



SPERLING CENTER
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In Their Own Words, 2nd Edition: What Scholars Say about Social- Emotional Skill Development while Learning Remotely

SEL, defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions,” is an essential part of a child’s development.¹ Research has shown that youth who participate in SEL-focused programs see a lifetime of benefits ranging from better academic outcomes, improved classroom behavior, the ability to better manage stress and anxiety, improved economic mobility, and lower rates of drug use.²

Introduction

In March 2020, the Sperling Center for Research and Innovation (SCRI) published a brief entitled [In Their Own Words: What Scholars Say About Social-Emotional Skill Development in Summer](#). This paper summarized youth survey findings from Summer 2019 related to scholars’ experiences with social and emotional learning (SEL) across six domains prioritized by BellXcel partners: growth mindset, self-awareness, self-regulation, responsible decision making, social awareness, and interpersonal skills. Open-ended survey responses were analyzed to highlight specific areas of growth according to the scholars’ own words.

One year later, SCRI again set out to explore how SEL programming affected scholars in BellXcel’s partners’ programs, though this time through a very different lens. The COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating effect on the educational landscape led BellXcel to develop a suite of tools, resources, and curricula to support partners in delivering high-quality remote learning programs in Summer 2020. The approach, called *BellXcel Remote*, sought to support the social and emotional (SE) needs of youth while offering engaging, teacher-led academic and enrichment activities for scholars and their families. *BellXcel Remote* emphasized relationships and routines above all else, asking staff to prioritize nurturing strong, positive relationships, putting in place consistent routines and schedules, creating a sense of belonging and emotional safety, and ensuring high levels of engagement.

SCRI conducted a mixed-methods analysis to learn about the scholar experience in a remote learning environment with the revised SEL focus and to see how scholars, in their own words, described their SE growth over the summer.

The analysis revealed a wealth of insights about how *BellXcel Remote*’s SEL programming positively impacted scholars and showed how participation in *BellXcel Remote* led to improved relationships, increased confidence, strengthened growth mindset, improved self-regulation and engagement, and better routines and schedules. Results are complemented by quantitative findings across stakeholder surveys and highlight the power a strong SEL curriculum can have on participants even remotely.

1 CASEL (2020). What is SEL? <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

2 Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82 (1). <https://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/meta-analysis-child-development-1.pdf>

Taylor, R.D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88 (4). <https://casel.org/2017-meta-analysis/>

Aber, L., Butler, S., Danziger, S., Doar, R., Ellwood, D. T., Gueron, J., Haidt, J., Haskins, R., Holzer, H., Hymowitz, K., Mead, L., Mincy, R., Reeves, R. V., Strain, M. R., & Waldfogel, J. (2015). Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and the Brookings Institution <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Full-Report.pdf>

Importance of SEL During COVID/Remote Learning

As the world continues to grapple with the threat and devastating impacts of COVID-19, the importance of SEL-focused youth programs has significantly increased. Traditional means of implementing an SEL curriculum in the classroom greatly diminished as school districts across the country quickly shifted to remote learning, while, at the same time, students, families, and staff were tasked with processing and dealing with the impact of the pandemic in their daily lives. The collective and individual traumas that have resulted from the pandemic will have long-reaching consequences; at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, more than 3 out of 4 social workers responding to a national survey conducted by UCLA said that a majority of students at their schools needed mental health supports as a result of the pandemic and school closures. These numbers will no doubt increase as the pandemic continues.³

is critical, and systems must be in place to encourage and support those relationships. An SEL-focused program can also ensure a positive and engaging virtual learning environment that nurtures unique voices and perspectives. Finally, an SEL-driven program, even delivered remotely, can help meet the need for skills and competencies that increase resiliency, promote empathy, and empower youth with the mechanisms to cope with the anxiety and stress of the current reality.

