

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

Final Report



Yael Kidron, Mark Garibaldi, David Osher
American Institutes for Research

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Abstract

Wood County Schools in West Virginia implemented an evidence-based social and emotional learning program for the middle grades—Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence (SFA)—districtwide, beginning in the 2013–14 school year. The SFA program is designed to promote a safe and supportive learning environment, essential social and emotional competencies, good citizenship skills, character values, and skills and attitudes consistent with a drug-free lifestyle.

American Institutes for Research conducted an evaluation of the Wood County Schools' implementation of SFA. The goals of the evaluation were to document program implementation and assess changes in students' social emotional, behavior, and academic effort outcomes over time. The main data sources included student surveys and records of office disciplinary referrals. In order to examine program effects on social and emotional outcomes, students in classrooms with higher quality SFA implementation were compared with students in classrooms with lower quality SFA implementation. In order to examine program impact on behavior and academic effort, groups of students were compared based on their history of participation in social and emotional learning programs (Lions Quest or other) in elementary school.

Program Implementation

Overall, SFA schools showed adequate levels of implementation, albeit with minimal efforts to infuse the program across the curriculum and create a schoolwide, coherent social and emotional learning approach. Although teachers and guidance counselors valued the program and generally liked the SFA materials and strategies, they noted several challenges to implementation, including time, training on social and emotional learning at large, and a lack of guidance and support from the school leadership.

Program Effects

Students in classrooms with a higher level of program implementation reported significantly better relationship skills. SFA also successfully prevented the involvement of students with no history of behavior problems in incidents of problem behavior. Students who consistently had no incidents of disruptive behavior continued to do so. Finally, students who participated in Lions Quest programs beginning in fifth grade (through the Skills for Growing Program) and received SFA in sixth and seventh grade had lower rates of absenteeism than their peers. There were no detectable program effects on students' grade point average in English language arts.

Conclusion

The findings provide an insight into factors that may support the social and emotional growth of students. First, multi-year implementation that consistently uses skill-building strategies can support students' development of competence and attitudes over time, and can improve their learning environment. Second, students with a history of behavior problems are likely to need additional supports in the classroom as supplemental SEL instruction. Finally, further research is needed to explore program implementation characteristics which mediate the impact of SFA on students and their learning environment.

Introduction

This study investigated the effects of the Skills for Adolescence (SFA) program on students' social and emotional learning (SEL), behavior, and perceptions of school climate. SFA is part of the Lions Quest suite of programs provided by the Lions Clubs International Foundation.¹ SFA is

Skills for Adolescence aims to promote middle school students' social and emotional competencies, character values, and attitudes consistent with a drug-free lifestyle, and to create a safe, caring, and supportive learning environment.

a comprehensive, research-based program for students in sixth through eighth grade. The program provides a sequenced curriculum and training of school staff to promote a safe and supportive learning environment, essential social and emotional competencies, good citizenship skills, character values, and skills and attitudes consistent with a drug-free lifestyle. With the generous support of the NoVo Foundation, Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) partnered with Wood County in West Virginia to provide a three-year districtwide social-emotional program.

SFA has been widely used in the United States and internationally. The program materials have been translated into 36 languages and adapted for implementation in 90 countries around the world. The SFA program aligns with the five core

competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Wahlberg, 2004). The SFA program integrates instruction on 21st century skills (critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, civic literacy, and health literacy) with SEL. The combination of these skills prepares students with the knowledge and psychological well-being needed for success in the middle school years as well as later in life (Dede, 2010).

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

Over the years, SFA has been recognized by several registries of evidence-based programs, including the U.S. Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse (2006), the National Registry for Effective Prevention Programs (NREPP; n.d.), the Collaborative for Academic, Social,

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

and Emotional Learning (CASEL; 2015), and the World Health Organization (WHO; Clarke, Field, Hussein & Barry, 2015).

A schoolwide implementation model of SFA has previously been evaluated in a randomized control trial with 34 middle schools in three large metropolitan areas (Eisen, Zellman, & Murray, 2003). That study investigated program effects on students in seventh grade and again on the same students in eighth grade. The study authors reported statistically significant differences favoring the intervention group on three drug-related outcomes (marijuana, lifetime use; marijuana, use in the last 30 days; and binge drinking during the last 30 days by baseline binge drinkers) one year after the end of the program.

Skills for Adolescence has been recognized by several registries of evidence-based programs.

The current evaluation aimed to expand our understanding of the effectiveness of SFA by examining changes in students' social and emotional skills, perceptions of school climate, and rates of problem behavior. American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted this study as part of a larger evaluation of Wood County's implementation of Lions Quest programs for elementary, middle, and high school students. This report summarizes findings for the fourth edition of SFA.² The following sections describe the importance of SEL in the middle grades, the SFA program, and the methodology and results of this study.

The Importance of SEL in the Middle Grades

Middle school students undergo many physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes, coupled with the demands associated with the transition to the relatively more impersonal environment of middle school (Kidron & Osher, 2010). These changes lead to early adolescents'

Middle school students experience more complex social, emotional, community, and environment problems than primary grade students.

vulnerability, which can negatively affect their academic performance (Barber & Olsen, 2004), academic engagement and self-esteem (Archambault, Eccles, & Vida, 2010), sense of belonging in school (Wang & Eccles, 2012), and psychological well-being (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Middle school students also experience more complex social, emotional, community, and environment problems than primary grade students (Armstrong, 2006). These problems affect the behavior of students at school and require teachers to give attention to students' social and emotional needs to be able to successfully deliver academic instruction (Raphael & Burke, 2012).

Social and emotional problems in middle school can also have long-term implications. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated a significant link between social and emotional skills in the middle grades and students staying on track for graduation in high school (Fleming et al., 2005; Karakus, Salkever, Slade, Jalongo, & Stuart, 2012). These consistent findings make a strong case for including SEL in the middle school curriculum to promote positive academic,

² A fifth edition of SFA was released in 2015.

behavioral, and health outcomes (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2005). In addition, comprehensive, schoolwide SEL programs can help increase students' sense of safety at school and strengthen their relationships with peers and school staff. Research shows that when students trust adults at their schools, they are less likely to respond defiantly to teachers' requests (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Studies have also found that teacher-student relationships are pivotal to school engagement of middle school students (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014). Such relationships involve a sense of connection and a desire to understand and help one another (National Middle School Association, 2010).

