than 1.4 million nonfatal victimizations (e.g., violence, theft) at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). School leaders, however, have no whole-school, empirically tested “best” or “promising” practices to address these safety concerns. One proposed strategy for promoting holistic improvements in school climate and safety is improving the social and emotional skills of students and educators.

This report summarizes results from a project funded by the National Institute of Justice in 2015 to study the association between social and emotional learning (SEL) and school climate and school safety in which RAND partnered with the Jackson (Mississippi) Public School District (JPSD). JPSD implemented Tools for Life®: Relationship-Building Solutions (hereafter referred to as Tools for Life or TFL), a classroom- and home-based program for children age three through five and grades 1 through 8 designed to improve school climate and safety through the proactive development of students’ interpersonal skills (relationship-building and communication) and intrapersonal skills (self-regulation and resiliency). For this study, JPSD implemented TFL in grades 1 through 8 in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. RAND researchers conducted a randomized controlled trial to determine whether TFL, integrated into existing school practices, positively affected school climate and safety in the district.

TFL consists of a toolkit for teachers, which includes supporting materials to send home for students’ parents/guardians and a classroom library of fiction and nonfiction texts used in each TFL lesson, and a toolkit for home (HomeSTART), which incorporates the same lesson materials as the classroom toolkit. Each grade level has from eight to ten lessons, which focus on a specific skill and use inquiry-based learning1 and pedagogical approaches. The calm-down corner was a very visible and prominent way in which each classroom teacher was expected to implement TFL. All teachers were required to establish a calm-down corner in their classroom, an area where students could visit when necessary to check their emotions and calm down before returning to class.

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1 Inquiry-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning that places students’ questions, ideas, and observations at the center of the learning experience. Educators play an active role throughout the process by establishing a culture in which ideas are respectfully challenged, tested, redefined, and viewed as improvable, moving children from a position of wondering to a position of enacted understanding and further questioning (Scardamalia, 2002).
Objectives of This Study

This study had three objectives:

1. Describe the implementation of TFL in JPSD.
2. Assess the degree to which TFL is effective in improving school climate and school safety outcomes.
3. Measure the costs of implementing TFL in JPSD.

To meet these objectives, we conducted a cluster randomized trial for students in grades 3 through 8 attending traditional public elementary and middle schools in JPSD. Twenty-three schools were randomly assigned to implement TFL in academic year 2016–2017 (treatment schools), and 22 schools were randomly assigned to continue to conduct business-as-usual and to delay implementation of TFL until academic year 2017–2018 (control schools). We requested active consent from students’ parents/guardians to conduct the research required in this study. Less than one-third of the eligible students in the district opted to participate in data collection. The remaining students either did not return consent forms or returned consent forms indicating that their parents/guardians did not wish to have their children participate in data-collection activities. We address the implications of this low response rate in the main body of this report.

To provide a descriptive portrait of the implementation of TFL in JPSD in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic school years, we relied on data from interviews with JPSD district and Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) officials, district-level TFL implementers, and Tools for Life Corporation coaches; results from surveys administered to students in grades 3 through 8; and interviews with school leaders and focus groups with instructional staff collected from six purposefully selected treatment and control schools. To assess the impact of TFL on school and students’ outcomes across both years of the study, we used data from the student surveys and JPSD administrative data. We also documented the costs of TFL in JPSD, relying on JPSD administrative data and financial records from TFL and JPSD.

Analytic Approach

The theory of change illustrated in Figure S.1 served as the study’s framework for analysis. This theory of change posits that TFL inputs and activities (school staff training provided by TFL, classroom toolkits with complementary practices for home) and outputs (the implementation of TFL) will increase short-term outcomes (school staff and students’ knowledge and skills). School staff will develop an in-depth comprehension of TFL techniques, and students will increase their intrapersonal (identify and recognize feelings, express feelings) and interpersonal skills (communicate respectfully, solve relationship problems, resolve conflicts). All members of the school community will start using a common language vis-à-vis relationship-building. With increases in TFL-related school staff and student knowledge and skills, we hypothesize that mediating factors (staff and student attitudes and students’ socioemotional health, such as self-regulation and empathy) will change. Ultimately, short-term outcomes and mediating factors produce positive longer-term outcomes: increased perceptions of school safety among students and staff; stronger perceived bonds and improved school climate; increases in teacher
and student attendance; increases in school safety as measured by observations of student and staff behavior and reduction in rates of office disciplinary referrals, out-of-school suspensions, and reported injury and aggressive incidents. Though not a primary outcome of interest, we also investigated the effect of TFL on student achievement (as measured through results on Mississippi state assessments) as a secondary, exploratory analysis. We hypothesized that with a greater sense of community and connection among students and teachers, students would become more engaged in instruction, leading to gains in achievement. Decades of research have demonstrated that when students are more engaged in instruction they tend to have higher academic achievement (Fredericks et al., 2004).

Research Questions and Data Sources
The study had two stages. In the first stage, we examined the impacts of TFL after one academic year of exposure. In the second stage, we examined the impacts of TFL exposure on students’ developmental trajectories. Our analyses in this report provide a descriptive portrait of the implementation of TFL in JPSD in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic school years. We used data from key stakeholder interviews, results from surveys administered to students in grades 3 through 8, and data from interviews with key TFL implementers and school leaders as well as focus groups with instructional staff collected from six focal schools. We assessed the impact of TFL on school and students’ outcomes across both years of the study, using data
from the student surveys and JPSD administrative data. We also documented the costs of TFL in JPSD relying on JPSD administrative data and financial records from TFL and JPSD.

We used a mixed-method approach that drew on both quantitative and qualitative data to describe the implementation, assess the potential impact, and document the costs of the TFL program. We asked seven research questions, listed in Table S.1. A description of the data sources are available in this report’s technical appendix (available at www.rand.org/t/RR4285).

Key Findings

TFL Had Little Impact on Students’ Social and Emotional Learning, Behavior, or Academic Performance

In analyzing JPSD administrative records and student survey responses, we found that after one year of implementation of TFL, there were no practically or statistically significant differences between schools that implemented TFL (treatment schools) and those that did not (control schools) in measures of students’ social and emotional, school climate, behavioral, or achievement outcomes. We also conducted exploratory examinations of differences in outcomes among subgroup populations, specifically comparing middle school with elementary school students and students who were homeless with those who were not. We did not find any discernible differences across subgroups. We conducted exploratory analyses of the impact of full TFL exposure on student outcomes. We did find a positive association between students’ self-reported exposure to TFL materials and lessons and their self-reported social and emotional outcomes.

Key Stakeholders Reported Positive and Negative Views About TFL Implementation

Interviews with JPSD implementation coaches (district staff who were to support TFL implementation) and TFL consultants, and interviews with school leaders and focus groups with instructional staff in the six focal schools, revealed varied perspectives about TFL. Teachers with whom we spoke noted that materials and resources were reportedly easy to use, yet they

Table S.1
Research Questions and Data Sources

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<tr>
<th>Project Objective</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Describe implementation of TFL</td>
<td>1. In what ways did the implementation of TFL vary across schools?</td>
<td>• JPSD central staff interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. What hindered or facilitated implementation?</td>
<td>• TFL staff interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Focal school administrator interviews</td>
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<td>• Focal school staff focus groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• JPSD administrative data</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Assess TFL effectiveness</td>
<td>3. Was TFL associated with improved school climate?</td>
<td>• Focal school administrator interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Was TFL associated with improved student social and emotional competencies and positive pro-social behavior?</td>
<td>• Focal school staff focus groups</td>
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<td>5. To what extent did program impacts differ across grade, gender, and income subgroups?</td>
<td>• JPSD administrative data</td>
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<td>6. To what extent was program exposure associated with improvement?</td>
<td>• Student school climate surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Measure the costs of implementing TFL</td>
<td>7. What were the costs associated with implementing TFL in JPSD?</td>
<td>• JPSD financial data</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• JPSD administrative data</td>
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also noted that materials and resources were not age-appropriate (they seemed too young or basic) for middle schoolers. Interviewees and focus group participants also noted that dosage was low: School administrators and instructional staff wore lanyards with the basic concepts of TFL on them, hung posters about feelings in classroom and school hallway walls, and created calm-down corners in classrooms so that students had quiet places to go to if they felt they needed to, but the ongoing instruction about TFL concepts was left to guidance counselors (in elementary schools) and to social studies teachers (in middle schools). Moreover, focus group participants noted that the TFL lessons were reportedly not clear; staff had little idea about how exactly to implement the lessons, if they had chosen to make time to do so.

Implementation of TFL Was Uneven Across Schools and, in Many Cases, Reportedly Shallow

Interviews with JPSD implementation coaches (district staff who were to support TFL implementation) and with TFL consultants revealed that implementation of TFL varied across schools in both years of the study. Interviewees also reported that this variation occurred even in the second year for treatment schools, as well as across the control schools, which implemented TFL in 2017–2018 only. Student surveys indicated that exposure to various TFL materials and lessons varied widely across treatment schools, and also between treatment and control schools (in year 1). Our analysis in six focal schools corroborated the students’ survey results: Interviews and focus group discussions with school staff and leaders in each school reported different ways in which TFL materials and structure were provided to students. TFL was rarely, if at all, implemented across a whole school as it was designed. Thus, implementation of TFL in JPSD over the first two years remained shallow.

A Variety of Factors Facilitated and Impeded Implementation

Interviews with key stakeholders and the analysis in six focal schools unveiled factors that could have affected the implementation of TFL and led to the reported uneven implementation across schools and varied exposure of TFL concepts to students. These factors included attitudes, district-level structures, and broader contextual factors:

- **Attitudes**: The extent to which parents, teachers, and especially school leadership had bought-in to the positive-behavior concepts promoted by TFL stakeholders’ desire for a positive behavior approach.
- **District-level structure**: Respondents reported that JPSD and TFL support facilitated implementation for them. However, they also noted situations in which communication lines faltered and that there were few opportunities for collaboration. Parental engagement was minimal, and in those schools that experienced principal turnover there was a lack of clear leader advocacy or attention to the program.
- **Contextual factors**: MDE audited JPSD concurrently with implementation of TFL in 2016–2017, which reportedly distracted many educators from implementing TFL. Moreover, teachers and school leaders were reportedly “burned-out” on having to implement new programs that they perceived might not last in the district beyond the one year.

TFL Was Relatively Expensive to Implement

In our cost analysis, we found that TFL, as implemented in JPSD, cost approximately $2,797,728 over the course of the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. Breaking this figure
down by year and by student, we calculate a participant cost of $174.31 per year, per student. We conducted sensitivity analyses in which we included alternative sets of assumptions, such as opportunity costs for teacher time for program implementation and attendance at events. These sensitivity checks increased the costs to as much as $177.79 per student, per year, bringing the total potential annual cost to $352.10 per student.

Although there are only a few examples of cost analysis of whole-school interventions that focus on improving school culture and student behavior from which we may draw comparisons, TFL appears to be relatively expensive compared with programs studied in other cost analyses. In particular, Blonigen et al. (2008) found that a schoolwide positive behavioral support program would cost approximately between $17,732 and $20,705 per school. If we take the average school in JPSD, which as of 2017 has 235 students, the average per-school, per-year cost of TFL implementation comes out to be $40,962.85. Furthermore, if we include the results of our sensitivity analyses by including in-kind opportunity cost of teachers’ time commitment, that per-school, per-year cost increases to $82,743.50.

Implications

Although the results from the outcomes analysis suggest that the offer of TFL was generally not associated with better outcomes, and thus that TFL might not have been effective or aligned with the specific needs of JPSD school population, it is clear from the documentation on implementation struggles and facilitators that there are several other plausible explanations for these findings that merit consideration.

First, TFL was not the only program implemented in JPSD that was designed to improve student SEL and school climate. For example, the district was also implementing other programs, including a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. To the extent that the benefits of participating in programs such as the PBIS program benefited all students in the district, the estimated effects from this study represent only the additional impact of the TFL program. This additional impact is likely to be smaller than would be anticipated had the control condition been defined so that students in control schools received no additional SEL programming.

Second, issues of implementation may have compromised the potential of the program to help students. We found some evidence that implementation of TFL was not optimal: It varied across schools and was, at best, shallow. This is evident from both the data from focal schools and from the heterogeneity in program exposure (presented in Chapter Three)—there were students enrolled in schools that were implementing TFL programming in year 1 who reported low exposure to posters and lessons. Educators’ contextualized critique of the program and reasons for not fully buying into it, described in Chapter Three, may provide further insight into the lack of detected effect in the outcomes. Moreover, at the time of TFL implementation, JPSD was dealing with superintendent turnover, the dissolution of its school board, and MDE’s audit of its performance. These stressors reverberated among the stakeholders with whom we spoke and most likely affected educators’ capacity to implement TFL as it was originally designed.

Finally, there are some methodological issues to consider. First, a large number of parents and guardians in JPSD did not consent to have their children participate in the study, and it is unclear whether the students who did consent were the students who would benefit
most from participating in the program. It is unclear whether the program would be more effective for these students and to what extent that would influence the overall estimation of program impacts. Second, the SEL and school climate outcomes rely on student-self report. There is some evidence that self-report measures of SEL and school climate may be biased. In particular, acquiescence bias, whereby respondents have a tendency to agree with all items, and halo effects, whereby positive perceptions about one domain influence perceptions of other domains, pose a particular threat to validity with such measures. This is also the case for all interview and focus group data, as those are self-reports. It is therefore possible that participants provided socially desirable responses about their perceptions of school safety and climate or about TFL implementation. It is also plausible that, as students participated in the program, their awareness of their own social and emotional competencies changed and they became less lenient in their judgments about their social and emotional competencies. This could even potentially explain the finding that self-reported self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management trajectories were negatively affected through TFL participation.

It is impossible to discern exactly which factor produced the results of this study, suggesting that additional research is needed to better understand the extent to which the findings reported here are driven by limitations of the data and sample, implementation challenges, or other factors.
Acknowledgments

We thank the National Institute of Justice for its generous sponsorship of this research. At Jackson Public Schools, we are grateful to many current and former administrators and staff for their support and work, especially the following: Superintendent Errick Greene, former Interim Superintendent Freddrick Murray, former Superintendent Cedrick Gray, former Executive Director of Student Academic and Behavioral Support Margrit Wallace, Executive Director of the Office of Climate and Wellness Amanda Thomas, Executive Assistant Twanda Leggin, and implementation coaches Cora Holland, Andrea Jones, Kimberly McBride, Etta-tina Myles, Jessica Quinn, Loran Taylor, and Farida Dogar.

We thank the staff at Tools for Life Corporation for producing and designing the Tools for Life® socioemotional learning program and for their critical partnership in the project. These include President Allen Croxall, as well as the other staff (including Lisa Lane, Regina Rees, and Victor Shaw) and consultants (Pat Bell, Cindy Martin, and Carri Pillers) who made implementation possible.

We appreciate the help and expertise of the following RAND Corporation staff who supported the research conducted as part of this project and the report’s preparation: Garrett Baker, Kate Giglio, Laura Hamilton, Elizabeth Thornton, and Katie Whipkey. As part of the quality assurance process, Lori Uscher-Pines, John Engberg, and Lynsay Ayer reviewed drafts of this report and provided constructive feedback that improved the overall quality of this report.

Finally, we are indebted to the students, parents, and district educators and administrators who participated in the implementation of Tools for Life® and the research, taking time to complete the surveys and to participate in interviews and focus groups with RAND.
### Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>BTC</td>
<td>Better Together Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBCSE</td>
<td>Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>intraclass correlation coefficient</td>
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<td>ITT</td>
<td>intent-to-treat</td>
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<tr>
<td>JPSD</td>
<td>Jackson Public School District</td>
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<td>MAAP</td>
<td>Mississippi Academic Assessment Program</td>
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<td>MDE</td>
<td>Mississippi Department of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>RLA</td>
<td>reading and language arts</td>
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<td>SD</td>
<td>standard deviation</td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td>standard error</td>
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<td>SEL</td>
<td>social and emotional learning</td>
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<td>SSIS</td>
<td>Social Skills Improvement System</td>
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<tr>
<td>TFL</td>
<td>Tools for Life®: Relationship-Building Solutions</td>
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</table>
Teachers and administrators across the United States struggle to maintain safe, civil, community- and achievement-oriented schools. During the 2014–2015 school year alone, 12-to-18-year-old students experienced more than 1.4 million nonfatal victimizations (e.g., violence, theft) at school (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). This translates to about 79 percent of public schools experiencing one or more incidents of violence, theft, or other crimes within a single school year. The nation has also grappled with the increased presence of mass school shootings, such as the shooting on February 14, 2018, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. These incidents have spurred urgent calls to action for schools to implement preventative measures to ensure student safety and well-being (Astor et al., 2018). School leaders, however, have no whole-school, empirically tested “best” or “promising” practices to address these safety concerns. One proposed strategy for promoting holistic improvements in school climate and safety is improving the social and emotional skills of students and educators.

This report summarizes results from a project funded by the National Institute of Justice in 2015 to study the association between social and emotional learning (SEL) and school climate and school safety, in which the RAND Corporation partnered with the Jackson (Mississippi) Public School District (JPSD). JPSD implemented Tools for Life®: Relationship-Building Solutions (hereafter referred to as Tools for Life, or TFL), a classroom- and home-based program for children age three through five and grades 1 through 8 designed to improve school climate and safety through the proactive development of students’ interpersonal skills (relationship-building and communication) and intrapersonal skills (self-regulation and resiliency). In school years 2016–2017 and 2017–2018, JPSD implemented TFL in randomly selected elementary and middle schools in the district (grades kindergarten through 8). Half of the schools received TFL in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018; the other half received TFL in 2017–2018 only. RAND researchers documented the implementation of TFL and its costs and assessed the program’s impact on school climate and safety. We also conducted a deep description of implementation through a study of six focal schools: three schools where TFL was implemented in both years of the project (2016–2017 and 2017–2018) and three schools where TFL was implemented in year 2 only (2017–2018).

In the remainder of this chapter, we summarize the existing literature on the potential association between SEL with school climate and school safety, the JPSD context, and the project’s objectives and analytic approach. We then provide a roadmap for the remainder of the report.
Social and Emotional Learning, School Climate, and School Safety

Two solutions to school safety concerns that have been used with frequency in U.S. schools are to issue exclusionary discipline sanctions and to invest in surveillance and security measures (such as cameras and school security officers) (Dinkes et al., 2007; Fabelo et al., 2011). For example, in 1999, 19 percent of public schools used security cameras to monitor schools, and this had increased to 61 percent of schools by 2010 (Robers et al., 2012). Moreover, high-poverty schools are more likely to use surveillance measures than low-poverty schools: In 2010, 11 percent of high-poverty schools conducted random metal detector checks on students, compared with 1 percent of low-poverty schools (Robers et al., 2012). Despite their widespread use, school security measures have not been consistently linked to decreases in violence (Blosnich and Bossarte, 2011; Burrow and Apel, 2008). And some security measures, such as inside camera use, have been linked to decreased perceptions of school safety, equity, and support (Johnson et al., 2018).

Similarly, there is little evidence that discipline “interventions” result in deterrence of misbehavior, reduced teacher or student victimization, or improved sense of safety or community in schools (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). In fact, accumulating evidence shows that exclusionary discipline sanctions can worsen students’ negative academic and behavioral trajectories (Arica, 2006; Hemphill et al., 2006). In some cases, punitive disciplinary approaches have been linked to posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, academic failure, and school dropout (Cameron and Sheppard, 2006). And although reported behaviors improved somewhat from 1993 to 2017, public schools still struggle to maintain safe and supportive environments: Student reports of threat or injury from a weapon on school grounds are high—around 6 percent for high school students (Robers et al., 2014; Robers et al., 2012; Musu et al., 2019); from 2003 to 2016, teacher reports of being threatened with injury by a student increased from 7 percent to 11 percent (Robers et al., 2014; Musu et al., 2019); and in 2015–2016 more teachers reported experiencing a physical attack (6 percent) relative to previous years (3–4 percent) (Robers et al., 2014; Musu et al., 2019). Bullying rates have also remained high. Twenty percent of students age 12–18 in 2017 reported being bullied during the school year (Musu et al., 2019). Of those bullied in school, 42 percent reported being bullied in classrooms, 43 percent on school grounds in the hallways or stairways, and 15 percent online or by text (Musu et al., 2019). These results emphasize the need for a schoolwide approach.

Furthermore, zero tolerance disciplinary policies disproportionately tend to negatively influence outcomes for African American youth (Schiff, 2013; Wilson, 2013). National data suggest that African American students represent only 17 percent of public school enrollment but account for 34 percent of suspensions (Advancement Project, 2005). African American students have not been found to misbehave in schools more than other groups of children, yet empirical data consistently indicate that they are more likely to be suspended or expelled than other groups of students (Wilson, 2013). This discipline gap in the United States has grown over several decades. From 1972–1973 to 2011–2012, the national rate of out-of-school suspensions for white students increased from 6 percent to 7 percent—but for black students, it nearly doubled, from 12 percent to 23 percent (Losen et al., 2015). This means that about one in four black students are given an out-of-school suspension within a given year. This discipline gap has been linked to the overrepresentation of black students in the juvenile justice and prison
systems (Fabelo et al., 2011), which has been well documented as the school-to-prison pipeline (Schwarz, 2009).

Positive School Climate Could Support School Safety
Responding to the negative effects of exclusionary discipline, alternative preventative measures have been promoted at the federal level (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In 2014, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called for the use of classroom removal as “a last resort” and for schools to instead focus on the promotion of “positive school climates and equitable discipline practices” (Duncan, 2014). The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act, now titled the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires districts to report on disaggregated rates of exclusionary discipline, and accompanying materials frame the discipline gap as a civil rights issue (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Accordingly, nine states have dedicated themselves to reducing the suspension gap by including suspension rates in their ESSA statewide accountability and improvement systems (Kostyo, Cardichon, and Darling-Hammon, 2018). Suggested strategies include those that support positive behavior in the classroom, including SEL and restorative justice approaches (Kostyo, Cardichon, and Darling-Hammon, 2018). According to recent scholarship, culturally responsive teaching, implicit bias training, and restorative justice approaches are effective for improving school behavior and equity (Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Gregory, 2018).

Programs that support a positive school climate have evolved in reaction to excessive use of school suspension and expulsion as disciplinary practices (i.e., zero tolerance policies) (Jain et al., 2014; Wilson, 2013). Having a safe, inclusive, and positive school climate can improve student well-being, including social, emotional, and physical health (Thapa et al., 2013). More supportive and equitable school environments have also been linked to smaller black-white racial discipline gaps (Bottiani, Bradshaw, and Mendelson, 2016). Although scholars have yet to agree on a definition of school climate (National School Climate Council, 2007), a common thread is that positive school climates are ones in which school community members share a common set of norms and values and have quality (trusting, supportive) relationships with one another (Payne, 2018). A positive school climate can be fostered through SEL programs, which aim to address individual inter- and intra-personal competencies (Berg et al., 2017).

Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate Are Interrelated
Despite having unique literature bases, school climate and SEL are highly interrelated. According to Berg et al. (2017, p. 20), there is a reciprocal relationship between the two: “Individual competence becomes a condition for others’ experiences and development; and the policies, procedures, norms, and expectations provide conditions to support and foster students’ social and emotional competencies.”

SEL has been defined as “the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Weissberg and Cascarino, 2013). Through SEL, students develop more positive attitudes toward themselves and others, which allows them to build healthy relationships and participate positively in school (Durlak et al., 2011). Social and emotional competencies, also known as noncognitive skills or soft skills, have been categorized into five competencies (CASEL, 2019):
• **Self-awareness**: Knowing one’s strengths and limitations and having a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism and a “growth mindset.”

• **Self-management**: The ability to effectively manage stress, control impulses, and motivate oneself to set and achieve goals.

• **Social awareness**: Understanding the perspectives of others and empathizing with them, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

• **Relationship skills**: The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

• **Responsible decisionmaking**: The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety, and social norms.

SEL is especially primed to support low-income children of color whose lives are marked by social inequalities and discrimination that foster perceived injustice and disrupted social bonds. These experiences can influence the quality of the parent-child relationship and levels of psychological distress (e.g., self-efficacy, depression, and anger)—both of which are related to a range of poor outcomes, including poor academic achievement and behaviors in youth (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009; Sanders-Phillips, 2009). The ability of children of color to successfully cope and negotiate these types of social inequalities is a critical developmental milestone (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009; Sanders-Phillips, 2009). Schools often play a critical role in addressing these social inequalities (Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff, 2003).

