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# **CASEL/NoVo Collaborating Districts Initiative:**

## **2015 Cross-District Outcome Evaluation Report: Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

This report presents findings for the evaluation of the Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) as of the end of June 2015. The CDI is an eight-district demonstration project designed to support districts' capacities to promote social and emotional learning (SEL) for all students. Three districts entered the initiative in 2011 (Cohort 1) and five more entered in 2012 (Cohort 2). All districts began with a selection visit and a roughly eight-month planning phase before starting their first implementation year.

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) is evaluating this initiative, and this document provides a high-level summary of our first four years of work. The goals of AIR's study are to evaluate (1) implementation of activities described in the CDI district theory of action as they relate to the implementation of systemic SEL; (2) district outcomes, including systemwide climate, commitment to SEL, and clarity of roles and responsibilities for SEL; (3) school implementation and school climate; and (4) student outcomes, including students' academic performance, attendance, and suspensions, as well as social and emotional competence. The evaluation design was developed to test a theory of action that CASEL developed in 2011–12. Over time AIR has developed and refined (in collaboration with CASEL) instruments to measure implementation and social and emotional competence and to see whether our designs that were aligned to the theory of action would hold as both districts and CASEL evolved their practice.

AIR administered study measures in collaboration with the districts each year (primarily in the period from February to May each year, as determined by each district). The measures that are the focus of this outcome report are the district rubric (as completed by AIR researchers 2011–2014 and by CASEL consultants, 2011–2015); a staff survey that measures school-level implementation of SEL activities; district school climate measures; extant data from educational records, such as achievement, attendance, discipline, dropout, and graduation; and teacher and student reports of student social and emotional competence. Where appropriate, we draw upon qualitative data that we collected systematically in 2011–2014.

**District implementation.** Implementation quality is measured with a district rubric, which rates the extent to which each district is engaged in the activities and realizing the outcomes identified in the CDI theory of action implementation rubric. Scores on these measures increased from 2011–2015, and were sustained during the past year in spite of many challenges that included leadership changes, budgetary exigencies, and uncertainty regarding the SEL grant.

**School implementation** is measured by a survey that is administered to school-based staff who work in the areas of instruction or student support. We examined whether school SEL implementation scores changed over time for the six districts that had surveys in at least two of the past three years (Anchorage, Cleveland, Chicago, Nashville, Sacramento, and Washoe County). Although our findings are tempered by low response rates in all districts except

Cleveland, with the data we have we saw that schools in these districts showed significant growth over three years on school SEL implementation. Chicago and Nashville showed improvement in all implementation measures. Specifically, five out of six districts in this group showed significant growth in shared vision/resources and needs and school integration of SEL. Professional learning was also a strength in implementation. When examining change in SEL implementation across elementary, middle, and high schools, change was much more strongly positive at the elementary level, a finding which is consistent with the initial emphasis that the districts placed on elementary school implementation.

**School outcomes.** The theory of action for this initiative posits that school climate should improve when schools work to address students' social and emotional development. Two districts—Anchorage and Cleveland—which have stable, high-quality student-level measures of climate, enable us to address this question. The Anchorage climate survey measures 9 scales. In the three years before CDI, the trend for eight of these scales was in a positive direction while for the other scale (caring adults) the trend was negative. The positive trends continued for those 8 scales post CDI, and scores for caring adults became less negative in the years following implementation.

In Cleveland, the change in trend compared to baseline was significantly positive for three of four scales: challenge, teacher support, and peer social and emotional climate. The change in trend for safety was also positive, but not statistically significant.

In a third district, Chicago, we were able to examine changes at the school level over time, and saw improvements across all CDI schools in CDI years relative to the year before CDI for both supportive environments and ambitious instruction.<sup>1</sup>

**Students' social and emotional competence outcomes.** Social and emotional competence improved at some grade levels in some of the dimensions measured in four of six districts. Chicago and Nashville showed improvement in all five social and emotional competencies at Grade 3; Austin showed improvement in all competencies measured at Grades 7 and 10. Cleveland improved in two dimensions in Grade 7 and one in Grade 10. The pattern of change is suggestive among districts where we have sufficient data, since it is consistent with data on implementation focus, spread, and quality. There were very few significant effects at Grade 10 outside of Austin, which is consistent with the districts other than Austin placing less focus on SEL in high schools.

**Students' outcomes from educational records.** We examined the effect of CDI on student academic and behavioral outcomes in 2014–15 in all districts. Academic outcomes include reading and mathematics standardized test scores and grade point average (GPA). Behavioral

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<sup>1</sup> For the other three of the Five Essentials measured on Chicago's survey, more than half of the CDI schools were missing scale data in the one pre-CDI year, so longitudinal analyses were not possible.

outcomes include attendance, suspensions, dropout, and graduation. The available outcomes vary across district; because all districts were missing at least some data elements, we also report here results from prior years' analyses of extant data. The purpose of these analyses is to discern whether there are common patterns of change across different districts, each with its own context, as they implement the CDI in their own ways.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, in which Austin, Chicago, and Cleveland districts participate, provides an opportunity to examine changes before and after the CDI using a standardized metric across states. All three districts improved during the CDI implementation years. Achievement test findings for the five districts with stable tests through 2014 (Anchorage, Cleveland, Chicago, Nashville, and Washoe County) showed consistent improvement for both reading and mathematics for three districts (Cleveland, Chicago, and Nashville) and improvement in mathematics for Washoe County. In addition, academic performance (as measured by achievement tests and/or grades) through 2015 was more positive in CDI implementation years than in the three to four years before the CDI in Cleveland, Chicago, and Nashville. In Anchorage, Chicago, and Nashville, GPAs were higher in CDI years than in prior years, while in Washoe County, high school GPA was lower in all three years.

