

# FOUNDATIONS FOR YOUTH SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

## LEARNINGS FROM STUDENT SUCCESS NETWORK “BRIGHT SPOT” PRACTITIONERS

How do practitioners at sites where youth experience exceptional SEL growth explain this growth? “Bright Spot” practitioners are clear that one-off activities are not enough. Adults need to create a supportive environment in order for activities and practices to take root. Student Success Network staff captured **six foundations** that “Bright Spot” practitioners see as building blocks of an environment that supports youth SEL development.

### FOUNDATIONS

#### AFFIRMATION AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Adults support youth in being unapologetically themselves, while respecting the perspectives of others. Adults encourage youth to reflect on their personal motivations and goals. Adults recognize inequitable systems at play in the lives of youth. They emphasize to youth that they and their voices matter. Adults are authentic and enthusiastic.

#### INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

Adults track individual progress for each student. Staff hold regular staff meeting dedicated to discussing the needs and progress of each student and planning appropriate supports. Adults use a strengths-based approach to support youth in identifying their interests, goals, feelings, and challenges. Program staff communicate with parents, teachers, and guidance counselors and support the young person as a unified team.

#### CULTURE OF CARE

Adults prioritize activities that create connections among youth and between youth and adults. Young people feel heard because adults listen to them without judging them. Young people open up about their struggles, allowing adults to better support them. Adults build trust with young people by sharing their perspective or story honestly. Adults address conflicts by engaging in dialogue rather than blame and publicly re-affirming community agreements.

#### SPACE TO GROW

Adults support youth without completing tasks for them. Young people try new activities, skills, and ways of thinking, and expand their network by building new relationships. Adults design activities and projects that incrementally build up skills and culminate in a demonstration. Adults and youth engage in conversations about difficult topics like bullying, family problems, and identity. As a staff team, adults admit what’s not working, reflect, and grow.

#### INCENTIVES WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

Adults communicate program structure and guidelines along with incentives. Adults foster and youth engage in healthy competition. Youth in leadership roles serve as role models and meet high expectations.

#### YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP IN DECISION-MAKING

Adults and youth set community guidelines, values, or expectations together. Adults give youth choices in lessons and learning plans. Adults create structures for youth to participate in decision-making and incorporate their ideas into programming. Youth orient newer participants to community guidelines and program structures.

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## REFLECTION TOOL

### OVERVIEW

This tool is for program leaders and practitioners who want to integrate social-emotional learning practices and approaches into their programs to create supportive learning environments.

The purpose of this tool is to help you:

- Reflect on ways your program is currently supporting youth SEL development;
- Identify new ways to support SEL development in your program.

### GUIDING QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are your strengths? Where do you see opportunities to expand your existing strengths?
- What are your goals for supporting your participants' SEL development? How do your goals align with the six foundations for creating a supportive environment for SEL development?
- Which foundations would you like to prioritize? You might start by prioritizing 1-2 foundations and adding in others as you become more comfortable with the process.
- How can you leverage your participants' strengths and engage their interests, backgrounds, and experiences to practice SEL? What are you currently doing, and where are there opportunities to draw more heavily on participants' assets and interests?
- Based on your priorities, which SEL promising practices and/or strategies might you try? What support might you or your colleagues need in your organization to effectively use those practices?

### YOU MIGHT USE THIS TOOL...

- After you have completed the [Organizational Capacity Rubric](#) and identified SEL Integration or Building Youth-Adult Partnership as areas to improve;
- As a resource when identifying strategies to test in your [Improvement Plan](#). For guidance and tools around testing strategies, consult your [Improvement Plan](#).



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# FOUNDATIONS FOR YOUTH SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING DEVELOPMENT REFLECTION TOOL

## EXAMPLES FROM BRIGHT SPOT SITES

### AFFIRMATION AND SELF-EXPRESSION

#### 1. Adults support youth in being unapologetically themselves, while respecting the perspectives of others.

- At Sadie Nash Leadership Project's Sisterhood Academy, the guideline "don't yuck my yum" reminds young people that all perspectives are valid. Staff say, "In many spaces you have to do something to belong - like sports or singing, but at Sadie Nash we don't expect anything but to be here and be you."

