

# Lions Quest Skills for Growing: Implementation and Outcome Study in Wood County, West Virginia

## Final Report

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## **Abstract**

Wood County Schools in West Virginia implemented an evidence-based social and emotional learning program—Lions Quest Skills for Growing (SFG)—districtwide beginning in the 2012–13 school year. The SFG program is designed to help elementary-age children increase a broad range of social and emotional skills such as self-management, social awareness, interpersonal relationship, and social problem-solving skills, as well as to promote a safe and supportive school climate.

American Institutes for Research conducted an evaluation of the Wood County Schools' implementation of SFG. The goals of the evaluation were to document the program implementation and to assess change in students' social emotional outcomes over time. The main data sources included student survey and records of office disciplinary referrals. We used a quasi-experimental study design to assess program effects. Students in SFG schools were compared to (1) students in schools that implemented other social and emotional learning programs, and (2) students in schools that did not provide social and emotional learning instruction to their students.

### ***Program Implementation***

Overall, SFG schools showed adequate level of implementation, albeit with minimal efforts to infuse the program across the curriculum and to create a schoolwide, coherent social and emotional learning approach. Although teachers and guidance counselors valued the program and generally liked the SFG materials and strategies, they found it challenging to find time for the lessons and expressed a desire for greater levels of support in aligning the program with other related curricula (e.g., health and counseling curricula).

### ***Program Effects***

Participation in the SFG program increased students' self-reported interpersonal skills and perception of their school environment as safe and supportive. There were no differences between the students who participated in the SFG program and students who participated in the other social and emotional learning programs. In addition, program participation reduced incidents of disruptive behavior at school. Program effects did not vary by gender. Students in the fourth and fifth grade levels were more likely to benefit from the program than students in the third grade level.

These results suggest that even with an imperfect implementation quality, school-based social emotional learning programs can significantly improve student outcomes relative to schools with no social and emotional learning programs. Future research should explore the conditions that enhance school leadership commitment and involvement in program implementation and the program training features associated with improved classroom management and instructional practices under the program.

## Introduction

This study investigated the effects of Skills for Growing (SFG) program on students' social and emotional learning (SEL), behavior, and perceptions of school climate. SFG is part of a suite of the Lions Quest programs of the Lions Clubs International Foundation.<sup>1</sup> SFG is a comprehensive, research-based program for students in prekindergarten through fifth grade. The program provides a sequenced curriculum and training of school staff for building a safe and supportive learning environment. With the generous support of the NoVo Foundation, Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) partnered with Wood County in West Virginia to provide a three-year district-wide social-emotional programming.

American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted an evaluation of the Wood County's implementation of Lions Quest programs for elementary, middle, and high school students. This report summarizes findings for the elementary school program: Skills for Growing (SFG). The goals of the evaluation were to document and describe how the program was implemented and to measure changes in students' social and emotional outcomes over time.

SFG has been widely used in the United States and internationally. The program materials have been translated into 36 languages and adapted for implementation in 90 countries around the world. The SFG program aligns with the five core competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Wahlberg, 2004). The SFG program integrates instruction on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, civic literacy, and health literacy), with SEL. The combination of these skills prepares students with the knowledge and psychological well-being needed for success in the elementary school years as well as later in life (Dede, 2010).

SFG uses an approach that is based on the positive youth development framework. This framework integrates two key ideas. First, there is the belief that all students possess strengths. Second, when students' strengths are further supported by the developmental assets of their environments, students develop academically, socially, emotionally, and have the skills to handle negative life events, difficult social situations, and academic problems (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). The developmental assets that schools can provide are safe and caring school climate and opportunities for SEL through formal, age-appropriate curricula (Theokas & Lerner, 2006).

Over the years, SFG has gained recognition as a quality program. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) identified SFG as one of 33 character education programs that are supported by empirical evidence and show promise for promoting a set of developmental outcomes, including socio-moral reasoning competencies (e.g., perspective taking) and behavioral competencies (e.g., ability to disagree respectfully, conflict resolution skills), as well as instilling prosocial motives

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<sup>1</sup> Lions Clubs International members support the Lions Quest programs financially and through volunteer work. The Lions Clubs International Foundation has awarded implementation grants to promote positive youth development and help children grow in a positive direction, free from the dangers of drugs and violence and able to make positive decisions.

and inclinations (e.g., perseverance). Two studies (Sehwan & Laird, 1995; Brandon University, 2003) have documented the implementation of SFG and confirmed the feasibility of different implementation formats (e.g., as a standalone social and emotional program or integrated into the health curriculum). Additionally, Sehwan and Laird (1995) reported that SFG participants had higher scores on measures of life skills and conflict resolution skills than students who did not participate in a SEL program. The current evaluation of SFG aimed to expand our understanding of the program effects using a comparative study design. The following sections describe the importance of SEL, the SFG program, and the methodology and results of this evaluation.

## The Importance of School-Based SEL Programs

Educators and policy makers have expressed concerns about the persistent number of schools where students' physical safety is a significant issue (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Zullig, Koopman, Patton, & Ubbes, 2010). Reducing behavioral problems in schools is also important to promoting students' ability to learn and thrive (Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Van Acker, 2007) and teacher job satisfaction (Hoglund, Klinge, & Hosan, 2015).

Schools can provide their students with safe and supportive environments by building a supportive school climate and offering social and emotional skill building to students (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Osher et al., 2008). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is "the process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others; making responsible decisions; establishing positive relationships; and handling challenging situations capably" (Zins & Elias, 2006, p. 1). Research suggests that social and emotional skills are malleable and can be supported through a variety of approaches and formats in school settings (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Learning social and emotional skills can support children's psychological well-being, social relationships, and academic achievement. Social and emotional skills help children concentrate in school, make sound decisions, solve social dilemmas, and manage stress and other difficult

***Learning social and emotional skills can support children's psychological well-being, social relationships, and academic achievement.***

emotions (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Researchers have identified a range of skills, acquired in early and middle childhood, that support children's psychological well-being, social relationships, and academic achievement. These skills include interpersonal and friendship skills (Thompson & Raikes, 2007), self-awareness and sense of self-worth (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Capara, & Pastorelli, 2001), helping and cooperating with peers (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015), and controlling emotions and behaviors (Casey et al., 2011; Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald,

2007; Rothbart, Sheese, Rueda, & Posner, 2011). When students develop social and emotional skills in childhood, they are better able to self-regulate their behavior and, thus, are more able to pay attention and less likely to be disruptive in class (Liew, 2012). They also interact effectively with teachers and peers (Raver, 2003). In a meta-analysis of more than 200 school-based universal SEL programs, Durlak et al. (2011) found that students who participated in SEL programs scored higher on measures of social and emotional skills and academic achievement

than those students who did not participate in SEL programs. Together, the competencies promoted by social and emotional learning can help students follow school rules and prevent incidents of problem behavior (Epstein et al., 2008).

