

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT OF SEL:  
SCHOOL STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT IS NECESSARY FOR SUCCESSFUL  
IMPLEMENTATION

AN ABSTRACT

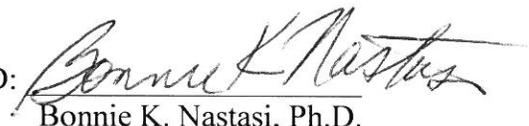
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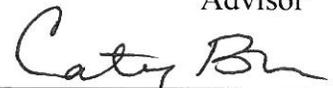
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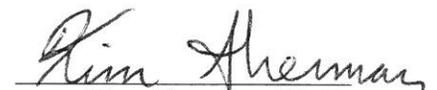


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## **Abstract**

Agencies declare the development of social and emotional skills critical to child development, and research on outcomes of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programming supports this claim. Despite the growing number of resources for educators, the day-to-day realities of individual school environments provide countless obstacles to implementation of SEL programs and initiatives. Without proper implementation, programs may not produce the desired student outcomes. Administrative support has been identified as a key factor underlying effective implementation, and while this seems to be a concrete way to increase SEL outcomes, the construct lacks a clear definition. This makes it difficult to identify which aspects of administrative support for SEL are the most important, and what mechanisms underlie the provision of support for SEL. Because there is no academic definition to guide school administrators in what supports to provide for effective implementation, it is necessary to research this construct. The current study seeks to do so by listening to the voices of those closest to the work of implementation, administrators and teachers themselves. By determining what supports stakeholders perceive necessary to successfully implement SEL in the context of a specific school site, the study aims to identify salient components of administrator support and create an emic definition to guide implementation.

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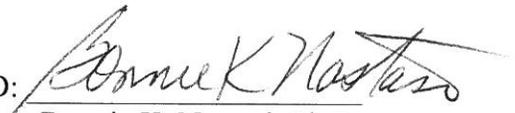
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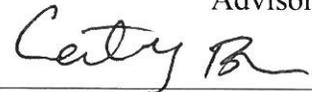
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	iv
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
Social Emotional Learning (SEL)	
Implementation	
Administrative Support	
3. CURRENT STUDY.....	18
4. METHOD.....	19
Phenomenology	
Setting/Background on the Existing Consultation Project	
Participants	
Data Collection	
Data Transcription and Analysis	
Trustworthiness	
5. RESULTS.....	27
Teacher and Administrator Definitions of Administrative Support of SEL	
(Research Question 1)	
Other Supports for SEL (Research Question 2)	

Additional Themes

6. DISCUSSION.....	44
Etic and Emic Definitions of Administrative Support of SEL	
Other Necessary Supports for SEL	
Implications for Practice	
Implications for Research	
7. CONCLUSION.....	55
Appendix	
1. APPENDIX A: Administrator Interview Protocol.....	57
2. APPENDIX B: Teacher Interview Protocol.....	58
3. APPENDIX C: Coding Scheme.....	60
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	63

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: *Saliience of Emic & Etic Codes* .....28

Table 2: *Recommendations for Improving Implementation of the PATHS® Curriculum*.50

## **Introduction**

In order to function as productive citizens in society, we must be able to make responsible decisions, be aware of ourselves and how we come across to others, manage our own emotions, and build and maintain relationships. These are the components of social emotional learning (SEL) as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2015). There are different ways to develop these abilities; they are not innate, but rather, they are discrete skills that can be taught and learned (CASEL, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2003). When children are taught these skills, their academic scores rise, their discipline issues drop, and their mental health can improve (Durlak & Dupre, 2008, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Schools are prime access points for children to begin SEL, as they are already set up to teach skills in a variety of subjects (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007), and there are increasing numbers of evidence-based SEL programs, interventions, and practices that teachers can implement to help their students build SEL skills. Despite the growing number of resources for educators, the day-to-day realities of individual school environments provide countless obstacles to implementation not found in researcher-implemented programming. Without proper implementation, the SEL programs may not produce the desired student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Forman, Shapiro, Coddling, Gonzales, Reddy, Rosenfield, Sanetti, & Stoiber, 2013) Ultimately, schools are often implementing SEL initiatives ineffectively (Greenberg et al., 2003). We

must determine how schools can implement SEL practices successfully to increase student development of SEL skills.

In a meta-analysis of eighty-one studies of prevention and promotion programs for children, Durlak and Dupre (2008) found that there were twenty-three or more factors impacting implementation. Though these multiple factors play a role in effective implementation, some may be more salient than others. Many papers on implementation in health and prevention science identify the importance of administrative support to implementation fidelity and outcomes (e.g., Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). The field lacks, however, a clear comprehensive definition of this construct of administrative support. The descriptions range from including allotment of time, dedication of resources, and demonstration that administrators value the innovation (Fixsen et al., 2005), to “general management skills” and “direct support for the intervention” (Forman, Olin, Hoagwood, Crowe, & Saka, 2009, p. 33) and the addition of accountability and monitoring (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009). Administrative support is also operationalized differently across studies, and may be measured by vague, one-item approaches on a scale from “the principal works hard to make sure the program runs smoothly” to “the principal often creates problems for the program” without further clarification (Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2006, p. 229). The resulting incommensurability and lack of depth in description makes it difficult to translate the construct into practice for schools. Given the importance of administrative support to teacher implementation of SEL, the present study uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods to identify the

supports that teachers and administrators perceive as necessary for implementing SEL in a southern urban charter school.

A phenomenological methodology is used for two reasons: there is not a clear definition of administrator support to guide current research and implementation, and understanding implementation in context is crucial for achieving and evaluating success. Investigating the perspectives of stakeholders with direct experiences in trying to implement SEL programs is extremely important in identifying necessary supports for SEL within the school. The present study is an inductive field study that will use teacher and administrator voices to identify perceptions of administrative support of SEL. Methods include an analysis of interview data from a group of administrators and teachers at an elementary charter school with an SEL initiative in a southern urban city. Analysis aims to discern the meaning of SEL support to stakeholders, their lived experiences with SEL implementation and administrative support of SEL. The study also analyzes administrator descriptions of the supports they provide (e.g., observations of teachers, feedback sessions with teachers, administrator coaching meetings) and teacher descriptions of the types of support they receive and how often they receive them.

## **Literature Review**

There is clear consensus in the literature that SEL leads to beneficial outcomes for students. The following literature review defines SEL and its importance, and why schools are a necessary part of this form of learning. Research on facilitators and barriers to the implementation of SEL programming is then discussed, and leads to the identification of administrative support as a necessary factor. A review of the literature on administrative support is given to illuminate the variety of definitions of the construct and the need for clarity and the identification how administrative support of SEL functions in order to promote the provision of such support during SEL implementation.

### **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Researchers agree that SEL is not a static one-time event, but rather a longer process of acquiring and applying skills (CASEL, 2006; Elias et al., 2007; Zins et al., 2007). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five core competencies that encompass such skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2015). These include both intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, recognizing the importance of managing oneself, but also one's impact on others and the ability to manage conflict with others in a productive manner (Durlak et al., 2011). The process of SEL aims for children to be able to exhibit these abilities and to integrate them with the ultimate purpose of using them to attain larger goals in life (Zins et al., 2007).

SEL programs, as conceptualized for this study, are universal interventions provided to children, for the purpose of promoting positive mental health and preventing mental health difficulties. Interventions fall into three general levels, or tiers, that target children at different levels of need: universal, indicated, and selected. While specific therapies and treatments are indicated for children with identified special needs, and skill remediation or small group training may be selected for children who are struggling, all children can receive universal programs aimed at the prevention of pathologies and the promotion of positive mental health. SEL programs fall into this universal category. As such, SEL programs and initiatives are designed to reach all children within a school and to lead to improved outcomes in multiple areas of student performance.

**Student outcomes and the importance of SEL.** Agencies have begun to declare the development of social and emotional skills as critical to child development (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000) and research on outcomes of SEL programming support this claim. The United States Department of Health and Human Services (2002) reported on school-based prevention programs including multiple SEL-focused programs and found that participating students showed improvements in grades, test scores, graduation rates, and core curriculum skills (reading, writing, math). While attendance rates increased, suspensions, grade retentions, and special education referrals decreased (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Hill et al. (2007) found that children who participated in SEL programs had comparable academic achievement test score gains to those participating in academic interventions (effect size of 0.27). In a seminal meta-analysis of 213 SEL program studies, Durlak et al. (2011) took this effect size and used Cohen's  $U_3$  index to compare the average student receiving SEL to the average control

student. Their results indicate that students participating in SEL show an 11-percentile point gain in academic achievement, a significant improvement over controls. In addition, students had significantly higher social emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011). Having these skills and competencies can not only increase achievement of goals and tasks, but can also lay the groundwork for preventing mental health problems and psychopathology (Institute of Medicine Report, 1994).

**The role of schools in SEL.** The purpose of schooling has been defined to include aspects of citizenry (Labaree, 1997; Zins et al., 2007) and increased autonomy for students (Piaget in Hart & Hart, 2014). Most educators, parents, students, and communities support this larger purpose, which stretches beyond academics to include interpersonal and intrapersonal skills consistent with SEL (Greenberg et al., 2003). Outside of school walls, legislators have supported SEL and states have developed SEL standards for public schools as well (Hoffman, 2009).

