

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS:  
EXPLORING HOW MIDDLE SCHOOLS USE SEL DATA TO SUPPORT STUDENT NEEDS

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by

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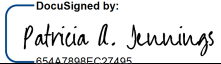
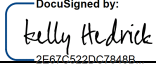
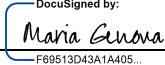

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## Abstract

Recent trends in education indicate a greater emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL) within schools (Allbright et al., 2019; Hamilton & Gross, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Research supports this trend in which SEL helps students build foundational skills to navigate life, such as self-knowledge, resilience, and collaborative problem-solving (CASEL, n.d.; Hamilton & Gross, 2021) while also preventing or reducing psychosocial problems in adolescents (van de Sande et al., 2019). One missing component of this research is SEL data, which is often overlooked or ignored despite its value. Within a suburban mid-Atlantic school district, schools have implemented new SEL programs as part of the return to learning following COVID-19 closures. These programs include SEL screeners, SEL instruction, and interventions for students with limited evaluation and evidence of their success. This qualitative study explores what SEL data are gathered by schools and how it is integrated into the decision-making processes. Inclusive of a survey of middle school SEL screener leads then a case study of three schools in which interviews and document reviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. Findings were used to be used to inform next steps in SEL data use within schools for central office and school administration to better support students.

*Keywords:* social and emotional learning, social emotional learning, middle school, data use, data-informed decision-making, data-driven decision-making, SEL screener, school leaders, qualitative research

## DEDICATION

To my mom, Wendy Crowley, the ultimate teacher, who taught me the importance of education, the value of relationships, and the grace of balancing life's responsibilities. Mom's unwavering love for her children - biological and students alike - embodies what it means to be a lifelong learner and inspires me to continue to do the same for the betterment of future learners.

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To my colleagues and friends: My EdD crew - you may have finished before me, but that just meant you guided me and supported me when Imposter Syndrome took over or I simply had no idea what to do. Thank you for the laughs and the unwavering support. And Dr. Katie Leigh - I honestly would not have made it this far without you. You are a true gem - thank you. To my SPS colleagues, especially the administrators, coaches, specialists and teachers with whom I have the honor to work - thanks for the encouragement and words of affirmation as I trudge through this process. Working in education is often a thankless job - please know I am thankful for each of you and the impact you make on a daily basis even if you do not see it yourself. The world of education is better because of you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

There is a growing consensus in education that schools can and should attend to students' social-emotional development (Allbright et al., 2019). This push became more important given the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on American youth (Huck & Zhang, 2021). This impact, including loss of learning, disconnection to school, and mental health needs (DeArmond et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Kashefpakdel et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021), prompted the United States government to allocate \$122 billion through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). This legislation funded state and local education agencies to address academic and wellness needs of students as a result of the global pandemic while safely reopening schools (Office of Research, 2022). This legislation highlighted the importance of schools to support students with vastly different experiences during the pandemic, specifically outlining the requirements to meet the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students (Hamilton & Gross, 2021; Office of Research, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). COVID-19-related legislation was not the first legislation to support more than only student academics, but ESSER is the most recent to provide substantial funding and guidance for educators inclusive of academic, behavioral, and emotional supports (Allbright et al., 2019; Dogan & Demirbolat, 2021; Mandinach, 2012; Yoder & Gurke, 2017).

Government and political influences have a tremendous impact on what happens in public schools; the decisions about what is taught, why it is taught, and how it is taught in schools are inherently political with those holding political power influencing what is taught (Hedrick, 2021; Vail, 2005). This influence is shown through federal, state, and local legislation and policies that impact curriculum, hiring and licensure processes, and even assessment

practices (Durlack et al., 2011; Mandinach, 2012; Vail, 2005; Virginia Department of Education Social Emotional Learning Implementation Team, 2021).

In the past two decades, much of education policy has focused on achievement through standardized tests and accountability metrics, rarely including any support for the social and emotional development of students (Yoder & Gurke, 2017). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, enacted in 2001, increased schools' accountability and data usage which introduced the concept of data-driven decision-making (DDDM) (Dogan & Demirbolat, 2021). Furthermore, DDDM was included as one of the four pillars in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009), indicating that federal education officials had decided to ensure that data and evidence are used to inform policy and practice (Mandinach, 2012). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 required states to measure at least one indicator of “School Quality or Student Success,” defined broadly to include measures of student engagement, educator engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, post-secondary readiness, or school climate and safety (Allbright et al., 2019). While it is essential for educators to make informed and data-driven decisions about school practices, the accountability, transparency, and ability to provide a rationale for decision-making has become equally as important because of the political nature of education.

The connection of DDDM to quality indicators in schools initiated legislation surrounding SEL within schools across many states due to the connection of SEL to student engagement and access (Hamilton et al., 2019; Kautz et al., 2021; Mueller, 2021). Research suggests that SEL helps students build foundational skills to navigate life, such as self-knowledge, resilience, and collaborative problem-solving (CASEL, n.d.; Hamilton & Gross, 2021). Furthermore, SEL competencies are important for preventing or reducing psychosocial



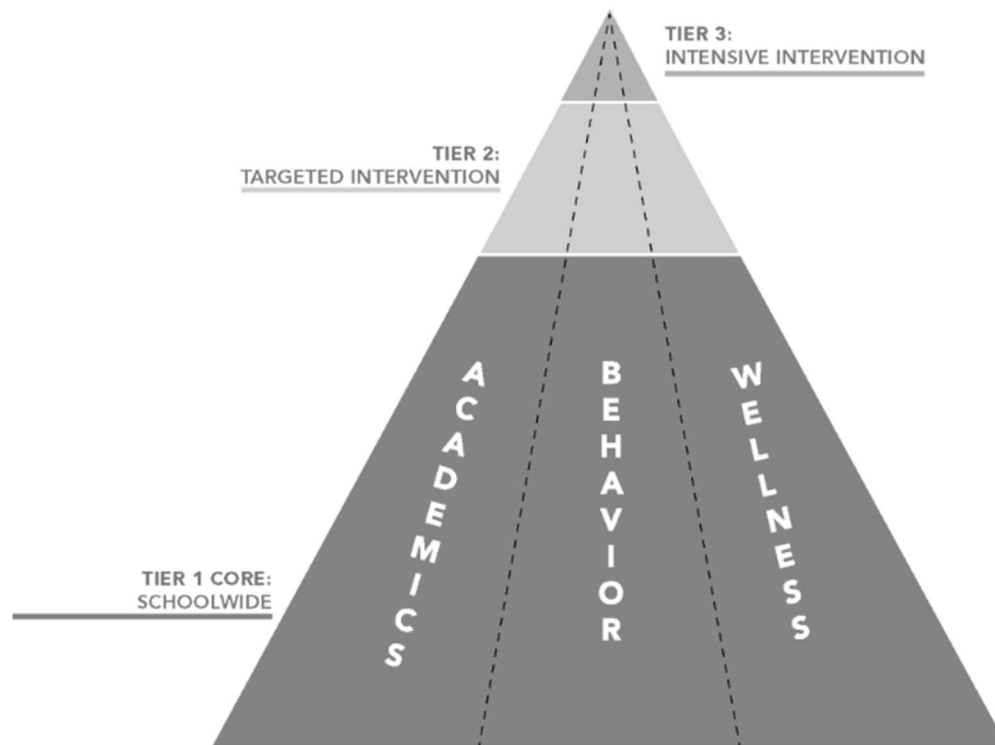
problems in adolescents, and because of this, schools are seen as a natural setting to teach and learn not only cognitive but also social and emotional skills to promote students' psychosocial health (van de Sande et al., 2019). Experts also have found that SEL competencies and well-implemented SEL programs are related to many life outcomes, including improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Kautz et al., 2021). Furthermore, research supports the notion that SEL skills can be shaped and developed through education. Coupled with research supporting the necessity and value of SEL in schools, mental health professionals have proclaimed that the behavioral health needs of children have been characterized as a "silent epidemic" with serious implications for students, families, and communities (Battal et al., 2020, p. 1475). Recent literature published following the COVID-19 related school closures indicates the pandemic experience made clear that social and emotional competencies are crucial, noting that ongoing concerns about the pandemic's impact on students' social and emotional well-being and development are unlikely to disappear any time soon (Chu & DeArmond, 2021).

### **A Problem of Practice**

The growing concern surrounding students' social and emotional wellness frames the problem of practice of exploring how middle schools collect and utilize SEL data in meaningful and useful ways to support students. Many districts and schools are struggling to integrate SEL practices and gather SEL data to better support students' overall well-being despite research demonstrating how important SEL is to middle school students (CASEL, n.d.; Durlak et al., 2011; Hamilton & Gross, 2021). Suburban Public Schools (SPS) is a large public school district located outside a major metropolitan Mid-Atlantic city. The district serves over 180,000 students and is one of the largest in the United States of America. Following the school closures due to

the COVID-19 pandemic, SPS began several SEL initiatives, including administration of a SEL screener and SEL time integrated into school days. As a middle school-based administrator in SPS, I see this problem of practice as timely and relevant to my professional work: middle schools do not use SEL data to inform practices for all students. Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and SEL are integral parts of my role, yet it was not until my doctoral program field study in 2021 that I began to see a connection between the two student-driven processes. When the school I worked at received \$145,000 as part of the ESSER grant, it was essential that we utilized relevant data to determine the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of our students.

I spent two years overseeing the ESSER grant team at my previous school where it was my responsibility to ensure our plans were in line with the wellness and academic expectations set out by our district and the related legislation. I was also a member of the MTSS team where we reviewed student data and identified targeted programs and interventions for students. As part of MTSS, students receive a systematic, yet personalized learning experience tailored to their individual needs that is based upon student-specific data collected by the school (Balmer, 2020). The SPS MTSS Tiers of Support are shown in Figure 1 (SPS, n.d.a). The tiers in a system represent a continuum of increasingly targeted interventions identified when the needs of a student are beyond what is provided in the previous tier, however we rarely discuss SEL data information pertaining to specific students during meetings or conversations. With the administration of the county-wide SEL screener, my school had our first glimpse into meaningful and robust individualized SEL data for our students last school year. Based on my observations, this data was provided to all administrators, teachers, and counselors who did little beyond surface level review of the data.

**Figure 1***SPS MTSS Tiers of Support*

*Note.* Adapted from Suburban Public Schools (2024). *MTSS Tiers of Support*.

The purpose of this capstone project was to explore how middle schools are using SEL data to support students academically, behaviorally, and socially. This investigation was accomplished by gathering data to explore what SEL data exists within schools and how that data are used to inform decision-making processes. Through sequential qualitative research, a survey was administered to the SEL screener lead at each middle school within SPS, followed by a case study of three schools who are utilizing SEL data. The data was coded and analyzed to find answers to the research questions. Furthermore, the findings were used to provide recommendations to school administrators and district leadership to improve SEL data collection and SEL data use processes within schools.

This study sought to address the problem of practice I have identified while intending to answer the following inquiry questions:

- In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate?
- How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?

### **Contextualizing the Problem**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt significantly by schools (DeArmond et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Hamilton et. al, 2020). When surveyed by researchers and organizations following the school closures, teachers emphasized concerns regarding students' social and emotional needs (Huck & Zhang, 2020), leading experts to recommend that schools formally assess and address the socioemotional and mental health needs of their students upon return to school.

Within SPS, a SEL screener was adopted during the 2021-2022 school year for students in grades 3-12 to measure social and emotional wellbeing throughout the school year. The SEL screener, published by Panorama Education, is a research-backed social and emotional learning survey to measure and promote students' social-emotional skills and competencies (Social Emotional Learning Assessment: Panorama Education, n.d.). For the first two years that the survey was administered, it included 22 questions for students to describe their "mindsets, skills, attitudes and feelings that help students succeed in school, career and life", connecting these to fundamental needs for motivation, social connectedness and self-regulation (Social Emotional Learning Assessment: Panorama Education, n.d.). In 2023, SPS and Panorama updated the survey to include 38 questions with fewer topics but more questions in each area to provide

schools and families with more data to support planning (Suburban Public Schools, 2023b) while also giving different versions to students in grades 3-5 and 6-12.

In 2015, Panorama Education conducted pilot sampling of the student survey to analyze its reliability and validity (Moulton, 2019). This pilot confirmed high levels of reliability for the survey, stating that the survey questions will elicit similar results under similar conditions with differences in responses being attributed to differences in perceptions (Panorama Education, 2015). Furthermore, the pilot affirmed evidence of validity for the scales of the survey, being developed through a six-step design process to minimize survey error then confirmed through the pilot process to confirm the measures address the concepts they are supposed to, and to review correlation between student data and SEL measures as expected. The SEL survey is designed for students to reflect on their school environment and experiences to help educators learn more about how to better support students' needs.

In my experience, this data had only previously been connected from students who expressed suicidal or self-harm ideations while at school, and even then did not provide guidance for instruction or targeted support beyond mental health identified through the depression screening or suicide risk assessments. The data from the SEL screener provides schools the opportunity to measure and monitor improvement of SEL at the school level, integrating another source of student-specific data. However, how schools use these data for improvement varies. While my previous school had minimally utilized this data to make isolated, informed decisions for students, there are other schools within the district that have administered this screener only to meet requirements, while still others have used the data for individualized support for each student. The SEL screener is a significant investment for our district, with a five-year contract originally costing over \$1.8 million and without clear expectations or ideas for data usage it

could be considered wasteful despite its relevance to current concerns (Walker, 2021). For other schools or districts struggling to meet the SEL needs of students, SPS can contribute to the body of research exploring how SEL data gathered through the screener can be used to support student needs.

To support implementation of the SEL screener within schools, principals at each middle school in SPS selected a SEL screener lead at the beginning of each school year. The requirements for the position include serving on the school-wide MTSS team, facilitating the administration and use of the SEL screener data, and acting as a conduit for key screener updates and resources. Across schools there is much variability as to the position of the SEL screener lead: some schools selected an administrator while others selected a counselor or teacher. This variability suggests the SEL screener lead may not have political capital within the building to make changes that may promote SEL, nor have the ability to set or sway the SEL vision of the school. At my previous school during the 2022-2023 school year, the SEL screener lead was an administrator who oversaw counselors; however, that person was not well-versed in data literacy nor in the MTSS process.

SPS had two additional requirements for all schools regarding SEL for the 2022-2023 school year (Suburban Public Schools, n.d.b). The first was that SEL instruction is taught at the Tier 1 level for all middle and high school students through an advisory period, built into the school day. During this time, there is an expectation that middle schools are using the evidence-based Responsive Advisory Meetings and The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)'s Three (3) Signature Practices (Suburban Public Schools, n.d.b). Elementary schools are required to engage in a Morning Meeting and Closing Circles from the Responsive Classroom model. This expectation has carried into the 2023-2024 school year as

well. The second requirement was that all schools have a school improvement and innovation plan (SIIP) goal around wellness or SEL for students that supports the district's strategies and actions for schoolwide implementation by the end of 2022-2023. It is suggested, but not required, that the SEL screener lead be an integrated part of both initiatives and the MTSS system within the school; however, the accountability portion of these requirements is not met with verification by SPS.

### ***SEL and Mental Health***

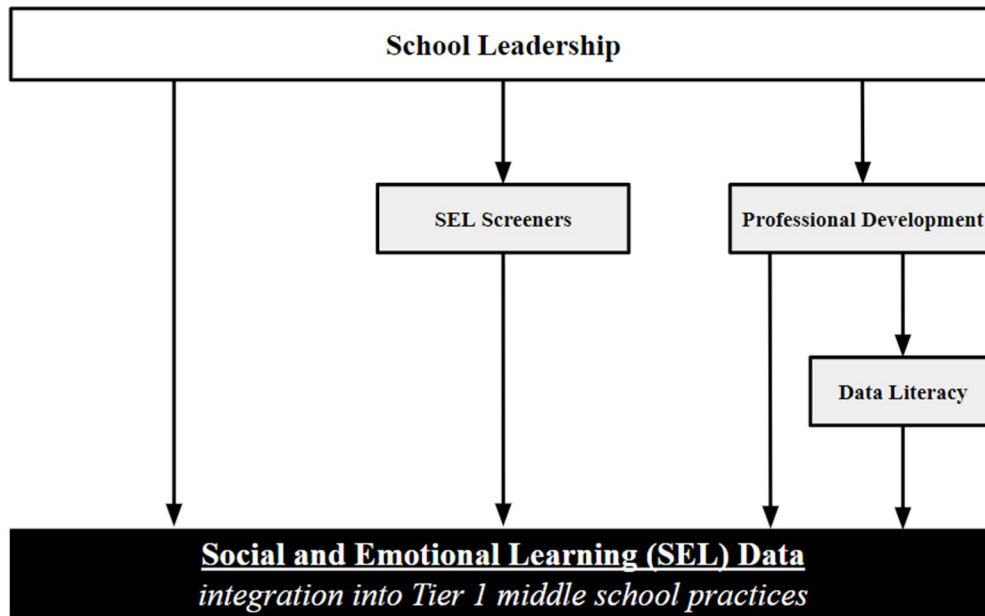
It is essential to also distinguish between SEL, mental health, and behavior because while they are interrelated, they are not interchangeable in the context of this capstone. SEL and mental health are both encompassed in the concept of mental wellness, or wellness, which is “a state of well-being in which individuals realize their own abilities, have the resilience to cope with normal stresses of life, and become productive and responsible members of society” (Suburban Public Schools, n.d.a). SEL refers to foundational skills that all adults and students need to be successful. specifically including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020), while mental health is changes in emotions, thinking, or behavior that lead to distress and/or problems functioning in varying settings (Suburban Public Schools, n.d.a). SEL skills are typically taught through Tier 1 programs like advisory while mental health is addressed through Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. Behavior is observable actions that can be measured, are influenced by culture and surroundings, and by a student's ability to use skills to manage their thoughts, emotions, and environment. Behaviors can demonstrate students' SEL skills and are also indications of a students' mental health. As SPS describes, behavior and wellness are reciprocal in their relationship but are not interchangeable.

## Conceptual Framework

This study has been framed by the work of Kim Schildkamp (2019) centered on data-informed decision-making, also known as data use. Schildkamp's (2019) research delves into the methodologies through which educational practitioners, including school leaders and teachers, can leverage diverse data sources beyond conventional summative assessments to enhance educational effectiveness. Her work underscores the significance of incorporating informal and non-academic data, advocating for a systematic approach to data utilization characterized by sequential stages of goal establishment, sense-making, and actionable interventions.

Through this theoretical lens, I have created a conceptual framework to guide this study. McGaghie et al. (2001) define the conceptual framework as "setting the stage" to present the particular research question that drives the investigation being reported based on the problem statement (para. 1). For my framework, I identified four variables that are especially relevant to how schools use SEL data within their practices of academic, behavioral, and social support and intervention for students at the Tier 1 level, meaning schoolwide. While these variables also play a role into Tiers 2 and 3, this conceptual framework focuses on variables that impact Tier 1. These variables emerged from the framework of Schildkamp (2019): 1) school leadership, 2) access to SEL screeners, 3) professional development of school staff, and 4) data literacy of stakeholders (see Figure 2). When considering each of these concepts in the context of the problem of practice, this framework suggests they are interrelated in informing SEL data use within middle schools. School leadership is a significant variable that influences SEL data integration within a school while also impacting the adoption of SEL screeners, professional development, and data literacy. Moreover, professional development influences educators' data literacy skills, both of which impact SEL data use as well.



**Figure 2***Conceptual Framework****School Leadership***

Among the most critical determinants of implementation success is leadership (Lyon, 2017). Although principals are figureheads as the primary leader within a building, implementation efforts in schools also must include leadership teams and lower-level leaders who are closer to implementation efforts. Scholars point out that the role of school leaders includes creating and maintaining a vision for the school while meeting the needs of all students, staff, and community members (Akinnusi, 2021; Balmer, 2020 Drury, 2018; Prudente, 2018). This study is focused on the work of schools in the context of SEL data use within schools. School leaders have an impact on the implementation of SEL screeners, the professional development of staff members, and therefore impact the use of SEL data to inform Tier 1 practices. As is the case with what happens within a school, the leaders are what drive the mission and vision forward. It is important to note that while other organizations and groups like

parent-teacher organizations and school boards may impact school leadership, this study focuses on school-based leadership including principals and assistant principals as well as teacher leaders, etc.

### ***SEL Screeners***

SEL Screeners, or SEL-related assessments, are universal screening tools that can be utilized to detect which students within a school may need additional support before difficulties become persistent and pronounced (Oakes et al., 2017). While historically used as an academic benchmark, universal screeners have only focused on behavior and wellness over the last decade yet are critical for the collection of quality data for school use. Given the contemporary educational landscape, which increasingly recognizes the multifaceted needs of students extending beyond academic realms, Chapter II will explore the utilization and impact of SEL screeners on Tier 1 structures within middle schools and within the framework of MTSS.

