Lessons Learned:
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Pilot

AUGUST 2016

SEL Pilot
Sprockets partnered with the PEAR Institute, which is joint initiative of Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital to offer a professional development pilot focused on social emotional learning (SEL). PEAR’s work with afterschool programs and schools focuses on the critical ties between social emotional development, health and life success, especially in the realm of learning.

The SEL Pilot targeted youth-serving professionals (managers and/or leaders of youth-serving organizations) and school-based educators or administrators working with middle and high school age youth. Organizations from St. Paul, Minneapolis and Brooklyn Park participated in the pilot. Sprockets expanded beyond St. Paul in order to build the capacity of practitioners across the region and better meet the social emotional learning needs of our young people.

The pilot goals include
1. Workforce/personal development
2. Improved service/program delivery
3. Collaboration among and across learning environments/opportunities

Participants were trained to identify key social and emotional assets and challenges and strategies to strengthen the assets and offset the challenges young people experience using PEAR’s Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) survey¹. Participants learned how to use these research-based tools to address individual and group social emotional needs.

Increased Knowledge, Skills and Abilities among Practitioners
SEL Cohort participants increased their SEL knowledge and improved their ability to identify key SEL skills, attitudes and beliefs over the course of the pilot. They reported increased knowledge in using HSA data to support SEL in youth and in youth programming; and increased collaboration within and across their programs. The diverse cohort allowed practitioners,

About Sprockets
Sprockets operates as an intermediary organization in St. Paul. It partners with and supports a diverse mix of after school and summer program providers through its network; and engages community leaders and funding partners around a common purpose. This common purpose is to ensure all Saint Paul’s youth develop their abilities as learners, contributors, and navigators so they can recognize and achieve their greatest potential.

¹ Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) survey is a data-driven tool to promote socio-emotional development in young people in school and afterschool settings. The self-report tool provides program staff, administrator and educators with a socio-emotional “portrait” or profile of the unique strengths and challenges of each young person and can be used to offer differentiated support and teaching strategies. PEAR Overview of Holistic Student Assessment (HSA), 2015.
researchers and decision-makers to better understand how SEL was impacted and influenced within and by systems.

Key Lessons Learned

In addition to increased knowledge, skills and abilities among practitioners, there were four key lessons learned during the initial pilot year that influenced practice and the systems that support practice and programming among cohort participants. These lessons learned have important implications for the field of youth development and education, and more importantly the children and youth we serve.

#1. SEL Resiliency versus Behavior

SEL skills are resilient (they are malleable, flexible, and adjust based on experiences). SEL skills present differently in each person, sometimes as a strength and other times as a challenge. In addition, behaviors are attached to SEL skills. Behaviors can present positively and negatively for each SEL skill whether it is a strength or a challenge of the individual.

Most adults are trained to manage behaviors in youth programs and classrooms, while fewer are trained on social emotional learning. Consequently, adults tend to respond to the behavior and not the SEL need.

For example, a young girl who distracts her peers or speaks negatively about the program activity for the day is often told to sit out or is sent out, ultimately being denied participation in the activity. The girl may be working actively to avoid participation for a number of reasons.

#2. Balancing the SEL Needs of Youth with Adult Responsibility

When adults work with children and youth in programs or schools they have specific goals and objectives they are responsible for accomplishing. Many times these goals and objectives are given priority over the SEL needs of youth in their programs or classroom.

For example, when youth silently deal with stress or loss and don’t ask for attention – or demand it through certain behaviors – they can fly under the radar and not get their needs met if adults are intentional about addressing and supporting SEL skills. Similarly, when a young person disrupts a class or program activity they are often sent out of the classroom or pulled out of programming rather than addressing the needs of the young person at that time. More times than not, adults will address their goals and objectives rather than stopping the group to work through social, or interpersonal issues, even when it involves multiple people.

#3. Culture and Cultural Diversity Matters

Culture and cultural diversity matters. Culture is core to one’s identity and one’s social emotional learning and development. Social emotional learning is influenced by culture. Cultural communities place value differently on SEL skills. When there is misalignment in these values across cultural communities, it is difficult to engage and feel as if one belongs. Children and youth from communities of color regularly ‘code switch’ between cultural communities in order to belong and find success. While code switching can be beneficial, it often means young
people from communities of color have access to fewer spaces and places where they can authentically be themselves.

Children and youth from the dominant community have significantly less pressure on them because their cultural values are more aligned; and therefore they are free to develop their SEL skills more freely and without judgment.

**#4. SEL Priorities Differ when Basic Needs are Met or Denied**

Social emotional learning begins at home and is shaped by one’s experiences in life. When someone is exposed to high levels stress on a regular basis or for a significant length of time, it can cause trauma that has long-term impacts on one’s overall health and well-being. The impact of trauma on a young person’s SEL skills, the resilience of these skills and the behaviors attached to them are important considerations for adults working with young people and their families. Early learning suggests adults need to carefully consider the impact of influencing SEL skill development when a young person’s environment, especially if its causing trauma or high levels of stress, cannot be changed.

**Summary**

Sprockets has continued its support of the SEL Pilot for a second year and remains focused on systems-level changes that assist youth practitioners, educators and decision-makers to implement changes to support social emotional learning in youth people.