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Improving Social and Emotional Learning in Middle School

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Improving Social and Emotional Learning in Middle School

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

Research shows that social-emotional learning has a direct impact on the academic and overall success of students in educational environments and beyond. Effective social-emotional programs and strategies implemented with fidelity can improve school climate and culture, positively impacting students, teachers, staff, and families. Without explicit teaching of social-emotional concepts, students are not given the opportunities to reach their full potential to be well-rounded individuals with developed social-emotional skills that support their overall wellness. The findings of a variety of research related to social-emotional learning guided the school improvement plan that was created to successfully implement social-emotional learning practices into schools. The goal of this plan is to improve the overall climate and culture of the schools in which it is implemented by engaging all stakeholders in meaningful social-emotional learning.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, school climate and culture, professional development

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Improving Social and Emotional Learning in Middle School

Under current requirements of public schools, students are expected to perform academically; yet their social and emotional knowledge is often lacking which leads to behavior problems. The lack of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in schools in turn takes away from the opportunities for academic growth. There is a direct correlation between the social-emotional skills of a student and the likelihood of graduating from high school (Soland, 2022). Social and emotional learning can help students thrive in school, develop real world skills, build strong relationships, and even improve academic achievement (Loeb et al., 2019). Teachers who are provided with proper training to implement SEL in their classrooms have improved confidence in their own abilities as teachers overall (Flushman, 2021). The problem is that students and teachers' overall experience is impacted when SEL is not explicitly taught.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to improve the social and emotional skills of middle school students, reduce problem behaviors, and positively impact school culture. It is the author's goal that this school improvement project will provide guidance for Ames Middle School and schools in a similar context to implement an SEL program to guide daily interactions within schools and support the needs of students.

Research for this project's literature review was conducted using journals available through the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College. All of the articles were peer-reviewed. The author focused on articles that shared research related to social and emotional learning in primary, middle, and high schools. Due to the limited number of studies focused solely on middle school students, studies from other grade levels were included. Additionally, the author selected articles that highlighted the impact of social and emotional learning on teachers. This

scope of research allows us to understand the impact of social and emotional learning on both the teachers and the students.

The author found four main areas of research relevant to the implementation and outcomes of social-emotional learning. These areas were the impact on students, the impact on teachers, effective SEL programs, and effective SEL strategies. The belief is that when educators at Ames Middle School implement SEL strategies and lessons, negative student behaviors will decrease. Strong social-emotional skills amongst students as a result of implementation of SEL from teachers will improve overall school culture.

The author has organized the literature review by the unique impact of SEL on different groups, as well as the learning itself. The literature review will begin with the impact of SEL on teachers. Next the literature review will explore the impact of SEL on students. Then the literature review will focus on SEL programs. Finally, the literature review will focus on the SEL strategies that are proven to be effective in schools.

Review of the Literature

Impact of SEL on Teachers

Researcher Flushman et al. (2021) conducted a study to determine the impact of SEL practices on new teachers and how participation in SEL impacts their students. Participants in the study included 27 novice teachers, working in elementary, middle, and high schools in the same west coast district. The study took place throughout an entire academic school year. All participants were part of a New Teacher Learning Community (NTLC) which met regularly throughout the school year. Participation in the NTLC provided new teachers with opportunities to learn from veteran teachers, form an online support community to share resources, coteach with one another, and engage in SEL activities to build connections and confidence related to SEL teaching. At the conclusion of the school year, all participants in the NTLC were given satisfaction surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The findings of Flushman et al. (2021) based on the survey and interview responses concluded that new K–12 teachers who participated in the NTLC found increased confidence around key SEL constructs, including relational skills through fostering a sense of belonging, communication abilities, and decision-making through practice with problem solving.

Michalec et al. (2022) conducted research with a similar goal as Flushman et al. (2021), focusing on novice teachers and their ability to implement SEL, but this study included a uniquely diverse student population. Participants in the study included 21 novice teachers in K-12 schools within the same large district serving over 86,000 students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 21 novice teachers. The interviews focused on the teachers' experiences in the district with SEL, and the researchers pulled themes from their responses. Growth, relational trust, and empowerment were the three main themes that came about as a

result of the interviews. The researchers determined that SEL for teachers is important for their own development. The findings of Michalec et al. (2022) suggest that what is good for students is good for novice teachers. Teachers must learn before they can successfully teach their students, especially those with vastly different cultural backgrounds than their own.

The confidence of teachers, both new and veteran, in teaching SEL was also examined specific to special education teachers. Researcher Alsalamah (2023) conducted a study to determine the impact of teacher self-efficacy in teaching SEL strategies to students with learning disabilities. Participants in the study included 109 special education teachers in public elementary and middle schools in Saudi Arabia. The teachers were all given the same survey which required reflection on their own abilities to effectively teach SEL to their elementary and middle students with disabilities. Most teachers surveyed were identified as low and moderate self-efficacy based on responses in the survey. The findings of Alsalamah (2023) suggest that teachers require additional training and support to successfully teach SEL strategies to students with disabilities.

Support for teachers in implementing new programs and strategies is important, but teachers' beliefs play a significant role in the effectiveness of implementation as well. In their research, Miller et al. (2023) engaged 103 teachers from a large and diverse Minnesotan school district in a survey. The teacher participants taught students of varying ages in different content areas in grades K-12. Given one day, during professional development, teachers were to complete the survey which asked questions about their own implementation of Second Step, an SEL program initiated by the district, as well as their beliefs about the program. Similar to the findings of Alsalamah (2023), Miller et al. (2023) found the survey responses suggested that supporting teachers in implementing SEL practices remained a critical area of need in both

research and practice. Specifically, teacher beliefs regarding SEL is an area that still needs further exploration, given that beliefs can impact the uptake and use of evidence-based practices, and not all teachers had “bought-in” to the program. Supporting teachers in implementing SEL programs is needed for confidence to transfer into teaching.

Impact of SEL on Students

Researcher Loeb et al. (2019) conducted a large-scale study of students across California to determine the overall SEL competency of students to guide future learning. Over 150,000 students in grades 4-8 participated in this study due to their enrollment in California schools participating in the CORE program. The study took place over the course of two school years. All students were given surveys with scaled response options to identify their own SEL competencies and the effectiveness of current SEL practices. Researchers had access to academic information about all student participants. The findings of Loeb et al. (2019) showed that academic performance and social emotional intelligence were directly related. Students who had higher scores regarding SEL competencies also performed better academically than their peers.

While Loeb et al. (2019) looked at the impact of SEL on students in grades 4-8, researcher Müge et al. (2021) focused on the impact of SEL on middle school students in grades 6-7, specifically looking at the relationship between SEL and problem-solving skills. The participants included 295 students in sixth and seventh grade in public middle schools in Istanbul. As part of the study, the students were given surveys to determine the relationship between their social emotional skills and problem-solving skills. The results of the surveys showed that there was a significant correlation between confidence in problem-solving and metacognitive awareness. Similarly, there was a significant relationship between confidence in

problem solving skills and self-control and SEL. The findings from Müge et al. (2021) show that students with higher SEL competencies possess stronger problem-solving skills.

Espelage et al. (2015) also conducted research that followed middle school students as the participants, much like Müge et al. (2021). However, in this study students all had intellectual disabilities which was an important factor in this research. 123 students in sixth grade, then followed to seventh and eighth grade, participated in this study that spanned three school years. Over the course of these three years, an evidenced-based SEL program, *Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention*, was implemented with the goal of reducing bullying, physical aggression, and victimization among students with disabilities. At the end of the three years, students were provided with a survey to determine the effectiveness of the program and the impact on the students. The findings from Espelage et al. (2015) suggest that students with disabilities are disproportionately bullied due to lack of social and communication skills. When explicitly taught these skills through SEL, bullying issues are reduced.