### ***Professional Development***

Implementation Science emphasizes the importance of training leaders and teachers to implement programs successfully and practically within schools (Lyon, 2019). Lyon describes the value of carefully choosing staff, designing appropriate training, and providing ongoing consultation and coaching for sustainability while Schildkamp (2019) adds to this by describing the effectiveness of in-service professional development in the use of data to create structure and protocols, and manage the link between data and instruction. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates the importance of training and professional development for MTSS practices to utilize and include SEL data. It also shows that data literacy is also impacted by professional development. This will be further discussed in Chapter II.

### ***Data Literacy***

Data use has become more commonplace in schools because of its connection to improvement instruction and policy initiatives (Barnes et al., 2019); however, data use is only effective if teachers and leaders have the data literacy knowledge and skills to use data in a meaningful way to monitor, model, scaffold, and guide throughout a school (Schildkamp, 2019). To build a data use culture and support data literacy, Schildkamp offers that it should be introduced as a continuous school improvement process, and not as an activity to meet accountability demands. The conceptual model seen in Figure 1 highlights data literacy as an influencing factor in how schools use SEL data within MTSS practices, but it is typically reliant on professional development to be cultivated and utilized. The literature reviewed in Chapter II will illustrate the importance of teacher and administrator data literacy within schools.

While many factors could influence a school's ability to utilize SEL data to support student needs, this conceptual framework is limited to the factors that I have identified and found to be the most relevant to my work as a school leader. I know that schools are increasingly expected to use data to monitor their performance, diagnose areas for improvement and to make informed decisions to improve the quality of education; however, this is complex work that must be done with meaningful and intentional implementation to find success. Literature surrounding these important and influential factors on school data use will be discussed in Chapter II.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

In this section, I will define key terms to create a shared understanding of meaning and use.

*CASEL* - The *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)* is an organization focused on making evidence-based SEL an integral part of education from preschool through high school (CASEL, n.d.). CASEL published the CASEL 5, the five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and

responsible decision-making, and the CASEL Wheel, a visual framework of the CASEL 5 and key settings that support SEL (CASEL, 2022).

**DDDM** - *Data-driven decision-making (DDDM)* is the analysis of school data, use of analysis results for school improvement, and then evaluation of these applications (Dogan & Demirbolat, 2021). DDDM is a key component of the multitiered system of support (Buzhardt et al., 2020) and may also be referred to as data-informed decision-making.

**ESSER** - The *Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER)* III Fund is legislation aimed to help school districts safely reopen, sustain the safe operation of schools, and address the impacts of COVID-19 on the nation's students (Office of Research, 2022). Suburban Public Schools, where I am an employee, received \$188.6 million in ESSER funds.

**Intervention** - *Intervention* is targeted and purposeful support for students beyond classroom instruction.

**MTSS** - *Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)* is an evidence-based model of education that employs data-based problem-solving techniques to integrate academic and behavioral instruction and intervention (Eagle et al., 2015)

*Tier 1* is instruction within the classroom, available to all students

*Tier 2* is targeted instruction or support for specific students, typically done in small groups during class instruction or during intervention block

*Tier 3* is intensive support, typically instructional in nature, for students who have needs that are not met during instructional time

**School Principal/Leaders** - The leaders of an entire community within a school are known as *principals*. Principals are responsible for managing the major administrative tasks and supervising all students and teachers. For this study, principals and assistant principals

collectively will be referred to as *school leaders* or *administrators*. School leaders lead others to do things expected to improve student learning outcomes (Akinnusi, 2021).

***School Climate*** - *School climate* is the experiences of students, parents, and school personnel based on patterns of school life; it also reflects the teaching and learning practices, norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, and organizational structures (Akinnusi, 2021). For this study, school climate will predominantly focus on the experiences of students within their schools.

***SEL*** - *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)* is a process that focuses on developing individual skills needed to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, and feel and show compassion for others (CASEL, 2022). The aim of SEL is for students to grow up and become productive citizens by acquiring the five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022).

***Mental Health*** - *Mental health* is a person's psychological and emotional well-being. In SPS, mental health concerns refer to changes in emotions, thinking, or behavior that lead to distress and/or problems functioning in varying settings (SPS, n.d.a).

***SIIP*** - *School Improvement and Innovation Plan (SIIP)* is an annual document published by each school in SPS outlining academic goals and priorities for the year. For the 2022-2023 school year, the SIIP for each school is the same document as the ESSER plan, including goals for math, reading and wellness.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

A literature review is a multi-stage process that includes scanning information, collecting notes and annotations, synthesizing, structuring information, writing a critical review of the literature, and building a repertoire of resources (Huck & Zhang, 2021).

This study focuses on how middle schools utilize SEL data to inform decision-making processes within schools. To explore the problem of practice, this chapter will present literature on data use in schools, the role of SEL in schools at the Tier 1 level as well as its connection to MTSS, and school climate. This review will begin by examining theoretical and empirical studies exploring data use in schools, including the data literacy of administrators and teachers, then exploring SEL and MTSS and noting connections between the two concepts. Finally, I will explore how SEL plays a role in school climate.

### Data Use in Schools

Data use for school improvement is an expected component of school operations but is regularly described as inconsistent and ineffective (Barnes et al., 2019; Barnes et al., 2022; Henderson & Corry, 2021). The practice of data use is embedded in educators' performance standards across the country, suggesting that accessible and meaningful data and literacy competency are commonplace in schools despite research suggesting otherwise (Gummer & Mandinach, 2015; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021).

While policy, scholarship, and research emphasize the importance of data use, Barnes et al. (2022) found little evidence in the literature that schools use data for improving teaching and learning. They described a gap in educators' knowledge of what counts as data, how it is analyzed or interpreted, and how to use data to change instructional practice. Through their review of existing research, Barnes et al. found that research on educator data use focuses on

school leaders' influence on teachers' data use and teachers' own beliefs about data. Barnes et al. underscore the integral role of data in teaching and learning. They provide recommendations to support educators in making data-informed decisions within schools. Specifically, they highlight the significance of establishing a clear purpose and shared vision among stakeholders, fostering collaboration among educators, and utilizing pertinent data to address key questions about students. While these recommendations are practical in the school setting for experienced educators, they still focus on academic assessments and fail to address behavioral or social-emotional data that may influence student learning, neglecting the differences in student needs that exist across grade levels. Furthermore, their recommendations imply educators already understand how to interpret data as well as implementing differentiation or interventions for students in response to data. Barnes et al. found that educators often overlook the impact of culturally responsive practices on data collection and usage, influenced by their own implicit and explicit biases toward student groups or individuals. They go on to propose that educators incorporate an equity lens when considering data utilization and teaching methodologies; instead of attributing outcomes to external factors, educators should employ data to assess their own instructional methods. Applying these recommendations to SEL data use in schools is a starting point, but need to become more specific to ensure the value and utility of SEL data is highlighted within schools.

Research also describes how a school's culture of data use can impact how educators use data (Henderson & Corry, 2021). In their exploration of archived data, Barnes et al (2019) explored elementary teachers' beliefs about data use, finding that these beliefs are influenced by what teachers view as data and how it is used to address students' learning needs. They went on to frame their findings considering political influences on principals, finding that context,

culture, and teachers' beliefs about data use vary across multiple school site contexts. This is especially common when school administrators have differing visions for data use. While this study focused on elementary teachers, the results can be transferable to middle school which would suggest that teachers' view and use of data would expectedly be impacted by administrators.

Missing through much of this literature is the school principal and leader's use of data. Meyers et al. (2021) found that despite an increase in expectations that principals serve as instructional leaders, the data-use literature has little to say about how school principals support teachers through data-use processes. Through their exploratory case study of four elementary schools, Meyers et al. studied how rural school principals determine and advance structural and process decisions to shape data teams and data used for curricular and instructional improvement. Despite systems being in place within the district and schools, Meyers et al. describe how these systems inhibited the use of data for instructional improvement, with educators following the systems without understanding and thereby without analyzing data. Principals and district leaders support data use yet focus only on student achievement and lack a vision for how data teams can improve their practice.

School leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the culture of data usage within educational institutions. Research by Barnes et al. (2022) emphasizes that when leadership emphasizes data use primarily for accountability purposes, it can hinder the meaningful utilization of data by both schools and teachers. This is highlighted in the work of Uiterwijk-Luijk et al. (2017) who surveyed 79 elementary school principals in the Netherlands. They found that principals with graduate degrees were statistically significantly better at communicating a culture of inquiry to their staff, indicating that education may be one aspect that prepares administrators for building a



common data culture within their schools. Schildkamp and Poortman (2015) further support this concept through their qualitative case studies of data teams made up of teachers and administrators. They noted the negative effect a leader could have on the entire culture of the data team by using “shame and blame” tactics that keep teachers from feeling trust to ask questions and take calculated risks that may benefit students (Schildkamp and Poortman, 2015, p. 35). This underscores the crucial role of school leaders in creating an environment of trust and collaboration conducive to meaningful data utilization and decision-making.

The implications of this work emphasize the importance of clear structures and a clear vision to make meaningful change for data use within schools. It is essential for school leaders to collaborate with teachers to identify a clear vision and clear expectations for data use to support students. As Meyers et al. (2021) note, there is limited research on how administrators use data within their schools, and not surprisingly, the literature focusing on SEL data use within schools is also severely lacking. There is, however, an assumption that when talking about data use that educators have a foundational understanding simply of what data use is, yet the reality is that data literacy is also missing from educators’ skill sets and therefore missing from literature.

### ***Data Literacy***

The literature on data literacy among school staff is small but offers insights into this important concept for data use within schools. The need for educational professionals to have strong data literacy skills began with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law in 2001 where the federal government introduced the topic of accountability for student learning outcomes based on standardized test data (Henderson & Corry, 2021). Despite laws and fast-paced changes toward a data-driven educational system, the training for data literacy skills are missing depth and

authentic application (Barnes et al., 2019; Gummer & Mandinach, 2015; Henderson & Corry, 2021)

Gummer and Mandinach define data literacy as “the ability to transform information into actionable instructional knowledge and practices by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting all types of data” (2015, p. 2). This skill is expected to be mastered by teachers as part of the evaluation process, yet Gummer and Mandinach found that at the level of classroom instructional decision-making, the nature of the specific knowledge and skills teachers need to use data effectively is complex and not well understood. Through a review of documents focusing on data use including practical guides, books, and manuals, Gummer and Mandinach examined the ways knowledge and skills on the use of data were characterized, then examined how state licensure and certification documents define data- and assessment-related knowledge and skills. Using this information, they synthesized the concept of data literacy for teachers into a conceptual framework, noting the domains of disciplinary content knowledge and practices, pedagogical content knowledge and practices, and data use for teaching knowledge and skills. While this information is essential to understanding data literacy and the many subcomponents that are part of it, Gummer and Mandinach indirectly emphasize the complexity of data literacy. Similarly, their work is theoretical, with acknowledgement that their work needs utility in programs of professional development to become practical.

To further explore data literacy, Henderson and Corry (2021) conducted a literature review of 28 data literacy and education articles from 2010 to 2018, finding that the concept of data literacy has become more concrete, but there is still disagreement about the parameters of the construct. While data literacy has a common definition and understanding of relevant skills and knowledge, Henderson and Corry found limited training programs for teachers to support

and promote these skills. Henderson and Corry emphasize that teachers and leaders need training for a strong foundation of data literacy skills to ensure they understand how data should be used to inform instruction. This recommendation is an important acknowledgement of what is missing in the era of data use in schools.

### ***Data-Driven Decision-making in Schools***

DDDM pertains to the systematic collection, analysis, examination, and interpretation of data to inform practice and policy in educational settings (Mandinach, 2012). Mandinach (2012) describes the emergence of DDDM as a topic of interest, finding that teachers who engage in DDDM must learn to translate data into actions that inform instruction. Mandinach continues by noting that data should be “part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement” (p. 75) in which educators collect a variety of data, interpret those data, and develop hypotheses about how to improve student learning, then make appropriate modifications to instruction to test the hypotheses and increase student learning. There is an important connection to a data culture in which leadership also uses and emphasizes the power of data to support the decision-making process.

Despite studying a system outside the United States, the work of Dogan and Demirbolat (2021) was included in this review of literature because of the focus on DDDM. Dogan and Demirbolat surveyed 179 administrators in Turkey to determine the effectiveness of DDDM in schools, finding that DDDM is more successful when school administrators have an appropriate tool and system to utilize throughout the process. They also emphasize the importance of technological infrastructure and hardware, a culture that is focused on data usage with purpose as well as data literacy for all, noting these must be in place as key components of school-wide DDDM.

The connection between MTSS and the value of DDDM has been an emerging theme within the literature as well. In their work with universal screening tools, Oakes et al. (2017) analyze and report on universal screeners and their use in K-12 schools, specifically tying universal screeners to MTSS and emphasizing the importance of using the screening data to inform teacher-delivered strategies and prevention efforts across the school. Oakes et al. also note the importance of leadership teams having established structures to review and monitor data and student outcomes within regular school practice. In the report for the Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Jackson (2021) explores how schools can leverage MTSS to ensure equitable outcomes for students, specifically recommending DDDM as an opportunity for schools to create changes to the system in the context of resource allocation, service delivery, curriculum, and other programming factors, basing these changes on student data and school needs. Jackson emphasizes that the DDDM process is where schools can create an equitable and culturally responsive system through changes to the system with resource allocation, service delivery, curriculum, and other programming factors—based on student data and school needs. Kautz et al. (2021) make a recommendation in their research for education stakeholders to receive additional guidance on how to use survey data to inform and improve their programming and interventions, especially in the context of supporting SEL competencies. Although not extensively addressed in the existing literature, anecdotal evidence indicates that DDDM plays a role in various aspects of school operations, particularly within SEL and MTSS programs. This evidence suggests that DDDM influences decision-making processes such as student class placements and recommendations for interventions, thereby shedding light on the underlying rationale behind school-based decisions.

## **SEL in Schools**

As I consider how SEL data is used within schools, it is important to understand existing literature on the impact of SEL in schools. Research has found that SEL helps students build foundational skills to navigate life, supporting their success after K-12 schooling (CASEL, n.d.; Hamilton & Gross, 2021). Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs in K-12 schools. Their work found SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance compared to students who did not receive SEL, also noting an average of an 11-percentile point gain in academic achievement over time in a subset of the reviewed studies. Data like this, when reviewed in the context of individual student needs, would support schools in determining what else students need to be successfully academically, socially and emotionally. Durlak et al. also found that SEL programs have these positive impacts at all educational levels (elementary, middle, and high school) and in urban, suburban, and rural schools, although they have been studied least often in high schools and in rural areas. While Durlak et al.'s work is over 10 years old, it is cornerstone literature to support the value and effectiveness of SEL programs because it has been referenced and utilized to support SEL programs since its publication (Aidman & Price, 2018; Allbright et al., 2019; Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Cipriano et al., 2023; Kautz et al., 2021; Sailor et al., 2021; Stickle et al., 2019; Stillman et al., 2018). Knowing SEL programs can have such a positive impact suggests there is value in collecting and utilizing SEL data and connecting it to students' academic data within schools.

There are districts in which SEL has been successfully integrated within the curriculum to meet students' needs. Within the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Kautz et al. (2021) studied how the district could use survey data to improve student outcomes. DCPS prioritized efforts to develop students' SEL competencies, such as perseverance and social

awareness. To measure students' SEL competencies and the school experiences that promote SEL competencies, DCPS began administering annual surveys to students, teachers, and parents during the 2017-2018 school year. This research found that students' SEL competencies and school experiences are the most favorable in elementary school and the least favorable in middle school and the beginning of high school. Furthermore, of the SEL competencies and school experiences in DCPS's survey, self-management, how well students control their emotions, thoughts, and behavior, is most related to students' later academic outcomes since a higher level of self-management is related to greater success (Kautz et al., 2021). In their case study of an urban middle school's implementation of SEL, Aidman and Price (2018) note that for SEL programs to be successful, teacher acceptance, creative scheduling, ongoing evaluation, and leadership support were all important components of program implementation.

Examining the literature on SEL in schools highlights the significant impact of SEL programs across educational levels and settings while also demonstrating the critical need for integrating SEL data into school decision-making processes. Successful integration of SEL into school curricula emphasizes the importance of data-driven approaches to enhance student outcomes while also highlighting the significance of teacher acceptance, strategic scheduling, continuous evaluation, and leadership support. Overall, the wealth of evidence supporting the positive impacts of SEL underscores the necessity of leveraging SEL data to tailor educational interventions that meet the diverse needs of students academically, socially, and emotionally.

### ***Educators' Perspectives on SEL***

Several scholars have noted that the success of SEL programs depends on the perspectives of the educators tasked with their implementation. In their report triangulating survey data from the American Educator Panels, Hamilton et al. (2019) present results on three

topics from surveys of nationally representative samples of over 19,000 public school teachers and principals across the United States including their opinions about SEL, their approaches to promoting students' social and emotional development, and their perceptions of supports that would help them do the work more effectively. Their analysis compared the perspectives of teachers and principals, which often differ, but found that SEL is a top priority for educators to improve student outcomes and school climate. The efforts to support SEL in schools can benefit from the use of high-quality data to guide decisions about which programs and practices to adopt and how to ensure that these approaches address students' needs. Hamilton et al. (2019) found that schools that utilize a more comprehensive approach to SEL data to inform decision-making incorporate multiple measures of student competencies, as well as measures of the learning environment.

This research also indicates the impact of leadership perspectives on SEL implementation. Hamilton et al. (2019) also found that seventy-two percent of principals indicated that promotion of students' social and emotional skills was either the school's top priority or one of the top priorities. This work confirms and supports the notion that educators - administrators and teachers alike - believe that SEL has the potential to improve students' achievement, engagement, and behavior, and to enhance school-wide climate when considering direct measures of students' social and emotional competencies. However, Hamilton et al. also found that principals were more likely than teachers to indicate strategies were being used within their schools, suggesting that teachers may not be aware of nor utilizing effective SEL strategies. Knowing SEL can have many different components within a school, it is important for whole-staff buy-in to ensure SEL is implemented with fidelity (Hamilton et al., 2019). The vision of a principal or school leaders must match the work being done by teachers.

In an additional study exploring perspectives on SEL programs within schools, Akinnusi (2021) conducted a qualitative study exploring ten secondary principals' implementation of SEL programs aimed at closing the disparity of special education identification and the suspension and expulsion of minority students within an urban school district in California. Her research found that clear communication with staff, setting manageable goals, and conducting needs assessments that address the disparity and intervention selections were vital to SEL program implementation. Simultaneously, lack of staff commitments, inadequate professional development, and insufficient time for planning impedes principals' leadership to support SEL implementation at their schools. Despite her study's focus on special education, her work is relevant to that of school leaders implementing SEL within their schools. As a school leader, I have found the elements addressed and identified within this research to be relevant and timely as schools implement SEL programs to support students. While Akinnusi's work primarily focuses on special education identification and minority students, the components she identifies as supports and barriers to SEL work are commonplace for leaders implementing change within their buildings, and especially relevant to this capstone.

In their pilot study with coaching educators, Stickle et al. (2019) contribute additional perspectives to support the value of SEL, finding that coaching increased teachers' use of SEL practices while also confirming coaching strategies to be effective. Their coaching model was designed to incorporate building teachers' social-emotional competence while providing support to implement short, targeted SEL strategies. Stickle et al. support the notion that school, and district leaders play an essential role in building capacity through policies, structures, and support. Ultimately, SEL functions best building strong relationships among all adults and employing ongoing support and feedback, noting that robust SEL implementation and optimizing



students' social and emotional development require that school leaders support teachers to understand, model, and implement high-quality SEL practices in an ongoing way.

Over the last several years, research has shown that educators use six defined practices to advance SEL: school climate and relationships, positive behavior, electives and extracurriculars, classroom instruction, staffing and professional development, and data use. (Allbright et al., 2019). To add to the positive perspectives on SEL, Allbright et al. (2019) examined the SEL practices in ten middle schools with high scores on student-reported SEL assessments, particularly for African American and Latinx students. They reviewed school data and interviewed school staff, including teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, and other staff involved with SEL-related activities. Allbright et al. connected the six common and overlapping categories of practices intended to support student SEL in schools: 1) common strategies to promote positive school climate and relationships, 2) supporting positive behavior, 3) promoting engagement, relationships, and SEL-related skills using elective courses and extracurricular activities, 4) SEL-specific classroom practices, 5) hiring, organizing, and training personnel, and 6) measurement and data use. Allbright et al. confirmed that schools can and should utilize data within their systems to attend to students' social-emotional development and that the adults within schools are what makes that happen by tailoring SEL approaches to the needs of students.