#### 2. Adults encourage youth to reflect on their personal motivations and goals.

- Brooklyn College Community Partnership staff provide a large picture frame in which each student creates and shares a personal motto. (See [Infusing Program with Self-Reflection, Positive Affirmation, and Self-Recognition](#).)

#### 3. Adults recognize inequitable systems at play in the lives of youth. They emphasize to youth that they and their voices matter.

- New York On Tech hosts panels of professionals that include people who identify as people of color or gender non-conforming. Students have opportunities to see people who look like them as leaders in the tech industry. (See [Highlight Representation to Build Self-Advocacy and Belonging](#).)
- South Asian Youth Action (SAYA) staff have explicit conversations with their Senior Cohort about what it means to exist as a person of color within predominantly white institutions, and how to confront white supremacy at a personal and community level.
- Y Staff at Bronx Explorations Academy recognize they work in a community facing systemic disadvantages. When young people say they don't want to go to college, staff persist in offering them support. In their words, "That means we have to build on this relationship. No conversation is a conversation not worth having. We've never turned a kid away."
- Y Staff at the Coney Island branch explain, "In Coney Island, there are very few opportunities where students are asked for opinions on critical matters." They facilitate a Teens Take the City program where students get to propose legislation on an issue of their choice.

#### 4. Adults are authentic and enthusiastic.

- "Give the enthusiasm you want to receive." - Center for Family Life staff
- "Don't do any activity that you won't participate in." - OneGoal Program Director
- "Teens see us in our natural state. We're having fun. We get in there play games, lose our voice. They love that about us." - Y staff at JREC
- "The teens gain a specific respect for you once they see that you're doing something that you love." - Y staff at Prospect Park

## REFLECT AND PLAN

**In what ways are you currently integrating this foundation into your program?**

**If you are choosing to prioritize this foundation going forward, how might you integrate it into your program?**

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## EXAMPLES FROM BRIGHT SPOT SITES



### CULTURE OF CARE

#### 1. Adults prioritize activities that create connections among youth and between youth and adults.

- At IS 126Q, Y staff design icebreakers that help youth learn to talk about themselves with each other. Most activities, including homework time, begin with an icebreaker.
- At Port Richmond High School, the OneGoal Program Director devotes one session per week of the college access curriculum to team-building activities. (See [Infusing Team-Building into College Access Curriculum](#).)

#### 2. Young people feel heard because adults listen to them without judging them. Young people open up about their struggles, allowing adults to better support them.

- Brooklyn College Community Partnership staff at S.T.A.R. Middle School say, “We shouldn’t impose our beliefs. Just listen to what [young people] have to say and guide them, [don’t] tell them what to do.”
- Y staff at Brooklyn Explorations Academy share, “If a kid is suspended or had a fight, they can come in our room. We are not judgemental and do our best to relate.”
- Y staff IS 126Q say that “what prevents kids from talking about issues is brushing them aside.” When staff learn about challenges at home or in the classroom, they show they care by listening and assisting.

#### 3. Adults build trust with young people by sharing their perspective or story honestly.

- Coney Island Y Leaders Club features discussions on topics or current events chosen by teens. Adults model sharing their perspectives first, then teens talk in small groups, and finally the whole group debriefs.
- A Phipps Neighborhoods staff member says: “I’m real with them— I tell them my own personal stories and what happened. I’m basically modeling for them that I’m still learning how to do all of this— take a mindful minute, breathe through my emotions. We’re all human.”

#### 4. Adults address conflicts by engaging in dialogue rather than blame and publicly re-affirming community agreements.

