

SEL-Focused After-School Programs

Noelle Hurd and Nancy Deutsch

Summary

After-school programs offer young people opportunities for self-expression, exploring their talents, and forming relationships with supportive adults. That is, after-school programs promote young people’s social and emotional learning (SEL) skills—whether the programs use that term or not.

Despite these programs’ potential, Noelle Hurd and Nancy Deutsch write, they have yet to make a big impact on the field of SEL. One reason is that studying them poses many problems for researchers—for example, attendance isn’t mandatory, meaning that it can be hard to separate a program’s effects from young people’s personal characteristics that led them to choose the program in the first place. Still, research shows that after-school programs can promote many desirable SEL outcomes, and Hurd and Deutsch outline the factors that make high-quality programs stand out.

How could policy help after-school programs promote SEL more effectively? First, positive youth-staff relationships are crucial to effective programs, and competent adult staff are the linchpin of effective after-school programs targeting SEL outcomes. Yet the after-school work force is poorly paid, and turnover is high. Hurd and Deutsch suggest several ways to professionalize after-school work—for example, by boosting professional development and creating more opportunities for career advancement.

Second, as schools have become more focused on standardized test scores, funders and policymakers have pushed after-school programs, too, to demonstrate their academic impact. Hurd and Deutsch write that this approach is misguided: overemphasizing academic outcomes leads to neglect of SEL outcomes that can help young people become productive and engaged citizens. They argue for expanding the criteria used to determine whether after-school programs are effective to include SEL. More broadly, they write, high-stakes evaluations create a disincentive for programs to undertake the difficult work of assessing and improving their own practices. A better approach to evaluation would focus less on whether programs “work” and instead seek ways to make them work better.

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Out-of-school settings, such as after-school programs and community organizations, are natural sites for social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions. Because these programs and organizations don't have schools' curricular demands and often have broader developmental goals and missions, they can focus on SEL skills and outcomes to a greater extent than schools can. Many of the types of skills that SEL interventions target are also implicit or explicit in the missions and objectives of out-of-school programs. Yet despite their potential to strongly influence SEL, out-of-school programs generally have had limited impact on the field of SEL, possibly because of their diversity—they range from after-school and summer programs to family- and community-level interventions—or the challenges of evaluating interventions in such settings. In this article, we examine research specific to SEL interventions that occur outside of school hours. But rather than consider all out-of-school contexts, we limit our scope to after-school programs, defined as adult-structured programs for students that are offered during the school year between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00 p.m.¹ Moreover, we review only programs that explicitly target what we define as SEL skills, whether the program uses the term SEL or not. This narrowed focus lets us be more thorough. In any case, most of the research on SEL interventions in out-of-school contexts has taken place in after-school programs rather than other settings. Thus research on after-school programs also offers the best opportunity to learn what works.

Even though SEL goals are common in programs that operate outside of school

time (a history we review below), only one extensive review has examined whether after-school programs that focus on social and personal development hold promise for boosting students' SEL development. In this article, we go over the findings from that analysis, paying particular attention to the features of effective programs. We also briefly review a broader set of studies that investigate the impacts of participating in SEL-focused after-school programs. To structure the article, we ask five questions specific to SEL and after-school programs:

1. Are after-school programs well suited for promoting SEL?
2. Is it realistic to expect after-school programs to affect SEL?
3. Do after-school programs affect SEL?
4. Why have findings thus far been so disappointing?
5. Where should researchers and practitioners focus in the future?

We conclude with policy implications for promoting SEL via after-school programs.

Are After-School Programs Well Suited for Promoting SEL?

The history of formal after-school programs suggests that they've always focused on SEL. Such programs arose in response to changing social conditions and the constraints of school, and their goals are often aligned with those of SEL. Thus, research on after-school programs often asks whether and how they foster SEL-related competencies. After-school programs are also rich in relationships. They offer good opportunities for young people to form the

kinds of relationships with adults that we believe enhance SEL.

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Historical Perspective

After-school programs have been around for more than a century, and they've always aimed to foster positive youth development broadly, including what we now call SEL. After-school programs were developed in the late 19th century as a practitioner-based movement, long before they became a field of study. Early programs sprang from reformers' concerns about children's safety and socialization. Child labor and compulsory education laws combined to leave children free during the after-school hours. In large cities with growing immigrant populations and crowded housing, many working-class and low-income children spent their out-of-school time on the streets. Child advocates worried about these trends. They saw a need for safe spaces where children could play after school. They also saw a need for adults to structure and supervise such play to socialize children in middle-class American values. The programs they built varied greatly and local actors developed their own aims and policies within them, yet they shared common goals. In his history of after-school programming, Robert Halpern identified the early goals of the field as protecting and caring for children; giving children opportunities to play, frequently as a means to promote SEL-related skills;

preventing delinquency among boys and reducing sexual risk among girls; teaching vocational and domestic skills (for boys and girls, respectively); and Americanization of immigrant youth, who made up a large proportion of the children served by early programs.² The adult staff members in these programs were to provide consistent oversight, guidance, role modeling, and support. From the beginning, programs differentiated themselves from schools in both their aims and activities.

