

A LEADER IN SEL RESEARCH

SEL RESEARCH HAS BEEN PART OF SSN'S STORY FROM THE START

Six years ago, fifteen NYC nonprofit leaders had an idea: what if they all measured student **social and emotional learning (SEL)** the same way? Could they then look at results across all their program sites, identify sites where participant SEL demonstrates significant growth, and learn from practitioners at those sites what accounts for that growth?

This was the start of the Student Success Network (SSN), which today is a self-governing community of 65 member organizations engaging students in grades 6-13 and opportunity youth at over 200 sites across NYC. The **SSN SEL Survey**, co-designed and improved by practitioners, evaluators, program leaders, and young people from across the Network, in partnership with Research Alliance for NYC Schools, uniquely meets **rigorous scientific standards** and the **needs of practitioners and youth**. Survey data are increasingly:

- **timely** — surveys are administered near the beginning and end of program cycles;
- **unbiased** — high response rates ensure the sample of students taking the survey is representative of the program as a whole; and
- **accurate** — youth understand why they are taking the survey, how the results will be used, and make an effort to respond to all the questions honestly.

To investigate key research questions, Research Alliance links individual-level SEL survey data with NYC Department of Education (NYC DOE) data, including student-level demographic characteristics, attendance, middle school and high school test scores, and high school GPA.

Members have made the Network's founding idea a reality. This pamphlet presents the fruit of members' efforts. Within it are insights into:

- **Promising practices to improve SEL** and conditions underlying those practices from **"bright spot" sites** where youth experience exceptional SEL growth;
- How young people's **personal identities**, as well as **socioeconomic status** and **special education status**, interact with their SEL growth; and
- How SEL growth affects **academic outcomes**.

This pamphlet also opens a conversation about future Network directions:

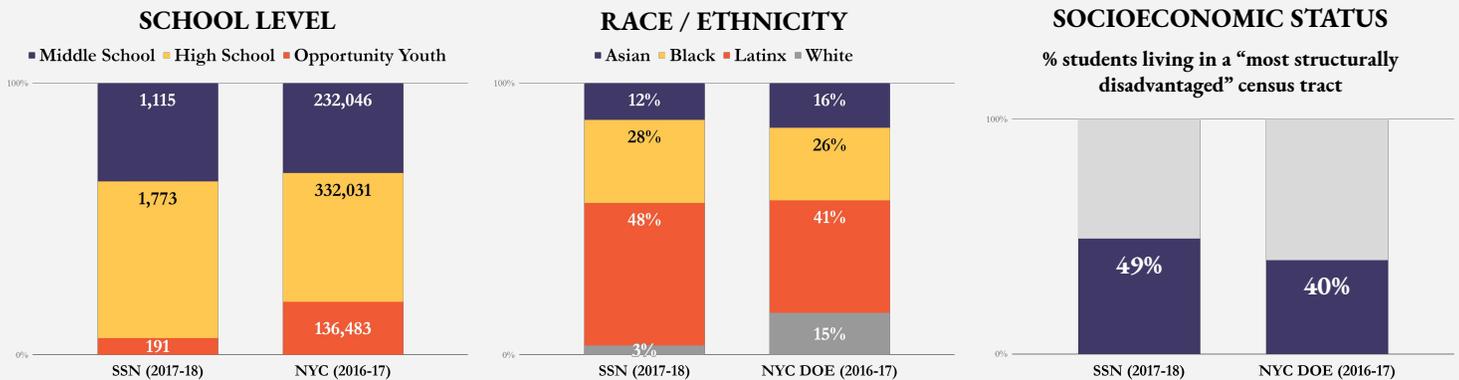
- **Using data in ways that advance racial equity.** This focus has been inspired by SSN staff participation in the New York Community Trust RaceForward NYC Racial Equity Learning Lab.
- **Making sure research findings are increasingly relevant and accessible to practitioners and youth** so they are applied to improve program, school and classroom practices. This direction is supported by "A Next Generation Research Agenda," a recent report from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.
- **Prioritizing members' "next" questions.** Practitioners and young people have expressed interest in exploring how SEL interacts with postsecondary outcomes and how adult SEL affects youth SEL.

DATA OFFER **INSIGHTS** INTO YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEVELOPMENT

JUNE 2019

Surveyed students resemble NYC public school population

The SSN SEL Survey measures seven SEL competencies: Academic Self-Efficacy, Belonging, Growth Mindset, Interpersonal Skills, Problem-Solving, Self-Advocacy, and Self-Regulation. (See Appendix for more details.) In the 2017-18 school year, SSN members collected more than 5,000 matched pre-and post-surveys. Research Alliance was able to link more than 3,000 of these surveys **with NYC DOE data**.



