TRAILS Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Curriculum Implementation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childhood rates of symptoms of depression and anxiety, and suicidal ideation have steadily increased since 2010 and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the problem. In fall 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) declared a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health, calling for increased funding and systems of care for youth mental health (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021).

Since 2013, the TRAILS (Transforming Research into Action to Improve the Lives of Students) program has delivered training, resources, and implementation support to schools and districts to provide evidence-based mental health programing for students in grades K through 12. TRAILS uses a 3-tiered approach to mental health support to meet the needs of all students:

- Tier 1: Social and Emotional Learning for all students
- Tier 2: CBT and Mindfulness for students with symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Tier 3: Suicide Prevention and Risk Management for students experiencing suicidality

As TRAILS expands to districts within Michigan and throughout the US to respond to increased need for student mental health support, they wanted to understand the experiences of the staff who were using the program.

During the 2021-2022 school year, TRAILS partnered with the Youth Policy Lab to conduct an implementation study of its Tier 1 Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum in three rural Colorado districts. A critical aspect of the success of any educational program is buy-in from staff and findings from this study indicate that the TRAILS program is successful in achieving that.

Data was collected from staff through a series of surveys administered throughout the school year. Feedback from staff was primarily positive and they expressed overall satisfaction with the program. Staff reported reasonable preparation and delivery times. They perceived students as generally being engaged in the lessons and felt that the materials were age-appropriate.

In addition to the staff feedback, students in grades 6-12 were surveyed in all three districts in the fall and spring on a number of measures of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) coping skills. While the pre-post design of the study does not allow us to make any causal inferences, findings suggest increases in SEL competencies for students in grades 9-12 and in CBT coping skills for grades 6-8.

As part of a statewide expansion of the TRAILS program in Michigan during the 2022-23 school year, the Youth Policy Lab is conducting a randomized control trial of the Tier 1 SEL program. This will allow us to make causal inferences about the impact of the program on student social, emotional, and mental health outcomes.

> " *It was a quick easy lesson to pull together and covered exactly what we needed it to cover.* "
>
> *9-12th Grade Teacher*

BACKGROUND

During the 2021-2022 school year, TRAILS partnered with the Youth Policy Lab to collect feedback from staff implementing its Tier 1 SEL curriculum in three rural Colorado districts. The Tier 1 program includes professional development for staff and a 20-lesson Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum. Lessons are offered for four grade bands, K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. All staff in Colorado who received the TRAILS Tier 1 SEL training were asked to complete a weekly survey to provide feedback about any lessons they had delivered that week. Staff received a $10 incentive for each survey they completed. Over the course of the year 84 out of 131 staff responded to the weekly survey.

In addition to the weekly survey, a separate post-implementation survey that included questions about general implementation strategies, frequency of SEL lesson delivery, repetition, skipping, and lesson order was sent out to the same staff at the end of the school year—44 staff responded to this survey and findings are incorporated. We present combined findings from both surveys but indicate, throughout the report, those from the weekly survey as a percentage of lessons conducted and those from the post-implementation survey as the percentage of teachers/staff responding.

The data presented here represents aggregate data for the three districts. We highlight any notable differences in the discussion.

> *Very practical for the students. The content was interesting and engaging.*
>
> *6-8th Grade Teacher*

Survey Participation

Staff provided feedback for 644 lessons. Surveys were optional so it is likely that more lessons were implemented than staff provided feedback for in the weekly surveys.

Most feedback was received for lessons in the 3rd to 5th grade band — 42% of all feedback was provided for this grade band (see Figure 1). Almost 70% of feedback was provided for the first half of the curriculum (Lessons 1-10).

Figure 1: Lesson Feedback by Grade Band
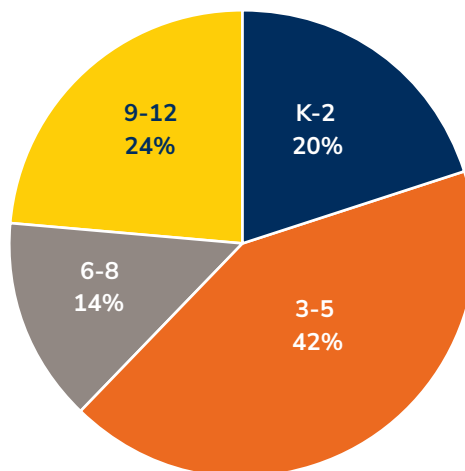
# FINDINGS

SEL Lesson Delivery

Most staff delivered SEL instruction regularly; 1-2 times per week or daily or almost daily. Forty-five percent of all lessons were implemented over multiple days but this varied greatly by district. In one district 62% of lessons were delivered over multiple days but only 3% were in another. There was some variation by grade as well. Over 60% of lessons were delivered over multiple days in grades K-2 and 6-8, 47% for 3-5, and only 11% for 9-12.

> **45%** of lessons were taught over multiple days.

