Improving Student Achievement with Social-Emotional Learning

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

Research shows that social emotional learning can positively improve student success both emotionally and academically. Social emotional programs, skills, and overall learning within school systems benefit staff, students, and stakeholders. When there is a lack of a clear and organized social emotional curriculum, students suffer and lack necessary skills to have long-term success both academically and personally. Using various research findings, a school improvement plan was created to construct a school-wide social-emotional system that includes both a research-based program and a variety of social emotional skills. This plan also ensures ongoing professional development for staff to implement with fidelity. The goal of this plan is to increase student success rates in elementary school and future endeavors academically, emotionally, and socially and to construct professional development that allows staff to implement social-emotional learning with confidence and fidelity.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, long-term success, academic success, professional development
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Improving Student Achievement with Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning 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” (Tussey & Haas, 2020, p. 30). According to Voith et al., social-emotional development plays a key role in children’s growth and well-being across their lifespans (2019). Social-emotional learning is often broken down into the categories of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Sometimes the categories of cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal are used as well (Tussey & Haas, 2020). When asked about major issues in their lives, students ranked anxiety, depression, bullying, addictions, and poverty as major problems (Tussey and Haas, 2020). The problem is students continue to feel these issues as a major problem in their lives without proper support, including the implementation of social-emotional learning in schools.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to strategically address the need for a social-emotional curriculum aimed at supporting students’ emotional needs. At Heritage Elementary School, a Leader in Me Survey was taken by staff, students, and families. From that data, 34% said that school culture needed improvement, 22% said they did not have trusting relationships, and 36% wanted more collective efficacy (Heritage Staff, 2022). We also had a connectedness survey show that 30% of our student body did not feel connected to another adult or peer. The school improvement plan will present opportunities for home/school connections, student/peer connections, and student/staff connections, which in turn will improve school culture and student achievement.
Research for this literature review utilized both Google Scholar and the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa to collect scholarly, peer-reviewed journals. All scholarly journals included in this literature review were published within the past ten years. The author focused on finding articles connected to social-emotional needs and programs. The author focused primarily on finding research studies that included elementary education, as Heritage is an elementary school. The scope of research also included studies involving early childhood, middle, and high school settings. This diversity allowed the author to consider various programs and research deemed appropriate for social-emotional learning.

The author believes that four main areas of research were highly effective in improving student connectedness and comfortability in schools. These areas include self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and safe decision-making. The belief is that when staff at Heritage Elementary School work together with students, colleagues, administration, and families of students they will build a community that better supports students’ social-emotional needs. According to CASEL research, “participation in SEL programs is linked to decreased emotional distress, more positive attitudes about self and others, and fewer externalizing behaviors and discipline problems” (CASEL Staff, 2023). The support of their social-emotional needs will lead to a more solid school community and culture that will help students succeed in their present setting and in their future endeavors.

The author organized the literature review by key themes deemed effective in implementing a social-emotional curriculum. The literature review will begin with the importance of social-emotional learning. Next, the literature review will cover the history of social-emotional learning in elementary schools. The literature review will then focus on various
programs and their results for social-emotional learning. Finally, the literature review will focus on the importance of specific skills that have the biggest impact on elementary-aged students.

**Review of Literature**

**Introduction**

As the world continues to change and technology grows, it seems students are bombarded with bigger issues than ever before. The ability to deal with such complex problems and emotions is often outside the realm of possibility for elementary students. The problems they are facing then take precedence over school performance and growth. With the use of effective social-emotional learning programs, we as educators can help our students develop lifelong skills to help deal with the issues they are facing.

**Effective SEL Programs that Result in Student Growth and Achievement**

Researcher Voith et al. (2019) conducted a study to determine the feasibility of school-based social-emotional learning programs. They specifically researched the Peace Program and its validity as a social-emotional learning program. The participants in the study included 287 students from 29 classrooms. At least 97% of the student body were children of color and 2% were eligible for free lunch. The study took place over the course of one academic year in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Peace Program includes the delivery of 30-minute weekly sessions by outside facilitators in pairs or groups of three for 28 weeks. Lessons are organized into the categories of interpersonal communication, self-confidence, feeling identification and anger management, and decision-making and problem-solving. In order to test the effectiveness of this program, researchers utilized focus groups, classroom system observation scales, and PATHS Student Evaluation. At the conclusion of the study, researchers found that students who were not regularly peacekeepers were using strategies to encourage others to be more peaceful. The
findings of Voith et al. (2019) seem to suggest that a consistent, established program with school leader investment leads to student growth and development.

In a study conducted by Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015), researchers studied the effectiveness of a program that focused on mindfulness and caring for others. The program was created for elementary students. Its aim was to enhance cognitive control, reduce stress, promote well-being, and produce positive school outcomes and pro-social behaviors (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Ninety-nine fourth and fifth-grade students participated in the study. Students in the program showed an increase in cognitive control, greater empathy, more emotional control, and decrease in depression and aggression (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Through this study, it was proven that students with an organized social-emotional program and investment within the program grow in multiple social-emotional skills.

Daunic et al. (2023) also explored the effectiveness of social-emotional programs for student growth and achievement. In their research, Daunic at al. (2023) involved fifty-two Title-1 funded schools across 11 school districts. This study specifically involved 163 kindergarten classrooms and 141 1st-grade classrooms. There were 627 kindergarten students and 527 1st-grade students researched in this study within a 150-mile radius surrounding Southeastern State University. The program studied was the Social-Emotional Learning Foundations Intervention program. It involves 52 kindergarten lessons and 54 1st-grade lessons within the SELF curriculum covering 17 SEL topics. Like the findings of Voith et al. (2019), this study also analyzed the effects of a systematic program on student growth and achievement both short-term and long-term. Notably, Daunic et al. (2023) noted that the SELF intervention offered a proactive approach to helping students adjust to school, especially children who are at risk of internalizing behavior issues. The study conducted by Daunic et al. (2023) also highlights the
importance of student self-regulation and SEL language use as well as their gains in social-emotional competence and how it affects their long-term success in school.

Wallender et al. (2020) conducted a study involving 124 elementary students and 61 middle school students in a public, rural, Midwestern school district researching the Second Step program. They studied the difference in perceived self-regulation competency levels of elementary and middle school students who are being formally introduced to social and emotional concepts by using the Second Step program. They conducted two lessons per month, delivered by a school counselor, and conducted surveys in September and May. At the conclusion of the study, they found that students thought they had high levels of self-regulation, social skills, and problem-solving because they did not know what those things really meant. Like Voith et al. (2019) and Daunic et al. (2023), organized and systematic SEL programs have proven to show student understanding growth and the growth of social-emotional skills. In addition, Wallender et al. (2020) explored the importance of self-regulation and students taking control of their own social-emotional learning with a verified program.