A meta-analysis of the impact of universal SEL programs in K–12 contexts found that these programs show promise across a multitude of schooling and behavioral outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011), including academic achievement, social and emotional skills, and reduced behavioral conduct problems. A meta-analysis of longer-term (with a median follow-up period of one year) effects of SEL programs reinforced these findings and demonstrated that results did not vary based on whether the sample consisted of primarily students of color and/or students growing up in lower-income families (Taylor et al., 2017).

**Testing a Social and Emotional Learning Program in High-Poverty Elementary and Middle Schools**

This study contributes to the education field’s understanding of the extent to which SEL can improve school climate, and thus school safety, by empirically testing this relationship. JPSD was an ideal district within which to test TFL. Below, we describe the context of JPSD prior to the inception of the project. We then describe the components of TFL. More specific information about TFL and its components is available in Appendix A.

**The Jackson Public School District Recognized Its Need to Improve School Climate and School Safety**

In 2012–2013, JPSD served 29,137 students in the city of Jackson, Mississippi, in 61 schools, with a population of predominantly African American (97.3 percent) students who are economically and academically disadvantaged. Ninety-two percent of enrolled students qualified for free- or reduced-priced lunch, and academic performance was below state and national averages on core subject area tests (such as English language arts and mathematics). At the
time of the study, JPSD faced serious school safety challenges and could have potentially benefited from improving school climate and safety. In the 2012–2013 school year, on average, 23.8 percent of students in elementary schools, 84.9 percent of students in middle schools, and 69.4 percent of students in high schools in JPSD had received an office discipline referral—occurrences when a teacher sent a student to the principal’s office for a minor behavioral infraction, such as being disrespectful, or for a major infraction, such as being physically threatening or vandalizing school property. Nearly 6,000 out-of-school suspensions occurred in the same time frame (462 in elementary schools, 2,142 in middle schools, and 2,895 in high schools). Additionally, results from a 2013 Gallup poll administered to all JPSD students in grades 5 through 12 revealed a clear need to increase school safety and to improve problem-solving and conflict resolution skills among students and staff. In the poll, JPSD students reported lower hope and engagement than national averages; only one-third of JPSD students reported that they “feel safe in this school” and that they “can find lots of ways around any problem” (email correspondence with JPSD administrator, July 2015).

JPSD recognized the need to address the well-being and development of the whole child to foster safer and more responsive learning environments. This is evidenced by various efforts that district staff undertook in the years prior to this project, such as implementation of Second Step socioemotional learning tools by counselors at some schools, restorative practice pilot projects, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) resources and programming (for more information, see Jackson Public Schools, undated; Insight Education Group, 2018). Despite these efforts, JPSD continued to struggle to maintain basic levels of school safety (Jenner, 2016; Mississippi Department of Education, 2017). Prompted by multiple years of poor state performance ratings, in 2016 the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) conducted a series of audits in JPSD both before and during the first year of TFL implementation (Dreher, August 31, 2017; Dreher, September 13, 2017). JPSD was found to be in violation of 24 out of 32 process standards, including those related to school safety and student discipline (MDE, 2017). Among other things, MDE staff found buildings to be insecure (e.g., unlocked doors, faulty metal detectors) and “frequently observed gang signs, foul language, and behaviors that were in violation of the District’s Code of Conduct in the classrooms and hallways” (MDE, 2017, Attachment F, p. 10). A survey of JPSD staff also found that the district suffered from a stressed and disjointed student social, emotional, and behavioral support system (Insight Education Group, 2018). Staff reported that teachers needed more training on how to identify and handle student social-emotional needs, and that specialists (school psychologists, guidance counselors, etc.) spent too little time in direct student service, yet had overlapping duties (Insight Education Group, 2018). According to the MDE audit, JPSD academic performance was also deemed inadequate: MDE gave the district a “failing” grade and put it in a probationary status (MDE, 2017). Table 1.1 provides a timeline of events in 2015 through 2017, the period leading up to MDE instituting a special commission that took control of the district’s improvement process.

Tools for Life®: Focusing on Whole-Person Social and Emotional Skills

TFL was developed in the early 1990s by the Early Identification Early Intervention (EIEI) mental health team at kidsLINK,1 a community organization in Canada. At the start of this

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1 The EIEI program is still offered in local schools by the successor organization to kidsLINK, which merged with other community organizations in 2013 to become CARIZON Family and Community Services.
Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to TFL implementation 2015–2016</td>
<td>MDE gives JPSD an “F” performance rating based on a statewide accountability system that takes into account (a) student achievement, (b) student growth, (c) graduation rates, (d) participation rate [sic], and (e) other outcome measures” (MDE, 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April–August 2016</td>
<td>MDE conducts a limited audit of JPSD (based on a state law that requires schools with a C, D, or F rating to be audited periodically; Dreher, August 31, 2017; Dreher, September 13, 2017). Based on what were deemed to be concerning findings, JPSD’s accreditation was placed on “probation.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 of TFL Implementation (2016–2017)</td>
<td>September 6, 2016–July 31, 2017: A second, more comprehensive audit is conducted by MDE (Dreher, August 31, 2017), which finds JPSD in violation of 24 out of 32 process standards, including those related to school safety and student discipline (MDE, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>JPSD superintendent Cedrick Gray resigns, and the JPSD school board selects Freddrick Murray, chief academic officer of high schools in JPSD and long-time educator and administrator in the district, as interim superintendent (Dreher, November 2, 2017; Mannie, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>JPSD files a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) with MDE to address the limited audit and is rejected by the State Board of Education due to lack of specifics (Royals, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 of TFL Implementation (2017–2018)</td>
<td>September 13–14, 2017: The Commission on School Accreditation (a statewide representative body that makes recommendations to the state school board; Mississippi Code Title 37, Education § 37-17-3) meets to review the results of the audit and decide whether to designate emergency status and recommend that the district be placed under state control. Instead, the Commission on School Accreditation, and following them, the Mississippi Board of Education, declared an “extreme emergency situation” due to safety and educational concerns and requested the state appoint its own interim superintendent (Dreher, September 13, 2017; Dreher, September 14, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 18, 2017</td>
<td>A federal lawsuit is filed by an attorney on behalf of 23 JPSD parents, alleging that the decision to take over the district violated constitutional due-process rights (Dreher, September 18, 2017). The lawsuit asserts that JPSD did not have adequate time to follow through on the CAP before the second audit was conducted, saying that some CAP items had a one-year timeline (Carson Law Group, 2017). It also asserts that “because the audit was contemporaneous with the Corrective Action Plan already prepared and executed by the District, a number of the audit’s ‘findings’ describe conditions existing before corrective action was undertaken” (p. 22–23).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 20, 2017</td>
<td>The JPSD school board, facing the resignation of four out of seven members, decides not to initiate the search for a new superintendent, and instead keeps the interim superintendent in charge of JPSD, Freddrick Murray (Dreher, September 20, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2017</td>
<td>Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant does not sign the resolution and instead selects a third option—one that would be neither a state takeover or allowing JPSD to maintain full control. This third option was to form a 15-member Better Together Commission (BTC) to oversee the transformation of JPSD, with five seats appointed by the governor, five by Jackson city, and five by W.K. Kellogg Foundation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
project, TFL had been implemented in over 100 schools in Canada and the United States. TFL focuses on the proactive development of students’ socioemotional skills on both the interpersonal level (how to communicate respectfully and resolve relationship conflicts) and intrapersonal level (how to identify and recognize one’s own feelings and to express feelings, self-regulation, and resiliency).

TFL is a set of strategies that teachers can integrate with classroom instruction (rather than as an “add-on”) to mitigate a multitude of problem behaviors at once (rather than targeting individual problems, which can be a piecemeal approach). TFL promotes a positive school environment by building relationships and teaching students interpersonal skills and intrapersonal skills. The program aims to promote children’s socioemotional development; the ability to identify and understand one’s own feelings, to accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others, to manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner, to regulate one’s own behavior (Shanker, 2010, 2012; Baumeister and Vohs, 2004; Bronson, 2000a, 2000b), to develop empathy for others, and to establish and maintain relationships (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; Denham and Weissberg, 2004) by equipping them with life skills from listening and self-regulation to decisionmaking, problem-solving, compromise, and collaboration. These are key strengths for handling peer-pressure conflict, such as bullying, and for reducing and managing trauma (Bonard, 1991; Search Institute, 2005; Gordon, 2005; McMahon, Wernsman, and Parnes, 2006; Anderson and Keltner, 2002).

These skills may also be critically important to the development of disadvantaged or marginalized youth or youth of color who have experienced social inequalities (Simson, 2012). TFL may counteract feelings of marginalization, powerlessness, and perceived injustice often reported by children of color (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009; Sanders, 2009).

TFL consists of a toolkit for teachers, which includes supporting materials to send home for students’ parents or guardians and a classroom library of fiction and nonfiction texts used in each TFL lesson, and a toolkit for home (HomeSTART), which incorporates the same lesson materials as the classroom toolkit. Each grade level has from eight to ten lessons, which focus on a specific skill and use inquiry-based learning and pedagogical approaches (Quigley et al., 2011; Watkins, 2012; Kuklthau, Maniotes, and Caspari, 2007; Scardamalia, 2002) that accommodate multiple ways of learning (Garner, 1983). Each lesson is age- and grade-appropriate and supports literacy and language development by incorporating reading literature, writing exercises, and hands-on activities. In addition to conveying specific skills to students, TFL aims to build a schoolwide sense of community and to strengthen students’ connection with the school by training staff on how to model caring and respectful behavior and the use of positive behavioral practices. Furthermore, parents and guardians are notified by letter each time their child is taught a different skill, along with discussion questions to spark discussions at home. Each school’s library will have ten HomeSTART kits that parent and guardians can borrow.

TFL includes three core components of an optimal positive youth development (PYD) program (Lerner and Steinberg, 2004; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004):

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1 Inquiry-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning that places students’ questions, ideas, and observations at the center of the learning experience. Educators play an active role throughout the process by establishing a culture in which ideas are respectfully challenged, tested, redefined, and viewed as improvable, moving children from a position of wondering to a position of enacted understanding and further questioning (Scardamalia, 2002).
1. **Building relationships with adults and developing community**—TFL creates positive and sustained adult-youth relationships through teacher-student and parent/guardian-student dialogue.

2. **Skills building**—TFL uses teachers to build students’ interpersonal and intrapersonal skills through play-based and inquiry-based learning practices.

3. **Application of skills building**—From kindergarten through grade 8, students are expected to apply the skills they have learned.

The core learning domains covered in TFL are described in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools for Life Domain (Students Will Learn to and Apply How to . . .)</th>
<th>Community Building</th>
<th>Skills Building</th>
<th>Application of Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Communicate and Interact Respectfully with Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak clearly, respectfully, confidently, and appropriately</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide feedback to others and express appreciation and support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively listen, providing verbal and nonverbal responses</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support and encourage others by creating, giving, and receiving “put-ups” (supportive or complimentary comments)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Express Feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify and describe a wide range of feelings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize a wide range of feelings in themselves and others</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept that feelings are OK</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use appropriate vocabulary and behavior to express their feelings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate responsible ways to act and respond to others’ feelings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Solve Relationship Problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify a potential relationship problem</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand and apply the relationship problem-solving process (stop, think, decide)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use strategies to promote healthy relationships (engage self-regulation and calming-down techniques, offer put-ups, listen attentively, recognize body clues)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify, describe, and apply the relationship problem-solving tools (talk it over, walk away, share/take turns, ignore, apologize, compromise, take a chance, ask for help when appropriate)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate a willingness to work with other of various abilities, interests, and cultural backgrounds</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand how to make and keep friends</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define cooperation and participate cooperatively in a variety of group settings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** TFL materials.
**Study Objectives**

At the time of this project, no SEL programs had been implemented districtwide in JPSD to improve school climate and safety. Moreover, although TFL has been adopted in more than 100 schools in North America, no empirical analysis had yet been undertaken to rigorously test TFL's potential effect on school climate and safety, nor had studies of TFL rigorously examined implementation to document the mechanism through which TFL affects the school environment and youth outcomes. This project provided the opportunity to do so. The purpose of this project was to implement TFL across a school district and use a randomized controlled trial to determine whether TFL, integrated into existing school practice with fidelity, can positively affect school climate and safety. This study had three objectives:

1. Describe the implementation of TFL in JPSD.
2. Assess the degree to which TFL is effective in improving school climate and school safety outcomes.
3. Measure the costs of implementing TFL in JPSD.

**Analytic Approach**

The theory of change illustrated in Figure 1.1 served as the study’s framework for analysis. This theory of change posits that TFL inputs and activities (school staff training provided by TFL; classroom toolkits with complementary practices for home) and outputs (the implementation of TFL) will increase short-term outcomes (school staff and students’ knowledge and skills). School staff will develop an in-depth comprehension of TFL techniques, and students will increase their intrapersonal (identify and recognize feelings; express feelings) and interpersonal skills (communicate respectfully, solve relationship problems, resolve conflicts). All members of the school community will start using a common language vis-à-vis relationship-building. With increases in TFL-related school staff and student knowledge and skills, we hypothesize that mediating factors (staff and student attitudes and students’ socioemotional health, such as self-regulation and empathy) will change. Ultimately, short-term outcomes and mediating factors produce positive longer-term outcomes: increased perceptions of school safety among students and staff; stronger perceived bonds and improved school climate; increases in teacher and student attendance; and increases in school safety, as measured by observations of student and staff behavior, reduction in rates of office disciplinary referrals, out-of-school suspensions, and reported injury and aggressive incidents.

Though not a primary outcome of interest, we also investigated the effect of TFL on student achievement (as measured through results on Mississippi state assessments) as a secondary, exploratory, analysis. We hypothesized that with a greater sense of community and connection among student and teachers, students will be more engaged in instruction, leading to subsequent gains in achievement. Decades of research have demonstrated that when students are more engaged in instruction they tend to have higher academic achievement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004).
Figure 1.1
Theory of Change for Implementation of TFL to Improve School Climate and Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation to evaluate</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Outcomes to evaluate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inputs and activities</strong></td>
<td><strong>Direct products of activities</strong></td>
<td><strong>Short-term outcomes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TFL components</td>
<td>School staff TFL knowledge and skills</td>
<td><strong>School staff improved:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for school staff</td>
<td>School staff model respectful communication and behavior</td>
<td>• Attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3-day workshop for 2 school staff</td>
<td>• Teachers integrate lessons from toolkit into curriculum</td>
<td>• Communication with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1-day workshop for all school staff</td>
<td>• School staff intrapersonal skills</td>
<td>• Perceptions of school climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom toolkit</td>
<td>• Communicate respectfully</td>
<td><strong>Students improved:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lesson plans</td>
<td>• Solve relationship problems</td>
<td>• Attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent guides and nonfiction texts</td>
<td>• Resolve conflicts</td>
<td>• Socioemotional health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and guardian communication</td>
<td>Student interpersonal skills</td>
<td>• Communication with staff and peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Workshops/community nights</td>
<td>• Identify and recognize feelings</td>
<td>• Perceptions of school climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• HomeSTART kits available in school library</td>
<td>• Express feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Email lists and social media</td>
<td>Use of common language across school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Longer-term outcomes                                           | **Secondary outcome:**              |
| School staff TFL knowledge and skills                          | Improved student achievement        |
| School staff model respectful communication and behavior        |                                                                                     |
| Parents reinforce classroom practices                          |                                                                                     |

Research Questions and Data Sources
We used a mixed-method approach that drew on both quantitative and qualitative data to describe the implementation, assess the potential impact, and document the costs of the TFL program. We asked seven research questions, listed in Table 1.3.

This study took place over two academic years (2016–2017 and 2017–2018). In the first year of implementation, 45 schools were randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions. We first stratified the participating sample into elementary schools and middle schools. Then, the stratified schools were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Beginning in October 2016, treatment schools began implementing TFL programming in grades 4 through 8. After the first year (2016–2017), the 22 schools in the control group implemented TFL. Details of the randomization process, including the number of schools and students allocated to the intervention and control groups, participation rates, and the characteristics of the schools that participated in the study, are available in Appendix A.

Of the 2,941 students whose parents or guardians consented that they could participate in data-collection activities associated with the study, 2,740 were enrolled in schools that were randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. 1,422 were enrolled in treatment schools at the start of the study, and 1,318 were enrolled in control schools at the start of the study. Before conducting any analyses, we examined the extent to which the study sample was balanced (i.e., had similar background characteristics across intervention and control conditions) and representative (i.e., those who consented to participate in data collection had similar back-
ground characteristics as those who did not). We found that, though the sample was balanced and there were no significant differences in the characteristics of students in the experiment by treatment group, the sample was not representative: Students whose parents or guardians did not consent to data-collection activities tended to have lower achievement and were also more likely to have discipline issues and higher absenteeism. Complete details of the representativeness and balance of these samples is available in Appendix A.

To evaluate the impact of TFL, we conducted a cluster-randomized trial in two stages. Stage I examined impacts after one academic year of exposure to TFL. Stage II examined trajectories for students’ outcomes from over the course of two academic years using a two-phase multiple baseline design, which is a within-person repeated-measures design that can be used to appraise the extent to which an intervention alters growth trajectories (Shadish, Kyse, and Rindskopf, 2013). In the focus groups, we allowed for open discussion among participants. To document the implementation of TFL, we relied on data from interviews with key JPSD, MDE, and TFL staff; analysis of the student survey; and data from the study of three treatment and three control schools, which involved focus groups with school instructional staff and interviews with school leaders.

**Table 1.3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Objective</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe implementation of TFL</td>
<td>1. In what ways did the implementation of TFL vary across schools? 2. What hindered or facilitated implementation?</td>
<td>• JPSD central staff interviews  • TFL staff interviews  • Focal school administrator interviews  • Focal school staff focus groups  • Student school climate surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Assess TFL effectiveness</td>
<td>3. Was TFL associated with improved school climate? 4. Was TFL associated with improved student social and emotional competencies and positive pro-social behavior? 5. To what extent did program impacts differ across grade, gender, and income subgroups? 6. To what extent was program exposure associated with improvement?</td>
<td>• Student school climate surveys  • JPSD administrative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Measure the costs of implementing TFL</td>
<td>7. What were the costs associated with implementing TFL in JPSD?</td>
<td>• JPSD financial data  • JPSD administrative data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Interviews with Key Jackson Public School District, Tools for Life, and Mississippi Department of Education Officials*

We conducted in-person and phone interviews with personnel in JPSD, TFL, and MDE in two data collection windows (spring 2017 and spring 2018). We spoke with all personnel who were involved in the direct implementation of TFL at the district level. This included the one JPSD TFL lead and six TFL implementation coaches. We also spoke to the three consultants from Tools for Life Corporation who were embedded in the schools to offer supports and guidance to school leaders and instructional staff. We purposefully selected JPSD central office staff from the superintendent’s office and those who were in charge of guidance counseling and curriculum standards to gain insights on the vision of TFL and how TFL could be integrated into broader district processes and practices. We purposefully selected the one JPSD school board member who had recently started their term to gain insights on their role, expectations
for the district, and for TFL. We purposefully selected officials from MDE who could provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the state and district.

Table 1.4 lists which stakeholder we interviewed in which window.

Interview protocols sought to obtain data on the implementation of TFL to document its design features and to provide context for explaining any outcomes. We used semistructured interviews that included open-ended questions with supplemental probes to examine specific topics. The protocols differed for each type of interviewee and were modified in each data collection window in order to inquire about changes to the program or implementation through time.

Protocols are available in Appendix D.

**Study of Six Focal Schools**

In spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018, we conducted site visits at six elementary and middle schools (three treatment and three control schools), conducting interviews with school administrators, focus groups with instructional staff members. Appendix C summarizes the data collection and analysis for the study of the six focal schools in order to gain insights in how TFL was implemented from educators’ perspectives. Appendix D provides interview and focus group protocols.

**Interviews.** Each site visit consisted of a 45–60-minute semistructured interview with a school leader/administrator (i.e., principal or assistant principal) and 45–60-minute interviews with designated lead TFL implementers or their counterparts in control schools (i.e., elementary school counselors and middle school social studies teachers). Protocols addressed such topics as perceptions of school climate and students’ SEL needs, response to the program, and facilitators and challenges to implementation.

**Focus groups.** Each site visit also included a 60-minute focus group with about six to ten staff members. We held focus groups with elementary staff after school; at middle schools, we held focus groups during the school day and selected among staff that had planning periods during the chosen time. Prior to the start of each focus group, we assigned participants num-

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**Table 1.4**

*Jackson Public School District, Tools for Life, and Mississippi Department of Education Officials Interviewed for Implementation Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Window</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2017</td>
<td>JPSD TFL lead</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JPSD TFL implementation coach</td>
<td>6 (group interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JPSD central office staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JPSD school board member</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mississippi State Department of Education administrator</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TFL consultant</td>
<td>3 (group interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2018</td>
<td>JPSD TFL lead</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JPSD TFL implementation coach</td>
<td>6 (group interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TFL consultants</td>
<td>3 (group interview)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
bers for identification purposes to ensure confidentiality of participants in our notes. Protocols addressed similar topics as the interviews.

**Observations of Districtwide TFL Events**

We observed and took field notes during training sessions for school leaders and/or staff, year-end conferences jointly held by JPSD and Tools for Life Corporation, and bring-and-brag sessions at which designees from implementing schools across the district (not just the focal schools) shared examples of how they integrated the program into their schools and classrooms.

**Student Surveys**

To inform the implementation and outcomes analyses, we fielded online surveys to students in grades 3 through 8. Questions on the survey inquired about students’ self-assessments of their interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships and about the school’s climate.³

**Content.** The student survey was adapted from several existing instruments, including the Alaska School Climate and Connectedness Survey (American Institutes for Research, 2016), the 5Essentials My Voice, My School Survey (Bryk et al., 2010), and the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) Student Form (Gresham and Elliott, 2008). Intact scales were taken from each source, and scores were computed for each student (or school) based on these scales. Internal consistency estimates from the baseline survey administrations are reported in Table 1.5, as are estimates of the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs), which describe the extent to which survey constructs varied across schools. Most of the internal consistency estimates for the student level constructs are above 0.70 and show adequate reliability. For the school level constructs, the ICCs imply that the school-mean scale scores were also mostly reliable, with average school-mean reliabilities between 0.38 and 0.88. The Safety scale had the lowest school-level reliability. Because these constructs were considered central to TFL’s theory of action, we included all these scales in our analyses. Also included in the survey was a set of items related to TFL programming. These items asked students whether they had seen TFL materials in their schools and whether they had participated in any lessons related to these materials. A copy of the survey instrument is provided in Appendix B.

**Administration.** Surveys were administered before and after the implementation of TFL, in fall 2016, spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018. Student surveys were administered to students whose parents actively consented that they could participate, using an online survey platform in treatment and control schools. Just prior to each administration, principals received emails with specific instructions for administering surveys. Follow-ups with coordinators were made to check on data collection progress and respond to any challenges. Additional phone calls, emails, and, in a few instances, on-site assistance were provided to coordinators and teachers as necessary to ensure that these data were collected in a timely manner and for as many of the targeted students as possible.

**Jackson Public School District Administrative Data**

JPSD provided RAND with de-identified administrative data for all students whose parents or guardians had consented to their participation. These data included demographic information

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³The original research plan was designed to include surveys of students and instructional staff. However, the initial fielding of the staff survey in fall 2016 showed very low staff participation, even with multiple follow-ups and reminders. Response rates averaged around 16 percent per school for these surveys. Thus, after the first administration, the data collection plan was revised to focus energy and resources on maximizing student participation in the surveys.
(race/ethnicity and gender) and indicators of suspension, attendance, and annual performance on the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) tests in English language arts and mathematics. MAAP scores are not vertically scaled. For the purposes of this analysis, all test score data were standardized within grade level based on state means and standard deviations. We obtained administrative data from JPSD for both years of the study (2016–2017 and 2017–2018). The complete list of administrative data is in Table 1.6.

The data collection timeline for these sources is presented in Figure 1.2.

**Limitations to Analysis**

There are several limitations to this study that warrant consideration. First, the conclusions we can draw about program impacts should not be generalized, given the relatively small proportion of eligible students that consented to participate in data-collection activities. As previously noted, despite repeated efforts to secure parental consent from students, less than one-third of the eligible students in the district opted to participate in data collection. The remaining students either did not return consent forms or returned consent forms indicating that their parents or guardians did not wish to have their children participate in data-collection activities. The low participation rate poses a serious threat to validity of inferences about program impacts because of the possibility of selection bias. It is not clear whether the consenting students are different from other students in some way, and therefore we cannot rule out the possibility of selection bias.

