



LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIPS FOR  
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

VOLUME 2, PART 2

# Expanding Social and Emotional Learning Beyond the School Walls in Boston

One of Six Case Studies of Schools and  
Out-of-School-Time Program Partners

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# HOW ONE BOSTON SCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PROGRAM PARTNERED TO PROVIDE SEL ENRICHMENT OFF CAMPUS AS PART OF THE SCHOOL DAY

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## **About the SEL Case Studies**

The SEL case studies feature partnerships between elementary schools and out-of-school-time (OST) programs in six communities. Each case study spotlights a specific approach to implementing social and emotional learning (SEL). A cross-cutting report briefly summarizes each case and highlights shared themes among them. That report can be found at [www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4).

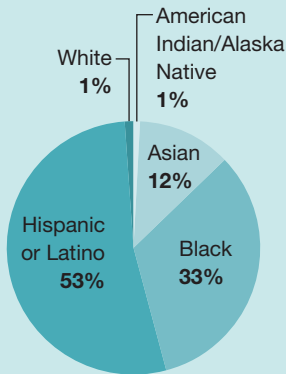
While there is no consensus definition of SEL, Boston's Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) work was guided by a vision document called *Portrait of a Social-Emotional Learner*, which merged Boston After School & Beyond's (BASB's) Achieve-Connect-Thrive (ACT) Skills Framework with the Boston Public Schools' (BPS') SEL standards, providing a common language for SEL across settings. At the start of PSELI, BPS defined SEL as "the process through which individuals learn essential life skills and competencies that promote a positive identity, a well-managed self, healthy relationships, and agency to successfully navigate their future." In 2019, BPS expanded this definition to include transformational SEL, "a process whereby young people and adults build strong, respectful, and lasting, relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, communal and societal well-being."<sup>1</sup>

The six school–OST program partnerships that we feature belong to 76 total school–OST program partnerships involved in PSELI. Half of the 76 partnerships started their SEL work in 2017–2018, and the other half could choose to start their work in 2019–2020. PSELI is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their OST programs partner to improve SEL, as well as to explore what it takes to do this work. The six communities that participate in PSELI are Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities and producing a series of reports that share useful lessons with the broader field.

## Russell Elementary Demographics as of 2017–2018

Percentage of students by  
race/ethnicity



**80%**

Percentage of  
students eligible for  
free or reduced-price lunch



**56%**

Percentage of  
English learners



**3 years**

Median years  
of experience  
(teachers)\*

\* Average years of experience are as of the end of school year 2017–2018 and were calculated using the teacher's current position entry date.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

This case study highlights the work of the Russell Elementary School and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester (BGCD) over the four school years spanning from 2017–2018 to 2020–2021 to implement social and emotional learning (SEL). As of 2017 when this case study started, the elementary school served approximately 400 students, who were primarily Hispanic or Latino and Black. Most qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. BGCD, located down the street in its own facility, served nearly 4,000 members and provided programming to an average of 250 youth a day.

BGCD and the Russell are only half a mile apart in Dorchester, but historically they did not have a relationship. Starting in 2017, at the inception of the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI), the Russell partnered with BGCD to offer optional afterschool programming for their students, serving 20 of the 400 Russell students that year. The partnership really took hold in fall 2018 when a new principal started at the Russell and had the idea to send all 400 students to BGCD twice a week during the school day, taking advantage of a community resource that otherwise sat empty during the school day. The new principal decided to implement this change because of the physical limitations of the small Russell building, which lacks a cafeteria, gym, or other rooms that could be used for activities such as dance; music; art; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); and fitness.

The school and BGCD staff planned to link the BGCD activities to school-day lessons through a shared focus on the school-day SEL curriculum. Not only would students receive important enrichment activities that they otherwise would not get in their normal school day, but they would also have the opportunity to learn social-emotional skills in new settings and in new contexts (e.g., through music and art). Critically, students

would be able to form positive relationships with and learn social-emotional skills from more adults than they would have otherwise.

The Russell and BGCD were part of a cohort of seven school-out-of-school-time (OST) partnerships in Boston. As a part of the PSELI grant from The Wallace Foundation, Boston Public Schools (BPS) and Boston After School & Beyond (BASB; a nonprofit out-of-school-time intermediary [OSTI<sup>2</sup>] organization working to coordinate the city’s OST programs) provided supports to the cohort, including SEL coaches and professional learning community programming for the four-year time period that we highlight.

As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between the Russell and BGCD evolved to provide more SEL instruction to students both in school and at BGCD. During school years 2017–2018 through 2020–2021 (when this case study ended), they worked together to strengthen their partnership and improve collaboration between teachers and OST program instructors, focusing specifically on adopting a shared SEL curriculum and rituals across the two settings. Despite disruptions due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, their established partnership, SEL work, and focus on positive relationships allowed for continued SEL opportunities for students.

