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Creating an Effective Social-Emotional Learning Program at the High School Level: A School Improvement Plan

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Creating an Effective Social-Emotional Learning Program at the High School Level:

A School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

This school improvement plan details the importance of creating an effective social and emotional learning (SEL) program for high school students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current mental health crisis among teenagers. Current research points to SEL programs for improvement in nearly all areas for students, whether it be academic achievement, attitude and behavior, resilience, or overall connectedness with peers; furthermore, research also indicates decreases in student aggression and emotional distress. With those findings in mind, this plan was created to focus on the improvement of two specific SEL skills: social awareness and relationship skills. The plan outlines a two-year initiative to educate staff and students about SEL, to develop an SEL curriculum appropriate for high school students, and to foster a positive school culture and climate.

Keywords: social and emotional learning, high school, mental health, COVID-19, school improvement plan

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Creating an Effective Social-Emotional Learning Program at the High School Level

Teenagers and young adults across the United States are in a mental health crisis. Nearly half of all adult mental health disorders begin during adolescence, and the percentage of teenagers with depression, anxiety, or those who engage in self-harm has steadily increased (Barker et al., 2022). Furthermore, "adolescents who suffer depression are 76% more likely to fail to complete secondary school and 66% more likely to be unemployed" (Barker et al., 2022, p. 448). The link between mental health and academic achievement remains strong with an almost cyclical effect. In fact, according to Barker et al. (2022), mental health in students aged 11-14 correlates to their academic achievement, or lack thereof, by age 16; conversely, those students who have low achievement by age 16 often show depressive symptoms at 18. This decrease in mental well-being is caused by many factors, but cyberbullying is one of the largest. In fact, according to Yang et al. (2021), an estimated 37% of adolescents experience cyberbullying, negatively affecting their psychosocial, academic, behavioral, and physical outcomes.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this issue. One study found the pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns increased stress in nearly 70% of its participants, who also reported an increase in depression (Reuter et al., 2021). Reuter et al.'s study was based on college-aged students, so the impact on adolescents could only be the same, if not worse. Moreover, the impact of COVID-19 has affected those students already at-risk, whether it is because of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or overall instability in their home lives (Barker et al., 2022). In short, the pandemic has taken the largest toll on those students who already have the least number of resources.

Because of this uptick in mental health concerns among adolescents, social and emotional learning (SEL) programs began popping up all over the country, well before the pandemic began. But as students have transitioned back to more traditional learning post-pandemic, districts are trying to strike a balance between academic instruction and support for students' overall well-being. However, the research done on these programs so far is either school-wide (PK-12) or focuses either on elementary or middle school students. Therefore, little to no research exists about how to create an SEL program in a high school or specifically for adolescents—the group of students who need these skills the most.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to create an SEL program for high school students to positively impact their mental health, modeled closely after those programs already working in middle schools, but incorporating more mature themes and adding in the flexibility needed in the high school setting. In doing so, the hope is to improve the school's overall climate and culture, while also building on students' resilience, academic achievement, and overall well-being.

The scope of research found to support this school improvement plan was made possible by Northwestern's DeWitt Library and its databases, specifically ERIC and JSTOR. All peer-reviewed articles included in the literature review were published within the last ten years, with 95% published within the last five years. The articles used focused on the implementation of SEL programs, the positive effects of SEL programs in both the long and short term, critiques of current SEL practices, and the effects of COVID-19 on mental health and overall well-being.

From the information gathered, there has been a negative trend in adolescents' mental health for quite some time, and the pandemic only exacerbated that fact. Social-emotional learning programs can combat this trend due to their positive effects on resilience and self-

efficacy in students, as well as on overall academic achievement. However, for SEL programs to be the most effective at the high school level, they need to be flexible to students' needs, teachers need to be on board and feel comfortable with and confident in teaching the SEL skills, and the programs need to be implemented seamlessly into content areas that already lend themselves to teaching those types of skills.

The literature review will first touch on the mental health crisis in adolescents before turning to the overall effectiveness of SEL programs on mental health, academic achievement, and SEL skill competency. Then, the literature review will turn its focus to the critiques of current SEL implementation before ending with strategies to improve its overall effectiveness.

Review of the Literature

Current Mental Health Crisis in Young People

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2021), an estimated one in seven young people is affected by a mental health condition. The WHO also estimates 4.6% of teens aged 15-19 experience an anxiety disorder while just under 3% experience depression or depressive episodes. In addition, over one in three teenagers have been the victim of cyberbullying in their lifetimes (Yang et al., 2021), which can result in feelings of loneliness and isolation. Furthermore, anxiety and depression can negatively affect schoolwork and school attendance as well as healthy eating habits and relationships. Overall, these conditions can lead to risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, but they can also lead to suicide. According to the WHO (2021), suicide is now the fourth leading cause of death in teens.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted these numbers even further, increasing issues with students' overall physical and mental well-being (Barker et al., 2022; Reuter et al., 2021). Students from lower socioeconomic statuses are inherently more at risk for mental health problems and self-harm, but the pandemic took away most of their access to treatment or services. Barket et al. (2022) state that while factors such as good parent-child relationships and strong family structure protected against many of the negative effects of the pandemic, students from lower socioeconomic statuses may not have those same supports. Additionally, "the isolation and upheaval created by closures are most likely to have impacted adversely on [students] from lower socioeconomic groups for whom school can be a crucial source of support" (Barket et al., 2022, p. 448). Therefore, COVID-19 forced the students who are most at risk for mental health conditions away from the one support they did potentially have—school.

Unfortunately, due to the recency of the pandemic, very little research has been published about its effects on children and students, especially teenagers. However, Egan et al. (2021) conducted a study on how British children (aged 1-10) were affected by the pandemic. The study found 90% of children missed seeing their friends, 87% missed playing with other children, and 81% missed school. Furthermore, qualitative data from parents described children who were "anxious, bored and fearful," as well as children showing "clinginess, isolation and low mood" (Egan et al., 2021, p. 930).

Reuter et al. (2022) also conducted a study about the effects of the pandemic on students, but their focus was on undergraduate students at Florida Gulf Coast University. The study found students had "a significant increase in difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions, as well as being impacted by feelings of sadness or hopelessness" (Rueter et al., 2022, p. 16). Furthermore, qualitative data showed an increase in students vaping, consuming alcohol, and using marijuana. Considering the study took place in Florida, which had some of the lightest restrictions during the pandemic, it would be safe to assume that other college students throughout the country felt similar emotions and took similar actions, perhaps even more often.