Second, while our initial study design incorporated data-collection activities involving both students and instructional staff, initial fielding of the staff survey showed very low staff
participation, even with multiple follow-ups and reminders. Response rates averaged around 16 percent for these surveys, rendering the data unusable for analytic purposes. After one administration of the instructional staff surveys, we revised our data-collection plan to focus energy and resources on maximizing student participation in the surveys.

A third limitation was small sample sizes. Initial a priori power analysis showed that with over 10,000 students from 52 schools, we have 80 percent power to detect an effect size of 0.14–0.26 on student outcomes, assuming a range of 0.05–0.15 for the intra-class correla-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>JPSD Administrative Data Used in the Study</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Student Level</strong></th>
<th><strong>School Level</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic information</strong></td>
<td><strong>Demographic information</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School of enrollment</td>
<td>• Title I eligibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grade level</td>
<td>• Magnet school indicator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• English language learner/limited English proficient indicator</td>
<td>• Total enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Free or reduced-price lunch indicator</td>
<td>• Total male enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Indicator of homelessness or housing instability</td>
<td>• Total special education enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Special education status</td>
<td>• Total ELL enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>• Total enrollment by race/ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Achievement information (MAAPS scores)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Achievement information (MAAPS scores)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Language arts score</td>
<td>• Average language arts score (by grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Math score</td>
<td>• Average math score (by grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attendance, enrollment, and disciplinary data</strong></td>
<td><strong>Attendance, enrollment, and disciplinary data</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Number of days attended</td>
<td>• Average daily attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Number of days enrolled</td>
<td>• Out-of-school suspension rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Out-of-school suspension</td>
<td>• In-school suspension rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-school suspension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: JPSD administrative data.

**Figure 1.2**
Data Collection Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 2016</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spring 2018</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPSD administrative data</td>
<td>JPSD administrative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall 2016</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fall 2017</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student survey</td>
<td>Student survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 2017</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spring 2018</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPSD administrative data</td>
<td>JPSD administrative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student survey</td>
<td>Student survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal school visit</td>
<td>Focal school visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key stakeholder interviews</td>
<td>Key stakeholder interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**participation, even with multiple follow-ups and reminders. Response rates averaged around 16 percent for these surveys, rendering the data unusable for analytic purposes. After one administration of the instructional staff surveys, we revised our data-collection plan to focus energy and resources on maximizing student participation in the surveys.**

A third limitation was small sample sizes. Initial a priori power analysis showed that with over 10,000 students from 52 schools, we have 80 percent power to detect an effect size of 0.14–0.26 on student outcomes, assuming a range of 0.05–0.15 for the intra-class correla-
tion and a range of 30–50 percent for the proportion of variance explained by the covariates. However, our actualized sample size was smaller at both the student and school level. Post hoc power calculations suggest that, for the same ICCs and proportion of variance explained by covariates, we have 80 percent power to detect effects between 0.17 and 0.30. This is important for two reasons. First, the minimum detectable effect sizes are larger than were initially planned for. Second, most of the estimated effects from the study were considerably smaller in magnitude than this. For student-level outcomes, effect sizes averaged around two-tenths of a standard deviation. While larger sample sizes may have resulted in enough power to detect effects of this size, it is also important to consider the extent to which these effects are practically significant (e.g., representing substantively meaningful program impacts on student outcomes).

A fourth limitation is that our survey measures of SEL and school climate outcomes, while based on widely used instruments with evidence supporting their validity, are limited to student self-perceptions. There is some evidence that self-report measures of SEL and school climate may be biased. In particular, acquiescence bias, whereby respondents have a tendency to agree with all items, and halo effects, whereby positive perceptions about one domain influence perceptions of other domains, pose a particular threat to validity with such measures. This is also the case for all interview and focus group data, as those are self-reports. It is therefore possible that participants provided socially desirable responses about their perceptions of school safety and climate or about TFL implementation.

Finally, the data we collected and analyzed with respect to the focal schools have several limitations. First, among all the elementary and middle schools participating in the evaluation, we randomly selected three schools (two elementary schools and one middle school) in the treatment group and then selected three control schools that were similar in student population size, state assessment score results, and demographic breakdown of the student population. The aim was to include a range of school “types” and to compare implementation in the treatment and control schools. However, there was little variation of treatment and control schools in terms of observable selection characteristics (all schools are about the same size and have similar state assessment scores, and demographic populations). Given this and the relatively small sample size of six schools, findings based on collected data may not generalize to all schools in the district. Second, as described further in the report, given the small sample of schools, we cannot make credible comparative inferences about subgroups, such as elementary versus middle schools, or even control versus treatment schools, given that any differences may be confounded with principal and staff turnovers, among other factors. Third, we interviewed some, not all, staff at the focal schools. The data from the study of the six focal schools, then, may not represent the views of all stakeholders at each school. Despite these limitations, the case study offers qualitative insights into implementation successes and challenges and the perceptions of interview respondents on TFL.

Organization of This Report

The remainder of the report summarizes the study’s analysis and findings. Chapter Two documents the implementation of TFL in JPSD. Chapter Three describes the implementation of TFL from the perspective of district, state, and TFL personnel, from the perspective of students as measured through self-reports on the student survey, and from the perspective of
educators in the six focal schools. Chapter Four summarizes the findings from the outcomes analysis that assesses whether TFL had an impact on school climate, school safety, and student outcomes. Chapter Five discusses the costs of implementing TFL in JPSD. We conclude the report in Chapter Six with a summary of the key findings and a discussion of their implications. Details of the study’s data collection and analysis are available in a separate online appendix document, available at www.rand.org/t/RR4285.
In this chapter, we describe how TFL was designed to be implemented in JPSD: its goals, how TFL was tailored for use in JPSD, and the roles and responsibilities of district and Tools for Life Corporation staff who implemented TFL.

Tools for Life Implementation in the Jackson Public School District

In this section, we describe in more detail the goals of TFL and describe the program materials deployed in JPSD. We also describe additional aspects of implementation, including the staff serving roles unique to the implementation and training provided to district staff.

Program Goals
The main goal of TFL is to help “children and youth discover how to recognize and handle their emotions and positively interact with others” and “to provide schools with a common social language and philosophy of problem solving” (Tools for Life Corporation, 2019). Students are taught to employ eight tools when solving relationship problems.

The program is intended for children age three through five and children in grades 1 through 8. Because JPSD implemented TFL among students in grades 1 through 8, we discuss only aspects of the program designed for those grade levels. JPSD leaders and TFL consultants conceived the program as one that would help create a school culture in which students feel safe and can learn effectively, and one in which teachers realize the importance of building relationships and interacting positively with students. They regarded it as a preventive, proactive social and emotional skills program that would help students learn to communicate with each other and provide viable problem-solving strategies. The goal was to have students learn to self-regulate and take responsibility for making good decisions, which, in turn, would translate into better academic outcomes.

Program Materials and Resources
Tools for Life Corporation developed an extensive set of materials that were an integral part of the TFL program. These include a classroom kit for the use of all educators and a Home-START kit designed for home use by parents and guardians.
**TFL Learning Kits**

The TFL Learning Kit is a key component of the TFL program and is intended for use by all educators. The kit includes separate manuals for grades 1–3, 4–6, and 7–8. Each manual contains a series of 8–12 lesson plans for each grade level, along with suggested activities corresponding with each lesson.

In addition to the manuals, each learning kit contains a variety of supplemental materials for use during classroom activities. These include posters, bookmarks, cards, and lanyards depicting the eight suggested problem-solving tools taught as part of the TFL curriculum. Other materials include posters depicting various concepts discussed in TFL lessons, a beach ball with pictures of children’s faces showing different emotions, a compact disc featuring songs related to TFL concepts and problem-solving tools, cards describing various problem-solving situations, feelings wheel activity cards, and a feelings bingo game. Figure 2.1 provides snapshots of these materials.

**HomeSTART Kits**

HomeSTART kits are kits designed for parents and guardians to learn about TFL concepts and problem-solving tools. Tools for Life Corporation created two versions of these kits. The first is for use in the home and contains a guidebook with instructions on how to use the kit, as well as supplemental materials similar to those included in classroom learning kits (e.g., feelings wheel, problem-solving tools lanyard, feelings bingo). The second version is for conducting parent workshops on TFL. These kits are similar to the home version but provide guidance and enough materials to allow a facilitator to conduct a TFL workshop with several parents or guardians (e.g., at a parent-teacher organization meeting, with families targeted for intervention due to student behavioral challenges). HomeSTART kits were made available in school libraries for JPSD parents and guardians to check out throughout the school year. Tools for Life Corporation had also planned to conduct parental workshops at schools to introduce the HomeSTART kit materials.

**Tools for Life Adaptations for the Jackson Public School District**

Tools for Life Corporation adapted the existing materials to the JPSD context, working with educators from JPSD and the surrounding area to modify language they felt would better resonate with JPSD students, such as making references to Jackson, Mississippi, specifically. In addition, Tools for Life Corporation created a JPSD-specific TFL logo for marketing through-
out the district, used pictures of JPSD students in materials, and ordered supplemental books for teachers to use in classrooms that were culturally competent and took into consideration students’ backgrounds.

**Tools for Life Consultants**

In additional to physical materials provided, Tools for Life Corporation hired three current and former school administrators in the Jackson area to serve as consultants. These consultants served as direct conduits between Tools for Life Corporation, the Chief Academic Officer and Director of Academic and Behavior Support for Students, implementation coaches (described below), and staff at JPSD schools.

**Jackson Public School District Staff and Training to Implement Tools for Life**

Implementation of TFL in JPSD involved several components, including training educators across the district and selecting staff to serve in specialized roles to promote the uptake of TFL. Implementation occurred over two academic years, as depicted in Table 2.1.

The Chief Academic Officer and Director of Academic and Behavior Support for Students oversaw the implementation of TFL across JPSD. As part of the implementation, she hired six implementation coaches to provide support in schools throughout the district. All implementation coaches were educators within the district: At the time of hiring, they were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Implementation Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2016</td>
<td>Start of project; preparation of TFL materials tailored to JPSD starts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2016</td>
<td>Selection of treatment and control schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2016</td>
<td>Meetings with principals to introduce TFL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 (2016–2017)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2016</td>
<td>Two-day training for lead implementers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2016</td>
<td>Half-day training for all elementary and middle school educators in treatment schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2016</td>
<td>Treatment schools begin teaching TFL lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2017</td>
<td>Mid-year professional development session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2017</td>
<td>Champions Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 (2017–2018)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2017</td>
<td>Two-day training for lead implementers, half-day training for all elementary and middle school educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2017</td>
<td>Treatment schools continue teaching TFL lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2017</td>
<td>Control schools begin teaching TFL lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2018</td>
<td>Mid-year professional development session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2018</td>
<td>Champions Conference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.1**

*Timeline of Implementation of Tools for Life in the Jackson Public School District*

SOURCE: JPSD implementation coaches.
either full-time teachers in JPSD or previously taught in JPSD. Coaches attended all formal training provided to counselors and teachers. Any other professional development they had as coaches would have been through their work with the Chief Academic Officer and Director of Academic and Behavior Support for Students. A full-time lead implementation coach served in a leadership role, helping to provide supervision and coordination of the work of additional implementation coaches. Implementation coaches were assigned schools and regularly traveled to the schools to speak with lead implementers and other educators to troubleshoot challenges related to TFL (e.g., providing feedback on “calm-down corner” spaces in classrooms) or closely associated programs, such as the district’s Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, which all schools within JPSD had been implementing since 2010.

Jackson Public School District Lead Implementation Staff

The Chief Academic Officer and Director of Academic and Behavior Support for Students and the District Superintendent, in consultation with Tools for Life Corporation, selected educators to serve in lead roles for implementation of TFL. These “lead implementers” were those primarily responsible for teaching TFL lessons provided in the learning kits. In elementary schools, JPSD selected guidance counselors as lead implementers, as they were already the point people in each school for questions related to PBIS. In middle schools, JPSD selected social studies teachers as lead implementers, with the goal that they would be better able to integrate the TFL lessons into the social studies curriculum, which already touched on social issues.

Trainings

Tools for Life Corporation provided several training sessions to various staff throughout the district over the course of the project. We briefly describe each of these professional development opportunities.

Certification Training for Lead Implementers

At the beginning of each school year during which implementation occurred (i.e., the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years), Tools for Life Corporation offered a two-day “certification training” for staff intended to serve as lead implementers. These trainings involved an introduction to the TFL program and materials, along with various small group activities to allow lead implementers to brainstorm with each other to generate ideas for TFL implementation in their classrooms. Implementation coaches and TFL consultants were introduced. Participants were also provided a binder with training materials. Both trainings were held at a hotel in Jackson.

Training for All Educators

Shortly after the certification trainings were held each year, Tools for Life Corporation held 2.5-hour training sessions for all educators in JPSD. Educators were invited to attend scheduled training sessions based on the grade they taught (for elementary level educators) or subject area they taught (for middle school educators). Similar to the certification training sessions, these training sessions included an introduction to the TFL program, materials, staff, and

1 Though there was one full-time implementation coach position, three different people served in the role over the lifespan of the project. Because staffing changes throughout the project, there were between three and five additional implementation coaches throughout the lifespan of the project.
implementation coaches; activities to encourage application of TFL in the classroom; and the provision of a binder of materials. The trainings for the 2016–2017 school year were held in the JPSD board room, and those for the 2017–2018 school year were held at a hotel in Jackson.

**Mid-Year Professional Development Sessions**

In January of each program year, Tools for Life Corporation facilitated the hosting of a daylong professional development session. These events were intended to affirm ongoing implementation efforts by allowing educators to make a brief presentation to the other educators in attendance about their efforts to implement TFL in their school. The event also provided opportunities for educators to gain new ideas about TFL implementation and troubleshoot challenges with their fellow educators, implementation coaches, and TFL consultants. These events were held at a hotel in Jackson.

**Champions Conference**

In June of each program year, Tools for Life Corporation facilitated a two-day conference focused on TFL and other related topics, such as building relationships with students, engaging students, and promoting a positive classroom climate. Each conference included keynote speakers and breakout seminars and workshops. In addition, there were activities designed to boost the morale of educators, such as displaying educator-created boards showing how schools implemented TFL (see Figure 2.2) and raffles for prizes. Attendees were given TFL-branded items, such as notebooks, t-shirts, tote bags, and lanyards with problem-solving tools. Both conferences were held at a JPSD middle school building.

**Lesson Plans, Scope, and Sequence**

All teachers were provided with a scope and sequence document showing when each TFL lesson should be taught by the lead implementers in each school. This document indicated that lead implementers would teach a new lesson approximately every two weeks, though all teachers were told throughout training that they could teach any lessons when it felt appropriate to

*Figure 2.2*

Educator-Created Displays Depicting Tools for Life Activities in Schools
their class or classroom situations. For the first program year, the scope and sequence document indicated that the first TFL lesson should be taught in October. For the second program year, treatment schools began teaching TFL lessons in September, with control-group schools beginning lessons in October.

**Institutional Supports for Implementation**

JPSD and TFL worked in tandem to support schools in their implementation of TFL. JPSD implementers’ and TFL coaches’ roles overlapped to a certain extent. There was not a formal structure in place for their interaction, but they did meet on an ad-hoc basis. In June 2016, JPSD and TFL met with school leaders (principals and vice principals) to explain TFL, how it fits in with the district’s PBIS strategy, and the rollout and structure of TFL in the schools. Thereafter, TFL consultants and JPSD TFL implementation coaches visited schools to meet with principals individually to talk about implementation, scheduling, and the curriculum. In August 2016 and August 2017, trainings were held for all teachers, counselors, and librarians. TFL consultants also trained nonteaching staff (e.g., custodians, bus drivers, office staff).

Implementation coaches visited each school weekly to provide hands-on support to principals and schools implementing TFL. In the first month of each school year, the coaches met with principals, built a rapport, helped teachers create calm-down corners, and put up posters. Coaches aimed to maintain regular communication and check-in with principals. Often, coaches instead, or also, directly communicated with counselors (of elementary schools). Coaches were directed to integrate into the “fabric of the school” to earn respect and help teachers buy in.

TFL consultants also provided hands-on support to schools. Each year, the lead consultant was in schools about 150 days (which included buildup to launch). Other consultants were in schools 50 days each. Consultants provided morning announcements, a syllabus, an outline of when lessons should be taught, and information for weekly newsletters. Consultants communicated with principals (e.g., to set up appointments, ask for agenda for visit days) and aimed to be “on-call” to be responsive to school’s needs. At the end of each school year, because of state assessment testing windows, TFL consultants conducted mini-visits at each school instead of a full visit. TFL consultants provided additional support—for example, training to talk about how TFL could support classroom management, and teaching SEL in middle school subjects.

TFL consultants provided certification training (for elementary counselors and middle school social studies lead teacher and counselor) and teacher trainings. They coordinated the end-of-year conference and bring-and-brag.

**Concluding Remarks**

This chapter introduced the primary components of TFL and how TFL was structured and designed to be implemented in JPSD. The main goal of TFL is to provide youth with the tools and tactics to discover how to recognize and handle their emotions and positively interact with others. It is also intended to be a whole-school intervention so that the youth and adults in the schools have a common social language and philosophy of solving relationship problems. It aims to be a preventive, proactive social and emotional skills program. The next chapter uncovers the extent to which the schools implemented TFL in JPSD from the perspectives of
various key stakeholders: JPSD district officials, JPSD staff implementing TFL, MDE officials, students, and educators.
CHAPTER THREE

Implementation of Tools for Life: Perspectives of Key Stakeholders

This chapter describes the implementation of TFL to answer the following research questions:

- **Research question 1**: In what ways did the implementation of TFL vary across schools?
- **Research question 2**: What hindered or facilitated implementation?

To answer these questions, we relied on data from interviews with key stakeholders in JPSD, MDE, and Tools for Life Corporation; focus groups and interviews with educators in three treatment and three control schools; and results from the student surveys. Data sources are described in Chapter One; data collection protocols are available in Appendix D.

We used the theory of action depicted in Figure 1.1 as a guiding template and touchstone for the analysis: We reviewed how program activities were implemented and documented that process and used these findings to identify areas of strength and areas needing improvement. The findings also provided contextual information to explain results from the quantitative outcomes and cost analyses (discussed in subsequent chapters). To describe the implementation of TFL in JPSD, we identified the original design features of the program, described in Chapter Two, juxtaposing those features with the information from the key personnel interviews, student survey responses, and educator interviews and focus groups from three treatment and three control schools. We then qualitatively synthesized this information to document how TFL’s design features were implemented and interviewees’ perspectives on what hindered or facilitated implementation.

**Jackson Public School District, Tools for Life Corporation, and Mississippi Department of Education Perspectives on Tools for Life Implementation**

In this section, we summarize the findings from interviews with the key personnel described in Chapter One: JPSD TFL implementation coaches, TFL consultants, JPSD central office administrative staff, and MDE administrative staff. It is important to note that the descriptions of TFL implementation in this section is based on the comments provided to us from interviewees; we present the data as provided. Most interviewees gave examples of positive implementation; few provided examples of poor implementation.
Expectations for Jackson Public School District Implementation

According to TFL consultants, full program implementation involved many components. School leaders were to deliver daily announcements, send home newsletters about social and emotional skills that students were learning, and put TFL on faculty meeting agenda once a month. Elementary counselors and middle school social studies teachers were responsible for teaching TFL lessons about every two weeks. Meanwhile, all other teachers were expected to reinforce these lessons in their classrooms, have a calm-down corner, display posters and wear a lanyard depicting key skills and tools, play the music included with the program, and use the common language of the program to talk about and support social and emotional skills development.

One JPSD central office administrator had high expectations for TFL, noting:

TFL allows teachers to connect with students in a real way. The lessons are dynamic, and they use literature to teach character development skills we want. It’s not about character development, it’s about skill development for social interaction. It’s beautiful to me, because it begins with the person identifying their feelings. This allows the learner to identify their natural feelings of anger, frustration. They then have the tools to handle those feelings.

In both years of TFL implementation, JPSD implementation coaches and TFL consultants visited schools on a regular basis, looking for the following aspects of TFL implementation:

- TFL posters and/or related student-made items are visibly displayed in the school.
- TFL materials are visibly displayed in classrooms.
- TFL lesson delivery is noted on JPSD lesson plan documentation.
- Teachers present TFL lessons in conducive learning environments.
- Teacher and students spend sufficient time on TFL activities and tasks.
- Teachers actively use TFL problem-solving strategies for behavior management.
- Teachers are receptive to implementation coach’s suggestions.
- Teachers wear lanyards with tools corresponding with each problem-solving tool included in the TFL curriculum.
- Teachers set up a “calm-down corner” (an area where students can remove themselves from main classroom area for self-regulation purposes).

These aspects thus served as an expectation for staff of minimal adequate implementation. These factors, though critical for implementation, do not in and of themselves represent a “gold standard” of implementation based on the TFL program goals of whole-school change in relationships among staff and students.

Implementation Was Reportedly Inconsistent Across Schools

Interviews revealed that while there were positive remarks and anecdotes about successful implementation, implementation was reportedly inconsistent across schools and varied depending on the teacher and school leaders’ enthusiasm and “buy-in” for TFL.

According to one TFL consultant, when reflecting on the first year of implementation, “Most schools did parts of what was expected.” According to the consultants’ observations, a few schools that claimed that they were implementing TFL—in that teachers wore lanyards or some classrooms had calm-down corners—were not necessarily implementing TFL to its
fullest extent. For one consultant, nine out of the 11 schools the consultant supported were reportedly “successful” in implementation. Another reported five out of six, due to a principal leaving midway through the school year. Another consultant estimated that six out of the eight schools the consultant supported were “successful.” Thus, according to the TFL consultants, approximately 20 of 25 schools implemented TFL to a satisfactory level in year 1.

TFL consultants and JPSD TFL implementation coaches reported a number of ways in which they observed successful implementation in year 1 treatment schools:

• For the most part, counselors implemented lessons as expected, and some showed or modeled for teachers how to integrate TFL into classroom practices.
• At the middle schools, students were going to calm-down corners on their own volition when they felt frustrated or about to get into trouble.
• Principals were using TFL language when misbehaving students were sent to their offices, inquiring of students, “What tools did you use?”
• Teachers who were in charge of in-school suspensions noted to TFL consultants and the implementation coaches that they liked TFL because it provided them with options for dealing with students.
• Although school-level customization was encouraged, TFL consultants and JPSD implementation coaches reported that they noticed that most schools followed the lesson plan script.

Interviews Revealed Positive Perspectives of Implementation

Calm-Down Corners
According to interviewees, calm-down corners seemed to be the most pervasive component of TFL implementation in JPSD schools. A JPSD School Board member who had visited a number of schools throughout the 2016–2017 school year noticed calm-down corners and how they appeared to “work”:

That was what was funny about the calm-down corners, especially in the middle schools. Traditionally, they’re punitive, they’re time out. We switched them to allow children to decide when they need to calm down. It was hard to get buy in in middle school. But we kept going and checking and responding to the principals. Now everyone has them. It’s safe to say that every single elementary and middle school classroom has a calm-down corner. Every single one! [laughing] I think it was funny because some people never thought they would actually use the calm-down corners, but the students still learned how to use it from other teachers and would use the corner, even if the teacher never intended it for use. The kids took it and ran with it.

Materials and Resources
TFL implementation coaches with whom we spoke observed that TFL materials and resources were utilized throughout the schools, noting, for example:

• Teachers liked having lanyards and used them. Students themselves have used the lanyards and refer to the lanyards.
• Elementary students like the feelings ball. It helped them identify feelings.
• Some teachers used the recommended books.
• The music teacher had middle school students make up songs about tools. Students made posters.

Although TFL consultants and JPSD implementation coaches noted that, in general, schools followed the lesson plan script, TFL implementation coaches also noted that individual counselors varied in the extent of customization of lesson plans. Most “tweaked the program” (i.e., changed the order in which they introduced the tools and other elements) to work for them.

School “Buy-In”

JPSD TFL implementation coaches also remarked on the ways in which parents, students, teachers, and principals in schools were enthusiastic adopters of TFL and had “bought in.” Interviewees noted the following:

• Students seemed to respond well because they were seen using the tools. They particularly liked put-ups and could be heard complimenting each other in the hallway.
• Parents seemed positive about TFL. At parent-teacher organization meetings and other events, for example, parents talked highly of it.
• The majority of principals (with a few exceptions) bought in. Many had been looking for “Tier 1” strategies—those that followed PBIS processes and guidelines. A few principals (in control schools) who were not yet implementing TFL were asking for it. The superintendent had not heard “any principals complaining about TFL. Everyone I’ve talked to feels that it’s productive and making a positive difference in their schools.”
• Despite some initial pushback in middle schools, a majority of teachers bought in and felt TFL was worthwhile. They saw TFL as helping them develop a relationship with students. As teachers attended training and started trying the lessons and seeing students respond by using the tools, they got more on board. One implementation coach reported: “I haven’t heard any complaints from teachers. They’re embracing TFL because they don’t see it as counseling effort. They see it as something they can do. It’s pragmatic; we’re not getting much pushback because teachers are actually seeing the students utilizing the tools in their daily classrooms. They’re actually seeing the results.”