## Description of the Lions Quest Skills for Growing Program

SFG was designed to promote a broad set of social and emotional skills, character values, and life skills. These skills include realistic self-confidence, impulse control, cooperation, respect for others, appreciation of diversity, perspective taking, responsible decision making and social problem solving, and helping others.<sup>2</sup>

***Skills for Growing is a research-based, comprehensive program that provides explicit, sequenced, and age-appropriate lessons and activities in social and emotional learning.***

SFG is a research-based, comprehensive program that provides explicit, hands-on, sequenced, and age-appropriate SEL lesson plans for classroom instruction. Each lesson plan comes with clearly articulated learning objectives, detailed instructions, and student materials. In addition to classroom instruction, the program provides resources for service learning, school-wide processes, and collaboration with families and the larger community. The program provides introductory training followed

by refresher training, coaching, and technical assistance for educators. The program comprises 31–34 lessons organized into 5 units:

1. *Unit One: Building a School Community* addresses students' need for recognition by building a classroom atmosphere that fosters the development of positive relationships and a sense of belonging.
2. *Unit Two: Growing as a Group* focuses on helping children to build and strengthen the interpersonal skills they need to communicate and work with others.
3. *Unit Three: Making Positive Decisions* addresses the importance of making wise and healthy decisions.
4. *Unit Four: Growing up Drug-Free* aims to help children gain the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to grow up healthy and drug free.
5. *Unit Five: Celebrating You and Me* focuses on building children's self-confidence and their ability to value and respect others.

SFG's design elements can be represented by the acronym SAFE: **s**equenced (activities that are coordinated to a learning progression), **a**ctive (activities that are interactive and hands-on), **f**ocused (a component that emphasizes the development of personal and social skills), and **e**xplicit (activities that target specific social and emotional skills). The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified these design elements as empirically linked to improved behavioral and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of this 3-year evaluation, LCIF released a new edition of SFG. The new edition has 6 units, more resources for classroom instruction, and more a comprehensive coaching process.

The program features a broad set of materials, including detailed lesson plans for teachers, *Together Times* student magazine, resources for expanded learning (e.g., bullying prevention, service learning), and resources for the school leadership team and for educators who wish to involve parents as partners. The service learning program component is a unique feature of the program and it enables students to apply SEL skills toward goals that benefit the broader community. The SFG lesson plans have a consistent structure. Each lesson is divided into four phases of learning:

1. Discovering—explicit instruction defining the concepts addressed during the lesson
2. Connecting—individual work applying the concepts of the lesson
3. Practicing—students role-play using the learned skills
4. Applying—students apply skills to a new situation

Together, these four phases provide instructional scaffolds to assist students in learning new skills and concepts in a safe and supportive environment and to gradually progress from discovering the concepts to applying the skills in different contexts. For example, a fifth-grade student may take a quiz about friendship (Discovering), create a list of skills for making and keep

**Each SFG lesson is divided into four phases of learning: Discovering, Connecting, Practicing, and Applying.**

friends (Connecting), complete a friendship assignment (Practicing), write self-reflections in a journal, participate in a skit about friendship, and find opportunities for using the skill outside the classroom (Applying). Core activities are supplemented by experiential learning activities, which aim to create an atmosphere of fun and collaboration. The program also offers activities for infusing social and emotional learning across the curriculum.

Instructional techniques are an important part of successful program implementation. The program guides teachers to use a variety of instructional techniques such as open-ended discussion questions, stories, models, games, and cooperative learning. Program trainers encourage teachers to provide positive feedback and praise as well as offer opportunities for students to share personal stories and ask questions. The program intends to create a welcoming, safe, and supportive learning environment that encourages students to try new strategies and to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts without fear of negative responses from peers or adults. An important aspect of the program is building positive teacher–student relationships, which can contribute to instructional effectiveness across the curriculum.

Introductory teacher training lasts 1–2 days and focuses on the sequence and scope of the program, classroom management techniques, and planning for implementation. Throughout the school year, teachers can participate in refresher training and workshops on strategies for effective implementation. Additionally, the program encourages schools to train administrators and community members so that these partners are also involved in the development of students' social and emotional skills.

# Methodology

## Design and Sample

In this study we employed a pre-post, intervention-comparison group design. Since the students were not randomly assigned to the groups, this is considered a quasi-experimental design.

The study took place in Wood County Schools, which serves the Parkersburg area, a small urban city and its nearby towns in west-central West Virginia, adjacent to the Ohio River. The sample included third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms in 19 elementary schools. We used a quasi-experimental design that compared three groups classified by their SEL implementation, as described below.

**1. SFG.** Eight elementary schools implemented SFG in all grade levels. Students in these schools were predominantly White (82%), and most students (75%) were economically disadvantaged as indicated by participation in the free/reduced-price lunch program. The Lions Quest trainers provided introductory training to teachers, counselors, and school principals. Schools could choose the pacing guides that accommodated their schedules, and the majority of schools selected an implementation schedule of 33 weeks per school year (1 session per week). Some core lessons required two class periods, but most were taught in 25–30 minutes. Guidance counselors implemented SFG during a period dedicated to the developmental guidance and counseling program. In some schools, the classroom teachers took responsibility for working with students using the *Together Times* student magazine. The program implementation was enabled by a grant from the NoVo Foundation.

**2. Other SEL.** Three schools requested, and the county’s Board of Education approved, the implementation of alternative SEL programs. These schools used their resources to fund the implementation of the selected SEL programs. Students in these schools were predominantly White (63%), and most students (93%) were economically disadvantaged as indicated by participation in the free/reduced-price lunch program.

*Using a quasi-experimental design, this evaluation compared the behavior and attitudes of students in schools that implemented SFG, other SEL programs, or no SEL programs.*

Two of these schools implemented Rachel’s Challenge, which is designed to equip students and adults to prevent bullying and social isolation by creating a culture of kindness and compassion. Rachel’s Challenge covers five central themes: Influence, Goal Setting, Journaling, Acceptance, and Kindness. At the elementary school level, Rachel’s Challenge offers the Kindness & Compassion program and the follow-up program Power of One. A third school implemented the program *The Leader in Me*, a SEL program built on leadership skills found in Dr. Stephen R. Covey’s book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

**3. No SEL (Comparison) Group.** This group included eight schools that planned to implement Lions Quest. These schools were invited to participate in all Lions Quest training events and received all curriculum materials. However, our fidelity assessment identified these schools as



demonstrating an extremely low level of implementation, defined as the use of less than 20% of the Lions Quest lesson plans. Students in these schools were predominantly White (91%), and most students (68%) were economically disadvantaged as indicated by participation in the free/reduced-price lunch program.

## Measures

### *Student Social and Emotional Learning Survey*

The student survey aimed to measure perceived social and emotional competence and the learning environment. The survey was anonymous and confidential and included five scales, further described below.

