



## Sustainability of Social-Emotional Learning and related programs: Lessons from a field study

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Social-emotional learning, character education, and related programs are being implemented in schools with increasing frequency and research supports their short-term effectiveness. However, there has been no empirical work to date that identifies the factors important for the long-term sustainability of programs established as excellent models of implementation. Using a series of case studies of evidence-based social-emotional learning programs implemented successfully for at least five years, this study articulates principles that characterize programs that were found to be well-sustained over time. These principles have implications for practice and serve as starting points for future research.

**Keywords:** social and emotional learning   character education   programs   sustainability  
school

The first decade of the twenty-first century has borne witness to increased visibility and demand for school-based programs that promote social and emotional learning (SEL) of students (Cooper and Cefai 2009). SEL is the process by which individuals achieve “the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development” (Elias et al. 1997, 2). Fostering healthy decision-making, improving academic achievement, preventing violence, and preparing students for a cooperative work force are some of the critical aims associated with implementing programs in schools (Zins et al. 2004; Durlak and Weissberg 2007). Worldwide, few would dispute the value of pursuing these goals in educating our nation’s youth (Elias 2003).

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### **What Does SEL look like in a school system?**

Principles of SEL can be infused throughout a school's curriculum, such as when students are taught and asked to apply problem-solving steps to a character's dilemma in a story, or when principles of collaboration and conflict resolution are taught, modeled, and reinforced in group work. A supportive school climate, in which administration and staff use the language and processes of SEL, reinforces student use of skills of social and emotional competence. Extracurricular activities provide further opportunities for practicing social and emotional skills, when structured and managed with sensitivity to SEL guiding principles. Students can also be encouraged to participate in community service activities. Opportunities exist throughout every school system for promoting and reinforcing SEL. And of course parents have a keen interest in promoting their own children's SEL; this is an arena in which their interests and those of the school clearly coincide (Patrikakou and Weissberg 2006). However, the most common approach to systematically promoting SEL in schools is direct classroom instruction of SEL principles via multiyear curriculum-based programs.

A number of school-based programs have been found effective in increasing children's abilities to act with greater social and emotional intelligence (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) 2003; Berkowitz and Bier 2005; Elias and Arnold 2006). Instrumental knowledge and resources are readily available to schools that wish to enhance social and emotional learning opportunities (Elias and Arnold 2006; Patti and Tobin 2007; Dunkelblau 2009). The next step in refining educational practices is to move beyond the content of social and emotional learning programs to investigate the contexts that allow them to thrive and become integrated permanently into school communities. In theory, a program that is sound in content and has produced demonstrated outcomes should take root and flourish in any school to which it is introduced. In reality, program implementation can disintegrate in schools unprepared to sustain it, greatly diminishing or eliminating benefits to students (Fullan 2005; Hargreaves and Shirley 2009).

Thus it is critical to look separately but concurrently at *implementation* and *sustainability*. *Implementation* refers to the manner in which an SEL initiative is brought into and established within a school system. Particular attention must be given to the initial procedures that are followed and the monitoring of subsequent activity. Fortunately, an evolving set of standards for programs and practices effective in promoting SEL in schools has been identified (Elias et al. 1997; Novick, Kress, and Elias 2002; Elias and Arnold 2006). While effective SEL programs vary in presentation, it has become clear that implementation is aided by programs developing scope-and-sequence plans for school systems to consider from the inception. In addition, programs should define their key elements and the timing and "dosage" of their delivery. The inception of an SEL program in a particular school system may understandably be followed by some tailoring of the implementation plan, but care must be taken to retain essential components.