These broad trends continued through the mid-20th century. Although these programs' aims were shaped by changing demographics and by societal developments such as mass media, the economy, and families' work circumstances, the focus on play, children's developmental needs, and after-school programs as unique out-of-school settings continued. During the second half of the 20th century, programs again responded to social concerns about low-income children.³ Reformers feared that these children were feeling alienated from broader American society. As a result, after-school programs became a space where poor children could "feel valued and recognized."⁴ At the same time, after-school programs continued to identify themselves as places where children who felt alienated by schools could express themselves and experience a sense of belonging. In the 1960s, in response to increasing worries about urban poverty, programs began to focus more on academic activities, which gave them access to government funding earmarked for improving education in high-poverty neighborhoods. And as more and more mothers entered the work force in the late 20th century, public attention again turned to after-school programs as safe, supervised spaces for children.

Although most programs retained their core recreational activities and continued to offer young people opportunities for self-expression, exploring their talents, and forming relationships with supportive adults, it also became increasingly common to set aside time for children to get help with their homework. More recently, after-school programs have been under pressure to demonstrate academic impacts, but this push has been driven by funders and policy makers rather than the programs themselves. As schools have become more focused on standardized test scores, after-school programs, too, have been pushed to demonstrate their academic impact. This trend threatens after-school programs' traditional focus on self-expression, exploration, and development.

Despite the increased pressure to boost test scores, numerous after-school programs explicitly aim to enhance young people's social and emotional competencies. For example, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, one of the nation's largest networks of out-of-school centers (serving nearly four million children at four thousand clubs), seeks to "promote and enhance the development of boys and girls by instilling a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging and influence." Its mission is "to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens."⁵ Similarly, 4-H, which reaches six million young people, aims to "[empower] young people to be true leaders," described as "young people who have confidence; know how to work well with others; can endure through challenges; and will stick with a job until it gets done."⁶ 4-H'ers work on four values (the four H's of the organization's name): head (managing, thinking), heart

(relating, caring), hands (giving, working), and health (being, living). Although Boys & Girls Clubs and 4-H both include some academic programming, their goals are much broader than academics alone, encompassing the types of personal and social competence that make up SEL.

The Role of Adult Staff

Competent adult staff are the linchpin of effective after-school programs targeting SEL outcomes.⁷ Interactions with staff shape young people's experiences, and those interactions are the pathways through which after-school programs affect SEL.⁸ Adult staff influence young people's outcomes in many ways. They determine whether the program's space will be conducive to SEL development, they implement the curriculum and transmit the program's values, and they cultivate meaningful relationships.

Effective Staff Practices for Promoting SEL

Adult staff foster SEL development by giving young people autonomy, choice, and appropriate levels of structure and supervision.⁹ Basing its recommendations on the best developmental science research, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine suggests that adults can foster positive developmental settings by providing eight components:¹⁰

- physical and psychological safety;
- appropriate structure;
- opportunities to belong;
- positive social norms;
- support for efficacy and mattering;

- opportunities for skill building;
- integration of family, school, and community efforts, and
- nurturance and support.

Below, we apply each of these recommendations to promoting SEL in after-school programs.

Safety. Unquestionably, adult staff members' ability to ensure participants' physical and emotional safety is vital—not just during the program itself, but on the way to and from it as well. Safety is a basic human need that must be satisfied for young people to have the mental resources they need to improve their social and emotional competencies. Staff can ensure safety by selecting safe locations, by establishing transportation plans that consider safety hazards, and by including activities that foster healthy and positive peer group interactions. Ensuring safety also means understanding implicit and explicit biases on the part of both staff and young people, and collectively working to confront these biases by modeling fair treatment of young participants.