TFL consultants corroborated this general impression, noting that although there was some initial hesitation, there had been “really good positive feedback” from teachers trying to implement TFL. Consultants also commented, “Teachers for the most part have bought in. . . . Many believe in it fully.” Consultants provided the following examples (paraphrased in the list below):

• It is a breakthrough for teachers to even allow students to go to calm-down corners themselves (in middle school).
• Middle school students are asking teachers, “Are we doing TFL today?”
• Principals are heard telling other principals to give TFL a chance, to buy-in because they have seen it improve the culture of their building. They have seen students solving problems themselves. So they see it working while recognizing that it takes time.
• Nonteaching staff (custodial, cafeteria) were pleased to be included.
• Some parents have asked school leaders, “What is Tools for Life?” “What is this about a ‘put-up’?” The parents that attended consultants’ workshops have been “very excited.”

**Improvements in School Climate and Safety**

Anecdotally, some aspects of school climate and school safety had improved. District central office staff noted

big improvements in the elementary schools. We’re seeing a decrease in ‘horror stories.’ We’re going to be looking at the data to see the impact. But overall, I think it’s beneficial. . . . We’re looking for ways to expand this work so students can have these tools in high schools. We think this will change our district for the better. . . . We’re seeing positive results. I’ve talked to principals. They think TFL is helpful. I think the tenets of TFL will help our district. We’ve had some issues with culture, climate, and safety. I think this is a case of us being proactive, rather than reactive. I think these tools will help us get where we need to go.

and

I can’t say it’s directly tied to TFL, but in the elementary schools and middle schools, we’re seeing decreased suspension/disciplinary referral numbers.

TFL Consultants also reported improvements in discipline and school climate based on their visits to schools and discussions with school staff with whom they support. One consultant commented:

At the end of the school year, most staff (90 percent) said they had seen a “positive impact” due to TFL. Several brought up that they were having less discipline problems, sending students to the office less frequently, and that they could hear it working. . . . Children could be heard using TFL language and strategies, and even reminding teachers to use such strategies (such as “ignoring” a student doing something annoying).

At end of the second year of implementation (spring 2018), enthusiasm for TFL had reportedly not waned, according to the TFL implementation coaches and TFL consultants. One TFL consultant noted a shift in school leader and teachers’ understanding of TFL and its importance:

One of the things I noticed is that after our first year in, going back to the veteran schools they realized that the traumas students were experiencing and the meltdowns the students were having—I think they really realized that they had to have something in place. So, they wanted to make sure they had the areas and I think they began to buy in once they really understood the concept. What I noticed that principals were saying was that by providing the calm-down areas, by teachers handling some of the traumas or issues and meltdowns students were having in the classroom, it eliminated the time out of the classroom for the students. Therefore, they could see teachers actually stepping up and trying to assist the students. The stress was really on getting to know the students that they are serving, building those relationships with the students. When they were able to do that, they were able to see the students differently and I think that’s one of the things that teachers are beginning to do. And you know that being in any profession, it takes 3–5 years for a concept to really catch on and grow or a person to grow in that role, and for that reason I think
that because we are an urban district, there are a lot of factors that play into it. But I think that teachers know that students need a way out without necessarily being punished for every little thing.

Factors Facilitating Implementation
Interviewees noted a number of factors that contributed to their positive perspectives of implementation. According to the JPSD TFL implementation coaches and TFL consultants, these factors included the following:

- **Leadership buy-in.** The majority of principals bought in, likely because the program was not sprung on them. Also, the kickoff came from the top (superintendent). The principals’ meetings were effective in allowing face-to-face interactions with coaches. Strong leadership begins with buy-in from the top. (“I think where we’ve had really strong leadership, the school has embraced. Where we’ve not had that consistently, that’s where we’ve had our biggest challenges.”)

- **Training and institutional supports.** The training and coach support facilitated implementation. Coaches built rapport with principals, helping to establish calm-down corners, put-up posters, etc. Coaches were very hands-on.

- **Desire for a positive behavior approach.** Our interviewees said that a lot of schools were looking for PBIS Tier 1 strategies.

- **Counselor buy-in.** Counselors are respected, so creating the relationship meant more buy-in from teachers.

- **Ease of implementation.** There is not a lot of paperwork or lesson planning involved in implementation. (According to a TFL consultant: “I haven’t heard any complaints from teachers. They’re embracing TFL because they don’t see it as counseling effort. They see it as something they can do. It’s pragmatic.”)

- **October launch.** Starting the program in October in the first year of implementation was reportedly a positive: everyone was settled by then.

- **Materials and resources were easy to use.** Teachers seemed to like the resources and that they have been customized for JPSD, and that the Mississippi education standards are referenced.

Interviews Revealed Where Implementation Could Have Been Improved
We also found some areas in which interviewees reported that implementation could have been improved. According to JPSD TFL implementation coaches:

- **HomeSTART kits were not as well utilized as expected.** In many cases, school libraries did not check out any kits or reported that they did not have them on hand.

- **Counselors and social studies teachers taught lessons, but there did not seem to be much teacher reinforcement of the lessons.** Instead, in some cases teachers assumed the counselors and social studies teachers had covered the material. Although coaches built relationships with counselors (and social studies teachers), and counselors and social studies teachers were teaching lessons, there did not seem to be much teacher reinforcement of the lessons. Other teachers did not feel like it was their job and were thus less bought-in.
Coaches also wished they had more time with individual teachers to build relationships and help them follow through.

- There was a lack of communication with the JPSD central district office. In interviews with JPSD central staff, many noted they had not heard of TFL or had heard very little of TFL, did not receive training, and had “no understanding of the curriculum.”

Factors Impeding Implementation

According to interviewees, the following set of factors impeded implementation of TFL:

- **Lack of principal buy-in.** Both coaches and consultants noted that it was difficult to meet with principals, especially those in middle schools. One implementation coach noted that they would like to have met with principals at least once per month, to help them better understand implementation details, but could not do so for middle schools. One workaround was to communicate directly with the counselors (for elementary schools) and social studies teachers (for middle schools). Another issue experienced by implementation coaches was that some principals wanted the coach to become an extra staff member, which was inappropriate.

- **Principal turnover.** Implementation coaches and TFL consultants noted that the schools in which they observed the weakest implementation were also ones that had a change in principals.¹

- **Lack of communication.** Coaches and consultants noted that all school staff (administrative and instructional) were generally unresponsive to emails. It was thus difficult to communicate visit schedules, instructions, or supports. Essentially, scheduling professional development and principal meetings were challenges.

- **Parental involvement.** In general, parents were not engaged with TFL. Thus, there was limited, if any, reinforcement of TFL lessons at home.

- **Inconsistent support from district.** Although there had been districtwide recognition of the need to move away from a zero tolerance punitive to a more child-centered focus, interviewees noted that initiatives related to positive climate at JPSD typically “get put on the back burner.” Typically, the district has “a big problem” supporting educators as they implement any program or initiative. Moreover, the counseling curriculum was not the same across the district—it had varied from school to school, which might have affected the implementation of TFL by counselors.

- **State audit occurred concurrently with implementation of TFL.** As described in Chapter One, as TFL was launched in 2016–2017, MDE was initiating a state audit of JPSD. Thus, district and school leaders were to focus on meeting the monitoring and compliance requests of the state of Mississippi alongside implementing TFL.

- **Program “burn-out.”** Many interviewees noted that JPSD seemed to initiate many programs, but that such programs tend to “not get full buy-in or to be implemented with fidelity” and that school staff are oftentimes burned out on having to implement new programs that might not last in the district.

¹ Over the course of the two years of the study, about one-third of schools had changes in principals.
Students’ Perspectives on Implementation

One limitation to the perspectives of JPSD implementers of TFL, TFL personnel, the district central office, and MDE officials is that they are adult administrators’ perceptions of their observations of implementation in schools. In this section, we document student perspectives on TFL implementation, reporting whether students in grades 3 through 8 were exposed to TFL posters or recalled participating in a TFL lesson.

Those enrolled in treatment schools reported various levels of exposure to TFL components. In the spring 2017 survey, students were provided with pictures of specific TFL posters and then asked whether they had “seen Tools for Life posters” or “experienced Tools for Life lessons” (see Appendix B for the survey items). Students generally reported seeing posters in their schools, with a variance of between 0.27 and 1.00 by school (that is, students saw between 25 percent and 100 percent of the TFL posters in their classrooms or schools), and students reported, on average, having experienced 73 percent of all lessons, with a fair amount of variability of self-reported exposure within schools. Approximately 70 percent of the total variation in self-reported exposure to TFL posters is between schools, and approximately 50 percent of the total variation in self-reported exposure to TFL lessons is between schools, suggesting that, while there were significant substantial differences in students’ own experiences, there were also large differences in exposure from school to school. For example, students reported, on average, experiencing between 19 percent and 100 percent of the TFL lessons. There was also some evidence of TFL exposure in the control schools, though exposure rates were much lower than in the treatment schools, as summarized in Table 3.1. Appendix E includes school-level averages of student survey responses.

These results corroborate the findings from the adults’ perspectives of implementation: students reported that schools implemented TFL in varied ways and implementation was uneven.

Implementation of Tools for Life in Six Focal Schools: Educators’ Perspectives

The previous section provided general insights into how TFL was implemented and hindrances and facilitators to implementation from the perspective of key district-level and state-level stakeholders and students. This section provides deeper descriptive and qualitative insight into how a subset of schools approached implementation of TFL. For this information, we studied six focal schools—four elementary and two middle schools; three treatment and three control schools—over two school years (2016–2017 and 2017–2018). We documented the support that

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SOURCE: Year 1 Student Survey (spring 2017).
school leaders and staff (hereafter collectively referred to as educators) received to implement the program, how they implemented key program components, what their perceptions were of the effectiveness of the program, and what facilitated or challenged program implementation. These insights are also intended to help contextualize findings from the outcomes analyses. That is, understanding what may have happened in implementation, including barriers schools may have encountered—even in a small sample of schools—may help in understanding any potential impacts or non-impacts of TFL on various student outcomes across the district.

Four specific questions guided the analyses of implementation in the six focal schools:

1. How did educators in the focal schools perceive the district rollout of and support for TFL?
2. How did educators in the focal schools implement TFL?
3. What were perceptions of TFL among focal school educators? What, if any, impact did they report?
4. What facilitated and challenged implementation of TFL in the focal schools?

Focal School Selection, Data Collection, and Limitations to Analysis

Our study of the focal schools drew on an embedded, single-case design (Yin, 2017). With this design, we recognized the primary unit of interest as the district (JPSD); we sought to understand how TFL was implemented in this single district by attending to selected subunits (i.e., the six schools) within the district. The schools provided opportunities for extended analysis and helped to enhance insights into the single district (Yin, 2017). Accordingly, this section features themes we identified across interviewees and sites. It does not provide a comprehensive narrative of any one site, nor is the focus on comparing across schools. Where appropriate, we provide examples from different schools, with the intent of demonstrating the variation in implementation or perceptions present in the district.

The findings in this section are primarily based on findings from six schools—four elementary and two middle. Two of the elementary schools and one middle school were part of the initial treatment group; they implemented TFL beginning in the 2016–2017 school year. The other two elementary and one middle school were in the control group; they received delayed treatment and began implementing TFL in the 2017–2018 school year.

In spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018, one or two trained data collectors conducted site visits at each of the six schools to conduct interviews and focus groups. Each site visit consisted of a 45–60-minute semistructured interview with a school leader/administrator (i.e., principal or assistant principal) and 45–60-minute interviews with designated lead TFL implementers or their counterparts in control schools (i.e., elementary school counselors and middle school social studies teachers). Each site visit also included a 60-minute focus group with about 6–10 staff members. When it was not possible to convene a focus group, the research staff conducted individual interviews with available teachers.

The data we collected and analyzed have several limitations. First, among all the elementary and middle schools participating in the evaluation, we selected only six schools (four elementary and two middle schools). Given this, findings based on collected data may not generalize to all the schools in the district. Second, given the small sample of schools, we cannot make credible comparative inferences about subgroups (such as elementary versus middle
third, we interviewed some, not all, staff at the focal schools. The focal schools data, then, may not represent the views of all stakeholders at each school. Moreover, all interview and focus group data were self-reports. It is therefore possible that participants provided socially desirable responses about their perceptions of school safety and climate or about the TFL program.

For descriptive information about the study of the focal schools and details about our data collection procedures and methods of analysis, see Appendix C. Interview and focus group protocols are available in Appendix D.

Key Findings on District Rollout of and Support for Tools for Life

Strong implementation of programs is often predicated on clear messaging of the program and implementation expectations. In this section, we address findings related to what educators understood about TFL, including its goals and intent, and how they came to that understanding. An examination of these factors related to the district roll-out and introduction of the program to front-line implementers (i.e., counselors and middle school social studies teachers that would teach TFL lessons, and all teachers that would reinforce the lessons) could provide insights into the outcomes analyses, described in Chapter Four.

Educators Perceived Tools for Life as Being Mandated by the District

Educators in schools selected to implement TFL perceived that the program was mandated by the district. Moreover, they felt that this was an instance of JPSD adopting a program without consulting with, or only minimally communicating with, school leaders or staff. This led to educators feeling somewhat resentful toward the school district and toward TFL, since they did not understand where the mandate came from or why they were expected to implement the program. As one school leader articulated:

I think a lot of principals weren’t receptive to [TFL] because it was just put on us. Our district does that sometimes with things they want to push. They just roll things out and we don’t know where it came from, or whose idea it was. It’s just here. Another thing to add to the plate.

Likewise, another school leader remarked, “I think that it’s not really something we need here, but we’re going to do it because we were asked to, and we’ll see how it works.”

Educators Did Not Perceive That Tools for Life Was a District Priority

Overall, educators agreed that, despite the appearance of importance because implementation (in select schools) seemed mandated, TFL was not visible as a district priority. They perceived that the district provided little guidance around program implementation expectations. In fact, principals perceived that such expectations originated from the TFL consultants rather than district leaders. And teachers, in turn, perceived that implementation expectations came from their principals (and, in some elementary schools, teachers thought the counselor, who was the lead implementer, had set the expectations). In any case, few recognized the initiative as owned and prioritized by the district.
Principals also reported that in the district’s contact with them, TFL rarely, if ever, entered into the conversations. For example, the program was not mentioned in school board meetings, and one principal reported that although the district provided their school with a comprehensive school improvement plan that involved recommendations for improving school culture, TFL was not mentioned in those plans. This suggests a lack of ownership or strong leadership from the district with respect to the program.

Principals Were Hesitant to Prioritize Tools for Life

Beyond the reasons provided above, from the start, principals struggled to champion TFL. They expressed concerns that the program would take energy and focus away from academics, and, given the intense academic review that JPSD was under by the state department of education, principals felt academics must take precedent. One principal said, “I can’t take away from instructional time.” Another, mirroring this sentiment, said, “I’m going to be honest, TFL is on the back burner. It’s just another thing we have to add.” Overall, principals were also concerned about “initiative fatigue,” with one saying, “I think teachers get burned out. We throw program after program after program on them and we think it will fix whatever ails them. And it doesn’t. And they’re exhausted.” One elementary principal did anticipate, however, that TFL may be less burdensome for classroom teachers because counselors were expected to lead program delivery in elementary schools.

Program Rollout to Staff Was Bumpy in Year 1 but More Successful in Year 2

In the first year of program adoption, 2016–2017, principals were first informed of TFL in June 2016. In August 2016, TFL consultants and the lead implementation coach designated by the district met with the principal of each implementing school to discuss the program, scheduling, and implementation matters. Despite this, some principals reported that figuring out what they were supposed to do with TFL was frustrating at the beginning. One principal remembered wondering, “What do we do with this? Is this something that’s going to be an additional task, in addition to what we already have to do? How is this going to affect instruction? We already have behavior systems, how do we bring it all together? We had to feel our way through.”

In Year 1 (2016–2017), the official rollout of the program (i.e., when implementation was expected to begin) was near the end of October 2016, several weeks into the school year. Several principals felt the late rollout was problematic, saying that it was difficult to start something new with teachers so far into the school year: “October is too late, I’ve had a whole nine weeks to get used to something else. Training new staff in the summer would be key. . . . I don’t think people are purposefully not buying in; people will do what I ask them to do. But just having what you need and knowing that’s the expectation goes a long way.”

In Year 2 (2017–2018), rollout appeared to be more successful. The schools that had not been implementing TFL in 2016–2017 had known for a year that they would be expected to implement the program in the 2017–2018 school year. Many educators had also by then heard about TFL through colleagues. Moreover, at the end-of-year conference in June 2017 that TFL consultants and JPSD had co-organized, attendees from the second wave of schools heard presentations by some of the most enthusiastic implementers from the early implementing schools, showcasing how they integrated the program. This opportunity appeared to have helped generate buy-in and enthusiasm for the program in Year 2. One teacher, for example, remarked, “You always learn more from other people. . . . It’s good to hear what worked and what didn’t.”
Educators Generally Had Mixed Perceptions of Initial Training

Teaching staff—all teachers, elementary counselors, and librarians—and nonteaching staff—including custodians, bus drivers, and office staff—received TFL training. Most educators we interviewed received the initial training positively. On the whole, they reported benefiting from examples that facilitators provided of how to implement the program and from working in collaborative groups to brainstorm and share ideas. Some educators, however, felt that more-extensive training was necessary to fully grasp the program. One teacher, for example, expressed not knowing by the end of the training how to reinforce the lessons or what exactly was included in their kit and how to utilize all the components. Another counselor reported that the training focused too much on the “why”—how trauma affects children, why teaching relationship building skills was essential, why TFL is beneficial—and not enough on what they were expected to do and how to do it. Still other teachers felt that there ought to have been building-based training, an opportunity for the faculty to discuss what they did and did not like about the program, and how they as a school were going to implement it.

Educators Had a General Understanding of Tools for Life Program Goals

Most educators’ understanding of TFL aligned somewhat with the program conception and goals, described in Chapter Two, although the depth of understanding was shallower. Many educators described TFL as an SEL program and highlighted emotional regulation and conflict resolution as the major skills taught.

For example, in an interview, when asked to describe TFL, one educator remarked,

[TFL is] supposed to help the children use strategies and skills to cope with things in the classroom that might be bad, as well as things outside of the classroom. Maybe it can help if there’s something going on at home that they’re not feeling too great about, or if they’re angry. TFL is supposed to give them some strategies to use to cope with it.

Unlike JPSD leaders and TFL consultants, however, educators did not describe TFL as a means to overhaul school culture. Some educators, for example, regarded it narrowly as a “behavior management” program, with one principal saying that the program was not necessary at their school because the school did not have high rate of student behavior-related incidents that merited disciplinary consequence. Some teachers also commented that, because they had good classroom management or well-behaved students, they did not see the need for TFL. Other educators perceived the program as not too different from what they already did. That is, as part of their daily interactions with students, teachers were already inclined to teach students social skills, such as listening and treating others with respect. One elementary principal remarked, “No offense to TFL, but the counselor, that’s part of her job anyway, is to teach those things [covered by TFL].” A few educators had an even less clear understanding of the program, or how the program was intended to work. For example, shortly after program launch, when asked which aspects of TFL would be most useful to the school, one principal said that they had “no sense” of that.

These responses appeared to suggest a surface-level or partial understanding of the program goals, which fell short of the intent of TFL. Notably, educators seemed to regard the program as reactive to behavior issues, whereas it is intended to be a proactive program. And whereas TFL aims to change school culture, including helping educators build positive relationships with students, few educators seemed to recognize that they were also intended targets
of the intervention and that they were expected to reflect on and change their attitude toward students and their interactions with them. Whether these shortcomings in understanding the program intent can be attributed to training, district messaging, or other matters related to rollout is unclear (though there is some indication that, during training, perhaps to alleviate educator anxiety about implementing a new program, TFL presenters often situated it as “something you already do”). Regardless, these perspectives may account, in part, for lackluster implementation on the part of some educators or schools and ultimately undetectable impact.

Early on, Educators Were Confused About the Relationship Between Tools for Life and the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Program

The relation between TFL and other existing programs that addressed school climate, student behavior, and SEL was unclear at the outset. Staff in first-year implementing schools had questions about the connection between TFL and PBIS, with one teacher saying, “From what I understand, [TFL] is very much like PBIS. I don’t know.” Multiple principals even expressed confusion over the relationship between TFL and PBIS. Some thought they were the same thing or that they were redundant with each other, and these staff therefore expected TFL to provide little value. Some of the confusion may have stemmed from PBIS and TFL being managed by the same administrative department in the district.

Toward the end of year 1 (2016–2017), the district provided some clarity, communicating that TFL was to be positioned and regarded as a complement to PBIS Tier 1, in particular as the content that fit into the PBIS structure. Whereas PBIS, as implemented in JPSD, focused on rewards, TFL was about proactively preventing social emotional issues and explicitly teaching essential skills related to effective interactions and interpersonal conflict resolution. Given this clarification, in year 2, educators thought that TFL was a strong “supplement” to PBIS.

Educators Were Mostly Clear on Basic Implementation Expectations

As discussed earlier in this chapter, according to TFL consultants, full program implementation involved many components. School leaders were to deliver daily announcements, send home newsletters about social and emotional skills that students were learning, and put TFL on the faculty meeting agenda once per month. Elementary counselors and middle school social studies teachers were responsible for teaching TFL lessons about every two weeks. Meanwhile, all other teachers were expected to reinforce these lessons in their classrooms, have a calm-down corner, display posters and wear the lanyard depicting key skills and tools, play the music included with the program, and use the common language of the program to talk about and support social emotional skills development.

During training, educators received basic messaging about these implementation expectations. Educators we subsequently interviewed articulated expectations that were in line with those set forth by TFL. Furthermore, within schools, the principal, lead TFL implementers, and teachers appeared to cohere in their understanding. One elementary school, for example, arrived at a shared understanding that the counselor would teach the lesson, then prepare and distribute an activity related to the lesson to all teachers, which they would be expected to do with students to reinforce the focal skill. Meanwhile, the principal would aim to reference the lesson in the daily announcement to staff and students: “The teachers know to have the same voice that I have and that the counselor has.”
School Leaders Did Not Monitor Implementation or Progress

While school leaders appeared to have played a role in communicating expectations regarding TFL implementation to teachers, no school leaders at any of the focal schools appeared to have collected data on or monitored the progress of program implementation in classrooms. Two principals, in fact, remarked that they did not want to see TFL explicitly implemented in classrooms (“I don’t want to see a separate Tools for Life lesson”) because teaching social and emotional skills is supposed to be “ingrained” in teachers and “woven into what they do.”

There was no expectation from the district or TFL that principals monitor implementation. Although teachers preferred not to be excessively monitored, of course, some did remark that this was an indication that TFL was not a priority. In contrast, for example, the district closely monitored teachers’ PBIS implementation. With such monitoring came requirements for producing and tracking data, and therefore the ability to see “tangible results.” Consultants and coaches did, however, conduct visits to check on implementation, as described in Chapter Two. While some staff reported feeling “stressed” by such “audits,” other teachers had assurance from the coaches and had developed enough of a relationship with them to know that the consultants and coaches were not observing in order to “get” teachers.

Educators Perceived Ongoing Support as Helpful

Schools received implementation support from TFL consultants and JPSD implementation coaches. As designed, TFL consultants’ role primarily included conducting occasional school visits to support principals in implementing the program. This included providing schedules for when lessons should be taught and other materials, such as morning announcement scripts and information for weekly newsletters. District implementation coaches also aimed to provide regular visits with hands-on support, such as helping teachers create calm-down corners. Often, coaches directly communicated with lead implementers (counselors at elementary schools). The majority of educators we interviewed—including principals—were not able to and/or did not distinguish among these two types of implementation supports (i.e., TFL consultants and district implementation coaches).

In general, educators perceived the combined support they received as helpful. Educators reported that, early on, consultants and coaches administered a survey to assess teachers’ needs. After learning that teachers wanted to see them deliver demonstration lessons, they filled that need. Teachers also reported that coaches were readily available via email. One counselor did report that the consultants could be more sensitive about their timing: “Certain times of the year, things can be really hectic. In a school system, you can come in and have a plan for the day and it ends up being a day of chaos. . . . [So if] I get an email from my TFL coach that they need to come in . . . it causes anxiety.”