Schools serve a majority of children and families, and therefore provide an access point to most of the young population for developing SEL competencies. With academic performance as a driving force behind many schools, and academic gains as consistent outcomes of SEL studies, it seems obvious that SEL programming is a good fit within the school setting. Adelman and Taylor (2000) are so convinced that prevention programs and services, including SEL, are beneficial to academics that they argue that schools may not reach academic goals for students without them. Potential additional benefits include increased teacher competencies in stress management and problem solving, meaning that teachers would then be more likely to model these adaptive behaviors and responses in their classrooms (Zins et al., 2007). Teacher ability to handle stress and solve complex

problems could also increase teacher retention rates, a variable known to be important in stable school environments (Forman et al., 2013). It is reasonable to conclude that these benefits could extend to parents and community members as well in cases where programming involves education and workshops for the larger stakeholder group.

Many schools either have tried or are currently attempting to address SEL in their buildings. There are hundreds of websites, books, and curricula specifically made for educators on this subject (Hoffman, 2009). Despite this support at face value, schools may be reluctant to invest the necessary time, training, and resources to fully implement SEL if they will not be able to see immediate benefits (Zins et al., 2007). The benefits promised by the label “evidence-based” programs may not be seen at all, however, if the initiatives are not implemented throughout the school as a priority. If schools are to truly work toward this purpose, they must plan to ensure that students attain SEL competencies.

### **Implementation**

Implementation science is the study of how research is effectively put into policy and practice outside of the laboratory, and social scientists in various fields are pursuing the question of effectiveness in natural settings (Eccles & Mittman, 2006). The literature on the implementation of innovations in school psychology continues to grow as it becomes increasingly obvious that the mere adoption of evidence-based interventions and practices is not enough to improve student outcomes in schools (Forman et al., 2013). Effective implementation of SEL programming in schools has been challenging. Multiple research teams have developed models for framing and understanding the complicated process of implementing prevention programs that include or can be applied to SEL

programming, and all parse the larger concept into different elements, components, or activities (Fixsen et al., 2005; Wandersman et al., 2008; Damschroder et al., 2009; Aarons, Hurlburt, & McCue Horwitz, 2011; Forman et al., 2013). Common pieces of the models include references to implementer training, communication and dissemination of the intervention, and organizational support systems (which include administrative supports and or leadership supports, but are not clearly defined). Though many models are based at the larger level of social innovations in a variety of settings (health care settings, mental health clinics, schools), they are useful conceptualizations when defining and evaluating implementation in schools.

**Implementation defined.** The field of implementation science distinguishes the intervention itself from the implementation of the intervention: the intervention is the program selected, while the implementation comprises the activities of the practitioner responsible for delivery and the environmental supports that make accurate dissemination of the program to its recipients possible (Fixsen et al., 2005). Other definitions of implementation include the integration of interventions (Forman et al., 2013) and the inclusion of the intervention into everyday routines (Eccles & Mittman, 2006). After reviewing successfully implemented programs and practices, Fixsen et al. (2005) proposed the following core components to implementation: staff selection, pre-service and in-service training, ongoing consultation and coaching, staff and program evaluation, facilitative administrative support, and systems interventions. How these elements are fulfilled then leads to the implementation outcomes of changes in behavior of the practitioners (Fixsen et al 2005), or in the case of schools, changes in the practices of teachers and other staff. Simply stated, implementation is the application of a treatment

or intervention. Whether that implementation is deemed effective or not depends on the factors described above and, ultimately, the subjects' outcomes. Implementation terminology and definitions of the factors are not always described within or consistent across studies (Damschroder et al., 2009).

**The effect of implementation on intervention outcomes.** With legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and the recent replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act (Civic Impulse, 2016) requiring the use of evidence-based programs, schools have increased their focus on instituting programs that have been proven to be effective and can therefore be considered evidence-based (Greenberg et al., 2003). Despite this designation of effectiveness, these programs or initiatives, once adopted, may sit on the shelf, fizzle out after initial enthusiasm wanes, or not produce the outcomes promised on the box, book cover, or website. Researchers interested in the effective translation of research to practice are tasked with figuring out why (Forman et al., 2013).

This task proves incredibly difficult, as many studies of evidence-based interventions only measure the outcome of the intervention (i.e., changes in behavior of recipients of the intervention) and fail to measure the methods and the extent to which it was implemented with fidelity (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). Sanetti, Gritter, and Dobey (2011) describe a review of literature in school psychology in which only half of the studies in a thirteen-year period report quantitative treatment integrity data. While this may seem low, it is actually higher than what has been reported in some similar fields (Sanetti, Gritter, Dobey, 2011). Without these missing data, it is impossible to determine if null or negative outcomes of an intervention occur due to problems inherent in the intervention itself, or due to inadequate or ineffective implementation (Fixsen et al.,

2005). For example, the amount of treatment given may have been below necessary doses, provided incorrectly, or provided inconsistently across students (Rossi & Freeman, 1985). In addition, experimental groups may be omitting core aspects of the intervention, while control groups may be implementing parts of the intervention or similar practices. Implementation monitoring would allow researchers to assess these variables, and take them into account when determining outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2005)

Without implementation data it is difficult to discern what environmental elements may have led to program failure or success, and what aspects need to be continued or fixed for improvement (Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2016). Looking at the studies that do report this data, it becomes clear that high levels of implementation are key to obtaining increased positive outcomes for program recipients (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). In one study of the Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) program, close to 50% of the variance in student academic growth was explained by school differences in implementation and climate (Banerjee, 2010). Even just the act of monitoring implementation has been found to increase effect sizes for programs. In a review of 59 studies on mentoring, effect sizes were three times larger for programs that monitored implementation compared with those that did not (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). It is important to note that monitoring was measured as being either present or absent, and types of monitoring and frequency were not described. Five meta-analyses of close to 500 studies of the implementation of prevention programs for children and adolescents, including SEL programming, show that when monitoring data indicates that programs are implemented at high levels, they obtain mean effect sizes two to three times larger than when these conditions are not met (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). In a

meta-analysis of 213 school-based studies, Durlak et al. (2011) found that schools that reported implementation problems in SEL programming had fewer significant effects than those without reported problems. It is important to note here that the presence of implementation problems was also coded dichotomously, as either “yes,” indicating problems were present, or “no,” there were not. Because of this, it is not possible to determine which aspects of implementation were the most problematic, or had the strongest effect on outcomes. Knowing which elements are the most important could help to improve implementation in the future. Implementers need clear delineation of what constitutes these elements and how they may vary while still leading to successful outcomes.

**Implementation facilitators and barriers in schools.** There are many possible reasons why implementation of SEL programming is low in schools. Until we determine what these are and how to address them, we will not see the program or practice outcomes presumed from the label “evidence-based” (Forman et al., 2013). Greenberg et al. (2003) point out that today’s schools must assume more roles in the lives of students, with fewer resources, and with increased pressure to perform academically. Time, access to resources, and academic performance pressure may contribute to the difficulty surrounding implementation of SEL in schools, but they do not account for the entire picture. There are also factors that increase implementation of SEL in schools and lead to more positive outcomes for students.

Many facilitators of successful implementation include aspects of the larger systemic operations of the school. Using strategies for broad environmental change have been shown to lead to effective programming (Catalano et. al, 2002; Durlak & Wells,

1997). In one study, 50% of schools with successful implementation of school-based prevention programs, including SEL programs, also had broader school goals that prioritized mental health (Forman, 2009). In the same study, 42% had a high match between school values and the intervention. Zins et al. (2007) also identified having school policy alignment with SEL goals as an “essential characteristic of effective SEL programming” (p. 199). School policy and goal setting are primarily the responsibility of those with decision-making power in a school, namely the school administrators. These policies do not necessarily translate into practice, thus underscoring the need to understand the practical side of administrator support to identify what is necessary to achieve successful implementation.

### **Administrative Support**

Administrative support, sometimes called leadership support, or measured as just principal support or a part of organizational support, has been identified as an important factor for effective implementation of preventive programming by numerous studies and reviews (e.g., Durlak & Dupre 2008; Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Fixsen et al., 2005; Forman et al., 2013; Kam et al., 2003; Ransford et al., 2009). This evidence is promising, as it provides a possible concrete way to increase SEL outcomes: the improvement of implementation by encouraging administrators to adopt identified supportive practices (Arends, 1980). The construct of administrative support, however, lacks a clear definition.

Outside of the psychology literature, the field of education administration has also struggled to provide a clear definition of administrative support. Richard Arends wrote an article for *Educational Administration Quarterly* on precisely this issue over 30 years ago

in 1982. Titled, *The Meaning of Administrative Support*, he discusses the lack of an “empirical definition,” and attempts to provide one for use. He concludes that support must include the administration providing the following: verbal affirmations, clear role expectations, goals and project oversight, a defense of the project when questioned, and “something of value” to implementers, such as time (p. 86). Although he defines each part of this list and hopes for its ultimate use by researchers, administrators, and training programs, it is clear that in the present day it has not been universally adopted or comprehensively used (23 citations in 33 years). Moving forward to 2008, Gigante and Firestone at least attempt a definition and incorporate part of Arends’ ideas, but inconsistency remains. In their study of teacher leader success in improving math and science instruction, Gigante and Firestone (2008) explicitly define administrative support as only “verbal acknowledgement and reinforcement,” (p. 323); however, they later discuss the value of administrators providing social resources, material resources, time, and communication.