Chance et al. (2023) researched the effects of the Ready for Success program on third graders’ social-emotional skills and competence. Specifically, they looked at their self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The study involved 195 participants which were 11 males and 84 females. These third-grade students included 53% free or reduced lunch, 9.7% special education, 4.6% with 504 accommodations, and 3.5% ELL students. This study was conducted in four public elementary schools in Southeast Florida over one academic school year. The program is designed with 30-minute lessons each week for five consecutive weeks as well as three monthly booster lessons. Chance et al. (2023) found that RFS increased students’ self-awareness, self-management, and
social-emotional competence. They found that these skills lasted up to three months following the intervention and results were more significant over three months than right away. Similar to Voith et al. (2019), Daunic et al. (2023), and Wallender et al. (2020), Chance et al. (2023) found that a designated program that is followed with fidelity and intent leads to success for students. Chance et al. (2023) found the areas of self-awareness and social-emotional competence to be major areas of growth for students in a longer-term capacity.

In a study conducted by Green et al. (2021), the SPARK program was studied as a potentially effective social-emotional program. In this study, 94 fourth and fifth-grade students were studied from a Title-1 school. These students were primarily Hispanic and 92% were identified as economically disadvantaged from a large southern school district. Green et al. (2021) were specifically finding whether the SPARK program was increasing participant knowledge of major social-emotional skills including communication, problem solving, and decision-making. They also were looking for proof that the program increased participants’ emotional regulation skills and resilience. This study was conducted from October 2019 to January 2020. Green et al. (2021) utilized pre and post-intervention questionnaires as well as the SPARK program, which involved 11 weekly lessons, standardized instruction manuals, and a peer-mentoring model. In connection to the studies by Voith et al. (2019), Daunic et al. (2023), Wallender et al. (2020), and Chance et al. (2023), Green et al. (2021) found short-term growth for students in a variety of social-emotional areas. Green et al. (2021) specifically saw significant growth for students in the areas of content knowledge and a medium to large effect size for communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Green et al. (2021) also showed students had less difficulty with emotional regulation and resilience after the SPARK intervention.
In a study conducted by Mariani et al. (2022), researchers analyzed the effects of the Student Success Skills SEL curriculum. This study involved a group of seventy seventh-grade students from a public middle school in a large district in South Florida. The study lasted one academic school year. Mariani et al. (2022) used Student Engagement in Social-Emotional Learning Surveys as the baseline, the beginning of the second marking period, and finals. The intervention studied was the Student Success Skills-SEL classroom manual. Because of this study, Mariani et al. (2022) found students evidenced self-reported gains in some SEL skills. In the previous studies conducted by Voith et al. (2019), Daunic et al. (2023), Wallender et al. (2020), Chance et al. (2023), and Green et al. (2021), Mariani et al., (2022) found an increase in various social-emotional skills such as communication and self-implementation of strategies because of a strategic program. Mariani et al. (2022) specifically found an increase in students showing strengths and sharing them, recognizing their own struggles, taking time to think of options, and noticing classmates’ strategies and implementing them for themselves. 50% of the participants reported they enjoyed the program materials, which was similar to the teacher response in Voith et al. (2019) and showed the added enjoyment linked to long-term use and fidelity of the program. Mariani et al. (2022), however, also found that 60% of students improved their letter grades in reading by one whole letter.

**Long-Term Success in Student Academic Achievement and Emotional Development**

To ensure a social-emotional program is worth the time and effort for teachers to implement, there needs to be proof of success. Students need to be able to develop skills and knowledge that will lead to long-term success both in academic achievement and emotional development. These skills and long-term success can help students in a variety of areas such as coping skills, communication with others, and self-reflection that can aid them in their future
careers. Finding a program, or a variety of strategies, within the school setting that leads to these desired results, is a top priority for schools that want to see their students succeed in a social-emotional capacity.

Researcher Jackson (2021) conducted a study to connect social-emotional learning to student long-term success. With the use of surveys, the researcher tried to find the best support for social-emotional development and how attending school with an SEL program leads to successful long-term outcomes. Participants in this study were 157,630 students who were in cohorts that were first-time 9th-grade students who attended high school between 2011 and 2017. This group included 55,560 students who are now old enough to have attended college. 78% of the students invited to take the survey responded. This study was conducted in Chicago, IL. The interventions researched were surveys for social-emotional well-being. At the conclusion of the study, Jackson (2021) found that some high schools are more effective in helping students develop healthy social lives, connections within their communities, and long-term skills and habits to promote hard work. The findings of Jackson (2021) seem to suggest that a school with a more extensive and strategic social-emotional routine and program yields more successful long-term results for students.

Social-emotional learning programs are very diverse, and depending on the type of school and students, one program may be more beneficial than another. In a study by Duncan et al. (2017), researchers looked at the connection between the Positive Action Program and social-emotional benefits. They examined long-term effects by looking at the trajectory from middle childhood to early adolescence as well. The participants of this study were 1,130 children in 14 different schools. 53% were female and they were all in grades 3-8. Similar to Jackson (2021), this study was conducted in Chicago, IL, but more specifically in Chicago Public Schools over a
6-year period. The intervention tested was the Positive Action Program as used in classroom-based curriculum to work on the importance of the desire to feel good about yourself and teach students self-control and social skills. Duncan et al. (2017) found that Positive Action Schools had improved behavior trajectories and that the universal program helped all students. Similar to the study conducted by Jackson (2021), Duncan et al. (2017) also found that the long-term effects of SEL programs coincided with the fidelity the program was taught with.

Schmitt et al. (2018) also conducted a study on Positive Action but focused on preschoolers and their social-emotional competencies and health. Researchers were studying whether children who participated in Positive Action demonstrated improvements across several social-emotional competence and health behavior measures. They also looked at whether teachers could effectively implement Positive Action with fidelity and engage children in Positive Action lessons. The participants of this study were 75 children, 40 of whom were in intervention classrooms and 35 in controlled classrooms. The study was conducted across five preschool sites across the Midwest United States. The intervention study lasted 15 weeks and covered fifty-four ten to fifteen-minute daily scripted lessons, and pre and post-tests across six units. Schmitt et al. (2018) found that students who participated showed greater improvement on the parent-rated scale than children in the control group as well as on the health scale. The health scale shows long-term benefits as these skills can be carried throughout life and in different settings.