Having systems in place to meet the SE needs of youth across the country is paramount. The pandemic has brought to light the many reasons why SEL is an essential component of youth-serving programming, particularly in a remote environment that can be isolating and exacerbate existing inequities.

Having systems in place to meet the SE needs of youth across the country is paramount. The pandemic has brought to light the many reasons why SEL is an essential component of youth-serving programming, particularly in a remote environment that can be isolating and exacerbate existing inequities. Decades of research show that learning is both social and emotional, so the need for strong, caring relationships between youths and the adults in their lives

³ Kelly, M. S., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G., & Watson, K. R. (2020a). Opening Schools Safely in the COVID-19 Era: School Social Workers' Experiences and Recommendations Technical Report. UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Social Work.

BellXcel Remote Snapshot and SEL Approach

As it became evident that summer 2020 was not going to be business as usual and that stay-at-home mandates would likely continue past the spring, BellXcel immediately shifted and began developing a remote learning model designed to give partners, scholars, and families a myriad of flexible summer learning options that could be delivered regardless of access to and comfort with technology. *BellXcel Remote*, created in partnership with Scholastic Education, was designed to meet partners, families, and scholars where they were with the intentional aim of eliminating any barriers of access to a top-notch, evidence-based remote summer learning program.

BellXcel Remote contains the following elements that, in conjunction with each other, provide an enriching, engaging, and supportive remote summer learning experience:

- Six hours of content per day for a five-week program, with various implementation options
- Modular and flexible sample schedules that could be condensed or expanded as needed
- A blend of instructional time from a teacher and independent work by students and families spanning Math, ELA, Reading Corner, social and emotional learning (SEL), physical wellness, and STEAM enrichment
- Focus on one primary lesson per day, alternating between Math and ELA
- Live instruction plus one-on-one check ins with students (by phone or computer)
- SEL, wellness, and enrichment activities (including virtual field trips) for scholars

- Family engagement opportunities supported by a family guide, family resource portal, and teacher outreach
- Program quality and evaluation tools such as end-of-program stakeholder surveys that are used to measure impact and identify areas for continuous improvement

Given that families, scholars, and staff would likely be starting their summer after a chaotic spring 2020 virtual learning experience, BellXcel recognized the need for a strong SEL curriculum for *BellXcel Remote*. Developed in partnership with Harmony with SEL connections infused throughout enrichment and wellness activities, *BellXcel Remote's* SEL curriculum focused on a number of skills and domains such as relationships, problem solving, the importance of routines and schedules, diversity and inclusion, critical thinking, emotional safety and trust, and growth mindset.⁴ SEL activities were designed to be completed at home either independently, with family members, or via live instruction with a teacher and/or small group of scholars. The activities were divided by grade band and could be completed in thirty minutes or less.

In order to measure the impact of the summer experience on its stakeholders, *BellXcel Remote* administered end-of-program surveys to staff, families, and scholars. The surveys asked questions about the quality of implementation, program satisfaction, and perceived scholar growth in SE skills and domains. Results from the surveys are used to tell stories of impact for BellXcel's partners and to identify key areas for continuous improvement and growth.

⁴ Harmony SEL. <https://online.harmonysel.org/>. CASEL. Guide to Schoolwide SEL. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-3/classroom/a-supportive-classroom-environment/>

Overview of Study Approach

In past summers, BellXcel utilized the Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR) Holistic Student Assessment (HSA), developed at the Institute at Harvard University and McLean Hospital, to assess SEL impact on scholars participating in a BellXcel-powered summer program.⁵ The PEAR HSA asked scholars to retrospectively reflect on their summer experience and report on perceived change in 15 SE domains. At the end of the survey were additional questions developed by BellXcel, including two open-ended questions that asked scholars about ways in which they grew or changed as a result of participating in the summer program and the best part of their summer experience. Results from the summer 2019 survey are detailed in the March 2020 report [In Their Own Words: What Scholars Say About Social-Emotional Skill Development in Summer](#).