- At Coney Island Y Leaders Club, when a teen feels offended or distressed by fellow teens’ behavior, a counselor will step out with the teen for a private discussion. The counselor will then address the situation in front of everybody and re-affirm guidelines -- like not laughing during serious or sensitive discussions -- that allow for an inclusive and safe space.
- Y staff at JREC note that participants might blame others for a group’s struggles. They support teens in taking responsibility and focusing on the impact of their own actions with questions like “What’s your role in this situation?” or “How might [your words or actions] make [another individual] feel?” (See [Reflecting on Teamwork with Teens](#).)

## REFLECT AND PLAN

**In what ways are you currently integrating this foundation into your program?**

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EXAMPLES FROM BRIGHT SPOT SITES



## INCENTIVES WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

### 1. Adults communicate program structure and guidelines along with incentives.

- At the Coney Island Y, teens must come to Leaders Club on time at 4:30 pm in order to play basketball at 7 pm.

### 2. Adults foster and youth engage in healthy competition.

- At JREC YMCA Rowe Scholars a **“Teen of the Month” board** and, at Bronx Explorations Academy YMCA Rowe Scholars, a **Spotlight Bulletin Board** positively reinforce student achievements.
- At Prospect Park YMCA Leaders Club, teens are awarded platinum, gold, silver, and bronze on a public **“Status Board”** for high program attendance, participation in community service, handing in required paperwork like report cards, and following “House Rules.” As teens achieve a new status, they are rewarded, for example by being invited to go on trips.

### 3. Youth take on leadership roles.

- At Good Shepherd Services Groundwork for Success, teens in the leadership cohort get a quarterly stipend if they meet program requirements. (See **Student Ownership of Program**.)
- At the Prospect Park Y, Teen Committee members are expected to be role models for their peers. Members have to make a speech to their fellow participants, meet program participation requirements, and do well in school. (See **Teen Committee**.)

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## INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

### 1. Adults track individual progress for each student.

- Harlem Lacrosse participants at PS 149 review progress reports and set weekly academic goals with the Program Director. (See [Short-Term Goal Setting...On and Off the Field.](#))
- Y staff at Bronx Explorations Academy keep a spreadsheet of all students' college application progress and individual files for each student.

### 2. Staff hold regular staff meeting dedicated to discussing the needs and progress of each student and planning appropriate supports.

- At South Bronx United, coach-mentors and program staff lead “Kid Talks.” At HEAF, staff hold monthly “Roster Reviews.” (See [Kid Talks](#) and [Roster Reviews Informed by Caring Relationships.](#))

### 3. Adults use a strengths-based approach to support youth in identifying their interests, goals, feelings, and challenges.

- Goddard Riverside Options Center volunteers who support juniors and seniors in the college essay writing process focus almost entirely on content, encouraging students to continue telling their stories. They note that over-emphasizing grammar and vocabulary discourages students from continuing.
- Many YMCA Rowe Scholars participants at JREC are English language learners and fear not being understood because of their accents. Advisors counsel teens on how being bilingual in a multicultural city can be viewed as an asset and design activities for teens to practice public speaking.

### 4. Program staff communicate with parents, teachers, and guidance counselors and support the young person as a unified team.

- At Bronx Explorations Academy, Y staff have conversations with teachers about individual student progress towards graduation and plan College Week activities based on school needs.
- At IS 126Q, Y staff talk to parents, teachers, and guidance counselors to learn challenges they observe young people having, and provide support as a team.

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### SPACE TO GROW

#### 1. Adults support youth without completing tasks for them.

- Y Staff at Bronx Explorations Academy hold students accountable for completing college application and enrollment themselves. If students ask counselors to complete a step for them, counselors refuse, and explain why. For instance, they say: “No, because you need to be able to do this. When you enter college in the fall, we are not going to be there.” (See [Developing Self-Advocacy Through College Application Support](#).)

#### 2. Young people try new activities, skills, and ways of thinking, and build relationships with new people.

- Brooklyn Community College Partnership staff at S.T.A.R. Middle School encourage students to persist. The facilitator of their Maker program describes the mindset youth practice: “You see yourself as a creator... We try to avoid dead ends. I might have reached an end but this is not the end. How can I maneuver?”
- Harlem Lacrosse Boys coach at Frederick Douglass Academy I strategically arranges the locker setup for the team so that teammates interact with others they don’t normally talk to during the school day. This allows students to build new relationships that wouldn’t happen otherwise.