Key Findings on How Educators Implemented Tools for Life

In this section, we present some descriptions and depictions of how educators implemented TFL. In addition to the in-depth interviews and focus groups with focal school respondents, we also include here examples from our observation of the districtwide bring-and-brag session, wherein designees from all implementing schools across the district (not just the focal schools) shared examples of how they integrated the program into their schools and classrooms. We first characterize school-level use of the program. Then we specifically describe elementary
school counselors and social studies teachers’ implementation of the required TFL lessons. Finally, we provide examples of how classroom teachers reinforced TFL concepts.

It is worth repeating that the descriptions we present below skew positive because of selection of data and also because few interviewees provided examples of poor implementation. At the extreme, weak implementation amounted to non-implementation of TFL lessons, tools, and strategies. We also note that implementation variation was present not only among the schools but also across teachers within schools.

**School-Level Use of Tools for Life**

While some educators with whom we spoke did not have strong buy-in of TFL, there were a few common ways in which schools implemented the program. Many principals delivered a morning announcement emphasizing a social-emotional target skill or message. At one school, the counselor followed up and asked classes what the announcement was; if the classes remembered and showed that they understood it, they would receive a token gift. School newsletters also featured a TFL concept (e.g., an explanation of listening bodies). These were also some of the ways in which schools began to acculturate students to using TFL language to communicate desired behaviors and strategies. Another visible example of implementation was put-up walls or boards, wherein encouragement and compliments to one other were written and displayed, for example, in the shape of leaves that formed a put-up tree. Put-ups were also instantiated verbally; for examples, students were encouraged to say kind things to others, including to other students with whom they did not typically interact. And in some schools, teachers stood in hallways to give put-ups to students as they passed by.

While some schools may not have gone much deeper in implementation, other schools did. In those schools, administrators reported to us that they worked to integrate TFL with PBIS, using its tools and activities as strategies to help students recognize, resolve, and avoid future conflicts. For example, at a few schools, the principal’s and the counselor’s office also had a calm-down corner. Some principals kept a lanyard with the problem-solving tools in their office so students could use it to talk about what they were experiencing. Principals have also asked students, “What tools did you use?” or should have used when they arrived at the office for a discipline-related issue. Similarly, some schools committed to counseling students for 30 minutes using TFL when they were in in-school detention and required such an interaction with the program before they were permitted to return to the class.

Lastly, at a few schools, some educators seemed to recognize that TFL was not just a program for students, but adults too. One principal said, “I often have to use the tools myself. The biggest piece is to ask for help. Children need to understand that kids are not the only ones that need to ask for help, adults need to, too.” In another instance, a teacher made use of a teachable moment when she used an “I feel” statement with a colleague in front of students as they were just learning about using such statements to express feelings appropriately. These examples may be more idiosyncratic than schoolwide, but they signal ways that TFL was beginning to be integrated into a school’s culture.

**Implementation of Tools for Life Lessons**

Elementary counselors and middle school social studies teachers implemented TFL lessons. Mostly, they followed the prescribed pacing and sequence, teaching one lesson about every two weeks. Counselors differed in what they did in the off-weeks in terms of the extent to which they used TFL program materials. At two focal elementary schools, for example, counselors
reported that, per their principal’s encouragement, they supplemented TFL with lessons from the Second Step counseling curriculum, and thus were not maximizing use of TFL. Furthermore, although JPSD and TFL encouraged school-level customization of TFL lessons, very few, if any, educators did so in a significant way. Some counselors reported “tweaking the program”—for example, by changing the order in which they introduced the tools and other elements—but on the whole, they did not redesign lessons to specifically address the state or local context.

Asked to highlight some lesson activities that were successful, counselors shared that students enjoyed activities involving put-ups. Providing students opportunities to give put-ups to each other, for example, was a positive and self-esteem boosting experience for many students. The concept of put-ups was extended beyond peers at some schools. At one school, fifth-graders prepared put-up messages to give to their teachers, and, at a middle school, the social studies teacher had students pick three adults in the building (including administrative, custodial, and cafeteria staff) to write a thank you note to. The adults were appreciative of the children’s maturity and sincerity.

Students also enjoyed lessons in which they engaged with conflict scenarios. One popular activity was having students role-play conflict resolution by drawing on the TFL problem-solving tools. One counselor described:

[Students like] the [activities] where one group comes up with a conflict, and another group uses a problem-solving tool to help them solve their problem. I’ve also used the sheet of scenarios that TFL provided, where I might read out a scenario and a kid proposes a tool to use to solve the problem, and they’ll have to explain why. When they explain why, they can often come up with the best solutions.

Other counselors have noted though that some students seemed more interested in acting out the problem than the solution.

At one middle school that was not a focal school, a social studies teacher used the authentic student context of social media to drive conversations around conflicts and application of problem-solving skills. The teacher had students visit the social media application(s) they typically engaged in and post a message to another student who appeared to be experiencing a conflict. The posting student had to recommend and write about a tool their peer could use to try to solve their problem.

Finally, educators reported that students responded positively to the TFL lessons about identifying emotions. As one middle school teacher recounted, emotions are “at a different level” in seventh and eighth grades. Often these students are in denial about feelings—for example, saying that they have “never been sad.” TFL helped the teacher help a class of eighth-grade students to work through that denial:

We started talking and asked everyone what it feels like to be sad. They would jump on each other, saying, “That’s not what it feels like to be sad.” And the [student] said back, “Who are you to tell me what I feel like when I’m sad.” They expect everyone to feel the same way because of their experience. If mama is in the hospital that may be a different kind of sad. You need to figure out what causes the feeling and how you’re dealing with it. When we talked about the same feeling and how it affects everyone differently, it opened my eyes to how I can deal with all the feelings coming through my door.
Likewise, the teacher felt that through TFL lessons, the seventh-graders were finally realizing it was safe to talk about how they feel: “They don’t have to be embarrassed to say ‘I was so sad I cried.’ And [for] boys, feelings are usually a girl thing. But now everyone is talking about feelings.”

**Classroom Use of Calm-Down Corner**

The calm-down corner was a very visible and prominent way in which each classroom teacher was expected to implement TFL. All teachers were required to establish a calm-down corner in their classroom, an area where students could visit when necessary to check their emotions and calm down before returning to class. According to school leaders we interviewed, nearly all teachers created one, although the level of buy-in, the quality, and the use of the corner varied. One school leader posited based on his observations that the teachers who were more supportive of TFL had more creative, inviting corners, while other teachers put less effort and energy into establishing the space. In what school leaders deemed to be inviting calm-down corners, teachers typically made available a range of materials and activities designed to engage students in something meaningful while they were in that space (e.g., books to read, a mirror for students to look at their own expressions to identify and acknowledge feelings, paper and crayons to write or draw about their feelings, and TFL activity pages), and items to make students comfortable and help ease any tension or intense emotions (e.g., pillows, beanbag chair, toy animals, rain sticks, fidget spinner, Rubik’s cube, music). One elementary school used available program implementation funds to buy each teacher a basket of such goodies to have in their corners. A few teachers across schools, however, voiced that students had unfortunately taken items from the corner.

How teachers understood and likely messaged the use of the calm-down corner differed. Most teachers described it as a place where students could go to calm themselves down before rejoining class, and as an alternative to punishing students who are upset: “It’s a moment for [students] to get themselves together without getting in trouble. . . . It’s welcoming to kids, much more peaceful than a time out. It’s peace, serenity, calm.” Teachers in both elementary and middle schools talked about encouraging students to go to the corner when they sensed a potential conflict and helping students recognize and decide when they need to calm down. In this respect, teachers attested to students learning to use it for its intended purpose; students went to the corner voluntarily when they felt frustrated or as if they were about to get into trouble, or simply if they needed a break from other students. On the other hand, other educators regarded the calm-down corner as having the function of a traditional time-out corner. They talked about sending students there as a punitive measure, about ensuring that students weren’t too comfortable there and weren’t there to “play and relax,” and about how students ought to know better than to get to a point where they need to use the corner in the first place. Overall, however, given general resistance to buying into TFL, numerous educators reported that the calm-down corner was perhaps their favorite aspect of the program. One counselor noted, “That’s the part of the program that’s been helpful and well received. Probably one of the only parts of the program that teachers used. Most teachers, I think, did enjoy the calm-down corner.”

**Other Ways of Reinforcing Tools for Life in Classrooms**

In addition to creating a calm-down corner and putting up posters, teachers were expected to reinforce TFL concepts through activities. Different schools approached this differently. One
focal school, for example, scheduled 15 minutes of TFL time in all classes every day, whereas another school did not make any special accommodations; rather, teachers were to integrate TFL activities into their regular class periods.

Among common activities teachers engaged students in were playing the feelings bingo game, producing art to represent their feelings, and role-playing problem-solving scenarios included in the TFL kit or developing their own. In a middle school, for example, a counselor had students consider scenarios related to bullying and pressure to do drugs. The counselor had students talk through which TFL problem-solving tools (e.g., ignore, walk away, talk it out) to use and act out how the tools would be applied. Another activity several teachers mentioned was to have students write songs or raps about feelings, problem-solving, or other key target skills. A middle school music teacher, for example, had students collaborate in writing songs about the problem-solving tools. The TFL program includes music and songs, but students, particularly middle-schoolers, found the songs difficult to relate to.

Teachers found that students responded well to the use of certain tools, including the lanyard with cards depicting problem-solving tools. They reported regularly using it with students to resolve conflicts. Furthermore, they noted that, as time went on, students referred to the lanyards themselves in conversation with classmates. In one instance at an elementary school, for example, when two students were having a dispute, the teacher took off the lanyard, handed it to the students, and said, “Here, pick your tools and work it out.” The students returned after a while and handed back the lanyard, saying they were done. The students explained that they had reached a compromise and were now going to walk away from each other. Students have even suggested that some additional strategies could be added to the lanyard.

Similarly, teachers have used and reported some success with was the feelings ball—a beach ball with faces and words depicting a range of emotions, intended to be tossed to students to prompt discussions about or sharing of their emotions. One teacher created a morning routine wherein, prompted by the ball, select students identified how they were feeling and why. Elementary teachers generally agreed that students found the ball helpful in identifying their feelings and that it is an effective tool because students can handle the ball; it is tactile and visual for a very abstract activity of talking about emotions. In one particular case, a teacher reported, “I have a student who, when he gets mad, he doesn’t talk, he just growls. So we pull out the ball and point at his feelings.”

Key Findings on Perceptions and Perceived Impact of Tools for Life

The following findings speak to educators’ perceptions of the value of TFL and its perceived impacts.

Tools for Life’s Proactive Approach Was Contrary to District Culture

Some educators expressed that students in the district greatly needed efforts targeted at developing their social and emotional competencies; however, they were skeptical as to whether TFL would be effective at addressing students’ needs because they believed that many students’ emotional and behavior responses to situations were too severe and too ingrained to be mitigated through a preventive Tier 1 SEL program.

Furthermore, TFL’s proactive and student-centered approach was perceived as a great contrast to the strict, punitive, and almost authoritarian approach to behavior incidents that
As one educator remarked early on, “That type of stuff [telling kids to calm down, or stop and think] doesn’t work with these types of kids. . . . What we have to do to these types of kids: you have to raise your voice. . . . Honestly, you have to talk to them like they’re not kids to get them to do what you’re asking them to do.”

One school leader acknowledged that teachers in JPSD do not tend to treat students with empathy and compassion, and instead often escalate situations when students start to act out. In the eyes of many educators, TFL suggested “soft” treatment of this population—for example, through allowing students to choose the calm-down corner instead of receiving a consequence. The introduction of this program, then, created tension for educators who resisted or found it difficult to shift their mind-set out of thinking of students as offenders. Indeed, the program required adults to deescalate situations, honor students’ voices, and regard students as misunderstood and needing help to learn to act respectfully. This mind-set shift seemed difficult to achieve. In one focus group with middle school staff, teachers asserted that “the sweet language of TFL doesn’t work, that students won’t listen unless you yell at them.” One principal seemed skeptical of the need for SEL programs at all, saying “I think it’s a shame we have to teach a program to teach people how to be good human beings.”

### Box 3.1. Profile of a Strong Implementing Elementary Case Study School

- School leaders were bought into the program and vocally supported teachers to implement its components—for example, to set up calm-down corners or to give put-ups.
- Teachers reported lots of communication about TFL at staff meetings. The principal described himself as a “people person” who frequently checked in and dialogued with staff.
- It seemed that a strong culture/community of teachers had been established. Staff described a family-like atmosphere and reported feeling driven to implement TFL well because they knew they were at a pilot school.
- Staff shared a clear understanding of the goal and expectations surrounding implementation.
- Teachers respected the counselor who was leading implementation. Other teachers reinforced the lesson and skills the counselor taught. Consistency in expectations, approaches, and strategies across teachers was evident.
- TFL was not regarded as a large burden. Educators reported that it was easy to use the language daily and the tools regularly. For example, put-ups became integrated into the school culture, such that both educators and students used put-ups regularly.
- Educators regarded the TFL lessons as fun for students. Students enjoyed them, too, and were perceived to have high buy-in.

Educators Considered Tools for Life as Disconnected from the Realities of the Family-Community Context of Students in the District

A theme related to the above idea is that some educators thought that TFL may not be effective for JPSD, given the context of the family and community students live in. Educators expressed concern that family engagement in and support of school initiatives were typically low; therefore, parental/caretaker knowledge and reinforcement of the skills TFL aimed to teach were
likely very limited to none. According to some educators, many students lived in environments in which the parental figures may be largely absent in their roles as primary caretakers. One school leader said:

I think [TFL is] necessary, but I think that in some situations—I think we’re dealing with kids that have—their issues are a little bit bigger than Tools for Life. . . . I think some of the kids here, [compassion] is what they need. But they don’t need it from me. They need it from their parents. Their father, their mother, whoever. And that’s why I was trying to say . . . the stuff here is bigger than us. The parents need to be trained on . . . how to love your child.

Furthermore, educators reported that it was not unusual for JPSD students to live in situations where they routinely saw adults conduct themselves in ways contrary to TFL teachings; many students had adults in their lives that did not model appropriate management of emotions or conflict-resolution skills. Students were likely, then, to infer that yelling and cursing, for example, were appropriate ways to communicate or simply be unaware of alternative ways of settling disagreements. One teacher said, “We can teach [students] all we want here, but when they go home and have a different way. . . . For me, it’s more about teaching the parents.” Some students may even know of adults engaging in extreme violent or destructive behavior, issues that are expected to affect students deeply and require intervention beyond learning social and emotional management skills.

This general disconnect between the realities of students’ home-community context and the perceived surface-level, proactive approach of TFL struck some educators as a reason why teachers might have difficulty buying into TFL and why the program was inclined to be ineffective in JPSD. They perceived the sequenced lessons, activities, and tools as a “band-aid over a bullet wound.” As one educator elaborated:

TFL, in my opinion, is a great thing, but it’s not great for inner-city kids older than age nine. . . . Kids grow up much faster here and deal with more stuff than in other areas. The way discipline is handled, there’s a lot of nonparenting. The people managing kids in this area might be a coach, an aunt, a cousin, rather than an absent father or drug-addicted mother. There’s more of those situations in this area. It feels like TFL just tells us to sing ‘Kum-ba-yah.’ We might have two kids whose relatives took each other out, literally. So while Tools for Life might be a good program in theory, it’s hard to get both teachers and kids from this context on board.

Middle School Educators Thought Tools for Life Was Not Age-Appropriate Their Students

Middle school educators provided other reasons for TFL being inappropriate for their students. Multiple teachers regarded the program materials—both content and aesthetics (e.g., posters, lessons, feelings ball) as “too elementary” and therefore difficult for middle school students to relate to. Others thought that it was too late to address the targeted skills (e.g., active listening, identifying emotions) in middle school; they should have been taught in elementary grades. One middle school educator’s sentiments exemplified this idea:

In middle school, a lot of behaviors have been ingrained because [students] have been indoctrinated in them in the home, in the community. It’s hard to trump [the behaviors that] have been ingrained in the home, the culture, or in the community. In smaller chil-
They’re more tender inside. A lot of these kids, when they get to middle school, they’ve already been through a lot.

Many Educators Felt They Did Not Need Tools for Life

Beyond the responses above, educators with whom we spoke provided another reason for not buying into TFL, saying that such a program was not necessary or not something they needed to implement explicitly since, on the whole, teachers already knew and did what the program was encouraging—helping students become better listeners, empathize with others, express feelings in appropriate ways, and resolve conflicts. Teachers commented, for example, that TFL was “natural” to them; it was what they already knew how to do, and, therefore, they did not need to learn it or use it in explicit, intentional ways. One teacher commented, “I think of TFL as another tool in the toolbox. It’s not another initiative or project I have to do.” And one principal said, “A lot of TFL is what teachers were already doing. We already have the character traits that we try to teach, so this just adds to that. We’re trained to do this with students already.” Similarly, one teacher stated that they would “never pull out the [TFL] manual if students were having a conflict,” implying that they already had the resources and skills required to support students’ social and emotional skills development.

However, Some Educators Noted a Positive Effect of Tools for Life on Them

Some educators did note benefits or positive impacts of TFL on them and the school in general. Specifically, they credited the program for helping the staff in the schools (and the district) establish and adopt a common language for talking about desirable social and emotional skills and strategies for achieving these. They reported, for example, that giving put-ups, having “listening body/ears,” and making references to the problem-solving tools on the lanyard have become integrated into the school culture. As one teacher said, “[TFL] puts words to what I was doing already.” Educators suggested that the use of common language, in turn, should help students understand what skills they are expected to demonstrate and what strategies they are expected to apply.

Some educators reported that TFL opened up their eyes to students’ feelings and made them more reflective of alternative approaches to discipline. These teachers mentioned that, prior to the TFL program, they were quick to judge students based on their actions, but now they were more patient. Also, they rarely used to try to understand students’ perspectives, and they did not consider that students may not have the skills for recognizing, managing, or communicating their emotions or problem-solving interpersonal conflicts. Now, educators were more inclined to regard the student as a whole child when addressing their behavior and apply strategies that help to defuse situations and help bring students back to a state where they could continue to participate productively in class and learn (e.g., with the use of calm-down corner).

Educators Perceived Limited Impact of Tools for Life on Students

Asked about perceived impact of TFL, educators pointed to some hopeful signs that the program was having an effect on at least some students. Principals reported, for example, that students had started asking for quiet reflection time. And teachers reported students applying strategies and tools, such as giving each other put-ups and using the problem-solving lanyard, to resolve conflicts with the support of educators. Some teachers perceived that there were fewer discipline problems in class and that they sent students to the office less frequently.
Few educators with whom we spoke, however, pointed to noticeable long-term impact on students. Teachers remarked, for example, that although students seemed to be engaged by TFL lessons and activities, students’ ability and/or commitment to transfer problem-solving strategies to situations beyond the lessons seemed very limited. Likewise, in general, students did not seem ready to use strategies without prompting and without educator facilitation. No principals or educators appeared to have kept records to track progress or substantiate claims of impact or non-impact.

Despite Being Critical of Tools for Life, Many Staff Would Recommend the Program

Even teachers who were quite critical of TFL as implemented in JPSD, however, responded by and large that they would recommend the program to other teachers, schools, and districts. One reason they gave for their support was that they felt “it couldn’t hurt” to formally adopt a program with an SEL focus in JPSD, given that the student population did have significant need for developing such competencies as identifying and expressing emotions appropriately and applying interpersonal problem-solving strategies. One refrain we heard among such teachers we interviewed was, “If [TFL] helped even one student, it would be worth it.” As one educator said, “I’d rather one be helped than none.” Another educator described general challenges with students using the calm-down corner appropriately, but noted one instance in which a student who was upset elected to go to the corner, then he rejoined the class after 15–20 minutes, ready to refocus. The teacher said, “That’s why we can’t say [TFL] is not good, because it helped that one.”

School Leaders Had Mixed Perspectives on Whether to Sustain Tools for Life

Acknowledging that students need support related to SEL and that TFL had been helpful for some students, about half of the principals in focal schools agreed that they would sustain TFL in their schools. Enthusiasm to sustain TFL ranged from lukewarm to strong. On the lukewarm end, one elementary principal acknowledged that there was no reason not to continue with the program, particularly since it was already up and running and teachers were familiar with it, saying “As long as I can keep the materials, I’ll keep implementing TFL. The lessons are only 12 weeks, so yes I’ll continue.” And one middle school principal said that he would support any program that helped students “deal with social issues and stay in class.” On the strongly supportive end, another elementary principal is committed to TFL saying that they were already “at a point where we can let it go on its own . . . It’s not another task. It’s a part of what we do.”

Meanwhile, however, the other half of the school leaders in the focal schools were disinclined to sustain TFL. A middle school assistant principal noted, for example, that the school would not continue to implement TFL if the district did not mandate it: “Honestly, if [TFL consultants are] not coming around, I don’t know how much the teachers are going to be doing it.”

One counselor cautioned that if TFL is a program JPSD wanted to implement “for real, and we’re going to stick with this and implement it for 10 years, there needs to be more than one lesson per month. We need help designing lessons.” Furthermore, the district would need to take into account the turnover in staff—counselors and teachers. Currently, much knowledge about lesson delivery and tailoring (i.e., customization of lessons for students) resides with counselors. It would be difficult to sustain the program if there were no plans with respect to training or onboarding new staff.
Key Findings on Educators’ Perspectives on Facilitators and Challenges to Implementing Tools for Life in the Jackson Public School District

In this final section, we present factors that interviewees reported, or that our analysis suggests, facilitated or challenged implementation of TFL in JPSD. We considered factors related to the context of JPSD, the TFL program itself, and messaging and supports around implementation. We reiterate and synthesize some ideas already mentioned in prior sections and offer additional findings. Altogether, insights into facilitators and barriers may help account for the extent to which TFL was implemented and impactful in this one district. By extension, this may contribute to lessons learned for similar districts—for example, schools similar in size, demographics, or school culture or under similar accountability pressures—as they consider adopting or preparing to implement TFL or a comparable SEL program.

Facilitators Related to the Jackson Public School District Context

Two factors related to the district context could be considered facilitators of TFL implementation. First, because JPSD had mandated PBIS but provided little clarity around what that entailed, a number of schools were reportedly looking for programs or strategies that satisfied the Tier 1 requirement. When the district positioned TFL as such a program, schools appeared to have had an easier time buying in, or at least understanding how TFL fit with all of the other mandates they had to meet. TFL then, was at least deemed compatible with existing district and school priorities related to behavior management.

Second and relatedly, because of JPSD’s recent failures to meet accountability standards, educators were used to being under scrutiny, by the district or state or both. Because of this, they grew accustomed to receiving mandates to implement programs, and they got used to complying with such directives. Although this certainly did not guarantee deep buy-in, educators did seem to want to understand what was expected of them and to meet those minimal implementation requirements.

Challenges Related to the Jackson Public School District Context

Concurrent stressors in the district made implementation difficult for school staff. At the same time that schools were expected to implement TFL, JPSD as a district was under audit by the state department of education. Schools were placed under intensive support plans for improvement by their district supervisors. These plans undoubtedly received priority and required much time and energy to implement. While JPSD was in need of substantive improvement in several areas, academic achievement was clearly of great concern and a key component of the improvement plan. As a result, a program like TFL, which does not target academic skills development directly, was perceived to be “on the back burner” at the district and school levels. Furthermore, because of the accountability status of JPSD, visitors and auditors from the state and district frequently visited classrooms, adding stress to teachers, who felt that they were under constant scrutiny. Because of this pressure, teachers focused on teaching the academic curriculum and content as prescribed, and therefore some reported choosing not to or not being able to integrate TFL teachings and activities. In the end, several educators reported fulfilling minimum expectations with respect to TFL, for fear that not doing so would be a reason for a low teaching or school evaluation rating. But, being overwhelmed, they were not able to make TFL a priority. As one teacher said, “You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to
realize that the people in the audience were only there because they were told to be there. . . . None of us left the training with a burning desire to implement Tools for Life.”

Several school leaders and teachers we interviewed reported that JPSD has had a history of struggling to implement programs with fidelity. JPSD seemed to adopt many programs but have difficulty achieving buy-in on the part of school leaders, not to mention teachers. Educators—including principals—often perceived requirements to implement as top-down; they found it difficult to fully subscribe to a program they had not been consulted about. It follows, then, that teachers perceived and received low support from school leaders with respect to program implementation. This pattern has led some educators to be wary of new district-initiated programs. Principals have expressed worry and frustration that TFL would contribute to “initiative fatigue.” Indeed, educators themselves have commented that they have “gotten burned out” by all the programs cycling through JPSD. Some educators also resisted buying in because they were skeptical that the program would continue after a year or two.