Low et al. (2016) conducted a study in Washington and Arizona that looked at the effects of high-quality implementation of social-emotional learning. This study included 31 schools, 5-6 classes from each school, and 157 teachers. They studied 3,586 students in the fall and 3,277 students in the spring. It was conducted over one academic school year. The intervention tested
was the Second Step curriculum, teacher assessments of student behavior, and prediction models. As was the case with Jackson (2021) and Duncan et al. (2017), this study also showed that the investment of educational professionals was a necessity to ensure success for students. Roughly, half the teachers had high-quality implementation classes. These classes had above-average participation, above-average fidelity to lesson and integration activities, and strong engagement with students. This group showed student success and growth in a variety of areas within the social-emotional curriculum.

**Preparing for Social-Emotional Learning**

In order to ensure the high level of engagement and fidelity to social-emotional programs that are needed for student success, there needs to be work put in before implementation. Teachers and school officials need to spend time and effort preparing for implementation. This ensures overall consistency and dedication to the program. As proven by previous studies, more success and growth come from well-established and well-implemented programs.

In a study conducted by Thierry et al. (2022), researchers looked at school readiness for social-emotional programs. Participants were a principal, two assistant principals, an instructional coach, and a parent liaison. In this study, researchers studied a residential area facing major intersections that feed into highways transecting the city. Thierry et al. (2022) used school climate observations, school leadership questionnaires, and focus groups. There were two studies conducted. The first study lasted one year and the second study lasted two years. The intervention tested was a pre-program readiness questionnaire and focus group to monitor the school readiness for SEL programs. The researchers also analyzed professional learning opportunities, professional development, and changes in policies, procedures, and behaviors. There were various findings from this research. In study one, Thierry et al. (2022) found the
school needed to enhance its welcoming environment. They needed to engage families and build SEL expertise in the building. In order to do this they needed training in various SEL strategies. In study two, researchers found professional development helped build capacities and a better understanding of the school’s needs. The school still needed more energy devoted to improving SEL needs areas. The needs Thierry et al. (2022) identify for school leaders to be invested and educated in the program interlace with the research findings of studies such as Schmitt et al. (2018) that show students need a well-developed and supported program to show long-term success.

School is led by the educators and staff that work in the buildings. In order for a social-emotional curriculum to be implemented with fidelity, teachers need to have a strong grasp on the program, strategies, and goals of social-emotional learning. In a study conducted by Waajid et al. (2013), researchers studied undergraduate students. Within this study, they looked at how these students experienced social-emotional learning during one semester. There were fifteen participants in the study, and all were in their last year of a teacher preparation program. Waajid et al.’s goal was to be able to show how social-emotional learning can be interlaced within other subjects and areas of school (2013). In addition, the study was aiming to demonstrate the need for social-emotional learning. As a result of this study, participants noted a larger understanding of SEL work and the importance of it within classroom settings (Waajid et al., 2013). One student that participated in the study commented, “Teaching is about understanding content as well as attending to the fact that children’s learning styles are preferences are affectively-based” (Waajid et al., 2013). This is a huge revelation and shows the need for teachers to understand and value social-emotional learning. If there is not an appreciation of SEL within a school that is attempting to implement programs and strategies, it will not affect students the way educators
hope. A high level of understanding of SEL implementation will bring student engagement up and lead to higher success in academics and social skills.

In a San Diego County study conducted by Capp et al. (2018), researchers studied the connection between peer-tutoring interventions for academic and social-emotional needs. Researchers looked at the connection between the Learn Together peer-tutoring program to improvements in behavior, academic success, and readiness to learn of students. The participants of this study were 55 tutor-tutee pairs, 3 class coordinators, and 2 program coordinators. Tutors were sixth, seventh, and 8th grade students. Tutee were fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. The intervention tested was the Learning Together, Math Together program for one school year. The researchers used surveys gathered three times during one school year, interviews with teachers and class coordinators, and observations. They also analyzed academic achievement scores and discipline referral data. This study looked at preparing a school for social-emotional learning through a smaller-scale test group of tutors and tutees. Capp et al. (2018) found tutors gained personal benefits including better grades themselves and more interest in their own studies by helping their tutee improve grades, improve behavior, and find more joy in academics. More than half the tutees reported their tutor helped them behave better and build a desire to help others. Most parents reported the program helped their children. 73% said the program helped their child learn and 65% said it helped their child behave better. Mean scores in academics grew for both tutors and tutees. Overall, this research showed the connection between growth and success with the investment of those involved. By using a positive relationship of tutor-tutee that was already pre-established, researchers were able to support the idea that investment in the program yields results. As was the case in Thierry et al. (2022), Capp et al. (2018) also found that the dedication of those involved led to a more successful implementation.
Research by Scott et al. (2021), shows that the COVID-19 pandemic also shows a need to prepare teachers with more social-emotional learning strategies and curriculum to support their students. Scott et al. collected literature to compare changes in education and student trauma levels before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that around 25% of children had experiences a traumatic event at some point during their childhood before the pandemic occurred (2021). In order to combat the trauma that students have faced, they suggest system-level changes. “Educators work within a system; therefore, system-level implementation of trauma-informed practice is needed to support the application of these strategies” (Scott et al., 2021). With this in mind, educators need a standard to work at and expectations to follow.

In a study conducted by Greenspan et al. (2022), researchers looked at the connection between social-emotional learning in an academic setting and physical activity. Researchers were looking at the underlying factors and structure of mental health practitioners and PE teacher measures. They also looked at the ratings of social-emotional learning, Positive Action, collaboration, and alignment between mental health and physical activity. Greenspan et al. (2022) look at how different areas in the school system can support each other and in turn the students, with social-emotional learning and growth. Participants of this study were 219 mental health practitioners from 40 states 35% of whom were elementary, 20% were middle, 16.4% were high school, and 28.6% were other. Participants were also 138 PE teachers from 35 states including 55.1% elementary, 23.9% middle school, 10.9% high school, and 10.1% other. Interventions included personal demographic forms, surveys of perceived importance, and connections between social-emotional learning and physical activity. Researchers found both mental health practitioners and PE teachers agreed that there is value in youths’ engagement in both SEL and PA. They both agreed there is also value in professional development to integrate
SEL and physical activity. In connection with Thierry et al. (2022), this research showed the importance of professional development and strategic learning around social-emotional learning to yield the best benefits for student success.

Ballin (2022) conducted a study looking at trauma-sensitive schools and social-emotional learning for school equity. Specifically, Ballin (2022) looked for what practices schools can use to support students affected by trauma and how schools can prepare themselves to administer those needed supports. Participants of this study included 15 selected teachers, 5 parents and their 5 children, and the principal in a Wellington school in the northeastern United States. The study lasted 35 days over a 3-year period through interviews and classroom observations. Ballin (2022) looked at intentional staffing, the design of internal space, and school-wide routines. The findings coincided with the results of Capp et al. (2018) which show that intentionality results in better success and growth. Ballin (2022) found that intentionality created a supportive environment for staff and students, “positive talk” and encouragement built participation and safe feelings for students, teacher modeling helped students to recreate what they see, and adaptations allowed for comfort and safety. By predetermining the needs of their students and planning, Ballin (2022) saw students show strength and success in various social-emotional skills.