Once an initiative is introduced into a school system and its content and procedures become familiar, the process of implanting an SEL program may feel completed. Beyond the point of having the components

of a program implemented fully in a school, however, it is critical to consider whether the program will be sustained as a permanent and integral part of the system. The fast pace of school life, changes in personnel, annual budget schedules, ever-evolving trends in education—all of these factors and many others present challenges to planning for long-term success in integrating an SEL initiative into a school. How many teachers, principals, and other school staff have been heard to say, “We used to have that program in our school, but after a few years it died out”? Or, even more disheartening, “They’re all the same. We’ll have this one for a few years, and then we’ll have something else.” These frustrations erode educators’ faith that any initiative can be sustained sufficiently to improve the social, emotional, and academic development of students, especially those at greatest risk.

There is clear need for empirically-based knowledge of the factors that promote healthy sustainability of SEL and related initiatives once healthy implementation has taken place. While there is a growing literature on program sustainability (Elias et al. 2003), the application of that knowledge base to SEL and related school-based program is in its very early stages. Developing and refining such knowledge can take place meaningfully from the analysis of SEL programs that have been in place and operated effectively over extended periods of time. Well-implemented programs are excellent springboards from which to address matters of sustainability.

### **Framework for thinking about Sustainability**

Michael Fullan (2005), whose name has become synonymous with work on sustainability, recognizes that there is no consensus on a precise definition of sustainability, or on its key components. He makes an important distinction between innovations that last because their origin and continuity reside in key leaders, and innovations that last because they have become embedded in systems. Not surprisingly, the latter are both rarer and also more idiosyncratic than the former. Hargreaves and Fink (2003) in fact label true sustainability as that which is reflected in a change that is incorporated into a school without upsetting the balance of resources or other parts of the system. For the present investigation, looking at the specific context of school-based SEL curricula and related programs, a change may be considered sustained when it continues past the point of consensually recognized sound implementation to become a regular part of school practices. This implies the necessity for ongoing flexibility of practices to promote and reinforce SEL, as opposed to the conceptualization of a set list of practices that may be prey to extinction if evolving school schedule, budget, or other requirements conflict with the practices as initially implemented. Using our earlier transplant analogy, this view of sustainability fits the school system as a complex, dynamic organism.

The importance of understanding sustainability for school-based SEL initiatives appears intuitive. If SEL is worth promoting, as has been well established, then it is worth promoting as a natural and permanent part of a school’s operation. What often proves trickier in reality, however, is allocating resources of time, energy, and money to understand and develop sustainability in an environment as fast-paced and demanding

as a school. Crises emerge and require instant resolution, budgets operate on annual schedules, state and federal requirements change from year to year, key administrators often shift assignments in two or three years, and many longer-term school employees are accustomed to cycles of “here today, gone tomorrow” initiatives.

Given this context, a wide-ranging literature review (Commins and Elias 1991; Backer 2000; Zins et al. 2000; Adelman and Taylor 2003; Greenberg et al. 2004; Johnston et al. 2004; Fullan 2005; Hall and Hord 2006; Dalton, Elias and Wandersman 2007; Blankstein 2009) suggests that sustainability is related to (a) *motivation and readiness* to sustain the program, signified by awareness by school leaders that a need exists for a program or intervention and a consensual process of selecting a program; (b) an *implementation support system* that assists the program in being sustained, including ongoing professional development of staff, access to experts in implementing the intervention, and resources and school goals and policies that support continuation of the program; and (c) *ongoing validation mechanisms* that foster recognition, improvement, adaptability, and continued motivation to use the program, including both objective (celebrations, salary increments, media recognition, evaluation feedback) and subjective (satisfaction at students’ responses to lessons, belief that one is doing the right thing) elements.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of the study consisted of operationalizing the framework on sustainability and applying it to programs that have been established as well-implemented over a long period of time. Fortunately, the SEL field has created a base from which such an approach can be applied. In 1997 a foundational text for understanding effective SEL programs was developed by CASEL, *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Elias et al. 1997). It delineated guidelines for planning and implementing high-quality initiatives, incorporating insights gained from visits to schools operating validated SEL programs across the United States. A total of twenty-three model sites were identified.