Program Description

SFA consists of 102 lessons in nine units based on building positive character values, such as respect for others, personal and social responsibility, appreciation of diversity, good citizenship, a community service ethic, healthy life habits, and social and emotional skills. Year 1 lessons are organized into eight units, and an additional service-learning unit, taught in conjunction with these units, is integrated into the curriculum. Year 2 and Year 3 booster units address healthy life habits and drug prevention. Lessons can be presented in nine-week mini-course, quarter, semester, year-long, or multi-year formats, or integrated into existing curricula.

Skills for Adolescence uses the design elements identified by CASEL as being linked to improved behavioral and academic outcomes.

SFA's design elements can be represented by the acronym SAFE: sequenced (activities are coordinated to a learning progression), active (activities are interactive and hands-on), focused (emphasizing the development of personal and social skills), and explicit (activities target specific social and emotional skills). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified these design elements as empirically linked to improved behavioral and academic outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Researchers agree that in the middle grades, it is important that adolescents establish a connection between learning and their everyday lives, as well as the larger society. This kind of learning occurs when adolescents actively explore ideas and behaviors in classrooms characterized by relationship building, positive interaction, and trust. Teaching values and skills such as tolerance, empathy, civility, and moral reasoning is best accomplished through multiple learning opportunities and experiences (e.g., games, stories, journal writing, discussions, project-based learning, debate, and role playing) (Howell, Thomas, & Ardasheva, 2011).

The program features a broad set of materials, including a teacher's resource guide, a Drugs Information Guide, a parent meeting guide, the Surprising Years book for parents, Changes and Challenges workbooks for students, and booster sessions for concept reinforcement when using the three-year implementation format. Lessons are intended to be taught by trained, Lions Quest-certified teachers. Curriculum materials are only available to trained teachers. Training consists of a two- or three-day workshop. According to the developer, a large range of targeted staff development inservice workshops and training-of-trainers programs, intended to prepare schools to conduct their own staff development, are also available.

The SFA lesson plans have a consistent structure. Each lesson is divided into four phases of learning:

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

Together, these four phases provide instructional scaffolds to assist students in learning new skills and concepts in a safe and supportive environment, and to gradually progress from discovering the concepts to applying the skills in different contexts. For example, a sixth-grade student may observe a role play that demonstrates poor listening skills and effective listening

SFA lessons assume active participation of students while teachers act as facilitators rather than instructors.

skills (Discovering), participate in a discussion about behavior examples that include the elements of effective listening skills (Connecting), take turns speaking and listening to classmates (Practicing), and document listening behavior in the following day's interactions with peers and adults (Applying).

Instructional techniques are an important part of successful program implementation. These techniques emphasize active participation of students, and creating a learning environment in which all students feel comfortable sharing their ideas, feelings, insights, histories, and cultural beliefs. Teachers are encouraged to serve as facilitators rather than instructors. The detailed lesson plans supply teachers with activities that include open-ended discussion questions, games, and cooperative learning. It is crucial that teachers establish an environment of trust, fun, and mutual respect in order to engage all students in classroom activities. These techniques align with the framework of experiential learning, which posits that students better comprehend and internalize the character values and skill concepts taught if they can see or practice the concepts rather than just be told about them (Phillips, 2014).

Methodology

Design and Sample

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

The study took place in Wood County Schools, which serves the Parkersburg area—a small urban city and its nearby towns in west-central West Virginia, adjacent to the Ohio River. The intervention group (SFA) included all sixth- and seventh-grade students in three middle schools in Wood County Schools. These schools participated in the program as part of a countywide initiative enabled by a generous grant from the NoVo Foundation. About two thirds of the students (68 percent) were eligible for the free/reduced-price lunch program. Most of the students (93 percent) were White.

Using a quasi-experimental design, this evaluation compared the behavior and attitudes of students in schools that implemented SFA or other SEL programs.

The comparison group included all sixth- and seventh-grade students in two middle schools that had chosen to implement other SEL programs, and allocated their own resources for that purpose. More than half of the students (56 percent) were eligible for the free/reduced-price lunch program. As in the intervention group, most of the students (93 percent) were White.

Interventions

Skills for Adolescence (SFA). SFA (grades 6–8) was designed to promote good citizenship skills, core character values, and social and emotional skills, and to discourage the use of drugs, alcohol, and violence. This study assessed the effects of Skills for Adolescence as delivered during homeroom/advisory periods. The designated scope and sequence included four units (Entering the Teen Years, Building Self-Confidence and Communication Skills, Managing Emotions in Positive Ways, and Making Healthy Decisions) and a supplemental unit on bullying prevention. None of the schools chose to implement the supplemental unit on service learning and the concluding unit (Developing Your Potential). The middle schools began implementation in the 2013–14 school year. This evaluation assesses the effects of two years of program implementation.

Other SEL. The two middle schools in the comparison group implemented two different programs. School A implemented the program Students Take Active Responsibility (STAR). The program provides three lessons per week during the entire school year. The guidance counselor developed the lesson plans based on students' developmental stages and needs and faculty recommendations. The program is divided into four sets of lessons. The first set of lessons includes community behaviors, sportsmanship, survival skills, cyber-safety, bullying prevention, and conflict resolution. The second set of topics includes drug/alcohol awareness, smoking, respect, peer relationships, differences, the peace tree and pluralism, perseverance, leadership, and Sean Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. This set also includes lessons for high school planning with students and parents. The third set of topics addresses honesty,

drama kings and queens, decision making, making smart choices, communication, life strategies, anger management, and differences. The final set of topics includes responsibility, integrity/academic integrity, interpersonal skills/rumors, surviving peer pressure, post-spring break “fine-tuning” assemblies, building character, and positive mental attitudes. School B implemented Rachel’s Challenge. Sixth-grade students used the Character in Motion Year 1 workbooks. The program was implemented during a development guidance period once a week. The counselor provided teachers with videos from other SEL and character education programs to supplement their instruction. Students also participated in the “Friends of Rachel” club. The club met over lunch and was supervised by two volunteer teachers, who were responsible for setting the agenda, facilitating discussions, and supporting planning of community service projects. Projects included holiday cards for a nursing home, food collection for the Humane Society, decorating the school, and sending “feel good” cards to students.

Measures

Student Social and Emotional Learning Survey

Students took the baseline survey in September 2013. Students took the survey again in May–June 2014 and May–June 2015. The survey aimed to measure perceived social and emotional competence and the learning environment. The survey was anonymous and confidential. It included five scales, described below.