Attendance outcomes were positive. There were more positive than null or negative effects for attendance in Chicago, Nashville, and Oakland. Anchorage attendance improved for elementary and middle but not high school students, while Austin's attendance has been lower than pre-CDI levels during the past two years. Suspension rates have also declined in all six districts for which we have data (Austin, Cleveland, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento, and Washoe County). Public data on dropout and graduation for CDI districts show positive trends. For example, according to state data, Cleveland's graduation rate improved from 52% in 2010–11 to 66% in 2014–15.

We examined **how student outcomes related to implementation of SEL** activities at the school level. AIR analyzed the extent to which implementation scores based on the staff survey predicted student academic and behavior scores. We found that SEL implementation was significantly associated with high school attendance in Anchorage and Nashville, elementary attendance in Nashville, and elementary school suspensions in Cleveland and Sacramento. These effects were all in the direction indicating that implementation of SEL was associated with more positive outcomes. These findings are consistent with additional studies that AIR did in Cleveland in which implementation quality was associated with improvements of students' social competence and attention and in a reduction of suspendable offenses.

## Conclusion

The CDI has the goal of systemically promoting and institutionalizing SEL districtwide in eight urban districts. Research on systemic efforts in education suggest that this process takes a minimum of 5–7 years to realize impact at the student level (Aladjem et al., 2006; Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). When this initiative began, there were many unknowns. At this point in this effort and the evaluation, we can start to address six policy issues that relate to districts:

1. Implementation: can districts implement and institutionalize SEL at a district and school level?
2. Leadership change: can these efforts survive the predictable leadership changes in districts?
3. Pathways to implementing SEL: is there is a single path to district SEL implementation, a few paths, or many paths and why?
4. The cadence of change: is there is a typical cadence to change?
5. Academic implications: what is the effect of district focus on SEL on students' academic outcomes?
6. Social competence and climate: what is the effect of district focus on SEL on students' social competence and school climate? What appears to mediate or moderate these effects?

The answer to the first two questions is yes—at least in the short run. Districts appear to be able to install and implement SEL and to take steps to institutionalize SEL, and districts appear to be sustaining the course even when senior leadership changes. Despite budgetary challenges, the CDI districts have developed and sustained a strong commitment to realizing and implementing SEL systemically. They have incorporated SEL into their strategic plans and made significant progress in aligning and integrating SEL with other district initiative and priorities. The longer term question remains: will enthusiasm grow, sustain, or diminish? What happens when there is a third superintendent, as there is in two districts? Subsequent evaluations can help address these questions.

The third and fourth questions can also be answered for what implementation scientists call the stage of early implementation. There appear to be multiple pathways to scale-up that vary in strategy, tactics, and pacing. These districts differ in their histories, local and (in all but one) state contexts, priorities, and readiness to implement SEL districtwide—both at the district and school level. Our analyses of the patterns of change in the eight CDI districts from their first year through 2015 suggested that there is no single pathway through the CDI implementation process; that each district begins with its own strengths and needs, finds points of entry for the work, and goes from there. The readiness of districts as well as perceptions of school and staff readiness

influence implementation. For example, some districts made more progress in the first year; others have made small but steady steps across many activity areas. These early gains have been sustained, and our school surveys suggest that school implementation of SEL continued to improve in the four districts that had surveys in all of the past three years (Anchorage, Chicago, Cleveland, and Nashville). All four districts showed significant growth in teacher practices, teacher attitudes, and school integration, and three had significant increases in their scores regarding classroom practices as well as in change management.

The fifth question is important, because some skeptics worry that a focus SEL will work against academic improvements. Our interrupted time series analyses done through 2015 suggested that this may not be the case: students' academic (as well behavioral outcomes) in the CDI implementation years, compared to the years prior to CDI implementation, were positive overall when examined districtwide. In three out of four districts where academic performance could be measured (i.e., performance on state achievement tests and GPA), outcomes were significantly higher in the CDI implementation years than in the three years before CDI. In the fourth district, outcomes were higher in the first year, but lower in the second. This year, due to changes in testing, we were only able to study the pattern in one district, Nashville, where both reading and mathematics achievement improved in each CDI implementation year across elementary, middle, and high schools for the 3 post-CDI years compared to the 3 years prior.

Findings for the sixth question about student outcomes beyond academic performance are still emerging, as might be expected in systemic reform, particularly in fiscally challenging times. SEL programming has not yet reached all schools, grades, or classes. Implementation quality is self-reported by school staff as moderate, not high, and other research we have done suggests that moderate implementation may not be sufficient to improve outcomes, particularly with middle school students whose developmental trajectories may attenuate the expression of social competence (Espelage & Colbert, 2016; Osher et al., 2014). As of this year, change in social competence measured in eleven grades across six districts showed consistent positive and statistically significant gains in Chicago and Nashville at Grade 3 and in Austin in Grades 7 and 10.

Going forward, the evaluation team hopes to continue to work with districts on monitoring vital outcomes as they complete their CDI funding periods and enter in to a phase in which SEL may be business as usual, or in some cases, may wither. The fact that the size of the CDI grants to districts averaged less than 0.04 percent of the average district's annual budget suggests that the external funding is not, in most instances, driving the work. As the evaluation team pursues future funding, we hope to explore questions about "readiness" to implement SEL among teachers and school staff, necessary adult attributes for success, effects on educational equity, academic achievement, and levers for successful change at the district and school levels.