The sites that were identified as models in the 1997 guide were considered to be flagships for SEL implementation. Therefore, they became a natural resource for investigating critical factors affecting sustainability for the programs they were implementing. CASEL undertook a follow-up study to determine whether model sites had sustained their SEL programs, how SEL was occurring in sites at the present time, how sites had negotiated challenges and obstacles of program development and maintenance, and what factors were critical for programs’ ultimate sustenance or deterioration.

The three aspects of sustainability were operationalized to frame interview and site visit assessments. Given what is known about successful implementation, an interview structure was developed to investigate the pathways traveled by participating sites in achieving, or losing sight of, sustainability. A telephone interview and assessment guide was created, piloted at several sites not part of the study, and then refined into the final version. Areas explored included (see Table 1 for additional detail):

- current program components and how they developed and changed since inception of the SEL program;
- history of program operation (time allotted, materials, staff roles, staff training, funding, decision-making and troubleshooting, and changes in these factors over years);
- progress of the program (satisfaction with programs over time, how value is determined, how progress is communicated, and changes over time); and
- observations regarding factors that sustained (or impeded) programs over time.

Introductory letters explaining the project and inviting participation were sent to 23 sites; 17 recipients replied to the inquiry letter and follow-up phone calls to request participation. Two sites refused because they had new administrators that did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable about the history of the program. Two others were unwilling to take the time necessary. Ultimately, interviews were conducted at 14 sites, representing 9 programs included in the original CASEL guide (see Table 2). Three individuals with experience consulting to and implementing SEL programs were trained in the procedures, practiced them at various sites not involved in the study, and then conducted interviews. No one assessed a site that was using a program with which they were primarily involved in any way.

Professional roles of school-based interviewees included teacher, school-based coordinator, school counselor, principal, director of curriculum, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. Participant roles from program offices included program coordinator, director of implementation, director of outreach, director of school services, and national director. Program sites in were in California, Connecticut, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Washington. Eleven were suburban, 3 were urban; 10 were elementary only, 2 were elementary and middle, and 3 were elementary, middle, and high school.

In telephone interviews, participants answered questions regarding their experiences and observations. They were asked for insights about the development of programs since the original inquiries and visits that constituted the 1997 guide. Sites in continued operation for this length of time were considered to be in a phase of sustenance, having survived the challenges of initial implementation and integration into the school system. Program representatives offered the added insight of experience in working with additional school sites that had operated for at least that length of time.

Data analysis was an inductive process, beginning by placing specific interview responses in sentences or phrases on index cards and then building increasingly inclusive categories based on the study's conceptual framework and relevant literature, culminating with thematically organized findings. Thematic categories were developed and refined on an ongoing basis based on consensual reliability, using the procedures from the method of grounded theory (Straus and Corbin 1998). All themes and those responses placed within them were the result of consensus by two coders not involved in data collection but with expertise in the areas of implementation of SEL interventions.

**Table 1 Application of Sustainability Framework to Interviews and Site Visits**

***Motivation and Awareness of Need***

1. Is the program still in existence? In what form does it now exist?
2. Are school staff members aware of the program goals? Do they perceive them as valuable goals? Have these goals changed over time, and if so, why? How has support and value of these goals changed, and why?
3. Is there any ongoing assessment of risk or needs? Has this been done regularly over the years? Why/why not? If so, have the needs changed?

***Implementation Support System***

1. Which staff members are involved, and what are their roles in the program? How has this evolved or changed over time, and why? How would you describe the commitment level of involved staff, and how they perceive the program?
2. Are specific program materials being used, and are they considered sufficient? Have there been changes over the years? What sort of changes? Have any such changes been well-received?
3. How is time allotted for program activities?
4. How are costs covered? Formalized as part of the school budget?
5. Are staff members who are not directly active in the program impacted by the program in any way, and are they indirectly supportive (or not unsupportive) ? How has this developed or changed over time, and why? Is there any collaboration with or support from individuals or groups in the community outside the school?
6. For each component of the program, ask about dosage and fidelity to original content since 1997
7. At program's inception, was there an explicit vision and plan for how it would be sustained? Has this developed over time, and how/why? Is there an individual coordinator assigned to oversee daily functioning of the program? Is there any educational process for the committee or general staff regarding program goals and theory of change toward desired outcomes?
8. Is administration involved (school and district level)? If so, how? Has the nature of involvement changed over time, and if so, how/why? Is ongoing training or support provided for staff? In what ways?
9. How are activities monitored, to be sure they occur and to identify needs for support? How has this monitoring developed or changed over time, and why? How is feedback on program functioning from school staff and students received and responded to? When did this begin, and how has it developed?