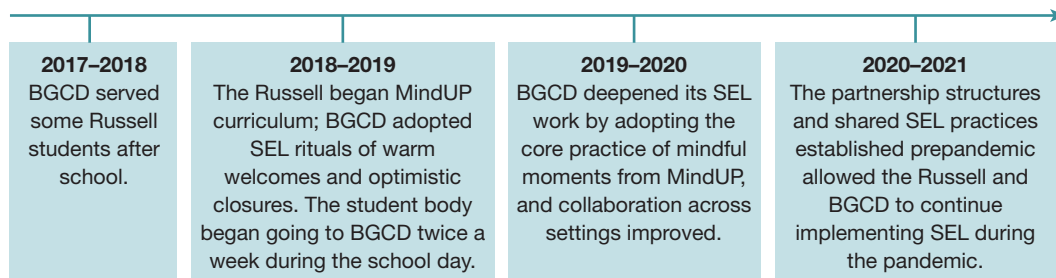
The individuals we feature in this case study who led the partnership are the school principal (who started at the Russell in 2018–2019), the director of the BGCD



*“We’re going to take our entire school [to the Boys & Girls Club]. With music, with art, with yoga, we’re designing lessons that extend beyond the curriculum, based on social-emotional learning. The hope is that kids will find their passion.”*

**Derrick Ciesla**, principal, the Russell Elementary School

FIGURE 1  
**Timeline of the Russell Elementary School and Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester SEL Partnership**



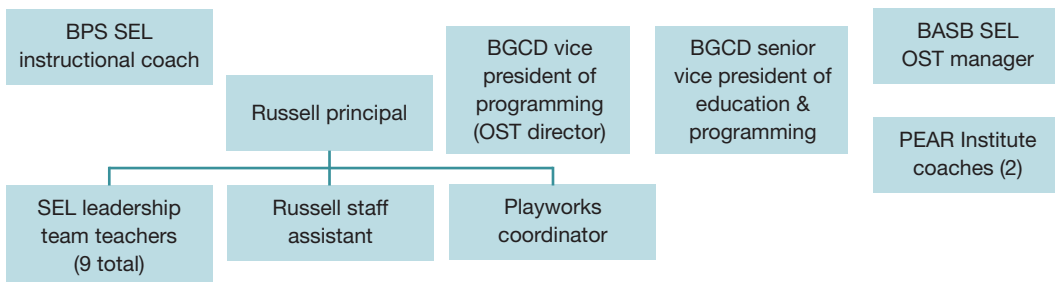
afterschool program, the BGCD senior vice president of education and programming, the Russell staff assistant, the Playworks coordinator (a national nonprofit that supports learning and social, emotional, and physical health), and four of the nine school teachers who served on the school’s SEL leadership team, which coordinated the schoolwide SEL efforts. SEL instructional coaches from BPS; from the OSTI, BASB; and from the Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR) Institute (a technical assistance provider to PSELI in Boston) also provided professional development (PD) and planning support to the school and afterschool leads, teachers, and OST program instructors. (See Figure 2.)

In the sections that follow, we describe the trajectory of the partnership between the Russell and BGCD shown in Figure 1. In so doing, we highlight the strategies that they applied to support their vision, lessons learned, and the outcomes of their work. We also note how they adapted their SEL work during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude by highlighting their successes, the challenges they faced and how they worked to overcome them, and the factors that enabled their successes. The appendix summarizes the data we collected and how we analyzed them for this report.

## ADAPTABILITY OVERCAME EARLY BARRIERS

The Russell and BGCD’s vision for their partnership was clear: expand Russell students’ access to enrichment by using the BGCD’s ample facilities (including a pool, basketball court, music studio, art studio, and computer lab) and link the enrichment

**FIGURE 2**  
**Key Individuals and Teams Involved in the SEL Implementation at the Russell Elementary School and Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester**



activities to the school-day curriculum through a shared focus on SEL.

Executing the vision involved intricate planning, led by the team of individuals noted above. It was an ambitious endeavor to transport the entire student body off campus for two hours twice a week and to implement a brand-new model of OST programming at BGCD, with different activities, timing, and a focus on SEL. It was, therefore, not surprising that it took the better part of the 2018–2019 school year to iron out the process. Communication and adaptability—changing the plan in real time in response to feedback about what worked well and less well—mitigated the early challenges related to funding, logistics, and staff buy-in.

In the first year (2018–2019), the school and BGCD leadership quickly realized that executing their plan would not be straightforward. Despite the physical proximity of BGCD to the Russell, students could not walk there because of safety concerns. So, the first hurdle was securing buses, which did not occur until February 2019. The program launched the following week.

Funding posed a second hurdle. The bus transportation amounted to \$24,000, which the school initially paid for out of its own annual partnership budget<sup>3</sup> of \$80,000. Although this was a necessary cost, it limited the school's financial ability to work with other external partners on programming unrelated to its SEL work. One BGCD employee noted in spring 2019, “We really like doing this, and the Russell really likes it too, but they're spending a fortune on transportation. And we're not spending enough on staffing.” By the subsequent school year, the bus transportation was funded through the PSELI grant, which alleviated resource constraints for the school.