In business management, Klein and Sorra (1996) investigate the challenges of implementation of new initiatives, and discuss leadership support as contributing to the climate for implementation. They describe such behaviors as including the responsiveness of leaders to concerns and criticisms of the new program, as well as holding the employees accountable for implementation through monitoring, praise, and incentives (Klein & Sorra, 1996).

In psychology, Durlak and Dupre (2008) found administrative support to be one of the twenty-three factors they identified as affecting the implementation process in schools, health clinics, and other community agencies. An examination of their entire list

of factors, however, reveals many others that are listed separately could be under the purview of administrators and their support. These other factors include: positive work climate, organizational norms regarding change, shared vision, shared decision-making, and leadership. This is promising because it means that investing in administrators could be an avenue for improving all of these aspects of implementation, and therefore could possibly make a substantial difference in SEL outcomes for children. The same is true of the core components influencing implementation identified by Fixsen et al. (2005).

Facilitative administrative support is one component, but it could be argued that others, such as coaching, staff and program evaluation, and staff selection could be a part of the role of an administrator in a school as well. In their review of implementation literature and its relationship to the field of school psychology, Forman and Barakat (2011) found administrative support to be one of five key factors impacting implementation, but two of the other factors, namely “fit with school goals, policies, and other programs” as well as “school organizational structures,” are inextricably linked to administrative support within a school (p. 289). This leads to the idea that administrative support may have a larger impact on implementation than other factors, in that it may actually encompass them.

Based on the literature reviewed above, it seems that administrative support needs to be more than just a rubber stamp of approval for a program or initiative. It may require active involvement through verbal support and defense of the program, specific allocation of resources, provision of training and ongoing coaching, and recognition and reinforcement (see Noell, 2014). The variations in definitions and measurement of administrative support make it difficult to identify which aspects are crucial across

studies. How administrative support is defined in each study, and what actions it may include, could impact the amount of influence it has on the actual implementation of programming.

**Measurement of administrative support.** The research literature lacks a clear definition of administrative support, and some studies do not attempt to define it at all. However, some idea of how it is conceptualized can be inferred from the methods of measurement. For example, in a study examining the implementation of the PATHS SEL program, Kam et al. (2003) measured principal support by having the PATHS Coordinator and her supervisor provide ratings on two items: (a) quality of principal support for PATHS, and (b) quality of support for the technical assistance team. The first item aimed to measure a general level support for the intervention, based on impressions, and the second item was meant to measure the support the coordinator and team received through their relationship with the principal more specifically (Kam et al., 2003). Though they provide examples of what high and low ratings could mean operationally, it is not clear that definitions were provided for each the numerical rating. There is also no way to identify how respondents themselves interpret support as a construct, and how that may impact responses. Therefore, it is difficult to translate their findings of principal support being a contributing factor to SEL intervention success into practice at other schools due to the lack of identification of specific supports that were effective.

Ransford et al. (2009) also acknowledge the range of behaviors that can encompass administrative support, and list verbal commitment, accountability, monitoring, and dedication of resources as common actions associated with support. The researchers used a common rating on a 1 to 4 scale to assess teacher perceptions of

overall support from the building administration, providing examples for each rating:

1 (*Does not make PATHS a priority. There is limited discussion of PATHS with staff and the curriculum is not mentioned during observations*); 2 (*Occasional support for PATHS in faculty and staff discussions, but does not see success of PATHS and social-emotional learning as central to the school's mission*); 3 (*Principal is supportive of teachers' efforts, speaks positively about PATHS with staff, problem-solves obstacles to implementation, uses PATHS material and observes PATHS lessons*); and 4 (*Is a "cheerleader" for the program, supports staff effectively to use PATHS and sees it as central to school mission*). (Ransford et al., 2009, p. 516).

Although these descriptions are more specific, their use is still limited in that they are not sufficiently operationalized as behaviors that could be encouraged in other schools or situations to produce similar or improved results.

Payne, Gottfredson, and Gottfredson (2006) also found that principal support has a significant relationship to the implementation of school-based prevention programs including SEL-focused programs, and they also measured it using just one indicator. The school employee responsible for direct implementation of the intervention completed a questionnaire including one item aimed at assessing principal support. The response choices ranged from "the principal works hard to make sure the program runs smoothly" to "the principal often creates problems for the program" (Payne et al., 2006, p. 229). It is left to the reader to guess what actions the principal may have taken that constituted such hard work or problem creation.

As is apparent after reviewing the differing descriptions and measures of administrative support, there is not a common way to define it or measure it. Fixsen et al. (2005) mention the difficulty of studying implementation science without clear, consistent definitions. No time is this clearer than when examining the construct of administrative support. Without clear definitions, it is difficult to identify which aspects of administrative support for SEL are the most important, or what mechanisms underlie the provision of support for SEL. With the exception of Ransford et al. (2009), the current descriptions and measures lack input from relevant stakeholders, calling into question the internal validity of the measures described above. Administrators and teachers, those who are giving and receiving support, are in key positions to define and evaluate such support, and their lived experiences may contribute to clarity of this implementation factor.

### **Current Study**

Because there is no academic definition to guide school administrators in what support to provide for effective implementation, it is necessary to research this construct. The current study does so by listening to the voices of those closest to the work of implementation, administrators and teachers themselves. By determining what supports administrators and teachers perceive necessary to successfully implement SEL in the context of a specific school site, the study aims to identify salient components of administrator support. These are used to create an emic definition, which can provide a base for further studies to test their effectiveness and lead to a clear construct for the field.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do teachers and administrators define administrator support of SEL?
2. What are the perspectives of teachers and administrators regarding necessary supports for the implementation of SEL?

## **Method**

### **Phenomenology**

This study employs qualitative analysis of archival data from a larger consultation project. The project uses a naturalistic inquiry paradigm that follows the Participatory Culture-Specific Intervention Model (PCSIM) to engage stakeholders at a school site in creating ecologically valid and sustainable mental health programming (Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas, 2004). The PCSIM is an integration of participatory action research, program development, and ethnography within an ecological model (Nastasi et al., 2004). Action research is research conducted specifically to investigate and improve practice (Hendricks, 2009). Participatory action research includes stakeholders as researchers, and the PCSIM includes stakeholders from the school and the community as partners in all ten phases of the model. Together with the researchers, they develop services to prevent and address the mental health needs of students.

The current study is a part of the fifth component of the PCSIM, Formative Research. Formative research follows the identification of a goal or problem, and the consultation team engages in data collection to gain a rich picture of the contributing factors to the problem. These data also contribute to the development of theory specific to the school and community environment (component six) that can drive later context-specific implementation (component nine; Nastasi et al., 2004).

### **Setting/Background on the Existing Consultation Project**

Data are analyzed from the Formative Research phase at the consultation site—an urban charter school serving kindergarten through eighth grade students in the southern United States. During the 2014-2015 school year, 506 students were enrolled, the majority of which were African American (90.5 percent). 95.8% of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch, and 16.1% received special education services (New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools, 2015). Eleven out of 41 teachers were new to the profession, and a percentage was a part of an alternative teaching certification program (attaining certification through a state-approved program outside of a university program or setting). The site has been working with the consultation team since the 2013-2014 school year, and as a result, has attempted to implement some SEL programming into their practices. During the 2014-2015 school year, the site purchased two evidence-based SEL curricula, set up a teacher SEL mentoring program, provided bi-monthly SEL-focused professional developments for staff, and planned for an SEL-based alternative to in-school suspension. The implementation of each of these initiatives failed to reach the stakeholder team's goals, and was deemed unsuccessful, based on feedback gained in a meeting with the team at the end of the school year. The stakeholder team identified barriers to successful implementation that included lack of recognition and resources from leadership, as well as lack of accountability for implementation. In addition, the stakeholder team discussed that they did not have the decision-making authority necessary to make school-wide decisions regarding SEL. The consultation team decided to work more directly with the school administration as a result of this feedback. In May 2015 the consultants facilitated a meeting in which school administrators began the process of developing a vision for the

school based on their collective ideas of the purpose of schooling. Administrators completed the vision at a leadership retreat, titling it “the SEL vision,” and presented it to the staff at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. The principal announced that meeting the vision would be a main theme for the staff this year, and that SEL could not be just an additional class or instructional method; it must be “a way of life” in the school. He declared, “This is what we want to say, live, and believe. This is what we are about”. School administrators agreed that understanding staff perceptions of the implementation of SEL would be important to inform their process, and the researchers conducted interviews to fulfill this need. This site was chosen for this study because of the unique focus on integrating SEL throughout the school. The high level of administrative involvement in initiating SEL practices for the 2015-2016 school year and large administrative team make the site a good fit for addressing the research question concerning administrative support of SEL. The school plans to use the information gained from this study to revise current practices to improve the implementation of SEL initiatives in a way that matches their school culture.

### **Participants**

Naturalistic inquiry encourages the inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives in research in order to create a complete picture of context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nastasi, 2008; Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2016; Schwartz & Ogilvy, 1979). The study analyzes interview data representing the perceptions of school administrators and teachers regarding the support needed to implement SEL initiatives. Participants in the interviews included employees designated as administrators, or in local vernacular, members of the school leadership team. One member of the twelve leadership team

members was excluded, due to unavailability for interview participation during the data collection period. Of the remaining eleven, nine work directly with teachers, either as their primary coaches (managers conducting observations, feedback sessions, and performance evaluations), or secondary support for students. Four have roles similar to an assistant principal, one is a special education coordinator and coach, one is an intervention coordinator, one runs the discipline office, one is a school psychologist, and one is the principal. The remaining two work in business operations and finance, supporting administrators, teachers, and students through indirect actions. Eight of the administrators identify as either White or Caucasian, one as Indian, one as Black, and one as mixed race. Ten of the eleven administrators identify as female.