***Mechanisms for Validation***

1. How is the value of the program for the district determined? Has this process changed over time?
2. How and to what extent is the program made visible in the school? How has this changed over time, and why?
3. How are results disseminated to the community? How has this happened over time?

**Table 2: SEL programs held in the follow-up study with web contact information**

I Can Problem Solve

[http://www.strengtheningfamilies.org/html/programs\\_1999/13\\_RTC\\_ICPS.html](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.org/html/programs_1999/13_RTC_ICPS.html)

Open Circle

[www.open-circle.org](http://www.open-circle.org)

Positive Adolescent Choices Training (PACT)

<http://www.state.sc.us/dmh/schoolbased/pact.htm>

Promoting Alternative Thinking Skills (PATHS)

<http://www.channing-bete.com/prevention-programs/paths/>

Raising Healthy Children

<http://depts.washington.edu/sdrg/SRD/rhc.html>

Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program (RCCP) <http://esrnational.org/professional-services/elementary-school/prevention/resolving-conflict-creatively-program-rccp/>

Second Step

[www.cfchildren.org/](http://www.cfchildren.org/)

Social Competence Program for Young Adolescents

<https://casat.unr.edu/bestpractices/view.php?program=111>

Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS)

<http://www.ubhcisweb.org/sdm/>

The results of interviewees' responses yielded valuable information about the factors existing in school systems where SEL programs were initiated before 1997. Some interviewees offered critical information about trends in sites where SEL initiatives were implanted and accepted, becoming part of the natural life of the schools. Others offered equally important information about factors that contributed to the withering or rejection of SEL initiatives from school systems that hosted them. Together, these insights form a blueprint for planning for sustainability.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Sustainability: Interview Findings and Quotes*

Information about fourteen specific school sites was used to develop four categories that depict both the current level of functioning ascribed to the particular program at its school site, as well as the course of its development over time. There were recognizable pathways both to sustainability and to program attrition.

Some programs chart a strong course from the beginning; others take a wrong turn but are able to regain their footing and continue along a reliable road to sustainability. Still others lose their way, and the program fragments or disappears entirely, sometimes due to taking dangerous shortcuts or to being run off the road by negative forces.

*Sustained* sites feature programs that are integrated into various aspects of school life, with skills and concepts visibly taught, reinforced, and applied. Sustained sites have maintained or expanded their level of program activity and positive results over a period of years, due to structures and practices they have put in place. *Re/developing* sites have many positive features of sustained sites but are still in the process of entrenching sustainable practices, usually because of a period of weakening followed by renewed interest and improved planning. Hence we use the combined term to note that some are still developing toward sustainability, and others are working to return to that status. Programs operating in *detached* sites have concepts and language that have not been integrated well into the curriculum and life of the school; the program may be viewed as an “add-on” or “extra” curriculum that can be dropped at any time. In *discontinued* sites, there is no longer any planned, school-wide implementation of a program, although individual teachers may continue to use some of the materials. Of the 14 sites, 6 were found to be sustained, 4 were re/developing, 2 were detached, and 2 were discontinued. It should be noted that the 6 non-responding sites were likely to be detached or discontinued; there is no clear rationale for categorizing the 4 sites refusing participation after initially responding. There was no pattern of findings for urban vs. suburban or elementary vs. combined sites. That two curricular programs included in the follow-up were found within the “sustained” grouping and also within the “detached” and “discontinued” groupings (PATHS and SDM/SPS) is quite telling. High quality implementation of a particular evidence-based program does not guarantee sustainability.