Social Awareness and Social Responsibility. This scale was taken from the student self-report Social Competence Survey (Dymnicki & Kendziora, 2012). It was rated on a 4-point scale (“not at all true,” “a little true,” “pretty much true,” and “very much true”). The scale included five items, such as, “I can tell when someone is getting angry or upset before they say anything,” “I care about other people’s feelings and points of view,” and “I try to understand how other people feel and think.” Cronbach’s alpha (α), a statistic calculated to indicate how consistently sets of items measure an underlying construct, was equal to .69, which exceeds the What Works Clearinghouse minimum reliability standard of 0.50 (What Works Clearinghouse, 2014).

Relationship Skills. This scale was taken from the student self-report Social Competence Survey (Dymnicki & Kendziora, 2012). It included five items, such as, “If I get angry with a friend, I can talk about it and make things better,” “I get into arguments when I disagree with people,” and “I try to work out disagreements with other students by talking to them.” It was rated on a 4-point scale (“not at all true,” “a little true,” “pretty much true,” and “very much true”). Internal reliability was adequate ($\alpha = 0.70$).

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

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

Risk Behavior. The nine-item Risk Behavior scale from the Individual Protective Factors Index (IPFI) was used in this study. Students responded to the prompt, “Please indicate how often these things happened to you within the last year...” using a 3-point scale (“three times or more,” “once or twice,” “not at all.”) Sample items include “Skipped school for a whole day (without parents’ knowledge)” and “Got into a fist fight.” The IPFI was developed as a tool for evaluating prevention programs for youth in the 10–16 age range. Development of the IPFI included a pilot test with 642 youth (aged 10–16) in five sites nationwide, and a validation sample of 2,416 youths in 15 sites nationwide. The instrument has established reliability and validity. The scale showed adequate internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.66$).

Prosocial Behavior. This scale included three items that were developed for this study: “Told others about the dangers of drug use,” “Helped other students when they seemed to be in need,” and “Volunteered in a project to support my school or community.” The scale showed adequate internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.60$).

Office Disciplinary Referrals

Administrative records were obtained for the 2012–13 (baseline) and 2013–14 (first year of intervention) school years.

We used the West Virginia Policy 4373 (expected behavior in safe and supportive schools) definition of inappropriate behavior: “Behavior that disrupts the learning environment in a manner that effectively deters future incidents and affirms respect for individuals. Inappropriate behaviors include but are not limited to incidents of harassment, intimidation, bullying, substance abuse and/or violence.” Using this guidance, West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) classifies inappropriate behavior into four levels:

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

- Level 4: Safe Schools Act Behaviors—are consistent with those addressed in West Virginia codes (e.g., Possession and/or Use of Dangerous Weapon).

Implementation Quality

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

Second, to supplement the data collected through implementation logs, the evaluation team conducted semistructured interviews with school counselors and teachers, school administrators who coordinated SFA implementation, and school principals, as well as focus groups with teachers. The interviews and focus groups aimed to collect information about changes to the original implementation plan and barriers to implementation.

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

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

Student Characteristics and School Characteristics

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

Results

Skills for Adolescence Implementation

Training, Participation, and Preparedness to Implement Skills for Growing

Teachers and counselors adequately attended the trainings in each year of the evaluation. Based on training records, all 81 teachers and guidance counselors who were recommended by the school principals for training attended the introductory training provided by Lions Club International Foundation. Refresher training workshops and training for new teachers were provided in subsequent years as required by the program.

Dosage of Skills for Adolescence

The implementation evaluation identified two limitations to implementation: (a) low dosage, and (b) lack of schoolwide components.

LCIF provided pacing guides that recommended a standard *duration* of implementation of 45 minutes once per week. The guides also recommended a standard *depth* of implementation of one lesson per week over a 33-week schedule during each school year. For the purposes of the evaluation, schools were asked to make time to implement 16 to 18 lessons in Year 2 and 33 lessons in Year 3, including a Service Learning Unit.

In the first year of implementation (2013–14), 30 percent of the teachers implemented at least half of the units and 20 percent of the teachers taught all of the units. In the second year of implementation (2014–15), 35 percent of the teachers taught at least half of the units, and 7 percent taught all of the units. In both years, the average lesson length was 30 minutes. Although teachers' monthly logs did not show systematic trends identifying certain units as more widely used than others, qualitative data indicated that values such as respect and kindness, skills such as resisting negative peer pressure, and attitudes such as healthy problem solving, decision making, and self-esteem were the most deeply discussed topics.

Teachers' Feedback

Content and Activities

Teachers reported that SFA provided a rich variety of activities and plenty of resources for them to use. They believed that the richness of the program enabled them to keep students focused and on task. As one teacher reported: *"I usually do a whole class discussion and then the other activities, like creating a poster or creating a skit, or role playing. I break them up into small groups and we just sit in different areas of the classroom."* Another teacher reported: *"They [Lions Quest] have a pretty good curriculum and I think they have a nice variety of different activities. Students seem to do very well when they have to create posters. Their favorite is doing skits and plays. We also do reenactments about certain issues. For student reflection, I find that*

dialogue and discussions work better than writing in their journals. I'll give them the opportunity to talk about the topic at their table and then we open it up." All teachers also found SFA to be comprehensive in its coverage of topics that are relevant and meaningful to middle school students. Teachers believed that social and emotional learning was part of their job and were committed to supporting students' social and emotional growth.

Social Climate

Teachers noted that the cooperative learning activities of SFA created more opportunities for students to hear about each other's interests, hobbies, and aspirations. Students who typically did not share this information with each other received the opportunity to discuss their interests

SFA cooperative learning activities improved the social climate in the classroom and led to more positive interactions of students with others outside their peer group.

with peers outside their social group. In some cases, these discussions led to positive social climate in the classroom and more positive interactions of students with others outside of their peer group. As one teacher commented: *"In middle schools and high schools it's kind of cliquey. You just hang out with your friends or whatever, which is fine, but it is nice to mix and match. The Lions Quest program lets you do that. Then students talk to each other in the halls a little bit more. It seems to help, especially with new kids."*

The Learning Process

Teachers noted that students were sometimes reluctant to participate in activities, saying that they were "funny" or "cheesy." Nevertheless, teachers saw the value of raising student awareness about issues that might interfere with their progress in school and of creating opportunities for sharing and discussing these issues. As one teacher explained: *"I think it's important for them just to be aware and put it in the back of their minds. I think we always need to be letting students know about self-esteem issues and how to interact with each other. Especially our school, which is a Title I school—these kids have poor social skills. They haven't been [shown] good social skills. This program [SFA] is a good opportunity for us to do this."*

SFA structured activities encouraged students to compare effective and ineffective behaviors and discuss the pros and cons of different mindsets. One teacher said: *"I think the discussions are good and have a positive impact on them [students]. The kids have very good discussions that give them a chance to listen to each other and talk about their feelings."*

Both counselors and teachers believed that teachers' attitudes towards the program played a significant role in its success. Teachers who were excited about the program got students motivated to try out the activities. They were also able to create an atmosphere of trust and openness among students. As one teacher noted: *"I think it depends on the teachers and how you implement it in the classrooms. The kids aren't always excited about doing it, but once we get going on it, they get into it."* Classroom observations confirmed that teachers who were openly enthused about the program (e.g., they sang and danced with the students) were able to get most of their students to participate in games, discussions, and other activities.