**SEL Strategies that can be Implemented alongside Standard Curriculum**

While whole, strategic programs are a great route for schools to take for social-emotional learning, they can also utilize strategies to assist students with these skills. Many studies have been conducted to find the most effective and supportive social-emotional strategies. In many school settings, it is not necessary for school to adapt a whole program, because they already have a variety of strategies or skills that promote social-emotional learning. Many times, smaller
populations of students need more individualized, or specific strategies to build skills that they are still lacking.

In a study by Tussey & Haas (2020), researchers analyzed the importance of social-emotional learning and how text sets can support student success. Participants included a group of teachers from across the United States. Researchers studied differentiated literacy instruction, completed SEL research, and examined text sets. At the conclusion of their research, they found that text sets provide teachers with a variety of social situations and lessons that students can learn from that they may not necessarily face. They add diversity to a curriculum that may not already have enough. Rather than adopting a full new SEL curriculum, teachers can use text sets to add social-emotional skills to their established curriculum.

Tan et al. (2022) researched social-emotional learning with the use of alternate realities. They sought to answer the question of how technology can help support social-emotional learning in the classroom. Participants were students from Singapore in their third year of a six-year integrated program. Seventy-five students were in the first study, while sixty-seven students were in the second. Researchers studied participants in two separate 60-minute sessions. The intervention and study were on immersive technology, immersive virtual environments (IVES), for social and emotional learning and in the context of character and citizenship lessons. In Tussey & Haas (2020), they also found that social-emotional learning could take place when strategies are added to an already established curriculum, rather than bringing in a full program on its own. Tan et al. (2022) found that IVE has a greater impact on perspective taking and empathy, assuming the perspective of another causes empathic responses.

The effectiveness of social-emotional strategies on test anxiety was researched by McLeod & Boyes (2021). In this study, researchers were looking to understand how social-
emotional strategies such as heart-focused breathing reduce test anxiety and stress in adolescents. The participants of this study were 105 public school students, aged 14-17. Thirty-five of the students were in a psychology intervention class while seventy were in the control group. The study took place in Alberta City over five months. McLeod & Boyes (2021) found, as did Tan et al. (2022) that a separate strategy can bring results for students that make it easier for them to grow and succeed in an academic setting. The findings of this study were that SEL and study skill strategies, with the use of HF breathing using biofeedback reduced the feelings of test anxiety and stress, increased self-efficacy, and improved academic performance. This showed, as did the research of Tussey & Haas (2020) that small, strategic skills can be developed without the use of a full SEL program.

Hurd & Deutsch (2017) conducted a study to understand the effect of after-school programs and social-emotional learning. They sought to answer whether after-school programs were well suited for promoting social-emotional learning and if it was realistic to expect after-school programs to affect SEL. Participants were in various after-school programs ranging from elementary to high school across the United States. Hurd and Deutsch (2017) looked at the participation in SEL-focused after-school programs on social skills, prosocial behavior, community service, civic activity, academic and school-related outcomes, and reductions in delinquency. Findings were limited due to a variety of problems. Overall, a quality program is necessary for the best-desired outcomes. Quality programs are judged differently by adults and children. Many young people participate in multiple programs, thus skewing data. However, there was growth due to this program, as there were in studies by Tussey & Haas (2020) and McLeod & Boyes (2021).
Ballard et al. (2014) conducted research to find the academic and social-emotional outcomes of mental health services in schools. They sought to answer what the student outcomes were from the expanded school mental health (ESMH) model. Participants of this study were 307 students in total. Of these students, 159 were in the ESMH group and 148 were in a comparable group. The study took place across the U.S. Midwest over one academic year. Ballard et al. (2014) used the ESMH framework and in-service training for early warning signs of Children’s mental health concerns. Because of this study, researchers found students receiving ESMH treatment significantly reduced the number of suspensions by about half and attendance was higher for the ESMH group. By parent and teacher questionnaire, behaviors improved more for the ESMH group than the control group. The added strategies and interventions of this method resulted in both social-emotional and academic success for students.

In a study by Xu et al. (2023), researchers analyzed social-emotional learning, school climate, and social networks in schools. Researchers were hoping to answer if ambassadors increase influence, if all students increase influence, if peer leaders have more influence than their peers at both the beginning of the intervention and at the end, and if there was a relationship between influence and perceived school climate. Participants of this study were students in grades 6, 7, and 8. 20 students were ambassadors and 38 students matched with them. There were four ambassador students from 6th grade, 4 from 7th grade, and 12 from 8th grade. The study was conducted in one urban school in a New Jersey School district. Xu et al. (2023) used surveys in October and May, self-report nomination surveys, MOSAIC leadership surveys, and climate surveys to collect their data. The study lasted one academic school year from 2016-2017. Researchers analyzed a peer ambassador program and social-emotional and character development curriculum. Two of the researchers’ five hypotheses were proven through their data
collection. One of their proven ideas was that peer leaders would increase closeness and in-degree centrality. The other proven hypothesis was that students overall will increase in closeness and in-degree centrality due to ambassadors. While this study looked into a social-emotional curriculum, Xu et al. (2023) focused more on the additional strategies provided by the ambassadors. The idea that various strategies for SEL can bring students closer to each other and help them grow and benefit both personally and academically can be seen in multiple studies including this one, Hurd & Deutsch (2017), and Tan et al. (2022).

School Profile & Baseline

Community Characteristics

According to the 2020 census, Ankeny had a population of 67,887 people. Of that population, 92.4% were white, 1.4% were Black or African or American, .1% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.5% were Asian, 3.3% were two or more races, and 3.1% were Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Of the 67,887 people in Ankeny, 7.5% were under 5 years old, 27.1% were under 18 years of age, 10.5% were 65 years old or older, and 49.7% were female. This diversity is reflected in Ankeny Community Schools as well.

Ankeny is located outside Des Moines, Iowa. It is located between the major cities of Des Moines and Ames. Since 1980, the population of Ankeny has more than tripled from 15,000 to over 51,000 (City of Ankeny, 2023). The community of Ankeny includes multiple public pools, a library, a large school district, and many events. Ankeny has a vibrant art scene and a rising population.