Given that the purpose of this research is not to focus on specific programs but rather conditions of sustainability, the focal themes to be reported were those most strongly associated with the clearest degree of sustainability; these themes also were not characteristic of detached or discontinued sites. Six themes emerged most clearly across sites as indicators of sustainability (See Table 3.) Each theme and its associated indicator responses are summarized next.

**Table 3 Features uniquely supportive of sustainability**

- Intervention by Program Developers to Engage New Administrators
- Program Consultation Offered to School Staff
- Ongoing Training and Professional Development
- Deep Involvement of Teams of Teachers Who Also Model Program Principles
- Programs Integrated into Whole-School Scope & Sequence
- Districts Develop Capacity to Assume Some of the Cost



### *Active Administrative Support and Follow-Through*

Programs need continuous, active and visible support by administrators. Administrative turnover was identified as the greatest threat to sustainability, but it could be survived.

### *Intervention by Program Developers to Engage New Administrators*

There is a clear need for an implementation support system that often extends beyond the school. New administrators need to be engaged by more than just their local staff. As test companies and textbook companies come to visit new administrators to help ensure that they don't make unsanctioned changes, a similar approach characterizes SEL sustainability. Either program developers or other outside experts in the program approach new administrators about the benefits of the program. Local support appears to be necessary but not sufficient to sustain a program when a new administrator is opposed, wants to bring in a favorite or "new" program, or engages in benign neglect.

### *Program Consultation Offered to School Staff*

Outside consultation --- even if not necessarily from program developers-- makes it more "costly" to just let something drop in the face of crisis or change. Program developer consultation brings schools new instructional procedures and information about how other sites have handled common issues. It then becomes less important to over-rely on local creativity, which is crucial for implementation but highly taxing over time. Sustainability can take a long-term emotional toll on its most committed members if the program is in a constant state of reinvention, change, adaptation, modification, and never able to routinize for at least some periods of time.

### *Ongoing Training and Professional Development*

Constant evolution of staff and changes in school populations require constant training and refreshing. This includes not only skill development but also opportunities to reflect on the work being done and one's role and satisfaction with it.

### *Deep Involvement of Teams of Teachers Who Also Model Program Principles*

The program must get off to a strong pedagogical start. Role model teachers are both opinion and instructional leaders. They must be invested to ensure that sound adaptations are made during the inevitable bumps in the road, major potholes, or detours that will occur. Invested teacher involvement is important because-going in the other direction-their feelings of ownership in adapting and adding to program components boosted their commitment and attachment to the program, thus helping to sustain it. Sustained sites also spoke about teachers as being "true believers" who "walk the talk" of the program's principles.

Over time, sustainability is more likely if these involved educators develop a deep understanding of the theoretical principles upon which the program is based and use this to make necessary adaptations. Thus, what often looks like change on the surface is actually what needs to happen to maintain the deep structure and pedagogy of the program in the face of crisis or change. However, this will be very hard to discern from the surface; it is likely that only someone knowing a program very well would be able to make a judgment about such changes. Further, this allows for adaptations to changing mandates and also shows the necessity of a team approach—this is very difficult for individuals to take on in a school context.

#### *Programs Integrated into Whole-School Scope and Sequence*

Enduring programs are integrated with other aspects of the school day and routine; this takes place over a period of years. Programs can be introduced in relative isolation as pilots and can be successfully implemented at a grade level or two, but to be sustained, they must become integrated into the whole school climate, routine, and curriculum structure. There is also a clear accountability structure so that progress can be determined and difficulties uncovered and addressed.

#### *Districts Develop Capacity to Assume Some of Cost*

Reliance on external funding often leads to problems over time. It may lead programs to move from sustainable to “developing” status, but it can also lead to detachment and discontinuation. Even if there is a funding “glitch” in sustained programs, many of the mechanisms of program vitality are still kept in place while attempts are made to restore what was lost. Detachment and discontinuation reflect small concern over such losses.

