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How are schools implementing a universal social–emotional learning program? Macro- and school-level factors associated with implementation approach

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Introduction: For universal SEL programs to contribute to positive learning environments, all school staff must be involved in implementing the program (CASEL, 2020). The first aim of the current study was to examined school/district- and macro-level factors associated with two approaches to SEL program implementation observed in schools: (1) classroom teachers as instructors of SEL lessons (i.e., teacher-facilitated) or (2) school counselors as instructors of SEL lessons (i.e., counselor-facilitated). A second aim was to examine the SEL provider's perception of the context of counselor-facilitated implementation in schools.

Methods: Public elementary and middle schools in the U.S. (N = 6,657), that adopted the Second Step digital program in the 2021-22 school year, were identified as utilizing teacher- or counselor-facilitated implementation using usage records. Predictor variables, namely support for SEL (i.e., state plans to utilize federal funding for SEL programs or access to systemic SEL consultation) and state adoption of stand-along K-12 SEL standards/competencies, were obtained from publicly available data sources. To evaluate the second aim, interviews were conducted with Second Step client support staff (N = 5), each representing hundreds of schools utilizing a counselor-facilitated implementation approach.

Results: A Generalized Linear Mixed Model analysis indicated that schools in states with support for SEL (i.e., plans to utilize federal funding for SEL programs or access to systemic SEL consultation) were more likely to use teacher-facilitated implementation than schools without support (OR = 1.64, $p < .01$, CI = 1.15 – 2.34). Schools in states that were early adopters of stand-alone K-12 SEL standards/competencies tended to be more likely than those without K-12 SEL standards/competencies to use teacher-facilitated implementation (OR = 1.70, $p = .06$, CI = 1.00 – 2.95). A qualitative study involving iInterviews with Second Step staff who support hundreds of schools utilizing counselor-facilitated implementation identified other potential factors motivating counselors as facilitators, including low SEL buy-in and

limited staff capacity. Although this approach has challenges, it could be a pathway to teacher-facilitated implementation over time.

Discussion: Taken together, findings indicate promising strategies for the promotion of more schoolwide use of SEL programs.

KEYWORDS

social–emotional learning, program implementation, educational policy, learning standards, educators

Introduction

Students learn best in the context of safe and supportive relationships with their peers, teachers, and other school staff (Klem and Connell, 2004; MacNeil et al., 2009). These interactions promote social and emotional skill development throughout childhood and adolescence which is critical for students' academic achievement and life success (Moffitt et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2015). A positive learning environment enables a systemic approach to social–emotional learning (SEL), in which all students are actively involved in practicing social and emotional skills (Mahoney et al., 2021). In a consensus report authored by a nonpartisan and multi-disciplinary team of educators, researchers, policymakers, business, and military leaders, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2018) affirmed the importance of the social–emotional environment for learning in schools. To foster these skills in students, the Commission laid out several recommendations for districts and schools to consider when integrating SEL into schoolwide practices. One of these recommendations is the adoption of an evidence-based, universal SEL program for the explicit instruction of social–emotional skills with regular opportunities to integrate these skills with academic content and throughout school-wide experiences. The current study examined whether state policies and support mechanisms designed to promote SEL in schools are associated with a more schoolwide approach to the implementation of a universal SEL program.

For SEL programs to contribute to positive learning environments, all school staff must be involved in implementing the program, especially the teachers who have the most frequent and direct interaction with students (CASEL, 2020b). In efficacy studies of universal SEL programs, teachers are typically the implementers of the curriculum, whereby they receive training to support high-quality delivery of the lessons and integration of the skills throughout the school day (e.g., during academic instruction, in the hallways, cafeteria, and playground). In a meta-analysis of the effects of universal SEL programs in schools, Durlak et al. (2011) found that over half of the interventions were administered by classroom teachers. The other half of the interventions were delivered by non-school personnel (e.g., program developer staff, research staff). They also found that teacher-facilitated SEL programs had the broadest effects on students, resulting in greater improvements in every outcome measured examined.

Outside of efficacy studies, when SEL programs are implemented at scale in schools, teachers may not be the program implementers. Rather, anecdotal evidence indicates that school counselors are often tasked with delivering universal SEL programs to students. In this instance, a school counselor may push into classrooms across grade levels to teach lessons to students on a regular basis. They may often, but not always, do so without any active involvement from teachers in the SEL content. Other models could involve counselors teaching SEL in most classrooms, with a few teachers self-selecting to implement the program in their classroom. This latter model could represent cases where counselors are attempting to transition the program to being facilitated by teachers schoolwide. The choice of school counselors as implementers of SEL programs aligns with their role in supporting students' social and emotional development. However, a reliance on school counselors as facilitators of SEL programs could present barriers to schoolwide SEL. For instance, counselors typically lack the authority to require that teachers also engage in the SEL program, which makes teachers less likely to integrate SEL skills into their academic instruction with students.

If teachers are the primary implementers of SEL curricula, then they should be more likely to acquire and use SEL language and skills themselves, and in turn, reinforce these skills with students beyond the lesson instruction period. When teachers model SEL skills and build positive, respectful, and empathetic relationships with students, greater improvements in students' own SEL skills and academic performance have been found (Mashburn et al., 2008; Burchinal et al., 2010; Downer et al., 2012). Counselors can still play a supportive role in teacher-facilitated implementation (e.g., providing teachers with foundational training on social and emotional skill development, reinforcing student learning *via* use of shared strategies, etc.), but the key difference is that counselors are not tasked with delivering the program to all students. Given evidence showing the critical role of the classroom teacher in supporting students' SEL competencies, research is needed to understand factors that contribute to decisions to utilize counselors versus teachers as facilitators of SEL programs, beyond general differences in professional training.