Meanwhile, for BGCD, the staff's new daytime schedule to run enrichment activities for Russell students during two-hour blocks twice a week ran counter to the organization's shiftwork regulations, necessitating a new pay structure for the work. The solution to this



*“We were building the plane as we flew it. We knew we wanted to have the kids come over during the school day. We wanted to do more professional development around social and emotional learning. But . . . not having enough time to plan and trying to get staff to buy in and learn something new and implement something new were the biggest challenges.”*

**Brendan McDonald,**  
vice president of programming, Boys & Girls Clubs of  
Dorchester

funding problem was to reimburse employees through a stipend.<sup>4</sup>

## Lesson Learned

The partners' vision for expanding access to enrichment and linking it to SEL was at risk of failing before it took off because of start-up hurdles. The school and the OST program avoided this by engaging in adaptive, flexible planning for funding, logistics, and instructional schedules and content.

Logistical challenges associated with executing the program included everything from crafting the schedule, executing the many transitions involved with getting students from class to BGCD and back again, sending medication with students to BGCD for those who needed it, and keeping the activities running on schedule. On top of that, BGCD was simultaneously developing the actual SEL-focused lessons and training staff to deliver new content in a different format (i.e., during short time blocks during the school day). As one OST program interviewee described the new model, “This is far and away more [work] than we ever thought or anticipated it would be.” These logistical and funding challenges lowered initial staff buy-in.

However, daily communication between BGCD and the Russell, adapting plans to address issues as they arose, and a deep commitment to the potential of the program to expose students to SEL in new ways and from a variety of caring adults carried the work through the initial barriers. As one Russell noninstructional staff member said in fall 2019, “I have never seen such an overwhelming [response] from the kids . . . to be exposed after that first week to music programs, different kinds of art, to run around a big full-length gym, to now be able to participate in swimming lessons . . . that partnership with the Boys & Girls Club is so important.”



# THE PARTNERSHIP COALESCED AS THE OST PROGRAM'S SEL INSTRUCTION TOOK OFF

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A two-thirds majority of teachers had voted for the new partnership model when the newly installed principal proposed it in fall 2018, and there was enthusiasm among BGCD staff for partnering with the Russell; however, the unforeseen scope of implementing the new model in that first year threatened staff support. The BGCD director faced staff resistance to both SEL and the new daytime model of programming, particularly from more-tenured staff who were accustomed to the traditional way of doing things. Russell teachers, meanwhile, were concerned about the many transitions for students and were unsure whether the disruption to the schedule was worth it—especially because the SEL component of the BGCD programming was slow to get off the ground. One teacher summarized in fall 2019, “So we started last year, and originally I thought the goal was that [students] were going to have extra support in social-emotional [learning]. But [the BGCD programming] did not have a social-emotional focus. . . . it was too non-structured. . . . I’m hoping that this year there will be more of a focus on social-emotional learning.”

The focus on SEL at BGCD intensified during the course of two school years, fueled in part by what BGCD staff had learned about SEL from membership on the school’s SEL leadership team. Formed in fall 2018, the committee included the principal, the BPS SEL instructional coach, the English as a second language (ESL) specialist, teachers from grades K–3, a representative from Playworks, and a representative from BGCD. This group met monthly and was responsible for monitoring the implementation of the SEL curriculum that the school used, determining the vocabulary everyone would use when implementing SEL, posting



*“This is something that I wish could happen with every school, where you’re able to build a partnership that increases the support of the children and families in the community. We understand and respect the school’s values and goals. The school understands and respects our values and goals, too. We have been able to have open and honest communication together through recognizing that we’re both working towards the common goal, which is to best support the students and their families. Through the years, we have gained a stronger understanding of how important the continuity of learning and care is for children when they go to school in the morning, until they go home from the Boys & Girls Club at night. That is where we’re able to have the biggest impact.”*

**Brendan McDonald,**  
vice president of program-  
ming, Boys & Girls Clubs of  
Dorchester

visual SEL reminders throughout the school, and promoting consistent short SEL rituals such as warm welcomes and brain breaks (e.g., focused, mindful breathing) across classrooms.

Attendance at this monthly meeting was an important initial avenue through which BGCD stayed in step with school-day SEL implementation; the BGCD representative learned about the school's approach to SEL in order to inform their own efforts in OST programming. By spring 2019, BGCD staff started putting some of the knowledge gained from the SEL leadership team meetings into practice. BGCD began using two short SEL rituals from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)—warm welcomes (e.g., greeting each student warmly by name) and optimistic closures (e.g., reflecting on skills learned in a given activity), both of which were used during the school day—as a starting point for its SEL work. Staff were given creative license over how to incorporate these rituals into their activities. This built excitement among staff for changing the way they delivered programming and helped to overcome earlier resistance on the part of staff.

## Lesson Learned

Staff buy-in grew as a result of giving staff increased creative license in their work, soliciting teachers' input on programming, and creating formal and informal opportunities for teachers and OST program staff to learn about each other's work.

Throughout the 2019–2020 school year, BGCD worked with the Russell principal and teachers to design the BGCD's daytime programming, getting teachers' input on what activities students would like. As a result, BGCD incorporated swimming and music into its school-day offerings. Because Russell teachers traveled with their students to BGCD for the daytime program, teachers were able to see firsthand the use of SEL practices and curriculum in BGCD lessons. Over time, the relationships between BGCD staff and teachers strengthened to the point at which they could reach out and communicate directly as needed about individual students and about SEL on a more frequent basis than the monthly SEL leadership team meetings. All of these factors increased teacher and staff buy-in to both SEL and the partnership. The Russell principal explained, "You need to be able to trust people . . . and be able to feel safe and like you're doing the same thing, you're

servicing the same kids. So now that I think we've gelled, we have a cohesion, there's a lot of work that can be done."