Barriers to Implementation

Lack of Leadership and Administrative Support

The role of guidance counselors as program coordinators was not explicitly delineated. Therefore, while counselors felt that it was part of their job to help teachers understand the pacing guides and the program content, they did not manage more procedural aspects of implementation such as ordering new student workbooks, ensuring that all teachers had the program materials, or supporting implementation coordination throughout the school year (e.g., identifying and inviting guest speakers or coordinating service learning projects). The counselors prepared a calendar for all teachers to follow throughout the school year, and met formally and informally with teachers to address questions about the lessons. The teachers suggested that appointing a staff member who is responsible for ongoing coaching of teachers as well as planning and coordinating logistics (e.g., obtaining and handing out books, scheduling guest speakers, identifying partnerships with community-based organizations) is necessary for achieving full implementation. These are tasks that teachers reported having neither the time nor sufficient guidance to perform. As one teacher explained: *“Because I’m a math teacher, I don’t have time to look at next week’s Quest lesson and worry about trying to find a guest speaker to come in and speak. A lot of kids here have social and emotional issues just because their whole life is a bit of a disaster for most of them. But I’m not a counselor. I don’t have the ability to really do it. I don’t know that we’re doing it [SFA] the way you’re supposed to do it. Because we have academic issues in this building, like a lot of low scores and everybody is hounding us about that. So I don’t worry about preparing for Lions Quest lessons when I’ve got to worry about improving their math scores.”*

Insufficient school leadership involvement in the implementation process undermined accountability. There were no grade-level or whole-school staff meetings about the program, and there was no monitoring of implementation. Teachers used a “pick and choose” method of

Because students did not receive grades for their participation, teachers were concerned about their ability to reach a high level of student participation.

deciding which lessons within units, and which activities within lessons, to implement. The use of student workbooks was left to teachers’ discretion. Some teachers saw the student workbooks as an integral part of implementation while others did not use the workbooks because of concerns that they would reduce student engagement in the program.

The homeroom/advisory period during which SFA was implemented (also called “flex time”) is part of students’ daily schedule, and is dedicated to delivering a counseling curriculum

in accordance with state-mandated counseling standards, and to provide any needed supports to students. Because students did not receive grades for their participation, teachers were concerned about their ability to reach a high level of student participation. Several teachers noted that students often viewed this time as a “free period,” and this view, coupled with a lack of accountability, led to inconsistencies in program delivery. While some teachers felt that they were forcing social and emotional learning activities on students who were not interested in them, others skipped the lessons and helped students with academic subjects instead.

These implementation problems were evident more in 2014–15—as the grant from the NoVo Foundation reached its last year—than in 2013–14. The decline in leadership involvement and monitoring of implementation was observed both in elementary and middle schools. Reorganization of the district office and uncertainty about long-term districtwide priorities and investments in social and emotional learning may have contributed to this decline in quality of implementation.

Time Constraints and Training

Teachers reported that the introductory and refresher training sessions were helpful but insufficient. Although teachers were trained in Lions Quest, they felt generally underprepared to address the social and emotional challenges that adolescents face. Consequently, some teachers limited the time allocated to discussions, role play, and sharing about personal experiences. In particular, teachers felt unprepared to handle stories about traumatic experiences, which were common within the high-poverty population they served.

Some teachers reported that they were unprepared to talk with students about the value of social and emotional learning at school. For example, one teacher recounted a question that a student asked after class: *“Do you guys just think we are all just really bad people? That’s why we have to do this every week?”* The teacher, who recalled being caught unprepared to address this question, replied: *“This is a countywide initiative. We all have to do it.”*

Teachers also reported not feeling ready to infuse social and emotional learning across the curriculum. They expressed skepticism about the value of preselected, preplanned social and emotional activities as part of teaching academic subjects. Instead, teachers believed that they should address students’ questions and issues that are unique to students’ personal experiences.

Combined data from teacher surveys, interviews, and focus groups consistently showed a discrepancy between the need for training and willingness to attend training. Teachers and counselors believed that the implementation of SFA would be improved if teachers received training about the topic of social and emotional learning that went beyond the specific structure and content of the program. One teacher commented, *“I think some of it [implementing SFA]—you need a lot more social and emotional training to do stuff effectively enough to change, and we don’t have that.”* A guidance counselor recounted, *“Most teachers need more training on how to implement Lions Quest, facilitate conversations about students’ emotions, and general theory and evidence on SEL and its importance.”* On the other hand, teachers and counselors noted a low level of staff buy-in, and noted that the school and district did not secure their commitment at the beginning of the initiative. As one teacher shared: *“It takes me 20 minutes a week to prepare for a Quest lesson. It is a time commitment that I wasn’t asked for my opinion on before I was told to do it.”*

The Effects of SFA on Students' Social and Emotional Learning: Evidence From Student Self-Reports

This section summarizes the results of the student survey analysis. All sixth-grade students in general education classrooms were invited to take the survey. The two middle schools that did not implement SFA declined administration of the student survey. Therefore, this analysis focuses on a comparison of classrooms with higher versus lower implementation levels of SFA. Higher implementing classrooms adhered more to the allocated time for program instruction and lesson plans. Lower implementing classrooms showed a low level of fidelity with regard to dosage and use of the lesson plans.

If data were missing from the baseline or follow-up surveys, the student's results were eliminated from the statistical analysis. The analytic sample, with full data for both points in time, included 188 sixth-grade students (126 students from higher implementing classrooms and 62 students from lower implementing classrooms) from three middle schools (41 percent response rate). The distribution of female and male students was even (94 female and 94 male students). The students came from a mix of implementing and non-implementing elementary schools with regard to use of Lions Quest Skills for Growing (SFG) for prekindergarten through grade 5. Survey responses at the end of fifth grade were used as baseline data. Survey responses at the end of sixth grade were used as posttest data. To protect students' privacy, the school district required that no other student data would be gathered by or linked to the survey. Therefore, we do not have additional information about the survey respondents' demographic characteristics or academic achievement.