One study did focus on teens, at least in part, and on what the COVID-19 shutdowns meant for students by studying the effects of absenteeism. Santibañez & Guarino (2021) found after missing 20 days of school, school-aged children lost social and emotional skills. Middle school students tended to be affected the most, losing skills in self-management, self-efficacy, and social awareness. In other words, students lost their ability to regulate their emotions, their beliefs in their ability to succeed, and their ability to empathize and understand others. This is not to say they lost these skills completely; however, the time lost due to the pandemic is estimated at over 50 days, more than double the days in the study. High school students also lost skills,

although theirs was centered solely around social awareness. This loss of empathy and ability to recognize resources and support systems have resulted in the perfect storm: social and emotional skills are at an all-time low while mental health concerns are at an all-time high. Therefore, the time to create meaningful SEL programs, especially at the high school level, is now.

Definition of Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning presents itself in many ways but can be best defined as when "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" (Mahoney et al., 2018, p. 18). The numerous studies on SEL programs are often focused on at least one of the five core competencies, developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Mahoney et al. (2018) lists them as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Overall, SEL programs and their benefits have been well researched, with hundreds of studies and many meta-analyses conducted.

Benefits and Effectiveness of Current SEL Programs

Mahoney et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis found students who participated in meaningful SEL programs at school from kindergarten through graduation increased their SEL skills by a significant amount compared to their peers with an effect size of .57. Furthermore, these students also increased their overall attitudes and positive social behaviors, while decreasing their number of conduct problems and amount of emotional distress. Taylor et al.'s (2017) study mirrored these findings, showing a 9% increase in SEL skills, an average 5% increase in attitude and positive social behavior, and a decrease of nearly 6% on average of conduct problems and emotional distress.

Both studies also found a high correlation between students who participated in SEL programs and their overall academic achievement. Mahoney et al. (2018) found an 11-point percentile gain in academic achievement for those who participated in SEL programs, while Taylor et al. (2017) found a nearly 13% increase. Taylor's findings could be considered more significant since they were based on outcomes up to three years after the SEL program took place; Mahoney's findings, on the other hand, were based on immediate outcomes. However, Fairless et al. (2021) make the case that while SEL skills do impact academic achievement (.20 effect size), the real impact comes from students' self-efficacy (.30 effect size). One could argue, however, that Fairless' definition of self-efficacy is similar to other researchers' definitions of SEL skills. For example, Fairless et al. (2021) define self-efficacy as "the ability to fulfill academic expectations, manage the learning processes, and master academic subjects" and "the ability to manage negative emotions" (p. 568). However, Ciotto & Gagnon (2018) describe self-management, one of SEL's core competencies, as "the ability to effectively control one's thoughts, emotions and behaviors in diverse and/or difficult situations … [including] managing stress, controlling impulses, and attaining personal and academic goals" (p. 29). They also identify self-awareness, another of the core competencies, as the ability to identify emotions, which would be necessary in order to achieve Fairless' definition of self-efficacy. Semantics aside, the research is clear that competence in SEL skills results in higher academic achievement.

Taylor et al. (2017) also found there was no statistical difference in positive effects of SEL programs among different groups of students. For example, the effect sizes of interventions affecting mainly white students, mainly students of color, and diverse student bodies were .23, .18, and .17, respectively. Moreover, students from different socioeconomic statuses saw similar benefits from their SEL programs as well. However, Bailey et al. (2019) found that "SEL

programs tend to have their largest effects among students with the greatest number of risks, including those with lower socioeconomic status or those who enter school behind their peers either academically or behaviorally" (p. 54). No matter the case, students from lower socioeconomic statuses should be a prominent focus for SEL programs in school since they may be lacking support at home and are more prone to social and emotional problems (Bailey et al., 2019; Barker et al., 2022).

Another benefit from an increase in SEL skills is its negative correlation with cyberbullying. Yang et al. (2021) found students who had higher self-management skills and those who were better at making responsible decisions tended to have fewer instances of cyberbullying victimization (CBV). Responsible decision-making, in particular, had a "protective effect" against CBV. Yang et al. (2021) hypothesized that this correlation is so strong because "students with higher responsible decision-making tend to be more conscious and ethical in their online actions" (Cohen-Almagor, 2018, as cited in Yang et al., 2021, p. 81), therefore making them a target for CBV less often. Increasing these decision-making skills proves important when so many students fall victim to cyberbullying, which is one of many key factors in the current mental health crisis in young people.

Teachers' beliefs in and ability to teach SEL programs and skills also have a correlation to those programs' success. Brackett et al. (2021) examined this topic at a school where teachers were trained in the RULER program. This particular program focused on teaching children how to "*recognize* emotions, *understand* their causes and consequences, *label* emotions, *express* them appropriately, and *regulate* them effectively" (p. 221). Teachers attended several trainings throughout the year and then were surveyed about their beliefs about SEL in general and about the RULER program. These beliefs were funneled into the categories of comfort, commitment,

and culture. The results showed teachers who scored highly in comfort had more buy-in to the program (commitment), confidence in teaching it, and were more open to it. Those high in commitment correlated most with the belief that the RULER program was effective. Lastly, those with high culture scores reported support from administration. Therefore, Brackett et al. (2021) concluded, "If teachers do not believe that students are able to improve their SEL skills through formal instruction in school, or at all, it is unlikely they will buy into SEL efforts at their schools. Teachers who believe students' social and emotional skills are malleable are more likely to devote time to SEL instruction" (p. 231). Consequently, it is important for administrators to assess teachers' beliefs about SEL and make sure they are properly trained before embarking on any new SEL program with students.

A successful example of this implementation came from a study done by Green et al. (2021) in two of Florida's middle schools. These two schools implemented the SPARK (Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid) Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum over the course of 12 weeks. Teachers used an instruction manual to teach the program using collaborative learning activities, class discussions, and games. A SPARK facilitator did random observations and found on a 4.0 scale, the teachers scored a 3.98 for "program fidelity" (Green et al., 2021, p. 1061). In other words, the teachers followed the curriculum and taught it with fidelity. Because of this, according to Green et al. (2021), 69% of students saw an increase in their levels of emotional regulation, while 78% saw an increase in their resilience. Students' communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills also increased.

However, not all effective SEL programs must be scripted or part of a paid program. In fact, Ciotto & Gagnon (2018) claim all five of the SEL core competencies can be taught (and are

most likely already being taught) in physical education classes from pre-kindergarten through senior year. They state, "by incorporating SEL into PE programs, students can learn to recognize and manage their emotions, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, meet personal and social needs, make responsible decisions, and solve problems" (Ciotto & Gagnon, 2018, p. 32). Many of those SEL goals will be hit by simply including group- and team-based games. The authors do encourage PE teachers to make sure their SEL content is age and level appropriate for their students.