Structure. After-school programs should be structured to ensure that they give young people the stability to grow and develop. Specifically, daily activities should give young people space to process their emotions, share their experiences, listen to the experiences of others, work together in teams, solve problems, and reflect on the outcomes of their decisions.¹¹ Staff must find the right balance between giving participants autonomy and, through clear and consistent rules and expectations, setting limits on their behavior. Depending on their age and how long they participate in the program, young people may also benefit

from increasing opportunities to help set rules and expectations themselves. Thus, staff can set and monitor clear boundaries but also let young people make important program decisions. University of Illinois researchers Reed Larson and Rachel Angus have called this approach “leading from behind”; they found that young people benefit most when adult staff support participants' leadership and offer “light touch guidance and assistance as needed.”¹²

Belonging. By highlighting their strengths, emphasizing healthy identity development, and encouraging positive bonding, staff can enhance young people's sense of belonging, which in turn will help recruit and retain a diverse set of participants.¹³ Program staff must also deal effectively with the participants' social identities and cultural backgrounds. Belonging is likely to be more important to young people from marginalized social groups, for whom key developmental tasks include being able to feel good about their group membership and connection to similar others. Participants should be able to feel good about their own social identities (for example, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability status) and to interact positively with members of different groups. Thus, staff should ensure that interactions occur on a level of equal status, explicitly talk about difference in relation to privilege and oppression, and ask young people from different groups to work collaboratively to achieve shared goals.¹⁴ Because no population of young people is homogeneous, staff should also pay attention to differences within racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, ability, and sexual orientation groups, as well as between such groups.¹⁵

Positive social norms. Program staff can foster SEL competencies by supporting a group culture that is conducive to prosocial values and behavior. For example, staff can set expectations regarding the use of inclusive language; group check-ins (in which participants report on their weekly highs and lows) can be an opportunity for staff to model caring responses to the good and bad things happening in young people's lives. Although a program's cultural norms should vary to accommodate the participants' backgrounds and needs, prosocial norms are fundamental to constructive behavior. Programs can establish patterns of behavior that lead participants to internalize certain values and morals.¹⁶ In this way, behavioral patterns can be self-reinforcing and solidified as good habits. But if staff and participants don't intentionally establish positive social norms, less favorable norms may emerge and become difficult to alter. Therefore, staff need to develop practices that foster good behavior, mutual respect, and inclusivity from the very beginning and maintain them throughout the program.

Efficacy and mattering. Feeling effective at appropriately challenging tasks and making a difference in one's social world are central to growth in SEL competencies. Adult program staff can foster efficacy and mattering through engaging and personally meaningful activities. As they progress from childhood to adolescence, young people are increasingly likely to benefit from empowering, youth-centered programs. They can learn to develop their own voice and leadership potential when they have a say in how programs are run or what types of activities are made available.¹⁷ They can also help identify community service projects or injustices that they

would like to take on. When activities have consequences for real-world problems facing them and their communities, young people can gain a sense of mattering and making a difference. Adult staff can help them gain agency by actively seeking their input and creating leadership positions for them to fill. Adults also can give young people greater responsibility based on their age and experience in the program. For example, *youth-adult partnerships*—in which youth and adults work collaboratively to address important social issues—seek an equal distribution of power between adult staff and participants.

Skill building. Staff can promote SEL by letting participants plan, practice, and perform targeted skills and apply those skills to the real world; by giving frequent feedback; by making sure that young people take an active role in their own learning; and by helping young people focus on personal improvement instead of comparing themselves to others.¹⁸ Staff also can model SEL skills themselves. Other ways to build skills include coaching youth on successful interactions with peers or adults, setting high expectations for participants, encouraging them to persevere when things get tough, celebrating their effort, and scaffolding (that is, providing more support initially and gradually withdrawing it as they become able to complete a task independently).¹⁹ As in other areas, young people's cultures, backgrounds, ages, and experiences should guide which skills the program targets. For example, an important SEL skill for young people of color is *bicultural competence*, or the ability to successfully navigate two cultures. Thus, programs that serve racial and ethnic minorities may help participants

get better at *code switching*—moving from one cultural style of interacting to another.

After-school staff may have more opportunities for informal conversations and shared activities than the young people's own parents.

Integration of family, school, and community. When adult expectations and values are consistent across family, school, and community, it's easier for young people to establish positive attitudes and patterns of behavior. Moreover, adults can use their connections with other adults to help give young people new opportunities and connections of their own. Adult program staff are uniquely positioned to bridge youths' social contexts such as family, school, community, and workplace. They can expose families, schools, and the broader community to the SEL content that program participants are learning. If they do so, adults in other settings can reinforce the after-school learning and apply it more broadly.