School District Characteristics

In Central Iowa, just outside Des Moines, the growing school district of Ankeny Community Schools (ACSD) serves students in both Ankeny and the closely surrounding
communities. In the 2022-2023 school year, ACSD served 12,621 students in 17 different schools. The district spans preschool to twelfth grade and employs 787 classroom teachers for a student-to-teacher ratio of 16.02 (Iowa Department of Education, 2023). ACSD has an 82.5% white student body, 3% Black, 2.8% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 6.3% Hispanic/Latino, .1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and .1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (Iowa Department of Education, 2023). Ankeny has a 95.7% graduation rate and an average ACT score of 23.2 (Ankeny Community School District, 2023). 84% of students in grades 3-11 met or exceeded the grade level expectation for college and career readiness in English language arts, 86.4% in mathematics, and 72.4% in science.

There are roughly 787 teachers employed by Ankeny Community Schools. 100% of those teachers are certified, 94.9% have three years of experience or more, and there are 18 full-time counselors (ACSD, 2023). Due to a variety of reasons, 55 teachers resigned from Ankeny this last school year, compared to 37 in the previous year (US News, 2023).

**School District Mission and Vision**

Ankeny Community School District’s mission statement focuses on the success of all students. The mission reads, “The Ankeny Community School District engages all students in an educational experience that equips them with the skills to flourish in and contribute to an ever-changing world” (ACSD, 2023). At Heritage Elementary, the mission is simplified for a younger demographic. Heritage’s mission states, “We are building a community of leaders who connect, learn, and grow” (ACSD, 2023). At Heritage, the goal is to help the whole child. As a school, adults come together to lead and foster relationships. The Heritage staff work each day to make connections with students that last for years using PBIS and the Check-in-Check-Out system.
a time when students move to other rooms and with other teachers to receive instruction that is personalized. Classroom teachers, associates, and support staff are all a part of this structure.

**Current Student Learning Goals**

In the Ankeny Community School system, students are tested both annually and multiple times within each school year. Students also set goals for themselves through the Leader in Me program academically, behaviorally, and personally. Once a year, students take ISASP (Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress) testing. Three times a year in fall, winter, and spring, students take the FAST (Formative Assessment System for Teachers) assessments. These assessments test language arts, mathematics, and science skills for all students. Students are also surveyed for social-emotional and behavioral information. Through the Leader in Me program, students create Wildly Important Goals once a month. These goals are formulated for themselves but fit into the overall school and district-wide goals. These goals are in the areas of reading, behavior, and personal. Students also participate in conferences with their families in the fall and spring. In the spring specifically, conferences are student-led and allow students to present their work through a leadership portfolio. These portfolios include their goals, various pieces of classwork, self-evaluation, assessment data, and teacher comments.

**School Building Characteristics**

In the 2022-2023 school year, 551 students were enrolled in Heritage Elementary School. Heritage contains kindergarten to fifth-grade classes. There were 100 kindergarteners, 85 first graders, 81 second graders, 98 third graders, 97 fourth graders, and 90 fifth graders. This population of students was 78.8% white, 9.4% Hispanic, 5.3% 2 or more races, 4.2% Asian, 2.2% Black, and 2% American Indian/Alaska Native. 51% of students were female and 49% were male. Heritage Elementary had a student-to-teacher ratio of 17.27 and was Title 1 eligible.
There were 16.7% of students who were eligible for free lunch and 4.2% of students eligible for reduced-cost lunch.

According to the Iowa Department of Education, in the 2022-2023 school year, Heritage Elementary School was overall a high-performing school. While the state average is 54.65, Heritage scored 63.97 (Iowa Department of Education, 2023). The percent of students at Heritage Elementary who were proficient in English Language Arts in the 2022-2023 school year was 76%, while the state average was 70.84%. The percentage of students at Heritage Elementary who were proficient in mathematics was 79.35%, and the state average was 64.97% (Iowa, 2023).

**Parent Involvement**

In the Ankeny Community school system, parents and involved and communicate with in a variety of ways. They have access to the Parent Portal on Infinite Campus. This system allows them to check grades, sign permission forms, and control their child's attendance record. They also have access to the Canvas system that teachers use to post classwork and grades. At least twice a year, parents have the opportunity to attend parent-teacher conferences. These usually occur once in the fall and once in the spring. In elementary school, these conferences are highly encouraged and are starting to be led more by students as part of the Leader in Me curriculum adapted in many buildings, including Heritage. Families can also be involved in the Parent-teacher Organization (PTO), as volunteers in the district-wide volunteer system, as leaders of clubs at the elementary level, and as community outreach members for various events such as book readings and STEAM nights. The partnership between school and home can help to build stronger connections with students and more investment in their academic goals.

**Teacher Work and Curriculum Design**
Currently, there is not a required, district-wide social-emotional curriculum or system. At the elementary level, schools are able to participate in the Leader in Me program and follow the 8 Habits established for highly effective kids (Covey et al., 2019). Heritage is a Leader in Me school and follows the curriculum as part of their social-emotional learning for students. This program includes the eight habits as follows:

- Habit 1: Be Proactive
- Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind
- Habit 3: Put First Things First
- Habit 4: Think Win-Win
- Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood
- Habit 6: Synergize
- Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw
- Habit 8: Find Your Voice

Ankeny schools also require guidance as one of the special area classes students attend once a day. Guidance counselors follow their own curriculum that helps students to understand, build, and develop social-emotional skills throughout elementary school. Some of these skills include communication, flexibility within roles and responsibilities, integrity, accountability, and more. The skills and strategies taught are age-appropriate and develop each year based on previous skills and strategies.

**Teacher Instructional Strategies**

While not all teachers within the district implement any social-emotional curriculum or strategies, teachers at Leader in Me schools such as Heritage Elementary follow the curriculum and lessons as developed by the program. Teachers focus on the lessons within each module...
which lead students through the eight habits. Heritage also follows the PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) system. This system links with the eight habits and includes lessons developed by an action team at Heritage that teaches students the expectations of Heritage in various areas of the building.

Assessment Practices

There are no formal assessment practices for social-emotional learning in the Ankeny Community School District. A system of surveys has been used to assess whether students feel safe at school, whether they feel connected to their classmates, and whether they feel connected to an adult in the building. This year, these surveys will not be administered to all students due to new legislation. If parents give permission, students can still be surveyed. However, since not all parents will give permission, this may not be a true data point as compared to years past.

Professional Development Practices

There is no formal, third-party training for either the Leader in Me program or the PBIS system. All professional development and training are given by either a district employee or school leader. However, in the 2022-2023 school year Ankeny Community School District did hire a social-emotional learning specialist. This individual has started to come to schools and new teacher meetings to teach the basics of social-emotional learning and strategies.