Researcher Anderson-Butcher et al. (2021) conducted a unique study specific to the impact of SEL in youth sports. Participants in the study included just over 300 children aged 9 to 15. The children in this study attended a 19-day sports-based summer camp called Learning in Fitness and Education through Sports (LiFEsports) due to being socially vulnerable. The summer camp curriculum focused on self-control, effort, teamwork, and social responsibility, referred to as S.E.T.S. The student participants were given pre and post surveys that covered all areas of S.E.T.S. where they scored their own abilities. The findings of Anderson-Butcher et al. (2021) showed that curriculum alignment and training youth sport leaders and social workers to draw connections between sport activities and social skills proved to be critical in supporting positive developmental outcomes for majority of the students. Their post surveys showed impressive

growth when compared to the pre surveys after just 19 days, showing that SEL works with students in many capacities.

Effective SEL Programs

Researcher Neth et al. (2020) conducted a study to determine the impact of the SEL program, *Strong Kids*, on middle school students. *Strong Kids* has proven to be successful in elementary schools, so the researchers wanted to analyze the impact in middle schools. The participants include eight 7-8 grade students at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. None of the participants were identified with special education needs or had an individualized educational program. The study took place over the course of 12 school weeks with a 3-week gap in between for winter break. Two teachers implemented the *Strong Kids* program in their classrooms while researchers attended and took notes for all 12 lessons taught in the 12-week span. Students were given pretests and posttests about the SEL topics covered. The findings from Neth et al. (2020) suggest that *Strong Kids* is effective at improving students' social-emotional knowledge and internalizing symptoms.

Sousa et al. (2023) also used 7-8 grade student participants in their research, similar to Neth et al. (2020), focusing on the impact of a different program, *PAUMS SEL*. In their research, Sousa et al. (2020) involved 704 Portuguese students in seventh and eighth grade from 12 middle schools in Portugal. The goal of the research was to analyze the impact of *PAUMS SEL* in reducing social anxiety and withdrawal. Given pretests and posttests, participants self-identified their social anxiety and withdrawal prior to implementation of *PAUMS SEL* and again after. The findings of Sousa et al. (2023) indicated the *PAUMS SEL* program was effective in reducing social withdrawal and social anxiety. Teacher-student relationships were of highest importance in reduction.

Teacher-student relationships were identified as important in Sousa et al. (2023) to ensure successful SEL. In Soutter (2019), the researchers analyze the tension between teacher intent and student experience surrounding the SEL program implemented, *CASEL*. *CASEL* focuses on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The participants in this study include 1,000 students in fourth and fifth grade attending 12 schools across 3 states. The research took place over the course of one school year. Student participants were interviewed and given surveys to determine the impact of *CASEL* lessons on their own sense of self-empowerment and voice. The findings of Soutter (2019) showed a majority of the students referred to *CASEL* in terms of compliance and following rules rather than empowerment which was the goal. The findings suggest that teachers must clarify the intent of SEL programs and lessons to be most beneficial.

Researcher Gordon et al. (2016) conducted a study to determine the success of SEL through a “teaching personal and social responsibility” (TPSR) based after school program with disengaged middle school boys. Participants in the study included male middle school students who were at risk for graduating high school. While attendance was not consistent, between 6-14 boys participated in the program over two years. The effectiveness of *TPSR* is being tested in this study through “Project Leadership”. *TPSR* is a widely implemented sport and physical activity based instructional model that offers the opportunity to implement best practices in SEL. The researchers conducted interviews to supplement their checklists and field notes. The findings of Gordon et al. (2016) showed that *TPSR* implementation was able to successfully foster SEL in boys that attended regularly, and the strategies used in the program were closely aligned with a SEL framework. The boys in the leadership club felt that the program fostered opportunities to develop and practice SEL principles.

While research from Neth et al. (2020), Sousa et al, (2023), Soutter (2019), and Gordon et al. (2016) highlighted specific SEL programs, researcher Germinaro et al. (2022) created a program that fit the needs of the students involved. Participants included 69 diverse students in fourth through sixth grade from seven participating schools. The research took place over 5 months at IslandWood, a 250-acre nonprofit immersive outdoor education center created to improve access to nature-based learning experiences. A rubric, created by IslandWood staff, used a scale to rate students to the first and last day of their experience. They were rated on communication, collaboration, peer interaction, and decision making. The findings of Germinaro et al. (2022) showed that the ratings of students' skills across all domains significantly increased over the course of the program.

Effective SEL Strategies

Researcher Bailey et al. (2019) conducted a study to determine the impact of the *EASEL* strategies on students' SEL. Participants in the study included an unspecified number of low-income prekindergarten-8 grade students. The study took place over 6 weeks during a summer program. The goal of the summer program was to exclusively implement *EASEL* strategies to improve overall SEL scores for students. Students were tested at the beginning and end of the program and teacher focus groups were conducted throughout to discuss the implementation of *EASEL* strategies and impact on students and teachers alike. Findings from Bailey et al. (2019) showed reports about students' growth on specific cognitive, emotional, and social skills revealed schoolwide improvement in every SEL area. Students that began the summer with the lowest scores showed the most growth over the course of the summer.

McBride et al. (2016) conducted a study involving all seventh-grade students; 148 students in an intervention school and 151 seventh-grade students in a comparison school. The

study looked at implementation of SEL strategies during social studies classes once a week for roughly an hour for an entire school year. Students were given pretest and posttest surveys in the fall and spring to understand changes in student attitudes regarding their belonging and engagement in school, self-worth, perceptions of community safety, and civic duty. Findings from McBride et al. (2016) suggest that students who participated in the yearlong intervention experienced significant reductions in failing grades and skipping classes compared with the comparison group. The findings show that SEL strategies have positive effects on behaviors related to academic success.

Researcher Jackson (2021) conducted a study comparing the impact of SEL to long-term successes. This research was conducted within Chicago Public Schools (CPS) with 133 public high schools, including neighborhood, charter, vocational, and magnet schools participating. All 9th grade students enrolled in CPS participated in this study; this is roughly 157,630 students. The research spanned 6 years where students were given annual surveys about social-emotional development and school climate in the CPS. In this survey, students share their experiences, behaviors, and attitudes related to school and the SEL strategies that were being implemented. Because of the large amount of participation across many schools, results of the surveys varied. Findings from Jackson (2021) discovered that some high schools are better than others at helping students develop healthy social lives, community connections, and life skills and habits. Students who attend these schools are more likely to experience positive outcomes in school and after graduation.

Forber-Pratt et al. (2024) conducted a study within Chicago Public Schools much like Jackson (2021), however this study focused on a specific middle school within CPS. In this study, motivational interviewing, a known therapy strategy, is analyzed to determine if it

supports students in making positive social choices to impact their mental, physical, and emotional health. The participants in this study include 20 middle school students in grades six through eight identified with disabilities and/or at risk for disability-identification in regard to behavior. Over 9 weeks, participants were involved in motivational interviewing intervention. This was designed as weekly one-on-one student meetings with a trained facilitator to develop SEL skills including social skills, group management, bullying/cyberbullying, and other key social emotional learning standards. Students were selected based on academic performance, absenteeism, behavioral misconduct, and emotional stability. Findings from Forber-Pratt (2024) suggest that the support of a trusted adult in the students' lives as being meaningful for social, emotional, and academic development. Participants learned a variety of strategies to reduce their involvement in interpersonal conflict with their peers and teachers through the study.