Criticisms of Current SEL Implementation

One of the main criticisms of current SEL implementation is the variance between districts and programs. Ura et al. (2020) did a meta-analysis of the same studies from Taylor et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis, this time focusing on which of the five core competencies were measured and what the overall outcomes were. According to the findings, only 24.5%, or 28 out of 111 studies, had a dependent variable that fell into one of the SEL five core competencies. Of those 28, only ten measured all five (Ura et al., 2020). Therefore, while Taylor's findings considered SEL programs as effective overall, many of them were measuring something *other* than the standard SEL skills. Furthermore, Ura et al. (2020) found the outcomes of studies varied greatly as well, with 83.7% of them focusing on what the researchers called broad outcomes, or those that are complex and hard to quantify. Examples of broad outcomes are overall mental health, substance abuse, behavioral issues, and instances of depression. Therefore, one study could be focusing on how self-awareness, an SEL core competency, affects drug use, while another could be focusing on a skill outside of the SEL core competencies and its effect on overall mental health. Both could be successful, but they are not similar. Ura et al. (2020) consider this vagueness an issue with understanding the true effects of SEL programs.

These qualms are echoed by Zhao (2020), in which she writes:

While CASEL may define SEL as a comprehensive set of five broad goals for child

development, schools always seem to narrow the focus to something much more specific.

One school will focus on growth mindsets, another on restorative justice, another on the

prevention of bullying, and so on. (p. 45)

Zhao also argues many districts are jumping in to the SEL "movement" because it stands in the

face of the data-driven standardized testing movement, which seemed forced upon educators by

the government. Therefore, school districts consider their programs focusing on growth mindset

or anti-bullying part of the bigger umbrella of SEL, but unfortunately, these programs are "not

the same as educating the whole child; neither [are they] the same as cultivating all the

nonacademic skills... or personal qualities... that students will need in future years" (Zhao, 2020,

p. 46). Yet schools still push that they are indeed teaching SEL, when only a handful of them are

truly focused on the five core competencies. Shriver & Weissberg (2020), two researchers active

with CASEL, responded directly to Zhao's article, claiming "our [CASEL] framework,

recommendations, and implementation guides are specific enough to encourage consistency

among programs while still allowing local school, family, and community partners to adapt their

SEL programs to fit their particular needs" (p. 53).

Conversely, Zhao expressed concerns about the equity of SEL programs if all students

are rigidly held to the same standards. She stated, "an insistence on measuring all students

against a single set of goals leads to individual and cultural differences being penalized,

achievement gaps being created, and local traditions and creativity being suppressed," which

could result in the very stress, anxiety, and depression that SEL programs are trying to avoid

(Zhao, 2020, p. 47). Shriver & Weissberg (2020) addressed these concerns as well, stating SEL

was not only intended to be taught to and will also benefit children from all backgrounds, but also that "early advocates of SEL argued that a lack of attention to students' social and emotional needs was at the heart of public education's failure to serve children from non-mainstream backgrounds" (p. 55). Shriver & Weissberg go on to mention how the SEL movement can be a start to grappling with the complexities of racism and inequality, believing SEL programs "can help children from all backgrounds to promote understanding, examine biases, reflect on and address the impact of racism, build cross-cultural relationships, and cultivate practices that close opportunity gaps and create healthier communities" (2020, p. 55). With mixed results of whether SEL programs benefit students of color the same or more than their white counterparts (Taylor et al., 2017; Bailey et al., 2019), this issue of equity will continue to be in the spotlight as the SEL movement continues to build traction.

Lastly, the lack of studies focusing on SEL programs at the high school level brings to light the question of their current effectiveness. Yeager (2017) contends this is because teens lose interest in lengthy programs that teach them what may seem like basic social skills. Moreover, teens may feel like those who are teaching them these skills are condescending since it is information they most likely already know. Yet another reason high school SEL programs may not be successful is because they are targeting the wrong skills for that age, or, as Yeager (2017) also suggests, they may be targeting the correct skills, but "do so in ways that teens don't internalize—that is, they may not show a willingness to implement the skill or mindset in a different setting when they don't have to" (p. 82). In short, Yeager claims if SEL programs feel like a mother yelling about how teenagers should make personal decisions a specific way, they will most likely have little to no positive effect on the teens involved.

Strategies to Improve SEL Programs

With SEL programs continuing to gain popularity throughout school districts in the United States, many researchers have taken it upon themselves to offer strategies to ensure these programs are at their most effective. Elias et al. (2017) believe the U.S. Secretary of Education needs to "call attention to the importance of [SEL], disseminate information about it, provide direct support to schools that implement it, and create incentives for states and local school districts to adopt policies and practices that support it" (p. 67). In particular, the researchers feel the Department of Education should create an SEL leadership position, should allocate federal funding and resources to school districts throughout the country specifically for SEL, and should encourage teachers to get professionally trained in SEL strategies and programs (Elias et al., 2017). Teacher training is especially important since most undergraduate teaching programs do not currently have course offerings about SEL implementation.

Another area in need of improvement is the number of states, or lack thereof, that have SEL standards. In fact, Eklund et al.'s 2018 study found less than a quarter of the states in the US (22%) had free-standing SEL standards in their K-12 curriculum. According to Eklund et al. (2018), in the state of Iowa, the pre-K SEL standards only include four of the five core competencies, leaving out responsible decision-making, and there are no free-standing SEL standards in our state's K-12 curriculum. All five of the core competencies are included in Iowa's K-12 PE curriculum, though. However, "while the inclusion of social–emotional competencies within other standards provides schools with strategies for supporting their inclusion in the general education classroom, this placement may cause SEL components to be overlooked or potentially lost among other school requirements" (Eklund et al., 2018, p. 323). Ciotto & Gagnon (2018) refute this, however, claiming that incorporating SEL into PE classes is one of the best ways to teach those skills. In fact, Ciotto & Gagnon claim, "physical education

teachers have a unique opportunity to affect the positive development of their students, not only through the content they teach, but also through the social interactions and relationships they develop—including how they manage student behavior and model social and emotional competencies" (2018, p. 32-33). With both of these studies in mind, the research points to the need for free-standing standards *and* strategies to incorporate those standards into other content areas to improve current SEL implementation.

Including new strategies to improve SEL programs was the crux of Bailey et al.'s 2019 study. The findings focused on three specific areas of improvement for SEL programs: they should focus on what is developmentally appropriate for students in specific age groups, they should focus on flexible strategies instead of just strict SEL curriculum, and they should be responsive to students' needs and experiences. By implementing a program with those criteria for six weeks in the summer, the researchers reported a statistically significant overall increase in students' SEL skills. In a different study, Yeager (2017) found similar areas of needed improvement for SEL programs, but his focus in particular was on being responsive to teenagers' needs and experiences. Yeager claims for SEL programs to be successful with teens, they need to harness teens' desire for status and respect, create a school climate that is more respectful to teenage students, and remind teens how social status and peer respect will ebb and flow, thus promoting resilience in harder social times.