#### *Qualitative Elaboration from Sustained Sites*

The three of the themes reported above reflect internal influences, i.e., they depend mainly on ongoing processes that occur within a school. An elaboration of some quotes related to those themes follows to provide both more texture and detail concerning how the themes played out in schools over time.

### **Ongoing Training and Professional Development.**

Training, we’ve always emphasized. But now we’re emphasizing *ongoing* training and coaching and support, because as I’ve talked with clients over the years, the one’s who are sustaining it have got a system for staying on top if it, reminding teachers why they’re doing it, keeping them excited, and helping them with snags.

Program Director

Initial implementation of an SEL program often begins with a round of training for school staff. Sustaining sites had some mechanism for determining the need for and delivering training for the inevitable arrival of new staff. Most also provided some boosters or repeated exposure for experienced staff. Practices varied, ranging from annual trainings to trainings repeated every three years, as well as requiring summer institutes and having an in-house professional development coordinator available for coaching and consultation. Some sites arranged for in-house staff to be trained by program developers so that they then could train other staff members. But sustained sites found it necessary to go beyond the typical turnkey or “train-the-trainers” model. Accessibility of support throughout the school year emerged as significant.

Interviewees discussing programs in sustained sites described atmospheres in which school staff members talked about SEL strategies regularly and could approach coordinators or other colleagues flexibly for support. This underscored the value of having a designated coordinator or committee members with time and ability to fulfill their roles as central sources of information and support. In one school, a regular time was allotted each week when teachers could drop into the school counselor’s office for consultation about that week’s curricular lesson. In other schools, supervisors and even a professional development coordinator were available and invested time and energy in working with teaching staff on SEL strategies. Leader of a SEL Committee are also more likely than individual teachers to be able to maintain a relationship with program developers, which can help in long-term troubleshooting of implementation problems and with updating training content and methodology.

[Part of our mission is] to be reflective and responsive. I think we’re doing the same things we did 60 years ago, but being more articulate about them. Kids can speak about them more and reflect about them more than they could

School counselor

Another important aspect of ongoing professional development supporting a sustainable growth process appears to be the ability of staff members to reflect upon progress of the program. Conscious thought about what works well and what does not can illuminate the pathway to continued success in implementation. Beyond personal reflection, the opportunity to share with and learn from the perspectives and experiences of others can yield rich results that benefit the entire school community.

The positive outcome of regular reflection about progress in promoting SEL observed in sustained sites anticipated the now-current understanding of the importance of reflective practice. Through reflection, the school community becomes more aware of what they are doing to promote students’ SEL and how to make their implementation more purposeful and thoughtful. As demonstrated by the school counselor quoted earlier, this can extend to modeling for students, who can benefit from reflecting upon their own efforts at becoming more socially and emotionally competent and improving their character. In addition, through reflection, administration and staff often became aware of modifications they needed to make to enhance program functioning. A raised level of continuing consciousness and participation served to increase the sense

of ownership and commitment that staff members felt for promoting SEL. Numerous interviewees spoke of the value they perceived of giving staff opportunities to voice opinions and ideas about the program, noting that people responded well when they felt that their input was valued.

What opportunities for reflection were created? Often interviewees spoke of an administrator's integration of program reflection into regular staff meetings or other staff gatherings. In some schools, groups of staff members met either during the school day or after school hours to develop and share lessons and strategies they had had success with, thus enabling further dissemination and entrenchment of positive practices in their school. Written surveys were also used to collect information from school staff about program operation, including such logistics as training schedules and formats. At the most informal level, most interviewees in sustained sites referred to an ongoing dialog between coordinators or administrators and staff members who would approach them to discuss ideas for program modifications or additions. When this approachability and responsiveness existed, the opportunity to share reflections often resulted in positive growth for the program. Moreover, reflection serves as a constant "early warning system" for potentially serious problems.