#### 3. Adults design activities and projects that incrementally build up skills and culminate in a demonstration.

- Brooklyn Community College Partnership students demonstrate and celebrate their learning in a showcase for all sites each year.
- Center for Family Life students at MS 136/821 participate in a new performing arts activity each day (incrementally learning how to count a beat, compose a song, etc). These lead into a performance each semester. Staff share, “Students think they won’t succeed, but their thinking changes once they finish the performance. Students are on a high and say ‘I can’t believe I just did that!’”
- City Squash students choose and learn a new skill by teaching themselves via YouTube. After breaking the skill into smaller pieces and practices over seven weeks, they perform their skill for an audience of peers and staff. (See [Growth Mindset YouTube Challenge](#).)

#### 4. Adults and youth engage in conversations about difficult topics like bullying, family problems, and identity.

- At IS 126Q, Y counselors facilitate single-gender groups of students discussing topics relevant to middle schoolers like bullying, self-love, and self-expression. (See [Teen Talk](#).)

#### 5. As a staff team, adults admit what’s not working, reflect, and grow.

- At Groundwork for Success, staff are “always meeting one-on-one... People feel close and vulnerable enough to ask questions. We admit that we’re having a hard time with peer groups or homework hour. We’re ideas off of each other constantly and have each other’s back. We tried seven different things about homework hour.”

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## YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP IN DECISION-MAKING

### 1. Adults and youth set community guidelines, values, or expectations together.

- At Harlem Lacrosse Frederick Douglass Academy I, the coach and student athletes co-create their core values. (See [Empowering Youth to Establish Team Values](#).)
- Each Sadie Nash Leadership Project group creates its own Community Guidelines. (See ["How We Are Going to Create Community"](#).)

### 2. Adults give youth choices in activities and learning plans.

- Center for Family Life After School Arts Program staff at MS 136/821 offer options during homework time. Students select a "Learning Choice" activity from a consistent menu of options developed with students' input. (See [After School Learning Choice to Build and Sustain Growth Mindset](#).)
- Citizen Schools students apply to participate in multiple extracurricular activities throughout the year. The rigorous selection process requires students to advocate for their top choices. (See [Youth Advocating for Club Choice](#).)
- At Goddard Options Center student alumni panels, high school students decide the agenda and ask the questions. Staff sometimes step out of the room to ensure that the students feel safe to ask honest questions about the college application process and college experience. (See [Wish I Had Known Panels](#).)
- Phipps Neighborhoods staff say, "I always come with three lessons and let them choose. Even within the lesson, I give them the choice about how we're gonna do this." (See [Prioritizing Voice and Choice in Lesson Plans](#).)

### 3. Adults create structures for youth to participate in decision-making and incorporate their ideas into programming.

- At Coney Island Y Leaders Club, staff include interested teens in regular staff planning meetings. (See [Youth-Led, Advisor-Supported Programming](#).)
- At Good Shepherd Services Groundwork for Success, Peer Leaders participate in decision making around program activities, structure, and even staff hiring. (See [Student Ownership of Program](#).)
- At Prospect Park Y, the Teen Committee take ideas from their peers and plan out activities and trips. When in doubt, they take the initiative to check with adults to see what's realistic or not. (See [Teen Committee](#).)

### 4. Youth orient newer participants to community guidelines and program structures.

- At the Coney Island Y, participants who have been in the program longer take responsibility for helping newer participants understand program activities and expectations.
- At Prospect Park Y Leaders Club, seniors introduce "House Rules" to newer participants, and eventually teens themselves hold each other accountable for following them.

## REFLECT AND PLAN

**In what ways are you currently integrating this foundation into your program?**

**If you are choosing to prioritize this foundation going forward, how might you integrate it into your program?**

Questions? Reach out to Alexandra Lotero, Director of Research-Practice Partnership at [alexandra@ssn-nyc.org](mailto:alexandra@ssn-nyc.org).