Baseline Equivalence

It is very important in a study comparing student growth to establish that the intervention group and comparison group were similar in relevant abilities at baseline. Demonstrating baseline equivalence on an outcome of interest minimizes potential bias from selection in quasi-experimental design studies. If the two groups are not similar, we cannot be sure if the growth we see is due to the program or is the result of some preexisting differences. We examined baseline differences using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with four survey scales (Safe and Respectful Climate, Peer Social and Emotional Culture, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness/Social Responsibility) as the dependent variables. Analysis results showed a significant multivariate effect [Wilks' lambda = 0.95, $F(6,175) = 2.34$, $p = .06$].

As Exhibit 1 shows, the SFA and comparison students were comparable at baseline on three of four measures: Safe and Respectful Climate, Peer Social and Emotional Culture, and Relationship Skills. SFA students were significantly higher than comparison group students on Social Awareness/Social Responsibility. The effect size for this scale was greater than 0.25, meaning it could represent meaningful differences between the two groups that cannot be corrected statistically (What Works Clearinghouse, 2014). Therefore, this scale was not further explored, although it was taken into account for statistical corrections.

Exhibit 1. Comparison of the Study Groups at Baseline

	Implementation Level	n	Mean (SD)	F(1,186)	Effect Size
Safe and Respectful Climate	Higher	126	2.30 (0.47)	<1	-0.02
	Lower	62	2.31 (0.46)		
Peer Social and Emotional Culture	Higher	126	2.03 (0.44)	<1	-0.05
	Lower	62	2.05 (0.42)		
Relationship Skills	Higher	126	3.06 (0.59)	1.5	0.20
	Lower	62	2.94 (0.64)		
Social Awareness/Responsibility	Higher	126	3.24 (0.53)	6.97*	0.41
	Lower	62	3.01 (0.63)		

Source: AIR May/June 2014 and May/June 2015 middle school student surveys.

Notes: (1) * indicates statistical significance at $p < .01$. (2) SD = standard deviation. (3) The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen’s d ; Lipsey & Wilson, 1993).

Change Over Time in Students’ Social and Emotional Skills

We conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to examine the effects of the program on students. Five survey scales (Safe and Respectful Climate, Peer Social and Emotional Culture, Relationship Skills, Problem Behavior, and Prosocial Behavior) were included as the dependent variables. Gender and scores on the same four scales at baseline were included as covariates. Analysis results showed a multivariate effect [Wilks’ lambda = 0.95, $F(5,176) = 1.97, p = 0.08$].³

Students in higher implementing classrooms showed substantial growth in their interpersonal skills, which exceeded the growth of students in lower implementing classrooms.

Univariate testing found the effect to be significant for one of the five scales, favoring higher program implementation. Exhibit 2 shows the details of the statistical analysis. To better understand the magnitude of growth for students in SFA schools, we looked at the “effect size,” a common metric that can be used to evaluate the amount of growth in the intervention group (in this case, the higher implementing group) relative to the growth in the comparison group. We found an effect size of +0.41 for Relationship Skills, which is considered “educationally meaningful” or “substantively important”⁴ according to the What Works Clearinghouse standards (2014). This indicates that students in higher implementing classrooms showed substantial growth in interpersonal skills (e.g., communicating

relative to the growth in the comparison group. We found an effect size of +0.41 for Relationship Skills, which is considered “educationally meaningful” or “substantively important”⁴ according to the What Works Clearinghouse standards (2014). This indicates that students in higher implementing classrooms showed substantial growth in interpersonal skills (e.g., communicating

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³ The examination of a multivariate effect enables us to explore multiple groups of social and emotional skills at the same time. The statistically significant effect means that the program has impacted at least one group of social and emotional skills and, potentially, other skills as well.

⁴ Defined as an effect size of 0.25 or greater, regardless of statistical significance.

with others, resolving disagreements peacefully) that exceeded the growth of students in the lower implementing group.

Exhibit 2. Comparison of the Study Groups at Posttest

	Implementation Level	n	Mean (SD)	F(1,180)	Effect Size
Safe and Respectful Climate	Higher	126	1.46 (0.59)	1.25	0.16
	Lower	62	1.36 (0.65)		
Peer Social and Emotional Culture	Higher	126	1.82 (0.58)	<1.00	-0.05
	Lower	62	1.85 (0.61)		
Relationship Skills	Higher	126	3.08 (0.44)	8.04**	0.41
	Lower	62	2.87 (0.62)		
Problem Behavior	Higher	126	2.73 (0.23)	2.04	0.21
	Lower	62	2.68 (0.27)		
Prosocial Behavior	Higher	126	1.85 (0.47)	<1.00	-0.08
	Lower	62	1.89 (0.48)		

Source: AIR May/June 2015 student survey.

Notes: (1) All scales except Relationship Skills were rated on a 3-point scale. Relationship Skills was rated on a 4-point scale. (2) A higher score on the Problem Behavior Scale represents less problem behavior. (3) This table shows covariate-adjusted means. (4) * indicates statistical significance at $p < .05$; ** indicates statistical significance at $p < .01$. (5) SD = standard deviation. (6) The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen's d).

The Effects of SFA on Students' Behavior

This section reports on the results of the analysis of students' office disciplinary referrals for disruptive, aggressive, dangerous, and illegal student behaviors. The sample included 919 middle school students who were in seventh grade in 2014–15. To be included in the analysis, the students had to be enrolled in an elementary school in Wood County beginning in the 2010–11 school year and have complete administrative records for all school years 2011–12 through 2014–15. The evaluation team compared six groups of students, as shown in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3. Number of Students by Study Group

	SFG in Elementary School	Other SEL in Elementary School	No SEL in Elementary School
SFA in Middle School	(1) 210	(2) 77	(3) 239
Other SEL in Middle School	(4) 215	(5) 98	(6) 80

This design enabled us to examine the effects of SFA with and without participation in the elementary school version of Lions Quest (Skills for Growing, or SFG). We hypothesized that students in SFA schools who participated in SFG while in elementary school would have the lowest rate of behavior problems.