School Profile

Student Performance

Ames Community School District is located in central Iowa and educates the students who live in the city of Ames. In the 2023-2024 school year, the district served students at Northwood Preschool, five elementary schools (i.e., Sawyer, Meeker, Mitchell, Fellows, and Edwards), Ames Middle School, and Ames High School. In 2023 there were 988 students enrolled in the middle school which includes grades 6-8. According to the Iowa Department of Education for the 2023-2024 school year, Ames Middle School average achievement in mathematics was 52.07/100 and the average achievement for English Language Arts was 51.94/100. Ames Middle School's overall performance scored 54.59/100 in 2023, falling just below the state average of 54.81/100 (State of Iowa, 2023).

Community, Student, and School Characteristics

Ames, Iowa, home of all Ames Community School District Schools, has a current population of 66,427 based on the 2020 census. This number is unique as it includes the population of students attending Iowa State University, who live in Ames during the academic school year (About Ames | City of Ames, 2024). The students of Ames Middle School were 63.41% white, 11.59% Hispanic/Latinx, 10.73% black, 7.27% Asian, 6.75% multiracial, .17% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and .09% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Ames Middle School is made up of 5.2% English language learners and 15.9% students receiving special education services, while 34.2% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch (Ames Middle School Fact Sheet, 2023).

Parental Involvement

In the Ames Community School District (CSD), there are many avenues of communication and information sharing that help keep parents and families informed. The Ames CSD uses Infinite Campus as the main student record management system, which also houses student grades and attendance and is always accessible to families. Ames Middle School uses Google Classroom as the online educational platform in which students complete and turn in work. Parents and guardians are added to these classrooms to support their students and hold them accountable. As of the 2023-2024 school year, Ames Middle School eliminated formal parent-teacher conferences. Instead, families are encouraged to communicate with teachers directly to ask questions, collaborate, and support their students. Parents and families also have the opportunity to participate in the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), run for school board, sponsor clubs and activities, and volunteer within the school. Additionally, the entire Ames CSD newly implemented P3 Campus, an anonymous reporting program, which provides students and families with a resource to anonymously report concerns or issues they may be experiencing.

School Mission and Vision

Ames CSD's mission "is to inspire and empower all students and staff to pursue and maximize their personal and educational potential, grounded in strong community and family partnerships and guided by high quality educators who commit to innovative instruction getting every student what they need to be successful" (Ames Community School District, 2024). The district is working on select focus areas that support the mission when paired with actionable objectives. First, with physical, mental, and emotional health and safety in mind, the district wants all students to thrive in a safe environment that facilitates learning and promotes healthy habits. Next, through the lens of instructional framework and programs, the district aims to provide engaging curriculum and instruction to all students designed to meet the needs of all

learners. Then, to support the diversity of needs, clear systems will be put in place to identify and teach to the abilities and inabilities of students. Next, very simply put, in an effort to organize responsiveness and communication, students will be provided with feedback. To build stakeholder engagement and support, the district will create community partnerships that benefit students and their pursuits. Finally, the district will work to retain diverse staff who engage in continued learning for the benefit of the students (Ames Community School District, 2024).

Current Student Learning Goals

Students at Ames Middle School are assessed through routine testing which allows for academic goals to be set and met within the scope of each school year. MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) testing is completed three times over the course of a school year: in the fall, winter, and spring. Students engage in goal setting with their homeroom teacher after the fall MAP assessment results are available. During this session, the homeroom teacher and student look at the assessment scores and create both winter and spring growth goals. These goals are revisited after the winter assessment scores are available. At this time adjustments may be made for the spring assessment score. All students are also assessed through ISASP (Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress) each spring. Students' ISASP score is more of a culminating result for the entire school year, where MAP allows for shorter intervals between and growth to be measured more frequently. Ames Middle School also has set a goal for students to meet the social expectations of being thoughtful, responsible, and safe. While there is no formal assessment of these goals, students are held to these standards throughout the entire school.

Teacher Instruction and Professional Development Practices

Teachers in the Ames CSD are working to fully implement the Danielson Framework for Teaching in their classrooms. This framework focuses on four main parts: (a) planning and

preparation, (b) the classroom environment, (c) instruction, and (d) professional responsibilities. With all teachers aligned in this framework, it makes collaboration and curriculum alignment more seamless. Across all schools in the district, teachers participate in professional learning communities (PLCs) that pertain to either their grade level, content area, or both. Teachers in the secondary schools often participate in multiple PLCs. For example, a 7th grade science teacher is part of both the 7th grade PLC as well as the school science PLC. Teachers grow professionally during once-a-month full-day professional development sessions. These sessions focus on data analysis, curriculum review and creation, addressing building goals, mental health training, and other trainings as necessary.

Needs Assessment

The Ames Community School District believes that “a sense of belonging, being physically and mentally healthy, and possessing emotional wellbeing are essential to learning” (Ames Community School District, 2024). The district currently has many supports in place to ensure that students have the opportunity to be physically healthy. Through required physical education, a wide variety of sports, clubs, and many extracurriculars, students’ physical health is a top priority. Unfortunately, students’ mental and emotional wellbeing is suffering, which makes sense of belonging a bigger challenge. The lack of social and emotional intelligence in students is having an equally important impact on teachers and staff. Schools within the district are challenged with a cyclical dysfunction because of the lack of social and emotional learning taking place. Student behavior is the result of the lack of SEL, teachers are burnt out from dealing with extreme behaviors and emotions, and the mental health of students and teachers alike are suffering.

In order to support students and teachers, there must be social and emotional learning opportunities implemented throughout the school district to foster a stronger school climate and culture. At Ames Middle School, one of the building goals for the 2023-2024 school year is to increase the rate of students reporting positive responses to feeling sense of belonging at school, across program and demographic groups, as measured by Panorama Survey data from the 2022-2023 school year. The Ames CSD was in just the 10th percentile compared to other schools around the country when it comes to sense of belonging. (Panorama Education, 2023) Ames CSD, and the middle school specifically, need to implement social and emotional learning into the students’ daily schedule to make an impact great enough to improve not only the scores on

the Panorama Survey, but to improve the overall climate and culture for students, teachers, and all staff.

Data Analysis

Each school year in the spring, students, staff, and families in the Ames Community School District participate in a survey that focuses on the climate and culture within the district. This survey, referred to as the Panorama Survey, is an online survey designed by the company Panorama Education. “The Panorama Culture and Climate Survey includes questions around social and emotional learning, school satisfaction, and staff and family engagement, among others. The purpose of this survey is to gather perception data from key stakeholders” (Ames Community School District, 2024). In reports from the 2023 survey results, responses for students in grades 3-5 were combined, as well as students in grades 6-12. Teacher and staff responses are separate, as are family responses due to the nature of the questions.

With 1,800 responses for students in grades 6-12, approximately 80% of students participated in the survey (Panorama Education, 2023). Focusing on the secondary grade responses, students were asked questions that fell into four categories: (a) diversity and inclusion, (b) valuing of school, (c) school climate, and (d) sense of belonging. Regarding diversity and inclusion, overall responses were 75% favorable. This puts the Ames CSD in the 60th percentile compared to other schools across the country on this topic. The question with the most favorable response in this category reads “how often do you have classes with students from different racial, ethnic or cultural backgrounds?”. Eighty-three percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 1), meaning their responses were “almost always” or “frequently”. The question with the least favorable response in this category reads “how fairly do students in your school treat people from different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds?”. Seventy percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 2), meaning their responses were “almost always” or “frequently” (Panorama Education, 2023).

