

# Reading Partners

Student Social and Emotional Learning  
Outcomes Evaluation

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## Student Social and Emotional Learning Outcomes Evaluation

Submitted to:

Alan Miyakawa  
Reading Partners  
[alan.miyakawa@readingpartners.org](mailto:alan.miyakawa@readingpartners.org)



# A Focus on Social Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an umbrella term referring to social and emotional competencies and skills that matter for success not only in school but also in life. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. Since the 1990s, SEL has become increasingly recognized as a critical component of whole education. With this recognition, intentional and explicit efforts to support SEL competencies through education have grown exponentially. This growth is supported by a strong evidence base that school-based SEL programs not only result in improved SEL, but in notable and meaningful gains in academic performance. Similarly, research suggests that out-of-school time programs can also influence SEL, and in turn academic performance, when the focus on SEL is sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Out-of-school time programs are well situated to support student SEL. Research shows that out-of-school programs are most successful when they meet the needs of the whole child, and SEL improves when youth have opportunities to practice SEL skills in different settings. Further, there is evidence that literacy and SEL can be developed simultaneously among early elementary students.

While Reading Partners has always emphasized student literacy outcomes, they have also long believed that the deep and sustained relationships that students develop with their tutors and AmeriCorps members help to foster gains in skills. Reading Partners first explored SEL outcomes during the 2017-18 school year. (10ca-7.3 22.3 (b)-11.2 n(u)-1.8 (t)2.9 (c)DE11.1 (b)-8 (b)TJ -0.3h.315 Td [(1)-DE11.1 L(o)Tp7.7 (a)0(1)



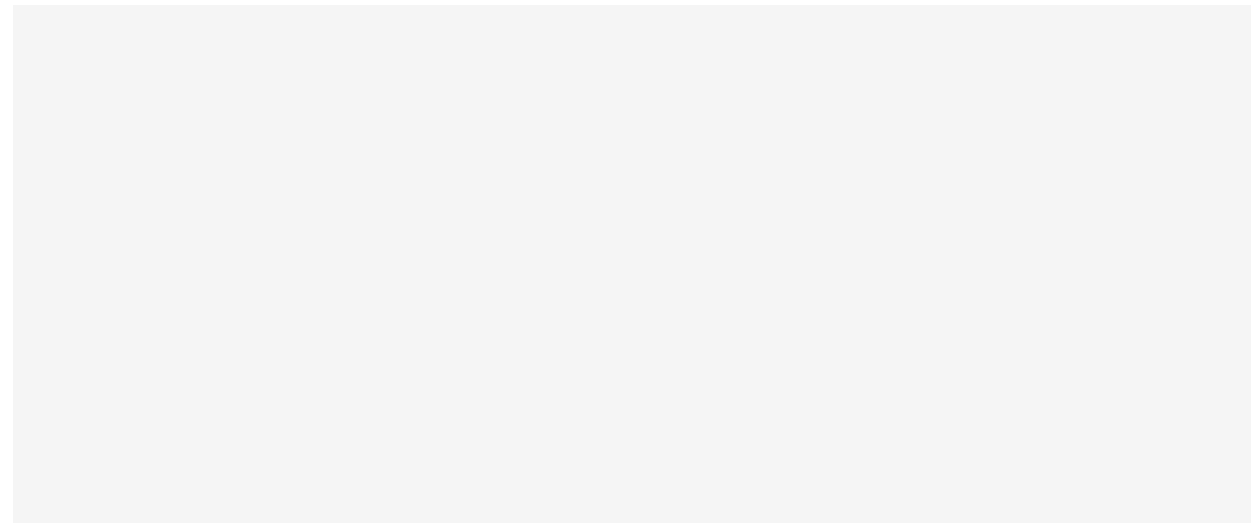
- Utilized a direct assessment of student SEL competencies rather than a teacher report of behaviors, providing a more proximal measure of the target outcomes and removing the restriction of limiting assessment to behaviors that were observed in the classroom or in a session and
- Considered the extent to which student characteristics, tutor characteristics, and program characteristics influenced implementation of the SEL curriculum and student SEL outcomes.

# Approach

During the 2021-2022 school year we conducted a multi-site, mixed-methods evaluation to address seven main evaluation questions.

## Evaluation Questions

Implementation and outcome evaluation questions were specified at the outset to identify priorities and inform study design.