A successful program studied by Nabors et al. (2019) showed high school students who were asked to teach and mentor younger students about social and emotional skills saw a benefit in their own SEL skills. Teens taught elementary school children mini lessons about expressing feelings, solving relationship problems, and working collaboratively. By the end of the study, "connecting with the children also helped adolescents relate to the adversity children faced and

support them as they worked together," (Nabors et al., 2019, p. 732). Furthermore, the researchers found many of the male teenagers were willing to express themselves more fully than first expected, modeling to the younger boys that emotions can be expressed and explored. Overall, both the mentor teens and their younger counterparts learned a lot about SEL skills from the program and from each other.

Another strategy to improve current SEL programs is connecting the language used at school to the language used at home. Miller et al. (2018) surveyed parents who were also professionals working with SEL frameworks, asking them what attributes they would want their children to grow up to have, as well as what words they would want a teacher to describe their child as by the end of the school year. Even parents who had immense knowledge of SEL terminology did not use those kinds of words to describe their children. However, a link between the two became evident immediately. Miller et al. (2018) state, "Not only do parents seem to prioritize the social and emotional skills that scholars are interested in investigating and promoting in schools, they also seem interested in the same breadth of skills, thus extending our understanding of the essential linkages between parenting and SEL" (p. 20). Therefore, the researchers suggest schools need to use the current SEL literature to decide how best to offer support, assistance, and modeling to the parents within their communities. Getting parents and the community on board and using the same language will only increase the effectiveness of schools' SEL programs.

Lastly, for SEL programs to be more effective, they cannot lose sight of the current mental health crisis. Barker et al.'s (2022) suggestions are for schools to implement a comprehensive mental health screening process and use conceptual frameworks that connect students' mental health and beliefs with overall school climate. Most importantly, however,

Barker et al. (2022) encourage schools to develop SEL interventions based on the priorities of

the young people who will be learning about and using them. Students should be both the

backbone and priority of any effective SEL program.

School Profile

Community Characteristics

The New Hampton Community School District is located in New Hampton, Iowa, which is the county seat of Chickasaw County. A small rural town of just under 3500 people, New Hampton has established roots in its blue-collar industry, a thriving business district, and a well-established parks and recreation program for both youth and adults alike. The city and school have a close-knit relationship, with many of the area's businesses donating to various causes for the school and students from the school giving back to those businesses philanthropically through their extracurriculars. New Hampton calls itself "The City of Expanding Horizons," and both the city and school are dedicated to developing and revitalizing the place they call home. The city streets are lined with trees, there is a walking trail, an enormous and well-kept public park, and a public pool open in the summer. Hotels, locally owned restaurants, and a few department stores round out the establishments that those in the New Hampton community frequent. A well-funded and newly renovated hospital and doctor's office is tucked downtown as well. New Hampton is also a community with deep roots in Christianity, with a K-8 Catholic school, a large Catholic church and community, and multiple churches of other denominations.

School District Characteristics

According to the most recent Iowa School Performance Profile, New Hampton has an enrollment of 947 students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Of those students, 87.4% are white, 9.1% are Hispanic, 2% are multi-racial, 1.4% are black, and 0.1% are Asian. Slightly more than 50% of students are male, while 49.9% are female. Just over ten percent (10.2%) of students have been identified for special education services and have IEPs, and 5.3% are categorized as English Learners. An estimated 36.6% of students are part of the free and reduced lunch program (Iowa Department of Education, 2021). These students are divided between two

campuses: the elementary campus in downtown New Hampton, serving students from pre-kindergarten through fourth grade, and the west campus, which serves students from fifth grade through senior year. The west campus consists of the high school and a nearly brand-new multi-million-dollar middle school wing, which was completed in the fall of 2019. A new industrial technology wing, wrestling room, competition gym, and cafeteria/commons were also included in the new build.

The district states, "the mission of the New Hampton Community School District is to empower all students to succeed in a changing world" (New Hampton Community School District, 2022). Additionally, New Hampton's (2022) vision statement to achieve this mission centers on creating opportunities for student growth in all areas, providing a welcoming climate that promotes diversity and mutual respect, utilizing district standards to create a framework for student learning, continually striving for excellence through innovation, and utilizing all resources (i.e., financial, community, technological) effectively.

School Building Characteristics

According to the most recent Iowa School Performance Profile, New Hampton High School has 352 students in grades 9-12. Of those students, 48.9% are male and 51.1% are female. Just over 11% have IEPs, while 6.5% are English Learners. Just under 36% qualify for free and reduced lunch. Additionally, 85.8% are white, 11.4% are Hispanic, 1.4% are multi-racial, 1.1% are black, and 0.3% are Asian. New Hampton boasts a graduation rate of 98.7%, and the school falls under the "commendable" category according to the state of Iowa's rankings, scoring a 57.8 out of 100, which is about three points above the state average (Iowa Department of Education, 2021).

The high school staff consists of 31 caring, invested, and dedicated educators ranging from first-year teachers to veteran teachers who have been in the profession for over 30 years. Of those high school teachers, 13 are male, while 18 are female. New Hampton High School also boasts a 96.9% teacher retention rate (Iowa Department of Education, 2021), which can be hard to come by, especially in smaller, rural schools. While there has been a mass exodus of teachers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, New Hampton High School has only had to find replacements for three educators in the past two years.

Student Performance

On the most current Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP) with scores available online, 80.32% of students at New Hampton High School were proficient in English/Language Arts (ELA) and 75.1% were proficient in math. These are well above the respective 68.95% and 65.21% state averages. Of those students who qualified for free and reduced lunch, 70% were proficient in ELA and 66.25% were proficient in math, again well above the state averages of 53.46% for ELA and 48.41% for math. Of those students with disabilities who have IEPs, 25.93% were proficient in ELA, just edging out the state average of 22.33%; meanwhile, 37.04% of students with IEPs were proficient in math, impressively above the state average of 22.81%. Hispanic students at New Hampton High School also outperformed the state average in ELA, with 65.22% of them showing proficiency compared to the 54.35% state average. However, only 47.83% of Hispanic students were proficient in math, which was just below the state average of 48.02%. Overall, the students at New Hampton High School perform well on the ISASP, which is directly tied to the standards of the Iowa Core Curriculum.

Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment

Students at New Hampton High School have a wide variety of courses ranging from agriculture and family and consumer science (FCS) to common core areas like English and math. Students can also further their education by taking dual-credit courses through Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC), some of which are offered by our own New Hampton faculty. Advanced Placement (AP) classes are also available for those who qualify for Talented and Gifted (TAG) services. All of the core content areas adhere to the Iowa Core Curriculum, and each content area's PLC has identified essential standards for their subject. Students also have a unique opportunity to work with the community by taking courses with Iowa Big North. Through Iowa Big, students can work with community members on initiatives to improve the community and/or school district, all while earning credit toward graduation. College and career readiness is the ultimate goal for students at New Hampton because the district believes our curriculum, while college preparatory in nature, also teaches the skills and gives the tools students will need to be successful in life.

Students complete work both electronically through Schoology and Google Classroom, while also completing tasks in more traditional ways, such as taking tests or filling out a graphic organizer on paper. Student grades are entered through PowerSchool, and both students and their parents can access this information whenever they choose to do so. Parents are also encouraged to sign-up online for face-to-face conferences with teachers in both October and March. They are also encouraged to contact faculty or staff with any questions they may have via teachers' office phones or email. New Hampton parents are also incredibly involved with the school's extracurricular activities, with many of them coaching Parks and Recreation youth teams, being active members of the Booster Club, and donating their time and money to support various initiatives for different clubs and organizations.

There is an intervention time scheduled every Wednesday for just over 20 minutes. Students report to homerooms at this time, and teachers are instructed to build relationships, help with homework, or give out important district information. Teachers can also request to see students to make up assessments, touch base if a student was absent, or re-teach an important skill. Class meetings are also held at this time to plan for prom, senior banquet, homecoming, and graduation.

Students have many opportunities for fine arts, agriculture, business, family and consumer sciences, and industrial technology classes to complement their core content classes in the district. While it is possible SEL skills are being taught or practiced within these different departments, New Hampton High School does not currently have a stand-alone SEL curriculum, nor does the district have any specific training on strategies to implement those skills at the high school level.

Professional Development Practices

The focus of the high school's professional development has been on two items: Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and project-based learning (PBL). As far as PBIS goes, teachers look at data at the end of each quarter and are asked to synthesize it in order to draw conclusions about what negative behaviors our students are struggling with most. The teachers can also suggest changes to our PBIS matrix of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, or they can suggest new ideas be added or taken away from our consequence "menu."

For the past five years, the main focus of professional development at the high school level has been on PBL, and specifically on our J-term courses. Every year, for the first two weeks of January, students sign up for a special course outside of the normal school curriculum. These PBL courses have been developed by the teachers and range greatly in content, from

creative writing workshops to creating a school pizza business. At the end of the two weeks, students are to prepare something for Showcase Night, and the community comes to look at the final products or projects the students have come up with to show their learning. However, this past year the school board asked the teachers to begin implementing more PBL units into our everyday curriculum. Therefore, this past school year, teachers were asked to formulate new PBL units that could fit into their "normal" curriculum throughout the school year. These units were required to be based in the PBLWorks framework. This will continue to be the focus of the high school professional development moving forward.

Needs Assessment

Although New Hampton High School has done a commendable job of getting students college and career ready when it comes to their academic skills, there is room for improvement when addressing and teaching social and emotional skills. There are no stand-alone SEL standards in the state of Iowa, and although they are supposed to be implemented into the K-12 PE curriculum in our state (Eklund et al., 2018), there is no guarantee those skills are being taught at the high school level. Furthermore, students can opt out of PE during their secondary years at New Hampton, especially senior year, if they meet certain criteria such as course overload (no study halls) or participation in an athletic extracurricular. Therefore, there is no way of knowing whether students at New Hampton are being taught CASEL's five core competencies in a way that will make them successful in their lives after graduation.

Ensuring a meaningful SEL curriculum is important, specifically at the high school level, because doing so reduces risky behaviors, such as underage drinking, experimentation with illicit drugs, and instances of unprotected sex. Those students low in SEL skills can experience peer rejection, are at risk of failing out of school, and can struggle with aggression and self-control. But on the other hand, successful SEL implementation has led to increases in students' academic achievement, attitudes, and positive behavior, while also lowering emotional distress and aggressive behaviors (Fairless et al., 2021). In a time when students are still struggling with the isolation and loneliness caused by the pandemic (Barker et al., 2022), coupled with the loss of their already-learned SEL skills since they were "absent" from school for an equivalent of at least 50 school days due to the shutdowns immediately afterward (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021), re-learning and re-focusing on SEL skills and mental health is necessary for students' overall success in high school and beyond. Students at New Hampton will not truly be college and

career ready until the district can guarantee the high school's curriculum is addressing SEL

skills.

Data Analysis

Each spring, along with ISASP testing, students at New Hampton High School are asked to complete the *Conditions for Learning* survey. In this survey, students use different Likert scales to respond to different statements about their feelings toward the school. These questions are divided into five categories: adult-student relationships, boundaries and expectations, emotional safety, physical safety, and student-student relationships (Panorama Education, 2022). While there are some bright spots in the data, New Hampton fell below the state average in four of the five categories. Furthermore, all five categories have seen a decrease in overall scores from the 2020-2021 school year to the 2021-2022 school year.

**Figure 1**

Adult-Student Relationship Data
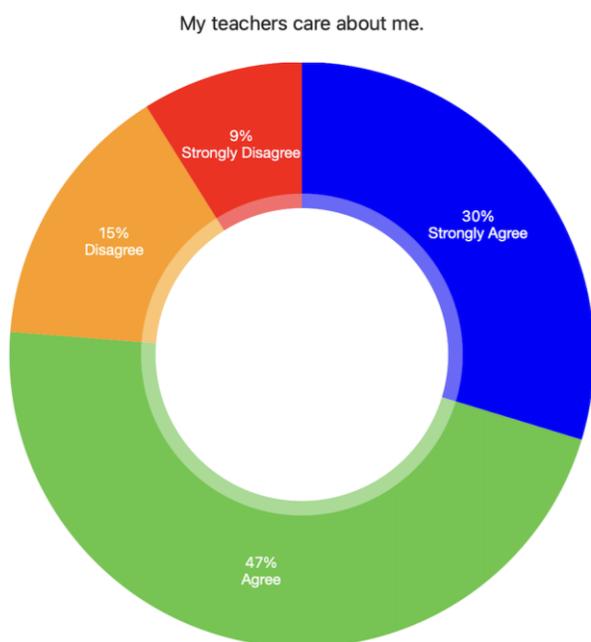
One of the positives from the 2021-2022 school year's *Conditions for Learning* survey is that a strong majority of students feel their teachers care about them. In fact, 30% strongly agreed with the statement, 47% agreed, 15% disagreed, and only 9% strongly disagreed

(Panorama Education, 2022). Therefore, 77% of the student body, or just over three out of every four students, agreed in some way that the New Hampton teachers in their lives cared about them. This positive connection between educators and students is a cornerstone to any successfully implemented SEL program.