Staff survey data showed substantial improvements in the partnership over time. In spring 2018, only 11 percent of school staff agreed that there was a respectful relationship between the school and OST program. This percentage had increased to 71 percent of school staff by spring 2019. And in spring 2020, 100 percent of OST program staff agreed that there was a respectful relationship between the school and the OST program.<sup>5</sup> In early 2020, the Russell hosted a "SELebration Day" during the school day, which was a full-day event for staff and students centered on SEL. The event tied together mindfulness, art, and physical activity, using activities that both the school and BGCD were doing with students. Russell staff, the Playworks coach, staff from the BGCD, the BPS SEL instructional coach, and coaches from the PEAR Institute and BASB attended and participated in this event, showcasing the strength of the partnership. The OST program manager said in spring 2020,

The partnership has shaped an opportunity for the teachers and our staff to learn more about each other. It has deepened the respect and understanding between us and the school (and staff involved). The ability to have open and honest conversations and hear feedback was a key factor in building trust and positive relationships. Over time, the teachers have become more engaged in the activities alongside the students. Overall, I think teachers are very pleased with the program, but they also know we welcome and value their advice and can make changes as we go.

## SHARED CURRICULUM AND RITUALS REINFORCED SEL IN AND AFTER SCHOOL

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As the relationships and trust deepened across the partnership, the school and BGCD began making strides in mutually reinforcing their SEL work in 2019–2020 (see Figure 3). The Russell focused heavily on implementing the MindUP SEL curriculum in 2018–2019 and 2019–2020. This curriculum takes a neuroscience approach to SEL, teaching students strategies to regulate stress and emotion, based on an understanding of how their brain

works. In addition to specific lessons on mindfulness, perspective-taking, gratitude, and kindness, the curriculum centers on the “core practice” of mindful moments (guided relaxation using chimes and focused breathing). Through teacher surveys developed and administered by the BPS SEL instructional coach and the Russell ESL specialist about implementation of MindUP, the SEL leadership team decided upon the core practice of mindful moments as the “aligned SEL practice” that BGCD would adopt. In June 2019, the BPS SEL instructional coach provided training to the BGCD staff on MindUP, and BGCD began implementing mindful moments in 2019–2020. This allowed BGCD and Russell to adopt a common SEL practice across the two settings without duplicating the MindUP lessons, which would have been redundant for students.

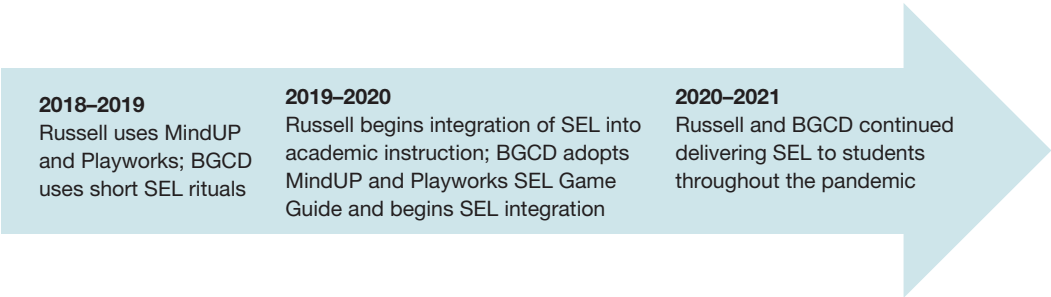
The BGCD director reported that, by spring 2020, all BGCD staff were expected to use mindful moments, warm welcomes, and optimistic closures daily. The degree of implementation varied, however: Some staff used them in every session, others only a few times a week. Our observation data from fall 2019 and winter 2020 reflected this, as we only saw those rituals in 33 percent of the two days of instructional sessions we observed. The BGCD director cited time management as the biggest barrier for staff incorporating SEL rituals.

Both the Russell and BGCD also used resources from the national nonprofit organization Playworks, which offers guidance on how to integrate SEL into games. Playworks began working with the Russell in fall 2018

**Lesson Learned**

Adopting a limited number of specific, short SEL activities from the school-day SEL curriculum and Playworks helped the OST program build a consistent SEL experience for students across settings.

FIGURE 3  
Adoption of Shared SEL Practices



to support student SEL skill development through play during recess. During 2019–2020, the school shared its Playworks SEL Game Guide<sup>6</sup>—which maps out games that reinforce SEL skills, organized by the skill, grade level, activity location, time available, and group size—with BGCD. An example of such a game is All Tangled Up, in which students gather in a circle and hold the hands of someone not next to them to form a connected knot. Students must communicate and cooperate to untangle themselves without letting go of each other’s hands. The Playworks Game Guide gave the BGCD staff guidance on integrating SEL into their activities, reinforcing what students were learning in school.

## COACHING ENHANCED A COMMON APPROACH TO SEL

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Both BGCD and the Russell viewed the MindUP curriculum as a critical unifying element for SEL across the two settings, creating a common approach to SEL in terms of the specific SEL goals and the language used in instruction. However, they got off schedule with delayed implementation of select elements of MindUP at BGCD. Coaching aided implementation in each setting and helped BGCD catch up to school-day implementation by 2020–2021.