Needs Assessment

Professional Development and Staff Capacity

In Ankeny Community School District, the focus for staff and students has always heavily been academics. Until recently, no mission statement or goal has existed in Ankeny for anything other than academics. There is no formal social-emotional curriculum and until last year was no district position for social-emotional learning. Unless a school chose to participate
as a Leader in Me school, there was no professional development formally assigned to staff members. While focusing on academics such as language arts, mathematics, and science are important for student success, a student’s mental health and social-emotional well-being are also just as important for a student’s overall success. “Research shows that SEL not only improves achievement by an average of 11 percentile points, but it also increases prosocial behaviors (such as kindness, sharing, and empathy), improves student attitudes toward school, and reduces depression and stress among students” (Durlak et al., 2011, pg. 408). Currently, Ankeny’s social-emotional learning is minimal, which does not assist teachers and staff in creating a positive school climate and culture or showing students they value their wellness as a whole.

For students, the lack of a formal SEL curriculum shows that their emotional wellness is not as important as their academics, and thus leads to a worsened school culture and climate. However, without a formal program or professional development for staff, there is no way to improve on these things. According to Waajid et al., teachers need to have a firm understanding of social-emotional strategies and curriculum in order to develop connections for students (2013). While culture and climate need to be addressed, it is first necessary to handle the training and capacity of the staff. “All staff members need initial and ongoing professional learning and support to implement evidence-based SEL practices and programs” (CASEL Staff, 2023). It is imperative for Ankeny Community Schools to acknowledge the need for both initial training and ongoing. Teachers who are new to Ankeny or new to the profession overall receive specialized training in ACSD. However, that training is not on social-emotional skills and strategies and does not continue as ongoing training. This year, Ankeny switched from Wednesday late start days for professional development, to full days once a month. These days are alternating between literacy and math. There are no days set aside for social-emotional learning as a district.
A formal, consistent, structured approach to social-emotional learning as a whole district is needed to minimize teacher stress and give teachers the tools needed to fully assist students. This school improvement plan will fully prepare teachers and arm them with the resources necessary to help students succeed in a social-emotional capacity. This plan will bring strategically designed professional development to Ankeny Community Schools in order to give teachers the capacity to help students find success in more than just academics. The lack of social-emotional training and support in the district is leaving teachers unprepared for the crises they face with their students each day and leaving students to deal with major issues on their own.

Data Analysis

Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected from all students at Heritage Elementary School during the 2022-2023 school year. These kindergarten through fifth-grade students were surveyed using three main social-emotional questions on a staff-created social-emotional and connectedness survey. These questions were: Do you feel connected to other students at Heritage Elementary, and if so, who? Do you feel connected to staff members at Heritage Elementary, and if so, who? Do you feel safe at school, and if not, why not? This survey was given in the fall, winter, and spring (Heritage Elementary Staff, 2022). All three questions needed to be answered in the affirmative for students to be considered connected at Heritage.

The student population that was surveyed in the 2022-2023 school year at Heritage Elementary was relatively evenly split among grade levels (Heritage Elementary Staff, 2022) (see Figure 1 below). In kindergarten there were eighty-nine students, first grade had eighty-two students, second grade’s population was seventy-eight students, third grade had eighty-nine
students, fourth grade had the largest group of ninety-five students, and fifth grade had ninety
students. This aligns with enrollment numbers as all students were surveyed.

**Figure 1**

*2022-2023 Heritage Elementary Student Population*

Students reported on the three questions of connectedness to peers, connectedness to
staff, and safety in the fall, winter, and spring. While there were moderate differences among
grade levels and seasons, overall the data showed room for growth in all areas (see Figure 2
below). Kindergarten data showed connectedness scores of 71% in the fall, 83% in the winter,
and 74% in the spring (Heritage Elementary Staff, 2022). First grade reported 82% of students
felt connected in the fall, 85% in the winter, and 87% in the spring (Heritage Elementary Staff,
2022). Second-grade data showed 73% in fall, 77% in winter, and 76% in spring (Heritage
Elementary Staff, 2022). Third grade reported 80% in the fall, a dip to 77% in the winter, and
growth to 82% in the spring (Heritage Elementary Staff, 2022). Fourth-grade students were 69%
connected in the fall, 87% in the winter, and 87% in the spring (Heritage Elementary Staff, 2022). Fifth grade showed the most growth over the school year with a connectedness score of 66% in the fall, 80% in the winter, and 92% in the spring (Heritage Elementary Staff, 2022).

**Figure 2**

*2022-2023 Connectedness Survey Data: Average for all Questions*

Another piece of data analyzed at Heritage is the Leader in Me Measurable Results Assessment (MRA) (see Figure 3 below). This MRA assessment was taken in the spring of 2023 and is given to students, staff members, and families. This data is scored in percentages and follows the rubric of 0-49% ineffective, 50-69% Needs Improvement, 70-79% Satisfactory, 80-89% Effective, and 90-100% Exemplary. In the area of Leadership, there were three categories that were Student Leadership, Staff Leadership, and Family & Community Leadership. Heritage scored 81% in the first, 75% in the second, and 72% in the third. In the area of Culture, the
categories were Supportive Student Environment and Supportive Staff Environment. Heritage scored 82% in the first and 71% in the second. The last category was Academics which included Empowering Teachers, Empowered Learners, and Goal Achievement. The scores for these categories in that order were 82%, 84%, and 81%.

**Figure 3**

*Spring 2023-Leader in Me- Measureable Results Assessment (MRA)*

Data Analysis

Overall, the data shows that not all students at Heritage Elementary School feel connected. The data from the Connectedness Survey shows that no grade level was ever able to reach 100% on the survey, and thus shows that they are lacking connectedness at Heritage (Heritage Elementary Staff, 2022). Whether it be connected to peers, connected to staff, or safe, no piece of data is at 100%. The MRA data also showed a lack of consistency as none of the categories received a score in the exemplary range and any within the Effective range were in the
lower half of that score bracket. There are a lot of areas that show room for growth within the social-emotional learning world at Heritage Elementary.

One of the areas of weakness at Heritage is the initial scores for connectedness in the fall. While this is the first survey of the year, and therefore it can be predicted that it would be lower, we saw the lowest initial score in 5th grade. Most of the 5th graders would have been in Heritage for a few years and should have already felt connected coming into their school year. This data point shows that some major gaps and regressions are happening for our students when they jump from one grade level to the next as well as over the summer. Another area of weakness reflected in the data is the low support of staff and the lack of family and community engagement from the MRA. These two pieces are lacking, but overall the MRA shows lower scores in all categories than Heritage’s goal of Exemplary status.