Beyond teachers implementing TFL just for compliance or resisting the program because they felt overwhelmed, there was another notable group of teachers. School leaders reported that some teachers appeared to not have bought into TFL on principle. These teachers wanted to “push a button and fix [behavior problems in students]” rather than be a part of the solution on this difficult issue. In fact, school leaders and other educators have remarked that there were teachers that often engaged in exchanges with students that were short of being respectful. Some teachers could even be characterized as authoritarian, believing that JPSD students did not respond well to empathy and respect and instead required disciplinary responses to perceived behavioral incidents. Some staff with this perspective believed that students would take advantage of the calm-down corner and use their time there to play, rather than to reflect on their feelings and behaviors.

As mentioned in a prior section, another major barrier to successful implementation was that many educators believed that TFL—or any other social and emotional skills program—was unlikely to be effective in JPSD because of its disconnect with students’ deep social-emotional needs. Educators believed that schools needed materials and resources, such as more counselors, school nurses, and mental health professionals, to help students, many of whom lived in troubled family environments. Although TFL designers may be motivated to help students who live with trauma, educators perceived the program’s approach as largely inadequate to handle the substantive problems JPSD students experience. Related, parental engagement—and expectations for parental engagement—was reported to be extremely minimal district-wide. Therefore, educators were skeptical that the program would be effective without reinforcement and modeling of appropriate behaviors at home. In fact, educators perceived community and parental modeling of respectful behaviors and conflict resolution skills as largely lacking.

A final contextual factor that affected implementation was principal turnover. In three of the six focal schools, school leaders left, and their successors had to learn about the program and catch up with implementation on top of other initiatives they were in charge of.

Facilitators Related to Tools for Life Program and Materials
Educators, particularly in elementary schools, appeared to like the TFL resources, finding them easy to use “off the shelf.” For example, many perceived that they did not have to prepare lessons; lessons were already included, as were most necessary materials (e.g., flashcards, bingo cards), in the kit that teachers received. Furthermore, many of TFL’s key components were
highly visible and easy to implement. Setting up a calm-down corner, putting up posters, and wearing a lanyard with problem-solving tool cards were all rather low-effort activities, especially on the part of teachers not responsible for teaching the core lessons. These visible materials were prevalent in all six focal schools, despite varying degrees of implementation and limited teacher buy-in in some schools. Finally, educators appreciated that many of the resources had been customized for JPSD. For example, the Mississippi state standards were referenced, and the cover art and materials reflected the student population of JPSD.

Challenges Related to Tools for Life Program and Materials
Many staff, particularly in the middle schools, felt that the TFL program materials were inappropriate for their students. Some middle school students themselves openly critiqued materials as being childish (e.g., the problem-solving card that said “share”). Moreover, in general, teachers did not think that the TFL music was engaging for their students—the folk-style music was not the type of music that students related to.

Some lead implementers (i.e., elementary counselors and middle school social studies teachers) noted that the program was limited to only 12 explicit lessons, so dosage was low. Lead implementers teaching two lessons per month ran out of lessons to teach before the end of the school year. The program offered flexibility to expand or adapt lessons, but no explicit instructions to do so. Moreover, lead implementers did not always feel equipped to create new lesson plans based on the materials. One counselor admitted that, after using the 12 lessons, she turned to her regular counseling curriculum.

Finally, according to some counselors, TFL lesson scripts were not as simple to follow. Moreover, the lessons “frequently required extra work and creativity to execute them in a way that keeps students engaged.” In particular, some counselors reported that the lessons did not appear to work well with a large group of students. This was especially a challenge because many counselors lacked experience teaching whole classes of students and had little classroom management experience. One counselor noted, “A lot of [TFL lessons] would work in smaller groups . . . [but] with groups of 25–30 kids, this doesn’t work. Me asking, ‘How do you feel when it’s your birthday?’ Remember, I don’t have classroom training. So then I have 30 kids raising their hands all wanting to talk about their birthday party.”

Facilitators Related to Messaging, Training, and Supports
Selecting counselors to teach the core TFL lessons in elementary schools was considered a facilitator. Counselors were respected, so having them lead implementation and help to promote the program likely contributed to more buy-in from teachers than if counselors had not been positioned as such. Moreover, some teachers expressed relief that the responsibility for—or burden of—teaching the lessons did not fall on them. While educators had mixed responses to the training, a clear facilitator of implementation were the June conference and the bring-and-brag session. These events were reported as successful in garnering enthusiasm for the program, encouraging buy-in, and helping educators to generate and take away ideas for implementation.

Overall, educators thought implementation coaches initially communicated clear expectations about TFL implementation. They also viewed the ongoing support provided by consultants and coaches favorably. They appreciated that these individuals were available for hands-on support, including helping teachers establish calm-down corners and modeling lessons. Teachers reported that such supports indeed facilitated implementation. Moreover, the consul-
Challengers Related to Messaging, Training, and Supports

In the first year, some principals felt that October was too late to start implementation because, by then, teachers had already settled into a routine with students around classroom management and how to address social-emotional skills. It was a challenge, however, to schedule teacher training during the summer because there were only two days prior to the beginning of the school year when teachers were officially available for district-mandated activities.

There was additional confusion and lack of clarity during rollout. As mentioned before, at the beginning of the first year, principals and teachers were unsure about the relationship between TFL and other behavior or social skills initiatives being implemented in JPSD, particularly PBIS, which was a district priority. Eventually, the message that TFL qualified as a Tier 1 PBIS program became clear and more deliberate in trainings. Moreover, principals were uncertain where the expectation to implement the program originated—whether it was from the district (and, if so, which department exactly), the state, or elsewhere. Subsequently, principals reported receiving little additional guidance from the district on how to implement the program.

Although having counselors and social studies teachers lead TFL lessons helped to unburden teachers, in some respects, this arrangement challenged full implementation of the program. That is, TFL was perceived as “light-touch” for non-lesson-implementers. Indeed, most other educators seemed to engage in uneven or sometimes limited reinforcement of the skills taught in the lessons. These teachers felt TFL was not an official part of their mandate, so they were less bought-in than the counselors and social studies teachers and had less ownership of the program. As one principal noted, “The other teachers have their corners, but otherwise it’s not a lot of work for them, since they don’t have to teach the lesson. So it’s not a matter of buying in. They’re just not that involved with it.”

Relatedly, in many teachers’ eyes, TFL implementation meant adopting superficial and visible materials in their classrooms (e.g., calm-down corner, posters, wearing the lanyard with problem-solving cards). As such, teachers perceived the program as easy to implement. This perception, in part, may have resulted from unintentional messaging about the program and expectations for implementation. That is, the message some trainers implied, that TFL was “something you already do,” may have hindered adopters’ understanding of the core program principles and led teachers to believe that they did not need TFL. Perhaps as a result of the missed opportunity to fully convey program intent and characteristics of deep implementation—which included transforming school culture through helping students become responsible decisionmakers and shaping educators’ own views of and interactions with students—implementation of TFL in JPSD over the first two years remained shallow.

While interviewees reported coaching and ongoing support as desirable and helpful, support was not always accessed consistently. Principals often found it difficult to make time to meet with consultants and coaches; these supporters worked around the principal sometimes and interacted directly with the counselors (in elementary schools). Regular meetings (e.g., monthly) between principals and coaches, as designed, may have helped principals better understand implementation details and become more engaged in implementation efforts.
Finally, while culminating events, such as the year-end conference and the bring-and-brag session, promoted enthusiasm for implementation, teachers had few informal channels (i.e., networks) and opportunities for communicating about TFL or sharing ideas within or across schools. While it was encouraged, school leaders spent little, if any, department or staff time on TFL. As a result, there was little collaboration on TFL lessons, and counselors had to work hard to plan supplemental lessons and activities when they finished implementing the 12 existing lessons. Moreover, again, except at the planned events, champions of the program had little visibility within schools, which perhaps hindered potential for garnering further buy-in.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we documented the implementation of TFL and found that, while there were positive perspectives from key stakeholders and district or state officials of TFL implementation, there was clear evidence that students’ exposure to TFL varied across treatment schools in year 1. This chapter also featured key findings from the study we conducted of six focal schools in JPSD. We addressed how educators perceived the district rollout of and support for TFL. Then, we provided descriptive examples of how educators implemented some key components of the program. Following this, we reported on educators’ perceptions of the program and any impacts they felt the program had. Finally, we chronicled factors that facilitated and challenged implementation of TFL in JPSD. We highlighted factors specifically related to the JPSD context, to the TFL program and materials, and to messaging, training, and supports.

While the six focal schools may not be representative of all the schools that attempted to implement the program in JPSD, the findings in this chapter suggest that, while most schools satisfied basic implementation expectations and used key components of the program, there were barriers to deep, effective implementation of the program. Notably, significant contextual issues predating or concurrent with program adoption—for example, issues related to district accountability status, culture, and educator preconceptions about students and their family environment—formed a strong undercurrent. Aspects of TFL materials and messaging may also have hindered stronger buy-in and uptake of the program.

Interviewees remarked on a number of factors that could have inhibited TFL implementation, creating the uneven implementation across schools and thus varied exposure of TFL concepts to students. These included the extent to which parents, teachers, and especially school leadership had bought-in to the positive-behavior concepts promoted by TFL; the extent to which JPSD and TFL training and institutional supports were reaching the teachers and school leaders; stakeholders’ desire for a positive behavior approach; principal turnover; the ease of using materials and resources and ease of implementing lesson plans; and the ease of communication between JPSD and TFL personnel and school staff. Interviewees also noted a handful of factors external to the implementation that could have made an impact. These included inconsistent support from district, the fact that the Mississippi state audit of JPSD occurred concurrently with implementation of TFL in 2016–2017, and teachers’ and school leaders’ being “burned-out” on having to implement new programs that might not last in the district.
In this chapter, we summarize our findings of the extent to which TFL positively affected school climate, student social and emotional competencies, and student behavior. Specifically, we examined the following research questions in evaluating the impact of TFL:

- **Research question 3:** Was TFL associated with improved school climate?
- **Research question 4:** Was TFL associated with improved student social and emotional competencies and positive pro-social behavior?

Though not a primary outcome of interest, we also investigated the extent to which TFL improved academic achievement (as measured through results on Mississippi state assessments). We included this set of analyses because, as outlined in the theory of change figure in Chapter One, improving school climate, including improvements in school connectedness, may improve student engagement and, thus, academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Kane and Cantrell, 2010; Kane and Staiger, 2012; Shindler et al., 2016).

We also conducted exploratory investigations of the extent to which program impacts differed across grade, gender, and income subgroups in order to gain a more nuanced and fine-grained perspective on the impacts of the TFL program, and to see whether some student groups may have benefited from the program more than others:

- **Research question 5:** To what extent did program impacts differ across grade, gender, and income subgroups?

The overall effects captured by questions 3 and 4 potentially conceal important differences in impacts across these subgroups, and understanding these differences may offer additional opportunities for program improvement. In JPSD, there is a relatively large population of low-income students, and approximately 15 percent of the total analytic sample is identified as homeless by the district (see Appendix A). In general, these subgroups are particularly important because past research has shown that there are disparities in both SEL (Hough, Kalogrides, and Loeb, 2017) and in discipline across these groups (Barret et al., 2017). Because the study was not powered to detect subgroup effects, we treat these analyses as exploratory. Finally, we investigated the extent to which program exposure is associated with impacts:

- **Research question 6:** To what extent was program exposure associated with improvement?
Prior research has shown that schools can vary in the degree to which they implement a new program or intervention (Burkhardt and Schoenfeld, 2003; Seltzer, 1994; Dusenbury et al., 2003; Vroom et al., 2019) with fidelity to the program design. One particular feature of implementation that we were able to measure consistently over time was the extent to which students were exposed to TFL materials and lessons, as reported in Chapter Three. Understanding the extent to which impacts differ across levels of exposure presents an opportunity to learn whether higher levels of exposure are associated with greater improvement.

We address these four research questions using student surveys of SEL and school climate in addition to district administrative data. The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, we describe the analysis methods used to investigate impacts after one year of TFL implementation and present the results of these analyses. In the second section, we describe the analysis methods used to investigate impacts after two years of TFL implementation and present the results of these analyses. We then discuss these results and their implications for policy and practice. Finally, we discuss limitations of the study design and outline a summary of key findings.

**Impacts After One Year of Implementation**

Below, we present the analytic models used to estimate program impacts after one year. We then present descriptive information about all of the outcome variables used in the one year analyses. Next, we present estimated program impacts on students’ SEL, school climate, students’ behavior, and student achievement. We then turn to the extent to which program impacts differ across grade, gender, and income subgroups. Finally, we report results from analyses of program exposure. Information about school randomization and sample attrition are provided in the Appendix A.

**Analysis Models: One-Year Impacts**

One of the major goals of this investigation was to find causal evidence that TFL improves student and school outcomes. To make a causal claim about the program’s impacts, it is necessary to be sure that changes in outcomes are attributable to the program itself—and not to any other factors. In our study, this is accomplished by using an experimental design in which schools were randomly assigned to treatment (receiving the TFL program) or control conditions. By randomly assigning schools, the control group provides a credible estimation of business as usual—what outcomes would be expected if TFL were not offered. By comparing the treatment schools with the control schools, it is possible to get an estimate of the impact of participating in TFL. Such a comparison effectively answers the question: “How much did Tools for Life improve outcomes, relative to standard practices in the district?”

We used three different models to address the four research questions above. The first two models estimate program impacts by comparing the treatment and control schools, as described above. The third model expands on these first two models to address research questions 3 and 4. As a reminder, we investigate differences in program impacts by (1) socioeconomic status (as measured by homeless status in academic year 2015–2016), (2) school level (elementary school or middle school), and (3) gender. This same model is used to explore the association of program exposure with program impacts. We defined program exposure as the percentage of TFL lessons students reported participating in on the student school climate
survey administered in the spring of academic year 2016–2017. We selected this survey because it was administered at the end of the academic year and thus represented the most complete accounting of the TFL exposure available during the first study year. We include all students with available outcome data in our one-year between-groups comparisons.1

For student outcomes, estimates of the impact of one year of exposure to TFL were estimated using multilevel regression models with students nested within schools:

\[ y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{y0} + \beta_{y}'W_{ij} + \beta_{y}T_{ij} + e_{ij} \]  
\[ \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}T_{j} + \gamma_{0r}Z_{j} + u_{j} \quad r = 2, \ldots, R \]
\[ \beta_{pj} = \gamma_{p0} \quad p = 2, \ldots, P \]
\[ \beta_{qj} = \gamma_{q0} \quad q = p + 1, p + 2, \ldots, Q \]

\[ y_{ij} \] is the outcome for student \( i \) in school \( j \). \( T_{j} \) indicates the school’s treatment assignment (0 for control and 1 for treatment). \( W_{ij} \) is a vector of student level characteristics, and \( Z_{j} \) is a vector of school-level averages. \( y_{ij0} \) is a measure of the outcome variable at baseline. \( u_{j} \) is a school level random effect with mean zero and variance \( \tau \). \( e_{ij} \) is an individual random effect with mean zero and variance \( \sigma^{2} \). The effect of TFL on student outcomes is tested by testing the null hypothesis that \( \gamma_{01} = 0 \). When baseline variables were missing, we used dummy variable adjustment. Missing data indicators (\( I_{ij} \)) were used in the impact analysis model.

The following pre-intervention covariates were included in the models examining student outcomes:

- individual-level
  - pretest measure of each outcome variable (when available)
  - pretest measure of closely related outcome variable (when available)
  - gender
  - race/ethnicity
  - state test scores (math and reading language arts)
- school-level
  - school average pretest measure of each outcome variable (when available)
  - school average pretest measure of closely related outcome variable (when available)
  - percentage male
  - race/ethnicity (percentage African American)
  - School average state test scores (math and English language arts)
  - Income (as measured by homeless status).

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1 The estimates that we obtain here represent “intent-to-treat” (ITT) effects, and they use information from all students and schools who were offered TFL programming, regardless of uptake. Because it preserves the benefits of randomization, ITT analysis can provide valid information about the impact of the offer of treatment (e.g., treatment effectiveness). However, ITT analysis cannot provide any information about the effect of the actual treatment received by each individual (e.g., treatment efficacy) (Little, Long, and Lin, 2009).
For school-level outcomes, we fit conventional linear regression models:

\[ y_j = \beta_0 + \beta_1 y_{j0} + \beta_2 T_j + \beta_p' Z_j + e_j \]  

(2)

\[ p = 3, \ldots, p \]

Where \( y_j \) is the outcome for school \( j \). \( T_j \) indicates the school’s treatment assignment (0 for control and 1 for treatment). \( Z_j \) is a vector of school-level covariates as above. \( e_j \) is a random effect with mean zero and variance \( \sigma^2 \). The effect of TFL on student outcomes is tested by testing the null hypothesis that \( \beta_2 = 0 \).

Subgroup analyses and analyses of the impact of program exposure are based on a modification of the random-effects model used for the one year impact analysis (Equation 1):

\[ y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} y_{ij0} + \beta_{2j} x_{ij} + \beta_{pj}' W_{ij} + \beta_{qj}' I_{ij} + e_{ij} \]  

(3)

\[ \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} T_j + \gamma_{0r}' Z_j + u_j \quad r = 2, \ldots, r \]

\[ \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} \]

\[ \beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} T_j \]

\[ \beta_{pj} = \gamma_{p0} \quad p = 3, \ldots, p \]

\[ \beta_{qj} = \gamma_{q0} \quad q = p + 1, p + 2, \ldots, q \]

Where all variables are as defined above, and \( x_{ij} \) is a moderator variable:

- categorical indicator of income (as measured by homelessness status)
- categorical indicator of whether school is a middle school or an elementary school
- categorical indicator of gender
- measure of program exposure (as defined above).

For income, gender, and school-level analyses, the parameter \( \gamma_{01} \) captures the treatment effect for nonhomeless students, male students, and elementary school students, respectively. The parameter \( \gamma_{21} \) captures the difference between the nonhomeless and homeless students, the male and female students, and the elementary and middle school students. For the program exposure models, the effect of being randomized to the treatment group but reporting no exposure to TFL is tested using \( \gamma_{01} \). The difference between this effect and the effect of being randomized to the treatment group and reporting complete exposure to the TFL lessons is tested using \( \gamma_{21} \).

Because students are not randomized to different levels of exposure (i.e., students are not randomized to receive different amounts of TFL participation), these analyses may be vulnerable to selection biases, and causal interpretations should be made with caution.
Year 1 Impacts of Tools for Life on School Climate, School Safety, and Student Outcomes

In this section, we first provide information about the distributions of the outcome variables used in addressing these four research questions. Next, we present estimates for impacts on SEL and school climate, followed by behavioral outcomes and academic outcomes. We then turn to our results regarding the extent to which impacts differ across grade, gender, and income subgroups. Finally, we present results for the association of impacts with program exposure.

Descriptive Statistics: Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate

The primary outcomes of interest in this analysis are students’ SEL competencies and school climate. These outcomes were measured on student surveys administered in spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018 (see Table 4.1).

The Emotional Health scale assesses the degree to which students self-report that they have the skills to nurture positive and respectful relationships with others, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement. Overall, students agree strongly that they have these skills (mean 3.14 on a four-point scale). The SEL scale assesses students’ self-reported self-awareness, social-awareness, and self-management. Overall, students in the district rated themselves highly on this scale (mean 3.15 on a 4 point scale). The Communication, Empathy, Self-Control, and Engagement scales come from the SSIS. On the SSIS, students indicate how often they exhibit certain behaviors on a four-point scale (ranging from never to often). Scale ranges differ for each of the scales. For Communication, Empathy, and Self-Control, scores range from 6 to 24, and for Engagement scores range from 7 to 28. Students rated themselves highest in terms

Table 4.1
Descriptive Statistics for the Scales of the Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate Survey: Three Administrations

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<th></th>
<th>Fall 2017</th>
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<td>2.62</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Teacher Trust</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Peer Relationships</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Authors’ analysis of Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate Survey.
NOTE: SD = standard deviation.
of engagement and lowest in terms of self-control, though, in all cases, these scores are in the normal range of behaviors for students in this age group.

There were also four school climate scales. The School Safety scale measures the degree to which students feel safe both in and around the school campus. In general, students agree that their school is safe, with an average of 3.12 on a four-point scale. The Safety scale measures the degree to which students report encountering little crime, violence, or bullying at school. Students were less positive about this scale overall, with an average rating of 2.53 (on a four-point scale). The Student-Teacher Trust scale measures the extent to which students and teachers show respect and trust for one another. Students, on average, agreed that their schools were trusting places, with an average rating of 3.22 on a four point scale. Finally, the Student-Peer Relationships scale measures the extent to which students treat each other with respect, cooperate, and support each other. Students were less positive about this scale, with an average rating of 2.61 on a four-point scale.

**Descriptive Statistics: Behavior Outcomes**

Turning to the behavioral outcomes, Table 4.2 displays descriptive statistics for suspension and attendance. These outcomes were collected twice: at the end of academic year 2016–2017 and at the end of academic year 2017–2018. Suspension was calculated as an indicator variable for each student, taking on a value of 1 if a student was suspended during the academic year and a value of 0 otherwise. In this way, a mean of 0.15 can be interpreted as suggesting that 15 percent of the students participating in the study were suspended at some point during the 2016–2017 school year, and a slightly higher percentage—24 percent—were suspended during the 2017–2018 school year. Attendance was calculated as the proportion of enrolled days that a student attended school. The mean of 0.95 can be interpreted as a measure of average daily attendance: The average student attended school 95 percent of the days they were enrolled in the district. For a standard 180-day academic year, this would suggest that students were typically absent nine days.

**Descriptive Statistics: Academic Outcomes**

Finally, we examined student achievement on two standardized assessments: MAAP Mathematics and MAAP Reading and Language Arts (RLA). Table 4.3 shows the results. These outcomes were collected at the end of 2016–2017. Because MAAP scores are not vertically scaled, all test score data were standardized within grade level using state means and standard deviations. A negative value can then be interpreted as a student scoring below the state aver-

### Table 4.2

Descriptive Statistics for Student Behavior (Years 1 and 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spring 2017</th>
<th>Spring 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>2,740</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>2,445</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


---

2 Though our original data request included MAAP scores for both the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic years, the district only provided valid student records for one academic year.
Table 4.3
Descriptive Statistics for the MAAP Scores (Year 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAAP RLA</td>
<td>2,513</td>
<td>-0.209</td>
<td>0.935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAAP Math</td>
<td>2,509</td>
<td>-0.323</td>
<td>0.894</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


age, and a positive value can be interpreted as a student scoring above the state average. Students in the sample overall scored well below the state average in both math and RLA. In RLA, students were more than a fifth of a standard deviation below average, and in math, students were almost a third of a standard deviation below average.

**Findings: One-Year Impacts**

Figures 4.1–4.8 show plots of the unadjusted changes over time in the student-level outcomes that were available for at least three administrations for the treatment (labeled as 1) and control (labeled as 0) groups. In each of the figures, the mean level for each group is displayed for each survey administration. In general, these plots show that the trends in both the treatment and control groups are very similar. In all cases, outcomes tended to deteriorate in both groups over time, with the exception of the SEL scale, which showed an average increase and then a subsequent decrease in the second year of the study.

Table 4.4 shows the results of the overall experimental one-year analyses. As a reminder, the estimates in the second column represent the difference between the average outcomes for students in schools participating in TFL and the average outcome for students in schools not participating in TFL after one year of implementation. These estimates provide unbiased

---

**Figure 4.1**
Changes over Time in Student-Level Outcome Variables: Emotional Health

![Graph showing changes in emotional health over time for Treatment 0 and Treatment 1]
Figure 4.2
Changes over Time in Student-Level Outcome Variables: Social and Emotional Learning

Figure 4.3
Changes over Time in Student-Level Outcome Variables: Communication
Figure 4.4
Changes over Time in Student-Level Outcome Variables: Empathy

Figure 4.5
Changes over Time in Student-Level Outcome Variables: Self-Control
Figure 4.6
Changes over Time in Student-Level Outcome Variables: Engagement

![Graph showing changes in engagement over time for Treatment 0 and Treatment 1.]

Figure 4.7
Changes over Time in Student-Level Outcome Variables: Attendance

![Graph showing changes in attendance over time for Treatment 0 and Treatment 1.]

information about the extent to which participating in TFL affected students’ self-reported SEL, perceptions of school climate, behavior, and achievement compared with business as usual. The rightmost column translates these estimates into effect sizes, which provide a sense of the practical significance of these impacts by benchmarking them against empirical benchmarks from a meta-analysis conducted by Durlak et al. (2011). Based on that synthesis, effect sizes as large as 0.57 might be attainable on self-reported SEL outcomes, and effect sizes of 0.27 might be attainable on academic performance (Hill et al., 2008; Baird and Pane, 2019).