***Social Awareness and Social Responsibility.*** This scale was taken from the student self-report Social Competence Survey (Dymnicki & Kendziora, 2012). It was rated on a 4-point scale (“Not at all true,” “A little true,” “Pretty much true,” and “Very much true”). The scale included five items, such as, “I can tell when someone is getting angry or upset before they say anything,” “I care about other people’s feelings and points of view,” and “I try to understand how other people feel and think.” Cronbach’s alpha was low but sufficient to establish reliability ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ).<sup>3</sup>

***Relationship Skills.*** This scale was taken from the student self-report Social Competence Survey (Dymnicki & Kendziora, 2012). It included five items, such as, “If I get angry with a friend, I can talk about it and make things better,” “I get into arguments when I disagree with people,” and “I try to work out disagreements with other students by talking to them.” It was rated on a 4-point scale (“Not at all true,” “A little true,” “Pretty much true,” and “Very much true”). Internal reliability was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

***Safe and Respectful Climate.*** This scale was taken from the Conditions for Learning Survey (Osher & Kendziora, 2010). It was rated on a 3-point scale (“Yes,” “Sometimes,” and “No”). The scale included four items, such as “I feel safe in the hallways and bathrooms of the school,” “I feel safe in my classroom,” and “Most students in my school treat each other with respect” ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

***Peer Social and Emotional Culture.*** This scale was taken from the Conditions for Learning survey (Osher et al., 2008). It was rated on a 3-point scale (“Yes,” “Sometimes,” and “No”). The scale included four items, such as, “Most students in my school get mad when they disagree with people,” “Most students in my school stop and think before they get too angry,” and “Most students in my school try to talk to other students if they are having a problem with them.” Internal reliability was low ( $\alpha = 0.64$ ).

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<sup>3</sup> The reliability (internal consistency) for each scale, expressed as the statistic  $\alpha$  (Cronbach’s alpha), is a number between 0 and 1 that reflects the degree to which the items in a scale tend to “hang together”—that is, the degree to which they correlate with each other better than they do with other items on the survey. Reliability in the range of .65–.79 is considered acceptable; higher than .80 is considered moderate to good.

***Interest in Social and Emotional Learning.*** This scale included four items: “I would like to learn how to better express my feelings,” “I would like to learn how to make my friends feel better,” “I would like to learn how to work with other students as part of a team,” and “I would like to learn how to help other students when they are scared or afraid.” The scale showed adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

### ***Office Disciplinary Referrals***

Records of inappropriate behavior were obtained for the 2010–11 through 2014–15 school years. The evaluation team used records submitted by Wood County Board of Education from the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS). The classification of behavior codes is aligned with the definition of inappropriate behavior from West Virginia Policy 4373 (expected behavior in safe and supportive schools; West Virginia Department of Education, 2014b): “Behavior that disrupts the learning environment in a manner that effectively deters future incidents and affirms respect for individuals. Inappropriate behaviors include but are not limited to incidents of harassment, intimidation, bullying, substance abuse and/or violence.” Using this guidance, WVEIS classifies four levels of inappropriate behavior:

1. Level 1: Minimally Disruptive Behaviors—disrupt the educational process and the orderly operations of the school but do not pose direct danger to self or others (e.g., Disruptive/Disrespectful Conduct).
2. Level 2: Disruptive and Potentially Harmful Behaviors—disrupt the educational process and/or pose potential harm or danger to self and/or others. The behavior is committed willfully but not in a manner that is intended maliciously to cause harm or danger to self and/or others (e.g., Physical Fight Without Injury).
3. Level 3: Imminently Dangerous, Illegal and/or Aggressive Behaviors—are willfully committed and are known to be illegal and/or harmful to people and/or property (e.g., Harassment/Bullying/Intimidation).
4. Level 4: Safe Schools Act Behaviors—are consistent with those addressed in West Virginia codes (e.g., Possession and/or Use of Dangerous Weapon).

### ***Implementation Quality***

The evaluation team used four sources of data to examine implementation quality. The primary source was monthly implementation logs. The evaluation team requested that teachers and school counselors implementing SFG complete online implementation logs throughout the school year. The purpose of the logs was to capture the scope of activities conducted in class during the allocated time for Lions Quest as well as any additional integration across the curriculum. Respondents could also complete optional questions in their logs, including a description of accomplishments and challenges and questions to the program developer.

Second, to supplement the data collected through implementation logs, the evaluation team conducted semistructured interviews with school counselors and teachers, school administrators who coordinated SFG implementation, and school principals. The focus of the interviews was

learning about plans for implementation, adaptations to the program (if any), and implementation process to date.

The evaluation team conducted classroom observations to corroborate the information obtained through logs and interviews. The classroom observations aimed to gather data on instructional time management and techniques, the extent to which the program resources (e.g., Student magazines) were used, and the extent to which students responded to the program implementation. Finally, the evaluation team gathered information about training participation and school principals' support of the program through principal surveys.

Using this multi-informant approach, the evaluation team rated the quality of implementation on breadth (i.e., number of lessons taught and time allocated for implementation) and depth of implementation (i.e., extent to which students received opportunities to practice skills and the extent of infusion of Lions Quest SFG concepts across the curriculum and as part of school events and projects).

### ***Student Characteristics and School Characteristics***

Student administrative records submitted by Wood County Schools and West Virginia Department of Education data were used to collect information on student characteristics (i.e., grade level, gender, teacher/classroom, absenteeism) and school characteristics (i.e., enrollment, percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, school academic performance, percentage White students). These data were entered into the statistical analyses to control for variables that can be potentially associated with the outcomes of interest. For example, student absenteeism may reduce students' attendance in Lions Quest sessions. Absenteeism also may be associated with students' needs (e.g., social difficulties), which in turn may predict behavior at school.

## Results

### Skills for Growing Implementation

#### *Context for Implementation*

The implementation of Lions Quest programs aimed to help Wood County Schools meet the requirements of West Virginia Department of Education Policy 4373, a 2012 policy that established standards for student conduct and the development of safe and supportive schools free of drugs, violence and harassment. The evaluation team examined a 6-year (2009-10 through 2014-15 school years) pattern in reporting of students' incidents of inappropriate behavior in order to assess changes over time resulting from the reporting guidelines of Policy 4373. We did not find systematic trends associated with the year of policy implementation. Overall rates of incidents of problems behavior across grade levels were stable. Therefore, we concluded that there was no interaction between the Lions Quest initiative and other district-wide initiatives intended to improve school safety.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Training, Participation, and Preparedness to Implement Skills for Growing*

Teachers and counselors adequately attended the trainings in each year of the evaluation. Based on training records, 88% (147) of invited staff attended the introductory training provided by Lions Club International Foundation (LCIF). Refresher training workshops and training for new teachers were provided in subsequent years as required by the program. Most teachers perceived the training as "very beneficial" and delivered in accordance with the program specifications, including hands-on activities, opportunities to practice instructional strategies, and examples of lesson delivery. However, some teachers suggested that the training did not sufficiently inform teachers about the relationship between SEL and academic performance and that the activities were not customized to Wood County Schools. As one teacher recounted: *"Instead of the generic training, we would need something more tailored, especially something that takes into account [the] poverty level of the county."* To help teachers and counselors prepare for implementation, school principals initiated a planning meeting to coordinate the sequence of units for the school year.