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research Alliance for NYC Schools analyzes the Network’s social-emotional learning (SEL) survey data to identify “Bright Spot” sites – sites where participants experience greater growth in at least one SEL factor compared to similar young people across the Network. SSN staff, including youth interns, interview practitioners at “Bright Spot” sites to learn **promising practices** that they hypothesize improve their participants’ SEL. Thank you to the 57 practitioners at 23 “Bright Spot” sites who participated in interviews. The examples in this document are drawn from interview notes.

| <b>Organizations &amp; Program</b>            | <b>"Bright Spot" Site(s)</b>                           | <b>Practitioner(s)</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| Brooklyn College Community Partnership (BCCP) | S.T.A.R. Middle School at Erasmus                      | Rebekah Severe, Megan Butch, Diamond Gordon                                       |
| Center for Family Life (SCO)                  | After School Arts Program at MS 136/821                | Karla Herrera, Elizabeth Jones, Jhodesa Reimer                                    |
| Center for Supportive Schools                 | Central Park East High School                          | Mayra Messi, Elizabeth Schrittwieser, Amy Girona, Bennett Lieberman, Kelly Cooper |
| Citizen Schools                               | Urban Assembly Unison School                           | Nadia K. Selby  |
| City Squash                                   | Bronx Middle School                                    | Micah Finkelman, Colin Murfree  |
| Goddard Riverside Community Center            | Options Center Access Program                          | Amy Kirschenbaum, Monica Ortiz, Gustavo Aguilar, Juana Alejandro                  |
| Good Shepherd Services                        | Groundwork for Success (GWS)                           | Heather Burack, Marissa Disla, Keith Rogers                                       |
| Harlem Lacrosse and Leadership                | PS 149 Boys  | Richie Hurley, Joel Censer  |
| Harlem Lacrosse and Leadership                | Frederick Douglass Academy I HS Boys                   | Owen Van Arsdale  |
| HEAF  | Harlem 7th Grade                                       | Krystal Bostick, L'Toya Jones   |
| New York on Tech                              | 360I, Carat, and Google                                | Evin Robinson   |
| OneGoal                                       | It Takes a Village Academy                             | Valerie Hennesy   |
| OneGoal                                       | Port Richmond High School                              | Meghan Duffy  |
| Phipps Neighborhoods                          | Urban Assembly School of Wildlife Conservation         | Nicole Rodriguez  |
| Sadie Nash Leadership Project                 | Sisterhood Academy                                     | Christina Jean Louis, Morgan Little, Shelly Strothers                             |
| South Asian Youth Action (SAYA)               | Senior Cohort; Young Men's & Young Women's Leadership* | Aaron Montgomery, Ali-Asad Somjee, Suhail Ahmed                                   |
| South Bronx United                            | SBU Academy 8th Grade                                  | Bridget Mahon, Andrew So  |
| YMCA - Leaders Club                           | Coney Island   | Toni Coley, Andre Desir, Justin Martinez  |
| YMCA - Leaders Club                           | Prospect Park*   | Jamel Davis, Michelle Duran, Joseph Satoo, Jasmine Rosa                           |
| YMCA - Rowe Scholars                          | Bronx Explorations Academy*                            | Wirna Diaz, Amanda Pagan, Bianca Sugrimsingh, Cody Velez                          |
| YMCA - Rowe Scholars                          | Julia Richman Education Complex (JREC)                 | Candy Halikas, Jessica Harris-Avila, Kenneth Melendez, Lorraine Santana           |
| YMCA - Y Scholars                             | IS 126Q - Long Island City (LIC)                       | LaChanda Williams, Julia Defeo  |
| YMCA - Y Scholars                             | Rockaway Village Academy                               | Samantha Narchet  |

\*Research Alliance for NYC Schools identified these sites as “Bright Spots” in both 2018 and 2019, and SSN interviewed them twice.



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