A subset of teachers also participated in individual interviews. Teacher participants were selected to comprise a representative sampling across grade levels and subjects taught. A total of eleven teacher interviews were conducted with at least two lead teachers from each of the three main clusters of grade levels (K-2, 3-4, 5-8), plus special education teachers and reading interventionists. Of the eleven teachers, ten identify as either White or Caucasian, and one identifies as mixed-race. Ten of the eleven teachers identify as female.

### **Data Collection**

Each school administrator and selected teacher participated in an individual interview facilitated by two graduate student consultants, who are also the researchers for this study. Both consultants have been working with the school in a consultative role for more than one year, and have developed strong working relationships with some of the administrators and teachers. Within the naturalistic paradigm, researchers who have

prolonged engagement with the setting and participants may have an increased ability to uncover true meaning within participant responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Both consultants have also previously been teachers and teacher coaches, and one has also been a school administrator at another local elementary charter school. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that such shared experiences between researchers and stakeholder participants can lead to greater understanding of values and perspectives.

Each of the interviews lasted between 10 and 60 minutes and was audio recorded with consent. Participants were asked questions about psychological health, how they define SEL, and what they view stakeholder roles to be in the provision of SEL. Both administrators and teachers answered questions addressing their beliefs about the importance of SEL in schools, how their school is currently addressing SEL needs, the types of support they provide or are provided regarding SEL practices, and the facilitators and barriers to implementation.

### **Data Transcription and Analysis**

Transcription and coding are key methods to the qualitative research process in order to encapsulate what participants are actually saying with minimal researcher interpretation (Creswell, 2009). Audio recordings of all interviews were transcribed by undergraduate research assistants and were coded by the research assistants and one of the researcher/consultants. The research team used a combination of deductive and inductive methods. The team engaged in a multistep coding process following receipt of archival data. First, they read through the transcripts in their entirety to familiarize themselves with the scope of the data collected. Next, they identified possible inductive codes pertaining to support of SEL that arose during the initial read-through. These codes

included supports that participants experience directly, or perceived as necessary for successful implementation. Single-statement summaries from participant responses were used as codes whenever possible, to preserve the language of the school. The team also used a deductive coding scheme derived from the literature to identify the etic factors that are salient to the participants. To begin, the researcher and assistants coded the same two interviews separately, coming back together when finished to compare. The team operationalized the definition of each code together, determining what would and would not be included under each. Other emergent codes were identified, and were brought to the research team for discussion and possible addition. They went on to code a total of five of the twenty-two interviews this way until reaching consensus. The researcher then applied the codes to all data and bracketed impressions while moving through each interview. When finished with initial coding, the research assistants entered the data into a database and performed a check on the researcher's coding of the remaining seventeen interviews. The researcher then analyzed the data for themes and patterns within and between each code. Next, an emic definition of administrator support was created, and that was compared to the etic definition derived from the literature. Other inductively coded supports outside of direct administrator actions were compared to factors from the literature as well.

Literature suggests that saturation of data is achieved with approximately twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Ando, Cousins, & Young, 2014). Though The two subgroups of administrators and teachers in this study contain eleven interviews each, which approximates the suggested twelve. Given the similarity of the interview protocols and common experiences and backgrounds of the participant groups, saturation

could also be viewed as a total, combined twenty-two interviews, thus exceeding recommendations.

### **Trustworthiness**

Existing standards for qualitative research typically involve the establishment of validity through the use of techniques designed to develop trustworthiness (Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2016). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the four criteria that create trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following techniques proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) will be utilized in the current study:

1. *Prolonged engagement*: the primary researcher collaborated with the school administrators, led work groups, and attended meetings and professional developments given by the school for over a year before data collection
2. *Peer debriefing*: periodic discussions were conducted with colleagues outside of the research project
3. *Member checks*: preliminary data and interpretations were presented to school stakeholders for accuracy. A final executive summary of results will be presented to school personnel as a part of the next phase of consultation.
4. *Thick description*: procedures were documented in detail to ensure transferability.
5. *Audit trail*: records were kept of all data collection and analysis procedures as well as formal and informal notes.

6. *Triangulation*: data was analyzed from multiple sources (teachers and administrators) and by multiple researchers.

## Results

This study sought to answer the research question: *How do teachers and administrators define administrator support of SEL?* Using a deductive coding scheme derived from extant literature, the researcher/consultant and two research assistants examined each set of interviews to explore match between this etic definition and teacher and administrator responses. Inductive codes were extracted from the interviews and themes were deduced from responses in order to add the perspectives of the school personnel to the definition and thus create an emic definition specific to this school.

Additionally, this study sought to answer a second research question: *What are the perspectives of teachers and administrators regarding necessary supports for the implementation of SEL?* The researcher/consultant and two research assistants identified inductive codes from within the interviews to identify what teachers and administrators deem necessary to successfully implement SEL initiatives in their school, beyond direct administrative actions. Table 1 presents the salience of deductive and inductive codes as reflected by the number of teachers or administrators who mentioned the code compared to the total number of participants in their group. Saturation was reached in this study, in that themes were repeated throughout the interviews, and no new themes appeared in successive data reviews (Ando, Cousins, & Young, 2014).

Table 1

*Salience of Emic & Etic Codes*

<u>Definition of Administrative Support: Deductive Codes</u>		
<u>Code</u>	<u>Teacher Salience</u>	<u>Administrator Salience</u>
Allocation of Resources	11/11	10/11
Provision of Ongoing Coaching	9/11	8/11
Recognition & Reinforcement	2/11	1/11
Provision of Training	11/11	10/11
Verbal Support/ Defense of Programs/SEL	6/11	5/11
<u>Definition of Administrative Support: Inductive Codes</u>		
Modeling	6/11	6/11
Discipline Support	9/11	0/11
School-wide Systems in Place	6/11	10/11
Accountability	9/11	7/11
<u>Other Supports: Inductive Codes</u>		
Families on Board	5/11	8/11
All Staff on the Same Page	8/11	8/11
Individual Teacher Factors	11/11	9/11
Proactive Disciplinary Strategies	0/11	8/11

*Note.* Salience is defined by the number of teachers or administrators who mentioned the code compared to the total number of participants in their group (e.g., 9 out of 11 teachers mentioned the provision of ongoing coaching in their interview).

## **Teacher and Administrator Definitions of Administrative Support of SEL (Research Question 1)**

**Deductive codes.** As stated in the literature review, administrative support may require active involvement through verbal support and defense of the program, specific allocation of resources, provision of training and ongoing coaching, and recognition and reinforcement. The deductive codes (Appendix) reflect these six elements, and the recurring themes and patterns within each code are described below.

*Allocation of resources.* Both teachers and administrators speak extensively about allocation of resources as a crucial aspect of implementation. For this study, this was defined as the provision of time, money, human resources, physical resources, and decision-making that prioritized SEL (Forman et al., 2009; Gigante & Firestone, 2008). While teachers and administrators mention multiple aspects of the allocation of resources, the provision of time, specifically, was most salient. The two groups are in agreement that time must be allotted in the daily schedule for SEL in order for the initiatives to be implemented successfully. As one teacher explains:

[The students] come back and you're teaching and then an hour goes by or whatever and you don't have those restorative conversations like you should...all teachers have said the same thing like, "when are we supposed to do that?" like, "how are we supposed to do that, when?" I mean you can do it—you can walk up to them later...when they're working and have sort of a little whisper in their ear. But we all said that that wasn't as effective as it could've been so we were all wondering when were we supposed to do that...That was the hardest part of the whole program this year. (Teacher 3)

Administrators echo the sentiment:

And when it comes to actually having time in the day to teach it...we're so low on time for academics it's like really hard to push time in the day to actually focus solely on SEL. We're constantly pushed [on] testing and scores and academics, and we have advisory time in the morning but it's really just not like — it's twenty minutes and they're in and out. There's just not enough time in the day to really focus on it... there definitely needs to be time for it and I just don't know where that time is. (Administrator 1)

Some teachers specifically view this as an administrator based problem, directly saying, “They don't give us time...They want me to teach Grammar and SEL in half an hour in the morning; that's impossible, I can't do that.” (Teacher 10)

Administrators also mention the creation of time through the provision for additional personnel to lead SEL initiatives:

I wish there was one person over the [SEL] curriculum...if I could have a dream position at the school, it would be for someone to be an SEL coordinator...and just manage all of those parts. Because right now, a little bit's in all the leaders' buckets and some are maintaining and some are dropping the ball because we have so much other stuff... it doesn't really belong to anyone on a systems level, and it needs to if we're serious about it. (Administrator 3)

***Provision of training.*** Formalized training sessions are highly valued by teachers and administrators at the school. These are referred to as professional development sessions (PDs) or workshops. They are scheduled and organized by administrators, and they take place after school or on days when students do not attend. Both groups of

interviewees mention the importance of trainings for learning how to implement SEL initiatives, including learning new strategies, and specifically, learning steps to address maladaptive behavior in “an SEL way.”