Nurturance and support. Caring and responsive staff members have the best chance to enhance young people's SEL outcomes.²⁰ Adults who have the capacity to understand and appropriately respond to young people's cultural backgrounds and needs are best positioned to build strong, positive relationships. Thus, after-school programs seeking to boost students' SEL outcomes should screen adults for key qualities such as attunement (that is, the ability to read and flexibly respond to

young people's needs and desires), effective communication, and empathy. Adults who understand the roles of power and privilege in maintaining societal inequities can effectively bridge differences and have the best chance to nurture and support all young participants.

Youth-Staff Relationships

Unlike teachers, after-school program staff don't face heavy instructional requirements and evaluation responsibilities. That means they have more flexibility in working with young people.²¹ In fact, after-school staff may have more opportunities for informal conversations and shared activities than the young people's own parents, who may be contending with work and other competing responsibilities. Unlike parents and teachers, after-school staff not only have time to share with young people during the after-school hours, but can also often do so around activities that align with their interests. These less structured and perhaps more enjoyable interactions may be ideal for transferring adult values, advice, and perspectives.²² After-school program staff also tend to be closer in age to young participants and are often from the same communities. Both factors may encourage closer relationships and lead young people to see program staff as more credible sources of information than teachers or parents. These two factors may also help after-school staff serve as role models, especially if they've overcome challenges similar to those that the program's participants face.²³

In-depth observations of after-school programs and interviews with staff members and participants have identified features of youth-staff relationships that appear to be

related to young people's SEL development. These include such things as the nature of staff-youth communication (for example, the peerlike nature of interactions or culturally relevant ways of communicating), the way staff handle young people's dilemmas that crop up during the program, how they express respect for participants, and how staff and participants communicate with each other about the young people's strengths and struggles.²⁴ Using data from its National Outcomes Survey, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America examined associations between youth-staff relationships and how young people described their experiences at the clubs. It found that young people tended to have more positive experiences when staff knew all the participants' names, had relationships with their parents, worked well together, and had received training in program planning.²⁵ Although such research can't prove that links between youth-staff relationships and outcomes are causal, it nonetheless suggests that programs can foster SEL when staff cultivate meaningful relationships with young participants.

Supporting Adult Staff

If staff practices play a central role in young people's SEL development, then support for the staff is crucial to after-school programs' success. Recently, the SEL Challenge—a collaboration among practitioners, researchers, and a prominent national foundation that analyzed eight highly effective after-school programs across the country—sought to identify key practices that foster growth in six SEL outcomes: emotion management, empathy, teamwork, initiative, responsibility, and problem solving.²⁶ Among its recommendations, the project suggested five strategies for supporting program staff:

- First, programs should recruit young people who are more likely to benefit from participation (for example, because their interests are a good match with the program's activities). Seeing youth succeed in the program is a powerful incentive for staff because it reinforces the challenging work that they do.
- Second, programs should ensure that multiple staff members have appropriate training in practices to promote SEL. Staff members should receive equivalent training so that they can best support each other and all youth in attendance. Having many trained people on hand also means that one staff member can work on an individual participant's needs while another leads the larger group.
- Third, staff members need collaborative planning time before program sessions and interactive debriefing afterward to ensure that they can communicate with one another, prepare adequately for program sessions, and work together to respond to problems that arise. Staff members may also need time to process their own reactions to program sessions and to support one another when they encounter difficulty. A supportive and collegial environment can motivate staff members to put forth their best effort and may reduce staff turnover.
- Fourth, staff need organizational supports such as extended vacation after intensive periods of work, mental health services or referrals,

resources for continued learning, and check-ins with supervisors to ensure the staff's general wellbeing. Staff who have the supports they need to bolster their own mental health and wellbeing are better positioned to serve program participants effectively.

- Fifth, programs should support continuous improvement. Staff need opportunities to reflect on and refine program practices. The inclusion of evaluation components to assess their practices will make staff members more aware of strengths and areas that need improvement. Such evaluations could collect data from young people, staff, and staff supervisors; if these evaluations include self-assessment, however, that should not be the only component.

Is It Realistic to Expect After-School Programs to Affect SEL?

After-school programs are natural settings for promoting young people's SEL skills. Because the programs don't face schools' curricular demands, they can focus on nonacademic skills. Well-run after-school programs let young people participate in activities that are meaningful to them and that form rewarding relationships. But despite these strengths, after-school programs face a number of barriers in promoting SEL. First, participation in after-school programs isn't mandatory. As a result, SEL interventions in after-school programs will never reach all young people, and sporadic attendance may dampen a program's effects. Further, staff turnover in after-school programs tends

to be high. Therefore, even though youth-adult relationships can be a significant strength of such programs, they can also be less stable than in schools. Funders' increasing focus on academic outcomes may also lead programs to offer fewer types of activities that are most likely to enhance SEL. Some of these issues, such as sporadic attendance, affect researchers' ability to confidently measure program effects. They may also affect the quality of the programs themselves, and as we discuss below, quality has an impact on program effects.