Figure 1
Student responses: Diversity and Inclusion

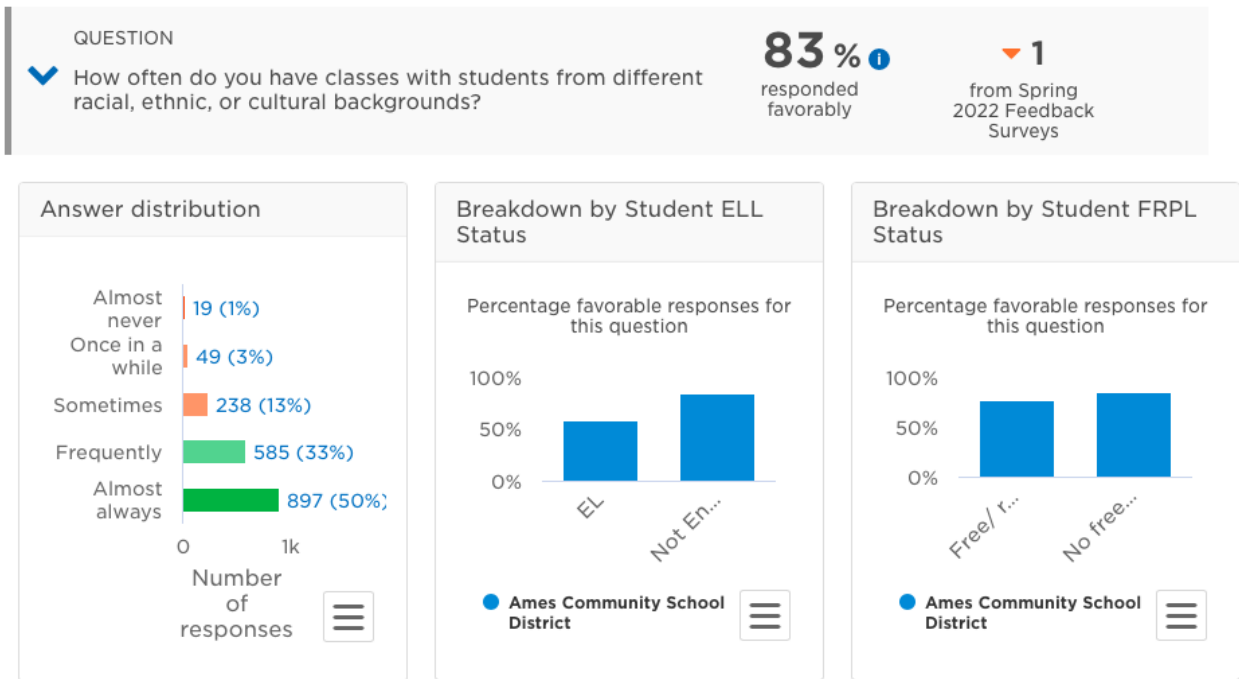
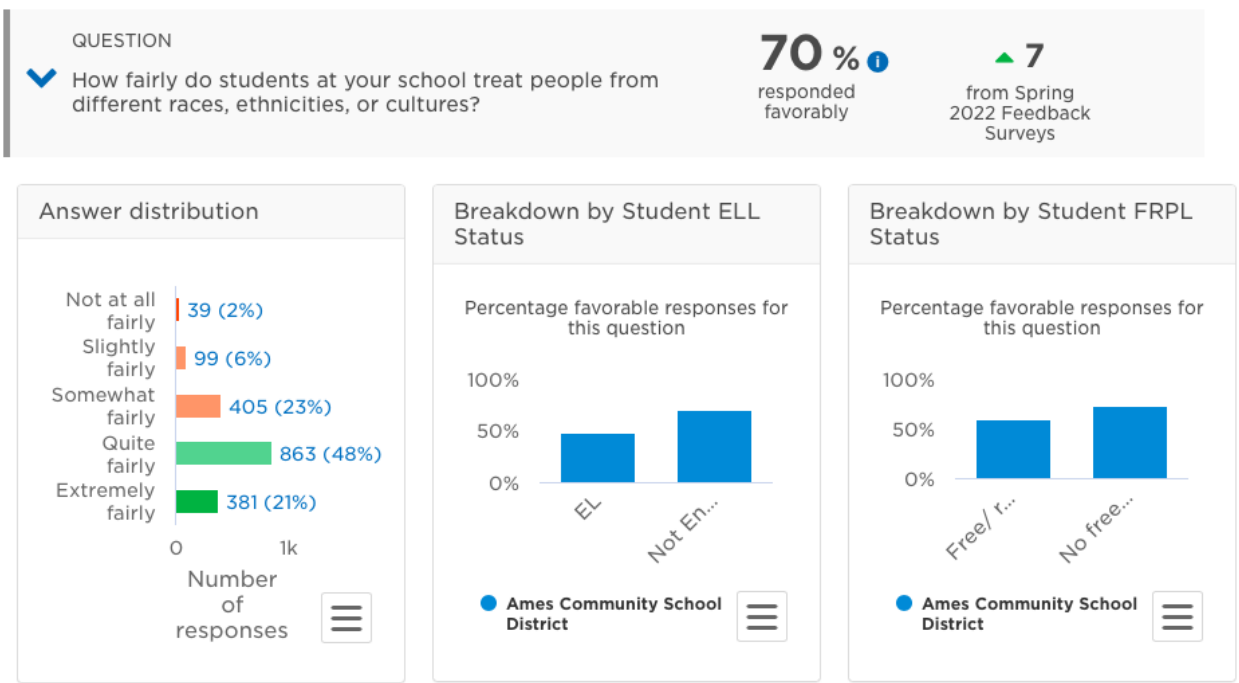


Figure 2
Student responses: Diversity and Inclusion



In regard to valuing of school, overall responses were 48% favorable. This puts the Ames CSD in the 10th percentile compared to other schools across the country on this topic. The

question with the most favorable response in this category reads “how important is it to you to do well in your classes?”. Seventy-eight percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 3), meaning their responses were “extremely important” or “quite important”. The question with the least favorable response in this category reads “how often do you use ideas from school in your daily life?”. Nineteen percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 4), meaning their responses were “almost always” or “frequently” (Panorama Education, 2023).