Teachers identify trainings as one of the ways that their administrators have provided support already, and they frequently requested more. When asked about supports that they received for SEL implementation, Teacher 1 responds, “The workshops...count as a support. I think that’s about it...We had one workshop like that last year I remember and I don’t remember anything like that since.” Teacher 4 explains that an SEL school would be a place “where teachers and staff are trained to recognize [student SEL needs], and to address them as needed.” Teacher 7 specifically attributes the trainings to administrators supporting the initiatives, stating, “I do believe that administration has supported us in a...really positive way. I think providing [trainings] for us to learn more about what we really need to learn. I think that was definitely the right thing for them to do.”

Administrators agree with this sentiment; Administrator 10 even describes it as a parallel process where “[SEL is] not just being taught to kids. It’s also...being taught to adults and actively practiced by adults.” Administrators also see it as their role to be facilitating or “coordinating the training stuff for adults” (Administrator 10), which is consistent with the etic definition that includes training as a component of administrative support. Both teachers and administrators recognize that this coordination requires both vetting trainers and providing follow-up, as Administrator 4 points out:

I think trainings and professional developments are good but I think it’s something that, like— I do feel like it’s something that, administration needs to be

so thoughtful and intentional about, because just having, like, a training every so often isn't going to be the key.

***Provision of ongoing coaching.*** Although training is mentioned often, school staff members recognize that training alone is not enough, and express it in statements reminiscent of Administrator 4's (above), "You know, three PDs over the summer does [sic] not make us an SEL school, right?" (Teacher 11). Teachers express that they receive coaching from administrators as a follow up to academic trainings, and they want more coaching around SEL. Teacher 10 shares:

I think they have to be in the classrooms observing, writing down things that they noticed; and then afterwards having a conversation with the teacher. Yeah I think it needs to be more than just your...like more than just my [coach, it] needs to be others, like [the principal] needs to be in there... observing, even videotaping, and then afterwards you have to reflect with the teacher... I think it helps to have more than one [coach] because then you can get [different] feedback. (Teacher 10)

Teachers say this repeatedly, stressing the need for coaching SEL:

I think when we start to see that [a student has significant SEL needs], then right away we should start having someone observe that kid and give the teacher feedback on a plan... they can email someone and be like 'hey can you come and observe me with this person? And give me feedback and tell me what to do when they do this or response to this when they do this because...the color chart's not working or a punishment's not working...' like finding solutions. (Teacher 5)

Teacher 6 recalls,

My coaches, which [sic] included the director and my grade level lead, offered a lot of problem-solving support around...providing my class some SEL structure to...keep the environment positive and learning. I feel this year there's been a drop in that... this year is more of a major push in my coaching around academics and it actually feels like there's a lot less focus on social emotional learning.

Administrators believe that coaching is one of the main ways that they provide support. Administrator 1 says that SEL “gets mentioned a lot in one-on-one coaching sessions,” and Administrator 7 “can meet with teachers [about SEL] daily unscheduled or scheduled.” Administrator 3 states that, “while it might not be the focus of all my observations, I definitely include it in my feedback... Beyond [coaching], I don't know. I don't think I do much. I don't think I do enough.”

***Verbal support and defense of programs.*** The traditional idea of verbal support is exemplified by Administrator 6's statement, “When I do coaching and observations with teachers or debrief, it needs to include the vocabulary of the things that, like, we believe matter...[SEL] is in the foundation of how I talk to, and about, kids.” The underlying concept is that administrators bringing up SEL in various types of communication will increase the likelihood of teachers valuing, and therefore implementing, SEL initiatives. Because of this, this study expanded the code “verbal support and defense of programs” to include any actions that were described as “pushing [SEL]” or “just pulling it to the forefront a little more” (Teacher 6). This included verbal actions, such as, “administrators...referring to [the SEL curriculum] like in conversations... I would say that the administration does a good job, like, referring to it.” (Teacher 8) Additionally, Teacher 3 would like “a chart in the room—like a visual thing to remind everybody about

like our vision. Like this is the sort of school that we're in" to continue the push for SEL beyond verbal communication. Administrator 9 stresses multiple forms of communication and the importance of "talking about it right, bring [sic] it to the forefront of communication. Whether it be emailing, in person, large group..."

***Recognition and reinforcement.*** Providing public and private praise, tokens of appreciation, and external rewards are hallmarks of increasing desired behaviors. Increasing the implementation of SEL initiatives is no different. Teacher 5 remembers having "people pop in and...write notes and stuff." Administrator 9 suggests "recognizing staff members who are really good about [SEL], demonstrating, like, what we're looking for in social emotional learning." More generally, Teacher 2 describes a "huge turnover rate" and "there are some people that would be staying if they felt like they were appreciated more." While this statement may not be specific to SEL initiatives, the recognition and reinforcement of such behaviors could potentially play a huge role in their success.

***Inductive codes.*** Teachers and administrators brought up aspects of administrator support that fell outside of the deductive coding scheme. These were categorized as inductive codes, using the language of the participants for code name when possible (Appendix). Themes and patterns within each code are described below (salience of each is depicted in Table 1.)

***Modeling.*** School staff describe the importance of administrators "lead[ing] by example" (Teacher 10) when it comes to SEL in interactions with each other, students, and families. When there is conflict, Administrator 2 steps in as "a calming force or as a model for how we can move forward." Administrator 3 discusses "teachers and all staff

members modeling what it means to, like, manage your emotions and manage your relationships respectfully all the time” in an SEL school. “Modeling is really important. Examples of how to do it well, what it looks like when you’re doing it well...when I go into classrooms, I need to model, you know, classroom management in a way that shows that this is what I believe.” (Administrator 6). “Having our top administrator actually try to promote and also model and do all this as well” has been especially important for Administrator 8. Teachers see the value in modeling, and express that “until I saw somebody do it, I couldn’t figure out how to get [students] to listen to me and to trust me.” (Teacher 10).

***Discipline support.*** Teachers express feeling supported in SEL when administrators come in to help address specific discipline issues with students. This potentially helps ensure that SEL would be reinforced to the student, but also helps to preserve the student-teacher relationship when they felt they could no longer respond in a social emotionally adaptive way. As Teacher 10 describes:

To be able to have a kid taken out of your classroom when you’ve reached that point with them where you’re not okay, and then to have them be able to go to a place where they are not going to be even, not that they’re not in trouble, but they’re not even, it’s not going to be worse, it’s just going to be like “Ok sit here, calm down. What happened? What could you do next time?” I think that’s a huge, huge part and really helpful.

Teachers want to be able to send students out of the classroom, and they feel that there “needs to be immediate support for that child in the hallway, like an adult there right away, willing to have the “stop and talk about it” conversation so [the student] can get

back in and fix it.” (Teacher 11). The support involves not only taking students out of the classroom, but also administrators pushing in.

If there’s a child having difficulties and they need to be removed from the room or go somewhere for a break, we have a cell phone and we just text and someone comes and removes the child and...they do a reflection sheet. ‘Why did this happen? What could you do better next time?...What are you gonna [sic] do when you get back to class?’ That’s really good. They also step in to—to classrooms that are having difficulties like culturally. They step in and they’ll speak to the—the class...about being kind to each other and, you know, saying nice things and um, you know, things like that. So that’s really great. I have never been at a school that has support like that. It’s been really helpful.” (Teacher 3)

**Accountability.** Two types of accountability are salient to school staff: teacher accountability for teaching and implementing SEL, and administrator accountability for providing support to teachers. A colloquialism in schools is, “what gets assessed gets addressed.” While this usually refers to the content of standardized academic assessments, it more broadly applies to any area that could be assessed through any measure. An idea for increasing accountability comes from assessment:

Maybe putting something into [teacher] rubrics or walk-through [observation] forms, or maybe creating a specific walk-through form just for SEL. I think that there needs to be some sort of, like system or structure where members of the [administration] are making sure that things are being addressed and that people are not...skirting around the issue. (Administrator 2)

Administrator 4 agrees that accountability is important, but is unclear on how it would work.

Also accountability for that [SEL] conversation to always be happening, which is hard because I don't know who would be that person holding us accountable or maybe it's just each other, but, like, always making sure we're bringing it back to [SEL] would be important.

School staff also relates the accountability of administrators to trust. "Teachers need to trust that they can upload that information to administrators and administrators will act on it, make something happen." (Administrator 3)

*School-wide systems in place.* In order for any of the above elements of support to function, school-wide systems need to be planned that outline procedures, roles, and communication structures. School staff articulated that ideally, "systems are built around character development, not in the moment solutions." (Teacher 11). The school needs "[to have] more structures in place for the little things" (Teacher 9), and "[administration] in certain cases as gotten in the way. Like knowing the chain of command...and not knowing exactly who to go to for support. That's definitely been problematic." (Teacher 2). An example of a specific system that administrators could put in place involves "going further with the structure like when we send home progress reports or report cards like there are places for grades but there aren't necessarily places for like SEL related things. So if we're an SEL school and that's something we really value and it's part of the day, it should be communicated to families where kids are with those skills." (Administrator 10)

### **Other Supports for SEL (Research Question 2)**

**Inductive codes.** In addition to administrative support, school staff identified other necessary supports that are summarized in Table 1 and defined in the appendix. Although the primary question posed in this study addresses clarifying the term administrative support, the secondary question looks at teacher and administrative perspectives on supports that are not directly administrative actions. Inductive codes were collected in order to provide additional, yet overlapping, ideas to the school administration when planning for improved implementation of SEL.