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<sup>4</sup> The next section reports on analysis of these data by program implementation condition using a methodology that tracked students over time.

LCIF encourages implementation of SFG by classroom teachers in order to promote positive teacher–student relationships and enable follow-up and infusion across the curriculum as well as family and community connections. However, most classroom teachers were reluctant to take on the extra burden of implementing a social and emotional learning program. As such, the most

**Most classroom teachers were reluctant to take on the extra burden of implementing a social and emotional learning program.**

typical participation of classroom teachers with Lions Quest was helping students complete their assignments in the SFG *Together Times* student magazine after the lesson delivered by the counselor concluded. However, classroom teachers noted that they could not find time, beyond the regular developmental guidance period, to implement the program. As one teacher noted: *“I wish I had more time for Lions Quest. It’s mainly scheduling because we just have so many things thrown at us. It just becomes difficult to get reading and math and the other subjects in [the regular school day].”*

SFG lessons cover several topics required by the West Virginia School Counseling Programs (West Virginia Department of Education, 2014a), such as conflict resolution, life skills, character education, social skills, and drug and violence prevention. Thus, most of the SFG lessons were delivered by guidance counselors, who typically divided their time between two or three elementary schools. In fact, many counselors reported that they were willing to take responsibility for implementing Lions Quest as many teachers needed additional training to prepare them for students’ social and emotional challenges: *“Some teachers would tell me about how their students would seek advice from them about their parents’ use of drugs and alcohol. Teachers do not feel prepared to handle these types of issues.”* Consequently, with the exception of approximately 15% of classrooms where the guidance counselor taught Lions Quest, teachers also reinforced the program through activities associated with the lessons covered by the counselor. No other school staff members were involved in the implementation of SFG.

SFG can be delivered as a standalone course, integrated into academic subject areas or foundational life skills programs, or treated as a schoolwide initiative. Schools had access to resources that would enable schoolwide implementation, which involves each unit serving as the basis for a monthly or bimonthly theme for whole-school activities; classroom lessons; applications in arts, music, and physical education classes; guidance activities; service learning projects; and parent meetings. However, none of the schools participating in this evaluation followed the schoolwide model. Instead, classrooms provided SFG as a separate course curriculum delivered with a core lesson once a week along with interactive activities that reinforced skills taught during the developmental guidance period. Therefore, the program implementation did not affect schools’ physical environments, policies, or schoolwide practices related to promoting positive student behavior.

### ***Dosage of Skills for Growing***

Guidance counselors scheduled Lions Quest lessons in advance in coordination with classroom teachers. The scheduled class time aimed to accomplish both the SFG implementation goals and

the goals of the state's mandated counseling curriculum. Guidance counselors were required to make time for additional skill teaching that was not included in the SFG program.

Because each counselor divided his or her time among multiple schools, careful scheduling was key to protecting the time set aside for program implementation for each classroom. We found that teachers varied in their level of communication with counselors for scheduling purposes. The challenge of counselors' limited available time was compounded by cancellations due to school closures. For instance, there were, on average, 16 snow days each year, which led to the cancellation of Lions Quest lessons.

We found that most of the SFG lessons were below the recommended length. On average, SFG lessons lasted 15 minutes—less than half the recommended time. Counselors either skipped about half of the activities or spread a single lesson over 2 weeks. In addition, counselors skipped whole lessons and, at times, whole units. On average, students were exposed to one-half of the lessons in the SFG curriculum. As a guidance counselor said: *“My time is very calculated and is approximately 20–25 minutes maximum. My lessons follow this [SFG] model and resemble mini-lessons.”*

There was no guidance from the school district nor collaboration among counselors for managing the time allocated. One counselor recounted: *“It would have been helpful if LCIF or the BOE [Board of Education] provided me with a crosswalk that linked the counseling standards to Lions Quest. So far, I've had to use my own judgment about which Lions Quest materials to leave out.”*

### ***Activities and Goals of Skills for Growing***

The guidance counselors were well versed in acting as facilitators rather than instructors, as the SFG program requires. Many of the lessons we observed were based on hands-on activities using the SFG student magazine, *Together Times*; hands-on activities in pairs or small groups; and group discussions with the whole class.

SFG is designed to be taught as a core skill-building lesson once per week, with additional multidisciplinary activities available to reinforce the skill throughout the week as needed. Yet, based on classroom observations, counselors and teachers did not integrate the program into one or more related areas of the curriculum to provide a meaningful context for teaching academic skills and knowledge. Additionally, most teachers did not deliver reinforcement activities beyond counselors' lesson of the week because they were not involved in the lesson. Observations revealed that most counselors and teachers who were the sole provider of the program were skilled with facilitating group discussions and familiar with the phases of the lesson.

SFG features family activities that include take-home worksheets for students and families to work on together at the end of a unit. These activities reinforce concepts and skills learned and engage families to support their child's progress through the program. Based on interviews with teachers and counselors, these worksheets were rarely sent home with students for parents, even though teachers stated their belief that parent involvement is important for promoting

students' social and emotional skills. In many cases, teachers were not aware of the program components that aim to promote family components.

### **Leadership, Accountability, and Alignment of Skills for Growing with Other Programs and Initiatives**

Guidance counselors did not receive support for aligning SFG with supplemental resources. They spent considerable time preparing lesson plans that included both the SFG activities and supplemental activities required by the counseling curriculum. Some counselors felt that in order to expand on some topics, as requested by their supervisor, they would need to employ additional pedagogical techniques that could take a whole class period to deliver. For example, a guidance counselor noted, *"There are many effective lessons on stress and anxiety in Lions Quest, but an expansion of these topics could have included strategies such as mindfulness that I have to address."*

There was relatively low school leadership involvement in implementation. Most school principals did not monitor implementation. A guidance counselor reported, *"We'd be more likely to receive an e-mail from the principal saying 'Make sure you're doing [Lions Quest]' than [to] be visited by the principal in our classroom about Lions Quest."* This lack of engagement from administrators appeared to reduce the planning; monitoring; and, most notably, communication about the importance of the program to counselors and classroom teachers.

In addition, the schools did not have school climate teams or other leadership teams in charge of ensuring successful implementation. As one counselor highlighted, *"[The principal] is reluctantly monitoring and encouraging teachers as it is an added burden on the school."*

**The evaluation found low school leadership involvement in program implementation, across schools.**

Guidance counselors felt that there was no oversight of the program implementation by the school or the district office. Although LCIF trained two district coaches as Training Affiliates to address questions about program implementation, guidance counselors were not aware who these Training Affiliates were and how to reach them.