Figure 3
Student responses: Valuing of School

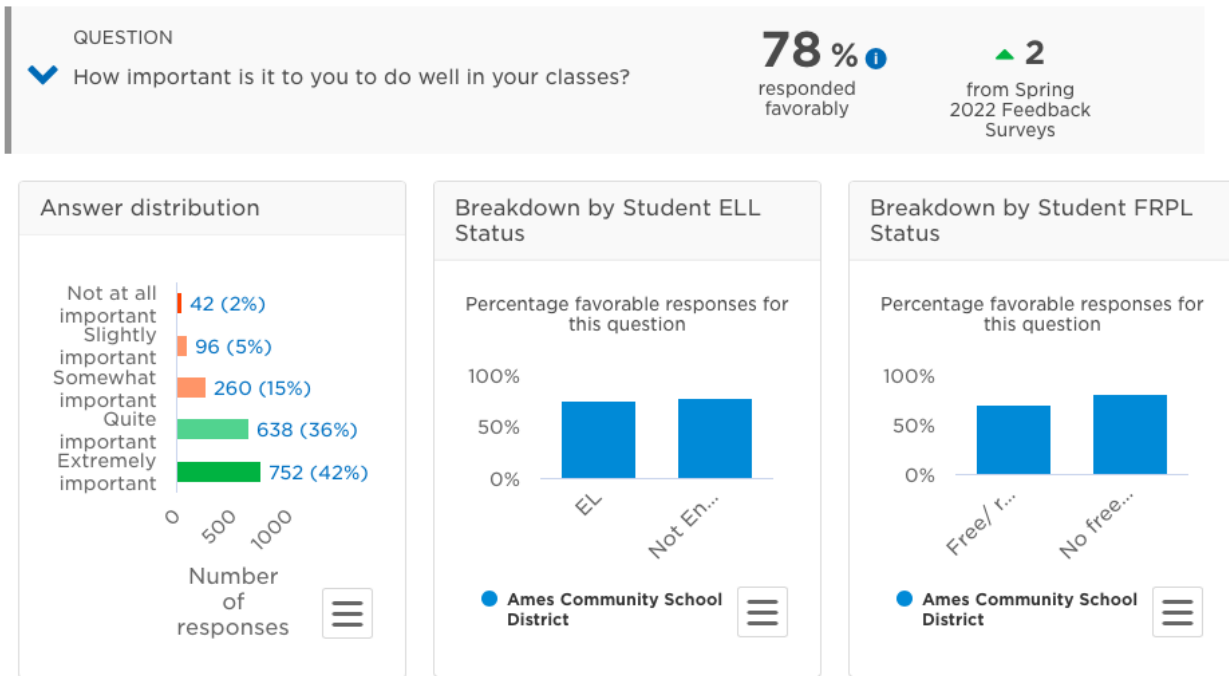
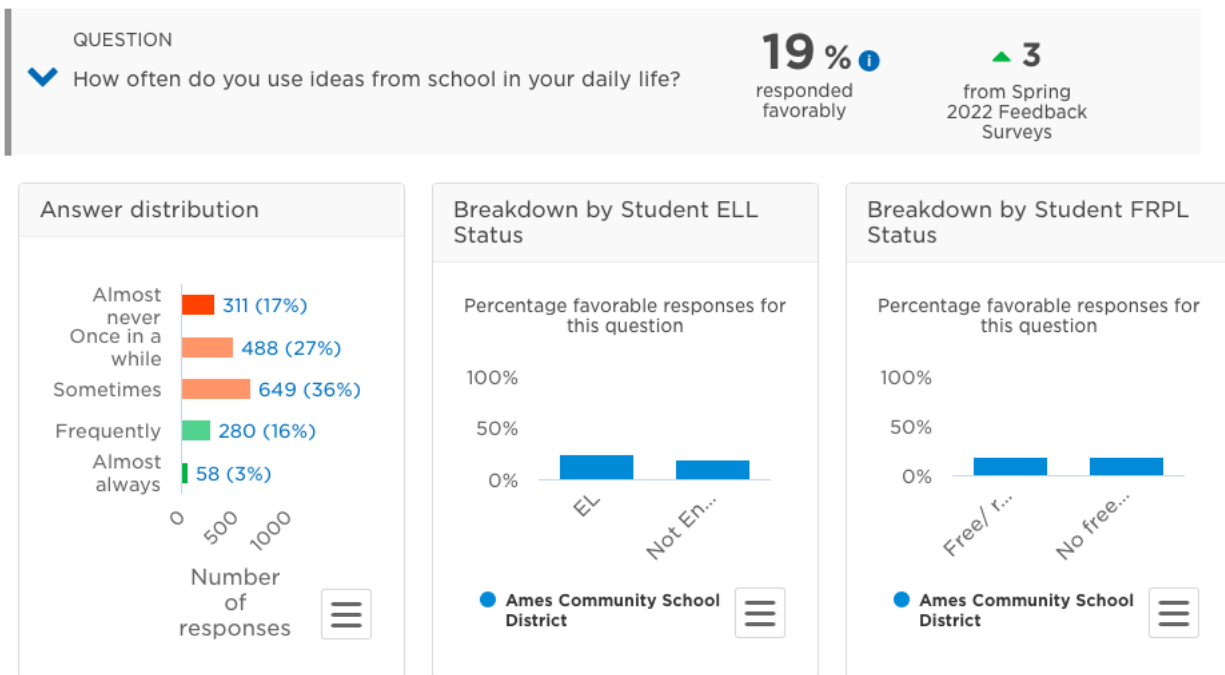


Figure 4
Student responses: Valuing of School



In the category of school climate, overall responses were 46% favorable. This again puts the Ames CSD in the 10th percentile compared to other schools across the country on this topic. The question with the most favorable response in this category reads “how fair or unfair are the rules for students at this school?”. Fifty-eight percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 5), meaning their responses were “very fair” or “somewhat fair”. The question with the least favorable response in this category reads “at your school, how much does the behavior of other students hurt or help your learning?”. Twenty-three percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 6), meaning their responses were “helps my learning a tremendous amount”, “helps my learning some”, and “helps my learning a little bit” (Panorama Education, 2023).