When considering the literature surrounding educators' beliefs and perspectives, I am reminded of how essential teacher buy-in is for school-wide initiatives, a theme emerging throughout the literature above. Teacher buy-in directly relates to the school climate and the ability of schools to reach their goals and support students. Without direct teacher support,

school initiatives like SEL or SEL data use are lost, and systems like MTSS are unable to function.

### ***SEL Instruction***

When narrowing the focus of SEL to what is provided for all students at the Tier 1 level, the literature is very limited for middle school SEL curriculum and instruction. Because of this, literature also including early childhood education was reviewed. A prominent theme throughout the literature is the value and importance of providing Tier 1 SEL instruction because of its reach and the potential to prevent future problems (Exner-Cortens et al., 2020; Green et al., 2021; Strahan & Poteat, 2020). With teachers and administrators focusing on SEL needs of students, there is continual support for integrating SEL within classroom academic instruction. Strahan and Poteat (2020) explored the perceptions of middle school students on their social-emotional development in a school where teachers integrated SEL with academics for twenty minutes each day. Students were guided by their teachers to explore social-emotional issues and make connections to the topics within their classes. The descriptive investigation explored how ten middle school studies developed stronger levels of CASEL's core competencies as well as a deeper awareness and appreciation of teachers' support for them because of the emotional safety offered within the classroom space. This study suggests that emphasizing the process of reflection across academic content areas in school may be a powerful way to enhance social and emotional learning in the flow of classroom events.

Early adolescence and the transition to middle school bring about many challenges for students including academic decline, social maladjustment, and increased risks of mental health-related difficulties (Green et al., 2021). One promoted strategy for supporting adolescents currently is the delivery of school-based SEL programs at the universal level. Through their

randomized controlled trial of Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid (SPARK) Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum, Green et al. found students who received the curriculum showed significant improvement in knowledge of curriculum content and principles, communication, decision-making, problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, and resilience compared to students who did not receive this instruction. Green et al. also note that the challenges associated with the developmental period and transitions with middle school are a time of significant opportunity to intervene to teach and strengthen students' social and emotional competencies.

The value of SEL within the academic classroom was further reinforced through the work of Exner-Cortens et al. (2020) who specifically targeted the work of high-quality Tier 1 programs and their implementation in middle school. This mixed-methods study explored the relationship between teachers' attitudes and the outcomes of SEL programs within middle schools in Canada, finding that high quality implementation is further supported by teachers' positive attitudes towards the programs as well as strong organizational support. While this study was conducted in rural Canada, the same themes emerged in the work of Elias et al. (2018) who conducted case studies within urban middle schools. Elias et al. highlighted essential guiding principles when implementing SEL at Tier 1: start with a positive vision and prioritize student voice, build the team with people who care about SEL, communicate and share successes widely, and more. They also reiterate that there is a severe need for schools to embrace SEL programs across tiers and embedded within the school day.

While reviewing the literature on Tier 1 programs, much focus was given to early childhood education programs being inclusive of SEL. Blewitt et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies on universal SEL programs in preschools where children receiving the

instruction showed significant improvement in social competence, emotional competence, behavioral self-regulation, and early learning skills while also reducing behavioral and emotional challenges compared to students not receiving SEL instruction. Blewitt et al. (2021) built upon these findings to examine the effectiveness of Tier 2 SEL programs, once again conducting a literature review but finding the Tier 2 interventions did not have a significant impact on improving SEL competencies to a greater degree than Tier 1 programs. Through their work, though, Blewitt et al. reiterate that there are students who may require more intensive support than what is offered through universal approaches, or who may not respond to the universal support. They also point out that targeted programs in Tier 2 generally seek to prevent the escalation of more serious mental health concerns.

Existing literature highlights the value and importance of universal Tier 1 resources being used to meet the needs of most students within a school building. SEL instruction is valuable and meaningful when implemented in a classroom as part of the daily teaching practices, no matter the age or grade level of students. However, the success of these programs is very reliant on several factors that impact them, including systems of support and school climate which are discussed in the following sections.

### **Multi-Tiered System of Support**

A recurring theme when focusing on the needs of students is that the MTSS serves as a preventative, data-based framework for improving the academic, social, and behavior outcomes for all students (Jackson, 2021). In the report for the Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Jackson explores how schools can leverage MTSS to ensure equitable outcomes for students, specifically noting that MTSS promotes early intervention with decisions that are data based. MTSS is driven by a collaborative data-based decision-making process and focused on outcomes

where educators can make objective instructional decisions that result in positive student outcomes.

The value of the MTSS framework is highlighted again through the work of Battal et al. (2020) who conducted an applied study to address the research-to-practice gap in the longitudinal impact of school-wide MTSS to universal instruction, intervention, and assessment. Their work found the benefits of a systematic approach that identifies the needs and assets of all children. In an MTSS model, high-quality core instruction implemented with fidelity for all students is considered the first layer (Tier 1) of prevention for academic and behavioral difficulties in school where evidence-based, high-quality core instruction focuses on social, emotional, and behavioral skills in classroom settings. Battal et al. continue that for any students who require additional support to master certain social, emotional, and behavioral skills, additional tiers of evidence-based instruction and/or support are provided, based on the identified level of need. Another key component highlighted by Battal et al. is that MTSS matches students with appropriate instruction based on their individual level of need, thereby emphasizing the importance of accurate data sources to understand students' levels of need across a variety of domains and skills. Unfortunately, though, Battal et al. also notes that SEL data has often been left out of district-wide assessments and initiatives. This seems to be an ongoing concern with data use within schools - despite existing structures to support students, there are important missing components that need to be addressed.

The idea of MTSS being implemented fully with fidelity is highlighted by additional research as well. Buzhardt et al. (2020) make connections between DDDM and MTSS while completing randomized control trials with educators in home-visiting early childhood programs. Buzhardt et al. note that MTSS is made possible by the advent of formative progress-monitoring

measures of students' growth in the school curriculum. They also found, though, that implementing MTSS with fidelity is challenging because of its many components, including tracking individual children's progress, and using data to help inform instructional and intervention decisions. They did, however, note that utilizing technology to guide data-driven intervention decisions greatly improved student growth over time as compared to students whose decisions were not data-based. This research, while relevant in terms of emphasizing the importance of system implementation, lacks connections to SEL and instead only looks at academic data through the MTSS system.

The literature focused on MTSS emphasizes the importance of this structure within schools in that it allows for decisions to be made that are based upon the identified needs of students. An emerging theme from this literature is that decisions are informed by academic and behavioral information, yet rarely include social and emotional data. Existing MTSS structures should be able to integrate SEL as an additional data piece to ensure all needs of students are met.

### ***Principals' Beliefs and Perceptions of MTSS***

As with SEL, the beliefs and perceptions of educators can make or break MTSS programs within schools (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Balmer, 2020; Drury et al., 2021). School leaders must meet the increasing demands of accountability that are placed on them to improve the outcomes of all their students (Drury, 2018). School leaders are responsible for meeting the needs of all students, using assessment data to make responsive decisions, applying scientific based interventions appropriately, monitoring students' progress regularly, and leading teams of teachers to assist in carrying out these tasks each day with fidelity.

In a survey of 61 leaders in education, Drury et al. (2021) measured the extent to which these leaders felt knowledgeable and prepared to lead the implementation of MTSS in their schools. Despite educators' initial beliefs they felt knowledgeable about this topic, when probed for specific information on the components of MTSS, gaps in knowledge and training were evident. School leaders must use assessment data to make responsive decisions, implement evidence-based programs to support students, monitor student progress, and provide instructional leadership to teachers to facilitate the delivery of these initiatives in the classroom. In their focus groups, school leaders did not believe they had the knowledge necessary to implement data collection procedures as part of an MTSS initiative and even highlighted a disconnect between what administrators perceived they needed to know about MTSS data collection versus the knowledge that teachers needed. Leaders also acknowledged that there was a gap in action stemming from uncertainties about data collection and subsequent utilization strategies.

These findings supported the work of Atwell and Bridgeland (2019) who surveyed 710 K-12 school principals on their perspectives of how SEL can prepare students and transform schools. Their analysis showed that principals continue to see SEL skills as highly teachable and a priority in their schools with more schools implementing specific SEL benchmarks by significant percentages, with 93 percent of principals believing their school should emphasize developing students' SEL skills. Furthermore, Atwell and Bridgeland found that principals and teachers are assessing SEL skills at much higher rates than just two years before, but there is more work needed to ensure SEL is taught and measured in meaningful ways across schools and districts. This important point, coupled with literature around the value of MTSS, reemphasizes that schools need structures in place that are driven by school leadership to address the needs of

students. However, the “research-to-practice gap” addressed by Battal et al. (2020, p. 1475) is a recurring theme for leaders and MTSS practices.

### ***Connecting MTSS and SEL***

Knowing that MTSS requires the review of student data to ensure targeted and appropriate instruction and resources are provided to schools, research indicates that SEL data must be integrated into MTSS (McCart & Choi, 2020; Mueller, 2021; Sailor et al., 2021; Weingarten et al., 2020). Sailor et al. (2021) examines the implications of schoolwide MTSS for inclusive education, particularly with respect to the issue of more fully integrating students with extensive needs for extra support and services. They note the positive impact that SEL has on academic achievement and enhanced students’ behavioral adjustment in the form of increased prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems. A fully integrated MTSS links decisions about academics and behavior, and therefore Sailor et al. also note that SEL can be increasingly nested within MTSS to address the needs of the whole child. While they include little guidance as to what this would look like, Sailor et al. share that SEL must be “woven into the work of every teacher in every classroom and every after school and summer enrichment program” (2021, p. 28) because MTSS connects all school-based decisions about academics and behavior.

The implementation of statewide MTSS initiatives in line with federal regulations is another recurring theme throughout the literature. McCart and Choi (2020) followed a group of 42 elementary schools implementing California’s MTSS Statewide initiative. They highlighted SEL-specific teams, screening, progress monitoring and effective tiers of support within the MTSS domain, allowing schools to formalize academic, behavioral and SEL competencies within their MTSS framework. This led to the direct inclusion and involvement of all students,



particularly those who have historically lacked assistance in academic and social achievements. This “all means all” philosophy coupled with technical assistance for SEL and MTSS alignment showed that student academic achievement increased when SEL-MTSS was implemented with adequate fidelity. Specifically, their systematic study demonstrated positive outcomes for students in ELA and Math when compared with matched controls, thus offering promising evidence of efficacy for implementation of SEL-MTSS. McCart and Choi continue to note that students benefit when school leaders have a strong philosophical foundation on which to build, access to high-quality professional learning and technical assistance, an evidence-based framework, and a clear focus on the mechanics of how to implement SEL-MTSS.

In their briefing for the National Center on Intensive Intervention, Weingarten et al. (2020) provide an overview of SEL and how it relates to intervention for students, emphasizing that successful implementation of MTSS may help schools more effectively deliver SEL programs and practices to all students. Weingarten et al. continue to note that within MTSS, SEL instructional practices are generally considered a universal or Tier 1 approach to support all students. Tier 1 SEL instruction may benefit students with intensive needs by positively impacting the social dynamics of the classroom and school, thereby enhancing the social interactions and relationships that students with social and emotional difficulties have with teachers and peers.

In 2019, the state legislature of Washington mandated social and emotional learning be expanded in a manner that helps build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and life (Mueller, 2021). A committee of educators that met regularly to analyze data and make recommendations for schools, prioritized including SEL at the core tier 1 level of support within

MTSS. Providing SEL as a universal support means that SEL is integrated into classroom lessons, taught by teachers to every student. Mueller shares that “the only way to know if our students are learning socially and emotionally, or if our schools and systems are fostering SEL well, is to check. Without knowing how things are going, Washington will not know what to continue, expand, replicate, and celebrate or what to limit, correct, or stop altogether” (2021, p. 11). In their work with MTSS in Washington, the most successful teams use strength-based universal screening to collect data to guide instruction and identify students who require additional support for increasingly intensive interventions based on need. Schools who use DDDM within their MTSS, inclusive of SEL data, can determine what is needed to meet students’ academic and behavioral needs at each tier, thereby adding value to this comprehensive exam and the importance to integrate these programs together.

Research has suggested that MTSS, when implemented with fidelity and comprehensively, can be a successful framework to identify and give targeted support to students who need it. MTSS is designed to focus on the whole child, meaning support must be offered for academic growth as well as behavior and social-emotional needs. MTSS can imbed SEL, and therefore equity, and contribute to the inclusion of students who need additional or intensive instruction and services. When schools have robust MTSS systems, students’ needs are supported for their individual profiles and based upon data that drives the decisions made for them.

### **School Climate**

School climate is the experiences of students, parents, and school personnel based on patterns of school life; it also reflects the teaching and learning practices, norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, and organizational structures (Akinnusi, 2021). In their work on SEL

within DC Public Schools, Kautz et al. (2021) explore the impact of fostering a positive school climate on SEL competencies while supporting DCPS in achieving their strategic plan goals. In describing the tangible and intangible attributes of a school that support students' development, Kautz et al. found relationships among students and staff, school discipline, student engagement, and safety can boost SEL competencies within a school. This is also supported by Stillman et al. (2018) who explored the perceptions of a positive school climate, describing how physical and emotional safety, the presence of adult support, and peer connection, academic challenge, engagement, and the ability of constituents to work together with trust and respect of diverse perspectives. Stillman et al.'s research supports previous literature that found SEL and school climate are complementary and intertwined, noting that opportunities for social and emotional learning enable students and staff to develop social and emotional competence, which then can make school climate more positive (Allbright et al., 2019). While these studies are focused on SEL being impacted positively by school climate, it is important to consider the impact school climate may have on SEL implementation within schools as well.

### **Summary**

While the literature confirms evidence of the value of SEL, MTSS, and DDDM independently, it shows limited recommendations for how schools should integrate these three pillars to support the social and emotional needs of students through tiered systems of support, therefore supporting the practicality of this problem of practice. Through each of these concepts, emerging themes include the impact of administration, the essentiality of school climate, and the value of professional development for data literacy. Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence schools have and use academic and behavioral information, yet decision-making at schools rarely includes social and emotional data. While schools are finding ways to implement

programs to support students' SEL and form MTSS within their schools, there is little research to support how to collect and use data for improving practice. This literature review also indicates the pandemic experience made clear the social and emotional needs of K-12 students, noting that ongoing concerns about the pandemic mean that concerns about students' social-emotional well-being and development are unlikely to disappear any time soon (Chu & DeArmond, 2021).

While the body of literature on SEL is vast for students in K-12, the literature exposes a "knowing-doing" gap that poses a problem for education (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Scholars and practitioners alike must continue to implement and monitor SEL for all students in addition to the academic responsibilities associated with schools. With years of standards-based reforms and accountability systems focusing almost entirely on high-stakes testing of academic subjects, many schools have felt the pressure to forego a well-rounded education to meet performance targets and raise test scores (Aidman & Price, 2018). However, the literature does support the notion that without strong social and emotional skills, the knowledge and information students acquire in their K-12 schooling would be incomplete if students struggle to function in college and within the workforce (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011).

Many educators believe and the research demonstrates that school based SEL programs have the potential to enhance students' success in school and life (Durlak et al., 2011) and that both the attributes of the program and the quality of its implementation are critical. With the intention of strengthening middle school use of SEL data to support students, this study adds to the body of research with findings in line with the following research questions: 1) In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate? And 2) How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?

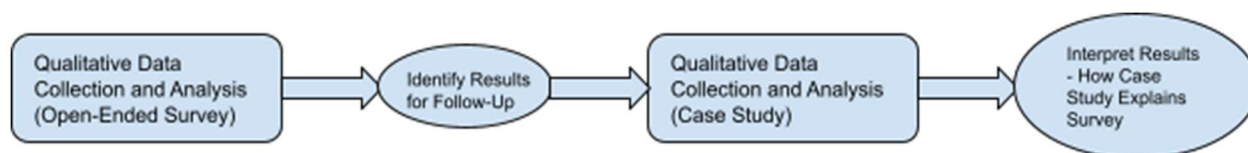
### **Chapter 3: Methods**

With the increase in school initiatives focusing on meeting the academic, behavioral, and social needs of students, the purpose of this investigation was to explore SEL data use within middle schools and how this data is used within schools to inform decision-making about students and their needs. These initiatives have been especially prevalent in SPS as educators integrate SEL into daily practices with middle schoolers, thus initiating this inquiry. As this study is exploratory in nature, a sequential qualitative study design was used. I conducted a survey with follow-up case studies to investigate my research questions, including interviews and document reviews. Findings from this study are used to make recommendations to stakeholders on how to adjust and improve practice at the school level while also making district-wide recommendations.

#### **Purpose Statement**

This study aimed to develop a greater understanding of how SEL data is utilized by middle school staff to inform practices and make decisions about student support. Specifically, the study focused on how SEL screener leads reported using SEL data and how it was used to inform the decision-making regarding improving practices. Since the purpose of the study involved a comprehensive analysis of the problem of practice that may result in conflicting reports, an exploratory sequential qualitative design allowed me as the researcher to collect qualitative data twice in which I can interpret overall results and explain contradictions within the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design is diagrammed in Figure 3.

This research is rooted in the pragmatic paradigm, focusing primarily on collecting data that will be useful to stakeholders (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). A pragmatic researcher

**Figure 3****Sequential Qualitative Research Design**

*Note.* Adapted from Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* (5th ed.) (p. 300). SAGE Publications, Inc.

emphasizes the relationship between herself and the research's stakeholders, so she is able to achieve her purpose within the research. Furthermore, a pragmatic researcher seeks to understand real-world problems and find solutions; for this research, the qualitative design explores how schools utilize SEL data and seeks to improve this important data use within middle schools (Creswell, 2018). The current study is an initial exploration into the problem of practice which I have identified through anecdotal evidence and experiences. This study produces more information related to the status of SEL data use within middle schools.

**Research Questions**

To address the problem of practice, I investigated the following research questions: 1) In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate? And 2) How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use? To initially investigate these questions, I invited the SEL screener leads at all middle schools in SPS to complete a survey. This information guided the second component of this study which was a series of three case studies with consenting participants to further unpack their experiences utilizing SEL data within their schools. As an additional component of research, I also reviewed school artifacts including SEL calendars and lessons, MTSS charts/protocols, SEL-related survey

drafts, etc. Each of these inquiry approaches provided insight into the SEL data use in middle schools (see Figure 4).

#### **Figure 4**

##### *Problem of Practice to Data Collection*



#### **Study Design**

The study was conducted in the context of a sequential qualitative research design. Qualitative research utilizes open-ended questions and responses to explore and understand a social or human problem within its natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By utilizing multiple sources of data, this qualitative study encouraged participants to share their ideas freely and allowed the researcher to review the data, make sense of it, and organize it into themes. Rather than being prescriptive and driven by the researcher, qualitative research allows the researcher to learn about the problem of practice and to address it by gathering information. Furthermore, qualitative research encourages inquirers to reflect about their own role and their personal background, culture, and experiences as part of the interpretation of the data. This is essential as an internal researcher within this study.

#### **Problem of Practice Study Context**

This study was conducted within a large suburban school district located in a Mid-Atlantic state, referred to as SPS. The school district educates over 180,000 students and includes 28 high schools, 23 middle schools and three secondary schools (7-12 grade). The school district's strategic plan is currently focused around four main goals: student success, caring

culture, premier workforce, and resource stewardship (Suburban Public Schools, n.d.a).

Following the school closures in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SPS shifted their focus to a safe and healthy return to school through the implementation of the ESSER III Spending Plan, highlighting unfinished learning and student academic and social, emotional, mental health needs as their priorities (Office of Research, 2022). Research shows this work is especially important at the middle school level, noting that middle school students have unique characteristics and developmental aspects that need to be supported to help them negotiate the impact of puberty on their intellectual, social, and emotional lives (Aidman & Price, 2018).

### **Participants**

After obtaining Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Science (IRB-SBS) approval from the University of Virginia (UVA) and through the SPS's Office of Research, some adjustments were made to ensure my study design complied with both the expectations of SPS and UVA. My initial intention was to obtain a list of the SEL screener leads at each middle school within SPS and invite them to participate in the survey and follow up case study.

However, per SPS guidelines, my sponsor was required to communicate with participants on my behalf, and due to the shortened timeline from SPS, the initial informational email went to the 26 middle school SEL screener leads the day before the invitation to complete the survey was sent.

These participants were identified through the district's database of serving as the staff member who oversees the SEL screener administration and data use within the building; however, their names nor contact information was shared with me as the researcher. These participants include administrators, counselors, and teachers who have been identified by building principals to serve in this capacity. While there are roughly 4,000 middle school staff members within SPS, this



sample will represent those staff members who should have the best knowledge base to provide information regarding SEL data within their schools.