***Families on board.*** Both teachers and administrators brought up the importance of having families involved in SEL initiatives. The involvement they described ranged from families just being aware of SEL initiatives at school, to families reinforcing the skills at home. While most participants mention that the school, family, and community play a role in SEL, the belief that family involvement is important is clear, even if that is not always practiced.

The sentiment from many teachers is exemplified in this response:

It would be great if families would be on board. Because I think there's a huge contrast in how to solve problems at home versus at school. And so I think it would be great if we were all on the same page. And usually when I'm having a behavior issue over and over again, I talk to the parent about it and say, 'here's how we solve it at school.' And like the way we talk about it. And so maybe that helps, I don't really know though. (Teacher 5).

Teacher 2 suggests "bring[ing] the families in to the situation and say[ing] here's what we're doing a little bit more. Because it feels like there's a huge divide between parents and teachers." Teacher 4 concludes that, "ideally I would need...really consistent

feedback from families and community and...input from them.” Administrators agree, stating that, “it can’t just be us at school promoting SEL if that’s not really being practiced within the home...I think that everybody has to have a part in it for it to really work” (Administrator 1). Administrator 3 highlights the importance of parents in this work: “Parents are the caretakers, to be modeling these skills and teaching them and giving their child regular feedback on that and kind of helping them grow that capacity in themselves.”

*All on the same page.* This phrase is a part of the school lexicon, and describes all school staff having the “belief that SEL within a school is important” (Administrator 10). It also encompasses all staff agreeing to actually implement the initiatives and use SEL practices. The sentiment is that SEL needs to be the “whole school. It’s not—it can’t just be one teacher.... the biggest thing is just making sure everyone’s on board” (Teacher 5).

Teacher 4 describes that:

Everybody has to be on board. It can’t just be some teachers doing it and some teachers not... I expect when children leave my room, if they’re doing something incorrect in the hallway that someone steps in and helps them and guides them.

When they leave me, I want that social emotional learning to continue. If they’re having um an issue with another teacher, like at P.E. or dance or whatever, I

expect that teacher to be responding to them the way I would... ‘cause I need to

trust all adults in the building to take care of my children the way I would in here.

In addition to teachers, school personnel discussed the importance of practicing SEL “for every adult in the building...we should have custodians doing it too... every adult in the

building should be in on it. But we have to find ways to not just make it the teacher.”

(Administrator 10). Administrator 3 highlights how this can play out in practice:

Something that has stood out to me particularly in my role as a coach is teacher mindset. If a teacher doesn't really value it, if a teacher doesn't really live it, there's not a lot you can do with tips or strategies, so, I think that would be the biggest thing— if this is really going to be our thing, if we're serious about this, then it needs to come in to play in our hiring decisions.

***Individual teacher factors.*** School staff realize that in addition to being on the same page, there are other specific teacher factor that can influence the implementation of SEL initiatives. Building teachers' own SEL skills is identified as a prerequisite or co-requisite for teaching SEL to students. Teachers have different expectations for students, and different levels of experience working with students. Teachers and administrators recognize that these factors have an effect on how SEL initiatives play out in a school.

Implementation of SEL:

...has something to do with having high expectations and then keeping them there... we have our standard and then there's this lowering of the bar. And it doesn't matter if you're doing social emotional or you're not doing social emotional, but if you're lowering the bar you've just disturbed the culture of the safe learning environment where we are all supposed to be doing this. (Teacher 10)

Teachers identify the impact of “having strong teachers in a classroom. I think is a huge benefit because last year we had a lot of first year teachers.” (Teacher 2). For Teacher 4, “a facilitator [of SEL implementation] has been... just that this is my fourth year, that I

have more experience. And that this is our third year really thinking and talking about social emotional learning.”

Teacher 8 explains the role of personal SEL factors:

I feel like a lot of my own inability to promote SEL is like my own tiredness, my own frustration, my own stress, which I really need to—I’m still learning how to do all of those things as a teacher, because I recognize that there’s a lot of things you have to leave at the door... You can’t bring it all in here with you otherwise like your kids are gonna be really affected. But I think training new teachers on how to do that more.

Teacher 9 discusses examples of the difference in teacher ability to manage their emotions:

I can remember one person who definitely knows how to address it. Like goes and sits next to a kid or takes them on a walk or just kind of like is present and calm. But then there’s another person who just ends up escalating kids more and like just not really helping and sometimes even making it worse.

Administrators also see this as an important factor:

I’ve seen like a lot of adults—not just in this work place it’s not like unique to us. But a lot of adults don’t have the skills that we’re trying to teach kids about. You know, managing their own emotions and healthy relationships and that sort of stuff. And some of it stems from like their own mental health issues, or... I think a big barrier is just adults’ ability to like model some of the behaviors that we’re trying to build up in kids or skills that were trying to build up in kids.

(Administrator 10).

*Proactive disciplinary strategies.* Administrators and teachers talk about discipline differently. Teachers talk about administrators pulling students out of the classroom for maladaptive behavior and addressing those student behaviors through a social emotional lens in the discipline office (see discipline support code).

Administrators, however, discuss discipline in terms of teacher behavior, such as building relationships with challenging students and focusing on preventing the behaviors from happening again. Administrator 1 explains a direct support given: “I will mediate between student and teacher. [The mediations have] been very successful, because it’s me giving time for the student and teacher to rebuild a relationship that has been broken.” But Administrator 1 also discusses the importance of teachers “being proactive instead of just super authoritative, right? So instead of just giving consequences, actually getting to the bottom of why it’s happening.” Administrator 4 explains the importance of “thinking about how we’re teaching behaviors and reinforcing appropriate interactions between students and adults,” rather than imposing black-and-white consequences for maladaptive behaviors.

Administrator 8 recalls:

...a student that we had today who— he just needed to pace. Like, allow the student to pace and don’t start getting frantic, don’t [ask a lot of] questions, so really trying to figure out what works with each other and allowing that to happen and how we can get [students] to a point in which they don’t need to do those bigger, maybe unsafe behaviors.

### **Additional Themes**

Two themes emerged across codes: tone of the language used by the teachers and administrators, and confidence in administrator's abilities to lead school-wide SEL initiatives. Both themes reflected concerns related to sense of agency among school personnel.

**Passive language.** The language from the school personnel often takes a passive tone, with phrases such as "there needs to be more time." This raises the question of agency: Who allocates time for SEL? Who is "in charge" of SEL initiatives? An implication here is that there is not clear communication around what the expectations are for SEL implementation, and who to go to if there is a problem. Can teachers decide to extend the allotted SEL block if it is not enough time? Can administrators do this on their own, or do they need permission from their supervisors? The staff seems pretty clear on what needs to happen, but they do not describe a path for actually making it happen.

**Administrator expertise.** Administrators also expressed a lack of confidence when it comes to supporting SEL. They described needing support in providing support, either specifically from consultants or from internal peers. This is related to the sense of agency described above, and a "you are the experts, not me" (Teacher 11) attitude from all staff. Administrator tendency to want someone "skilled" or to need "the best way" to coach SEL is a way to distance themselves from the implementation, possibly due to stress, and underscores the desire to have "an SEL coordinator" who can provide the support. Helping all staff to see support as a joint learning opportunity will be key to reducing fear of lack of expertise and increasing levels of SEL implementation.

## Discussion

This research study was originally developed to add to the implementation literature and, ultimately, to help improve implementation of SEL initiatives in schools. At the participating school site, the answer to research question one, *How do teachers and administrators define administrator support of SEL?* is mapped on to the existing elements described in the literature to both concretize the concept of administrative support and to identify the areas of the etic definition that are missing from the school perspective.

The answers to research question two, *What are the perspectives of teachers and administrators regarding necessary supports for the implementation of SEL?*, provide school-based perspectives on the additional supports need to implement SEL that fall outside of direct administrator actions and reflected concerns related to sense of agency. These supports are compared to the additional implementation factors outlined in the literature. The administrative role is still essential in each of these supports, and it is hoped that by identifying school perspectives on what is necessary for successful implementation, school administrators will be able to address these areas as well.

### **Etic and Emic Definitions of Administrative Support of SEL**

The etic definition of administrative support of SEL used in this study describes active involvement through verbal support and defense of the program, specific allocation of resources, provision of training and ongoing coaching, and recognition and

reinforcement. While teachers and administrators mention each of these elements, the salience of each requires a shift in definition for the school. Themes of time or lack thereof are so important to both internal groups that time must be included specifically in order to accurately represent the school perspectives. Teachers and administrators recognize that many elements of administrator support will not be feasible unless there are school-wide systems in place to support them. Thus, administrative support of SEL at this school may be defined as:

*The allocation of time for, verbal support of, and the provision of training on teaching SEL, combined with school-wide systems designed to provide coaching, modeling, accountability, and discipline support addressing SEL initiatives and practices.*

**Differences in definitions.** The differences between the etic and emic definitions of administrative support of SEL highlight areas for improvement in both. For example, teachers and administrators describe modeling SEL strategies as one of the main ways administrators either currently provide support or can provide support to teachers at their school. Because of this focus, modeling is not included as a part of ongoing coaching, as it is in the literature, but is pulled out as a specific part of the emic definition. This finding suggests that including modeling in definitions of administrative support of SEL in the literature may provide a concrete way for schools to begin to plan systems around support.