Baseline Equivalence

We examined baseline differences using an analysis of variance with rates of Level 1 behavior (minimally disruptive behavior) in the year before the districtwide implementation of Lions Quest (2011–12 school year), when students were in fourth grade. Students who were in elementary schools that implemented the Skills for Growing program throughout the initiative may have participated in the program in 2012–13 school year, when they were in fifth grade. Students who were in middle schools that implemented SFA received the program in sixth and seventh grade (2013–14 and 2014–15). Therefore, there are three possible groups of students who participated in SFA:

- (1) SFG/SFA – Students who participated in SFG in elementary school and in SFA in middle school.
- (2) Other SEL/SFA – Students who participated in another SEL program in elementary school and in SFA in middle school.
- (3) No SEL/SFA – Students who did not participate in an SEL program in elementary school and participated in SFA in middle school.

We hypothesized that students who participated in SEL programming in elementary school would benefit more from SFA and show a lower rate of behavior problems than students who did not receive SEL programming in elementary school.

Using the available data, these three groups of SFA participants can be compared to three groups of non-SFA participants:

- (4) SFG/Other SEL – Students who participated in SFG in elementary school and in another SEL program in middle school.
- (5) Other SEL/Other SEL – Students who participated in another SEL program in elementary and middle school.
- (6) No SEL/Other SEL – Students who did not participate in an SEL program in elementary school and participated in another SEL program in middle school.

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance with study group classification as the independent variable and rate of disruptive behavior as the dependent variable. Data were from the year prior to the beginning of implementation of Lions Quest in Wood County (2010–11, when students were in third grade). Analysis results did not find a statistically significant multivariate effect [$F(5,913) = 1.22, p = .30$]. Effect sizes ranged from 0 to 0.24, indicating that the group differences were not substantively important, according to the What Works Clearinghouse standards (2014). Therefore, baseline equivalence was established. Exhibit 4 provides the means and standard deviations of the six study groups.

Exhibit 4. Comparison of the Study Groups at Baseline

Group	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
(1) SFG/SFA	210	0.20	0.98
(2) Other SEL/SFA	77	0.10	0.31
(3) No SEL/SFA	239	0.23	1.17
(4) SFG/Other SEL	215	0.10	0.36
(5) Other SEL/Other SEL	98	0.08	0.37
(6) No SEL/Other SEL	80	0.31	1.39

Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) 2011–12.

Program Effects on Behavior

We tested separately the effects of SFA on students with and without a history of behavior problems. Students were classified into two groups based on the total number of incidents across all levels of problem behavior and across grades from second through sixth grade. The group of students with a history of behavior problems included 216 seventh-grade students. The group of students with no history of behavior problems included 702 students.

We did not find a statistically significant effect for the differences by study group among students with a history of behavior problems, likely because of the small sample size. Therefore, we examined the magnitude of the differences, or effect sizes. As Exhibit 5 shows, participation in

SFG in elementary school enhanced the effects of SFA in middle school on students with a history of behavior problems compared to students who participated in other SEL programs in elementary school and then in SFA in middle school (Cohen’s $d = 0.30$). A possible explanation is the importance of consistency in SEL instructional approaches. Similar to the SFG/SFA group, students who were classified as Other SEL in elementary school and Other SEL in middle school tended to be in the same program (Rachel’s Challenge) across all grade levels. Both groups had the lowest rate of behavior problems, supporting the argument that maintaining a consistent instructional approach across the school years is beneficial. Exhibit 7 depicts these differences graphically.

Exhibit 5. Change Over Time in Minimally Disruptive Behaviors of Students With a History of Behavior Problems

	Comparison				
	(2) Other SEL/ SFA	(3) No SEL/ SFA	(4) SFG/ Other SEL	(5) Other SEL/ Other SEL	(6) No SEL/ Other SEL
(1) SFG/SFA	0.30	0.04	0.10	0.13	0.15
(2) Other SEL/SFA		0.24	0.17	0.44	0.17
(3) No SEL/SFA			-0.05	0.16	-0.09
(4) SFG/Other SEL				0.23	-0.03
(5) Other SEL/Other SEL					-0.34

Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS).

Notes: (1) The numbers of students in each study group are as follows: SFG/SEL: $n = 62$; Other SEL/SFA: $n = 14$; No SEL/SFA: $n = 80$; SFG/Other SEL: $n = 21$; Other SEL/Other SEL: $n = 18$; No SEL/Other SEL: $n = 21$. (2) This table shows effect sizes for differences between study groups. The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen’s d). (3) Substantively important effect sizes (that is, at least 0.25) are highlighted in bold font. (4) Positive sign indicates higher rate of behavior problems in the comparison group (dark blue shaded area).

In examining the effects of SFA among students with no history of behavior problems, we found a statistically significant effect for study group classification [$F(5,696)=7.12, p<0.001$]. We found that SFA successfully prevented the engagement of students in disruptive behavior. All three groups of SFA students (together with students who participated in other SEL programs in elementary and middle school) showed the lowest rates of behavior problems. Students who did not participate in SEL in elementary school and received other SEL in middle school, as well as students who participated in SFG in elementary school and then received a different SEL program in middle school, showed the highest rates of behavior problems. These findings suggest that SFA is an effective prevention program that can successfully keep students on social and emotional development pathways indicated by good behavior and following the school rules.

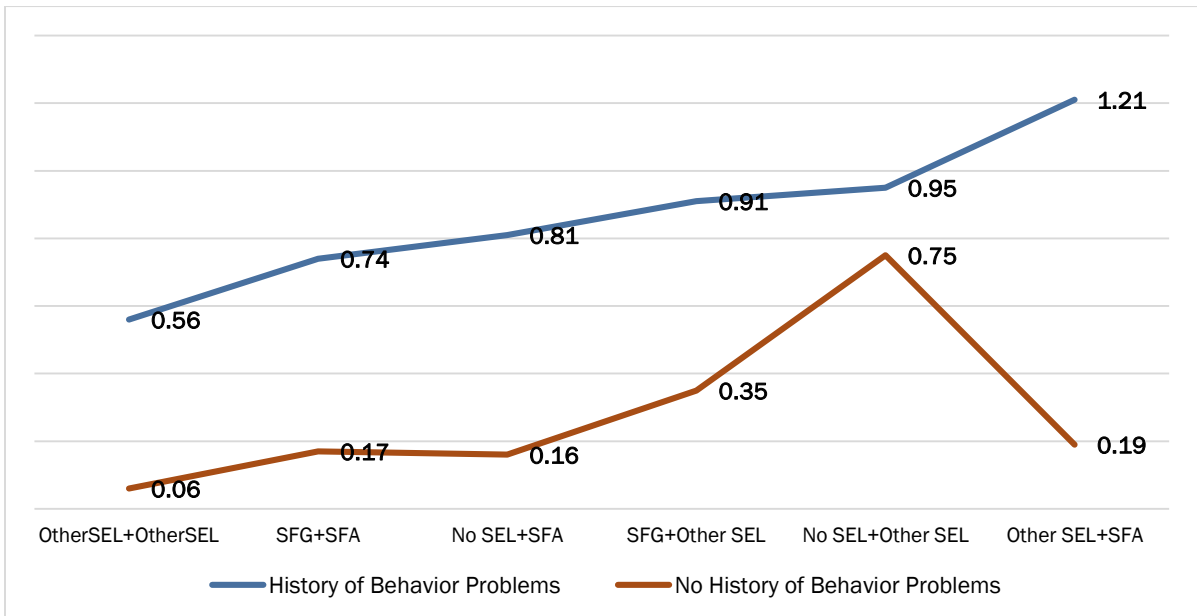
Exhibit 6. Change Over Time in Minimally Disruptive Behaviors of Students With No History of Behavior Problems