Following the administration of the survey, participants were asked to participate in the case study portion of the design and identify their name and school for further research. The two participants who completed the survey responded to this request, and a third was asked based on my knowledge of her school's SEL and MTSS programs (see Table 1). These three schools and participants represent three different populations of students, locations within the district, and varying levels of SEL and MTSS systems as identified through my prior knowledge. While these participants are knowledgeable of SEL data and MTSS within their schools, they are not representative of the entire population of schools within SPS. I was able to send confirmation of their participation in the case study interviews and document reviews since their names were shared with me through the survey.

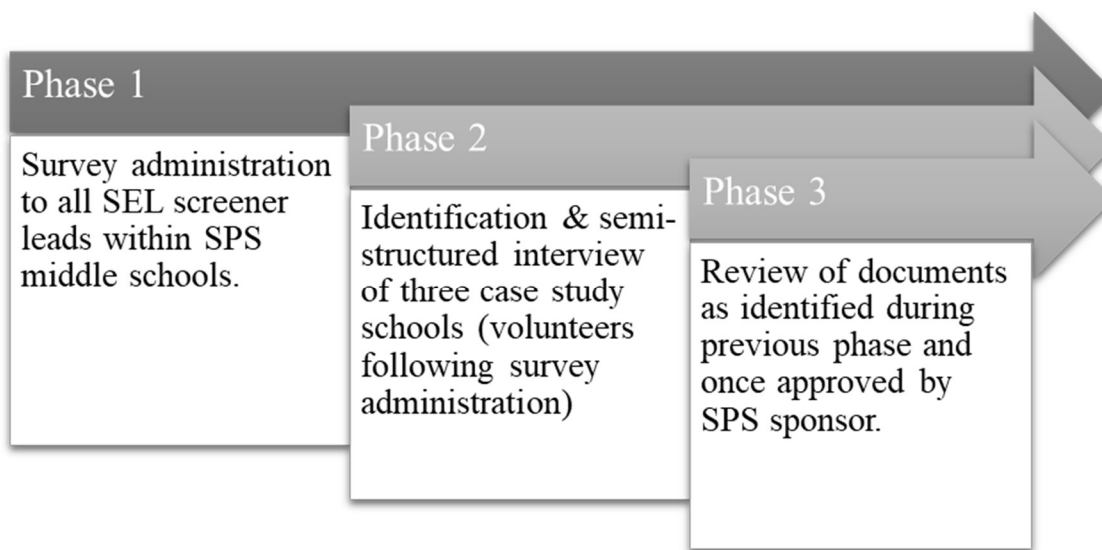
Participants did not receive incentives for their participation; however, I did write thank you notes in appreciation for their time.

**Table 1**  
*Case Study Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Role at School</b>	<b>Years in Role</b>
Cynthia Archer	North Street Middle School (NSMS)	Social Worker	11 years
Siobhan Hartwell	Point of Rocks Middle School (PRMS)	School Counselor	7 years
Matthew Moore	Meadowview Heights Secondary School (MHSS)	System of Support Advisor	2 years

**Figure 5**

## Phases of Data Collection

**Data Collection**

After receiving IRB-SBS approval through UVA and through the school district's Office of Research, data was collected through a survey of SEL screener leads and three follow up case studies to look more closely at the work within the middle schools (see Figure 5). A survey was utilized to begin the data collection process because it provides expansive data that shows the perspective of many stakeholders, in this case the SEL screener leads, who are knowledgeable about their schools' SEL data use. As the researcher, I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of the work done at each of the schools within the case study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For this study, I developed a survey protocol to gather data (see Appendix A and Appendix B) as well as a pilot plan. Due to SPS limitations, the survey was not piloted prior to administration to the sample population.

To reach the participants, my SPS sponsor sent an introductory email including the purpose of the study and invitation to complete the survey the following week. He then sent the survey link via email. SPS limited survey administration to a two-week period which meant only

**Table 2**

*Data Collection Timeline*

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Phase of Data Collection</b>
Survey	All Middle School SEL Screener Leads	Two Weeks	Phase 1
Case Study - Interviews	3 SEL Screener Leads	Two Weeks, extended to Four Weeks	Phase 2
Case Study - Document Review	3 SEL Screener Leads/Schools	Two Weeks, extended to Four Weeks	Phase 3

one follow up email was sent by my SPS sponsor prior to the closing of the survey window. The data collection process was anonymous so continued requests to participants for completion of the survey were sent to all invited participants since I am unable to follow up directly with participants who have not replied. The final question on the survey offered participants the opportunity for a deeper dive into SEL practices through case study to explore their experiences and perspectives within their schools. Participants self-identified if they were willing to participate in the case study. Since I did not receive three respondents willing to participate, I utilized specific criteria to invite case study participation. The first participant volunteered from North Street Middle School, and the second participant volunteered from Meadowview Heights Secondary School. Knowing these schools have similar demographics and are located near to

one another within SPS, I invited a third participant from a different area in the district, Point of Rock Middle School, who has self-reported high proficiency for the use of SEL data. The timeline for data collection is outlined in Table 2.

Following the survey administration, I conducted a case study of the three schools to gather more in-depth information of the work being done. Due to SPS limitations, this research procedure was limited to include interviews and document reviews within a three-week period following survey administration. Protocols for each of these data collection activities are in Appendices D and E. Through each of these activities, my goal was to observe evidence of the implementation of the processes described in the survey results regarding how SEL is used within schools. Survey questions were aimed at receiving direct and specific information regarding SEL data within schools while the case studies were developed to allow participants the opportunity to further explain the SEL work within schools. Through both these processes, I was able to gather relevant data to further answer the research questions.

### ***Survey***

I developed the survey instrument (see Appendix B) and intended to pilot it through a process to ensure reliability of the obtained data and validity of the inferences based on that data. The survey described the purpose of the study to the participants and included the informed consent agreements (embedded in the survey). It is inclusive of four sections that focus on SEL at the school-level: SEL programs and instruction at school, SEL data, SIIP/ESSER, and demographics. There are 29 open-ended questions that were asked in specific order, and the survey offers the participant the opportunity to add additional comments at the end of each section. While I developed the survey instrument utilizing the CASEL Framework (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2022), SPS did not approve the pilot process, so

the initial unvalidated version of the survey was administered to the participants; therefore the survey may lack validity. The pilot study can be reviewed in Appendix C for potential future use.

Identified participants received a pre-notification email asking for their participation and including the purpose of the survey one business day ahead of the survey distribution. The pre-notification email also included informed consent and was duplicated in the email including the survey link. Because the survey was anonymous, I was not able to track each school's response. All responses were collected through Qualtrics XM (Provo, UT), and all participants received a follow up email during the second week of administration requesting their participation. Survey responses were downloaded and exported into Google Drive, then all data was downloaded and stored within a password protected UVA Box. Data was analyzed and interpreted, guiding the following work and focus of the case study.

### *Case Study*

Following the survey and the responses of those who were willing to provide additional information in their school setting, I scheduled virtual interviews with the SEL screener leads to further explore the SEL data work being done. Prior to conducting the interviews, I obtained signed informed consent agreements and preliminarily reviewed the survey data to inform the case study interviews and identify any additional questions based upon the anonymous information shared by all survey respondents. The case study was inclusive of three schools who volunteered on the last question of the survey or met the criteria listed above. Their names were confidential, and pseudonyms were immediately assigned to ensure confidentiality. SPS initially limited the window for conducting the case studies to the two weeks following the survey administration; however, an extension was given due to the timing of obligations within schools and the difficulty with scheduling during case study participants' time. Written informed consent

was received prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews via Zoom, and pseudonyms were assigned to the SEL screener leads and their schools to ensure anonymity. These semi-structured interviews with the SEL screener lead at the schools provided an in-depth understanding of the work with SEL data within the school (see Appendix E). Following the interviews, the recording was transcribed using Otter.ai and uploaded into UVA Box. Additionally, the transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose for analysis.

The interviews led to a document review where documents discussed during the interviews were sent to my SPS sponsor for approval, then sent to me for review. Through the document review, I took notes of the components of each of these documents and how they support the work done within the school using the document review protocol in Appendix D. All data was downloaded and stored within a password protected UVA Box, then the data analysis was performed.

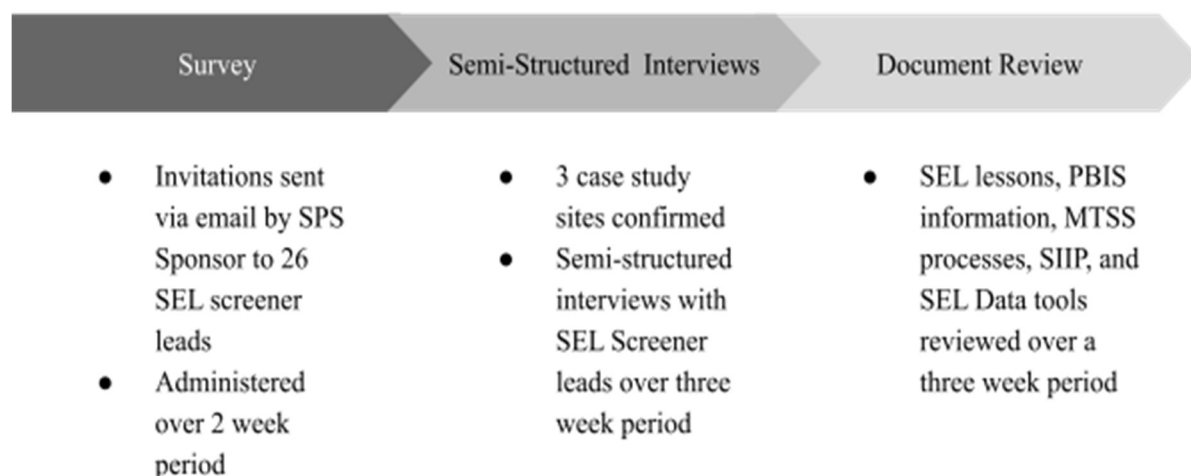
### **Data Analysis**

This section describes the processes used to analyze the data collected from the survey, case study interviews and document reviews (see Figure 6). I used *a priori* codes that were established following the review of literature, and I analyzed the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For data validation, I structured my research to include multiple sources (Glesne, 1999; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017), including the survey and numerous interviews. I asked participants to verify the interview transcripts and to read the final documents to confirm accuracy while also paraphrasing and summarizing throughout the interviews to ensure validity. I have spent enough time over the last 15 years in schools and with educators, so my relatability and institutional knowledge within SPS allowed me to obtain honest and comprehensive data. I

also kept a journal throughout the process to note any biases and to identify data themes as they began to emerge.

**Figure 6**

*Capstone Data Sources*



***Survey and Semi-Structured Interview Transcriptions***

The survey was administered using the Qualtrics software system. Survey results were downloaded into Google Sheets and coded using *a priori* codes developed ahead of the case study. Due to a limited number of responses, two, case study sites were determined using the above criteria, and qualitative research procedures were limited by SPS. The case study included semi-structured interviews and document reviews. The interviews were conducted and recorded in Zoom and transcriptions were compiled using Otter.ai. Once reviewed by the researcher, they were sent to the participants for review and member checking.

***Qualitative Coding***

This research design produced a tremendous amount of information from different sources, and therefore it was essential for me to synthesize the information in a way that allowed me to combine, integrate, and summarize the data (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The data

analysis included three phases: first reviewing and analyzing the survey results, then analyzing the interview transcripts and document review protocols by coding the data and noting broad themes, and finally integrating the two (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As Creswell and Creswell describe, it was essential to report on the findings from the analysis of both components of qualitative data to determine whether there is convergence or divergence between the two sources (2018) and what additional research should be conducted in the future.

**Codes for Case Study, Document Review and Survey Results.** The codebook (see Appendix F) was created with *a priori* codes that aligned to and are based upon existing literature and this study's conceptual framework which links school leadership to professional development, data literacy, and the use of data within middle schools (Schildkamp, 2019). Codes also emerged following initial coding and were added to the analysis as emergent codes.

### ***Coding Procedures***

The survey results, transcripts, and document review protocols were uploaded securely into Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis program. I used Dedoose to support data organization and analysis; this included entering the *a priori* codes and going through the coding process while also making notes and initial interpretations during the coding process. I read through the transcripts and document review protocols three times: first gaining a general understanding of the data, next coding and labeling the text with *a priori* codes; then rereading to add emergent codes and noting preliminary themes as notes when they began to emerge.

### ***Analyzing for Patterns and Themes***

After coding the data and reviewing my reflective memos, my focus shifted towards identifying connections among the data, codes, and notes, and noted central ideas, commonalities, and themes. This analytical phase aimed at illuminating central ideas,



commonalities, and overarching themes embedded within the dataset. The exploration involved a meticulous examination and interpretation of the data, with a keen eye on noting any emerging conclusions. Employing a spiraling methodology, I engaged in a repetitive cycle of activities, reading and re-reading transcripts, jotting down reflective memos, and identifying recurring phrases and common themes. Subsequently, I organized these themes systematically, allowing for a holistic understanding of the interconnected patterns. This process supported a deep exploration of the data, ultimately leading to the drawing of informed and meaningful conclusions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before beginning the study, I received approval from UVA's IRB-SBS. This process ensured my study's alignment with authorized, ethical research practices. Once I received IRB-SBS approval, I also sought approval from SPS's Office of Research, inclusive of an SPS director's sponsorship to conduct the study within SPS. SPS's authorization included conditions to ensure my research fulfills SPS's trust and high standards to benefit the school district and align with their Strategic Plan. To gain support and trust from participants, I was explicit about the nature of the study, the purpose, and my own commitment to this work and their confidentiality. All participants and their schools were assigned unique code numbers and pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Additionally, I frequently engaged in conversations with a critical peer, my committee chair, and a committee member to confirm my communication and representation of the study were accurate and aligned to my proposal.

### **Researcher as Scholar Practitioner**

Due to my positionality as an administrator within the same district as the participants, ethical issues may arise as part of this study, but I attempted to anticipate and address them

throughout the work. It is important for me to acknowledge my own expectations, biases, and assumptions that surfaced throughout this work. I pride myself on building strong relationships in my professional life which will convey through my research to protect the research participants, build trust, and promote the integrity of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants are professional colleagues of mine, and therefore there is minimal imbalance of power because I am not anyone's supervisor or employee. Furthermore, I know and respect the norms and systems that exist within middle schools in our district and will utilize that to build trust with my participants. The focus of this research, SEL data use, is relevant to schools and to the district, and I was able to disclose the purpose of the study and the problem of practice so that participants understood the benefit of this work while also understanding that I will not be using the information to undermine the work of any schools or serve as an informant or whistleblower for the district. I was straightforward and honest in my communication with all participants and stakeholders because I believe our collaboration and partnership support this important research.

The purpose of my work is to understand what schools are doing and utilize my knowledge and experiences to provide recommendations for the future. I do believe my role as a scholar practitioner allowed me to display my dedication to the work and my interest in seeking reliable data which is in line with the pragmatist paradigm. While I am deeply involved and invested in the SEL work within my own school, I recognize that this work may not be as important within other schools. In focusing this research to only middle schools within one district, I can see how similar settings with similar populations and resources are utilizing SEL data without creating extensive limitations. I recognize the importance of incorporating SEL data into the decision-making processes within schools as much as we incorporate the achievement

data. However, this may also contribute to my expectations that all schools follow the same protocols as my own.

Through this work, I did assume that schools are following the guidelines set out by district offices. By including a research question about barriers to SEL data use, I can acknowledge this limitation to support schools that may not be doing the same work that is expected of them. I also assumed that my colleagues who participate in the survey are the most appropriate to be doing so, and that we have a shared understanding of SEL and what it looks like within our schools. I also assumed my colleagues would participate in the survey and would provide truthful answers that can be substantiated by the case study follow up. While surveys are dependent upon participant honesty, the case studies allowed me to confirm the validity of the results. While notable, these assumptions do not invalidate the findings of this study as it is meant to be the first step in identifying how SEL data is used within schools which will inform next steps for future research.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The first limitation came from the conditions set forth by SPS's IRB, including the time period for collecting data and the dissemination of the survey link. These structures resulted in only two people completing the online survey rather than the intended twenty-six participants. Following the shortened window for survey data collection, I had to seek out participants for the case study rather than them volunteering for participation. The sample of participants is not representative of all middle schools in SPS; however, the participants do represent varying schools and systems within SPS. I did remain faithful to SPS' timeline and communication restrictions, which meant that the intended participants received the survey from someone that was not me. This may have resulted in

participants feeling the survey was a burden or would be used by SPS instead of by me, and showed unfamiliarity with the SPS sponsor since many of the intended participants are known colleagues to me.

The timeline by SPS also meant participation in the case study was limited to semi-structured interviews and document reviews and did not include any observations of SEL-related activities at the identified schools. With only a two-week window to conduct interviews and review documents, the case study participants were burdened by their own professional workloads making scheduling interviews difficult, but then also making it difficult to schedule observations due to the timing of any SEL-related meetings. Equally as limiting as the timeline is that the participants who are selected by their schools to be the SEL screener leads have varying roles within their schools and may have an implicit bias that influences their perspectives - such as a clinician thinking predominantly from the mental health perspective while a teacher may think from an instructional perspective. These varying perspectives as well as the limitations of their own capacity as an influence within their building may impact the information they know or can share with me for school-wide initiatives. While the participants were knowledgeable and provided useful data, their limited perspectives and answers to my interview questions thereby limited my ability to have a robust, saturated data set for this study. I reviewed the recordings and transcripts several times to glean as much information as possible, and requested documents that display how the schools are using SEL data through their processes, but this did not fully include the varying perspectives of those involved in SEL data use within the middle schools. For example, NSMS's SEL screener lead is the school social worker and has no connections nor informed perspective of Tier 1 instruction at her school. She was able to provide lessons and calendars that are NSMS specific, but her insights into how SEL data are used did not include

building-level information. A final limitation is that the expectations of MTSS and SEL programs within SPS schools are few which results in a limited ability to compare similar programs across schools due to varying levels of implementation and fidelity. Some schools implement these programs and systems with fidelity while others do not. This information should be taken into consideration for future research and exploration.

### **Delimitations**

There were delimitations to this study. The first delimitation is that I limited my study to SPS's middle schools only. I chose this level because of my familiarity with the programs and expectations, as well as the importance of SEL at this age level (Aidman & Price, 2018; Allbright et al., 2019; Kautz et al., 2021). It is unclear if SEL at the high school or elementary levels would look differently, but reviewing this would have extended the timeline of the study and may have resulted in an inability to triangulate data comprehensively. Additionally, this study included three case studies which were inclusive of semi-structured interviews and document reviews. Due to the SPS limitations, I wanted to focus on quality interviews and document reviews which I was able to do. While each participant referred to team meetings where they discuss SEL data regularly and with a group of knowledgeable peers, I did not conduct observations in these settings. Observing these meetings could prove to be valuable for SEL data use within middle schools in future studies.

### **Timeline**

This research was conducted during Fall 2023 following UVA IRB-SBS approval being granted on April 24, 2023. SPS approval was granted on September 12, 2023, and addended for extension on November 10, 2023. This meant data collection was limited to the month of October 2023, but I received the extension to be able to continue through November 17, 2023, if

needed. The survey was administered from October 2-16, 2023, and the case studies were conducted from October 31-November 7, 2023, following an extension of the IRB approval.

### **Summary**

This study was designed to investigate two research questions: 1) In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate? And 2) How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use? By utilizing the sequential qualitative research approach, data was collected through a survey of middle school SEL screener leads and a follow up case study inclusive of interviews and document reviews to obtain a comprehensive understanding of SEL data within middle schools in SPS. Data was analyzed using *a priori* codes, member checking, critical peer engagement, and triangulation methods to enhance the accuracy of the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Gathering and analyzing data this way allowed me to generate findings that answer the research questions as presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretation

This sequential qualitative research study aims to develop a greater understanding of how SEL data are utilized by middle school staff to inform practices and make decisions about student support. Having seen firsthand the ways in which SEL data are and are not used within my own middle schools, I focused this study on how SEL screener leads report using SEL data to inform decision-making practices. This problem of practice has evolved following the COVID-19 pandemic in which school districts and legislators have allocated resources to support students' social and emotional wellness, while also requiring schools to collect and use relevant data for student support. These initiatives have left many schools and educators with questions about what to do with SEL data, thereby necessitating this study to inform the body of research around SEL data use. Data were collected from a survey, interviews, and document reviews to better understand and explore how middle schools use SEL data. Analysis of the data gathered in this study focused on answering the following research questions:

- RQ1: In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate?
- RQ2: How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?

First, I discuss how middle school SEL screener leads report using SEL data to inform decision-making within their schools among instruction, school culture, and climate. Next, I describe the patterns for SEL data use across middle schools. Then, I present themes in the barriers that exist within this work. It is important to note that all study participants' accounts are included as a means of triangulation. I finish the chapter with assertions made, based on the findings and interpretations.