One of the direct outcomes of leadership disengagement was lack of coherence. There were no proactive efforts to align the implementation of SFG with other curricula, such as the health curriculum. This caused redundancies that led to reduced student engagement. As a counselor expressed, *"We've been covering alcohol and smoking, which is something they've covered extensively in their health classes. Students are less than enthusiastic to cover something they've already done."* Additionally, the program materials were inconsistently distributed to schools as some schools did not have a sufficient number of booklets for students. According to interviews, limited available resources contributed to the small dosage of SFG in classrooms: *"I don't think any of us have done the program at the school or used the magazines at this point. There was only one booklet for each class."*

Some of the guidance counselors attempted to share SFG implementation with classroom teachers. For example, one counselor created a version of the program pacing guide that clearly

indicated the parts to be taught by teachers. However, these counselors did not gain school principals' support and, consequently, most teachers did not participate in the program implementation. SFG was designed to fit into several of the required subject areas and learning objectives of most states. Therefore, LCIF recommends infusing program activities across the curriculum in order to reinforce students' learning.

## **The Effects of SFG on Students' Social and Emotional Learning**

### ***Student Sample***

This section summarizes the results of the student survey analysis. All third, fourth, and fifth grade students in general education classrooms were invited to take the survey. These students were classified to SFG and No-SEL (comparison) groups based on their school enrollment at baseline. The schools that implemented other SEL programs declined survey administration. Where data were missing from the baseline or follow-up surveys, the student's results were eliminated from the statistical analysis. The analytic sample, with full data for both points in time, included 474 students (50% response rate).

Time 1 data, which were established a proxy for baseline data were available for September 2013.<sup>5</sup> The elementary school student survey was completed by 944 students. Follow-up survey data were obtained in May 2015 and aimed to assess change in students' social and emotional skills and perceptions of their learning environment after completing two years of program participation (2013–14 and 2014–15 school years). We used the intent-to-treat principle in this study because students who moved out of their schools at the end of 2013–14 were still considered as receiving half of the dosage of the intervention. Of the 474 students in the analytic sample, 15 students (3%) moved from SFG schools to No-SEL schools and 7 students (1%) moved from the No-SEL schools to SFG schools in the following year (2014–15 school year). The analytic sample included 253 students from 7 SFG schools<sup>6</sup> who were compared to 221 students from 4 No-SEL schools.

The SFG group has a relatively higher number of female students (144 females and 109 males) compared to the comparison group (106 females and 115 males). The distribution of students by grade level at baseline was similar in the SFG and comparison groups (Exhibit 1). To protect students' privacy, the school district required that no other student data would be gathered by or linked to the survey. Therefore, we do not have additional information about the survey respondents' demographic characteristics or academic achievement.

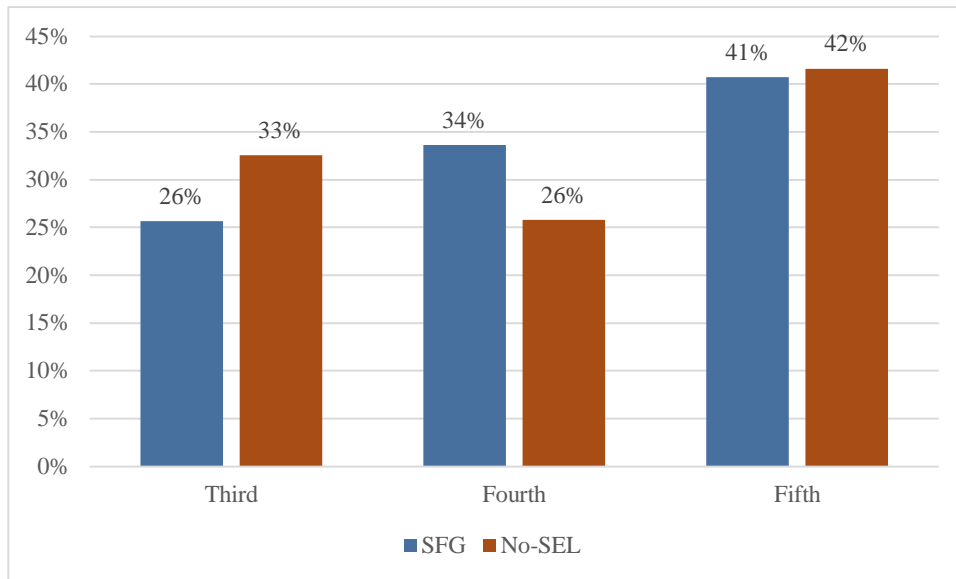
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<sup>5</sup> Some of classrooms in the intervention schools began the program in the middle of the previous school year. Survey data are not available for all schools in that year. Data collected at three elementary schools suggested that the first implementation months resembled a "pilot" year as structures and responsibilities for program implementation were still being determined by the schools.

<sup>6</sup> Two of the SFG schools had a K–6 configuration. The remainder of the schools were feeder schools to middle schools that implemented the program.



**Exhibit 1. Distribution of Students in the SFG and No-SEL Groups by Grade Level at Baseline**



Source: AIR September 2013 and May 2015 Student Surveys.

Note: The total number of students was 253 in the SFG group and 221 in the No-SEL group.

**Baseline Equivalence**

It is very important in a study comparing student growth to establish that the intervention group and comparison group are similar in relevant abilities at baseline. Demonstrating baseline equivalence on an outcome of interest minimizes potential bias from selection in quasi-experimental design studies. If the two groups are not similar, we cannot be sure if the growth we see is due to the program or the result of some preexisting differences. We examined baseline differences using a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA).

As Exhibit 2 shows, the SFG and comparison students were comparable at baseline on three of four measures: Safe and Respectful Climate, Peer Social and Emotional Culture, and Relationship Skills. SFG students were significantly higher than comparison group students on Relationship Skills. However, the effect size was smaller than 0.25, meaning that we can statistically adjust for this difference using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

**Exhibit 2. Comparison of the Study Groups at Baseline**

	Group	n	Mean (SD)	F(1,472)	Effect Size
<b>Safe and Respectful Climate</b>	SFG	253	2.60 (0.43)	2.26	0.14
	No-SEL	221	2.54 (0.40)		
<b>Peer Social and Emotional Culture</b>	SFG	253	2.08 (0.41)	<1.0	-0.05
	No-SEL	221	2.10 (0.44)		
<b>Relationship Skills</b>	SFG	253	3.02 (0.43)	3.09	0.16
	No-SEL	221	2.95 (0.42)		
<b>Social Awareness/Responsibility</b>	SFG	253	3.39 (0.47)	5.33*	0.22
	No-SEL	221	3.28 (0.54)		

Source: AIR September 2013 and May 2015 Student Surveys

Notes: (1) \* indicates statistical significance at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < .01$ . (2) SD = standard deviation. (3) The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen’s d).