	Comparison				
	(2) Other SEL/ SFA	(3) No SEL/ SFA	(4) SFG/ Other SEL	(5) Other SEL/ Other SEL	(6) No SEL/ Other SEL
(1) SFG/SFA	0.03	0.01	0.23*	-0.18	0.74*
(2) Other SEL/SFA		-0.03	0.20	-0.26	0.66*
(3) No SEL/SFA			0.22*	-0.14	0.66*
(4) SFG/Other SEL				-0.39	0.89*
(5) Other SEL/Other SEL					1.02*

Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS).

Notes: (1) The numbers of students in each study group are as follows: SFG/SFA: n = 148; Other SEL/SFA: n = 14; No SEL/SFA: n = 80; SFG/Other SEL: n = 21; Other SEL/Other SEL: n = 18; No SEL/Other SEL: n = 21. (2) * indicates statistically significant difference, $p < 0.05$. (3) This table shows effect sizes for differences between study groups. The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen's d). (4) Substantively important effect sizes (that is, at least 0.25) are highlighted in bold font. (5) Positive sign indicates higher rate of behavior problems in the comparison group (dark blue shaded area).

Exhibit 7. Comparison of Study Groups by Rates of Disruptive Behavior



Additional analyses of group differences in rates of potentially harmful, imminently dangerous, and Safe School Act behaviors did not find statistically significant effects. These findings suggest that a more intensive level of intervention (both schoolwide and individualized) is needed to prevent students' involvement in aggressive and illegal behavior. There were also no statistically significant effects on students' grade point average in English language arts.

Effects of SFA on Middle School Students' Academic Effort

SFA emphasizes setting personal goals for learning and growth and personal responsibility. In addition, as reported in the previous section, it reduces rates of disruptive behavior in the classroom, which could improve the conditions for learning for students. We therefore examined the program effects on students' absenteeism and grade point average in English language arts as indicators of academic effort.

Baseline Equivalence

We examined baseline differences using an analysis of variance with rates of Level 1 behavior (minimally disruptive behavior) in the year before the districtwide implementation of Lions Quest (2011–12), when students were in fourth grade. The same six study groups described above were compared in this analysis. We did not find statistically significant differences among the six study groups with regard to absenteeism (number of days missed). Exhibit 8 presents descriptive statistics by study group. Effect sizes ranged from 0.04 to 0.26. All effect sizes except one were smaller than 0.25. The effect size for the difference between the SFA/SFG group and the Other SEL/Other SEL group was 0.26. Absenteeism at baseline was therefore used for statistical control in subsequent analysis.

Exhibit 8. Comparison of the Study Groups at Baseline

Group	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
(1) SFG/SFA	177	9.45	11.89
(2) Other SEL/SFA	40	8.70	7.19
(3) No SEL/SFA	214	9.61	9.95
(4) SFG/Other SEL	178	8.30	6.86
(5) Other SEL/Other SEL	75	6.69	5.47
(6) No SEL/Other SEL	73	9.05	7.47

Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) 2011–12.

Program Effects on Absenteeism

We conducted an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) with study group as the independent variable, absenteeism in the 2014–15 school year as the dependent variable, and absenteeism in 2011–12 as the covariate to control for baseline differences. The effect was marginally significant [$F(5, 748)=1.84, p=0.10$]. A post hoc Least Significant Difference (LSD) test showed that students who participated in SFG in elementary school and in SFA in middle school had significantly lower absenteeism than students who did not participate in an SEL program in elementary school and participated in another SEL program in middle school ($p<0.05$; Cohen's $d=0.38$). Students who participated both in SFG and SFA also had significantly lower absenteeism than students who received other SEL programs both in elementary and middle school ($p<0.05$; Cohen's $d=0.32$). Both effect sizes are substantively important (that is, at least 0.25). These findings suggest that the Lions Quest programs can effectively reduce absenteeism, especially if implemented across

the elementary and middle school years. Exhibit 9 presents the effect sizes for the comparisons among groups. Exhibit 10 depicts the group differences in a graphic format.

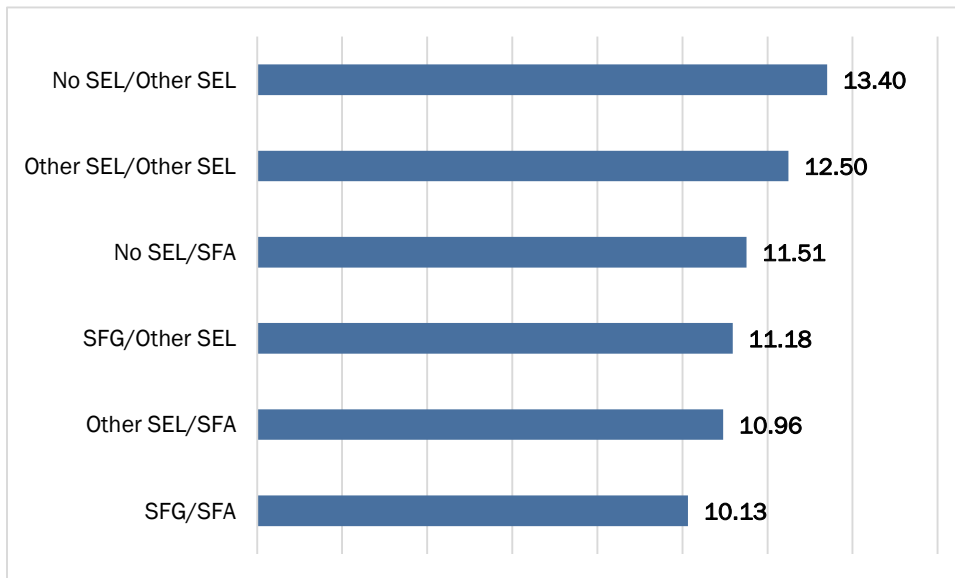
Exhibit 9. Differences Among Study Groups

	Comparison				
	(2) Other SEL/ SFA	(3) No SEL/ SFA	(4) SFG/ Other SEL	(5) Other SEL/ Other SEL	(6) No SEL/ Other SEL
(1) SFG/SFA	0.1	0.13	0.15	0.32*	0.38*
(2) Other SEL/SFA		0.03	0.05	0.15	0.18
(3) No SEL/SFA			0.03	0.14	0.24
(4) SFG/Other SEL				0.1	0.18
(5) Other SEL/Other SEL					0.09

Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS).