*Deep Involvement of Teams of Teachers Who Also Model Program Principles.*

As I look at leadership and change, it may start at the top, but everyone should be together. One thing we did right was that it didn't come from me; it came from the school, teachers saying something wasn't right. A committee collected data, including teachers from every grade.

School principal

While the support of the school administrator is important, sustainability requires a core group of individuals who strongly support the program and are deeply involved in it over time. One striking finding that emerged from the interviews was that sustained sites often, over time, had staff members involved in creating supplementary materials or related programs and generally tailoring the original SEL program to the needs of the particular school. The intuitive risk of this evolutionary process is that the resulting SEL practices may not retain absolute fidelity to the formats, concepts, and skills of the original program. In the strongest model sites, it was clear that administrators provided oversight for carefully planned additions or departures from the original program protocol, in order to continue developing a valid and viable program.

Even with the staunchest support of the school administrator, SEL programs cannot thrive without the commitment of other members of the school community. At the most basic level, implementation of most curricular SEL programs requires instruction by school staff members—most often teachers. However, teachers today are bombarded with countless responsibilities and pressures. Implementing an SEL curriculum may receive low priority if it is perceived as disconnected from the academic mission of schools or as going part of a current fad or unfunded mandate related to students' character or prevention of problem behaviors. Hence, SEL-related programs often fade away. Yet the need for attending to students' social, emotional, and

character development never fades (Elias 2009), and thus programs are repeatedly introduced to address these issues without any one program becoming infused enough into the school's daily life and culture to have the desired impact. This makes programs seem expendable, and perpetuates a vicious cycle.

In successful, sustained SEL program sites, however, school staff largely were committed to and even passionate about instruction that incorporated SEL. Stories were told of teachers sharing their successful strategies with other teachers, devoting their own extra time to lesson planning, and even presenting to parents and professional audiences at conferences about their SEL approaches. One program representative, reflecting on progress of her particular program in different school systems, noted that continuity despite administrator changes was most common where teachers had taken a very active role in running the program and had a deep knowledge of the program's principles and pedagogy. Teachers in one school wrote grants to procure funding and were active in coaching one another and planning implementation. In one district, when frequent changes in administration brought in new administrators who were unfamiliar with the program or seemed unsupportive, teachers approached them directly to gain support for continuity, and were successful.

One school counselor who coordinated SEL efforts in her school described her conscious efforts to involve other staff members in roles in program-related activities. She explained her concern that program components would be more likely to survive her tenure at the school and become a more permanent part of school functioning if a broader sense of ownership existed among staff. This appeals to logic, as well; the wider the base of people who are committed to and support the program and the more embedded it is within other programs and goals of the school, the less precarious will be its balance in the face of the changing winds that affect schools.

#### *Programs Integrated into Whole-School Scope and Sequence.*

When we started pulling this together we were concerned about the evaluation component, because we needed to know it was effective...My first year it was not unusual at lunchtime for 15 to 20 kids to be referred to my office. Now we're down to 10 a year. My first five years in the building, I would receive a stack of bus referrals that would amount to about 50 to 55 a year. Last year there were 3! We can quantify that.

School principal

Schools that systematically gathered information about the effectiveness of their program components generally were best sustained. This reflected a serious concern with programs reaching valued school goals. Strategies varied, including tracking discipline referrals, monitoring various problem-solving forms completed by students, and distributing surveys to students and staff, but all sustained sites valued documentation of effects. One school established personalized grades for effort individual students showed toward developing different social-emotional skills. One example was that of a student who would get a positive grade for raising his hand to participate in class because expressing himself in that manner was difficult for him. The practice of formally acknowledging students' acquisition and use of SEL skills through

grades or progress reports was a clear sign of the value and importance of working on those skills, and reinforced the understanding that such skills can be taught and developed. Ongoing program evaluation was taken very seriously as a way to develop credibility in one's school district and to gain the support and commitment of the school community and parents.