Figure 5
Student responses: School Climate

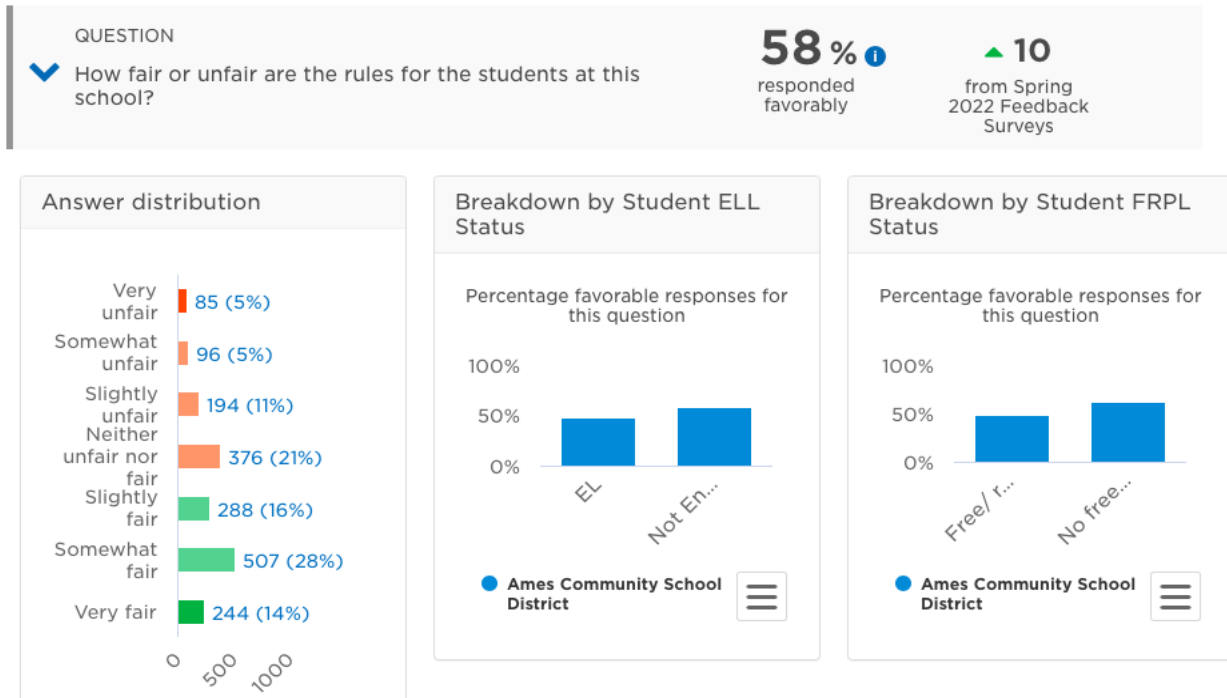
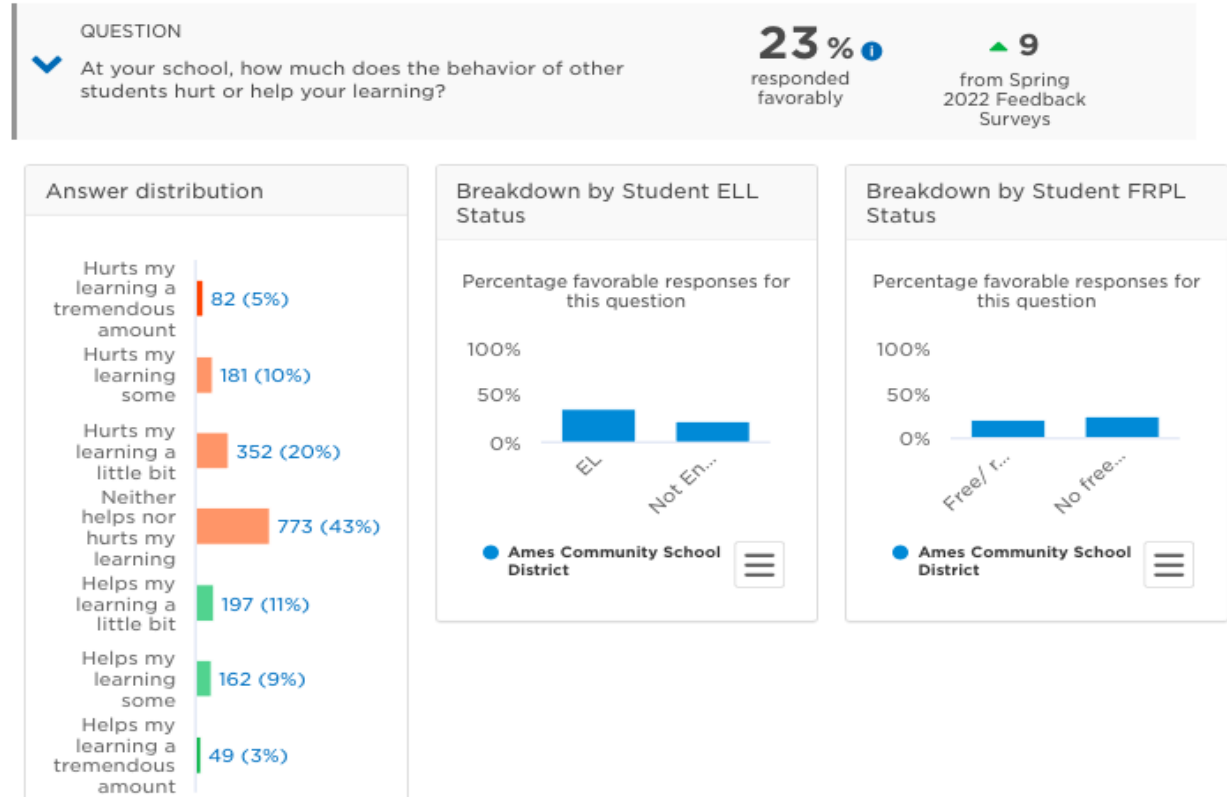


Figure 6
Student responses: School Climate



Finally, regarding sense of belonging, overall responses were 40% favorable. This, yet again, puts Ames CSD in the 10th percentile compared to other schools across the country on this topic. The question with the most favorable response in this category reads “overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?”. Forty-six percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 7), meaning their responses were “completely” or “belong quite a bit”. The question with the least favorable response in this category reads “how connected do you feel to the adults at your school?”. Thirty percent of students answered favorably (see Figure 8), meaning their responses were “extremely connected” and “quite connected” (Panorama Education, 2023).

Figure 7
Student responses: Sense of Belonging

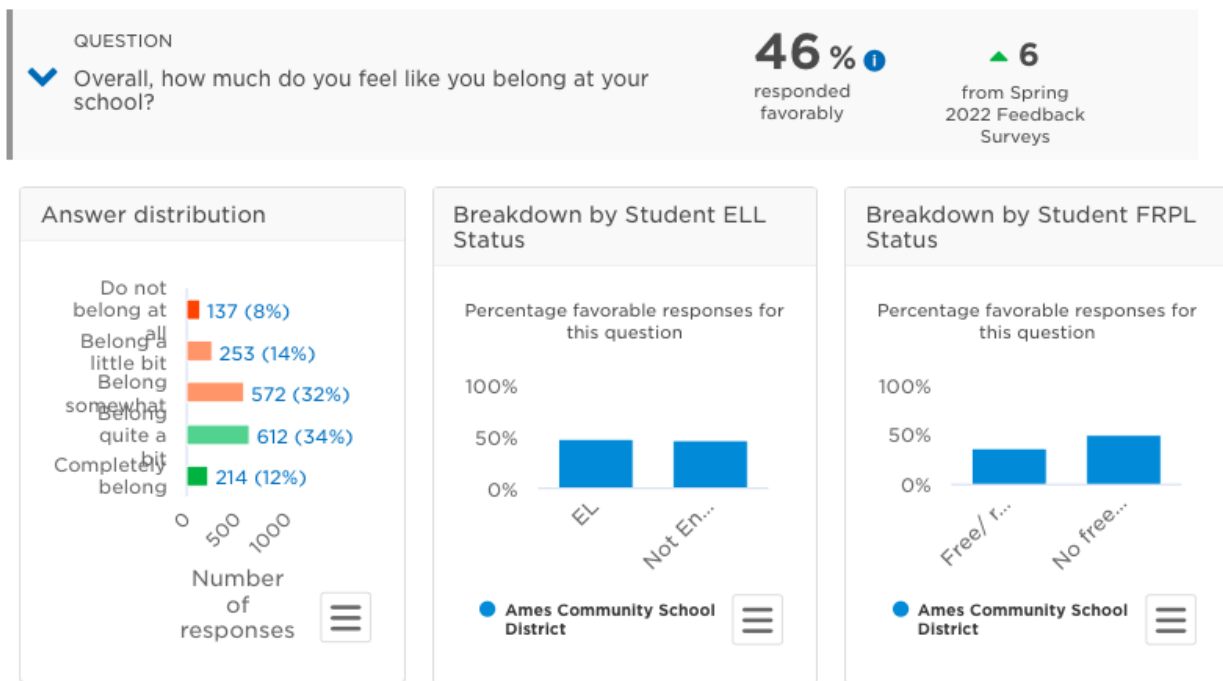
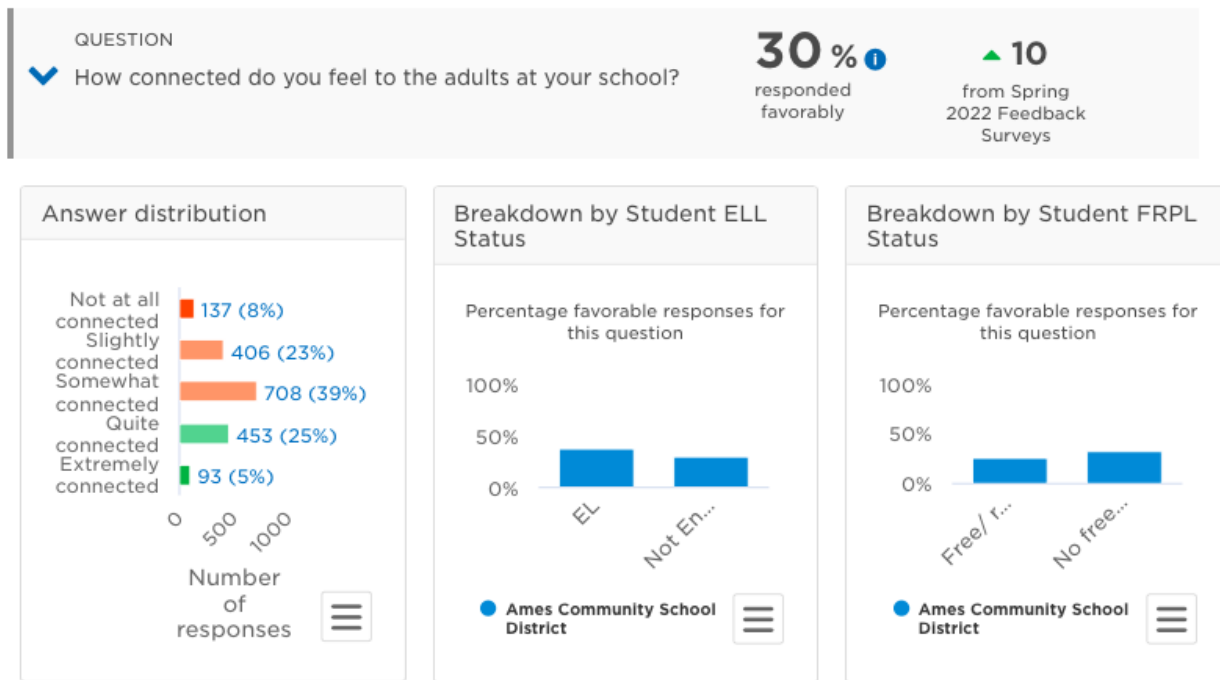