Despite their strengths, after-school programs face a number of barriers in promoting SEL, such as sporadic attendance and high staff turnover.

Do After-School Programs Affect SEL?

Many comprehensive after-school programs focus on personal and social skills broadly, even if they don't use the term SEL. Reviews of how after-school programming affects academic outcomes have yielded mixed findings.²⁷ Here we review the research exploring SEL-related outcomes from after-school programs that aim to improve young people's personal and social development. These types of after-school programs have been associated with improvement in such SEL outcomes as self-confidence, self-regulation, and social competence, as well as with decreases in adjustment problems such as delinquency, depression, and anxiety.²⁸ Evaluations of

after-school programs that target SEL skills, however, vary widely with respect to the methods they use and the effects they report.

In 2010, psychologists Joseph Durlak, Roger Weissberg, and Molly Pachan published a meta-analysis of after-school programs with an explicit SEL component (a meta-analysis is a statistical technique that combines the results from many studies to test for overall effects).²⁹ They included 68 studies of SEL-focused after-school programs. About half the programs targeted elementary school-aged students, about one-third targeted middle school-aged students, and about 10 percent were geared toward high school students (several evaluations didn't report participants' ages). About one-third of the studies used a *randomized* design, meaning that young people were randomly assigned either to a program or to an alternative such as a waiting list. Because a randomized design removes bias introduced by self-selection into a program (that is, young people who sign up for and attend after-school programs may differ in important ways from those who don't), it's considered the best way to test whether an intervention works. The rest of the studies included in the meta-analysis used what researchers call *quasi-experimental* designs, which use different approaches to cope with bias and isolate program effects. Although more than one-third of the studies did not give much information about the demographics of study participants, those that did represented groups of young people who were diverse with regard to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

The meta-analysis found that after-school programs targeting SEL outcomes appear to improve young people's self-confidence,

positive attitudes toward school, positive social behavior (for example, cooperation and leadership), grades, and standardized test scores. At the same time, they reduced problematic behaviors such as aggression and drug use. Overall, the size of these effects was in the small-to-medium range; in statistical terms, average program effect sizes—a number that assesses how large the difference is between two groups on an outcome of interest—ranged from .12 for academic grades to .34 for increased self-esteem.

Not all after-school programs targeting SEL outcomes produced the desired improvements in students' skills and behaviors. Only programs that used evidence-based skills-training approaches were effective in boosting students' SEL outcomes. Evidence-based skills-training approaches met four requirements, identified by the acronym SAFE: they included a sequenced (S) set of activities, emphasized active (A) forms of learning, included a focused (F) component aimed directly at improving students' social and emotional skills, and contained explicit (E) learning objectives (that is, program staff communicate to young people what they're expected to learn through the program). Programs that didn't follow the SAFE guidelines showed no effects on the studied SEL outcomes. The SAFE programs yielded average effect sizes in the small-to-medium range—from .14 for school attendance to .37 for increased self-esteem.

The fact that SEL-focused after-school programs can affect such a variety of outcomes underscores their potential value. Moreover, even if the size of the programs' effects fell in the small-to-medium range, those effects were larger than those found

Table 1. SEL-Related Outcomes of After-School Programs

Program	Population	SEL Skills Assessed	Findings
Boys & Girls Clubs of America (four clubs in one city)	Club members ages 10–18	Psychosocial functioning	Positive experience at clubs, but not attendance alone, was associated with positive outcomes
Boys & Girls Clubs of America (10 urban clubs)	Club members in seventh and eighth grade	Character development	Greater attendance was associated with improvement in about half the outcomes assessed
Boys & Girls Clubs of America (one urban club)	Club members and comparison group from same community; mean age 11	Self-concept, social skills, attachment to family, risky behaviors	Greater attendance at clubs, but not participation alone, was associated with positive outcomes
Boys & Girls Clubs of America (2,400 clubs nationally)	Club members nationally; compared to data on peers from other national studies	Community service, social skills, risky behaviors	Middle and high school club members volunteered more and reported lower levels of substance use; higher quality and level of participation associated with some outcomes
4-H (in 42 states)	7,000 youth in grades 5–12 (~2,520 of those were 4-H participants)	5 C's—Confidence, Competence, Character, Caring, and Connection—as well as contribution to community	In some grades 4-H members demonstrated more positive outcomes in the 5 C's and were more likely to contribute to their communities
After School Matters (apprenticeship program in Chicago)*	High school students	21st Century Skills linked to SEL	Positive effect on some outcomes; no effect on majority of outcomes
Systematic review of programs with recreational or youth development focus combined with academic supports *	Primarily low-income racial/ethnic minority students in urban areas	College aspirations, believing the best about people, bonding, feeling bad for others, feeling left out, sticking to beliefs	No effects
Maryland's After School Community Grant Program (14 sites)**	Elementary and middle school students	Social skills, social bonding, delinquency, substance use	Participation was linked to small decreases in delinquency for middle school students
35 high-quality after-school programs from ethnically diverse, high poverty communities	3,000 elementary and middle school students	Work habits, task persistence, social skills, prosocial behaviors, problem behaviors, misconduct	Program participants improved in many of the tested skills