### Outcome Evaluation Questions

The goal of the outcome evaluation was to understand the degree to which students served by Reading Partners demonstrate gains in SEL while enrolled in the program. The evaluation questions were as follows:

- Do students demonstrate SEL gains while enrolled in Reading Partners?
  - Do student SEL gains differ based on student characteristics such as student gender, race/ethnicity, grade level, baseline reading level, multilingual learner status, target student status, reaching primary literacy growth goal?
  - Do student SEL gains differ based on programming characteristics such as tutoring dosage, program delivery method (RP Connects vs. RP Traditional), number of tutors, or tutor SEL?
  - Do student SEL gains differ based on the quality of the student-tutor relationship, or whether the tutor and student share a racial/ethnic background?
- Are student SEL gains greater than would be expected based on normative developmental skill building?
  - Does this relationship vary by tutoring dosage or program delivery method (RP Connects vs. RP Traditional)?

## Student Enrollment

The evaluation was conducted in 71 reading centers in Maryland, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, North Texas, and Tulsa. These are five of the 12 geographic regions in which Reading Partners operates, and represent regions supported by California Volunteers, the OneStar Foundation, and AmeriCorps, the agency. These five regions were selected based on their capacity to implement the evaluation activities. In addition, key demographic characteristics (percentage of students experiencing economic hardship, percentage of multilingual learners, and race/ethnicity) of students in the selected regions are similar to the demographic characteristics of all Reading Partners students. Once regions were selected, Reading Partners extended a request to participate to all reading centers within c(i)0.6 4.8 (e)-9 ( )1.6 (f)-8.4 (o)7.2 (r)-5



SELweb scores are standard scores that reflect performance compared to ~~saged~~ children in the United States. Standard scores are scaled with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 5.0. Of note, the age-based norms were developed through field trials conducted prior to COVID-19. For the Early Elementary assessment, the age-based norms field trial was conducted during the 2014 school year with 4,419 K-3 students from 21 schools in 10 urban and suburban school districts in seven states across

## Administrative Data

For students participating in the evaluation, administrative data collected through the normal course of program implementation were used. These data included student demographic information as reported by the consenting parent/guardian (enrollment), student literacy data (including STAR assessment and a progress indicators) and program participation information (including tn tatc 0 Twr(

Wilcoxon rank sum test, and Mann-Whitney U test. In all cases, we conducted descriptive statistics to examine the data prior to conducting inferential analyses.

### Qualitative: Content Analysis

To analyze open-ended tutor survey questions and AmeriCorps member focus group data, we conducted qualitative content analysis to identify key themes. Specifically, we used deductive approaches to identify themes that directly addressed the evaluation questions of interest, and inductive approaches to capture other important themes that emerged across respondents.





There were nearly equal numbers of male and female students (47% and 53%, respectively).<sup>23</sup> At home, most students spoke English, about one quarter spoke Spanish, and very few spoke another language.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of the school year, students' ages ranged from four to 12 years old, and nearly 75% of students were between seven and nine years old.<sup>24</sup> Relatedly, most students (82%) were in first, second, or third grade, with the remaining students in kindergarten (K) or fourth grade.

Note that student SEL changes are reported separately for K

Reading Partners determines mid and final year primary literacy growth goals for each student. Kindergarten through second grade students who meet their goal are determined to be developing mastery in appropriate literacy domains based on their literacy scores. Similarly, based on their reading score percentile rank, third and fourth grade students who meet their goal are determined to be improving in their reading scores relative to their peers. Overall, two in three students (68%) reached their final literacy goal.

# Results

## Implementation of SEL Lessons

There is a prescribed scope and sequence for the Reading Partners curriculum overall, and how the SEL lessons are dispersed throughout the overall course of the curriculum. All students should complete Lesson1: Getting to Know You, and completion of the next SEL lesson depends on their placement in the overall sequence. For example, a student could complete Getting to Know You, but their placement in the sequence of the curriculum (based on their literacy levels) would mean that their next SEL lesson is Lesson3: Mindfulness (resulting in them skipping the second lesson). What's more, program coordinators may opt to recommend specific lessons outside of the regular scope and sequence based on individual student needs

## Student Exposure to SEL Lessons

In this section we explore the proportion of SEL lessons delivered to students, and whether delivery differed based on RP Connects versus RP Traditional participation, and other student characteristics.



participation in Traditional sessions ranged from 17 to 92%, with the median being an even split (50/50%) between Traditional and Connects. On average, students who participated in all virtual sessions completed significantly more Sessions than students who participated in all in-person sessions ( $p < .001$ ).

Figure 2. Average number of lessons

Tutor characteristics were not related to students' completion of SEL lessons, suggesting that there was consistency in implementation.

There was no significant correlation between the number of SEL domains completed and any of the tutor characteristics we explored, including the number of tutors a student worked with over the course of the year; tutors' experience level (assessed as the reported number of years serving as a Reading Partners tutor); tutor SE

Tutors often tried to relate Reading Partners lessons to their students' lives and generally felt that the lessons reflected their students' cultures.

Figure 4. Average tutor reports relating Reading Partners materials to student backgrounds.