The school started to implement the SEL curriculum MindUP in 2018–2019 with extensive coaching support from the BPS SEL instructional coach. The principal estimated that 90 percent of the Russell’s PD that school year was devoted to SEL, specifically the MindUP curriculum, and 100 percent of Russell staff reported receiving SEL PD on the spring 2019 staff survey. Teachers reported frequent teacher team meetings with the BPS SEL instructional coach, along with responsive emailing (e.g., the coach answered questions and shared SEL resources). Every teacher was observed doing a MindUP lesson and received written feedback from the BPS SEL instructional coach on lesson planning and instruction. The Russell used mindful moments in classrooms, in schoolwide events, during recess, and during lunch, particularly during transitions from one setting or activity to the next. In 2019–2020, the Russell worked with its BPS SEL instructional coach on integration of SEL into instruction as the school

strove to balance the focus on SEL and academics. They did this using the BPS SEL standards and specifically focused on integrating SEL into English language arts and science classes through the use of read-aloud text that blended academic content with SEL topics. Results from staff surveys reflect this focus: In spring 2018, only 39 percent of staff reported making connections to SEL competencies in academic instruction; this had increased to 62 percent of staff by spring 2019. In our daylong observations, we saw integration of SEL into academic instruction in only 18 percent of instructional sessions in spring 2019; this had increased to 36 percent of instructional sessions in 2019–2020. These data suggest that the school was making incremental progress toward its SEL goals with the support of its coach.

## Lesson Learned

SEL instructional coaching from the school district and the OSTI helped teachers and OST staff integrate SEL into their instruction and create consistency in the SEL programming across the school and OST.

BGCD, however, did not begin using the MindUP curriculum until 2019–2020—one year later. Until then, its focus was on SEL rituals, supported by coaches from the PEAR Institute. Although this laid an important foundation for SEL at BGCD, it resulted in a mismatch between the school’s focus and BGCD’s, with no direct SEL instruction happening at BGCD. Coaching from the BPS SEL instructional specialist on MindUP began in summer 2019 for the BGCD staff, and the PEAR Institute coaches launched implementation of direct SEL instruction at BGCD. In 2019–2020, a newly hired SEL OST manager at BASB provided on-the-ground coaching support expressly to create consistency between in-school and out-of-school SEL coaching among the cohort of Boston school–OST partnerships. At the Russell and BGCD, this meant ensuring that BGCD had access to MindUP, that the coaches from the PEAR Institute providing support to BGCD staff were trained in MindUP, and that the coaching supports given to Russell teachers and BGCD staff on how to use MindUP were consistent. To further improve coherence, BGCD continued to work directly with the same BPS SEL instructional coach supporting the Russell on MindUP implementation throughout the school year. As a result, in spring 2020, 100 percent of BGCD staff reported receiving coaching or mentoring on SEL topics. In addition to providing support for

BGCD’s use of MindUP, the coaches helped BGCD staff work through problems of practice, such as “How am I supposed to implement SEL in a dodgeball game?” by making clear connections between activities like dodgeball and SEL skill-building strategies such as communication and teamwork. This was aided by reference to the *Portrait of a Social-Emotional Learner* vision document, which outlines specific observable behaviors related to each social-emotional skill that staff could then provide to give students the opportunity to practice—for example, by guiding students through how to articulate their point of view, listen to different opinions, and resolve conflict through compromise during a dodgeball game. In our daylong observations at BGCD, we observed SEL curriculum and/or integration of SEL into instruction in 0 percent of instructional sessions in spring 2018, in 14 percent of instructional sessions in spring 2019, and in 50 percent of instructional sessions in fall 2019 and winter 2020, tracking with the increase in coaching in the use of MindUP.

Coaching was a key catalyst in the Russell and BGCD using the same SEL rituals and curriculum and contributed to teachers and OST staff integrating the same SEL competencies into their instruction. In 2020–2021, BGCD continued with SEL coaching supports from the PEAR Institute and from BASB, whereas the Russell discontinued district SEL supports, including coaching, because school staff bandwidth was devoted to supporting students in remote learning and the transition back to in-person learning during the pandemic.

## ADAPTING TO COVID-19

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As the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the country in March 2020, the district transitioned to remote learning, and BGCD offered virtual programming for the remainder of the school year. The district launched the 2020–2021 school year with fully online distance learning, which BGCD supported by hosting three learning hubs for 25 Russell students (eight or nine

### Lesson Learned

The partnership structures and shared SEL curriculum and rituals that had been established pre-pandemic allowed the Russell and BGCD to support students’ remote learning and continued social-emotional development and build strong relationships with students and their families during the pandemic.

students in each hub) who needed a safe and positive environment in which to connect to their school online. The BGCD learning hub was open and available to students in person from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. BGCD staff supported students' remote learning, and when Russell classes were not in session, students would take part in a variety of activities at BGCD, including art, gym, STEM, and collaborative games. BGCD also offered virtual afterschool programming to the rest of its student members during 2020–2021 and gradually added in-person programming in spring 2021. A consistent focus on the importance of SEL allowed the Russell and BGCD to continue to provide SEL supports to students throughout the challenges of COVID-19.