Sources: See endnote 30.

Note: * = experimental design; ** = three of 14 sites used experimental design.

for other types of youth programs, such as school-based drug prevention or mentoring programs. In fact, the average effect of SAFE after-school programs on students' standardized test scores was larger than the average effects found in meta-analyses for after-school and summer school programs that focus heavily on academics. The effects of SAFE programs may also have been underestimated. A high proportion of the comparison group students (that is, those who did not participate in a particular SEL after-school program) were participating in other types of after-school activities, rather than attending no program at all. Further, at least some of the SEL after-school programs recorded fairly inconsistent attendance by participants. Both of these factors make it harder for researchers to isolate a program's effects. The fact that we see rather strong findings despite the presence of factors that could undermine their effects suggests that SAFE after-school programs can indeed foster SEL development along with a host of other positive youth outcomes.

What Does the Rest of the Research Say?

Beyond the meta-analysis by Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan, other evaluations of after-school programs' effects on SEL outcomes have yielded inconsistent results. Table 1 summarizes findings from studies of after-school programs that have examined SEL-related outcomes, ranging from studies of single after-school centers to combined studies of multiple programs. Although there is a rich tradition of qualitatively analyzing SEL development in after-school programs using a descriptive approach, we only included quantitative (that is, numeric) findings in our summary so that we can compare the sizes of program effects.

Participating in SEL-focused after-school programs has been associated with outcomes that include improvements in social skills, prosocial behavior, community service, civic activity, academic and school-related outcomes, and reductions in delinquency and other problem behaviors. But even when studies have documented positive effects on some outcomes, they tend to find no effects on others. And the effects they do find are often limited to certain age groups or genders. Overall, findings from correlational studies (that is, studies that look at associations between programs and outcomes without fully controlling for sources of bias) tend to find some positive outcomes, but experimental studies (that is, studies that more completely account for bias) find fewer or none. One limitation of correlational studies is that they don't let us determine whether participation in the program actually *caused* the differences we see in youth outcomes, as opposed to the possibility that the program attracted young people who were already doing better than their peers.

One trend that we see across many of the studies is that program quality matters. Attendance alone doesn't appear to be enough to promote SEL outcomes. Rather, multiple studies have found that positive outcomes are related to how much young people participate in the program and the quality of the experience they have there. Although program quality is often measured by outside observers, young people's own perceptions of program quality may also be an important predictor of outcomes.³¹

Differences among Young People

Young people's experiences in after-school programs and the extent to which they

benefit from participation aren't a function of the program alone—they're determined by the fit between the program and the young people's characteristics.³² Not only may outcomes differ across different groups, but different program features may be important to different young people.³³ Despite the role that race, ethnicity, culture, and other characteristics play in shaping young people's experiences in SEL-focused after-school programs, however, few studies have considered differences in experiences and outcomes as a function of participants' characteristics. Among the few studies that have done so, age and gender have been associated with differences in a program's effects.³⁴ But these differences haven't shown a consistent pattern.

The very nature of after-school programs poses problems for researchers. After-school programs are both voluntary and, for many families, necessary.

Why Have Findings Been Disappointing?