Figure 2

Online Student-Student Relationship Data

I have received a threatening or hurtful message from another student online.
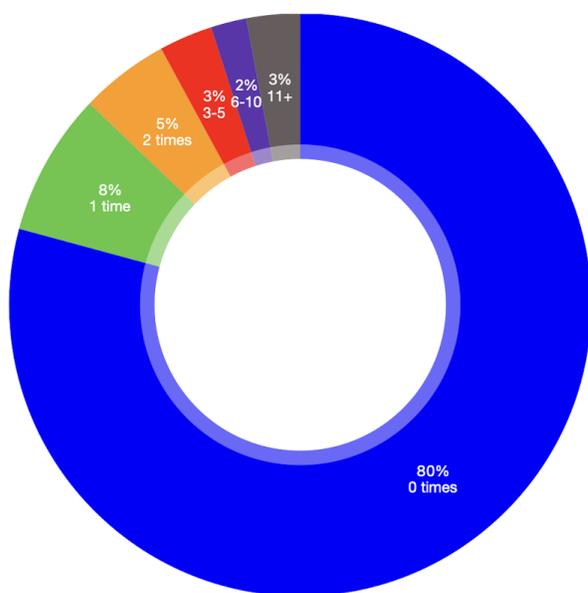
Yet another positive to come from this year's survey is the relationships students at New Hampton have with each other online. Cyberbullying victimization is increasing for young people everywhere (Yang et al., 2021), but it seems the students at New Hampton do not struggle with it as much as others. In fact, 80% of students said they had never received a threatening or hurtful message from another student online, which includes over the phone, through email, on a website, or through an app (Panorama Education, 2022). Another 8% of students said it happened once, 5% said it happened twice, 3% said it happened three to five times, 2% said it happened between six and ten times, and 3% said it happened eleven or more times.

Figure 3

Student-Student Respect Data
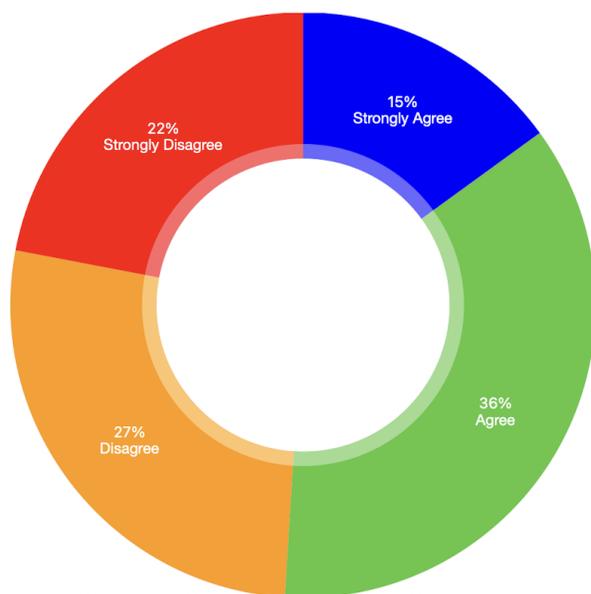
Some of the data from the *Conditions for* Learning survey showed challenges for the district as well. For example, Figure 3 shows students at New Hampton are split nearly evenly between whether they agree that the students in their school are respectful of each other's differences. It is important to note this statement also included a parenthetical statement, which adds "for example, gender, race, culture, learning differences, sexual orientation, etc." (Panorama, 2022). Only 15% of students strongly agreed with the statement, 36% agreed, 27% disagreed, and 22% of students strongly disagreed. With 51% of students agreeing in some form and 49% disagreeing in some form, this points to a need to increase social awareness, one of CASEL's five core competencies for SEL. According to CASEL (2022), social awareness is the ability "to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds."

Figure 4

Student-Student Bullying Data

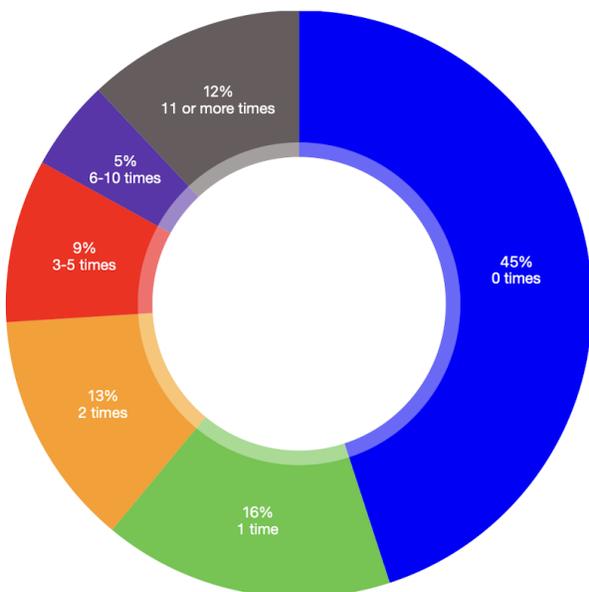I was called names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way.

Figure 4 along with Figure 5 show the challenges in students' relationship skills, another of CASEL's core SEL competencies. In Figure 4 (above), 55% of students at New Hampton were treated in a hurtful way at least once this year, whether that was being called names, being made fun of, or being teased. Specifically, 16% of students reported it happened once, 13% reported it happened two times, 9% reported it happened 3-5 times, 5% reported it happened 6-10 times, and 12% reported it happened eleven or more times (Panorama Education, 2022).