SEL was at the forefront of the BGCD learning hubs. In the intimate setting of a learning hub, BGCD staff were able to build deep relationships with those students, as well as with their families. Brain breaks also became an essential part of the model to help mitigate the “Zoom fatigue” that can result from virtual learning, and staff included fun, engaging activities for the students to do during breaks in instruction. BGCD continued implementing warm welcomes, mindful breathing, and optimistic closures. It also introduced a monthly SEL theme linked to a specific skill, such as teamwork, which then tied into different activities throughout the month. When funding became a challenge for the school (the hubs cost \$8,000 per month), BGCD continued to host the Russell hubs at no cost to the school using funds raised by the OSTI, BASB. BGCD also distributed grab-and-go meals for students and their families every Friday, working with individual families to determine their needs during the pandemic (help with utility bills, hygiene products, etc.), along with daily “BGCD at Home” Zoom programming that built in time for opening and closing rituals for students to express how they were doing.

Despite the pandemic, the Russell also continued many of its SEL practices during 2020–2021. In January 2020, the school hired an SEL specialist teacher, whom they were able to employ throughout the pandemic, to deliver 55 minutes of SEL instruction centered on yoga, mindful breathing, how to be part of a community, and expressing feelings to all K–5 students once a week. The school continued to use warm welcomes, brain breaks, and community circles, with 100 percent of teachers responding on the spring 2021 survey that they used morning meetings or welcoming rituals often and 71 percent of teachers reporting that they often used



mindfulness practices. The school continued MindUP implementation in grades K–2, with explicit 30-minute lessons twice a week (but not in grades 3–5, which were focused on meeting state academic standards and following a pacing guide that did not lend itself to incorporating SEL in a virtual setting). On the spring 2021 staff survey, 100 percent of school staff agreed or strongly agreed that the Russell’s focus on SEL helped their students cope with the pandemic.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, both BGCD and the Russell reported that their partnership strengthened. BGCD staff collaborated closely with Russell teachers on learning goals and school assignments for the students who attended the learning hubs. As one teacher said, “[BGCD] was able to actually have their staff participate in the virtual SEL lessons with the kids while they were over there. So, I feel like it actually improved our collaboration.” The BGCD director reported that the major upside of the pandemic was the relationships that were built between staff and students, teachers, and families.

The Russell principal summarized in May 2021, “At the end of the day, kids need to be happy, they need to feel good about themselves, and have a good experience, and I think it starts with SEL. [This year] we haven’t had a lot of chances to interact as a community, so hopefully we can get back to that and continue the work we had started that got interrupted.” Students were able to do so in 2021–2022, when the partnership reinstated a rotation schedule so that each student attended BGCD once every two weeks for 90 minutes. Students received SEL-infused activities and had access to the pool, gymnasium, art room, technology center, and music room. In January 2022, the program temporarily paused again due to a spike in COVID-19 cases. However, as of March 2022, the Russell and BGCD were collaborating on a plan to restart the program for the remainder of the school year. In the interim, the BGCD continued to serve Russell students in their afterschool and enrichment programs, including sports leagues, music lessons, art classes, STEM classes, dance, fitness, and swim lessons.

## CONCLUSION

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This case is an example of supporting student SEL skill development by creating a new school–OST partnership that involved

moving children from the school and into the community for part of the school day. It is one of several systematic approaches to enacting SEL for elementary-age students. To learn about other strategies, see the case studies summary report, *Strengthening Students' Social and Emotional Skills: Lessons from Six Case Studies of Schools and Out-of-School-Time Program Partners* (available at [www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4)), where we describe approaches such as developing an effective SEL leadership team that includes a school and OST partner, finding and protecting time for SEL in the school and afterschool schedules, and incorporating equity into SEL, among others.

There have been notable **successes** in this partnership:

- The Russell and BGCD built a brand-new partnership centered on an innovative yet complex model of delivering SEL-infused enrichment to students off campus during the school day. The partnership weathered start-up hurdles and then a complete disruption of the model due to the pandemic but came out on the other side with a reinforced commitment to SEL. Facilitators to this success included the following:
  - Weekly, and often daily, communication between the principal and the OST program director helped solve problems in real time and develop the partnership at the leadership level.
  - BGCD's willingness to adapt to the needs of the school reinforced the authenticity of the partnership. Whether it was modifying the daytime program content based on teacher input, hosting learning hubs for high-need students during the pandemic, or finding alternative funding sources to support the partnership, BGCD sought to partner in a way that responded to the needs of the school and their students.
  - Providing formal and informal opportunities for BGCD staff and Russell teachers to collaborate and see each other's work built trust and strengthened relationships. There were multiple avenues for this, including BGCD attendance at the school SEL leadership team meetings, BGCD soliciting teacher input on its daytime program, teachers accompanying students to BGCD and participating in activities, and BGCD staff participating in virtual learning classes through the learning hubs.