With the development of *BellXcel Remote*, the shift to remote implementation, and revised SEL domains, a new approach was needed to measure the impact of remote SEL programming on BellXcel scholars. SCRI, in partnership with BellXcel, developed revised stakeholder surveys that asked questions around perceived changes in scholars' SE competencies with a focus on relationships, trust, emotional safety, routines, engagement, and growth mindset.

Surveys, which include both scaled and open-ended questions, were administered at the end of a program, typically in the last week, to families, staff, and scholars in the 4th grade and higher.

To understand the full impact of *BellXcel Remote* on scholars' SE growth, SCRI analyzed the responses to two open-ended questions in the scholar survey:

- "Overall, what was the best part of your experience during the Summer Program?"
- "What are 1 or 2 ways in which you grew or changed for the better during the Summer Program?"

Responses were hand-coded using qualitative analysis software, MaxQDA; codes were reviewed, adjusted, and combined where necessary.

Also included are data from the family and staff surveys about perceived changes to scholar SE skills as a result of participating in *BellXcel Remote*. These data points are used to complement and support findings from the scholar survey that participation in *BellXcel Remote* led to SE growth.

Summer 2020 Findings

SCRI found that scholars recognized and perceived their own growth in SE skills after participating in *BellXcel Remote*. Quantitative analysis of the scholar survey shows that large majorities of scholars felt that *BellXcel Remote* provided them with a supportive and trustworthy learning environment. Results include scholars reporting positive and trusting relationships with their teachers (98%), feeling safe to make mistakes (87%) and ask for help (88%), believing that their opinions mattered (92%) and that they could learn from their mistakes (99%). These quantitative findings are bolstered and complemented by qualitative

findings from the open-ended questions in the scholar survey. Findings from the staff and family surveys provide additional supporting evidence that participating in *BellXcel Remote* leads to strong, positive outcomes for scholars in SE areas. Overall, these results highlight the importance of having a strong SEL curriculum integrated across programming and the effect that a positive learning environment can have on youth even remotely.

⁵ Partnership in Education and Resilience (PEAR). The Holistic Student Assessment. <https://www.pearinc.org/holistic-student-assessment>

Insights into Scholar Perceptions of SE Growth

This study highlights the top findings from the qualitative analysis of open-ended scholar survey questions in order to feature scholars' own words about their *BellXcel Remote* experience. The analysis shows how participation in *BellXcel Remote* led to improved relationships, increased confidence, strong growth mindset, improved self-regulation and engagement, and better routines and schedules for scholars. These findings are complemented by quantitative results from the scholar, family, and staff surveys where applicable.

Deeper Relationships with Teachers and Peers

Scholars overwhelmingly described how their summer experience had a positive impact on their relationships with both teachers and peers. They specifically mentioned trusting their teacher, believing that their teacher would support them in their learning, and feeling safe to tell their teacher their problems. When describing positive growth in relationships with their peers, they mentioned self-confidence in interacting with others, a desire to be more helpful, and learning how to work collaboratively as a result of participating in their summer program.

Relationships with Teachers

- "I felt like I could trust my teacher."
- "The way I changed is by telling my teacher my problems. And also telling my teacher I need help."
- "Something I changed is I met new people. And my teacher was nice and friendly."
- "I can ask if I can stay after class to talk about things I didn't know, or I can call my teacher and tell her I am struggling."
- "I learned to "appreciate my friends and teachers."
- The best part was "That my teacher understood me and if I have a problem my teacher will help me."

Peer Relationships

- "I am always shy, but in summer school I get to talk to new people."
- "I learned how to work in a group and to have patience with others."
- "I learned to be honest and helpful to others."
- "I got to talk to people outside of my family."
- "One way I changed is I opened myself up to people."
- I grew in "My trust in other people and better friendships."

Quantitative results also showed that large majorities of scholars felt their teacher helped them (98%), they got along well with (98%) and could trust (98%) their teacher, their teacher cared about them (98%), and felt like they could talk to their teacher about their problems (83%).