Significant limitations make it hard to draw definite conclusions from studies of SEL-focused after-school programs. First, many studies of after-school programs don't evaluate program curricula or specific program activities, so it isn't clear what precisely is being evaluated. Second, few studies of after-school programs use research designs that prove a causal link between participation and SEL-related outcomes. Even studies that have

used rigorous randomized designs have been criticized for other methodological flaws, such as ignoring differences in implementation across sites. Third, evaluation studies often look only at participation versus nonparticipation in a given program. But participation comprises many things, including frequency of attendance, years of participation, breadth of the activities in which one participates, and quality of engagement.³⁵ Therefore, participation defined simply in terms of attendance may not be related to effects. Fourth, young people who don't participate in a given program are frequently participating in another program, rather than no program at all. Working parents need childcare after school, and they're likely to find an alternative program if their child isn't assigned to the after-school program being studied. For example, in the experimental study of After School Matters, 91 percent of the comparison group participated in other after-school programs.³⁶ Thus, after-school research is often comparing the program being studied to another program or activity. And as the Study of Promising After-School Programs shows, many young people participate in several programs, which makes distinguishing the effects of any given program even harder.³⁷

Indeed, the very nature of after-school programs poses problems for researchers. After-school programs are both voluntary and, for many families, necessary. Moreover, many of the outcomes that researchers are interested in are related to the very youth and family characteristics that may also affect young people's participation in after-school programs. Although it's hard for researchers to isolate program effects, we recognize that after-school programs

are an important part of the landscape for young people, especially those who live in marginalized communities and attend under-resourced schools. Being unsupervised in the after-school hours is associated with substantial risk for young people, suggesting that involvement in any supervised after-school programs is preferable to being left unsupervised.³⁸ Consequently, it may be better if researchers and practitioners focus on improving the quality of programs rather than on simply attempting to prove whether particular programs work.

Where Should Researchers and Practitioners Focus in the Future?

As we've noted, evaluations of after-school programs—and the conclusions we can draw from them—have been limited in various ways. Self-selection into programs restricts our ability to ascertain their effects and determine whether any given findings generalize to groups of young people who differ in substantial ways from those studied. Other complicating factors include the tremendous variety in purpose, activities, and dosage (that is, frequency and length) across SEL-focused after-school programs. All these factors likely play a role in determining the extent to which young people benefit. And as we've mentioned, young people's own attributes also likely influence their experiences in programs, meaning that some of them benefit more than others.

It's important to highlight all the challenges facing evaluations of SEL-focused after-school programs, because these challenges can contribute to inconsistent findings across evaluation studies. They can lead us to find effects that don't exist and to miss

effects that do. Currently, many researchers argue that better integration of multiple approaches to evaluation could better account for the complexities inherent in evaluating SEL-focused after-school programming.³⁹ Although randomized design has been upheld as the gold standard for evaluating program effects, this approach does little to help us identify how and why programs benefit (or fail to benefit) young people. When assessments are limited to closed-ended measures, and only include measures of attitudes and behaviors before and after a program, evaluators miss the opportunity to collect more detailed information about how individuals experienced the program and what they found to be most or least beneficial. As a result, evaluators may not be able to explain what about the program made a difference (or why it didn't)—and that's the kind of information that can help programs improve. Integrating various approaches to evaluating programs—for example, by including open-ended interviews with program staff and participants—could help researchers determine not just whether a program benefited its participants, but also understand why it did or did not confer benefits and in what other contexts we may or may not expect to see effects.⁴⁰ Extensive observations of highly effective SEL-focused after-school programs have identified universal processes that effectively build SEL across different programs, and they've pointed to program practices that best promote these processes.⁴¹ And new measures (for example, the Youth Program Quality Assessment) have been developed to assess two critical ingredients of SEL-focused after-school programs: the quality of the setting as a whole, and the experiences and interactions of the young people and adults in that setting.⁴²

Measuring these dimensions also can help to capture universal processes that drive program effects, and programs can use such assessments to drive improvements in their practices. The notion that only researchers should conduct evaluations is antiquated. Scholars increasingly advocate for greater bidirectional influence between research and practice and for shifting the broader agenda of evaluation research away from proving what works to identifying opportunities to improve programs.⁴³ This approach to evaluation could greatly enhance the experiences and outcomes of young people who attend SEL-focused after-school programs.

We also advocate for considering social justice in the practice and study of SEL-focused after-school programming. For example, we should ask what program factors can promote the greatest improvements among the most marginalized and underserved youth.⁴⁴ Moreover, underserved youth may find it harder to get to after-school programs because of factors such as cost and transportation. If they can't get to after-school programs, they're likely to spend more time in unsupervised and unstructured activities, placing them further at risk for poor outcomes. Staff turnover and limited program offerings also tend to be more common in programs that serve marginalized youth. In this way, after-school programs may replicate and extend societal inequality. If young people's experiences in after-school programs vary in accordance with their access to resources more generally, such programs will exacerbate disparities rather than remedy them.