Alternatively, recognition and reinforcement is included in the literature, but not included in the emic definition, due to only slight mentions in the interviews. Its absence from the emic definition provides a key area for school focus. Implementation of new

initiatives of any type can only be done through the behavior change of the adults in a school. Reinforcement is the most recognized way to change behavior, and school administrators are not thinking about it as such, or using it in the same way that they do for academic achievement of teachers and students. Comparing the two definitions highlights the need for a school-wide system to positively reinforce teacher implementation of SEL initiatives and practices.

Discipline support is very salient to teachers at the school. They express the need for administrators to take students who are misbehaving out of the classroom to preserve the teacher-student relationship and to enable continuation of instruction. Discipline support is not mentioned in the etic definition or the literature. This may be because SEL initiatives are mostly conceptualized as preventative measures when it comes to maladaptive behavior. Teachers' explanation of the reality of maladaptive behaviors still occurring and requiring specific SEL-influenced responses from administrators highlights an area of SEL implementation that could be crucial to success in this school setting.

Interestingly, the topic of discipline is the only place in which the salience differed greatly between the administrator and teacher groups (Table 1). The inductive codes "Discipline Support" and "Proactive Disciplinary Strategies" were separated from a larger original code of "SEL Discipline" precisely because of the difference in the way the two groups discussed response to maladaptive behavior, or discipline. It is useful to note that nine out of eleven teachers brought up discipline in terms of administrators providing support by responding directly to student misbehavior, while zero out of eleven administrators discussed it in these terms. Eight of the eleven administrators talked about discipline in terms of teacher-based proactive strategies to prevent student misbehavior,

while zero out of eleven teachers did so. The differences in the view of disciplinary actions split so clearly by job may reflect a difference in the two groups' understanding of roles and responsibilities of the other. Teachers seem to see themselves handling maladaptive behavior up to a certain extent, before it becomes the administrator's job to take over. This extent of behavior, however, can be subjective and vary from teacher to teacher. Administrators see teachers as responsible for employing strategies to prevent maladaptive behavior as a much as possible, and see their own role as support in this prevention, rather than as people who remove individual students from the classroom. The roles and responsibilities, as well as the ideas of prevention and intervention need to be clarified for the staff to ensure that administrative support of SEL meets the needs of both groups, and most importantly, the students.

### **Other Necessary Supports for SEL**

The main factors associated with SEL implementation in the literature are staff training, ongoing coaching, staff and program evaluation, systems interventions, and facilitative administrative support (Fixsen et al., 2005; Durlak & Dupre, 2008). This study sought to investigate the definition of facilitative administrative support through research question one. To improve implementation in schools, however, it is important to look to the other identified factors as well. Research question two examined the match between other supports that school staff deemed necessary, and the factors from the existing literature. Staff training and ongoing coaching were infused into administrative support, because the nature of these two factors requires that they be facilitated by administrators at the school site.

**Staff and program evaluation.** Teachers and administrators do discuss staff evaluation, referencing rubrics that are being created to assess teacher implementation of SEL and the importance of data collection. This is just a part of the larger inductive code of accountability under administrative support, which also includes ensuring staff follow-through on agreed upon initiatives, and the norm of staff members addressing each other personally when they observe someone not using SEL practices. Building these practical accountability pieces into staff and program evaluation could be a potentially helpful way to increase successful implementation. They would also contribute to an SEL-focused school culture by ensuring that staff were all participating in the initiatives, and therefore “all on the same page.”

**Systems intervention.** Each of the factors that teachers described needs to have a system designed to facilitate it. Teachers and administrators are completely aligned with the existing literature on this point, and they recognized that implementation cannot happen without the clarity of staff roles, protocols for general and specific situations, methods for integrating SEL throughout the day, and clear communication among all staff members. All of these are systems that need to be well-planned and explained prior to successful implementation. The fact that this was identified in the literature and salient to school personnel makes it difficult, on the surface, to understand why the systems still fail to exist in this school. However, their perspectives on necessary systems taken in context with their other responses show that they perceive a lack of time for planning out and implementing such systems, given the extensive number of academic, operations, and additional systems administrators and teachers are responsible for.

### **Implications for Practice**

Because of the contextualized nature of this study, findings have implications for practice within the study site. In addition, implications for application in other settings can be made. These topics are discussed separately in this section.

**Recommendations for the school site.** Recommendations for this school site include training administrators and staff in the basic tenets of implementation from the literature and the importance of each. Another recommendation for the school is to ensure that staff are, “all on the same page” by including interview questions about SEL and teacher mindset in the hiring process. Most importantly, it is also recommended that administrators allocate time specifically for planning school-wide systems for each of the deductive and inductive factors identified in the study. Formative interviews as a part on new staff on-boarding and end of year meetings with all staff could inform these plans. An example of specific suggestions organized by implementation factor/code is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Recommendations for Improving Implementation of the PATHS® Curriculum<sup>a</sup>*

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Recommendation</u>
Staff Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present literature review of SEL and impact</li> <li>• Present literature review of implementation</li> <li>• Address/build adult SEL skills—mindfulness, protocols</li> <li>• Watch video clips of lessons</li> <li>• Introduce fidelity checklist/observation measures</li> <li>• Give structured time to explore curriculum kits/lesson plans</li> <li>• Hold introductory training in July</li> <li>• Hold follow-up sessions: October, January, March OR smaller sessions more often?</li> <li>• Clarify roles and responsibilities in discipline practices</li> </ul>
Coach Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present literature review of SEL and impact</li> <li>• Present literature review of implementation</li> <li>• Debunk “train &amp; hope” model</li> <li>• Create fidelity checklist/observation form</li> <li>• Norm observation and evaluation using a video lesson</li> </ul>
Ongoing consultation/coaching & modeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All coaches coach PATHS</li> <li>• Ongoing observations and feedback</li> <li>• Model in the classroom and out (formally and informally)</li> <li>• co-teach</li> <li>• co-plan lessons (as needed)</li> <li>• Include PATHS in coaching meeting template (even if just to pay it lip-service)</li> <li>• Schedule regular day to cover for teachers to observe each other</li> <li>• Plan for what happens when “something comes up”</li> <li>• Plan for how coaches will hold themselves accountable when so much is going on in the school?</li> <li>• How do coaches reach out for ongoing support/coaching?</li> </ul>
Accountability & staff and program evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create annual implementation and outcome goals</li> <li>• Decide whether to use the PATHS baseline assessment or something different</li> <li>• Add SEL-related items to current walk-through checklist</li> <li>• Add SEL-related questions to existing parent and student climate surveys</li> <li>• Add to staff surveys</li> <li>• Conduct end of year staff interviews for feedback</li> </ul>

- Ask for informal feedback in coaching meetings (document on meeting template)
  - Collect teacher self-reports of lesson delivery weekly
  - Analyze office discipline referral data
  - Analyze coaches observation data
  - Include SEL feedback in formal feedback/performance reviews (rubric)
- Systems interventions
- Review policies and procedures using an SEL framework
  - Include questions about SEL and teacher mindset in hiring interviews
  - Include a PATHS activity bin at recess
  - Hang posters/artifacts around school (halls, on cafeteria tables, back of teacher clipboards)
  - Communicate future goals for larger systems integration
  - Hold parent training (can bring in outside group)
  - Add PATHS skills to daily homework
  - Add PATHS section on daily reflection/communication log
  - Use PATHS activities/lessons in discipline office
- Facilitative administrative support
- verbal support
  - verbal defense of the program
- Mention PATHS in formal staff communication (weekly newsletter, staff meetings, PD introductions-connect to PATHS/SEL)
  - Mention PATHS in informal communication (ask how PATHS is going when interacting in halls/cafeteria/parking lot)
  - Unwaveringly defend program when questioned (if needed, waver behind closed doors)
- specific allocation of resources (time, personnel, money)
- set clear boundaries/expectations for time by answering:
  - is it ok to stop academic instruction to have teachable moment? Is it expected?
  - Is it ok to use PATHS time for other subjects if needed? What about near testing?
  - Is it ok to repeat/reteach PATHS lesson if scholars didn't master it the previous day? How will teachers know this?
  - Will substitutes be expected to teach PATHS?
- provision of training and ongoing coaching
- All coaches coach PATHS  
(see above section on coaching)

- recognition and reinforcement
    - Announce PATHS teacher of the week at staff meeting (for showing excellence in teaching curriculum (give concrete example) and integration into another time in the day (give concrete example))
    - Give out PATHS/SEL rewards (water bottle, t-shirt, coozie...) for goal attainment/growth
- 

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>The PATHS® curriculum is a social emotional learning curriculum for grades preK through 5. This table is an example of concrete recommendations for improvement of SEL implementation at the school site. Factors identified by Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2005; School Staff, 2016.

**Applications beyond this setting.** This study was conducted at one school site, and is therefore not necessarily generalizable to other settings. There are still, however, some valuable lessons that can go beyond this individual school. The implementation of new initiatives is not unique to this school or schools in general. All organizations undergo changes in programming and systems, and process of gathering employee perspectives on the implementation of these can provide valuable insight into why the changes are successful or unsuccessful. Mapping the responses back onto the literature illuminates missing elements in each approach. Using the combination of both supports is likely to lead to the most robust implementation, and therefore, positive program outcomes.