Heightened Confidence

Scholars described increases in confidence as a result of participating in *BellXcel Remote*. They described feeling more confident generally and in their academic, social, and technology skills.

- "I am now more confident in math."
- "Confidence and socialization."
- "I started to not be as shy when interacting with other students."
- I am "More comfortable with online classes."
- "I grew more confident and became a better participant."
- "I got less insecure about showing myself."

Families and staff confirmed this finding, with eighty-two percent (82%) of families and eighty-eight percent (88%) of staff saying that scholars increased their confidence as a result of participating in *BellXcel Remote*.

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Growth Mindset

Scholars reported improved growth mindset in their qualitative responses and focused on persistence, self-confidence, learning from mistakes, and the importance of effort and hard work in meeting their goals.

- “Never give up, even if you don’t know the answers.”
- “The chance to learn and grow from my mistakes.”
- “In my opinion, I think I grew because I always thought that I was bad at math, but now I know that if I just push myself a little further, I know I can get better at it. It doesn’t matter if you’re good at it or not, it matters if you’re really trying or not.”
- “I changed the way I think of mistakes and failure.”
- “I learned some things and I never gave up and did difficult things.”
- “I was more outspoken and I wasn’t afraid to make mistakes.”

Quantitative results show that over ninety-five percent (95%) of scholars believed they could learn from their mistakes, they could get better at things if they work hard, and they didn’t give up if they had a hard time solving a problem.

Higher Engagement & Self-Regulation

Scholars also reported changes in self-regulation and engagement in their qualitative responses; they described being more focused, paying attention more, enjoying their work, and feeling more engaged in their summer program activities than their school-year activities.

- “I became more confident in my math answers. I actually liked the work and worked on it even when I didn’t have to.”
- I “Was a lot more engaged than in school.”
- I grew by “Listening better. Paying attention and trying harder.”
- I grew by “Making sure I’m following the rules and being on my best behavior.”
- “I started doing my work on my own without my parents telling me to.”
- “I participated more than I usually did...and I feel like I’m sort of ready for middle school.”

Quantitative results show that eighty-two percent (82%) of scholars were excited to do activities in their summer program, seventy-seven percent (77%) liked to share what they learned with other people, and ninety-one percent (91%) felt focused on their activities. Furthermore, large majorities of staff felt that scholars improved in active listening (85%) and participating in activities and assignments (87%).

Improved Routines and Schedules

Scholars recognized that participating in *BellXcel Remote* helped improve their routines and schedules over the summer. Scholars described improvements to their sleep schedules, feeling better equipped to manage their time, and improved organization.

- I grew by “Learn[ing] how to work online and manage my time with school.”
- “I made a habit of getting out of bed earlier because of my summer program.”
- “I got more organized with my time.”
- “I got rid of habits like waking up late and going to sleep late.”
- “I learned how to study better and stay on top of my work.”
- “I learned to be...punctual.”

Eighty-two percent (82%) of families also agreed that the consistency of their child’s routines improved as a result of participation in *BellXcel Remote*.

Stronger Sense of Emotional Safety and Trust

Scholars reported positive growth in emotional safety and trust in their qualitative responses, citing gaining the confidence and ability to ask for help when they need it and not being afraid to ask questions or make mistakes.

- “I’m not afraid to ask questions if I need help.”
- “One way I grew for the better during the summer program was that I was able to ask for something when I needed it.”
- “One way I changed for the better is that I’m not as afraid to ask for help/get things wrong once in a while. Another thing is that I grew academically.”
- “I am confident now that if I do not know something to ask for help.”
- “...I can ask for help without feeling shy.”
- “I learned from my mistakes and I can ask the teacher for more help now.”