Figure 5

Student-Student Exclusion Data

Other students left me out of things on purpose, excluded me, or completely ignored me.
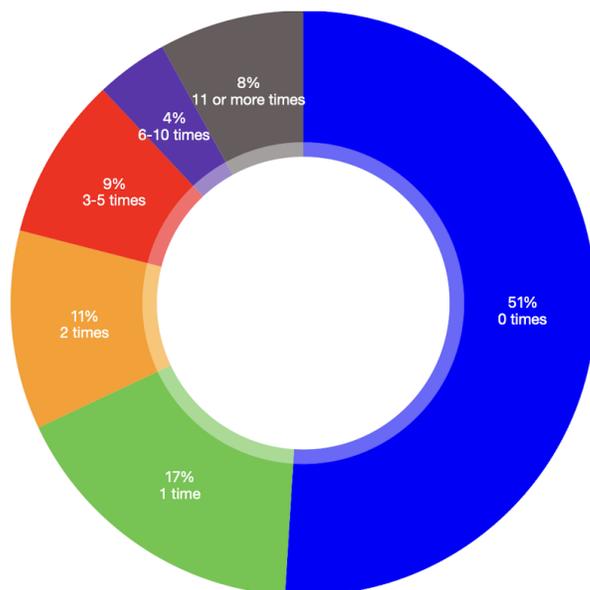
Nearly half of the students at New Hampton also reported being excluded, left out, or ignored on purpose. Figure 5 shows 49% of students felt that way at least one time. More specifically, 17% of students said it happened once, 11% said it happened twice, 9% said it happened 3-5 times, 4% said it happened 6-10 times, and 8% said it happened 11 or more times (Panorama Education, 2022). A major aspect of what CASEL calls relationship skills focuses on working collaboratively, seeking ways to offer and then offering support to those who may need it, resisting negative social pressure, and standing up for others' rights (CASEL, 2022). If nearly half of the high school's student body has felt purposefully excluded at some point during the school year, then relationship skills are something these students need to work on moving forward.

Future research could include qualitative data in which students could expand upon these answers by giving details anonymously. In particular, students could answer what made them simply agree instead of strongly agreeing, or what made them strongly disagree instead of simply disagreeing, and so on. Qualitative data including details about what happened in each of the

instances in Figures 4 and 5 will also give a better overall picture as to how the students are feeling about their interactions with each other. Students could also be asked why they feel the way they do about certain data points, such as: *Why do you think around half of the student body disagrees with the statement 'Students in this school respect each other's differences'?* Finally, students could be asked if they agree or disagree with the results from the *Conditions for Learning* survey and why.

Action Plan

Based on the reviewed literature and the data taken from the 2021-2022 *Conditions for Learning* survey, New Hampton High School is in need of an SEL program focusing on social awareness and relationship skills. The first step in making this program a success is to survey the teachers' current beliefs about SEL and their willingness to include it in their curriculum and classrooms. According to Brackett et al. (2012), "Because teachers' beliefs about SEL can impact implementation quality, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who are invested in educating the whole child should be especially interested in assessing these beliefs" (p. 231). After those beliefs have been assessed, the next step is to show teachers the current reality of the mental health and emotional well-being of the high school students at New Hampton. This would be accomplished by showing them this year's *Conditions for Learning* survey as well as other statistics on the overall mental health challenges of teenagers today.

Next, teachers would be introduced to CASEL and the five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2022). This major step will ensure the high school faculty and staff are on the same page as to what SEL skills are, increasing the comfort level and eventually the commitment to teaching CASEL's SEL skills. Teacher comfort and commitment are two key pieces of what Brackett et al. (2012) say create a successful SEL program. After gaining an initial introduction to the five core competencies, more time will be spent specifically on social awareness and relationships skills, since that is the identified area of need from the current data. Furthermore, teachers will also be shown the data supporting current SEL programs, illustrating that they not only increase SEL skills, but also increase academic achievement, overall attitudes, and positive

behaviors while decreasing conduct issues and emotional distress (Mahoney et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017).

New Hampton's high school staff will also need to decide if they feel more comfortable teaching SEL directly through its own curriculum and standards or incorporating SEL into their existing content areas and curriculum. Current research points to positives with both (Eklund et al., 2018; Ciotto & Gagnon, 2018); however, CASEL (2022) suggests SEL-focused classrooms, which combine a supportive climate in the classroom, integration of SEL instruction into the current curriculum, and explicit SEL instruction. Administrative support and guidance will be key in this step because it sets the tone for the overall school culture, which is also another key aspect to the success of any SEL program (Brackett et al., 2012).

Although much of the decision-making will come from the administration and teachers, an incredibly important step to creating a successful SEL program at New Hampton is responding to what students need. Bailey et al. (2019) state SEL programs are at their most effective when they are developmentally appropriate for the student age group and based on the students' experiences at school, home, and in their communities. Furthermore, according to Bailey et al. (2019), "In focus groups, teachers have commented that existing SEL curricula don't always feel like they are designed for their students; therefore, it can be difficult to generate student buy-in" (p. 56). Therefore, it will be important for there to be flexibility in whatever SEL curriculum or standards are chosen so they can be the most responsive to New Hampton students' needs and experiences. Doing so will create student interest in the program as well.

Along similar lines, particularly since this will be a program for high school students, teachers and administrators will need to ensure the SEL program feels respectful to teenagers and

mature enough for them. According to Yeager (2017), SEL programs only work for teens if those programs can harness the students' desire for status and respect. In other words, whatever the SEL program teaches should increase how students feel about themselves, such as making them feel cool, popular, and influential.

The final and perhaps most crucial step in this action plan is to hear from the students. Barker et al. (2022) urges school districts to get students involved in researching mental health and strategies to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. They even suggest students should be involved in collecting data and measuring the overall well-being of their peers. Simply put, but incredibly important for all stakeholders to remember, is that the most important step to creating a successful SEL program is to ensure student voices are heard every step of the way.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Timeline

Figure 6

Two-Year Implementation Calendar

2022-2023 School Year	
Month(s)	**Action(s)**
August	During pre-service professional development (PD), teachers fill out the Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale
	Students take additional anonymous surveys through Google Forms to give the district further information about their current relationship skills and social awareness, as well as on the school's overall climate
September & October	Teachers, administrators, district leaders, and the guidance counselor meet once a month during PD to learn about CASEL and the five core competencies of SEL
November - January	Teachers, administrators, district leaders, and the guidance counselor meet once a month during PD to discuss the results of the *Conditions for Learning* survey, the new additional student surveys, current statistics on mental health in teens, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health
February & March	Teachers, administrators, district leaders, and the guidance counselor meet once a month during PD to learn about effective SEL programs at the high school level and learn about specific SEL programs
March - May	Teachers, administrators, district leaders, and the guidance counselor meet once a month during PD to choose an SEL program and set a goal—focused on relationship skills and social awareness—for the student body for next year
	Students take the *Conditions for Learning* survey
May	At the end of the school year, a newsletter is sent home to parents and guardians introducing the new SEL initiative; the high school's social media pages will also make the announcement
2023-2024 School Year	
Month(s)	**Action(s)**
August	During pre-service PD, teachers re-fill out the Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale and review what was covered last year, especially the overall goal for the student body; administrators give the chosen SEL curriculum to teachers