A major area of strength is that Heritage is taking this data seriously. Surveys are taken multiple times a year. These surveys are given to not just students, but staff and families as well. Heritage’s overall goal is to help 100% of students feel connected and to get families and communities involved. It would be impossible to grow and move forward within high expectations and the drive to succeed in these areas. Not all schools take students’ social-emotional wellness and intelligence as seriously as Heritage does, and that alone is a major strength for them.

Moving forward with a social-emotional curriculum and professional development, there need to be assessments that assess how well students and staff are understanding the new curriculum. To ensure the curriculum is being utilized correctly and that teachers are teaching it with fidelity, it is important to ensure they understand it. There also needs to be assessments or surveys that find the comfortability of all involved. If teachers and students are uncomfortable
with what is being taught, they will be less likely to use it to its fullest capacity. “…teachers need to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly so that they can help students create useful cognitive maps, relate ideas to one another, and address misconceptions” (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Lastly, there need to be assessments that ask what the staff, students, and families need moving forward. To ensure that the social-emotional needs of Heritage Elementary students, staff, and stakeholders are being met, they must be able to give their feedback and communicate their needs.

**Action Plan**

After reviewing various research including work by Voith et al. (2019), Daunic et al. (2023), Wallender et al. (2020), and more regarding social-emotional learning strategies and curriculum, I have found multiple strategies that will support Heritage Elementary School. The implementation of this school improvement plan and the strategies within it will focus on supporting students with both their social-emotional wellness and academic success. It will also support teachers in their journeys to social-emotional wellness as well as implementation. When implemented with fidelity, these strategies with change the trajectory of student success at Heritage Elementary. In addition, it will give teachers peace of mind and support when struggling with difficulties in their classrooms such as student home lives and troubling behaviors.

One of the most important aspects of this school improvement plan is consistency. A wide variety of research shows the importance of consistency within a chosen social-emotional program. Voith et al. (2019) for example reported on the results of the Peace Program. This program showed an increase in student social-emotional skills from a routine of thirty-minute lessons once a week for twenty-eight weeks. These lessons covered topics such as interpersonal
communication, self-confidence, feeling identification and anger management, and decision-making and problem-solving (Voith et al., 2019). Daunic et al. (2023), Wallender et al. (2020), Chance et al. (2023), Green et al. (2021), and Mariani et al. (2022) also reported that consistency and fidelity of social-emotional programs led to increased student success both within the programs and academically. As shown in the study by Schonert-Reichl et al., giving students a set program and skills to focus on contribute to success emotionally, socially, and academically (2015). Students will have the skills needed to deal with their emotions and social struggles which will alleviate stress. Without the added stress, students will have the capacity to focus on their academics more and dedicate more time and energy to finding success in that area. For these reasons, Heritage will implement weekly, thirty-minute lessons for continued consistency.

Another aspect of this improvement plan for Heritage Elementary School is to ensure both students and staff are invested in the program. Research done by Jackson (2021) found that the more extensive the program was, the more long-term success for students academically was reported. It is also important to have student, staff, and parental buy-in to the program or strategies used. This improvement plan will utilize student, parent, and staff surveys to ensure all stakeholders are on board with the strategies being used and the way the program is being implemented (see Table 1 below). These surveys will be given on Google Forms three times a year; once at fall conferences, once at spring conferences, and once at the end of the year. Both parent and educator support and investment within a program and the strategies used lead to long-term academic success for students (Schmitt et al., 2018 & Low et al., (2016),

Table 1

Example of Google Form Questions and Answer Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
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</table>


What level of comfort do you feel with the current social-emotional program and lessons?

- Not comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Relatively comfortable
- Very comfortable

What skills do you think need to be taught more?

- School and Class Community
- Self-Regulation
- Relationship Building
- Leadership Skills
- Social Interactions

What level of growth have you seen in yourself/your child/your student?

- No growth
- Some growth
- A lot of growth
- A great amount of growth

Strategies to be Implemented

First, Heritage will implement focus groups to ensure that all stakeholders are understanding and supportive of the strategies (Thierry et al., 2022). These focus groups will create their own norms and will meet monthly to discuss how social-emotional learning is progressing at Heritage Elementary. The group will also review the results of the Google Form surveys (see Table 1 above). This group will help to problem-solve as the strategies are put in place and discuss the next steps for the building. They will also give a place for stakeholders to voice concerns and hear from staff members and students their perspectives from within the building.
Next, all staff members at Heritage will be trained to be trauma-sensitive. This training will help ensure that Heritage is an intentionally supportive environment that encourages self-reflection and uses positive self-talk at all times (Ballin, 2022). This will ensure both staff and students feel safe to be themselves at Heritage Elementary. Pandemics and the death of loved ones are major causes of trauma, therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic that all of our staff and students have lived through should qualify Heritage, and all schools, to be trained in proper trauma-sensitive procedures.

Heritage’s social-emotional committee and focus group, along with the approval of the school board, will choose a research-based school-wide social-emotional curriculum. In addition to this chosen curriculum, the guidance teachers will also teach heart-focused (HF) breathing (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). HF breathing will help students with anxiety and stress and is a strategy that students can use in various locations and situations in their lives. Our media specialist will also include SEL strategies, such as virtual reality (VR) lessons. These VR lessons will include social situations students may work through virtually and carry over those learned skills to real life (Tan et al., 2022). Virtual reality will allow students to work through potentially stressful social situations in a safe, virtual world.

**Steps for Heritage School Improvement**

Heritage Elementary School will follow these subsequent steps to ensure the implementation of the social-emotional program and the professional development that run parallel. Starting in August of 2024, a social-emotional action team will be formed at Heritage Elementary, led by the school principal, school counselor, social worker, and academic coach. This action team will include any teachers and staff that choose to join. This action team will help choose an appropriate SEL curriculum for Heritage Elementary, plan supplemental SEL
strategies to teach across academic areas and plan professional development. The following steps will increase the effectiveness of the implementation process.

1. The SEL action team will be formed.

2. The action team will research and choose the SEL curriculum for Heritage Elementary that will best support both students and staff.

3. The action team will determine a way to check in with teachers to ensure all are teaching the curriculum with fidelity.

4. The action team will plan and design professional development to help teachers. These professional development sessions will include one half-day session to be completed before the start of each school year as well as monthly boosters to be completed in the morning of our monthly teacher work days.