**Finding 1: SEL data-driven decision-making in the areas of instruction, school culture and climate varies significantly across middle school settings.**

***Point of Rocks Middle School***

Point of Rocks Middle School (PRMS) has historically been a high-performing school. The principal is an experienced middle school principal and has returned to PRMS this year after serving as an assistant principal at PRMS several years ago. The SEL screener lead, “Siobhan Hartwell”, has been at PRMS for 7 years as a school counselor, having previously served as a teacher and instructional coach at another school.

Siobhan describes SEL as being incorporated across the whole building. She described how their new principal has been really focused on SEL and has a school-wide expectation for SEL within every classroom. Instructionally, each teacher is supposed to be using the three signature CASEL practices of the inclusive welcoming, student engagement, and the reflection at the end of each lesson. Furthermore, PRMS has Ram Time every other day for 90 minutes where teachers do not focus on academics but instead build community with their students, deliver lessons on SEL topics like inclusivity, responsibility, accountability, etc. and all students are receiving the same message with common language. These lessons circle around the CASEL competencies, the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Matrix, and timely lessons like how to prioritize their workloads or how to de-stress.

During Ram time, counselors also went into classrooms and conducted a lesson at the beginning of the year, talking with students about their role as well as the roles of adults within the building. Siobhan and her team created a student survey where they collected student-specific information: the names that they prefer to be called, what pronouns they use, something they are really good at or something they want to get better at. The survey also asked questions about how



students feel about their friendships and who some of their friends are at PRMS. Students were also given the opportunity to self-identify a need or interest in the small groups facilitated by some of the staff in the building, including executive functioning support, managing emotions, mentoring, or leadership opportunities.

The expectations for SEL and data use at PRMS also permeate meetings, including interdisciplinary teams, MTSS team, clinical team, and the administrative team. There is a standing agenda item at each meeting where the team looks at student specific SEL data to determine what the team needs to do to support them. Siobhan shared this structure has allowed PRMS to better form support groups and meet the needs of students because they have such specific SEL data for students. She shared that it has also helped teachers build better relationships with students since they are able to see quantitative data from the SEL screener where a student's perceptions of school and themselves may stand: "That's the power of the team, you know? They should know the students."

Siobhan also described how the SEL-screener data enlightened the school team about what students need. During the 2022-2023 school year, their SIIP/ESSER goals focused on staff knowledge of SEL and engaging in SEL practices. They focused their efforts on teaching self-management skills to students and building connections between staff and students. Siobhan shared that by the end of the school year, students identified a 15% increase in feeling connected to adults in school. When asked about how these goals impacted the school climate, Siobhan shared:

I think [COVID-19] made it really hard for students to feel connected and adults to feel like they could connect. So I think this was a way for all of us to kind of relearn some of those skills... I think there's a lot of assumption at Point of Rocks, that our scores are

very high, we always, you know, we're always the top in the county for science and our students, generally speaking, do school really well and perform highly. So I don't know that there's always an awareness that just because students are doing well means that they're feeling well.

This interview excerpt shows the important realization for the whole PRMS community after seeing the SEL screener data: that students were not feeling connected which increased the focus on SEL as part of instruction and school climate. Siobhan also shared that SEL has been integrated into the MTSS processes because the wellness conversations are just as important as the academics.

### ***Meadowview Heights Secondary School***

Meadowview Heights Secondary School (MHSS) is a 7-12 grades school located in a very diverse area of SPS. The school serves over 3,000 students with a free and reduced lunch program population of just over 30%. Students from the local military base choose to attend this school that is home to state champion sports teams and several specialty programs for high school students. The principal is in his first year in SPS having served as a principal for the last 11 years in another district. MHSS has maintained its accreditation through the state, but this year there are concerns about the student achievement gaps in mathematics as well as chronic absenteeism and the college, career and civic readiness index, all of which contribute to the accreditation requirements from the state (Mid-Atlantic Department of Education, 2023). The focus has shifted from the overall school climate and community to these areas of concern.

The SEL screener lead, “Matthew Moore,” is the middle school Systems of Support Advisor (SOSA) and shares the role with his high school counterpart. He is in his second year as SOSA and his first year overseeing the SEL screener. At MHSS, SEL looks different from a

traditional middle school in SPS because it is tailored to students grades 7-12. Matthew described SEL instruction at MHSS as being a 30-minute lesson once a week during the embedded advisory block that is typically pertaining to the school's core values, P.R.I.D.E.: prepared, resilient, inclusive, dependable, engaged. He shared that during his time at MHSS, the lessons have included coping strategies, self-advocacy, and emotional regulation while also touching on social issues or current events. Matthew often works with the high school SOSA to create lessons that are appropriate for 12- to 18-year-olds while also including important announcements or activities required by the school and the district. Matthew shared that one of the biggest hurdles with this model of SEL instruction is that teachers do not always do the lessons, especially in high school advisories. Effort is put into making lessons appropriate for 7th to 12th grade, but teachers are not even giving it a chance, and therefore it becomes more difficult to even collect data or produce meaningful change when teachers are not doing the lessons. When asked what can be done, Matthew shared:

I think there has to be some sort of mandate where there's consequences for teachers that aren't doing it... I think the first thing [is that] we have to figure out why we are not all thinking that this is important. Like, I don't know what that looks like, from the top down. But there has to be some sort of communication to staff like this is as or more important than your content area. Whether it's just one little 30 minute lesson a week that maybe if you're out of your comfort zone, it's that important. Or, hey, you need to have it five minutes in the morning. I don't care if you have all seniors - check in and see how everybody's doing.

Matthew added that he knows some teachers are incorporating SEL strategies into their daily classrooms because he sees it and has done it himself when he was teaching, adding five minutes

at the beginning of lessons to check in with students and get to know them. Beyond that, Matthew shared there is limited fidelity to SEL instruction at MHSS: perhaps this is due to a high school mindset in which the staff is focused on content more than emotions or social issues, or perhaps it is just the school culture.

When asked about SEL data, Matthew described how there are tiers of support both academically and social-emotionally at MHSS but there is little use of the SEL screener data when identifying the needs of students or implementing programs for them. Matthew shared that “right now, it's probably just the people that look at the data...it's not disseminated. I think it may be shown to the staff, and that's it”. The issue with this, he continued, is that the only people thinking about SEL screener data are the staff members who are dealing with student crises and behavior.

At MHSS, the school climate is such that “if a teacher sees that 50% of our kids don't have a trusted adult or something, that sucks, but then they forget about it and move on, teach the next lesson, and they hope that they're doing okay with their group of students”. For Matthew, though, data changed the dialogue for conversations with students, acknowledging this was also true for many counselors and administrators: “We think about these things... it's always on my mind to ask a kid ‘who's an adult you trust to talk to?’ I ask every single student since we saw that data - and I'm way more cognizant of it now... like there's really kids that feel that way?”. He further added that if anything, this data is on the minds of people who do similar work to him. As a former teacher at MHSS, Matthew also acknowledged that the SEL screener data is not user-friendly to many of his colleagues at MHSS and there has been limited opportunities for the staff to understand how to navigate the information.

When asked about the MTSS process at MHSS, Matthew shared that to him, MHSS is not in a place where the staff is able to talk about students and their needs. “Somebody always says SPS is data rich, but knowledge poor... we have so much data in this county, and even in our school, but then we're not using it for what it could really be used for”. Matthew said that MTSS is relatively new to MHSS, and people are not necessarily on the same page, especially about particular students. There are limited groups and tiered support for students beyond academics, touching only on small groups or individual plans that may exist for students as identified by school staff (MHSS Tiers of Support, Document Review, December 2, 2023). Matthew runs a ten-week boys’ group where students focus on community building and self-awareness. Through a pre and post questionnaire, Matthew asks the students to identify the calming and coping strategies they use while also probing students for additional skills they want to learn. This questionnaire serves to guide the curriculum for the group while also being used to show progress and development over time. Matthew said that while he sees this group as meaningful and supportive for the students who are part of it, he also shared that there is not a hub or a central place to find support for students when so many need support at MVSS. He continues by saying “everyone is playing whack-a-mole” instead of planning for student needs. This interview and the review of MHSS’s documents show how Matthew’s role of SOSA bridges all three tiers of MTSS, but that there is a gap in the systems that exist to support students’ needs.

### ***North Street Middle School***

North Street Middle School (NSMS) is the newest middle school in SPS, opening its doors in 2013 in the southern part of SPS. The principal is in his first year, and he previously served as an administrator in three other schools within the district: an alternative school, a

middle school, and a high school, and has formal training as a school counselor. With a population of just under 1,000, NSMS is home to an advanced academics center, an intellectual disabilities center, and a free and reduced percentage of 24%. The SEL screener lead, “Cynthia Archer,” is in her third year at NSMS as a school social worker, but her first year as the SEL screener lead. She inherited the role from a recently retired Director of Student Services, who was minimally involved in the MTSS process and relied on other staff members to administer the SEL screener.

Despite the significant changes in staffing at NSMS, there are existing SEL programs that Cynthia described from her perspective as a clinician. There is an embedded advisory period every other day where teachers lead Responsive Advisory Meetings and teach lessons identified by school administration. Cynthia had limited knowledge of what SEL looks like within the classroom, sharing that she did not think SEL data was used to plan the lessons since the SEL screener data for Fall 2023 was only recently made available to schools. It should be noted that previous year SEL data for schools and individual students have been available to the SEL screener leads since the screener was first administered in Fall 2021. In acknowledging Cynthia’s understanding of the availability of the data, perhaps she had not reviewed it prior to her taking on the role of SEL screener lead this year. The lessons were made by a teacher who had firsthand experience of what the needs of students were based upon her own classroom and the reports of her peers, but that teacher has since retired, and Cynthia is not sure who is planning the lessons and where they come from now. From her perspective, there is limited school-wide SEL and even less SEL data use beyond the student services and MTSS teams.

As a clinician and in conjunction with the school counselors, Cynthia described how the SEL screener data informs interventions and programming done at the tier 2 and tier 3 levels:

As far as interventions go, we are going to be using the SEL screener data to help inform groups, mentoring, and figuring out which students need mentors. And we are going to be trying to bring some training in around certain areas for teachers to help with some of our areas that were reported as non-strengths.

Cynthia has embraced her role as the SEL screener lead, diving into the data and wanting to use it to make improvements to existing structures at NSMS. A key member of the MTSS team, Cynthia has partnered with the Intervention Specialist who supports interventions and attendance at NSMS, to use the data to put into place concrete programs and plans to reach the needs of students, specifically sharing that the biggest area of need from the SEL screener this year was a Sense of Belonging by students.

Cynthia emphasized how important it has been to use the SEL data to problem-solve and inform teachers when talking about specific students - this is a change from previous years at NSMS where SEL data was rarely used. With the data from the SEL screener, Cynthia regularly attends interdisciplinary team meetings to help teachers better understand the specific social-emotional, behavioral and wellness needs of students. Using an Intervention Planning Document, Cynthia and the team review student-specific information and brainstorm next steps for student support, whether it be academic or wellness (Document Review, December 2, 2023). She shared that an important next step will also be teaching the staff how to navigate the SEL screener data as part of the intervention planning process. This is also important because as a clinician, Cynthia does not typically plan for tier 1 instruction or supports - her responsibilities are in tier 2 and tier 3. Equipped staff with the knowledge and skills to access then use the data within their own classrooms is an important component of school-wide implementation of SEL.

### ***Similarities and Differences***

As noted in the methods section of this study, after coding the interview transcripts and reviewing the documents, several themes began to emerge, specifically in the area of using SEL data and the barriers that exist at each school. A missing component of the data is the requirements set forth by SPS in terms of the SEL screener lead: none of the study participants shared the expectations or trainings they underwent in order to perform their responsibilities successfully despite the expectation that each SEL screener lead attend multiple professional development sessions for the role. The district has expectations for SEL screener leads and for how schools are expected to use the SEL screener data within the MTSS process, specifically that schoolwide teams should review the data for tier 1 while the MTSS teams should be reviewing individual student data after each screening window. Additionally, SEL screener leads are encouraged to share the SEL data with all staff through provided resources, and further are encouraged to provide support to teacher teams (like curriculum or grade level teams) as they review SEL data and resources available. All SEL screener leads within SPS are required to attend three trainings a year that address data literacy and action planning, and there is a required annual training for teachers, clinicians and administrators that covers data literacy.

Matthew and Cynthia both acknowledged their own limited perspectives of SEL and MTSS because of their roles and the systems that exist at their schools, while Siobhan has extensive knowledge of how SEL data are used as a prominent member of her school's MTSS team. Each of these middle schools look different and have differing leadership and priorities, but they all describe how the SEL data they collect from the SEL screener and from school stakeholders inform the lessons done at least weekly at each school. Furthermore, each SEL screener lead referenced the SEL data directly dictated ESSER/SIIP goals during the 2022-2023 school year and thereby informed the SIIP goals for the 2023-2024 school year; and it is



commonplace and best practices within schools to engage in regular check-ins with students. Each of these similar practices are essential components of the first tier of MTSS.

### ***Summary***

As evidenced through the case study interviews and document reviews, middle schools approach the use of SEL data to drive decision-making in a variety of ways. While some schools have developed a school culture and climate inclusive of systems that embrace SEL through all components of the day, other schools use SEL data minimally or have competing priorities or programs that neglect the data. Each SEL screener lead projected a positive belief towards the value of SEL within their school, and shared constructive and realistic ways for how SEL data use can be improved and what impact that may have on their schools. Furthermore, SEL screener leads alluded to the importance of collaboration with other members of the school team in order to make the work happen. Only one lead emphasized the impact of building leadership on this collaboration and prioritization of SEL data use, supporting the notion that the beliefs and perceptions of the building principal towards this work significantly impacts the success of SEL programs within schools (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Balmer, 2020; Drury et al., 2021). It is important to keep these findings in mind when evaluating SEL data use within middle schools.

**Finding 2: Across middle school settings and despite common barriers, SEL data is used to inform the first tier of MTSS.**

Each middle school SEL screener lead described the ways in which the SEL screener data was used at their school, furthermore, noting what inhibits the use of data beyond school-wide initiatives.

***Subfinding 1: Middle schools with strong MTSS integrate SEL data into all tiers.***

At PRMS, the school team has developed a strong MTSS framework in which the core team collaborates regularly and impacts the work done throughout the building for all students and involving all staff. Siobhan described the MTSS hub:

It has our PBIS matrix, it has our MTSS flowchart, it has our special education data collection pages right on it by each team. You can click right into their agendas and their kid talk forms and updated attendance lists. So there's just one hub where teachers can go in and see everything including the data, recent actions, observations around academics, concerns around positive staff connections. Teachers can fill in the dates of what they're looking for... [Our MTSS Coordinator] runs a biweekly list of students of concern so people that are off team can see who we're talking about and get access to that. And then this year, we look at those every time that we meet as an MTSS team. And generally the meetings have had an academic focus, but every other meeting is just about wellness and behavior. So we've finally dedicated that time to be able to have just wellness conversations because a lot of the kids need it.

This system allows for all PRMS staff to have access to the SEL data and programs developed for all students, and allows the staff to plan and document progress or interventions done by students. Creating a system that is inclusive of more than just the core MTSS team allows PRMS to make SEL work everyone's work. Siobhan's description of the MTSS process as well as her principal's involvement echoes the literature that connects MTSS and SEL success to principal knowledge and understanding (Drury et al., 2021).

In contrast, MHSS has a limited MTSS process as described by Matthew, in which all the core members of a student's education are not on the same page:

We don't have a working system where I know exactly where I fit in when a kid every time and what exactly I should be doing. A lot of people, I think it feels like we're in silos a little bit too much. And so we can have all the data we want... but it doesn't seem like we're super organized as a team yet to do true MTSS.

As the SOSA, Matthew's role is to support students and serve as a liaison between teachers and administrators, often being the first point of contact for a student who needs support. Without an understanding of the various systems of support that exist at MHSS. Matthew shared that he does have collaborative relationships with the identified MTSS lead, counselors, and administrators, but there is not a defined process for how to best navigate the many responsibilities of the adults in the building and how to direct teachers and families to access support.

### ***Summary***

Per SPS, the SEL screener lead must be involved in the MTSS process within the schools because of the necessity of the SEL screener data to be integrated into the processes of MTSS. However, the SEL screener leads had different perspectives as to their roles within the MTSS processes within their schools due to the varying implementation of MTSS at each school. PRMS's SEL screener lead and the review of their documents highlight successful integration of SEL data into their previously existing MTSS structures. This further means they have been able to implement SEL support across all tiers of their systems. While not as established as PRMS, the MTSS at NSMS demonstrates some implementation and integration of SEL data into their existing structures, and thereby are continuing to find ways to support students as they continue to understand their roles on the team. This is not the case for MHSS where the MTSS processes are in their infant stages. The MTSS team at MHSS operates independently because of the lack of structures for their work. These varying degrees of MTSS operations and adoption of SEL

data within their systems across middle schools suggest the importance of establishing and emphasizing MTSS to further increase SEL data use within middle schools.

***Subfinding 2: The most significant barriers inhibiting SEL data use in middle school are the MTSS Implementation and the Role of the SEL screener lead, staff buy-in, and access to resources.***

Middle schools within SPS have similar responsibilities when it comes to supporting the needs of their students. Given that each school is different, it would be expected for the barriers to be different across schools as well. However, the SEL screener leads describe similar barriers to SEL data use within their schools which are described as their role as the SEL screener lead within the MTSS system, the buy-in and ownership of staff within the building, and the ability to access the resources needed to productively use SEL data.

**MTSS Implementation and the Role of the SEL Screener Lead.** Each year, SPS principals are tasked with selecting a SEL screener lead to coordinate the administration and implementation of the screener. Requirements for the role include the lead be someone who serves on the school-wide MTSS team, can facilitate the administration and use of the SEL screener data, and act as a conduit for key screener updates and resources. This became a barrier for NSMS as the SEL screener lead is a clinician who openly shared that she had no knowledge of the responsibilities nor involvement in the SEL screener prior to taking on the role: “This is a disadvantage of having a clinician be the SEL screener lead because I don’t live in the tier one, it’s not what I do on a daily basis” (Archer, Interview, November 2, 2023). Cynthia described major barriers to the administration of the SEL screener, including teachers not administering it to their students. “I’ve never done a school-wide screener before, so I also didn’t know what I was doing. I still don’t.” Cynthia implied that one of the biggest barriers she faces as the SEL

screener role is more than understanding of what her responsibilities are, but also the inability to take the information and disseminate it in a meaningful way. If a principal selects a staff member for the role of SEL screener lead who may not be well-suited for the role, there exists an innate barrier for the success of the SEL screener lead and the fidelity to the requirements of this role set out by SPS.

On the other end of the spectrum is PRMS where Siobhan is the lead school counselor and serves as the SEL screener lead, regularly meeting with administration and serving on the MTSS committee. Teachers are used to receiving communication from her with directives for lessons, activities, students and data, and her team has integrated the SEL data into the MTSS system because she has an active role there as well. The differences in SEL screener lead roles impact the implementation and use of the SEL data (see Table 1). When the lead does not have political capital within the building, there is limited ability to make change on a whole-school level.

**Staff Buy-in.** A second significant barrier is that of staff buy-in. As alluded to by all three participants, some teachers stand in the way of the administration of the SEL screener. “Some teachers just didn’t do it” (Archer, Interview, November 2, 2023), meaning she had to track them down and have them administer it at a different time. At PRMS, Siobhan describes how many teachers do not feel comfortable or confident supporting SEL: “We’re trying really hard to not make all of this the Student Services team job, but rather all of our responsibilities, like we’re here to help them help students, right? Not that we don’t help students, but at the tier one level, we want [teachers] to feel confident in being able to support SEL” (Hartwell, Interview, October 31, 2023). Siobhan continued that the biggest hurdle she sees for SEL data use is teacher ownership:

Teachers at the secondary level are more content based, so they don't see SEL as part of their work. And I'm not saying that's true of all of them, but generally speaking, for secondary teachers, it's overwhelming. They have pacing guides, they feel like they feel like SEL is something they have to stop and do, not something that's just part of the lesson. And then just teachers own awareness of their social emotional states, right? And so when there are students that trigger us, whether it's because of the student or other things that have happened, how we respond is going to make a difference in how they respond. And I get it, I've been a classroom teacher, it's really hard. And as a counselor... there's a need for our own self-awareness.

Siobhan added that because of her principal's commitment to SEL, there has been improvements and more evidence of SEL integrated into classrooms, but it still often falls to the counselors to support teachers with the SEL work on an individual basis.