Implications for Policy

To bolster the potential of after-school

programs to promote improvements in SEL, we must look beyond research and practice to consider the pivotal role of policy. To start, we make several recommendations for policy changes at various levels that could make adult staff more effective. Positive youth-staff relationships likely are the driving force of effective after-school programs targeting SEL outcomes, and a number of structural program elements may determine whether these relationships confer benefits to participating youth. For example, a high youth-staff ratio and high staff turnover can undermine the formation of strong ties between young people and adults. High-quality programs have been found to have low staff turnover rates and to hire staff with more experience and higher levels of education.⁴⁵ Yet the after-school workforce as a whole tends to have high turnover rates, and workers enter the field with mixed levels of relevant prior experience—and, as with other childcare jobs, the pay is low.⁴⁶ Thus, programs may have a hard time hiring and retaining the most qualified people.

One way to boost staff quality is to professionalize after-school staff positions.⁴⁷ These positions often feature low status and low pay, and they seldom provide opportunities for hierarchical advancement within a youth-serving organization. A greater emphasis on professional development, growth, and career advancement is key to improving staff quality and retention. Furthermore, staff evaluations should focus explicitly on the quality of interactions with young people, and incentives should be provided for staff members who consistently perform well or demonstrate improvements. We can also help create professional networks of

youth workers—similar to teacher learning communities—so that they can learn from one another and access in-person and online opportunities for networking, training, and support.⁴⁸

Another challenge is that staff positions in after-school programs are, by their very nature, part-time. Hence they may be better suited to young adults who are completing their education, or to retirees. One way to encourage young adults to take these positions would be to forgive student loans in exchange for a set time commitment to after-school programs in underserved communities. Such an approach could make these positions more desirable for young adults and diminish staff turnover in under-resourced programs. Giving young adults opportunities to advance into full-time positions in an organization could also help to attract qualified staff and would increase opportunities for junior leadership. And some organizations, such as Boys and Girls Clubs of America, have junior staff programs in which teenage participants undertake an apprenticeship program aimed at developing their skills and interests in human services work. In any program, as staff members move through the ranks, they could mentor less experienced hires.

Another option for overcoming the problems associated with part-time work would be to hire staff who can combine school and after-school work hours. This could mean hiring teachers and teacher's aides as after-school program staff or finding opportunities for after-school staff to extend their hours by working in schools during the day.⁴⁹ Such an approach might not only enhance the quality of

after-school program staff, it could also bridge young people's school and after-school experiences. Consistency of adults across different contexts can further support SEL development.

Policy could also alter the approach to evaluating after-school programs by broadening the criteria used to determine whether programs are effective and, consequently, worth funding. The current overemphasis on academic and economic outcomes leads to neglect of SEL outcomes that are valuable in their own right and also have great potential to foster more successful life outcomes over time. Focusing exclusively on academic improvement or reductions in problem behavior as the key determinants of effective after-school programming can mean taking resources away from programs that effectively foster growth in SEL competencies. And because SEL competencies can take time to translate into improvements in academic performance and classroom behavior, programs shouldn't lose funding if little or no immediate change can be seen in those outcomes. Expanding the criteria used to evaluate programs to include key SEL outcomes could also help to produce productive and engaged citizens, rather than just high-achieving students.⁵⁰ Collectively, we should invest in supporting the next generation's ability to make positive contributions to society in many areas. Undoubtedly, feeling self-confident and being able to effectively manage relationships with others are central to engaged citizenship, and the personal and social skills that constitute SEL are at the core of civil society.

We've discussed the need for evaluations of after-school programs to shift from focusing

solely on whether programs are effective to focusing on how to make them work better. The current policy environment isn't structured to support such a shift. Notions of accountability reinforce the removal of human and financial support from programs when evaluations don't show effects. This policy climate may, in fact, discourage programs from seeking evaluation and may undermine opportunities to learn about nuanced aspects of programs that could be modified to yield program benefits. An alternative approach to evaluation would prioritize finding the key elements of features or practices that have been linked to improvements in after-school participants' outcomes. Evaluation data could then drive program improvements and subsequent

re-evaluation. High-stakes evaluations create a disincentive for programs to undertake the difficult work of assessing their practices and outcomes. But creating incentives for evaluation would better support after-school programs' efforts to further develop and refine their approaches to fostering young people's SEL development. After-school programs are uniquely positioned to further the goals of the SEL movement. Not only are their objectives aligned with those of targeted SEL interventions, they also can help level the playing field for young people with the fewest resources. Thus, allocating more attention and resources to determining how we can best promote SEL after school holds promise for broadening the SEL movement's impact on all young people.

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