Quantitative data show that during their summer program, eighty-eight percent (88%) of scholars weren’t afraid to ask their teacher for help, and eighty-seven percent (87%) weren’t afraid to make mistakes during an activity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Research has shown that participation in SEL-focused programs can yield a myriad of benefits. Meeting social and emotional needs in a virtual environment is no doubt challenging, but, with the onset of COVID-19, the urgency to meet those needs has proven to be more crucial than ever. SCRI sought to understand if summer learning programs could quickly shift to a remote model and still meet the social and emotional needs of participants.

This follow-up report highlights how, in scholars' own words, BellXcel Remote gave its participants an enriching, engaging, and positive summer learning experience that led to improved relationships, increased confidence, strong growth mindset, improved self-regulation and engagement, and better routines and schedules.

Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative responses to summer 2020 post-program surveys revealed a wealth of insight about how scholars navigated their remote summer learning experience and showed that even in a virtual environment the incorporation of an SEL curriculum can lead to strong SE growth for participants. This follow-up report highlights how, in scholars' own words, *BellXcel Remote* gave its participants an enriching, engaging, and positive summer learning experience that led to improved relationships, increased confidence, strong growth mindset, improved self-regulation and engagement, and better routines and schedules.

The promotion of positive relationships with adults and peers, particularly in a remote learning environment, helped nurture a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and self-value for

scholars. Encouraging consistent, predictable routines paved the way for lower stress and anxiety and allowed scholars to know what to expect during their day and be better equipped to focus their energy on learning. Because scholars felt affirmed and that their beliefs and perspectives were important, they were more likely to be engaged, motivated, and feel that their teachers respect and care for them. Finally, feeling emotionally safe and supported no doubt led to higher confidence, comfort in asking for help, higher motivation to succeed, and the ability to better focus on learning.

Recommendations

Though the push to get students back in the classroom has picked up steam, the reality is that virtual learning may be with us for some time well into the future. Nonetheless, in both in-person and virtual learning environments, the need for SEL-infused programming grows. Out-of-school time providers have the opportunity to give youth across the country an enriching, engaging, and supportive experience that can help them heal from the upheaval of the past year. BellXcel's experience shifting to a remote model at the onset of COVID-19 and continuing to provide its stakeholders with a top-notch evidence-based learning program can serve as an example to other providers hoping to do the same.

- **Prioritize use of evidence-based practices.** The science of learning and development has matured and solidified the importance of social and emotional development to a young person's ability to learn. Implementing evidence-based SEL practices is paramount to learning. Leaning on the evidence base can also support being nimble, prioritizing what you know to be true for young people while adapting and shifting to meet needs and environments.
- **Focus on relationships, building trust, emotional safety, and routines.** Shift the focus of your SE curriculum and practices to the highest-priority skills and competencies your participants need to cope and thrive. Allow your program to home in on the SE competencies that you know you can effectively deliver and support. The comments from our scholars reinforced the importance of relationships, trust, emotional safety and routines.

- **Assess SE growth in participants to understand SEL programming impact.** Implementing an SEL assessment is an easy way to know how your program model supports SE growth in your participants. The assessment can be formal, where your participants respond to survey questions in a standardized setting, or informal, where your staff regularly checks-in with participants to gauge progress. With data in hand, programs can more easily adapt or make quick changes to SEL programming and set up a system for continuous improvement within your program.
- **Include open-ended survey questions to capture stakeholders' experiences and voices.** Including open-ended questions in surveys or conducting focus groups or interviews as part of your evaluation can provide the opportunity to glean information that might otherwise not be caught in quantitative results or that might not align with expected outcomes for a strict program model. This also provides the chance to amplify stakeholder voice and add depth to quantitative results. Our qualitative analysis revealed insights about increased technology comfort and confidence that our quantitative questions would have missed.

The pandemic has brought to light the essential call for youth-serving organizations to address their participants' social and emotional needs. As COVID continues to impact the educational landscape and affect the mental health of youth across the country, providing a positive, engaging, and supportive learning environment with an SEL focus will be crucial for moving forward and healing.