Matthew shared the same sentiments in describing the work at MHSS. The school culture at MHSS is not focused on SEL, and to him, teachers do not all think that social and emotional learning is important:

We have parents that opt out [from SEL] in the county, right? They opt out of these things. Like, 'I don't want anybody teaching my kid anything about emotions'...And then we also have teachers that work here that probably feel the same way, or they're just content driven minded people, they're really good at calculus so they teach it to students. But they probably wouldn't be a mentor. And they probably don't feel like they want to talk about social issues, because maybe that's not a comfort level for them.

Matthew went on to say that even with MHSS being a secondary school, there are just more adults that need to be persuaded and encouraged to review and use SEL data and implement SEL

programs within their classrooms. As someone who cares for the well-being of students, Matthew voiced his disappointment and inability to understand why other staff do not believe SEL is important.

**Resources.** Each SEL screener lead described their PBIS programs and activities, specifically noting core values that highlight positivity around each building. Each school also uses their embedded advisory period to deliver SEL lessons that are connected to the CASEL competencies and in line with SPS expectations for SEL. The core values at each school and the lessons are directly linked to the SIIP/ESSER plans that each school worked towards during the 2022-2023 school year. However, the ESSER funding ended in June 2023, and therefore many of the wellness activities these schools offered also ended or shifted significantly. At MHSS, Matthew shared that their PRIDE points system has limited rewards for students and therefore the program is minimally used now to highlight positive behavior of students. “We don’t have money and we try to get donations, but we lose buy-in... it’s now a month later and we haven’t given back to the kids yet”. Matthew also shared that previously, teachers were part of the SEL lesson planning and were paid for it through the ESSER funds; now no one wants to contribute because there is no financial incentive for them compounded by already lacking the time for it.

The same lack of resources has led to Siobhan and the counseling team at PRMS being tasked with making their SEL lessons:

Last year with the lessons, we had a team of teachers because we were able to pay them... So teachers were supporting the lessons and teachers know what's in the classroom the best, right? And they have thought authenticity and all those pieces to be able to write things for teachers... And this year, we don't have that as much. We tried to bring in teachers, but it was creating more work so... the three of us counselors are doing

it... I feel like the lessons are good; we're getting good feedback, but it's harder when it's not more authentically coming from classrooms. We lost that piece.

As she described what has changed due to the lack of funding, Siobhan mentioned that teachers are only willing to support what they see as necessary, which has resulted in teachers supporting some executive functioning groups, but she also notes their involvement has been because of intrinsic value and seeing the need.

Cynthia shared similar needs at NSMS: because there is limited staffing and limited time, they have not implemented groups and programs to support all the SEL needs of students they see from the SEL screener data. She also said a barrier has been not having someone who can train the whole school on how to use the data to implement SEL, let alone finding the time to offer the training. This is supported further by survey responses that note there are no programs to support student needs because there are not enough SEL team members and not enough time (Survey, October 2023). As each lead describes in at least one way, the lack of financial, staffing, and time resources directly impacts their school teams' ability to engage in data-driven action planning for SEL.

### ***Summary***

While barriers are a common factor in the implementation of any program within a school (Akinnusi, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2019; Stickle et al., 2019), three significant barriers were highlighted through the interviews with SEL screener leads that impact the implementation and use of SEL data within their schools. These include the role of the SEL screener lead role being one that needs to have the ability to have access to school-wide operations and a direct connection and role within MTSS; the lack of staff buy-in and support of SEL programs and data use; and access to financial and staffing resources to create and implement programs identified as



needs. Addressing and removing these barriers will lead to greater implementation and use of SEL data within these middle schools.

***Subfinding 3: School leader involvement leads to increased SEL data use.***

A missing component from much of the data within this study is that of the role of the principal within SEL data use. Previously discussed literature highlighted the importance of the building leader in implementation and accountability for MTSS and SEL work to be successful (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Balmer, 2020; Drury et al., 2021). Table 3 outlines the connections between each school’s MTSS system and their principal involvement.

**Table 3**  
*MTSS Systems by School*

School	MTSS System	Principal Involvement
North Street Middle School (NSMS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bi-weekly IDT meetings</li> <li>● Monthly core meetings</li> <li>● Existing Processes for support</li> </ul>	Minimal
Point of Rocks Middle School (PRMS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Weekly meetings, alternating academic and behavior/ emotional</li> <li>● MTSS HUB for all staff</li> </ul>	Signifiant
Meadowview Heights Secondary School (MHSS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Form for request</li> <li>● Monthly team meetings</li> </ul>	Minimal

At PRMS, Siobhan highlighted her principal’s investment in SEL, sharing that since he is “really big on the SEL piece,” there are clear expectations for teachers to be using SEL within their classrooms and instruction. She later described the MTSS team, noting that while the team includes the counselors, ESOL and special education department chairs and the Dean of Students, it also includes the whole administrative team. During their time together, the MTSS team at PRMS has data dialogues using a process they developed to review data at a high level then drill down to the subsets of what is happening with each student, then identify next steps for

students. Because the principal is involved in this process, there is accountability and follow-through at PRMS while also demonstrating this work is not just for clinicians or teachers.

At MHSS, the principal is new this year but has been focused on instruction and improving the school climate. Matthew shared that while he does not know what SEL looks like from the top down (meaning central office directives), he also has limited facetime with the principal when it comes to the work he does as SEL screener lead, within MTSS or for SEL planning. Although he did not outright say there is limited principal involvement in SEL, he did share that expectations need to be communicated to staff that SEL is as important as the academic content that teachers cover, and he shared that this needs to come from leadership - not from him. Matthew noted that the barrier of principal involvement leads to a lack of staff buy-in and accountability for conducting the surveys has impeded his ability to collect quality data that can be used to plan for improvements. He shared that he and some of his colleagues want to student generated SEL data (like tardies and perspectives on tardies), specifically gathering student input as to why they look the way they do at MHSS; however, he is unable to gather comprehensive schoolwide data to collaborate with the administrative team to problem solve and make improvements. When the principal is not involved or does not have a vision for how SEL should look, Matthew implied that it means it does not happen.

Similarly, at NSMS, Cynthia described how grade level administrators have been part of the intervention and attendance teams, interdisciplinary team meetings and MTSS, but there has been no involvement by the principal in the work she does as SEL screener lead.

### ***Summary***

Each of the middle schools in this study have principals who are new to the role at their school for the 2023-2024 school year. However, their involvement in SEL and SEL data use

varies to a marked degree. PRMS's principal is significantly involved in the SEL work and their systems and school-wide structures demonstrate that SEL data use is an integrated part of the work at their school. This may be due to his leadership style, his vision for the school or the pre-existing structures that were in place prior to his arrival to PRMS. MHSS and NSMS have principals who have minimal involvement in the SEL work, and their schools' structures show less school-wide implementation and systems that are underdeveloped. Their absence from the SEL processes may suggest to school staff that SEL is not as important as other priorities within the school, or that their own understanding of how to support and implement SEL is lacking. The variety in principal involvement in SEL data and the success of the structures involved can help to inform recommendations and leadership development to increase SEL data use within middle schools.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the findings that enabled me to explore the problem of practice in context and understand how three middle schools are using SEL data to inform their practices. The use of SEL data has been an ongoing problem of practice for schools and administrators as the pressures to address students' social-emotional wellness continues to exist following the COVID-19 pandemic. The schools in this study highlight the variety of ways school teams have been utilizing SEL data while also emphasizing the barriers that continue to inhibit successful practice. Themes that emerged highlight the conceptual framework (see Figure 2) in which school leadership, the SEL screener, data literacy and professional development impact SEL data use within middle schools. Furthermore, I examined the study's research questions:

- RQ1: In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate?
- RQ2: How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?

Individual analysis and collective triangulation of the data, inclusive of survey responses, transcripts of interviews and document reviews, enabled me to make the following assertions:

- SEL data-driven decision-making is inconsistent across middle schools in SPS in terms of instruction, school climate and culture. While some schools regularly use the SEL data to inform programming and instruction, others hardly make any reference to SEL data at all. There is variety as to the importance of SEL data within the school culture and climate, and therefore variety as to how much SEL data is used to impact happenings within a school.
- SEL data is used to guide tier 1 instruction during middle school embedded advisory time, but there is variety in how SEL data informs instruction beyond this block of time or for tiers 2 and 3.
- Similarly, middle schools with existing MTSS structures and processes are more likely to use SEL data to identify and support students through all tiers. This is especially true for the schools where their MTSS team meets regularly and involves stakeholders from across the building.
- The barriers that inhibit SEL data use are consistent across buildings: MTSS Implementation and the role of the SEL screener lead, staff buy-in, and access to resources. In schools where the SEL screener lead has a role within MTSS and

school-wide influence, there is more teacher ownership, involvement, and implementation of SEL school-wide.

- School leader involvement leads to increased SEL data use. For a school to successfully implement a SEL program, the principal needs to be involved in the processes and program.

Through these assertions and findings, three focus areas emerge for recommendations to implement and improve SEL data use within middle schools. These areas include integrating SEL into MTSS, acknowledging and overcoming the common barriers within middle schools, and ensuring the school leader's role with SEL data. In the fifth and final chapter, I connect my findings, interpretations, and assertions to contextual recommendations for the SEL data use within middle schools. I will also discuss translation to practice, potential limitations, and opportunities for future research.

## Chapter 5: Translation to Practice

This capstone research project, *Social and Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Middle Schools Use SEL Data to Support Student Needs*, was conducted to address a problem of practice in Suburban Public Schools (SPS) middle schools and exploring how these schools collect and utilize SEL data to support students. Schools struggle to integrate SEL practices while also gathering SEL data to support students' overall well-being, despite research that emphasizes the value and importance of SEL to middle school students (CASEL, n.d.; Durlak, et al., 2011; Hamilton & Gross, 2021). SPS adopted the SEL screener in 2021 for use in grades 3-12 and has emphasized the importance of SEL and SEL data through initiatives and their recently adopted Strategic Plan (Suburban Public Schools, 2023a). Goal #2 of the Strategic Plan specifically states that “every student will experience an equitable school community where student health and well-being are prioritized, and student voice is centered” (Suburban Public Schools, 2023a), further noting that this goal’s progress will be measured by “student access to the necessary emotional, behavioral, mental, an physical health services to support their successful engagement in school”. Schools are tasked with administering the SEL screener two times per year, using the SEL data to implement SEL programs for all students, and were required to measure progress through a SIIP goal during the 2022-2023 school year, which became optional for 2023-2024. The following research questions guided my study:

- RQ1: In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate?
- RQ2: How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?

I used a sequential qualitative study including a survey then a case study with interviews and document reviews to answer the research questions. In this chapter, I first identify the intended audience and purpose of the recommendations. Next, I focus the assertions into three areas (i.e. integrating SEL into MTSS, overcoming barriers, and the leader's role with SEL data), and within each I identify commendations, actionable recommendations, and intended benefits. I end this chapter with possible limitations, opportunities for future research, and a brief conclusion.

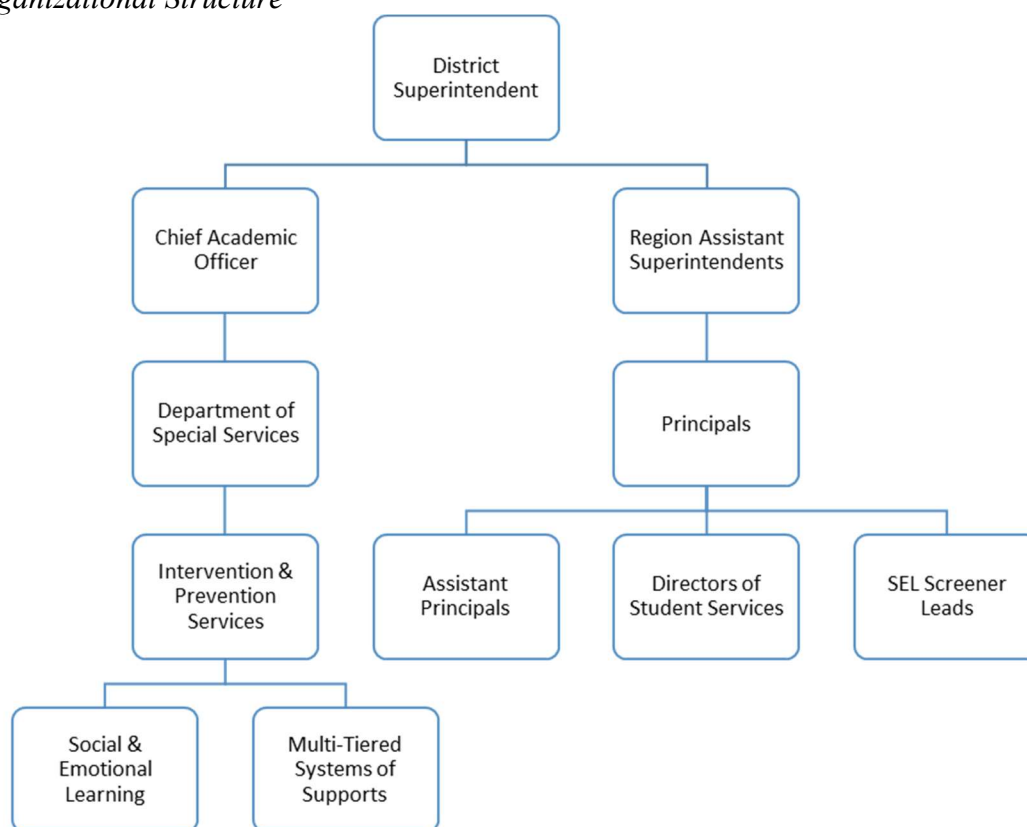
### **Intended Audience and Purpose**

The intended audience for the recommendations is the leadership team of Suburban Public Schools (SPS), the Office of Intervention and Prevention Services, and school-based administrators in middle schools in SPS. While this study is focused on the SEL data usage within middle schools, all schools in SPS are responsible for SEL data use, and therefore the study's findings may support their work as well. As required by SPS approval for research, the recommendations should first be presented to the SPS Leadership Team and the Office of Intervention and Prevention Services who oversees the Office of Social and Emotional Learning. The district leadership sets priorities through the Strategic Plan and guidelines for the SIIP each year while the Office of Intervention and Prevention Services can utilize these recommendations to improve the distribution and support of the SEL screener each year. The recommendations can then be shared with the Middle School Principals Association for middle school principals to reflect and improve the SEL data use within their schools. An organizational chart is available in Figure 7. Additionally, since the work of SEL impacts school-based leaders and the SEL screener leads, the recommendations should be shared with these stakeholders with the intended purpose of a) assisting with the understanding and value of the SEL screener and SEL data available to middle schools; b) improving SEL data use within middle schools by integrating it

into MTSS; c) creating an opening for middle school teams to consider how their structures may better support students in need of SEL support; and d) support students to improve social and emotional wellness and find success during their middle school years and beyond.

**Figure 7**

*SPS Organizational Structure*



### **Three Focus Areas: Integrating SEL into MTSS, Overcoming Barriers, and the Leader’s Role with SEL Data**

Three areas of focus emerged from the study’s findings and the interpretations of the findings. While they are interconnected and inform one another, the three focus areas and their connected recommendations are listed in priority order. It should be noted that priority was determined in part through prevalence within the data and analysis, connections to the literature, and based upon my own understanding of importance for implementation. A supporting



document that details considerations for SPS is in Appendix J, including assertions, recommendations, benefits, action steps and guiding questions to improve SEL data use within schools.

### ***Integrating SEL into MTSS***

**Aligned assertions.** The following assertions emerged from the study's finding in terms of SEL data and MTSS: 1) SEL data-driven decision-making is inconsistent across middle schools in SPS. 2) SEL data is used to guide tier 1 instruction within middle schools, but very few examples of SEL data use exist beyond tier 1. 3) For schools that have existing MTSS structures, their processes integrate SEL data and are more likely to support students through all tiers.

**Commendations.** Middle schools are tasked with educating students who are at a critical point in their growth and development and mindsets towards school (Green et al., 2021; Kautz et al., 2021). As schools in SPS collect and make sense of the significant amount of data they gather for students - test scores, attendance, grades, and now SEL data - they create protocols for data dialogues and collaborate to increase understanding of the data to monitor student progress. School teams also differentiate the supports offered academically and socially-emotionally knowing students come with so many differing needs. As the MTSS framework has become a required method to support students in SPS, middle school teams have independently developed collaborative site-based teams, intervention protocols, and referral systems to ensure students are not falling through the cracks and providing means of support that all staff can utilize and be part of.

**Recommendations.** My first recommendation is grounded in the review of the data, which identified disconnects between SEL data use and the MTSS process. Each school

described in some capacity an MTSS system, including a team of educators, who meet and discuss student needs. However, these systems do not regularly include SEL or wellness conversations, but instead focus primarily on academics. Siobhan and the team at PRMS stand out by dedicating every other week of their MTSS meetings solely to SEL, emphasizing the importance of intertwining SEL with academics. The overarching suggestion is that schools should acknowledge the interconnectedness of SEL and academics, advocating for the integration of both within a comprehensive system (McCart & Choi, 2020; Mueller, 2021; Sailor et al., 2021; Weingarten et al., 2020). While academics are important, schools need to also consider the interrelatedness of SEL and academics and utilize a system that incorporates both.

My second recommendation is grounded in a review of school documents, which have inconsistent methodology and understanding of data use as well as a lack of fidelity to the implementation of expected data use protocols. For example, PRMS utilizes a data dialogue within interdisciplinary team meetings and in CT meetings to discuss the quantitative data around students, whereas MHSS does not have a common structure. To rectify this, SPS should tighten the fidelity of implementation of the data dialogue protocols for MTSS to include SEL data, and this should be monitored across schools. For example, SPS does have the expectation that all schools discuss wellness data within the MTSS team meetings for tier 1 (schoolwide) and tiers 2 and 3 (intervention team), but there is not fidelity to these expectations or to a tightly aligned process for MTSS teams. Additionally, there is not a comprehensive data literacy training for staff tasked with data review. While staff may have varying preferences of what protocols for data dialogues they want to use, SPS would benefit from creating and sharing specific processes for use within different teams of staff, such as teacher teams or administration teams. While SPS may have recommended data dialogue protocols and trainings, school teams

are not required to use them, nor is there common knowledge of how to access or use them. By offering training around data, the structured protocol, and how to connect to the work within schools, SPS will promote a unified and effective approach to data interpretation and application while also ensuring schools have common practices that emphasize the importance of SEL data use.

**Benefits.** These recommendations may contribute to the context's problem of practice and benefit schools by fostering a more holistic and effective approach to student support and data utilization, supporting the work of Barnes et al. (2022). Firstly, the integration of SEL into MTSS addresses a critical gap identified in the data use. By dedicating specific time to SEL discussions within these meetings, schools can create a more comprehensive understanding of students' needs, promoting a balanced approach that considers both academic and socio-emotional aspects (Oakes et al., 2017; Sailor et al., 2021). Siobhan's initiative at PRMS serves as a practical example, demonstrating that such a shift in focus can enhance educators' ability to address the diverse needs of students.

Secondly, the recommendation to establish consistent data dialogue protocols across schools and provide comprehensive data literacy training yields multifaceted advantages. A standardized approach to data discussions ensures uniformity and coherence in interpreting and utilizing quantitative data. This not only streamlines communication among educators but also facilitates a more efficient identification of students' strengths and areas for improvement (Battal et al., 2020; Buzhardt et al., 2020). The emphasis on data literacy training further equips staff with the necessary skills to navigate and connect various data points, enabling them to make informed decisions regarding student interventions and support.

In summary, these recommendations contribute to a more integrated, systematic, and informed educational environment, ultimately enhancing the ability of schools to cater to the diverse needs of students and optimize the impact of their support systems.

### ***Overcoming Barriers***

**Aligned assertion.** The following assertion emerged from the study's finding in terms of barriers: the barriers that inhibit SEL data use are consistent across buildings and include MTSS implementation and the role of the SEL screener lead, staff buy-in, and access to resources. In schools where the SEL screener lead has school-wide influence, there is more teacher ownership, involvement, and implementation of SEL school-wide.

**Commendations.** Middle schools are tasked with following federal, state, and local initiatives while also ensuring the needs of students are met. Throughout each of the case studies, it was apparent that the SEL screener leads care deeply for their school communities and believe in the value and importance of SEL programming. Each SEL screener lead described their successes while also strategically noting the barriers that inhibit their work. They were reflective in their work and articulated ways that SEL can be done better, while also taking time to celebrate the wins they experience. Matthew at MHSS explained how he has used Donors Choose to support the SEL efforts and has really focused on building relationships because of the data he has seen for the students within his school. The same is true for Cynthia, who acknowledged the limitations of her role as a clinician but has pushed to ensure she is a contributing member of the systems and structures already in place at NSMS. Despite the barriers that exist in the work they are doing for SEL data use, the SEL screener leads maintained optimistic outlooks and highlighted many of the positive changes that have occurred with access to the SEL screener data.