5. Teachers will begin the new curriculum during the first week of school.

6. The focus group will meet once a month to ensure implementation and success.

These steps will form the expectations and requirements of program implementation. Administration within the building will ensure steps are being followed with fidelity. The focus group will also discuss these steps and change them as needed for future years. Overall, these will give a structure and routine for staff members and will allow implementation to happen as smoothly as possible.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Intro

The Peace Program is a research-based curriculum program that includes lessons on interpersonal communication, self-confidence, feeling identification and anger management, and decision-making and problem-solving (Voith et al., 2019). This program will be used for all
Heritage students, grades kindergarten through fifth, as the assigned social-emotional curriculum. The curriculum will be taught by the guidance counselor in the students’ weekly guidance classes. The lessons within the Peace Program are 30-minute lessons designed to be implemented weekly for 28 weeks. In addition to the Peace Program, classroom teachers will also implement weekly lessons on various strategies to work on other social-emotional skills. These lessons will be on skills that the Focus Group and SEL committee will deem necessary based on survey responses and observations.

**Timeline**

The Measureable Results Assessment (MRA) was taken by Heritage Elementary students, staff, and stakeholders in the spring of 2023. The data from this assessment will be discussed in August before school begins for the year. Each month, the SEL Focus Group and Committee will meet to go over observations, survey results, and student responses. This will give the guidance counselor and teachers a chance to discuss how their lessons are progressing, how students are responding in class, and what their next steps should be. All lessons of the Peace Program will be completed by April. At this time, teachers will reteach any lessons they feel students need reminders of as the school year comes to a close.

**Table 2**

*Timeline of Implementation*

<p>| <strong>April 2023:</strong> Students, staff, and stakeholders will take the Measureable Results Assessment (MRA). | <strong>Early August:</strong> Results from the MRA will be analyzed by the Focus Group and SEL Committee. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Mid-August:</strong></th>
<th><strong>September:</strong></th>
<th><strong>October:</strong></th>
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<th><strong>January:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Staff will meet to receive training on the PEACE Program and start planning implementation.</td>
<td>Focus Group, committee, and staff will meet to finalize plans for program launch in October.</td>
<td>PEACE Program will begin in guidance classrooms and teachers will begin skills builders. Focus Group and committee will meet at the end of the month to discuss next skills builders.</td>
<td>PEACE Program will continue in guidance classrooms and teachers will teach skill builders that were decided at the meeting in October. Focus Group and committee will meet at the end of the month to discuss next skills builders.</td>
<td>PEACE Program will continue in guidance classrooms and teachers will teach skill builders that were decided at the meeting in November. Focus Group and committee will meet at the end of the month to discuss next skills builders.</td>
<td>PEACE Program will continue in guidance classrooms and teachers will teach skill builders that were decided at the meeting in December. Focus Group and committee will meet at the end of the month to discuss next skills builders.</td>
<td>PEACE Program will continue in guidance classrooms and teachers will teach skill builders that were decided at the meeting in January. Focus Group and committee will meet at the end of the month to discuss next skills builders.</td>
<td>PEACE Program will continue in guidance classrooms and teachers will teach skill builders that were decided at the meeting in February. Focus Group and committee will meet at the end of the month to discuss next skills builders.</td>
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April: PEACE Program will come to an end in guidance classrooms and teachers will teach skill builders that were decided at the meeting in March. Focus Group and committee will meet at the end of the month to discuss next skills builders and next steps for PEACE Program.

May: Guidance counselor and classroom teachers will wrap up the year with re-teach lessons. Stakeholders, staff, and students will take the MRA.

Role Clarification and Assignments

All grade level teachers, the guidance counselor, the instructional coach, and the administration will be involved in implementing the program. The roles will fit each group’s specific function within Heritage. They will support the PEACE program and implementation while also giving and receiving feedback. They will also be able to attend the focus group at any time to have a bigger voice in implementation.

The guidance counselor will be the person giving the PEACE Program lessons in class each week. They will be trained in the implementation of the program. They will also be part of the focus group and committee. They will have connections within the PEACE program’s organization to stay up to date on changes in the curriculum. Guidance counselors will be the leaders of the implementation.

Teachers will give skill builders each week. Teachers will find a time in their classrooms to teach specific skills that have been decided by the committee and focus group. They will work with the guidance counselor when they are in need of additional support. Teachers will also communicate with parents, through their required weekly newsletters to inform parents of what skills are being worked on each week.
Volunteer family members will also be involved within the focus group. These volunteers will meet monthly to discuss what is going well and where improvements can be made. Volunteers will also have a chance to discuss with teachers and the guidance counselor. They will give feedback and analyze results from surveys as well.

The instructional coach will also support through modeling lessons as needed and providing additional research within the committee and focus group. The instructional coach will also step in when teachers need help planning skill builders. The instructional coach will also attend the focus group and committee to provide feedback. They are there as an additional support.

The administrators will provide support when the guidance counselor and the instructional coach are unavailable. If either of these roles are absent, are dealing with student behavior, or are out the building the administrators will step into their roles. They will also attend the focus group and committee. They will regulate the dates of surveys so the school takes all surveys in the same week.

**Progress Monitoring**

To determine the success of the program, the Measurable Results Assessment will show an increase in favorable conditions for the majority of classrooms. Students, staff, and stakeholders will answer questions about comfortability and connections. A smaller way to determine program success is through observation and assessment questions at the end of each lesson. Lastly, teachers will monitor and record when they see students using the skills taught weekly.

**Limitations**
A challenge to implementing this program successfully is the fidelity to which the lessons are taught. While it is expected that the guidance counselor will teach the same lessons the same to each classroom, that may not always happen for a variety of reasons. Depending on how each lesson is handled and implemented, each class may develop different feelings and skills. This could result in differences among students. It is also expected that each teacher teaches the skills builders the same way, but that may not always be the case either. This may cause even more differences in the implementation and data results.

**Conclusion**

Research has shown that social-emotional learning can positively impact student success in academics. Many schools already have a chosen social-emotional program that is implemented to help students develop the necessary skills. These skills include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as well as cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills (Tussey & Haas, 2020). These skills must be taught to ensure students have a clear understanding and are ready to utilize these skills in their everyday lives.

Schools need to better support students’ social-emotional learning in order to create a more positive environment and create better academic success. That is the problem Heritage was facing before the implementation of this school improvement plan. The purpose of this plan is to strategically address the need for a social-emotional curriculum. This necessary learning should be done in all schools at all levels. School boards and districts need to make social-emotional learning a priority and put in the time and money to choose programs that assist students with positive intent and research-based positive results. These programs will help students develop skills that will not only help them find success academically, emotionally, and socially as well.
This research must continue and develop with students as the world is ever-changing and adding new struggles for our young learners. “Experiences of adversity during formative developmental periods may jeopardize academic, social, and emotional learning in students” (Scott et al., 2021). Students have recently faced trauma, in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the development and implementation of social-emotional curriculum will assist students in finding their way through these events. A standardized, school-wide approach and system for social-emotional learning is in the best interest of all students and staff.
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