Districts used different delivery models. In most cases, the lead classroom or homeroom teacher delivered all lessons to a single class; 76% reported an average of 16-30 students per lesson. In contrast, in two of the districts some staff delivered SEL lessons via a push in model, where one teacher delivered the lesson to multiple classes, as indicated by five staff reporting that they delivered SEL lessons to more than 91 students, on average. In one district, the latter model was used exclusively for grades 9-12.
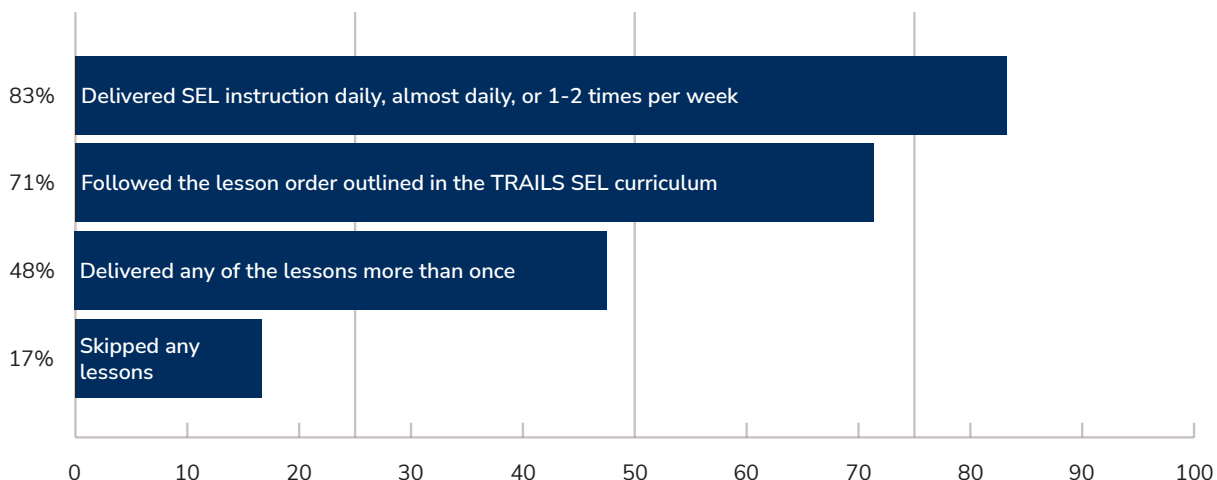
Lesson preparation and delivery times were, on average, not burdensome for staff. The mean preparation time was a little over 20 minutes and lesson delivery time was 33 minutes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Average Lesson Preparation & Delivery Time

Lesson Preparation
20 minutes

Lesson Delivery
33 minutes
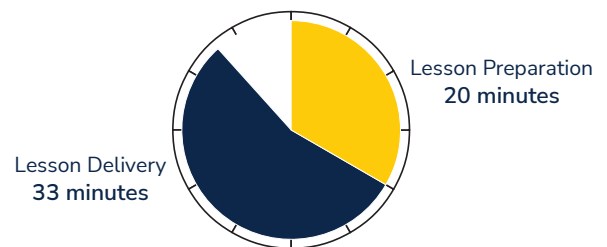
Most staff taught the TRAILS lessons in the order outlined by the curriculum. Almost half of those who taught TRAILS lessons reported that they delivered a lesson more than once. Most staff did not skip any of the lessons in the TRAILS curriculum sequence (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: SEL Lesson Delivery Format

83% Delivered SEL instruction daily, almost daily, or 1-2 times per week

71% Followed the lesson order outlined in the TRAILS SEL curriculum

48% Delivered any of the lessons more than once

17% Skipped any lessons

Student Engagement and Teacher Satisfaction

Staff were asked how engaged students were in each lesson. They reported moderately high student engagement overall; 3.6 on a 5-point rating scale. Reports of student engagement were higher for elementary school students than middle and high school (see Figure 4).

Staff were also asked about their own satisfaction with each lesson. Average satisfaction for individual lessons was always over 4.0, on a 5-point rating scale, indicating overall satisfaction with the lessons. Similar to engagement, staff who were teaching elementary school reported slightly higher satisfaction with the curriculum compared to staff teaching middle and high school (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Average Lesson Engagement & Satisfaction
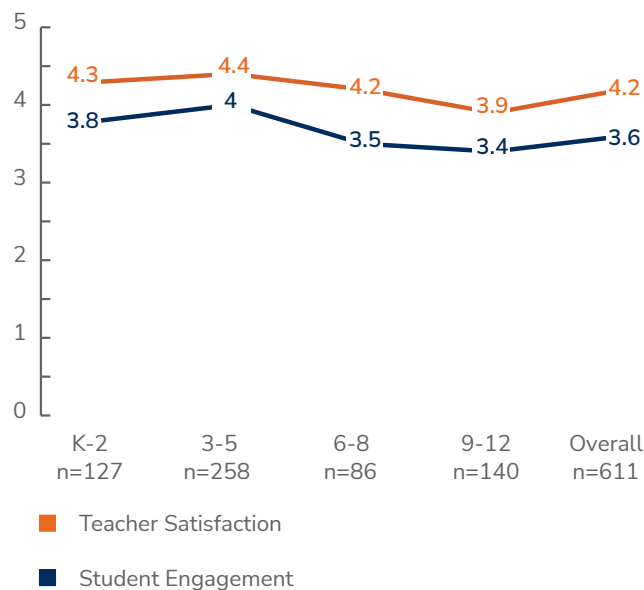
Teachers in Their Own Voice

Staff provided almost 600 open-ended responses for what they liked about the curriculum. Staff consistently reported that the content was age-appropriate and engaging for students, that the lesson topics were relevant for students, and that the lessons were easy to prepare for and deliver. Staff reported few difficulties with the curriculum. Over 75% of responses for grades K-5 reported no problems implementing the lesson. Staff indicated that roughly 10% of lessons in the middle grade bands (3-5 and 6-8) took longer than expected. At the older levels (6-8 and 9-12) staff reported encountering some resistance from students about participating in the SEL activities (41% and 21% of lessons, respectively).

> ❝ *I like that it gives me the opportunity to share my feelings and show the students that I have them too, and it is OK to share them.* ❞
>
> *K-2nd Grade Teacher*

About the Authors

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Youth Policy Lab

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.