**Recommendations.** My first recommendation is grounded in the review of the data, which identified that each SEL screener lead has a different role within the building. Because being the SEL screener lead requires school-wide administration of the SEL screener as well as school-wide training and the promotion of the use of the SEL data, I recommend that the SEL screener lead be an administrator or counselor. Recognizing the pivotal role of the SEL screener lead in facilitating teacher ownership, involvement, and implementation of SEL school-wide, it is recommended to further empower and support these leaders. The SEL screener lead must have capacity and knowledge to implement school-wide initiatives with SPS support that includes professional development to deepen their understanding of SEL data use within schools; and while there is existing training and requirements, there must also be accountability for these individuals to complete the required trainings and tasks. As Schildkamp found, the capacity of leaders to use data in a meaningful way is only as strong as their data literacy knowledge (2019). Entrusting this person with the ability to enlist resources for programming, enforce accountability with other adults within the building, and make recommendations for changes is part of the necessary job responsibilities of the role of SEL screener lead.

As a corollary to the first recommendation, the second recommendation is that SPS invest resources into the SEL screener lead in terms of their ability to address staff buy-in as a significant barrier. By providing SEL screener leads the professional development to perform their role with a strong understanding of the work, this administrator or counselor can then focus on fostering a culture of support and engagement among school staff. Schools can implement targeted awareness campaigns, workshops, and forums to communicate the benefits of SEL data use. Creating a shared understanding of the impact of SEL on both educators and students can help build enthusiasm and commitment among adults within the school community. This

recommendation is affirmed by the work of Drury et al. (2022) who found the gap between leaders' knowledge and ability to lead change when it comes to MTSS initiatives. With SEL screener leads being equipped with the skills to guide SEL initiatives, they can support data literacy and interpretation, communication, and implement best practices in SEL within their schools. Another component of this is the ability to collaborate across school settings to exchange ideas, problem solve, and collaboratively plan to demonstrate collective efficacy across middle schools for SEL data use and support, as initially indicated by Hamilton et al. (2019). With SEL screener leads having the expectation of attending trainings and completing tasks, there also needs to be an understanding of the capacity of their role with competing priorities for time and professional development. For SPS to prioritize SEL work, there must be more time provided to the SEL screener lead to participate in required tasks, trainings, and activity development for their schools.

The third recommendation links to equity across middle schools. SPS must prioritize resource allocation for SEL initiatives. A recurring theme across the case study interviews was that there were limited staff to support response to what SEL data identified, such as whole-school SEL lessons and targeted groups. Schools should assess and invest in the necessary tools, materials, and programs that support effective SEL data use. This may involve collaboration with external organizations, securing grants, or reallocating existing resources to prioritize SEL in alignment with its demonstrated impact on student outcomes. For some schools, like MVSS, the school team waited for resources to fund reward programs for so long that they lost staff buy-in. While operating a successful SEL program, PRMS also felt the difference in having ESSER funding for activities and to purchase programs identified for tier 1 use. If SPS wants SEL and

SEL data use to be a priority for schools, there must be support in the resources needed to support students at all tiers of support.

By implementing these recommendations, schools can more easily mitigate the identified barriers and create an environment conducive to widespread adoption and successful implementation of SEL practices, ultimately fostering a more supportive and enriching educational experience for both educators and students.

**Benefits.** These recommendations may bring forth a range of benefits aimed at overcoming the challenges and enhancing the integration of SEL data use and practices across schools. SPS will enhance the effectiveness of leaders by strengthening the role of SEL screener leads through professional development which will in turn equip them with the skills to effectively guide and lead SEL initiatives. Existing literature underscores the importance of training both leaders and teachers for successful program implementation, further emphasizing that coaching and support for leaders are crucial to ensure the effectiveness of the professional development efforts (Lyon, 2019; Schildkamp, 2019). This, in turn, contributes to enhancing the SEL screener leads' leadership effectiveness within the school community. As SEL screener leads gain a better understanding of their role, they will be well-prepared to facilitate the implementation of SEL practices on a school-wide level with a more cohesive and consistent approach to SEL integration.

The benefits of fostering staff buy-in will aid in cultivating a positive school culture (Akinnusi, 2021; Allbright et al., 2019; Stillman et al., 2018). When the staff of a school are willingly engaged in school-wide initiatives, their buy-in contributes to cultivating a positive school culture that values and prioritizes SEL. This cultural shift fosters a sense of collective responsibility among staff, promoting a collaborative and supportive educational environment.

As the school community becomes more aware and understanding of the benefits of SEL data use among stakeholders, there will be an increase in engagement and commitment; educators who recognize the positive impact of SEL are more likely to actively participate in its implementation.

As SPS prioritizes SEL implementation, the prioritization of resources and access to resources will ensure that schools have the necessary tools, materials, and programs to implement SEL effectively. This optimization contributes to a smoother and more successful integration of SEL practices into the overall educational framework (Kautz et al., 2021). Furthermore, access to resources allows for a more comprehensive and tailored approach to SEL, potentially leading to improved student outcomes. Adequate resources enable schools to address the diverse needs of students, creating a positive impact on their social-emotional development.

In summary, these recommendations not only address specific barriers identified in the study but also contribute to the overall improvement of school culture, leadership effectiveness, educator engagement, and student outcomes through the intentional integration of SEL practices.

### ***The Leader's Role with SEL data***

**Aligned assertion.** The following assertion emerged from the study's findings: School leader involvement leads to increased SEL data use. For a school to successfully implement a SEL program, the principal needs to be involved in the processes and the programming within the school.

**Commendations.** Middle school teams and SEL screener leads demonstrate commendable dedication to their work, with or without direct principal involvement. While principals are responsible for all that takes place within their buildings, including writing and monitoring their SIIP goals and ensuring student progress, the teams that come together to



support that work are commendable. At most schools in SPS, the SEL screener lead and the MTSS teams exhibit a commendable level of autonomy, showcasing their commitment to fostering a positive and supportive school environment while also creatively using resources to support SEL school-wide. Furthermore, the proactive way these teams request principal support underscores a strong sense of initiative and collaboration, contributing to the overall success of the school's educational initiatives.

**Recommendations.** My first recommendation is grounded in the review of the data which echoes the literature's emphasis on leadership being one of the most critical components of implementation success (Lyon, 2017). Lacking from survey responses, the case studies, and the document review is the role of the principal, who is the primary leader of the building, and is responsible for creating and maintaining a vision for the school. School leaders should actively participate in the planning phases of SEL programs and have the knowledge of how to access and what to do with the SEL data for their schools. Principal involvement is essential to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the program goals, objectives, and intended outcomes. It would be further beneficial for the principal to regularly collaborate with the SEL screener lead and be incorporated into the professional development surrounding SEL and SEL data that is required of SEL screener leads.

My final recommendation is grounded in the review of the data where SEL screener leads described the 2022-2023 wellness goals for their schools, but this type of goal was not required to carry over into 2023-2024. Principals devote time to developing and understanding the data to support their school-improvement initiatives, and these goals often focus on achievement gaps in academic performance. By requiring each school to have a SIIP goal focused on SEL/wellness that is directly tied to the SEL screener data, SPS will ensure principals are involved with the

SEL programs within their schools. Furthermore, by incorporating a SEL goal into the SIIP, principals may promote a culture of data-informed decision-making within the school in which there is regular review of SEL data, analyzing trends, and using this information to make informed adjustments to the SEL program to meet the evolving needs of students. In the same way principals review test scores to monitor the academic goals, they can also review SEL data to monitor student wellness and continually readjust to ensure students' needs are being met.

**Benefits.** These recommendations may contribute to the context's problem of practice and benefit schools' by offering a comprehensive approach to enhancing the principal's role in SEL program implementation, from fostering data-informed decision-making, focusing on student wellness, providing continuous opportunities for improvement, and integrating student wellness into the broader context of student improvement. This recommendation supports previous literature that emphasizes the importance of school leaders implementing clear structures and a clear vision to make meaningful change within schools (Barnes et al., 2022, Meyers et al., 2021; Uiterwijk-Luijk et al., 2017). With principals developing a greater understanding of program goals, objectives and intended outcomes, there can be more effective planning and execution of SEL initiatives within middle schools in SPS.

### **Limitations**

It is crucial to acknowledge certain limitations associated with the implementation of these recommendations. One significant challenge lies in the existence of competing priorities at the school level. Schools often grapple with a multitude of demands, ranging from academic requirements to administrative tasks, creating a complex landscape where SEL might compete for focus and prioritization. Additionally, the effective execution of these recommendations depends heavily on the availability of time and resources dedicated to SEL and MTSS leads.

These individuals play a pivotal role in driving the integration of SEL data into their schools and in turn the offering of SEL within schools. It is very important to ensure that resources, including time, are allocated to these leads to ensure they can comprehensively support their school and students' needs. The success of these recommendations relies on a delicate balance, necessitating a strategic allocation of resources and a concerted effort to elevate SEL and MTSS to a level of prominence amidst competing priorities within the educational landscape.

### **Opportunities for Future Research**

While this study has provided valuable insights into the use of SEL data within the selected middle schools in SPS, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations and pave the way for future research endeavors. To expand the scope and generalizability of findings, future studies could delve into continuing case studies encompassing additional schools, and exploring how SEL data are utilized in elementary and high school settings. Furthermore, a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics involved in the implementation of SEL programs can be achieved through direct observations of SEL teams within schools, shedding light on their collaboration, decision-making processes, and overall impact. Additionally, gaining the perspective of school principals on SEL data use within their own institutions would provide a holistic view, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges and successes experienced at the administrative level. These suggested avenues for future research not only address the limitations of the current study but also present exciting opportunities for further exploration into the multifaceted realm of SEL data utilization in educational settings.

### **Conclusion**

Addressing and supporting social and emotional wellness in middle schools is a multifaceted challenge that requires a holistic and integrated approach. The complexity of this

task is evident in the myriad components involved, ranging from data accessibility to the need for enhanced knowledge in utilizing such data effectively. Schools, with access to plentiful data, may lack the opportunity and expertise to harness its full potential. To truly make a meaningful impact, it is essential to ensure that district and school leaders not only focus on the data available, but also comprehend the data, and possess the ability to build capacity to use it in shaping the support systems for students. SEL data and the programs that are informed by its trends should not be isolated; rather, they must be interwoven into the fabric of all school activities and accessed by all stakeholders. Schools and leaders bear the responsibility of meeting students where they are, fostering an understanding of CASEL competencies, and leveraging social and emotional well-being as a catalyst for continued growth and learning.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing mental health crisis, SEL emerges as a top priority despite variations in resources and priorities within schools. Education of the whole child becomes imperative, transcending traditional academic domains. Schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of students, ensuring that SEL takes precedence in nurturing a supportive environment conducive to overall well-being. In this way, schools contribute not only to academic success but also to the holistic development of each student, preparing them for a future marked by resilience and social-emotional intelligence.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Administration Plan

Stage #1: Pre-notification letter, sent via email one week prior to survey:

A few days from now you will receive via email a request to fill out a survey for an important project conducted by the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development (EHD) and Suburban Public Schools (SPS). The purpose of our survey is to collect information about how stakeholders within your school use SEL data to inform decision-making. The results will be used for future professional development and program modifications. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Best regards,  
Miranda Hendershot  
Doctoral Student, UVA  
IRB-SBS Protocol #

Stage #2: Distributing the survey via email, including a cover letter, the informed consent information and instructions regarding how to access the survey by paper if needed.

COVER LETTER:

DATE

Dear (Participant Name),

I am writing to ask for your participation in the below survey about social and emotional learning data usage within your school. The purpose of our survey is to collect information about how stakeholders within your school use SEL data to inform decision-making. The results will be used for future professional development and program modifications, and is being done as part of my research as an EdD student in my local context of Suburban Public Schools (SPS). As the SEL screener lead at your school, your perspective is valuable and unique because of how your school is using SEL data. If you choose to participate in the survey, your responses will be reported as part of group summaries and not specifically from you. If you have any questions or comments about this survey, please feel free to contact me at [meh5dj@virginia.edu](mailto:meh5dj@virginia.edu) or at the address below my signature. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, <INSERT IRB INFO>. Thank you very much for assisting me with the important study. I will also send you copy of the final report indicate at the end of the survey. I value your contribution and support of my work.

Best regards,  
Miranda Hendershot  
Doctoral Student, UVA  
IRB-SBS Protocol #

<Personalized Link to Survey>

Stage #3: Reminder Notification after one week (email), thanking all respondents so far. Also include a link to ensure it is available for those who may have missed it the first time.

Stage #4: Second "mailing" of survey via email approximately two weeks after initial mailing sent only to participants who have not responded.

Stage #5: Third "mailing" of survey via email approximately three weeks after initial mailing, sent to specific participants who have not responded.

Contingency Plan: If the target response rate is not met at this point, I will make individual phone calls to the non-respondents.



## **Appendix B**

### **Survey**

#### *SEL Data Use in Middle Schools*

##### **Introduction**

*Thank you for taking this survey, which should take about 10-15 minutes to complete. The survey is being given to the SEL screener lead in each middle school in our district. The purpose of the survey is to explore the following questions: 1) In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate? And 2) How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?*

*This survey serves as the initial dive into the research, aiming to determine what schools are doing with SEL data. The goal for this survey is to inform next steps in SEL data use within schools so central office and school administration can better support the students. Please answer to the best of your ability and skip any questions that you may feel uncomfortable with. You may also discontinue your participation at any time.*

**Note:** This copy is for review only - the actual survey will be administered online.

## Informed Consent Agreement

Study Title: Social and Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Schools Use SEL Data to Support Student Needs

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of the survey is to explore the following questions: 1) In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate? And 2) How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?

What you will do in the study: You will be asked to share your experiences as the SEL screener lead within your school, including what SEL programs are offered, what SEL instruction takes place, what SEL data is collected and how this data is used.

Time required: The survey will take 10-15 minutes to complete.

Risks: There are no risks to participating in the study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help to understand what SEL data is being used within schools so the district and school administration can better support the students.

Confidentiality: The information that you give in the study will be handled anonymously. You will have the opportunity to volunteer for additional research following this survey. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your responses will not be used in the study.

How to withdraw from the study: There is no penalty for withdrawing. Please email [meh5dj@virginia.edu](mailto:meh5dj@virginia.edu) if you intend to withdraw.

Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Using data beyond this study: The data you provide in this study will be retained in a secure manner by the researcher for 5 years or until it is no longer useful, and then it will be destroyed.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Miranda Hendershot

Doctoral Candidate, University of Virginia

Email: meh5dj@virginia.edu

To obtain more information about the study, ask questions about the research procedures, express concerns about your participation, or report illness, injury or other problems, please contact:

Tonya R. Moon, Ph.D.

Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences

One Morton Dr Suite 500

University of Virginia, P.O. Box 800392

Charlottesville, VA 22908-0392

Telephone: (434) 924-5999

Email: irbsbshelp@virginia.edu

Website: <https://research.virginia.edu/irb-sbs>

Website for Research Participants: <https://research.virginia.edu/research-participants>

UVA IRB-SBS # (TBD)

Electronic Signature Agreement:

I agree to provide an electronic signature to document my consent.

I do not agree to provide an electronic signature to document my consent.

[Signature Box]

Study Agreement:

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

I do not agree to participate in the research study described above.

You may print a copy of this consent for your records.

Part 1: SEL programs/instruction at your school

*Answer each question to the best of your knowledge.*

1. Describe the SEL programs and SEL instruction that exist within your school.	
2. Which students are part of these programs?	
3. What does SEL look like within classroom instruction at your school? (Tier 1)	
4. In what ways are families involved with SEL?	
5. What programs/activities address self awareness within your school? <i>Note: self awareness is described as the abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.</i>	
6. What programs/activities address relationship skills within your school? <i>Note: relationship skills are described as the abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.</i>	
7. What programs/activities address social	

<p>awareness within your school? <i>Note: social awareness is described as the abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, &amp; contexts.</i></p>	
<p>8. What programs/activities address self-management within your school? <i>Note: self-management is described as the abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.</i></p>	
<p>9. What programs/activities address responsible decision-making within your school? <i>Note: responsible decision-making is described as the abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.</i></p>	
<p>10. Please share any comments regarding SEL programs and SEL instruction.</p>	

*Answer each question to the best of your knowledge.*

1. Describe the SEL data that exists within your school.	
2. Where does the SEL data come from?	
3. How does this data get used for students?	
4. How does this data get used for school initiatives/programs?	
5. How would you describe how the SEL data informs decision-making at your school? Please share examples.	
6. What additional data do you wish your school had for students?	
7. What are the barriers to SEL data use in your school?	

8. Please share any comments regarding SEL data.	
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Part 3: School Improvement and Innovation Plan (SIIP)/ESSER

*Answer each question to the best of your knowledge.*

1. Please share your SIIP/ESSER Goal for Wellness.	
2. What data/rationale did your school have for determining this goal?	
3. How has your school used ESSER funding for wellness?	
4. What populations did this target?	
5. What changes will you make to this goal for the future?	

6. Please share any comments regarding SIIP/ESSER.	
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#### Part 4: Demographics

Your answers are for informational purposes only.

1. At what school do you work?	
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2. What is your job title?	
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3. How many years of education experience do	0-1	2-3	4-8	8+ years
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you have?	years	years	years	
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4. How many years have you been at your current school?	0-1 years	2-3 years	4-8 years	8+ years
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5. If you are an administrator, what department(s) do you oversee?  If you are a teacher or counselor, what grade(s) do you primarily work with?	
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6. If you are willing to participate in further research regarding your school's SEL data use, please write your name here.	
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**You've reached the end of the survey. Thank you for your response!**



## Appendix C

### Survey Pilot Plan

#### Plan for Pilot Testing Survey Items

**Time required:** one hour or less

**Subjects:** 4-6 persons, hand-selected participants who I feel confident will be honest with their opinions/suggestions for the survey. These associates will not be from the target participants (middle school SEL screener leads).

**Explain the purpose of the survey:** As part of my doctoral work and the ongoing process to continually improve the professional development in our district, I am developing a survey designed to assess your experience. I appreciate your willingness to help pilot test this survey and provide feedback on your understanding and perception of the survey items. Your responses at this time, during the pilot test phase, will not be recorded or reported to anyone except me, the designer of the survey.

**Process:**

1. After explaining the purpose (above), hand out the survey.
2. Indicate to participants that the survey should be completed as if it were the real administration. Ask that they answer honestly and thoughtfully. Participants are not able to ask questions as they go through the items.
3. Take note of the length of time it takes participants to complete the survey.
4. After the participants have completed the survey, ask the following questions while noting the comments.
  - a. After reviewing the questions, were the items understandable? That is, did you have to read the item more than once to understand what it was asking? Was the meaning of the question clear and straightforward?
  - b. After reviewing the questions, is the open-ended format clear? That is, do you feel the questions could be answered in a way that made sense to you?
  - c. After reviewing the questions, were they written in such a way that you could have answered it more than one way?
  - d. In your opinion, were the questions written in such a way that you could answer them given your experience?
  - e. In your opinion, were there any questions that you did not feel comfortable answering? Which questions?
  - f. After reviewing the questions, do you feel the survey answers the intended questions: “1) In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate? And 2) How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?”
5. Compile all notes, suggestions, questions, etc. into a summary and edit the survey for distribution.

## Appendix D

### Document Review Protocol

*Document Title* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date* \_\_\_\_\_

*Link to document:* \_\_\_\_\_ *(or attach hard copy)*

Describe the document.	
What is the intended purpose of this document?	
Who created the document?	
When was this document created? Does it have a designated review date?	
How is it utilized by the school?	
Who uses this document?	
What evidence is provided for how SEL data is used?	
What evidence is provided about possible barriers to SEL data use?	
Additional comments.	
Additional questions.	

## Appendix E

### Semi-Structured/Open-Ended Interview Questions

Introduction:

*Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. This interview should take no more than one hour of your time. As you know, you completed a survey that served as the initial stage of research, aiming to determine what schools are doing with SEL data. The goal for this interview now is to better understand from your experience SEL data use within schools so central office and school administration can better support the students. Your answers are confidential, so please answer to the best of your ability and skip any questions that you may feel uncomfortable with. You may also discontinue your participation at any time.*

## Informed Consent Agreement

Study Title: Social and Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Schools Use SEL Data to Support Student Needs

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of the interview is to further explore the following questions based upon previously obtained survey results: 1) In what ways does DDDM of SEL inform instruction, school culture and climate? And 2) How is SEL data used within middle schools, and what are the barriers to SEL data use?

What you will do in the study: You will be asked to share your experiences as the SEL screener lead within your school, including what SEL programs are offered, what SEL instruction takes place, what SEL data is collected and how this data is used.