**Change Over Time in Students’ Social and Emotional Skills**

We conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to examine the effects of the program on students. The four survey scales (Safe and Respectful Climate, Peer Social and Emotional Culture, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness/Responsibility) were included as

*Students in SFG schools showed substantial growth in their social and emotional learning, which exceeded the growth of students in the comparison group.*

the dependent variables. Gender and scores on the same four scales at baseline were included as covariates. Analysis results showed a significant multivariate effect [Wilks’ lambda = 0.94,  $F(4,462) = 7.56, p < .001$ ].

Univariate testing found the effect to be significant for two of the four scales, favoring the Lions Quest SFG group. Exhibit 3 shows the details of the statistical analysis. To better understand the magnitude of growth for students in SFG schools, we looked at the “effect size,” a common metric that can be used to evaluate

the amount of growth in the SFG group relative to the growth in the comparison group. We found effect sizes of +.40 for Safe and Respectful Climate and +.32 for Relationship Skills. Both effect sizes are considered “educationally meaningful” or “substantively important”<sup>7</sup> according to the What Works Clearinghouse standards (2014). This indicates that students in SFG schools

<sup>7</sup> Defined as an effect size of 0.25 or greater, regardless of statistical significance.

showed substantial growth in their SEL that exceeded the growth of students in the comparison group. They also felt safer in and around their schools than students in the comparison group.

**Exhibit 3. Comparison of the Study Groups at Posttest**

	Group	n	Mean (SD)	F(1,465)	Effect Size
<b>Safe and Respectful Climate</b>	SFG	253	2.20 (0.47)	14.23**	0.40
	Comparison	221	2.00 (0.52)		
<b>Peer Social and Emotional Culture</b>	SFG	253	1.91 (0.57)	<1.0	0.02
	Comparison	221	1.92 (0.56)		
<b>Relationship Skills</b>	SFG	253	3.22 (0.46)	6.92**	0.32
	Comparison	221	3.07 (0.49)		
<b>Social Awareness/ Responsibility</b>	SFG	253	3.33 (0.47)	<1.0	
	Comparison	221	3.25 (0.52)		

Source: AIR May 2015 Student Survey

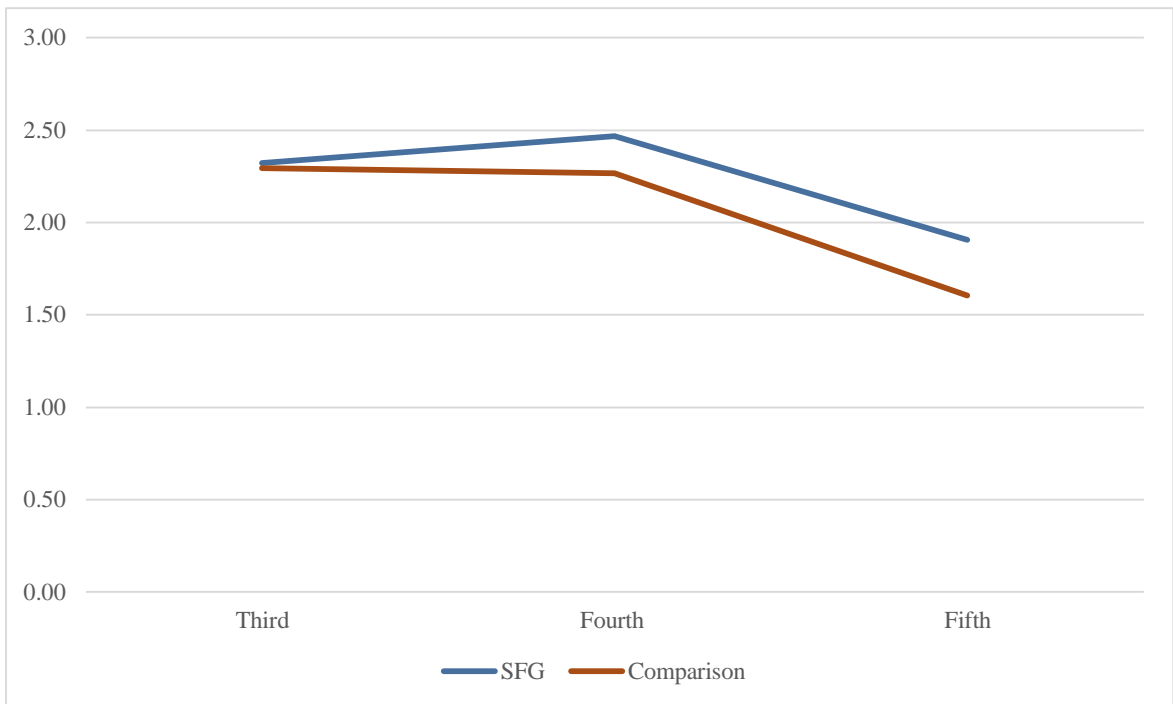
Notes: (1) \* indicates statistical significance at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < .01$ . (2) SD = standard deviation. (3) The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen's d).

While it is important to know if an intervention works, it is also important to know which parts of the intervention work and for whom they work. This allows for the amplification of effective program aspects for the appropriate sub-group of students. We examined associations with interest in social and emotional learning, gender, and grade level. We first examined relationship to interest in SEL. We found no statistically significant difference in interest in SEL between the SFG and no SEL group. Students in both groups expressed moderate-to-high interest in learning social and emotional skills (average rating of 3.2 on a 4-point scale). The program impact was not associated with their interest level. There was also no significant interaction between program participation and student gender, meaning that the program affected male and female students in a similar manner.