- The Russell and BGCD both used the MindUP curriculum, which established how teachers and SEL instructors would teach SEL in terms of the specific language and practices used, providing a consistent SEL learning experience for students. Facilitators of this success included the following:
  - BGCD adopted the core practice of mindful moments from the school-day MindUP curriculum. This allowed staff to integrate SEL more easily into their program activities, without duplicating MindUP lessons for students.
  - Both the school and BGCD used Playworks' SEL Game Guide, as well as warm welcomes and optimistic closures, adding more layers of consistency across the two settings.
  - Coaching from the school district and OSTI facilitated SEL implementation in each setting and also contributed to shared SEL rituals and curriculum across the two settings.

There were also prominent **challenges** that the partnership worked to overcome:

- There were early financial hurdles to overcome in order to launch the new program model. Funds had to be secured for transportation and BGCD staff salaries and were not easily attained through existing district or BGCD revenue streams. Leaders on both sides had to reallocate resources and find creative solutions to fund the new model.
- Transitions to and from BGCD created disruptions to the learning schedule in both settings and involved a greater degree of planning and oversight than originally anticipated. This translated to early frustration with the model on the part of teachers and BGCD staff. Reorganizing both the schedule and content of the programming helped alleviate these concerns.
- BGCD staff were tasked with integrating SEL into a new format of programming, and there was some initial resistance to both the new hours of programming and the integration of SEL. When given increased autonomy over how to incorporate SEL into activities and coaching support to guide staff through this process, staff buy-in increased greatly.

- Teachers did not see direct SEL benefits to students from the BGCD partnership early on and did not have relationships with BGCD staff, which limited trust in the new model. Once teachers and BGCD staff were given the opportunity to inform the program content and design and chances to observe and participate in the daytime BGCD activities, buy-in increased, and relationships between them strengthened.

Finally, during the pandemic, BGCD adapted to meet the changing needs of the Russell, and strong relationships across all levels of staff became central to the work of supporting students. SEL served as a through-line for those relationships. The partnership and common SEL rituals established pre-pandemic gave them a framework to fall back on as they navigated the shifting landscape of instruction during virtual and hybrid learning. The in-person school-day model at BGCD resumed in 2021–2022, which is a testament to the partnership that they were able to build and the benefits that they see in this model, which gives students the opportunity to learn social and emotional skills by participating in engaging enrichment activities provided by supportive adults at both the school and BGCD.

### **Key Takeaways to Strengthen School and OST SEL Partnerships**

- Weekly and sometimes daily communication between the committed school and OST program leaders helped solve problems in real time.
- Attending joint meetings and observing each other's classrooms increased teacher and staff buy-in and established trusting relationships.
- Working off of the same formal, written SEL resources created consistency across the two settings. Gaining autonomy over how to incorporate SEL into activities increased staff buy-in and ownership greatly.
- Coaching from the school district and OSTI facilitated SEL implementation in each setting and focused on the same topics in both places.

# APPENDIX

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## Background on Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning

Recognizing the importance of SEL and the potential contributions of both schools and OST programs to youth social and emotional development, The Wallace Foundation launched PSELI. Through PSELI, The Wallace Foundation seeks to explore whether and how children will benefit if adults in schools and OST programs collaborate to improve climate<sup>7</sup> and to foster SEL that is mutually reinforced during and outside the school day, as well as what it takes to do this work.

Starting in summer 2017, The Wallace Foundation awarded annual implementation grants to each of the following six communities: Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. These grants were awarded jointly to school districts and OSTIs in each community. These districts and OSTIs then allocated some of these funds to a cohort of schools and OST programs—ranging from five to seven partnerships in each community—to collaborate to improve climate and to foster SEL that is mutually reinforced during and outside the school day.

Altogether, 38 school–OST program partnerships worked to implement SEL programming throughout the school and after-school day during the first four years of PSELI. Another 38 demographically similar school–OST program partnerships from the same six communities continued business as usual and could elect to implement any new SEL of their choosing in the fourth year of PSELI and beyond.

Although each PSELI community designed and implemented its own approach, all 38 school–OST program partnerships in the first four years of PSELI were supposed to focus on the following four approaches to providing SEL for students:

1. Set a positive climate.
2. Offer explicit SEL instruction to students during the school day; SEL instruction during OST programs was optional.
3. Integrate SEL into academic instruction and OST activities.

4. Pursue school–OST partnerships that mutually reinforce SEL practices across the school and OST program day.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities. These case studies are part of a series of reports RAND will publish about PSELI. The first report of the series, titled *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* ([www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1)), provides more detail on the PSELI initiative.

### Our Methods for This Case Study

For each of the six case studies in this series, we use with permission the actual names of schools, OST programs, and, in some of the cases, individuals. Quotes presented in the case study were checked by the quoted individuals to ensure accuracy, and they also reviewed the draft for factual accuracy. The case studies are part of a larger mixed-methods study of PSELI over four years in six cities. To select the cases, we first identified sites with unique, high-quality approaches to their SEL work based on interview and observation data from fall 2017 through spring 2019. We then proposed these as candidates for case studies to the district and OSTI leads of PSELI, sometimes changing the site in response to the district and OSTI leads' suggestions. In fall 2019, we had finalized the six case study sites, each highlighting a particular aspect of the initiative (e.g., explicit SEL instruction, strong school–OST partnership). We then expanded our data collection activities at each of these sites to get a more in-depth understanding of their approaches to SEL implementation.