What practices and underlying conditions impact student SEL?

Based on network-wide survey data analyses, the Research Alliance for NYC Schools identified **18 Bright Spot Sites** — member sites that had a stronger positive effect on youth SEL when compared to other sites serving similar youth. SSN staff and youth interviewed practitioners at Bright Spot sites, and participants in each interview **collaboratively documented promising practices** to share across the network.

CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Bright Spot practitioners are clear that **practices alone are not the answer**. They emphasize the need to create underlying conditions that foster effective practices:

1. **A Culture of Care** — Staff prioritize relationships among themselves and youth to build trust and community, resulting in a safe space where staff and youth can talk frankly, set goals and come up with plans to move forward.
2. **Inclusive Decision-Making** — Staff seek out and incorporate youth feedback in program decisions, including hiring, curriculum planning, and policy changes. All levels of staff and students feel empowered to share new ideas to improve programming.
3. **Personalized Attention to Individual Student Goals** — Staff prioritize understanding individual student strengths, challenges, and goals, and staff support students in using their strengths to address challenges in meeting goals.

SELECTED PROMISING PRACTICES

- Colin Murfree and Micah Finkelman of **City Squash** say their YouTube Challenge increased Growth Mindset among middle schoolers. City Squash gives students 7 weeks to choose and demonstrate mastery of a new skill learned from YouTube videos.
- Jamel Davis, Joseph Satoo, and Michelle Duran of **YMCA Prospect Park Leaders Club** attribute growth in students' Interpersonal Skills and Belonging to their group meeting model where older students play leadership roles in setting the agenda and encouraging all students to share insights and advice.
- Christina Jean-Louis, Shelly Strothers, and Morgan Little credit **Sadie Nash Leadership Project's** community guideline process with their participants' growth in Interpersonal Skills. The process creates a space where young people and adult facilitators openly explore their lived experiences and social issues. Participants feel their different perspectives are valued and learn how to be with others in community.

Want to learn more?
Check out our [Resource Library!](#)

DATA OFFER **INSIGHTS** INTO YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEVELOPMENT

JUNE 2019

How do young people's identities, school level, socioeconomic status, and special education status interact with the SEL growth they experience?

Understanding how student identities, socioeconomic status and special education status interact with SEL growth is a starting point in understanding structural barriers that lead to differences in outcomes (e.g., discriminatory societal messages and practices), and in designing supports tailored to specific student experiences. Here are a few trends we've seen over multiple years:

- **Female students** experience higher levels of growth than male students in **Interpersonal Skills** and **Growth Mindset**, while **male students** grow more in **Academic Self-Efficacy**.
- **Black students** experience greater growth than Latinx students in **Academic Self-Efficacy**.
- **High school students** show more growth than middle school students in **multiple SEL factors**: Belonging, Growth Mindset, Interpersonal Skills, and Problem-Solving.

New findings this year suggest that socioeconomic and special education status each affect a student's SEL growth.

- Students who **do not live in a "most structurally disadvantaged"** census tract grow more in **Growth Mindset** than students who do live in a "most structurally disadvantaged" census tract.
- Students **without an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)** grow more in **Growth Mindset** and **Interpersonal Skills** than students with an IEP.

* **"Most structurally disadvantaged" census tracts** are in the top quintile nationally in terms of measures of structural disadvantage. Research Alliance calculates structural disadvantage using census measures that identify impacts of structural racism (e.g., housing segregation, poverty, and unemployment).

Which SEL competencies lead to the largest changes in academic outcomes?

Different SEL competencies matter at different points in a student's academic career. Our data consistently show that:

- **Middle school students** — including those living in a "most structurally disadvantaged" census tract — who experience an increase in **Belonging** or **Growth Mindset** also improve their **state test scores**.
- **High school students** who experience growth in **Self-Regulation** also improve their **GPA**. Further, high schoolers who experience increased **Growth Mindset** are more likely to **graduate**.
- **Young Adult Borough Center (YABC)** participants** who experience an increase in **Belonging** also improve their **GPA**.

The relationship between SEL and academic outcomes also varies by student identity and socioeconomic status.

| Students with this identity or background... | ...who experience growth in these SEL factor(s)... | ...also improve these results |
|--|---|-------------------------------|
| Black students | Self Regulation | HS GPA |
| | Academic Self-Efficacy | MS Attendance |
| Latinx students | Academic Self-Efficacy, Growth Mindset, Self-Regulation | MS State Test Scores |
| Students who <i>do not</i> live in a "most structurally disadvantaged" census tracts | Self Regulation | HS GPA |
| | Problem Solving | MS State Test Scores |
| Students who <i>do</i> live in a "most structurally disadvantaged" census tracts | Belonging, Growth Mindset | MS State Test Scores |

** **Young Adult Borough Centers** are afternoon and evening programs designed to meet the educational needs of high school students who are between 17.5-21 years old and who are behind in credits or have responsibilities that make it hard to attend school during the day.