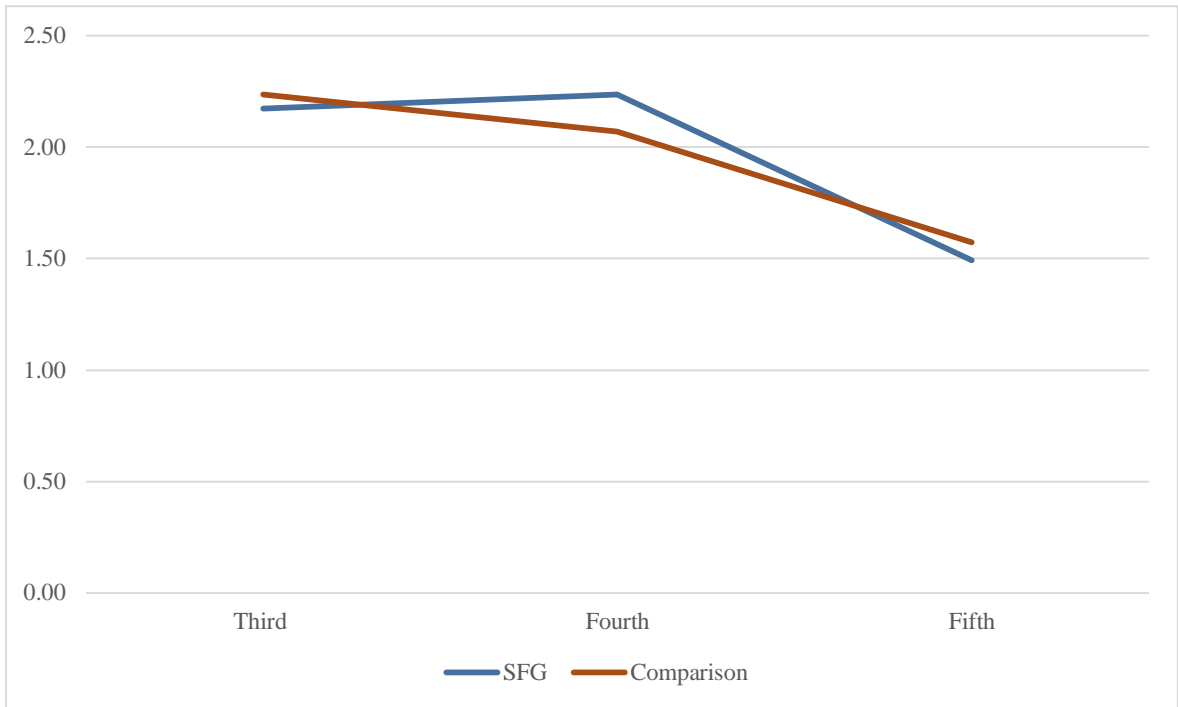
We examined program effects by grade level and found a statistically significant interaction [Wilks' Lambda = 0.95,  $F(8,922) = 2.98, p < .01$ ]. More specifically, the SFG program had differential effects by grade level relative to two scales: Safe and Respectful Climate and Peer Social and Emotional Culture. As Exhibit 4 shows, there was a parallel trend in both groups where older students were less likely to perceive their learning environment as safe and respectful. The greatest differences between SFG and comparison students were among students who were in fifth grade at baseline and sixth grade at posttest. Similarly, as Exhibit 5 shows, in both groups older students assigned lower ratings than younger students when asked about the social and

emotional competence of their peers. SFG effects were primarily on students who were in fourth grade at baseline and fifth grade at posttest. These findings suggest that SEL can serve as a protective factor during this time of critical development of social and academic self-esteem in childhood. Researchers have identified normative trends of decline in self-esteem from Kindergarten to fifth grade (Scott, 1999). Social and emotional learning program like SFG, which encourage children to express themselves, identify their strengths, and celebrate the talents of their peers, may counteract to some extent the decline of children and young adolescents' beliefs in their social and emotional capabilities.

**Exhibit 4. Effects of SFG on Safe and Respectful Climate by Grade Level**



**Exhibit 5. Effects of SFG on Peer Social and Emotional Culture**



**Change Over Time in Students’ Behavior**

This section reports on the results of analysis of students’ office disciplinary referrals for minimally disruptive and harmful behaviors. The evaluation team conducted MANOVA with study group (Lions Quest, No SEL, Other SEL) as the independent variable and occurrences of minimally disruptive behavior and harmful behavior as the dependent variables. The analysis controlled for baseline rates of the outcomes measured and baseline school characteristics (enrollment, percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch program, percentage of White students, and West Virginia school achievement index). Exhibit 6 shows the means, standard deviations, and effect sizes.

In Year 2 of program implementation, the multivariate effect of study condition was statistically significant [Wilk’s Lambda=0.98,  $F(4,2256) = 3.82, p < 0.01$ ]. The univariate analysis of variance showed statistically significant effect of study condition on minimally disruptive behavior [ $F(2,1129) = 4.76, p < 0.01$ ]. Students in the SFG group had fewer incidents of minimally disruptive behavior than students in no SEL schools ( $p < 0.01$ ; effect size = 0.18). In addition, there was a tendency toward statistical significance for harmful behavior [ $F(2,1129) = 2.76, p = 0.06$ ].

The findings in Year 3 were similar. The multivariate effect of study condition in the most recent year of data was statistically significant [Wilk’s Lambda=0.99,  $F(4,2256) = 2.98, p < 0.01$ ]. The univariate analysis of variance showed statistically significant effect of study condition on minimally disruptive behavior [ $F(2,1129) = 4.99, p < 0.01$ ]. Students in the SFG group had fewer incidents of disruptive behavior than students in no SEL schools ( $p < 0.01$ ; effect size = 0.22). We did not find a statistically significant effect of SFG on incidents of harmful behavior [ $F(2,1129) = 1.56, p = 0.21$ ].

**Longitudinal analysis revealed that students in SFG schools had fewer incidents of disruptive behavior than students in no SEL schools.**

Across the three years of program implementation, the gap in rates of problem behavior between the SFG and no SEL widened whereas the gap between the SFG and other SEL schools narrowed. This finding adds to the growing research evidence showing that social emotional learning programs are important for increasing school safety and improving school climate.

**Exhibit 6. Comparison of the Study Groups at Posttest**

	Group	n	Baseline Mean (SD)	Year 2 Mean (SD)	Year 2 Effect Size	Year 3 Mean (SD)	Year 3 Effect Size
<b>Minimally Disruptive</b>	SFG	382	0.12 (0.82)	0.02 (0.20)	SFG/No SEL: 0.18	0.07 (0.25)	SFG/No SEL: 0.22
	No SEL	433	0.22 (1.05)	0.12 (0.74)		0.18 (0.63)	
	Other SEL	324	0.15 (0.74)	0.16 (0.83)	SFG/Other SEL: 0.24	0.07 (0.28)	SFG/ Other SEL: 0.0
<b>Harmful</b>	SFG	382	0.07 (0.54)	0.03 (0.30)	SFG/No SEL: 0.22	0.09 (0.50)	SFG/No SEL: 0.25
	No SEL	433	0.10 (0.61)	0.12 (0.50)		0.36 (1.39)	
	Other SEL	324	0.10 (0.51)	0.12 (0.48)	SFG/Other SEL: 0.23	0.08 (0.41)	SFG/ Other SEL: 0.02

Source: West Virginia Information System (WVEIS) for 2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14, and 2014-15 school years.