Notes: (1) The numbers of students in each study group are as follows: SFG/SFA: n = 175; Other SEL/SFA: n = 40; No SEL/SFA: n = 214; SFG/Other SEL: n = 178; Other SEL/Other SEL: n = 75; No SEL/Other SEL: n = 73. (2) * indicates statistically significant difference, $p < 0.05$. (3) This table shows effect sizes for differences between study groups. The effect size was calculated as the standardized mean difference (Cohen's d). (4) Substantively important effect sizes (that is, at least 0.25) are highlighted in bold font. (5) Negative sign indicates lower absenteeism in the comparison group (dark blue shaded area).

Exhibit 10. Average Number of Missed School Days by Study Group



Source: West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS).

Note: This exhibit presents covariate-adjusted means.

A similar set of analyses was conducted to examine differences among study groups in students' grade point average in English language arts. It did not find statistically significant differences.

Discussion

The Lions Quest program for middle schools (SFA) had a positive impact on students' relationship skills, absenteeism, and behavior. These findings are encouraging, as these outcomes are predictors of long-term academic achievement and school completion (Balfanz, 2009). Students in classrooms with relatively high-quality SFA implementation had higher self-ratings of relationship skills than students in classrooms with lower quality implementation. The relationship skills examined in this study included teamwork, conflict resolution, and communication competencies. These skills are important to cooperative learning in the classroom—a pedagogical technique that is increasingly used in middle school classrooms today (Strom & Strom, 2011). In addition, these skills are essential for effective communication that builds on accurate social information processing (Orobio-de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002).

SFA had positive effects on keeping disruptive behavior of students with no history of behavior problems at a low level relative to students who did not participate in SFA. Examples of disruptive behavior problems include use of inappropriate language, disrespectful conduct, insubordinate

The present study findings suggest that students benefit from multi-year implementation of SEL programs.

or defiant behavior, violation of school rules and policies, and cheating. Research evidence suggests that SEL can help reduce occurrences of inappropriate behavior by teaching students alternative attention-seeking strategies, more effective ways to express frustration and needs, and a wider repertoire of strategies to manage stressful, anxiety-provoking situations (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010). Results from this evaluation are consistent with previous research demonstrating that students attending SEL programs reported significantly more

positive behaviors than students who did not receive these learning opportunities (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012). The results also suggested that implementation may have been insufficient (in terms of both scope and intensity) to change the behavior of students with a history of behavior problems. There is a need for further research on SEL practices that can support this student sub-group, in light of research showing that persistent behavior problems in elementary and middle school may, if left untreated, place students on a path toward chronic behavior problems in high school (Tobin & Sugai, 1999).

Students who participated in both SFG and SFA were less likely to miss school days than their peers. Absenteeism can be an indicator of academic disengagement—a set of attitudes associated with being on a path toward high school dropout. Poor attendance may suggest that students are uninterested in learning, or that they are experiencing challenges at home that impede their ability to consistently attend school. Longitudinal studies have shown that students who are not present for instruction are likely to underperform and experience low academic self-confidence, and may eventually decide to drop out of school (Schoeneberger, 2012). The Lions Quest programs, SFG and SFA, encourage students to set personal goals and identify ways to achieve those goals. In addition, these programs emphasize building a sense of self-worth through self-reflection, engagement in service learning, and positive feedback from adults and peers. Findings show that participating in both SFG and SFA is necessary to significantly reduce

absenteeism, which suggests that the process of working toward personal goals and building one's self-confidence is a gradual, multi-year process that benefits from consistent, sequential instruction across the elementary and middle school years. Moreover, the students included in our sample began participation in fifth grade and continued program participation in the sixth and seventh grades. These students received the SFG and SFA programs during the critical time of transition to middle school—a time when it is highly likely that students' academic performance and self-confidence will decline, while behavior problems increase (Erath, Bub, & Tu, 2016; Goldstein, Boxer, & Rudolph, 2015).

Students may also miss school because they avoid anxiety-provoking situations and threats to their emotional or physical well-being (Dube & Orpinas, 2009). SFA aims to increase students' ability to overcome difficult social situations (e.g., bullying, peer harassment) inside and outside the classroom. In addition, SFA helps teachers create a culture of tolerance and respect in the classroom, where all students are accepted and encouraged by the teacher and by each other, regardless of their backgrounds and abilities. The SFA lesson plans guide teachers to use explicit instruction in values and skills, as well as pedagogical techniques designed to foster a culture of respect in which all members of the class—teachers and students—treat each other with dignity, fairness, and an appreciation of the talents of each individual. This ideal is aligned with the key belief of the National Middle School Association (2010)—that the school environment should always be inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all students.

The study findings should be viewed in light of the limitations in program implementation. School principals and school leadership teams were not involved in program implementation and, as a result, the quality of implementation varied among classrooms in terms of the number of

Future studies should explore the contextual factors that enhance the effects of SFA. Such research can inform training and technical assistance to schools.

program units completed and classroom management strategies. However, the implementation challenges identified here are similar to challenges reported elsewhere in the context of SEL programming (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Research has shown that the context of SEL implementation, such as accountability and encouragement of school leaders can reduce or enhance the effects of SEL programs (McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, & McClowry, 2015). Exploring the contextual factors that can enhance the effects of SFA can inform training and technical assistance to schools and support district and school

administrators in their planning and oversight of programs to promote students' skills and safe and supportive school climate. Future research could also supplement student self-reports and behavior records by gathering data from teachers and parents about the behavior and attitudes of children, as well as potentially mediating variables such as parent education and teacher training in classroom management techniques and SEL.

In conclusion, the results suggest that the SFA program holds promise for enhancing students' social and emotional skills. If schools decide to adopt the program, school and district administrators should focus attention on promoting a schoolwide approach with sufficient guidance and support for all teachers.

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