Time required: The interview will take up to one hour to complete.

Risks: There are no risks to participating in the study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help to understand what SEL data is being used within schools so central office and school administration can better support the students.

Confidentiality: The information that you give in the study will be handled anonymously with your school being identified with a pseudonym. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your responses will not be used in the study.

How to withdraw from the study: There is no penalty for withdrawing. Please email [meh5dj@virginia.edu](mailto:meh5dj@virginia.edu) if you intend to withdraw or tell me prior to beginning the interview.

Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Using data beyond this study: The data you provide in this study will be retained in a secure manner by the researcher for 5 years or until it is no longer useful, and then it will be destroyed.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Miranda Hendershot

Doctoral Candidate, University of Virginia

Email: meh5dj@virginia.edu

To obtain more information about the study, ask questions about the research procedures, express concerns about your participation, or report illness, injury or other problems, please contact:

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Website for Research Participants: <https://research.virginia.edu/research-participants>

UVA IRB-SBS # (TBD)

Electronic Signature Agreement:

I agree to provide an electronic signature to document my consent.

I do not agree to provide an electronic signature to document my consent.

[Signature Box]

Study Agreement:

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

I do not agree to participate in the research study described above.

You may print a copy of this consent for your records.

Possible Questions:

Please tell me your name and your position.

How long have you been in this position?

What does SEL look like at your school?

What SEL data exists in your school?

How is this data collected?

In what ways are SEL data used in middle schools to inform their decision-making?

What would you do differently in terms of SEL at your school? In terms of SEL data?

What areas of school/activities/academics are impacted by SEL data?

What are the barriers to SEL data use in schools?

## Appendix F

### Codebook

<i>a priori</i> codes		
Code	Definition	Sample Excerpt
barrier	mention of something that inhibits the school/person's ability to implement a program or change	"We don't have like a hub. We don't have necessarily all of the different people on the same page with particular students that we have this data about this particular kid, we know this. It's a lot of just sort of, yeah, I worked with that kid already."
climate	referencing a common practice or feeling within the school building; something that is an expectation or part of the community within the building.	"It works when I'm with teachers to help support the relationships they have with kids, whether it's through mentoring or small groups are things that we do"
data use	mention of using information/data for a purpose	"SEL data used for writing wellness goals; SEL data included: attendance, school climate survey, SEL screener, SS EOY survey"
instruction	mention of teaching students; may include all students or a group of students; also may include tasks done by teachers within the classroom	"It would be kind of like best practice to have some SEL at the beginning of every lesson for five minutes or so. But and there are teachers in this building that do that."
mtss	referencing tiers of the multi-tiered system of supports, such as whole group (tier 1), small group (tier 2), individuals (tier 3); reference of interventions/supports for identified students	"In MTSS, it's really school-wide MTSS. We talk about school-wide practices, and then for individual student data we have the site based intervention team."
school culture	describing school specific happenings, including values, beliefs, norms, expectations, attitudes; the personality of the school	"Additionally, we need to strengthen our implementation of CASEL's Signature 3 Practices school-wide and consistently apply the RAM model to our weekly SEL time."
SEL data	mention of data that is relevant to the social and emotional learning of students; may include wellness or behavioral data	"One that we pulled out was like, it was a, I forget the number, but it was a, it was an unfavorable percentage of our students felt like they did not have or at least they answered that they didn't have an adult in the building that they could trust. So that was something that tried to really push in my groups last year, and I'm doing the same thing this year."

SEL program	describing programs that target social and emotional learning; may include social groups, mentoring, CASEL competencies, etc.	"it looks like 30 or so minute lesson once a week during a sore block period, which is like an advisory block and that is either something pertaining to our core values We established this year at Meadowview Heights, which is named prepared and resilient and inclusive and dependable and engaged. So we've had the first few weeks of school, we were kind of disseminating those words and how we could have students meet the standards of those words, what they meant to them. As the years gone on, we've talked about and like last year and previous years, coping strategies, self advocacy, what it looks like, when you don't feel regulated. We talked about a lot of social issues, or, you know, things going on in the world. And so that's, that's like the main SEL lessons that students get."
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<b><i>emergent codes</i></b>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
SEL	describing SEL within school
Tier 1	referencing specific activities/programs for all students
Tier 2	referencing specific activities/programs for some students
PBIS	mentioning a specific positive behavior intervention system or activity for students
ESSER	referring the ESSER grant; mentioning programs that are related to ESSER
Improvement	Suggestions or ideas to make programs/activities better
Role	referencing the responsibilities of the SEL screener lead



## Appendix G

### IRB-SBS Approval - University of Virginia



**Office of the Vice President for Research**  
**Human Research Protection Program**  
**Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences**

**IRB-SBS Chair:** Moon, Tonya

**IRB-SBS Director:** Blackwood, Bronwyn

#### Protocol Number (5703) Approval Certificate

The UVA IRB-SBS reviewed "Social Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Middle Schools Use SEL Data to Support Student Needs" and determined that the protocol met the qualifications for approval as described in 45 CFR 46.

**Principal Investigator:** Hendershot, Miranda

**Faculty Sponsor:** Jewett, Anne

**Protocol Number:** 5703

**Protocol Title:** Social Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Middle Schools Use SEL Data to Support Student Needs

**Is this research funded?** No

**Review category:** Exempt Review

2ii. Educational tests, surveys, interviews, observations (no surveys or interviews for minors): no risk to criminal/civil liability, financial standing, employability, education advancement, reputation

**Review Type:**

**Modifications:** No

**Continuation:** No

**Unexpected Adverse Events:** No

**Approval Date:** 2023-04-24

As indicated in the Principal Investigator, Faculty Sponsor, and Department Chair Assurances as part of the IRB requirements for approval, the PI has ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the study, the ethical performance of the project, the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, and strict adherence to any stipulations imposed by the IRB-SBS.

The PI and research team will comply with all UVA policies and procedures, as well as with all applicable Federal, State, and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects in research, including, but not limited to, the following:

1. That no participants will be recruited or data accessed under the protocol until the Investigator has received this approval certificate.
2. That no participants will be recruited or entered under the protocol until all researchers for the project including the Faculty Sponsor have completed their human investigation research ethics educational requirement (CITI training is required every 3 years for UVA researchers). The PI ensures that all personnel performing the project are qualified, appropriately trained, and will adhere to the provisions of the approved protocol.
3. That any modifications of the protocol or consent form will not be implemented without prior written approval from the IRB-SBS Chair or designee except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the participants.
4. That any deviation from the protocol and/or consent form that is serious, unexpected and related to the study or a death occurring during the study will be reported promptly to the SBS Review Board in writing.
5. That all protocol forms for continuations of this protocol will be completed and returned within the time limit stated on the renewal notification letter.
6. That all participants will be recruited and consented as stated in the protocol approved or exempted by the IRB-SBS board. If written consent is required, all participants will be consented by signing a copy of the consent form unless this requirement is waived by the board.
7. That the IRB-SBS office will be notified within 30 days of a change in the Principal Investigator for the study.
8. That the IRB-SBS office will be notified when the active study is complete.
9. The SBS Review Board reserves the right to suspend and/or terminate this study at any time if, in its opinion, (1) the risks of further research are prohibitive, or (2) the above agreement is breached.

**Appendix H**  
SPS Research Approval

Office of Research

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**THIS LETTER MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY A SIGNED  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RESEARCHER RESPONSIBILITIES**

September 22, 2023

Miranda Hendershot

Dear Ms. Hendershot,

This letter represents the final phase of your application to conduct a study titled *Social Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Middle Schools Use SEL Data to Support Students Needs*.

The Research Screening Committee has reviewed and approved, with conditions, your application to conduct the study. The conditions of approval for this study are described in the attached Acknowledgement of Researcher Responsibilities, which you have signed. The Division places great trust in you to maintain the highest standards for research, to uphold all the researcher responsibilities you agreed to in the attached Acknowledgement, and to seek counsel from your sponsor if your commitments are ever in jeopardy. Michael Axler, acting director, Intervention & Prevention Services, has agreed to be your sponsor.

You are authorized to begin data collection upon receipt of this letter. Please contact Michael Axler at [REDACTED] to begin the project. You should be prepared to share this approval letter and your signed Acknowledgement of Researcher Responsibilities with schools and/or participants, if requested.

We look forward to receiving the study results, which are expected to benefit the system by providing information about how SEL data is used in schools.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]  
Director

LZH/spk

Enclosure

cc: [REDACTED]

Application ID #24010

Office of Research

**THIS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT DOES NOT REPRESENT APPROVAL  
TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN  
UNLESS ACCOMPANIED BY A SIGNED RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER  
ISSUED BY**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RESEARCHER RESPONSIBILITIES**

**Research Title:** Social Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Middle Schools Use SEL Data to Support Students Needs

**Lead Researcher:** Miranda Hendershot

**Affiliation:** [REDACTED]

**Date:** September 21, 2023

The Researcher acknowledges the following responsibilities in conducting the study *Social Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Middle Schools Use SEL Data to Support Students Needs* in [REDACTED]:

1. Participation in this research study is voluntary for all parties. Data collection from [REDACTED] staff requires written informed consent. The Researcher is obligated to maintain evidence of consent for all participants for a period of at least three years after data are collected. Furthermore, at any time during the three-year period, upon request, the Researcher agrees to provide to [REDACTED] evidence of consent for any or all study participants.
2. Anonymity of the [REDACTED] division, individual schools, and all individual persons participating in this project will be preserved in the public reporting and presentation of the results. Any disclosure of the name of the division, school, or participants or de facto identification of the Division through the sharing of unique and identifiable characteristics that effectively identify [REDACTED] as the subject of the research (e.g., [REDACTED]) requires written approval from the Superintendent or designee. If any exceptions to this paragraph have been approved, a separate disclosure agreement will be attached to this acknowledgement of researcher responsibilities.
3. The Researcher may conduct an exploratory study to understand how SEL data is used in schools, abiding by the following conditions:

The Researcher may not collect data at schools during blackout periods [REDACTED] has reserved for beginning of year, testing, and end of year activities. For SY 2023-24 reserved blackout periods have been set from August 7 through September 4, 2023, and from April 8 through May 31, 2024.

Schools

- The Researcher may recruit participants from all [REDACTED] middle schools.
- The Researcher must work with the sponsor to facilitate recruitment by having the sponsor send out recruitment fliers to SEL leads at middle schools.

Application ID #24010

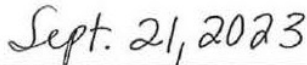
Teachers/ School Counselors

- The Researcher may recruit up to 26 teachers or school counselors who serve as the SEL screener lead in their school for study participation.
  - The Researcher must work with the sponsor to facilitate recruitment by having the sponsor send out recruitment fliers to SEL leads.
  - The Researcher may ask all participants to complete a 30-minute survey about how SEL data are used in schools, which must be administered between October 2 and October 16, 2023. The survey will ask participants if they want to volunteer to participate in a case study portion of the study. From those responses, the Researcher may select up to 3 participants to participate in additional data collection activities. If more than 3 participants volunteer, the Researcher will randomly select 3 participants.
  - The Researcher may ask a sub-sample of 3 participants to complete an audio-recorded, 60-minute semi-structured interview, which must occur between October 16 and October 30, 2023.
  - The Researcher may ask consented teachers and school counselors to send documents related to how SEL data are used in the school building to **the sponsor**. The sponsor must ensure that the owner of the documents (central office staff or principals) are comfortable with the sharing of those documents. The sponsor may release the documents to the Researcher after reviewing and receiving approval from the owner of the document.
  - The Researcher may also ask to observe the 3 participants in team meetings about SEL data. The Researcher must obtain written consent from all of those attending the meeting to complete the observations. Should any one of the meeting attendees choose to not consent, the Researcher must not proceed with the observations. Observations of the meetings must occur between October 16 and October 30, 2023.
  - To protect privacy, the Researcher must assign each participating SEL screener lead an alphanumeric code and pseudonym, which the Researcher must use on all data collection forms and instruments, as well as in all analyses and reporting. The Researcher must keep the list connecting participants' names and the codes and pseudonyms in an encrypted and password protected file only accessible by the research team. The Researcher must keep the audio and video recordings on a secure server with password protection only accessible by the research team.
4. Should [REDACTED] have to shift from normal operating status, the approval to conduct the research outlined in the agreement will no longer be valid.
  5. The Researcher will share a copy of the final report with the following:
    - Dr. [REDACTED], interim director, Intervention and Prevention Services, the sponsor
    - The Office of Research and [REDACTED]
 Note: Preferred delivery is via email to [REDACTED]  
 Please reference your application # 24010 when submitting reports.
  6. Approval to conduct the research activities identified in paragraph 3 is valid for SY 2023-24. If the Researcher wishes to change methodology during the course of the year, the Researcher must request approval for any such modification from [REDACTED] (Research Modification Request Form available by emailing [REDACTED]); the Researcher may not implement modified data collection unless the [REDACTED] Division Research Screening Committee approves the changes. If the Researcher would like to continue study activities in [REDACTED] beyond June 2024, the Researcher must reapply using a Division Research Screening Application. The Researcher understands that modification requests and future research requests are subject to the policies and practices in place at the time of the request; Research Screening Committee cannot guarantee continued support or approval for requests to continue or modify this study.
  7. The Researcher will follow the procedures approved by the Research Screening Committee. The Researcher will adhere to all [REDACTED] policies and regulations.
  8. In conducting this research, the Researcher will comply with best practices endorsed by professional research and evaluation organizations (i.e., American Evaluation Association, American Educational

Research Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, and American Psychological Association), including the involvement of human subjects.

9. The Lead Researcher must sign and return an executed *Acknowledgement of Researcher Responsibilities* before a decision letter can be issued by [REDACTED] and may not begin any study activities before receiving the decision letter.
10. The Researcher is authorized to oversee this research study and ensure that all responsibilities listed above are fulfilled.
11. Failure to meet one or more of the responsibilities listed above may result in the immediate termination of research approval for this study. Furthermore, [REDACTED] reserves the right to void any other current research approvals that Researcher may have and deny, without review, any applications for future research studies.

  
(Miranda Hendershot, Lead Researcher)

  
(Date)



Office of Research



**THIS ADDENDUM MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY THE ORIGINAL SIGNED ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF RESEARCHER RESPONSIBILITIES AND A SIGNED RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER ISSUED BY [REDACTED] TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN [REDACTED]**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RESEARCHER RESPONSIBILITIES - ADDENDUM**

**Study Title:** Social Emotional Learning in Middle Schools: Exploring How Middle Schools Use SEL Data to Support Students Needs

**Name of Researcher:** Miranda Hendershot

**Affiliation:** [REDACTED]

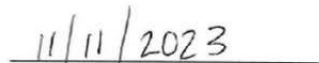
**Date:** 11/10/2023

This addendum reflects an approved change in the dates to conduct interviews with participants.

- The Researcher may collect interview data through November 17, 2023



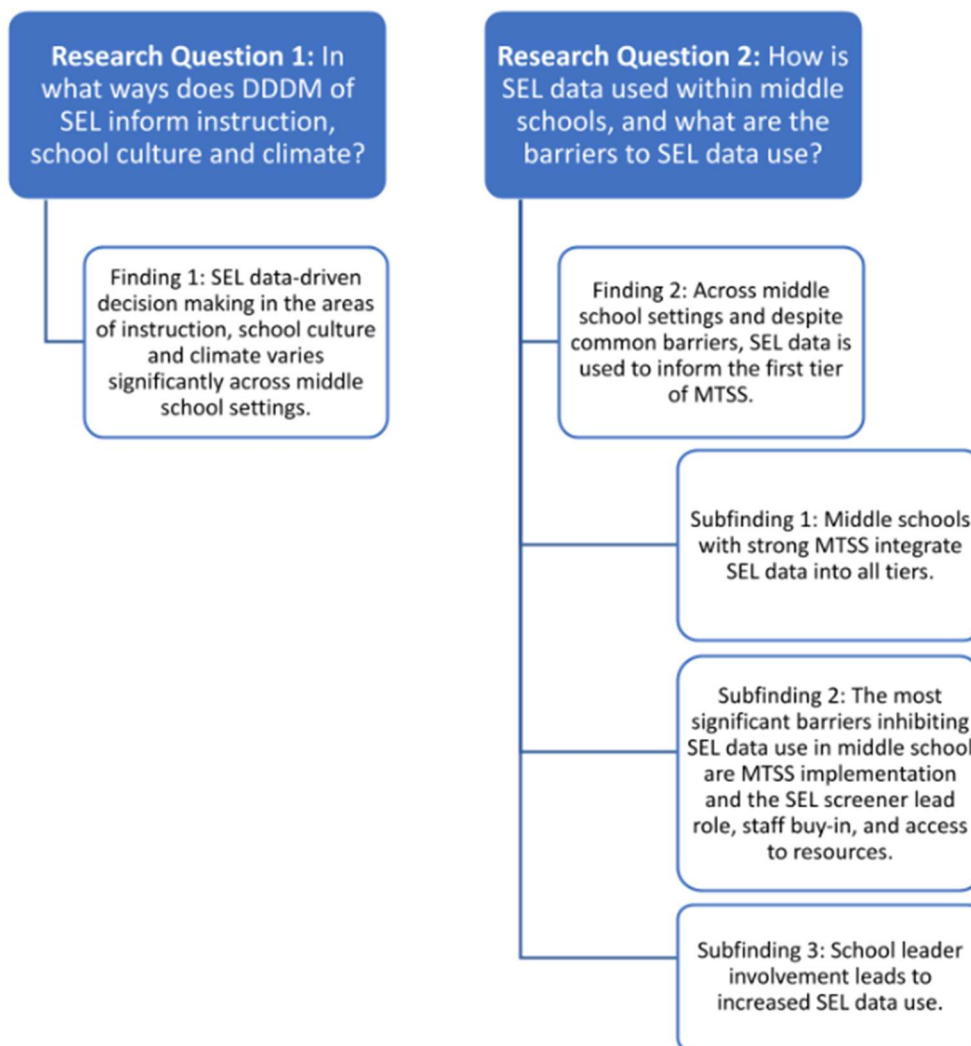
Miranda Hendershot, Lead Researcher)



(Date)

## Appendix I

### Alignment Between Research Question and Findings





## Appendix J

### Considerations for Suburban Public Schools: Support Document



## IMPROVING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING DATA USE WITHIN SCHOOLS

### Considerations for Suburban Public Schools

#### Assertions

- Data-driven decision-making for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) lacks consistency in middle schools.
- SEL data primarily influences Tier 1 instruction, with limited impact elsewhere.
- Current Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) frameworks facilitate SEL data utilization.
- Common barriers to SEL data implementation exist across schools.
- Principal engagement in SEL data application varies among schools.

#### Recommendations

1. Schools must acknowledge the interconnectedness of SEL and academics, and advocate for the integration of both within a comprehensive MTSS structure.
2. Suburban Public Schools must acknowledge the barriers that exist for schools, and thereby streamline expectations, resources, and support across school buildings.
3. School leaders, including the principal, must be involved in SEL planning, programming, and reflection.

#### Benefits

- Implementing these steps will enhance a comprehensive and effective system for supporting students and utilizing data in each school, fostering a deeper comprehension of SEL data and the interconnectedness of MTSS processes.
- A cohesive staff with shared understanding can nurture a positive school environment.
- These acknowledgements and action steps will promote an extensive and all-encompassing SEL support in a school setting, focusing on more than just academics.





## IMPROVING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING DATA USE WITHIN SCHOOLS

Considerations for Suburban Public Schools

### Action Steps

1. SPS needs to establish and promote consistent data dialogue protocols for MTSS that incorporate SEL data, then implement these protocols across all schools.
2. SPS must provide a comprehensive data literacy training for staff responsible for data review beyond just the SEL screener lead.
3. The SEL screener lead should be an administrator or counselor, and SPS should invest resources in their professional development to clarify their role, gain support, and enhance data literacy.
4. SPS should consolidate and equitably distribute resources to schools that include tools, materials, and programs, while also supporting the prioritization of the SEL screener lead and this person's need for dedicated time to the responsibilities of their role.
5. Principals should actively engage in MTSS processes that must include SEL and wellness. Furthermore, the SIIP needs to incorporate SEL/wellness-related objectives.

### Guiding Questions

- What guidance is given to school leaders regarding the SEL screener lead selection, the responsibilities of the role, and the expectations for use of the SEL screener data? In what ways does this guidance need to be updated and/or clarified?
- What processes and protocols exist to support SEL data use within schools, and how is that information shared with schools? Consider the adjustments that can or should be made to streamline information dissemination to schools.
- In what ways does a school's MTSS process include SEL data? Where can it be added to ensure it is incorporated?
- How are school leaders, especially the principal, involved in MTSS and SEL Data use?