Figure 8
Student responses: Sense of Belonging



Staff and teacher survey responses were recorded separately despite being asked the same questions. These questions fell into four different categories: (a) school leadership, (b) school climate, (c) professional learning, and (d) feedback and coaching. Focusing on school climate, staff responses were 62% favorable. This puts Ames CSD in the 50th percentile compared to other schools across the country on this topic. Teacher responses were 51% favorable, putting the district in the 30th percentile compared to other schools across the country on this topic (Panorama Education, 2023).

Families of students within Ames CSD were asked a separate set of questions that fell into four different categories: (a) barriers to engagement, (b) school safety, (c) school climate, and (d) school fit. Focusing on school climate, parent responses were 62% favorable. This puts Ames CSD in the 50th percentile compared to other schools across the country on this topic (Panorama Education, 2023).

Analysis of these results shows that Ames CSD is struggling when it comes to school climate from the perspective of students, teachers and staff, and families. The data shows that the majority of students care about school and want to do well, however the barriers of negative school climate and culture could impede this. Students are struggling to feel connected at school and the behavior of others has a direct impact on their beliefs about school. Connections between students and adults are lacking, and teachers are feeling the negative effects of overall school climate which impacts their abilities as educators. There is significant need for improvement to Ames CSD culture, climate, and social-emotional learning.

Future research should again assess the culture and climate of the Ames CSD through the use of the Panorama Survey. Additional surveys may be necessary to address issues that are specific to the district and schools. For this school improvement plan, data will be collected using the Panorama Survey with goals to improve scores directly related to climate, culture, and SEL.

Action Plan

Through the analysis of research specific to social emotional learning conducted by Neth et al. (2020), McBride et al. (2016), Forber-Pratt (2024), Soutter (2019), and more, clear themes have emerged as vital to the success of SEL implementation to ensure success for students. A variety of SEL programs and strategies were reviewed through this research, some of which will have a direct impact on Ames Middle School through the implementation of this school improvement plan. The strategies selected meet the specific needs and areas identified for improvement for the students, teachers, and staff at Ames Middle School. If implemented with consistency and intentionality, this school improvement plan could have a great and lasting impact on all participants and stakeholders.

For this school improvement plan to be successful, there must be consistency across all facets of the plan and implementation. Research shows that despite the specific SEL program, consistency is what drives the program forward. Neth et al. (2020) focused on the *Strong Kids* program, which was implemented with middle school students over the course of 12 weeks. Through consistent once-a-week lessons focused on promoting resilience and fostering coping skills, results of the *Strong Kids* program showed improvement in social-emotional knowledge amongst the students.

Similarly, McBride et al. (2016) conducted research amongst middle school students in seventh grade with once-a-week lessons for approximately an hour over the course of an entire school year. These lessons focused on belonging and school engagement, self-worth, community safety, and civic duty. With the seamless integration of these SEL lessons into the social studies curriculum on a consistent basis, student participants experienced significant reductions in failing grades and skipping classes due to the gained social-emotional knowledge. Due to the success of

consistently implemented SEL programs and lessons, Ames Middle School will implement twenty-minute lessons twice weekly, during scheduled homeroom times. With grade levels 6-8 in the building, not all grade levels will engage in SEL lessons during homeroom on the same days. Homeroom is a time used for grade level meetings, extracurricular meetings, and whole school assemblies. Due to this, lessons will be staggered with no lessons taking place on Fridays for whole school assemblies.

Equally as important as consistency throughout this school improvement plan is the need for intentionality amongst the teachers, staff, and students of Ames Middle School. In order for students to fully invest themselves in the learning that will take place, teachers and staff must first invest themselves into the SEL programming and the positive changes that will come about as a result of their efforts. Research from Forber-Pratt et al. (2024) centered around nine weeks of motivational interview interventions with student participants. These interventions developed SEL skills including group management, bullying, and other social skills. The findings from this study showed that the biggest factor in the success of the strategies implemented was the connection between the students and their teachers. Building a trusting relationship proved to be most important for student social, emotional, and academic development.

Research from Soutter (2019) analyzed the relationship between teachers and students through the implementation of the SEL program, *CASEL*. Specifically, the researchers looked at teacher intent and how that impacted students. While *CASEL* focuses on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, the biggest takeaways from the research had less to do with the intended SEL for students and more to do with the teaching. Students overwhelmingly felt as if the SEL lessons were intended to make them more compliant and focused on rule-following. It was evident that teachers needed to

clarify the intent of the learning taking place and be invested themselves so that students can then be successful. To support teachers and gauge their feelings about SEL, they will all be given a Google Forms survey about their opinions of SEL prior to beginning lessons with students. This survey (see Appendix A) will allow the SEL Team to address any feelings that may negatively impact the implementation of SEL programming and lessons prior to teaching.

This school improvement plan can only be successful if rolled-out with an appropriate timeline to give all stakeholders the opportunity to truly invest in the SEL that will take place. The plan will be broken into three main phases to allow for proper learning amongst teachers and staff before ever reaching the students. Phase one will focus on planning, phase two will center around teacher learning, and phase three will be the implementation of SEL with students.