Many interviewees referred to the increasing pressure to select validated programs and demonstrate positive impact on student functioning in order to sustain funding and other aspects of commitment to SEL program implementation. However, those in sustained sites were most likely to recognize the need to respect the developmental nature of programs. One program director who had worked with many schools to implement a particular SEL program emphasized the need for patience in pursuing evaluation of SEL outcomes. While data about such behavioral indices as bus or lunchtime referrals or classroom conflicts may be collected from the first year, such gains are not likely to be seen until after the second full year of implementation. Sustained sites had ways in which they conveyed an understanding of these realities to both implementers and key stakeholders, such as school board members.

The program director just mentioned related the story of a particular school whose principal initiated tracking of discipline referrals after beginning implementation of an SEL program. "In the first year, there was not that huge of an improvement," he reported. "But after two years, referrals dropped incredibly. After three years, it was unbelievable. It's not all going to happen in one year. You need to keep going."

This piece of wisdom helps set realistic and productive expectations not only for program administrators, but also for school staff, parents, and other members of the school community who understandably will await the results of program implementation. This highlights the need for communication to the school community about the natural trajectory of SEL program effects. Without that awareness and understanding, programs may be abandoned rather than sustained with patience and, perhaps, some needed modifications. For example, the recent focus on bullying may lead some schools to look for an entirely new program to focus specifically on bullying, rather than consider how their current SEL program targets the issue and how additions or modifications may be made within the context of the existing program to respond to changes in the school's needs. In sustained sites, there was often a school psychologist or counselor or other formal or informal SEL leader who would help foster coordination of programs, versus proliferation of initiatives in response to every crisis or mandate. In some ways, this is essential for sustainability, i.e., that an SEL program and those operating it are flexible to meet changing needs as an integral part of whole-school scope and sequence.

## **Conclusion**

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) define the future of educational reform as involving a confluence of innovation, inspiration, and sustainability. They are not sanguine about the challenges involved in creating conditions that support that confluence: purpose, professionalism and respect for teachers, school-to-school

networks, courageous leadership that understands child adult learning, and instilling responsibility for outcomes, vs. external accountability are among the forces that must converge. But their point is clear: without sustainable programs and processes, true educational progress is unlikely. The same is true of the question to have students emerge from schools with the social-emotional competencies needed to meet the challenges of higher education, careers, and civic, workplace, and family responsibilities.

Advancing knowledge in this field is difficult because, as noted earlier, studies of sustainability are challenging. They require innovations that are both well-implemented and sustained, and they are inherently linked to the specific context of the innovations being studied. Many program implementation variables will elude control because study designs in this domain will be largely naturalistic. Here, the focus was on flagship settings for evidence-based SEL programs, attempting to circumscribe (but certainly not systematically varying or controlling) variance related to the specifics of the interventions and the quality of implementation. The generality of the findings summarized in Table 3 for sustainability of programs related to SEL, or other school reforms, requires further evaluation. For the present, these are offered as starting points for educators and others considering or actively involved in implementation of school-based programs that they would like to see sustained. Clearly, the current findings suggest that simple debates about fidelity vs. adaptation of programs are unrealistic. The larger questions revolve around the kinds of adaptations that will allow continued implementation of the structural and pedagogical principles underlying a program, its extension into new domains, and its continued demonstration of effectiveness (Dalton, Elias and Wandersman 2007). From the perspective of the current study, when it appears necessary to bring in a new program, a plan should be put in place from the outset for adapting it to enhance coordination with already existing programs.

Future systematic research, as well as case studies within and across specific SEL programs and in varied contexts, will refine this study's conclusions and improve the guidance that they can provide. This is a vital area of inquiry for those concerned with students' social-emotional competence in particular, as it is becoming clearer and clearer that continuity of interventions for children is necessary if they are to have their desired impact; this is especially true for students who may be considered "at risk" by virtue of their own developmental characteristics or disadvantage in the environments in which they are being raised (Elias et al. 2003; Adelman and Taylor 2006).

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