For the social and emotional outcomes, though the point estimates are largely negative, they are neither practically nor statistically significant. The effect sizes are all very close to zero, suggesting that the TFL program had nearly no impact on student social and emotional outcomes, and certainly had impacts that are far smaller than what has been demonstrated as attainable in the meta-analysis conducted by Durlak and colleagues (2011), though that study did not specify the nature of the control condition, and the extent to which students in the control groups included in their sample participated in other programs designed to improve SEL competencies. The same is true for school climate outcomes.

Turning to the behavioral outcomes, we see similar patterns. The point estimate on the attendance outcome is negative and neither statistically nor practically significant. An estimate of –0.005 here can be interpreted as approximately a 0.5 percent difference in attendance rates between the TFL participants and their peers. This translates into a less-than-one-day difference in overall attendance over the span of a standard 180-day school year. For suspension, TFL participants had slightly higher suspension rates than their peers, though, again, this estimate is not statistically significant. The difference represents about a 3.5 percent difference in the percentage of students who were ever suspended between TFL participants and their peers.³

³ Recall that a positive coefficient for suspension corresponds to a relative increase in suspension rates.
Finally, turning to the academic outcomes, there were, again, very small and statistically nonsignificant positive outcomes on student achievement, including MAAP math and MAAP RLA scores. In math, the effect size is so small as to be nearly 0, and in RLA, the corresponding effect size is 0.016. Both of these effects suggest that the impacts are not practically significant and are far smaller in magnitude than what has been demonstrated as attainable in other studies (Durlak et al., 2011).4

**Findings: One-Year Impacts by Grade, Gender, and Income Subgroups**

Table 4.5 shows the results of from analyses of impacts by grade configuration, gender, and income subgroups. These analyses allow for an investigation of the degree to which program

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4 As described previously, the high rates of attrition from the study pose a serious threat to the external validity of these findings. Where possible, we replicated these analyses using school-by-grade level data in order to test the sensitivity of our estimates to attrition. The findings of these sensitivity analyses are consistent with the results presented here. These analyses were only possible for suspensions, attendance, and proficiency categories for MAAP scores. Complete results are presented in Table E.2 in Appendix E.
impacts differ across these subgroups and to see whether groups may benefit from the program differentially. The estimates presented in Table 4.5 can be interpreted as the difference in TFL impacts for subgroup members. Negative estimates would mean that subgroup members benefited less than their peers (or were negatively affected), and positive estimates would mean that subgroup members benefited more than their peers (or were less negatively affected).

In terms of school grade configuration, most of the point estimates are small but positive, suggesting that middle-schoolers tended to be more positively impacted by the program than elementary school students. Most of these point estimates are neither statistically nor substantively significant. For example, for the Engagement scale of the SSIS, there is a positive effect of 1.022, suggesting that, on average, the self-reported engagement of middle school students enrolled in TFL was about 1 point higher than that for elementary school students enrolled in TFL. However, the estimate represents a standardized effect size of less than 0.05 standard deviations, far smaller than the benchmark value of 0.57 from Durlak et al. (2011). For the behavioral outcomes, the point estimates show negative effects—higher rates of suspension...
and lower rates of attendance for middle school students participating in the program. The effect on attendance is statistically significant and represents approximately a 3 percent difference in attendance rate; this corresponds to around five days in a standard 180-day school year.

For gender, the results were more mixed in terms of direction, but all the estimates are very close to zero, suggesting that there was no differential benefit based on gender: Male and female students enrolled in TFL saw similar impacts.

Turning to income, homeless students, in general, were affected more negatively by TFL than their nonhomeless peers. Most of the point estimates are negative, particularly for the self-reported social and emotional outcomes. These estimates are generally small in magnitude. For example, for self-reported Emotional Health, homeless students enrolled in TFL saw more negative effects than their nonhomeless peers—homeless students enrolled in TFL reported, on average, an Emotional Health score that was around 0.164 lower than nonhomeless students. This is on a four-point scale, and corresponds to standardized effect estimates of approximately –0.05. For Communication, homeless students self-reported around 1 point lower than nonhomeless students, corresponding to approximately a –0.05 standardized effect estimate.

**Findings: One-Year Association of Impacts with Program Exposure**

While the impact estimates presented above are important because they provide information about the offer of the TFL program, they are based on analysis models that do not use information about the extent to which schools and teachers implemented the program with fidelity or the extent to which students in particular schools were exposed to the TFL programming and materials. This makes it difficult to separate out and understand the degree to which the statistically and practically nonsignificant impact estimates can be attributed to the program itself, and the degree to which these estimates can be attributed to low exposure or uptake among certain schools, teachers, or students.

Information presented in Chapter Two suggests that students reported exposure to TFL lessons to varying degrees. Although these results cannot be interpreted causally (because students were not randomly assigned to receive different amounts of the program), the analyses presented in this section provide some insight into the degree to which differences in program exposure are associated with program impacts. These analyses thus help to shed light on what impacts may be attainable if students are fully exposed to the TFL program.

As we described previously, program exposure was defined based on student self-reported participation in TFL lessons. Specifically, on the SEL and school climate survey, students indicated whether they had participated in a variety of TFL lessons. Exposure was then defined as the proportion of TFL lessons that students indicated that they had been exposed to during the 2016–2017 academic year, out of a set of 12 possible lessons.

Tables 4.6 and 4.7 display the impact of increased program exposure on treatment effects. To facilitate interpretation, the estimates presented in the first row of Tables 4.6 and 4.7 show the differences in impact between a treatment student who did not report participating in any TFL lessons and a treatment student who reported participating in all of the TFL lessons. Positive estimates would suggest that more exposure was beneficial (or less harmful).

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5 In JPSD, all students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the standard indicator for lower-income students. The district’s definition of homeless, however, refers to any student living in shared housing that is not adequate or fixed, according to federal law.
There are statistically significant positive associations between TFL exposure and social and emotional outcomes. These estimates imply that at full implementation there would be an anticipated positive impact on all social emotional outcomes. For example, given that the average student is exposed to approximately 0.503 of the TFL lessons, we would estimate that, at full exposure, the impact of the TFL lessons would be approximately a 0.898 increase on self-reported Self-Control, and approximately a 0.075 increase on Emotional Health. These associations are quite small in a practical sense. For example, these estimates imply that a student who did not report having any of the TFL lessons would self-report their emotional health approximately 0.237 scale points lower on average than a student who reported having all of the TFL lessons, on a four-point scale. The estimates for the four SSIS scales are larger in magnitude, but not in their practical significance, because these scales are scored on a much larger range: for example, students who reported participating in all lessons also reported Empathy 1.228 scale points higher than a student who participated in no lessons, but this is on an 18-point scale.

Turning to behavioral and academic outcomes, there are no statistically or practically significant differences in attendance rates, suspension rates, or academic outcomes based on exposure, suggesting that those with low exposure to the program fared no better or worse than those with high exposure.

Table 4.6
Impact Estimates on Social Emotional Outcomes After One Year, by Program Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Emotional Health</th>
<th>SEL</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Self-Control</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposure</td>
<td>0.237**</td>
<td>0.163**</td>
<td>1.450**</td>
<td>1.228**</td>
<td>1.932**</td>
<td>1.356**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SE)</td>
<td>(0.055)</td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
<td>(0.390)</td>
<td>(0.417)</td>
<td>(0.470)</td>
<td>(0.467)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate impact at full exposure</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.258</td>
<td>0.400</td>
<td>0.898</td>
<td>0.427</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table 4.7
Impact Estimates on Behavioral and Academic Outcomes After One Year, by Program Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Suspension</th>
<th>MAAP Math</th>
<th>MAAP RLA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposure</td>
<td>−0.003</td>
<td>−0.030</td>
<td>−0.136</td>
<td>−0.100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SE)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>(0.074)</td>
<td>(0.078)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Impacts After Two Years of Implementation

Our two-year analyses allow us to more deeply explore the extent to which TFL improves student social and emotional competencies and promotes positive pro-social behavior by examining student growth over time. While the one year analyses give a robust picture of the impacts of the TFL program on average SEL and behavioral outcomes, looking across time allows us to understand how program participation may not only influence average levels of self-reported SEL competencies and pro-social behavior, but may also influence the growth trajectory of students. This may be particularly important given that past research has shown that impacts can surface over time (Barnett, 2011; Bailey et al., 2017). Additionally, the first year of program implementation is a time when many schools, teachers, and students are still learning how to use the TFL program effectively. Below, we present the analytic models used to estimate program impacts after two years. We then present estimated program impacts on students’ SEL and students’ behavior.

Analysis Models: Two-Year Impacts

We use a two-phase multiple baseline design over two years (Shadish, Kyse, and Rindskopf, 2013) to investigate how TFL exposure impacts student growth trajectories. In our two-year, two-phase multiple baseline analyses, we exclude students who were promoted to ninth grade at the end of the 2016–2017 school year (e.g., the majority of the study participants who were enrolled in eighth grade at randomization). These students would not have had two years of access to the program by the end of the study period. We also focus these analyses on student-level outcomes (social and emotional outcomes and behavioral outcomes\(^6\)) because students change schools between school years, and school-level variables, such as school climate, may be sensitive to changing school composition. Our primary analytic model is described in more detail below.

Our primary model has three levels, with time points (e.g., survey administrations or academic years) nested within students nested within schools. At level 1, the model can be expressed:

\[
y_{ij} = \pi_{0ij} + \pi_{1ij}a_{1ij} + \pi_{2ij}a_{2ij} + \pi_{3ij}a_{1ij}a_{2ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}
\]  

(4)

And at level 2 (the student level), the model can be expressed:

\[
\pi_{0ij} = \beta_{00j} + \beta_{0ij}W_j + \beta_{0ij}I_j + u_{0ij}
\]

(5)

\[
\pi_{1ij} = \beta_{10j}
\]

\[
\pi_{2ij} = \beta_{20j}
\]

\[
\pi_{3ij} = \beta_{30j}
\]

\(^6\) We exclude academic outcomes from this analysis because JPSD did not provide us with valid data for the 2017–2018 academic year.
The level 3 (school model) is given by:

\[ \beta_{00j} = \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{00p}Z_j + u_{00j} \quad p = 1, \ldots, p \]  

\[ \beta_{0rj} = \gamma_{0r0} \quad r = 1, \ldots, r \]  

\[ \beta_{0qj} = \gamma_{0q0} \quad q = r + 1, \ldots, q \]  

\[ \beta_{10j} = \gamma_{100} \]  

\[ \beta_{20j} = \gamma_{200} \]  

\[ \beta_{30j} = \gamma_{300} \]  

where \( y_{tij} \) is the outcome for student \( i \) in school \( j \) at time \( t \). \( a_{1tij} \) is a time index, centered so that 0 represents the time right before a student participates in TFL programming. For Emotional Health and SEL scales, there are four administration periods, and \( t = 0,1,2,3 \). For the SSIS scales (Communication, Empathy, Self-Control, and Engagement), suspension, and attendance, there are three measurement occasions, \( t = 0,1,2 \). \( a_{2tij} \) is a dummy code for treatment phase, and \( a_{1tij}a_{2tij} \) is an interaction term indicating slope dependency on phase.\(^7\) Other variables are as described above. The parameter \( \gamma_{100} \) describes the overall time trajectory, averaged across all students. The parameter \( \gamma_{200} \) describes the mean shift in the outcome that occurs after participation in the TFL program. The parameter \( \gamma_{300} \) describes the change in slope trajectory that occurs after initiating participation in the TFL program.

**Two-Year Impacts of Tools for Life on School Climate, School Safety, and Student Outcomes**

As a reminder, our two-year analyses allow us to explore the extent to which TFL improves student outcomes by examining impacts on average level and impacts on growth trajectory. In this way, our two-year analyses expand on the one-year analyses by examining change over time.

Table 4.8 presents the results of our two-year models. The second column shows the average overall trends across time for all students, regardless of whether they participated in the TFL program. Negative values here would suggest that students self-reported SEL outcomes decline over time, or that, overall in the district, there were changes in student attendance or in the proportion of students who were suspended. The third column shows the impacts on average level. These impacts can be interpreted as the boost (or decline) in average outcomes that occurs immediately after participating in the TFL program. The fourth column shows the trajectory changes after treatment. These values can be interpreted as the change in trajectory in the time periods that follow TFL participation. Positive values would mean that participating in TFL positively impacted the growth trajectory. For all outcomes that were only collected at three time points, we estimate only time trends and impacts on average level.

Overall, we find statistically significant negative time trends for several social and emotional outcomes including Communication, Empathy, and Engagement. These values are

---

\(^7\) This interaction is only defined for the outcomes that are measured four times.
small: If a student had indicated strong agreement (4 on a four-point scale) at the start of the study, by the end of the study time period, their reported agreement would have declined just over half a scale point. While not practically significant, these declines are consistent with other research (Hough, Kalogrides, and Loeb, 2017) that has found that social and emotional trajectories tend to be negative throughout middle school. Attendance also declined on average over time. From academic year 2015–2016 to academic year 2017–2018, attendance is predicted to decline by about 2.7 percent—nearly five days (in a standard 180-day academic year calendar). Suspension rates, on the other hand, were predicted to increase overall by around 22 percent.

Table 4.8
Impact Estimates on Social Emotional, School Climate, Behavioral, and Academic Outcomes After Two Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate (SE)</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Treat</th>
<th>Time*Treat</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Health</td>
<td>–0.034</td>
<td>–0.032</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEL</td>
<td>0.056**</td>
<td>–0.058</td>
<td>–0.093**</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>–0.216**</td>
<td>–0.160</td>
<td>–0.038*</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
<td>(0.203)</td>
<td>(0.219)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>–0.203*</td>
<td>–0.112</td>
<td>–0.026</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.083)</td>
<td>(0.219)</td>
<td>(0.249)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>–0.176</td>
<td>–0.026</td>
<td>–0.013</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.095)</td>
<td>(0.249)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>–0.244*</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>–0.010</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.095)</td>
<td>(0.249)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>–0.009**</td>
<td>–0.001</td>
<td>–0.001</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>0.075**</td>
<td>–0.009</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Safety</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>–0.010</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.058)</td>
<td>(0.096)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>–0.019</td>
<td>–0.049</td>
<td>–0.013</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.048)</td>
<td>(0.079)</td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Teacher Trust</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>–0.051</td>
<td>–0.042</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.069)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Peer Relations</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.066)</td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTE: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Student-level models contain grade-level fixed effects.
Turning to the impacts on average level in the third column, in general, there were no statistically significant or practically significant differences in average level of any of the outcomes after TFL participation (though the difference for the SEL scale is statistically significant).

Finally, turning to the impacts on growth trajectory in the fourth column, we also find largely no statistically significant or practically significant differences in trajectory attributable to TFL participation. However, the effect for the self-reported SEL scale is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that self-reported self-awareness, social-awareness, and self-management trajectories are negatively impacted through TFL participation.

**Concluding Remarks**

To recap, our analyses produced the following results:

- The one-year impact analyses found no practically or statistically significant effects of offering TFL programming on social and emotional, school climate, behavioral, or achievement outcomes.
- Exploratory subgroup analyses examined whether middle school students, female students, or homeless students experienced different treatment effects than students not in those subgroups. These analyses predominantly found nonsignificant effects.
- Significant positive associations were found between TFL exposure and self-reported social emotional outcomes, implying that, at full exposure, TFL is expected to have positive impacts.

Taken together, the major implications of these results are that, as offered in JPSD, the TFL program had little discernible impact on students’ SEL, behavior, or academic performance. There are four plausible explanations for these findings:

1. It is possible that the TFL program is not aligned with the specific needs of JPSD student population. Under these conditions, we would expect that the results found here would likely be replicated in future studies.
2. TFL was not the only program implemented in JPSD that was designed to improve student SEL and school climate. For example, the district was also implementing other programs, including the PBIS program. To the extent that the benefits of participating in programs such as PBIS benefited all students in the district, the estimated effects from this study represent only the additional impact of the TFL program. This additional impact is likely to be smaller than would be anticipated had the control condition been defined so that students in control schools received no additional SEL programming.
3. It is possible that the program was not implemented with fidelity, and that many students were not exposed to the critical TFL components that were necessary or required in order for the program to be effective.
4. It is possible that our ability to detect an effect was adversely influenced by limitations in how our study was enacted.
While we cannot rule out the first two of these reasons, the other two explanations merit elaboration.

Regarding the third possible explanation, there is evidence that implementation of the TFL program was not optimal, and that even in schools where TFL was offered, students may not have been exposed to all of the TFL components. This is evident based on both the data from the focal schools and on the heterogeneity in program exposure (presented in Chapter Three)—there were students enrolled in schools that were implementing TFL programming in year 1 who reported low exposure to posters and lessons.

The results presented in this chapter suggest that more program exposure is generally associated with better social and emotional outcomes, which suggests the possibility that some issues of implementation may have compromised the potential of the program to impact students. The estimated adverse effects of TFL exposure on RLA outcomes are more difficult to explain. Educators’ contextualized critique of the program and reasons for not fully buying into it, described in Chapter Three, may provide further insight into the lack of detected effect in the outcomes.

Regarding the fourth possible explanation, there were several places where our enacted study deviated from our experimental design. A large number of parents in JPSD did not consent to have their student participate in the study, and it is unclear whether the students who did consent were the students who would benefit most from participating in the program. As was described in the limitations section in Chapter One, there were substantial differences between those who consented to participate and those who did not, and those who did not consent had lower RLA scores and were also more likely to have discipline issues and higher absenteeism. It is unclear whether the program might have had more impact for these students and to what extent that would influence the overall estimation of program impacts.

What’s more, because of low participation from school staff, the SEL and school climate outcomes rely on student-self report. In addition to the fact that accurate and consistent use of these survey scales relies heavily on students’ cognitive and literacy skills, which may be problematic for those enrolled in lower grades, it is plausible that, as students participate in the program, their awareness of their own social and emotional competencies changes and they become less lenient in their judgments about their social and emotional competencies. These changes in how students engage with the survey and self-report may complicate the interpretation of impact estimates. For example, it is not clear whether true improvements in SEL are offset by the fact that students’ self-reports tend to be lower as they become more aware of what it means to have strong interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. This could even potentially explain the finding that self-reported self-awareness, social-awareness, and self-management trajectories are negatively affected by TFL participation.

Of course, it is also a possibility that these results reflect a combination of factors, including the fact that our measure of exposure relies on student self-reports, and additional research is needed to better understand the extent to which the findings reported here are driven by limitations of the data and sample, implementation challenges, or other factors.
In this chapter, we enumerate the costs of implementing TFL in JPSD during the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years to answer the following research question:

- **Research question 7:** What were the costs associated with implementing TFL in JPSD?

Understanding the costs of TFL is important for state and local education agencies considering the feasibility of implementing similar interventions in the future. The goal of this analysis is to estimate the cost of the resources needed to implement the program—both resources that require cash expenditures and those that are provided in-kind. Our approach is to integrate information gleaned from interviews with key informants, such as TFL program leadership and JPSD district staff, to develop a model of program ingredients and corresponding quantities that were utilized in the process of implementing the program. We apply prices to these ingredients using a combination of administrative documentation, including budgets, invoices, and reimbursement records, when possible. In addition, we use information from the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education (CBCSE) CostOut tool (Hollands et al., 2015) to generate estimates of ingredient costs that are based on prevailing market valuation methods.

We calculate total program cost and per-student, per-year costs that take into account the fact that students in approximately half of JPSD schools received TFL services for two years (the treatment group), while others attended schools that only had one year of program implementation (the control group). Finally, we conduct numerous sensitivity checks to understand the degree to which estimates of program cost may differ based on different assumptions regarding the inclusion of program ingredients, particularly in-kind resources such as space utilization and staff time.

The guiding questions for this cost analysis are as follows:

- What was the total cost of the TFL program, as implemented in JPSD, and approximately how much did it cost per student, per year?
- To what extent does the cost estimate vary as a function of different assumptions about program ingredients and pricing methodology?

In the following sections, we summarize the scant literature on cost estimation for school safety and climate programs such as TFL, then review our data sources and methodology for enumerating ingredients and calculating costs, and finally we present results for our primary analysis and numerous sensitivity checks that incorporate different costing assumptions.
Conducting a Cost Estimation

Research indicates that the full cost of educational interventions can be difficult to estimate, due in part to states and districts not always knowing the true program costs when allocating funding (Karoly and Gomez, 2019). There are only a handful of examples of cost studies for programs geared toward improving student behavior, school safety, and school climate (such as TFL). First, Maynard, Kjellstrand, and Thompson (2014) found that a student check-in program designed to improve student behavior and attendance cost approximately $1,370 per student, in 2017 dollars (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, undated-a). Second, Cook et al. (2014) estimated that the “Becoming a Man” (BAM) intervention that combined math tutoring with behavioral and character development programming for high school students cost approximately $4,608 per student, also in 2017 dollars (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, undated-b). Finally, Blonigen et al. (2008) provided school-level estimates of the cost of implementing a whole-school positive behavioral support program, with the costs ranging between $17,732 and $20,705 per school, depending on the scale of the intervention.

Across these cost studies and those focused on other types of school-based interventions, the largest expenditure is often related to personnel, as manifested in wages, fringe benefits, and in-kind opportunity cost cases where staff are not being monetarily compensated for their time (e.g., Kase and Kilburn, 2016). Personnel costs are incurred across a variety of activities related to schoolwide behavioral interventions, including initial program development, training of implementers, and actual implementation activities (Blonigen et al., 2008). Materials are often the second most costly component of program implementation, with other drivers of program cost including facilities, travel, and special event–related costs, which was the case with TFL.

Data and Methods

We undertook the following steps based on the ingredients method of economic evaluation (Levin and Belfield, 2015; Levin et al., 2017) to conduct this cost analysis:

1. Enumerate the ingredients required to implement the intervention.
2. Identify the costs of each ingredient.
3. Calculate total program costs and average costs per participant.

In addition to these procedures, we added a fourth step of conducting a series of sensitivity analyses in which we estimates additional costs based on alternative assumptions about program ingredients, particularly in-kind opportunity cost of teacher, counselor, and parent or guardian time.

Step 1. Enumerate Ingredients

To understand the full range of ingredients that went into the TFL program, we conducted interviews with key informants from the TFL leadership team, along with the lead coach that was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the program. We also interviewed officials from JPSD who oversaw the partnership with TFL and financial record-keeping. Data collection focused on ingredients related to personnel, facilities, equipment and materials, and
other program inputs, such as special events and workshops (interview protocols available in Appendix F).

In addition to these interviews, we also obtained financial records indicating costs incurred by TFL through its subcontract with JPSD, along with the itemized reimbursement paperwork.

**Step 2. Identify Costs for Each Ingredient**

We used information from key informant interviews to ascertain some, but not all, of the costs presented in this analysis, as financial records such as these often omit important information about real program costs that may extend beyond traditional program accounting, such as facilities and unaccounted time spent by program staff or participants (Levin et al., 2017). To supplement this financial information, we used the CBCSE CostOut tool to develop estimates of off-budget costs, such as training time for school guidance counselors and lead teachers who were required to attend intensive trainings at the beginning of their schools’ implementation of the program.

Special program events proved to be a key component of TFL’s implementation in Jackson, which included trainings for counselors and lead social studies teachers, half-day trainings for teachers, and elaborate annual celebrations in which a handful of representatives from each participating school participated, to share best practices and celebrate implementation success stories. Because of the unique nature of these events (and the fact that every event proved to be quite different from the others), along with limited data available on itemized costs incurred in the planning and staging of these events, we relied on financial records such as invoices to ascertain the cost. Furthermore, even though much of the event costs would typically be considered a component of other cost categories, such as personnel (e.g., TFL coach time to prepare for and run the events), materials (e.g., swag provided to participants), and facilities (e.g., hotel conference room rental fees), we ultimately folded these costs into a larger per-event cost. The one exception is participant time, which was provided in-kind. This cost was not covered by invoices or other administrative documentation, so we estimated it separately and placed that information in the Personnel category. Otherwise, all event-related costs have been placed in the Other Program Inputs category.

**Step 3. Calculate Total Program Costs and Average Costs per Participant**

The bulk of TFL implementation occurred during the 2017 calendar year, with fewer costs being incurred in 2016 (including start-up planning and initial implementation in half of the schools) and 2018 (e.g., program wind-down TFL and district leadership), so all costs are calculated in 2017 dollars.