Discussion questions

1. What **structural barriers** — e.g., discriminatory societal messages and practices — might contribute to the differences in outcomes our data show?
2. How can we support the social-emotional development of students with **different lived experiences**? E.g., how can we support Latina students — who may experience negative societal messages about their academic potential — in developing their Academic Self-Efficacy?

The Network will continue to use data to advance racial equity

The effects of structural racism are pervasive: past and present systems and policies contribute to young people of color facing more obstacles and fewer opportunities to build academic, social, and emotional skills throughout their educational experiences.

SSN data are disaggregated by race so members can identify and think critically about disparities they see. Future research will continue investigating racial disparities and seeking out promising practices to address barriers to equity.

We will use language that supports racial equity by:

1. **Being race-explicit.** Name race by using specific words like “Black,” “Latinx,” and “Asian” instead of vague words like “underserved.”
2. **Avoiding passive voice when describing racial disparities.** Name structural drivers like “policies and systems,” “segregated schools,” or “historical exclusion” that cause or might cause those disparities.
3. **Framing people of color in terms of their strengths, rather than as victims.** For instance, “partner with youth of color to lift up solutions” rather than “saving young people in need.”

The Network is primed to become an exemplar of Next-Gen research

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development highlights a critical challenge in “[A Research Agenda for the Next Generation](#).” Research knowledge is **not easily accessible** to educators and therefore **not applied** to improve practices in school or youth programs. The Commission recommends a paradigm shift distinguished by meaningful engagement of academic researchers, school and nonprofit leaders, educators and staff, and youth in conducting research, prioritizing questions, and sharing knowledge.

Student Success Network and Research Alliance are at the leading edge of the Next Generation Research Agenda. Multidisciplinary, diverse stakeholders have improved the SSN SEL survey, and our community’s “next” questions are a priority. Applying the principles of partnership and co-design that made our measurement rigorous, relevant, and accurate will make new research findings even more **accessible** and **applied**.

As we move forward, we will apply six principles of Next Generation Research:

1. Maintain **relevant and rigorous research**
2. **Use precise terminology** for shared understanding
3. **Use assessments for continuous improvement** and capacity building, not high-stakes accountability
4. **Co-create a Theory of Change** with researchers, practitioners, and youth
5. **Move beyond average effects** — whether or not programs work — to illuminate **active ingredients** within effective programs (*how* and *why* programs work) and attend to **variation** so practitioners can adapt for different experiences and settings
6. **Address both structure (tangibles) and processes (intangibles)** to support SEL integration and meaningful, lasting change

We will also apply three recommendations for Next Generation Research:

1. **How Research Is Conducted:** The Next-Gen project teams will engage staff at all levels, practitioners and researchers with different areas of expertise, and adults and youth with different identities and lived experiences in iterative, collaborative inquiry cycles.
2. **How Questions Are Prioritized:** The team will agree on a problem of practice that is of immediate concern locally but that also has broad implications for the larger field.
3. **How Findings Are Shared:** The team will collaborate to craft summaries that provide guidance for practitioners and call out specific applications in practice.

The Network will address members’ “next” questions

SSN and Research Alliance staff asked practitioners and evaluators in our Data Advisory Working Group and teens in our Elevating Youth Voice program for their input on new directions for our research. Both groups expressed interest in linking Network SEL survey data to postsecondary outcomes and in exploring how adult SEL affects youth SEL growth.

With additional funding:

- Research Alliance can test how **SEL, academic preparation, and postsecondary process navigation** interact with one another to affect post-secondary outcomes.
- SSN and Research Alliance can support Network members in piloting an **adult SEL survey** and link it to members’ youth SEL survey data.

APPENDIX: 2018-19 SSN SEL SURVEY BY COMPETENCY

JUNE 2019

ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY

Belief in one's ability to succeed in academic situations or accomplish academic tasks

Please tell us *how often* you do some things or feel a certain way.

- 3 I'm confident I can do a great job on assignments and tests.
- 7 I'm sure I can understand the hardest information in readings.
- 8 I'm sure I can understand the most complicated information presented by the teacher.
- 9 I'm sure I can learn the skills taught in school

RESPONSES

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1 Almost never | 3 or higher is considered a positive response. |
| 2 Sometimes | |
| 3 Often | |
| 4 Almost Always | <i>Adapted from Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale, March et al (2006)</i> |

GROWTH MINDSET

Belief that intellectual ability is not fixed and can develop through hard work and practice

Please tell us *how true* each of these statements are for you.