In phase one, beginning in the summer of 2024, the SEL Team will be decided through applications of teachers within Ames Middle School. The SEL team must be made up of two representatives from each grade level, two special education teachers, all school counselors, all instructional coaches, and one administrator. The first goal of the SEL Team will be sending the teacher survey, found in the Appendix, to better understand the Ames Middle School staff as a whole regarding SEL. Next, the team will determine an SEL program with strategies and lessons that best fit the needs of students, staff, and teachers at Ames Middle School. Once an SEL program is decided, the SEL Team will work to plan professional development sessions throughout the entire 2024-2025 school year. This is phase two of the school improvement plan. With approximately one full day of professional development each month throughout the school year, along with the in-service days at the beginning of the school year, roughly 10 sessions will be planned to prepare teachers for implementation of the SEL programming for the 2025-2026

school year. Phase three is the roll-out of the SEL program and full implementation with students.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Timeline

For this school improvement plan to be implemented in a meaningful and impactful way, ample time must be allotted for teacher and staff learning before SEL programming reaches the students. Because of this, the total timeline for this school improvement plan is just over two years. Phase one of the plan begins in the summer of 2024 as seen in Table 1, phase two begins in the fall of 2024 and spans the next year as seen in Table 2, and phase three begins in the fall of 2025 as seen in Table 3.

Table 1

Phase One: Summer 2024 - SEL Team Planning

May 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL Team applications due
June 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL Team determined by administrator • SEL Team created and distributes Teacher SEL survey to all staff • SEL programs evaluated by SEL Team
July 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL program chosen by SEL Team • SEL team trained in SEL program • SEL team begins planning for professional development trainings
August 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL team plans and designs all professional development sessions for the 2024-2025 school year

Table 2

Phase Two: 2024-2025 School Year - Teacher Training

August 2024 8/20/24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half-day professional development session introducing SEL program to all staff
September 2024 9/16/24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-hour professional development training session for all staff • 1-hour breakout groups led by SEL Team leaders • SEL team meets to discuss and prepare for next session

<p>October 2024 10/7/24</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-hour professional development training session for all staff • 1-hour breakout groups led by SEL Team leaders • SEL team meets to discuss and prepare for next session
<p>November 2024 11/4/24</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-hour professional development training session for all staff • 1-hour breakout groups led by SEL Team leaders • SEL team meets to discuss and prepare for next session
<p>December 2024</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL Team distributes Teacher SEL survey to all staff for mid-year check-in • SEL team meets to discuss survey responses
<p>January 2025 1/13/25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-hour professional development training session for all staff • 1-hour breakout groups led by SEL Team leaders • SEL team meets to discuss and prepare for next session
<p>February 2025 2/10/25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-hour professional development training session for all staff • 1-hour breakout groups led by SEL Team leaders • SEL team meets to discuss and prepare for next session
<p>March 2025</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL Team leaders meet with grade level teams/PLCs to address questions, concerns, and facilitate practice lessons
<p>April 2025 4/7/25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-hour breakout groups led by SEL Team leaders with grade level teams and/or PLCs • SEL team meets to discuss and prepare for next session
<p>May 2025 5/5/25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-hour breakout groups led by SEL Team leaders with grade level teams and/or PLCs • SEL Team distributes Teacher SEL survey to all staff for end-of-year check-in • SEL team meets to discuss survey responses

Table 3*Phase Three: 2025-2026 School Year – Student Implementation*

<p>August 2024</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEL Team meets to prepare all materials
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half-day professional development to review all SEL program expectations, distribute materials, and complete practice lessons in small groups
September – October 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeroom teachers facilitate SEL lessons twice weekly • SEL team leaders meet with grade level teams/PLCs monthly to address questions, concerns, and share celebrations
November – December 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeroom teachers facilitate SEL lessons twice weekly • SEL team leaders meet with grade level teams/PLCs monthly to address questions, concerns, and share celebrations
January – February 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeroom teachers facilitate SEL lessons twice weekly • SEL team leaders meet with grade level teams/PLCs monthly to address questions, concerns, and share celebrations
March – April 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeroom teachers facilitate SEL lessons twice weekly • SEL team leaders meet with grade level teams/PLCs monthly to address questions, concerns, and share celebrations • Students, staff, and families complete the Panorama Survey
May 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeroom teachers facilitate SEL lessons twice weekly • SEL Team distributes Teacher SEL survey to all staff for end-of-year check-in

Staff Responsibilities

Amongst the staff at Ames Middle School, much importance and responsibility is placed on those that make up the SEL Team comprised of two representatives from each grade level, two special education teachers, all school counselors, all instructional coaches, and one administrator. These leaders are not only responsible for choosing the SEL program that best fits the needs for Ames Middle School, but they must also be proficient enough with the program that they are able to train the entire staff. The SEL Team will put in a lot of time and effort to plan for professional development sessions, support teachers as they learn, and be a wealth of

knowledge regarding SEL. The make-up of the SEL Team is highly important as they will guide the success of implementation.

The teachers of Ames Middle School are critical to the success of this school improvement plan. Teachers are responsible for not only following the lessons of the SEL program but teaching with intentionality. To truly reach the students and make an impact that goes beyond the lesson, teachers must believe in what they are teaching and model the behaviors and actions asked of the students. They should collaborate with one another and not let the lessons stop in homeroom. Teachers share the responsibility of continuing to practice social-emotional skills throughout the entire school day.

Data Collection

Throughout the implementation of this school improvement plan, teachers and staff will engage in the Teacher SEL survey four times: once prior training, again mid-year during phase two while teachers are being trained, once at the end of the training year for teachers, and once more at the end of the first year of implementation with students. The data collected from these surveys will help the SEL Team guide the learning that needs to take place for teachers to be adequately trained. Additionally, it will allow for growth to be measured amongst the teachers and staff regarding their own attitudes, beliefs, and abilities with SEL. To gather data from students along with teachers and parents, the Panorama Survey will be given toward the end of the school year. The results of this survey compared to the previous two years will show the growth related to culture and climate that has been made as the result of SEL implementation. This survey is given annually and can be used to compare previous results for years to come with continued improvement focused on SEL as the goal.

Barriers and Challenges

The biggest challenge in ensuring the success of this school improvement plan is the consistency in which the SEL lessons are taught. While teachers will be given ample training and a schedule to follow, there are many factors that could still impact the teaching that takes place. Each teacher is unique in their own teaching style which may or not play well into the SEL program's lessons. Each homeroom also has a mix of students with varying skills and abilities. The engagement level of students is somewhat dependent on the teacher and partially on the student themselves. This cannot be controlled directly, therefore the SEL lessons may have different levels of success within different homeroom classes and amongst different students.

Conclusion

Schools are designed to support students academically and prepare them for the future. However, for students to meet their full potential academically, they must also be competent socially and emotionally. Social and emotional learning helps students to thrive in school, develop real world skills, build strong relationships, and improve academic achievement (Loeb et al., 2019). The problem is that students are not being taught social-emotional skills explicitly, and their overall educational experience is impacted because of it. For schools to support their students in developing social and emotional skills, they must implement SEL programming for all students.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to highlight the challenges schools are faced with due to the lack of social-emotional competence and the impact this has on the overall climate and culture of the educational environment. Not only are students impacted by poor climate and culture, staff, teachers, and families are affected as well. Implementing an SEL program at Ames Middle School is a major step toward improving the climate and culture of the school, connecting students and teachers, and preparing students for a future with strong social-emotional skills. This school improvement plan is a guide to successful implementation that will greatly benefit the students, staff, and families of Ames Middle School.

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Appendix A

Examples of Teacher SEL Google Form Survey Questions and Response Options

Questions	Response Options
AMS staff strives to promote student social and emotional knowledge/skills.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree/disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree
I believe that social-emotional skills are related to student academic success.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree/disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree
I integrate SEL into my academic lessons.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree/disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree
The disciplinary plans for AMS promote student social and emotional wellness.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree/disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree
SEL will benefit the students of AMS.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree/disagree<input type="checkbox"/> Agree<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree
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