September	Teachers meet in PLCs to create lesson plans and activities using the SEL curriculum that will reach the goal; monthly PD will also have time set aside for this, as well as discussion amongst the entire staff about any insecurities they have about incorporating the new lessons; instructional coaches will be available to help curate resources and identify strategies
October - December	Teachers begin teaching the new SEL curriculum; administrators and instructional coaches touch base with teachers during and after the lessons are taught
January	Teachers and students are surveyed anonymously about the new SEL program and its effects and potential benefits
February	Teachers, administrators, district leaders, and the guidance counselor meet for their monthly PD to discuss the results of the January surveys; implementation of the SEL curriculum continues
March - May	Teachers continue teaching the SEL curriculum
	Students take the *Conditions for Learning* survey; teachers take a survey focused on students' relationship skills and social awareness
May	Teachers, administrators, district leaders, and the guidance counselor meet at the end of the school year to discuss the results of the *Conditions for Learning* survey, the teacher survey, and whether their overall goal has been reached; a new goal is set for the next year

Resources

For the implementation of this plan to be successful, multiple resources will need to be found, curated, and used. The first major resource is the *Conditions for Learning* survey, which is created by Panorama Education and given to the students online each spring as a state requirement in Iowa. Another crucial resource is the Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale, which can be found in Brackett et al.'s (2012) study. The administration and district leaders will have access to the teachers' results so they can have a thumbprint on those teachers who are on board with the SEL initiative as well as those who may have reservations.

Resources about the five core competencies of SEL can be found at CASEL's (2022) website, and updated statistics on teenagers' mental health can be found at the WHO's (2021) website. Additional research should be done on the pandemic's effects on overall mental health

since there is currently such little information. Administrators and district leaders can curate information from these sources into slideshows and presentations to share with the faculty and staff.

An SEL curriculum will need to be decided upon, and since the focus will be on relationship skills and social awareness, the programs to choose from should focus on that as well. The first resource could be *Core Lessons for High School*. Developed by The Core Project, this curriculum "is an age-appropriate, discussion-focused curriculum to engage and challenge students to develop who they are *from the inside out* and develop skills that increase their ability to be successful in school...and beyond" (n.d.). Its web-based content may be more accessible and appropriate for both high school students and their teachers as well. Another choice may be the BARR Model developed by the BARR Center. Their model includes eight strategies, two of which are I-time and U-time. They both focus on intentionally helping students learn and practice essential life skills, in particular developing teacher-student and peer-peer relationships (BARR Center, n.d.).

Yet another choice for an SEL curriculum could be *Peer Group Connection*. This program taps into the power of juniors and seniors being leaders and mentors to the underclassmen. In particular, "pairs of junior and senior peer leaders meet with groups of 10-14 9th graders in outreach sessions designed to strengthen relationships among students across grades" (The Center for Supportive Schools, n.d.). In addition, these peer leaders would be enrolled in a for-credit leadership class throughout the school year.

Lastly, the Wyman Center has developed the Teen Connection Project (TCP) as another viable SEL curriculum. The TCP is based on research stating that teens are socially focused, SEL skills develop best when students are in supportive relationships, and those supportive

relationships tied to the SEL skills increase life outcomes (Wyman Center, 2017). This particular curriculum would work best in small groups that can meet often, perhaps during New Hampton's Wednesday intervention time, instead of in larger classes.

The final resources needed will be the additional surveys for both students and faculty throughout the implementation plan. District leaders and administrators will create these surveys and then will also use the data collected from them to create presentations to show the faculty and staff during PD days.

Roles and Responsibilities

The administrators and district leaders (instructional coaches, the guidance counselor, etc.) will spearhead this initiative. Therefore, it is important they are well-versed in the information they will present to the faculty and staff. It will also be important for them to be on board with the idea of teaching the whole child, or more specifically, that all students can improve upon their SEL skills, that it is important to include SEL curriculum in each of our classrooms, and that improvement in SEL skills leads to overall better outcomes for students. Only then can they create a school culture conducive to a successful SEL program. It will also be important for them to support teachers and check in with them frequently to give them whatever support they may need, even perhaps focusing on those teachers who have reservations about SEL. As aforementioned, this group will also oversee curating SEL resources, creating all of the surveys, and using the survey data to create meaningful presentations for the faculty and staff.

The teachers will be expected to learn about SEL and eventually teach the skills necessary to implement an SEL program with fidelity. They will be responsible for lesson planning and collaborating with their PLCs to produce meaningful activities for students to learn these new SEL skills. Although no one can be forced, teachers will also be expected to

understand the importance of SEL skills, especially the importance of teaching them in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers, along with students, will also be expected to answer the survey questions with candor and thoughtfulness.

Progress Monitoring

The success of this plan will be measured by the surveys and their corresponding data referenced above in both the timeline and resources section. Keeping them anonymous is a way to ensure candid responses from both teachers and students alike. An increase in overall scores for the *Conditions of Learning* survey each year will also serve as a benchmark for the plan's success. Lastly, this plan will be considered a success if all stakeholders feel the goal set for students' relationship skills and social awareness has been met by the end of the 2023-2024 school year.

Potential Challenges

No matter how intentional a plan may be, there is still room for both seen and unforeseen challenges. One such challenge could be a majority of teachers simply will not want to take part in an SEL program. Many of our veteran teachers have had so many trainings over the years that this may feel like another "fad" in education to them instead of a necessity to combat the consequences of the pandemic. This could mean some students will not have the SEL curriculum taught to them with fidelity.

Another challenge may be getting the students on board. Since our student body already struggles with social awareness and relationship skills, it may be hard to encourage them to open up and talk to each other, something many of the SEL programs put a large focus on. The students could also not take the initiative seriously, or worse, they could tell half-truths or lie on the surveys administered to them by the administrators and district leaders.

       As with any addition to the curriculum, teachers may struggle to find the time to include SEL curriculum in their already overloaded schedules. Moreover, they may simply not want to take away from their own content and will struggle to implement the SEL curriculum. Over time, both teachers and students may find themselves bored of the program and will simply go through the motions instead of taking an active role in their teaching and learning, or perhaps it may be removed from their classrooms altogether, albeit absent-mindedly.

Conclusion

The mental health crisis continues to worsen for young people in the United States, and many studies point to the development of SEL programs to combat it. This school improvement plan aims to increase two of the five core SEL competencies: relationship skills and social awareness, the two areas that the current student body struggles with most. Doing so will positively affect the school's culture and climate because it will foster a sense of connectedness among the student body, which is desperately needed after the loneliness and isolation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implementing an effective SEL program at the high school level will increase academic achievement, boost positive attitudes and behaviors, and lower aggressive behaviors and emotional distress as well. New Hampton's goal for each graduate is college and career readiness. With this plan in place, each student will have the academic, social, and emotional skills they need to be successful in their lives beyond the school walls. By implementing this plan with fidelity, New Hampton can offer much needed data about the effectiveness of SEL programs at the high school level, helping other schools move forward while they do as well.

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