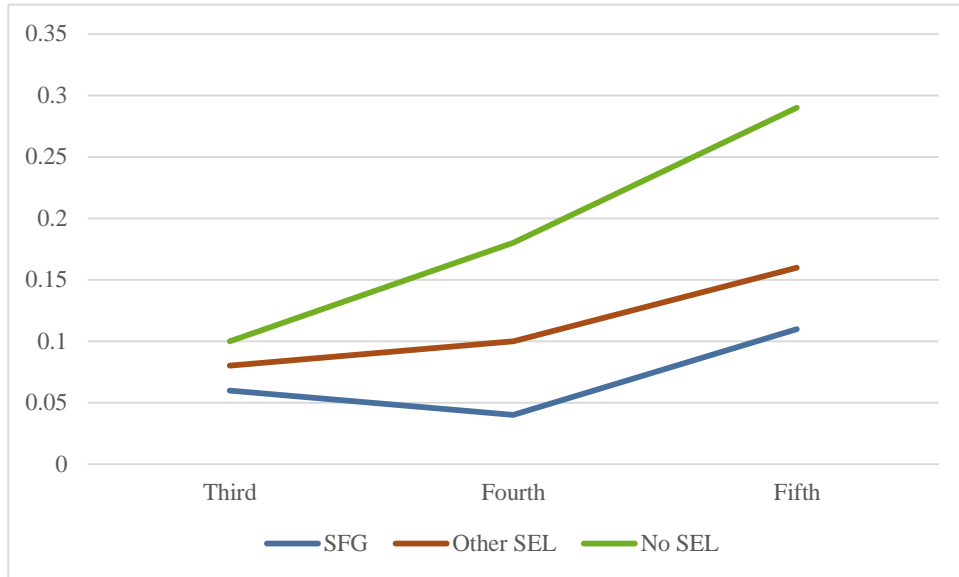
Notes: (1) \* indicates statistical significance at  $p < .05$ ; \*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < .01$ . (2) SD = standard deviation. (3) The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen’s d). The signs of the effect sizes were reversed. Higher values represent lower rates of inappropriate behavior.

**Subgroup Effects**

We tested the interaction between grade level and study group. We found a statistically significant multivariate effect [Wilk’s Lambda=0.99,  $F(8,2256) = 2.98, p = 0.05$ ]. The univariate analysis of variance showed statistically significant interaction effect on minimally disruptive

behavior [ $F(4,1129) = 2.83, p < 0.05$ ]. Similar to our findings from the student survey, SFG had greater impact on students who started the program in fourth and fifth grades than students who started the program in third grade (Exhibit 7).

We did not find a statistically significant interaction between program participation and gender, meaning that SFG impacted similarly male and female students. In addition, SFG affected equally students who had high or low number of unexcused absences as well as students with high or low grade point average in reading. These findings suggest that the program can be beneficial to students with varying levels of academic needs.



## Discussion

This evaluation examined the effects of SFG on children's ability to behave in a socially acceptable manner, interact effectively with others, and demonstrate prosocial attitudes and behaviors such as helping and listening skills. Developing social skills to enable successful relationships with others is one of the most important accomplishments in childhood. During the elementary school grades, children learn social awareness and social responsibility skills, which then become the foundation of prosocial and positive behavior (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014). Social awareness and social responsibility as defined and measured in this study pertain to understanding the feelings and perspectives of others and caring about others' feelings. This core social and emotional competency is the foundational motivation for understanding one's roles and responsibilities in the classroom, school, and broader community (Davis, Summers, & Millers, 2012). The SFG lesson plans address multiple components of this competency including sympathy for others (Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001), reduction in perceived differences between the self and the other (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), better emotion regulation (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011), more accurate interpretation of peers' intentions as benign rather than hostile (Mathieson et al., 2011), more effective persuasion when negotiating with others (Bartsch, Wade, & Estes, 2011), fewer biases and prejudice towards others who seem different (Pfeifer, Brown, & Juvonen, 2007), and greater internal motivation to help others (as opposed to being motivated by external rewards) (Wentzel, Filisetti, & Looney, 2007). Such skills are learned through interactions with peers. For example, working cooperatively with peers in small groups is essential for building communication and teamwork skills (Järvenoja & Järvelä, 2009; Bergin & Bergin, 2009). We interpret the lack of group differences on this competency in light of the quality of implementation as observed in classrooms. Counselors and teachers did not model emphatic listening and assigned limited time to soliciting diverse opinions on the issues discussed. In addition, teachers prioritizes teaching about conflict resolution, bullying, and healthy decision making over other lesson plans. We found that students who participated in the SFG program reported significantly better interpersonal skills and higher sense of safety at and around school.

The data also suggested that SFG may counteract, to some extent, the reduction in prosocial attitudes and self-perceptions of interpersonal skills that occurs in early adolescence (Luengo, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Zuffianò, & Caprara, 2013). While, similar to research on other programs, male students reported more negative behaviors than girls (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015; Snyder et al., 2013), we did not find that the program affected male and female students differently. The findings suggest that program effects may be stronger in the upper grade levels.

The present study's findings are strengthened by the fact that student self-report and behavior data corroborated each other. Students in SFG schools were less likely to be involved in disruptive behavior incidents than students in schools that did not implement a social and emotional learning program. Research evidence suggests that SEL can help reduce occurrences of inappropriate behavior by teaching students alternative attention-seeking strategies; more effective ways to express frustration and needs; and a wider repertoire of strategies to manage stressful, anxiety-provoking situations (Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008; Osher,



Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010). Results from this evaluation are consistent with previous research demonstrating that students attending SEL programs reported significantly more positive behaviors than students who did not receive these learning opportunities (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012).

***The present study findings are strengthened by the fact that student self-report and behavior data corroborated each other.***

Our data suggest a stronger level of implementation in SFG schools in Year 2 than in Year 3. This may explain the reduced differences between the SFG schools and schools implementing other SEL programs.

The findings of this study should be viewed in light of the limitations in program implementation. We found that implementation was conducted in a fragmented and

decentralized way by counselors and teachers. School principals and school leadership teams or school Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) teams were not involved in the program implementation. Therefore, the quality of implementation varied among classrooms in terms of the number of program units completed and classroom management strategies. While school-based social and emotional learning programs very often have implementation problems (Jones & Bouffard, 2012), future research would benefit from examination of strategies to promote implementation quality. It is possible that with greater involvement of school leadership, better alignment of the program with other SEL policies and practices in the schools, and infusion of the program across the curriculum, effects on students would be even more profound. This study examined effects of two full school years of program participation in order to overcome variability among teachers and classrooms. Because groupings of students into classrooms change every year, students experienced program implementation by two teachers with two different groups of classmates.

However, the fact that school counselors implemented the program instead of teachers reduced the potential contribution of the program to teacher-student relationships. A meta-analysis of 99 studies reported associations between closer student-teacher relationships and higher levels of school engagement and achievement in students from preschool through 12th grade (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Future research is needed to examine whether the SFG program would yield positive effects on students' academic achievement as well as perceptions of their peers' social and emotional competence (an indicator of positive school climate) if implemented by teachers.

Future studies should explore the mechanisms by which SFG improves student behavior, attitudes, and character values, including teacher training and school leadership involvement. Future research could also supplement student self-reports and behavior records by gathering data from teachers and parents about the behavior and attitudes of children as well as

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potentially mediating variables such as parent education and teacher overall training in classroom management techniques and SEL.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that use of the SFG program holds promise for enhancing students' social and emotional skills. If schools make the decision to adopt the SFG program, school and district administrators should give focused attention on how to promote a schoolwide approach with

sufficient guidance and support to all teachers.

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