### **Implications for Research**

Past studies emphasize many factors of implementation, staff training, ongoing coaching, program evaluation, systems intervention, and facilitative administrative support (Fixsen et al., 2005; Durlak & Dupre, 2008). But at a school, administrators, at either the school or district level, are in charge of all of them. With this heavy workload plus all other school responsibilities, it is important to translate these factors into concrete recommendations. Evidence from the interviews seems to highlight the research to practice gap, as well-established practices from research (e.g., reinforcement, consistent support of SEL beyond training) are not recognized as much in practice in the school setting. This underscores the importance of participatory research and the practice of sharing research results with schools, and also that schools need to have access to this information outside of media-digested or marketing sound bites. Researchers and consultants play a role in this, and have a responsibility to share not only their findings,

but also their access to research-based knowledge. School psychologists, both researchers and practitioners, are prime candidates for leading this in schools.

Having a definition of administrative support can also inform the researchers creating SEL curricula. Researchers who understand the basic practical components of administrative support of SEL from a school perspective can design the programs to incorporate this information. For example, including an administrative support guide within the curricula could include the definition and highlight ways to provide assistance to teachers that cover each of the identified components. The implementation guide for teachers could include a section on what kinds of supports they may need and should advocate for from administration.

This is a preliminary qualitative study at one school site. Additional research at multiple sites is necessary to gain generalizability. Hypotheses could then be generated to define administrative support for SEL in schools, and elements could be tested quantitatively to determine the effect of each component of administrative support, and implementation of SEL as a whole. A limitation of this study is that it only includes the perspectives of administrators and teachers at the school. Family, student, and community perspectives are necessary to complete the picture of what is necessary to improve SEL implementation. Future studies should use these perspectives to continue to define and refine specific implementation factors in order to assist schools in how to concretely support and implement SEL initiatives effectively. The study of administrative support for academics in schools in contrast with support for SEL could also illuminate ways to bolster administrative support of SEL and thus improve implementation school wide.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from the present study suggest that while there is some overlap between etic and emic definitions, there are key elements missing from each. By sharing these differences with school personnel through future consultation, it is hoped that the school site can improve the implementation of SEL initiatives. By conducting future research on the defining elements of implementation factors in other schools and educational settings, it is hoped that the literature will be enhanced and ultimately easier to translate into effective practice for schools.

It is also important to obtain school staff perspectives on what the school needs for successful implementation. School staff stress the importance of administrators modeling SEL language and strategies in interactions with students, families, and other school personnel. It is crucial for teachers and administrators that administrators embody a social emotionally aware person, not only as a way to teach teachers, but as proof that they truly believe these initiatives will help students in the long run. Modeling then serves to the school staff's other addition of accountability. If administrators want teachers to implement the initiatives with regularity, then administrators must hold both groups accountable for doing so. Teachers will not feel that they need to spend time and effort on making a change towards SEL practices if administrators do not do the same, and if they are never questioned when they do not. Teachers also feel that they need support with discipline when the SEL strategies in their repertoires are not sufficient.

They need to trust that their coaches and administrators will be there to help them when a student is struggling and they are unsure of what to do. Conversely, administrators need to know that teachers are putting in the effort to build relationships with students and that teachers are attempting to use proactive strategies to get to the root cause of the behavior before calling in for help. All of these factors, whether emic or etic, require school-wide systems for them to function. Both teachers and administrators recognize this, but are not sure of how to create them and keep them running throughout the school year. This is where additional consultation could be incredibly useful. Because of the formative research that has been conducted, consultants can help the school design systems and programming that combine both etic and emic factors into a plan that is specific to the needs, perspectives, and priorities of the school site.

## **Appendix A**

### *Individual Interview Protocol with School Administrators*

The purpose of the first part of the meeting today is to get your thoughts on SEL and how to support SEL at [this school], so that we can generate some definitions that are specific to your school community, with the goal that this will help implementation in the future.

### ***GENERAL QUESTIONS***

1. What is a psychologically healthy environment (e.g., home, school, community, society)?
2. What is social emotional learning?
3. What are the roles of schools, families, communities, and societies in promoting SEL?

What constitutes an “SEL school”?

4. What are some ways to promote SEL for children in schools?

What are some facilitators and barriers to the promotion of SEL?

What factors lead to successful implementation of SEL programs/initiatives in schools?

5. How would you define administrative support of SEL?

As in, how can school administrators provide support?

What factors (systems within the school and school environment) are necessary to have high levels of administrator support of SEL?

What are some supports that you provide to teachers? Regarding the provision of SEL?

How often do you provide them?

6. Is there anything else you want to add/more ideas about SEL/Administrative support?

## **Appendix B**

### *Individual Interview Protocol with Teachers*

The purpose of our meeting today is to get your thoughts on SEL and how to support SEL at [this school] so that we can generate some definitions that are specific to the school community, with the goal that this will help the implementation of SEL initiatives in the future.

### ***GENERAL QUESTIONS***

1. What is your definition of social emotional learning?
2. Who do you think is responsible for promoting SEL in kids (schools, families, communities society?)
3. How would you define a “Social Emotional Learning school”?

What are some ideal ways to promote SEL for children in schools?

4. Read the school’s SEL vision statement from the beginning of this year.

*Our school is a safe learning environment that encourages all to succeed and also learn from their mistakes. Staff members strive to create a positive, supportive community through calm, productive interactions. Students rely on each other and the teacher and ask for help in order to reach their full potential. This is the way of life in this school.*

What have been some facilitators and barriers to the promotion of this vision this year?

So, what has led to you and/or the school to get closer to this vision?

What has hindered you and/or the school from getting closer to this vision?

Overall, do you think you and/or the school did any better at attending to

students' social emotional learning this year than last year?

5. What would you ideally need to realize this vision in your classroom next year (that you haven't already mentioned)?

**We've talked a lot of different types of facilitators and barriers to the promotion of SEL. Now we'd like to talk to you specifically about support you've received or would like to receive from administrators.**

6. How would you define ideal administrative support of SEL?

As in, how should school administrators provide support? (Support you in promoting SEL?)

7. What are some supports that administrators currently provide to you regarding the promotion of SEL?

How often do you receive them?

8. Is there anything else you want to add/additional ideas about SEL/ Administrative support?

## Appendix C

### *Coding Scheme*

#### Definition of Administrative Support

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##### Deductive Code

##### Examples

Verbal Support and Verbal Defense of Programs/SEL

- Administrators Verbally supporting SEL, stressing the importance of SEL,
- using language related to SEL,
- focusing on SEL
- “push” for SEL
- visual reminders
- defending use of SEL when questioned
- “This is dumb.” “No! It’s important.”

Allocation of Resources

- Provision of training
- giving time to teachers for SEL
- giving admin’s own time to SEL
- hiring personnel/reallocating people to jobs related to SEL
- money for SEL-related stuff
- physical resources like posters, materials, curricula
- lack of resources
- decision-making that prioritizes SEL
- bringing in outside resources/people

Provision of Training

- professional developments (PDs)
- steps for what to do when something happens
- learning new strategies

Provision of Ongoing Coaching

- observations
- feedback
- collaborative problem-solving
- follow-up to trainings

Recognition/reinforcement

- praise
- external rewards for teachers using SEL

<u>Inductive Code</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Modeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tokens of appreciation</li> <li>• administrators modeling use of SEL for the teachers (in student, parent, and teacher interactions)</li> </ul>
Discipline Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• someone coming to help a student</li> <li>• someone (other than teacher) “dealing” with student behavior</li> <li>• someone removing student from room as a result of behavior</li> <li>• following up after behavior incident</li> </ul>
School-wide Systems in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• clarity of roles</li> <li>• protocols</li> <li>• clear communication with staff</li> <li>• planning for students</li> <li>• prioritizing SEL</li> <li>• systems integrate SEL</li> </ul>
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• administrator buy-in</li> <li>• administrator follow-through</li> <li>• build teacher trust</li> <li>• ensure teacher well-being</li> <li>• getting support when they need it</li> <li>• School staff is held accountable to using SEL practices</li> <li>• Adults bring it up with each other if they don’t use SEL practices</li> <li>• Data collection and analysis</li> </ul>

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### Other Supports

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<u>Inductive Code</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Families on Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families know about SEL</li> <li>• Families practice SEL at home</li> <li>• Families agree that school should be teaching SEL</li> <li>• Families receive SEL training</li> </ul>
All on the Same Page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ALL teachers, admin and staff agree that school should be teaching</li> </ul>

## Teacher Factors

- SEL
- ALL agree to use SEL practices
  - Adults help each other
  - Teacher buy-in
- 
- Teachers' own social emotional competencies
  - Teachers' expectations of students
  - Teachers' level/years of experience
-

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### **Biography**

Laura Catherine Cornell is currently a second year doctoral student in the School Psychology program at Tulane University. She works with Dr. Bonnie Nastasi using a participatory model to build culturally-specific, comprehensive mental health programs in schools. She became interested in public education and education inequality during her undergraduate studies, and has been involved in New Orleans education reform for the past twelve years. Her previous work as a teacher and administrator in schools has led to her research interests in facilitators and barriers to the implementation of prevention programs and the specific role of administrative support. Laura holds an M. Ed. in administration and supervision from National-Louis University, a B.S. in psychology and art history from Tulane University, and is a National Board Certified Teacher, as an exceptional needs specialist.