Students in treatment schools received services for the full two years (2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years), while those in comparison schools participated in the TFL intervention for only the 2017–2018 school year. Therefore, to estimate per-student, per-year costs, we essentially double-count students from treatment schools because they received the intervention for two years. With 5,297 students in grades 3 through 8 in treatment schools and 5,456 students in control schools, we used the total (16,050) as the denominator in our calculation of costs per participant.\(^1\)

\(^1\) An important caveat is that during the calculation of total costs we did not double-count fixed costs, such as initial trainings, as these program components only occurred once for treatment schools even though they participated in the study for two years.
Step 4. Sensitivity Analyses
Following the approach taken by Kilmer et al. (2011), we conducted a series of sensitivity analysis to assess how the results would change under a series of alternative assumptions. These three sensitivity checks are as follows:

1. Include the opportunity cost for event attendees.
2. Include the opportunity cost for teacher implementation activities during the school year.
3. Include the opportunity cost for counselor time commitment during the year.

Results
In Table 5.1, we present the full list of ingredients utilized for the TFL implementation in JPSD along with the estimated price. We provide an overview of each cost category below, in turn.

Personnel. The key JPSD personnel in our primary analysis include a project director housed in the district (row 1a) and the TFL project manager and lead implementation consultants who collectively worked on the project for approximately three calendar years, encompassing project kick-off and administrative tasks prior to the beginning of implementation in schools (row 1b). JPSD personnel also included local implementation coaches who each served a caseload of 10–12 schools (row 1c). Note that we do not include in-kind time from staff to implement the program during the year, as that is included in the sensitivity analyses, described in the next section.

Facilities. The main facilities expenditures were the rental of facilities for training events, which we include in the Other Program Inputs, below.

Equipment and Materials. This category includes costs associated with the various resource kits that TFL developed and shipped to schools for program implementation. These included the HomeSTART kits that were made available to each school (ten per school, row 3a), the grade-specific resource kits for teachers’ use (the number varied based on the school’s grade configuration, row 3b), and the parenting kits that were made available during workshops (one per school, row 3d). Materials costs also included nontrivial shipping and handling charges to send the materials from TFL offices in Canada to the schools in Jackson (row 3c).

Training and Events. This category contains many of the in-person activities of the TFL intervention, including the three-day certification training for newly onboarded schools (row 4a), the one-day workshop for teaching staff (row 4b), and the annual best practices users’ conference (row 4c). For all of these trainings, the listed price encompasses facilities, travel expenses for participants, training materials, and raffle prizes.

We found that TFL, as implemented in JPSD, cost approximately $2,797,728 over the course of the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. When we break this down by year and by student, we calculate a participant cost of $174.31 per year, per student. Because treatment schools experienced two years of TFL support, our findings suggest that for students in these schools, the average cost was $348.62 for the duration of the project.

However, it is important to note that the cost for treatment schools would be slightly less than double because some of the trainings only occur once for treatment schools despite the fact that they are in the program for two years. We conducted supplemental analysis that
### Table 5.1
#### Tools for Life Cost Details, by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredients</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Personnel</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Project director</td>
<td>Local project director. Includes fringe benefits.</td>
<td>$13,819.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. TFL project manager and TFL consultants (8)</td>
<td>TFL project manager and 8 part-time positions, employed by TFL. Positions were two-year terms. Includes fringe benefits.</td>
<td>$655,986.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. Implementation coaches (7)</td>
<td>5 part-time positions for the first year (4 coaches, 1 lead coach). 2 additional coaches were added in year 2. Includes fringe benefits.</td>
<td>$605,565.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Facilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Included in Training and Events.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Equipment and Materials</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a. TFL HomeSTART kits for school libraries</td>
<td>Each school has 10 sets that are available. Kit includes 20 guidebooks for families and a facilitator guide.</td>
<td>$54,961.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b. TFL resource kits</td>
<td>Each school has kits designed for each relevant grade level. Kits contain various materials (cards, stress ball, lanyards) and instructional resources.</td>
<td>$337,925.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3c. Shipping and handling</td>
<td>Shipping from TFL offices in Canada to JPSD schools.</td>
<td>$47,809.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3d. Parenting kit for school workshops</td>
<td>One kit for each school, designed to be a guide for ongoing parent workshops.</td>
<td>$171,500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3e. Additional supplies</td>
<td>Office supplies, nonfiction and fiction books, printing costs, computers and software.</td>
<td>$55,330.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Training and Events</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a. Certification training—delivered to the schools by TFL</td>
<td>Three-day certification training for newly onboarded schools. Price includes facilities, materials, and travel expenses. Also this total includes counselor time for three days. CBCSE CostOut price for one day of counselor time is $58,620 per year or $225 per day. There are a total of 135 leads: 3 per school, with 23 the first year (treatment schools) and 22 in the second year (control schools).</td>
<td>$132,265.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b. One-day workshop for teaching staff</td>
<td>Teaching staff training for one-day training. The CBCSE CostOut price is $316.11 per day. Estimate is based on a teacher headcount of 331 treatment teachers and 341 control teachers, based on an assumption of a teacher-student ratio of 1:16.</td>
<td>$286,162.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4c. Annual best-practices users’ conference</td>
<td>Annual celebration for TFL best practices and cross-school collaboration. Approximate attendance is 150 staff per year. Price includes facilities, materials, and travel expenses.</td>
<td>$323,550.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Other Program Inputs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a. Honoraria to schools</td>
<td>$2,000 per school in recognition of program participation and data collection support.</td>
<td>$104,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b. Travel for coaches</td>
<td>Travel to schools for meetings with teachers.</td>
<td>$11,841.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Cost</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>$2,797,728.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of students * years</strong></td>
<td>There were 5,297 students in grades 3–8 in treatment schools and 5,456 in control schools. We double-counted students from treatment schools because they received the intervention for two years.</td>
<td>16,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average cost per student, per year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>$174.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: JPSD administrative data and financial records.
accounts for fixed costs of training, with the per-year, per-student cost for students in treatment schools being $172.22 and comparison schools being $178.37.

**Sensitivity Analyses**

As a final step in our analysis, we conducted a series of sensitivity checks to determine the extent to which program cost differs under alternative sets of assumptions. We present the results in Figure 5.1 and describe them below, in turn.

1. **Add opportunity cost for event attendees.** In our primary analysis, as shown in Table 5.1, we only included staff time cost for counselors and lead social studies teachers who were required to attend trainings so that they could serve as program leads in their school. In this sensitivity analysis, we added opportunity cost for all of the teachers who were asked to attend one-day workshops during the year. We used the daily pay rate from the CBCSE CostOut tool to calculate cost for all 672 teachers to attend a one-day training. At a daily rate of $316.11, the total cost of this addition is $212,425.92. In addition, we include daily rates for the 150 staff members that attend the annual best-practice users’ conference each year. This addition of 300 staff days at $316.11 per day totals $94,833.00 in added cost. These two additional costs combine to total $307,258.92, or $19.14 per student, per year. This additional cost is reflected in the first bar of Figure 5.1.

2. **Add opportunity cost for teacher implementation activities during the school year.** Because teachers were directly paid to implement TFL during the school year, and they were not asked to work additional hours after school or on weekends, we opted not to include teachers’ opportunity costs in our primary cost analysis. However, because the implementation of TFL may detract from teachers’ time spent on other activities, we con-

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**Figure 5.1**

**Additional Costs Derived from Sensitivity Analyses**

![Bar chart showing additional costs](chart.png)

- **1. Add opportunity cost for event attendees:** 19.14
- **2. Add opportunity cost for teacher commitment during the year:** 177.79
- **3. Add opportunity cost for counselor time commitment during the year:** 22.96

SOURCE: JPSD administrative data and financial records.
ducted a sensitivity check to understand the opportunity cost of implementing TFL. We assumed that an upper bound of time spent implementing TFL would be approximately two hours (or a quarter-day) per week. This ends up totaling nine staff days per year, per teacher. When we use the pay rate of $316.11 per day, times nine days per year, times 341 control teachers and 331 treatment teachers (who are double-counted because of two-year implementation), we get a total added cost of $2,853,524.97 for general teachings staff, which can be broken down to being $177.79 per student, per year. This additional cost is reflected in the second bar of Figure 5.1.

3. Additional opportunity cost for counselor time commitment during the year. Following a similar methodology for sensitivity check number two, we estimated the upper bound of the added cost for guidance counselor’s in-kind time commitment during the school year. We assumed that counselors would spend approximately a half-day per week on TFL activities, which would bring their annual time commitment to 18 days. At a daily pay rate of $225 per day from CostOut and an assumption of one guidance counselor per school, we calculated an added cost of $368,550.00, or $22.96 per student, per year. This additional cost is reflected in the third bar of Figure 5.1.

Concluding Remarks

Cost analyses such as this are important for understanding the feasibility of implementing educational interventions in a variety of settings. Although there are only a few examples of cost analysis of whole-school interventions that focus on improving school culture and student behavior on which we may draw comparisons, TFL appears to be more expensive than programs studied in other cost analyses. In particular, Blonigen et al. (2008) found that a schoolwide positive behavioral support program would cost between approximately $17,732 and $20,705 per school, depending on the scale of the intervention.

If we take the average school in JPSD has of 2017 to be 235 students, the average per-school, per-year cost of TFL implementation comes out to be $40,962.85. If we include the results of our sensitivity analyses by including in-kind opportunity cost of teachers’ time commitment (column 2 from Figure 5.1), that per-school, per-year cost increases to $82,743.50.

It is important to note that there is still some uncertainty in these estimates, which is mostly explained via the sensitivity analyses. In addition, the program cost may vary slightly when considering the inclusion of annual fixed costs versus repeated costs when conducting two-year program—most training is only done once, but in reality, because of teacher turnover, there is likely to be some need for training at the beginning of year 2. We estimate an upper bound whereby all fixed costs are repeated in year 2, and a lower bound where none of the onboarding activities repeat. In the end, the difference in costs for students in treatment versus control schools ended up being less than $2 per student, per year.

School and district leaders considering implementing programs such as TFL should account not only for on-budget items as enumerated in our primary analysis and illustrated in Table 5.1, but also the costs of in-kind staff time when determining the feasibility of adopting such a program. That being said, even when we ignore a variety of in-kind personnel resources, we still find TFL to be a relatively expensive program compared with other school climate interventions that have been the subject of cost analyses.
TFL is a whole-school, classroom- and home-based program for children age three through five and in grades 1 through 8 that is designed to improve school climate and safety through the proactive development of students’ interpersonal skills (such as relationship-building and communication) and intrapersonal skills (such as self-regulation). The public school district of Jackson, Mississippi (JPSD) partnered with TFL to implement the program in its elementary and middle schools in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. Half of JPSD’s schools were randomly selected to receive TFL in 2016–2017 (treatment schools); the remaining portion received TFL in 2017–2018 (control schools).

The analyses in this report provided a descriptive portrait of the implementation of TFL in JPSD in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic school years. Using data from key stakeholder interviews, results from surveys administered to students in grades 3 through 8, and data from interviews with key TFL implementers and school leaders as well as focus groups with instructional staff collected from six focal schools, we asked two research questions:

1. In what ways did the implementation of TFL vary across schools?
2. What hindered or facilitated implementation?

We also assessed the impact of TFL on school and students’ outcomes across both years of the study, using data from the student surveys and JPSD administrative data. We asked four research questions:

3. Was TFL associated with improved school climate?
4. Was TFL associated with improved student social and emotional competencies and positive pro-social behavior?
5. To what extent do program impacts differ across grade, gender, and income subgroups?
6. To what extent was program exposure associated with improvement?

We also documented the costs of TFL in JPSD relying on JPSD administrative data and financial records from TFL and JPSD. We asked:

7. What were the costs associated with implementing TFL in JPSD?

In this chapter, we summarize our findings from the analysis provided in this report. We end with concluding thoughts on how the implementation of SEL programs can be improved in high-needs school districts. The analyses summarized in this report can further inform the direction of collaborations between school districts and SEL programs; they should be of inter-
est to local and state education agencies, and education stakeholders who endeavor to improve school climate and school safety.

**Key Findings**

**Key Stakeholders Reported Positive and Negative Perspectives of TFL Implementation**

**Materials and resources were reportedly easy to use.** Educators, particularly in elementary schools, appeared to like the TFL resources, finding them easy to use “off the shelf.” For example, many perceived that they did not have to prepare lessons; lessons and most necessary materials (e.g., flashcards, bingo cards) were included in the kit that teachers received. Furthermore, many of TFL’s key components were highly visible and easy to implement. Setting up a calm-down corner, putting up posters, and wearing a lanyard with problem-solving tool cards were all rather low-effort activities, especially for teachers not responsible for teaching the core lessons. Educators also appreciated that many of the resources had been customized for JPSD. For example, the Mississippi state standards were referenced, and the cover art and materials reflected the student population of JPSD. However, the perceived ease of use of materials may have caused teachers to only do the bare minimum and not fully engage in TFL lessons or materials to the extent that was expected to produce a whole-school culture shift.

**Materials and resources may not have been age-appropriate for middle schoolers.** Educators and district staff noted that the TFL program materials were inappropriate for middle school students. Materials were perceived as “childish,” and the TFL folk-style music was not engaging for middle school students.

**Dosage was reportedly low.** Some lead implementers (i.e., elementary counselors and middle school social studies teachers) noted that the program was limited to only 12 explicit lessons, so dosage was low. Lead implementers teaching two lessons per month ran out of lessons to teach before the end of the school year. The program offered flexibility to expand or adapt lessons, but no explicit instructions to do so. TFL was perceived as “low-touch” for non-lesson-implementers. Indeed, most other educators seemed to engage in uneven or sometimes limited reinforcement of the skills taught in the lessons. These teachers felt that TFL was not an official part of their mandate, and so they were less supportive of TFL than the counselors and social studies teachers and had less ownership of the program.

**Lessons were reportedly not clear.** According to educators with whom we spoke, TFL lesson scripts were not as simple to follow or required extra work to keep students engaged. In particular, some counselors reported that the lessons did not appear to work well with a large group of students. This was especially a challenge because many counselors lacked experience teaching whole classes of students and had little classroom management experience.

**Implementation of TFL Was Uneven Across Schools and, in Many Cases, Reportedly Shallow**

Interviews with JPSD implementation coaches (district staff who were to support TFL implementation) and with TFL consultants revealed that implementation of TFL varied across schools in both years of the study. They also reported that this variation occurred even in the second year for treatment schools, as well as across control schools, which implemented TFL in 2017–2018 only.
Student-reported exposure to various TFL materials and lessons varied widely across treatment schools, and also between treatment and control schools (in year 1). Our analysis of six focal schools corroborated the students’ survey results: School staff and leaders in each school reported different ways in which TFL materials and structure were provided to students. TFL was rarely, if at all, implemented across a whole school as it was designed. In some schools, only posters were put up or calm-down corners were instituted—and not necessarily throughout all classrooms. Most school staff reported that they did not integrate TFL lessons within their teaching because they assumed that the key TFL implementers (guidance counselors in elementary schools and social studies teachers in middle schools) were doing so. In very few cases were home kits made available and utilized, which thus reduced the potential for students’ parents and guardians to reinforce the TFL elements. Moreover, across the focal schools, we found that implementation was shallow: Teachers felt that they did not need TFL, had little buy-in, and did not fully engage students in lessons. Perhaps as a result of the missed opportunity to fully convey program intent and characteristics of deep implementation—which included transforming school culture through helping students become responsible decisionmakers and shaping educators’ own views of and interactions with students—implementation of TFL in JPSD over the first two years remained shallow.

Several Factors Facilitated and Impeded Implementation

Interviews with key stakeholders and the analysis in six focal schools unveiled factors that could have impacted the implementation of TFL. Interviewees remarked on a number of factors that could have affected the ways in which TFL was implemented, creating the reported uneven implementation across schools and thus varied exposure of TFL concepts to students. Insights into facilitators and barriers may help account for the extent to which TFL was implemented and effective in JPSD. By extension, this may contribute to lessons learned for similar districts—for example, similar in size, demographics, or school culture or under similar accountability pressures—as they consider adopting or prepare to implement TFL or a comparable SEL learning program. These factors included the following.

**Attitudes**

The extent to which parents, teachers, and especially school leadership had bought-in to the positive-behavior concepts promoted by TFL. School leaders with whom we spoke in the focal schools reported that some teachers appeared to not have bought into TFL on principle. Although TFL designers may be motivated to help students who live with trauma, educators perceived the program’s approach as largely inadequate to handle the substantive problems JPSD students experience. Many educators with who we spoke believed that TFL—or any other social and emotional skills program—was unlikely to be effective in JPSD because of the program’s disconnect with students’ deep social and emotional needs. Educators believed that schools needed materials and resources such as more counselors, school nurses, and mental health professionals to help students, many of whom lived in troubled family environments.

**Stakeholders’ desire for a positive behavior approach.** Because JPSD had mandated PBIS but provided little clarity around what that entailed, a number of schools were reportedly looking for programs or strategies that satisfied Tier 1 requirement. When the district positioned TFL as such a program, schools appeared to have had an easier time buying in, or at least understanding how it fit with all of the other mandates they had to meet. TFL, then,
was at least deemed compatible with existing district and school priorities related to behavior management.

**District-Level Structures**

**JPSD and TFL support facilitated implementation.** Implementation coaches and TFL consultants were available for hands-on support, including helping teachers establish calm-down corners and modeling lessons. Moreover, the consultants and coaches helped to create a sense of supported—and not evaluative—accountability around TFL implementation. On the whole, JPSD implementation coaches and TFL consultants were reported to be friendly and professional, and even teachers that did not buy in to the program reported that they respected the implementation coaches and consultants. The training provided by TFL and the June conferences and the bring-and-brag sessions were reported as successful in garnering enthusiasm for the program, encouraging buy-in, and helping educators to generate and take away ideas for implementation.

**Communication lines faltered and there were few opportunities for collaboration.** The extent to which JPSD and TFL training and institutional supports were reaching the teachers and school leaders was inconsistent and depended, in part, on time and communication lines between JPSD and TFL personnel and school staff. Principals often found it difficult to make time to meet with consultants and coaches; TFL consultants and implementation coaches noted that emails were not returned and that they thus had difficulty setting up times to meet with principals and other school staff. Regular meetings (e.g., monthly) between principals and coaches, as designed, may have helped principals better understand implementation details and become more engaged in implementation efforts. Moreover, there was little collaboration on TFL lessons, and counselors had to work hard to plan supplemental lessons and activities when they finished implementing the 12 existing lessons.

**Parental engagement was minimal.** Parental engagement—and expectations for parental engagement—was reported to be extremely minimal districtwide. Therefore, educators were skeptical that the program would be effective without reinforcement and modeling of appropriate behaviors at home. Educators perceived community and parental modeling of respectful behaviors and conflict resolution skills as largely lacking.

**Principal turnover.** In three of the six focal schools, school leaders left, and their successors had to learn about the program and catch up with implementation on top of other initiatives they were in charge of. TFL consultants and JPSD implementation coaches reported that the schools that they observed with weaker implementation of TFL tended to be those in which principals changed.

**Contextual Factors**

**The Mississippi State Department of Education audited JPSD concurrently with implementation of TFL in 2016–2017.** The audit could have impeded implementation: At the same time as schools were expected to implement TFL, JPSD was under audit by MDE. Schools were placed under intensive support plans for improvement by their district supervisors. These plans undoubtedly received priority and required much time and energy to implement. While JPSD was in need of substantive improvement in several areas, academic achievement was clearly of great concern and a key component of the improvement plan. As a result, TFL, which does not target academic skills development directly, was perceived to be “on the back burner” at the district and school levels. Furthermore, because of the accountability status
of JPSD, visitors and auditors from the state and district frequently visited classrooms, adding stress to teachers, who felt that they were under constant scrutiny. Focus group participants reported that, because of this pressure, they focused on teaching the academic curriculum and content as prescribed, and some reported choosing not to or not being able to integrate TFL teachings and activities. On the other hand, the MDE audit had a facilitating effect: Educators were used to being under scrutiny and thus accustomed to being mandated to implement programs. Because of this, teachers reported that they were accustomed to receiving mandates to implement programs, and they got used to complying with such directives. Although this certainly did not guarantee deep buy-in, educators did seem to want to understand what was expected of them and to meet those minimal implementation requirements.

Teachers and school leaders were reportedly “burned-out” on having to implement new programs that might not last in the district. Interviewees and focus group participants reported that JPSD seemed to adopt many programs but have difficulty achieving buy-in on the part of school leaders, not to mention teachers. Educators—including principals—often perceived requirements to implement as top-down; they found it difficult to fully subscribe to a program they had not been consulted about. It follows, then, that teachers perceived and received low support from school leaders with respect to program implementation. This pattern has led some educators to be wary of new district-initiated programs. Principals have expressed worry and frustration that TFL would contribute to “initiative fatigue.” Indeed, educators themselves have commented that they have “gotten burned out” by all the programs cycling through JPSD. Some educators also resisted buying in because they were skeptical that the program would continue after a year or two.

Tools for Life Had Little Impact on Students’ Social and Emotional Learning, Behavior, or Academic Performance

In analyzing JPSD administrative records and student survey responses, we found that that after one year of implementation of TFL, there were no practically or statistically significant differences between schools that offered TFL (treatment schools) and those that did not (control schools) in measures of students’ social and emotional skills, school climate, behavioral, or achievement outcomes.

We also examined whether there were differences in outcomes among students from different subgroup populations, specifically comparing middle school students with elementary school students, male students with female students, and students who were homeless with those who were not. We did not find any practically or statistically significant differences across comparison groups.

We did find a positive association between students’ self-reported exposure to TFL materials and lessons and their self-reported social and emotional outcomes, suggesting that, at full exposure, TFL may have positive impacts. However, we found significant negative associations between TFL exposure and academic achievement, as measured on scores on state assessments.

Tools for Life Was Relatively Expensive to Implement in the Jackson Public School District

We found that TFL, as implemented in JPSD, cost approximately $2,797,728 over the course of the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. Breaking this figure down by year and by student, we calculated a cost of $174.31 per year, per student. We conducted sensitivity analyses in which we included alternative sets of assumptions, such as the inclusion of opportunity costs for teacher time for program implementation and attendance at events. These sensitiv-
ity checks increased the costs to as much as $177.79 per student, per year, bringing the total potential annual cost to $352.10 per student.

Although there are only a few examples of cost analysis of whole-school interventions that focus on improving school culture and student behavior on which we may draw comparisons, TFL appears to be relatively expensive compared to programs studied in other cost analyses. Given the average school size in JPSD is approximately 235 students, we estimated the per-school, per-year cost of TFL implementation to be $40,962.85. Furthermore, if we include in the results of our sensitivity analyses the in-kind opportunity cost of teachers’ time commitment, that per-school, per-year cost increases to $82,743.50.

Implications

While the results from the outcomes analysis suggest that more exposure to TFL was generally not associated with better outcomes, and thus that TFL might not have been effective or aligned with the specific needs of JPSD school population, it is clear from the documentation on implementation struggles and facilitators that there are several plausible explanations that merit consideration.

First, TFL was not the only program implemented in JPSD that was designed to improve student SEL and school climate. For example, the district was also implementing other programs, including a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. To the extent that the benefits of participating in programs such as PBIS benefited all students in the district, the estimated effects from this study represent only the additional impact of the TFL program. This additional impact is likely to be smaller than would be anticipated had the control condition been defined so that students in control schools received no additional SEL programming.

Second, issues of implementation may have compromised the potential of the program to help students. We found some evidence that implementation of TFL was not optimal: It varied across schools and was, at best, shallow. This is evident from both the data from the focal schools and on the heterogeneity in program exposure (according to students’ responses on surveys): There were students enrolled in schools that were implementing TFL programming in year 1 who reported low exposure to posters and lessons. Educators’ contextualized critique of the program and reasons for not fully buying into it may provide further insight into the lack of detected effect in the outcomes. Moreover, at the time of TFL implementation, JPSD was dealing with superintendent turnover, the dissolution of its school board, and MDE audit of its performance. These stressors reverberated among the stakeholders with whom we spoke and most likely affected educators’ ability and capacity to implement TFL as it was originally designed.

Finally, there are some methodological issues to consider. First, a large number of parents in JPSD did not consent to have their students participate in the study, and it is unclear whether the students who did consent were the students who would benefit most from participating in the program. It is unclear whether the program would be more effective for these students and to what extent that would influence the overall estimation of program impacts. Second, the SEL and school climate outcomes rely on student-self report. It is plausible that, as students participate in the program, their awareness of their own social and emotional competencies changes and they become less lenient in their judgments about their social and
emotional competencies. This could even potentially explain the finding that self-reported self-awareness, social-awareness, and self-management trajectories were negatively impacted through TFL participation.

Of course, it is also a possibility that these results reflect a combination of factors, and additional research is needed to better understand the extent to which the findings reported here are driven by limitations of the data and sample, implementation challenges, or other factors.
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