Tutors felt less prepared to implement SEL lessons than other Reading Partners lessons

While tutors reported generally feeling prepared to implement SEL and other Reading Partners lessons, on average, tutors felt significantly less prepared to implement the SEL lessons than other Reading Partners lessons ( $M = 11.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Both levels were still above "often," and the actual mean difference was on the order of tenths of a point, suggesting there was no major preparedness breakdown in the newer content. Still, the significant difference is notable, and it makes sense to consider additional SEL supports for future training efforts that are of interest to tutors and AmeriCorps members, as described in greater detail below.

Figure 5. Average tutor readiness to implement Reading Partners and SEL lessons.





would feel like they needed to convince the tutor to complete them but did not fully understand the importance of the lessons themselves. Others reported that when implementing SEL lessons, tutors struggled to understand the content, and therefore struggled to teach their students.

AmeriCorps members offered many suggestions for how to improve Reading Partners approach to SEL, including how to better support AmeriCorps members and tutors in implementation, and programmatic revisions.

Suggestions included ideas specific to the SEL lessons that were relevant across the entirety of the Reading Partners model (g)3.ud6 (l)5.6: ese









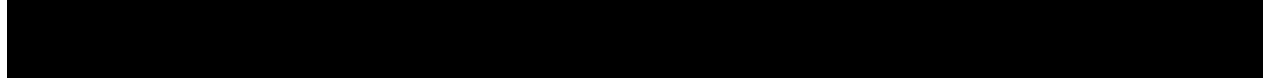
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- Younger students within the same grade demonstrated greater growth than older students that grade<sub>7</sub> (p=0.001) [7.58]
- Female students demonstrated greater growth than male students (p=0.001) [7.58]
- Hispanic/Latinx and White students (p=0.001) [7.58]

selected models from the prior step. Full results from the selected models, described below, are provided in Appendix 2 Tables 7a and 7b.

Student-tutor relationship quality and tutor SEL were not related to student SEL growth.

Among K-3 and fourth grade students, there was not a statistically significant association between student SEL growth and student-tutor relationship quality or tutor SEL.



During the 2021-2022 school year, OMNI conducted an evaluation to understand the successes and challenges of implementing SEL tutoring lessons through the Reading Partners program, the degree to which students served by Reading Partners demonstrated gains in SEL competencies, and whether and to what degree student, tutor, and program characteristics influenced those gains. The evaluation included 1,090 students in 71 reading centers in Maryland, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, North Texas, and Tulsa.

The Reading Partners SEL lessons were first implemented through RP Connects (the virtual tutoring program) during the 2020

Further research is needed to understand how the Reading Partners program, and high quality implementation of SEL lessons particular, is related to student growth in SEL competencies.

Although students demonstrated significant growth in SEL competencies, most students did not experience the full Reading Partners SEL curriculum. In addition, although student growth was greater

programming or compensates for in the absence of school

connections, and practical application (e.g., reading and responding to other students' responses). Recognizing that ongoing coaching or training sessions are resource-intensive, it may also be worth revising the SEL lessons to scaffold those connections such as by providing conversation prompts or suggestions for questions to ask students that encourage application of the material to students' lives.

Because AmeriCorps members are uniquely positioned to support tutors and given that they often feel ill-equipped to do so, there are also opportunities to better utilize AmeriCorps members to support effective implementation. Equipping AmeriCorps members with talking points and evidence-based information to share in an ongoing manner with tutors who may be hesitant or resistant to delivering the SEL lessons could further bolster tutor comfort and buy-in. This could be accomplished by making AmeriCorps members aware of existing resources designed to serve that purpose, including where and how to access them, and by strengthening use of such resources through focused training on how to use them. Additional training may also focus on how AmeriCorps members can provide reflective supervision or effective coaching to their tutors around implementation of SEL, so that their support is customized to the unique or idiosyncratic challenges that tutors experience. For example, coordinated peer groups could promote AmeriCorps members' learning that they then take back to support tutors, including how to navigate varying types of challenging conversations that may arise with students and

SEL lessons and to better equip tutors and AmeriCorps members in supporting student SEL growth. The extent to which future evaluations could provide meaningful insights into mechanisms that link Reading Partners' efforts to student SEL growth would be reliant on strong implementation. We recommend strengthening and monitoring implementation for one to two school years before investing additional resources to examine student SEL outcomes in more rigorous ways, such as through experimental or experimental study. Monitoring implementation can include examining the extent to which and how consistently SEL lessons are delivered to students, as well as assessing tutor and AmeriCorps member receptiveness to SEL and the SEL lessons through large-scale surveys and targeted focus groups. Taken together, these data could provide early indicators of implementation success that will help Reading Partners determine when to move forward with the next phase of evaluation of student SEL outcomes.