- 34 My intelligence is something that I can't change very much.
- 35 Challenging myself won't make me any smarter.
- 36 There are some things I am not capable of learning.
- 37 If I am not naturally smart in a subject, I will never do well in it.

RESPONSES (Reversed)

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 5 Not at all true | 4 or higher is considered a positive response. |
| 4 A little true | |
| 3 Somewhat true | <i>Adapted from Measuring MESH: Student and Teacher Surveys Curated for the CORE Districts, Transforming Education (2016)</i> |
| 2 Very true | |
| 1 Completely true | |

BELONGING

Feeling of being taken in and accepted as part of a group

Please tell us *how true* each of these statements are for you.

- 28 There's at least one adult in this program I can talk to if I have a problem.
- 29 Adults in this program respect me.
- 30 Other students in this program take my opinions seriously.
- 31 I can really be myself in this program.
- 32 Students in this program are friendly to me.
- 33 Other students in this program like me the way I am.

RESPONSES

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 1 Not at all true | 4 or higher is considered a positive response. |
| 2 A little true | |
| 3 Somewhat true | |
| 4 Very true | <i>Adapted from Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM), Goodenow (1993)</i> |
| 5 Completely true | |

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Ability to clearly communicate one's thoughts, be aware of one's own communication style and those of others, and be empathetic

Please tell us *how confident* you are at doing each of the things below.

- 14 I can be a good group leader.
- 15 I can appreciate opinions that are different from mine.
- 16 I can work well with others.
- 17 I can solve problems with other students without being aggressive.
- 18 I often think about the feelings of other students.
- 19 I usually work well with other students without being told to.

RESPONSES

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1 False | 4 or higher is considered a positive response. |
| 2 Somewhat false | |
| 3 A little false | |
| 4 A little true | <i>Adapted from Teamwork Scale, American Camping Association (2007) and Social Competence Scale, ChildTrends (2014)</i> |
| 5 Somewhat true | |
| 6 True | |

APPENDIX: 2018-19 SSN SEL SURVEY BY COMPETENCY

JUNE 2019

PROBLEM-SOLVING

Ability to identify a problem, analyze possible plans to resolve the problem, select and implement a plan, and evaluate the outcome

Please tell us *how often* you do some things or feel a certain way.

- 1 I compare different solutions to find the best one to solve my problem.
- 2 I look at a problem from many different viewpoints (my own, my friends', my family's, etc.).
- 4 When solving a problem, I look at all possible solutions.
- 5 I try to get all the facts before I try to solve a problem.
- 6 I try to think about the long-term results of each possible solution.

RESPONSES

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 1 Almost never | 3 or higher is considered a positive response. |
| 2 Sometimes | |
| 3 Often | <i>Adapted from Solving Problems, Barkman et al (2002)</i> |
| 4 Almost Always | |

SELF-ADVOCACY

(1) Self-Awareness: Conscious knowledge of one's strengths, weaknesses, and needs (2) Agency: Ability and tendency to speak up for oneself and gather appropriate resources

Please tell us *how confident* you are at doing each of the things below.

- 10 I think about how to become a better person.
- 11 I stop to think about my day.
- 12 I check with someone (advisor, teacher) to see how I'm doing.
- 13 I set goals for myself.
- 20 I tell teachers / adults what I need.
- 21 When I disagree with teachers / adults, I tell them.
- 22 When things get hard, I can deal with them.

RESPONSES

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|---|
| 1 Almost never | 1 Strongly Disagree | 3 or higher is considered a positive response. |
| 2 Sometimes | 2 Sort of disagree | |
| 3 Often | 3 Sort of agree | |
| 4 Almost always | 4 Strongly agree | <i>Student Success Network / Research Alliance (2015)</i> |

SELF-REGULATION

Ability to successfully manage one's behaviors in academic situations — effectively managing impulses and motivating oneself to work towards academic goals

Please tell us *how confident* you are at doing each of the things below.

- 23 Get teachers to help me when I get stuck on schoolwork.
- 24 Finish my homework on time.
- 25 Get myself to study when there are other interesting things to do.
- 26 Organize my schoolwork.
- 27 Get myself to do schoolwork.

RESPONSES

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1 Not confident at all | 4 or higher is considered a positive response. |
| 2 Slightly Confident | |
| 3 Moderately Confident | |
| 4 Very Confident | <i>Adapted from Children's Self-Efficacy Scale, Bandura (2006)</i> |
| 5 Extremely Confident | |