Note that all six cases are in large urban districts that primarily serve students from historically disadvantaged populations. As such, the lessons we glean from the six case studies may not generalize to all elementary schools. Table A.1 documents the types of data we collected for the PSELI study at large and at the Russell and BGCD specifically. Details about the survey instruments, observation protocol, interview protocols, and how we analyzed the data we collected are found in the technical appendix of our earlier report, *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* ([www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1)).

TABLE A.1

**Data We Drew on for the Case Study at the Russell and BGCD**

<b>Data Category</b>	<b>Fall 2017</b>	<b>Spring 2018</b>	<b>Spring 2019</b>	<b>Fall 2019</b>	<b>Winter 2020</b>	<b>Spring 2020</b>	<b>Spring 2021</b>
Observations of instructional time	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
Extra observations related to case study topic (e.g., staff meetings, additional classes)				*		—	—
Staff survey (The Russell school staff response rates) (BGCD staff response rates)	✓ (51%) (n<10)	✓ (84%) (n<10)	✓ (57%) (n<10)			P (N/A) (86%)	✓ (68%) (n<10)
Interviews of principal and OST program director	✓	✓	✓	✓+		✓+	✓+
Interviews of teachers and OST program instructors	✓	✓	✓	✓+		—	✓+
Interviews of additional SEL roles (e.g., coaches, SEL leads)		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Interviews of noninstructional staff (e.g., cafeteria worker, secretary)				*		—	✘
Documents related to SEL			✓			✓	✓

NOTES: The school-specific and then the BGCD survey response rates are shown in parentheses. The BGCD response rate includes one member from another OST program, OneBead, who also provided programming to Russell students during PSELI. Blank cells mean that the data category was not part of the planned collection at that given time point.

P = partial data collection. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we were unable to survey school teachers.

— = not allowed to collect due to COVID-19 restrictions.

✘ = dropped to reduce burden on sites during COVID-19.

✓+ = extended data collection focused on case study topic.

\* = collected at case study sites only.





# ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>ACT</b>	Achieve-Connect-Thrive
<b>BASB</b>	Boston After School & Beyond
<b>BGCD</b>	Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester
<b>BPS</b>	Boston Public Schools
<b>CASEL</b>	Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning
<b>COVID-19</b>	coronavirus disease 2019
<b>ESL</b>	English as a second language
<b>OST</b>	out-of-school-time
<b>OSTI</b>	out-of-school-time intermediary
<b>PD</b>	professional development
<b>PEAR Institute</b>	Partnerships in Education and Resilience Institute
<b>PSELI</b>	Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative
<b>SEL</b>	social and emotional learning
<b>STEM</b>	science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

# ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Boston Public Schools, “Social Emotional Learning & Instruction” webpage, undated. As of June 8, 2022: <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/seli>

<sup>2</sup> OSTIs can take a variety of forms, including a single nonprofit organization or a network of agencies that work together. They carry out such functions as allocating funding, setting standards, monitoring programming quality, and communicating with the public. Some of them directly fund OST programming, but many do not and instead serve a coordinating and organizing function for a community’s OST programs.

<sup>3</sup> District funding allocated to schools based on a formula for student-weighted funding, which schools use to partner with external organizations to meet a variety of student needs.

<sup>4</sup> By 2021–2022, the Russell and BGCD were funding transportation and staff salaries through their own budgets, prioritizing sustainability of the model even beyond the PSELI grant term.

<sup>5</sup> We do not have school staff survey data from spring 2020 due to COVID-19. Sample sizes for the OST staff survey were too small to report on in spring 2018 and spring 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Playworks, “Get the SEL Game Guide,” website, undated. As of July 12, 2022: <https://www.playworks.org/resources/get-the-sel-game-guide/>

<sup>7</sup> In this context, *climate* refers to the features of a school or OST environment that youth and adults experience. *School climate* can include aspects of the physical space, culture, norms, goals, values, and practices. Sources: David Osher and Juliette Berg, *School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches*, State College, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, January 2018; and Amrit Thapa, Jonathan Cohen, Shawn Guffey, and Ann Higgins-D’Alessandro, “A Review of School Climate Research,” *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2013, pp. 357–385.



# ABOUT THIS REPORT

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## **RAND Education and Labor**

This case study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking.

This research was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices to improve learning and enrichment opportunities for children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit its Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this case study should be directed to Katie Tosh at [ktosh@rand.org](mailto:ktosh@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

**T**he Wallace Foundation’s Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their out-of-school-time programs partner to improve social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as what it takes to do this work.

According to the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning, SEL is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” This case study explores how the Russell Elementary School and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester (BGCD) partnered in Boston to provide SEL enrichment off campus as part of the school day.

The Russell and BGCD built a brand-new partnership centered on an innovative yet complex model of delivering SEL-infused enrichment to students off campus during the school day. The partnership weathered start-up hurdles and then a complete disruption of the model due to the pandemic but came out on the other side with a reinforced commitment to SEL. The Russell and BGCD both used the MindUP curriculum, which established how teachers and SEL instructors would teach SEL in terms of the specific language and practices used, providing a consistent SEL learning experience for students.

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