Potential factors associated with social–emotional learning implementation approach

Teacher- vs. counselor-facilitated SEL implementation approaches are likely impacted by various socio-ecological factors, or the context in which programs are located (Atkins et al., 1998). Based on a socio-ecological conceptualization, Domitrovich et al. (2008) proposed a multi-level quality of implementation framework for SEL programs, in which the following three levels of systems can affect program implementation in schools: (1) individual level, involving characteristics of those delivering the program (e.g., professional and psychological characteristics of staff), (2) school/district level, such as having enough staff capacity to support high-quality program implementation, and (3) macro level, which involves state and federal funding and policies to support a program.

As previously discussed, an individual-level characteristic of school counselors that distinguishes them from teachers is that counselors' roles are more explicitly tied to children's social and emotional well-being. However, given that differences in counselors' and teachers' professional training is a stable characteristic, we would not expect this factor *per se* to account for any variation in leaders' decision-making around teacher- or counselor-facilitated implementation. Other individual-level factors that could impact implementation approach is the extent of teacher buy-in for SEL and self-efficacy for teaching SEL. Motivation to implement a new program is a well-documented factor associated with uptake of programs across a range of settings (Atkins et al., 2008; Aarons and Sommerfeld, 2012). Studies also show that these individual-level factors are heavily influenced by school/district- and macro-level factors (Scaccia et al., 2015), specifically the availability of district- and state-level resources and policies that support teachers vs. counselors as SEL program facilitators along with structural characteristics of schools that make it more or less feasible for teachers vs. counselors to serve as SEL program facilitators.

Support for social–emotional learning programming

A school- and district-level factor likely to be associated with implementation approach is the extent to which schools have direct strategic programming support for systemic SEL. During the last decade, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has supported the Collaborating Districts Initiative in systemic SEL improvement. To date, this effort, includes 20 large school districts across 15 states in the country. One recent evaluation indicated that districts and schools participating in the Collaborating District Initiative had more indicators of systemic SEL (e.g., use of a universal SEL curriculum, supportive school and classroom climate, supportive schoolwide discipline practices) than districts and schools not participating in the Collaborating Districts Initiative (Schwartz et al., 2022). Although the use of counselors versus teachers as implementers was not assessed in this study, the indicators of systemic SEL would suggest that these schools were also more likely to be utilizing teacher-facilitated implementation of SEL programs.

At the macro-level, the use of federal or state funds for schoolwide SEL program implementation may also be a correlate of teacher- versus counselor-facilitated implementation approaches. Of course, educational funding availability or allotment can vary widely across states. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government provided a $189 billion distribution of COVID-relief funding for school districts, known as the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund. Based on initial reviews of the spending plans of approximately 100 large, urban school districts, about 43% reported plans to invest in social–emotional support for students (Dusseault and Pillow, 2021). Similar findings were obtained from a survey of hundreds of superintendents about their plans to use COVID relief funds (AASA, 2022). Given that teacher-facilitated implementation is more costly than counselor-facilitated (e.g., more staff to train, higher curricula costs, etc.), schools with funding for SEL programming may be more likely to utilize teacher-facilitated implementation. The AASA report also indicated regional differences in SEL spending plans, with superintendents from rural districts being less likely than those from suburban and urban districts to indicate plans to invest in SEL programs (AASA, 2022). These regional differences in use of funding for SEL instruction could be tied to SEL implementation approach in rural, urban, and suburban schools. No extant studies have examined how funding utilization is tied to SEL implementation approach.

Social–emotional learning policy

Also at the macro level, schoolwide SEL is often supported by national and state policies that prioritize SEL alongside core subject areas (reading, math, science). One policy that may be correlated with implementation approach is whether states have adopted stand-alone SEL standards or competencies across grade levels. To facilitate state education agency support for SEL implementation in school districts, CASEL also initiated the Collaborating States Initiative in 2016 (involving 30 states). A core outcome of this effort has been an increase in the number of states with K-12 SEL standards/competencies, from four states in 2016 to 2027 states in 2022 (Dusenbury et al., 2020), the majority of which are located in the Central, Northeastern, and West Coast regions of the country (Dermody and Dusenbury, 2022). Fewer states in Gulf Coast, Southeast, and Mountain Plains have adopted K-12 SEL standards or competencies. The existence of stand-alone SEL standards/competencies across grade levels, especially for those who adopted SEL standards early on, may signal to educators the importance of teaching these skills alongside academic skills (e.g., reading, math). In this context, district and school leaders may be more likely to view teachers (rather than counselors) as key implementers of universal SEL curricula (CASEL, 2020a,b). No extant studies have examined whether this specific policy is in fact associated with SEL implementation approach.

Structural characteristics of schools

Certain structural characteristics at the school level could make teacher- or counselor-facilitated implementation approaches more or less feasible. For instance, the choice of counselors as lesson facilitators may be a more feasible option in elementary grades than in middle school grades due to the larger enrollment and departmentalization of classes in middle school grades, which would make it more difficult for school counselors in middle schools to teach SEL lessons. Relatedly, because schools in rural areas and towns tend to have lower student enrollment than schools in urban and suburban areas, counselor-led approaches may be more feasible in rural areas and small towns.

Study aims and hypotheses

Aim one

The first aim of this study was to describe the frequency of teacher- versus counselor-facilitated implementation of a widely used SEL program (i.e., Second Step) in K-8 schools in the United States and to identify school/district- and macro-level predictors of implementation approach. The following variables were examined as primary predictors of implementation approach in schools: (1) Access to support for SEL programs (i.e., district participation in CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative and/or utilization of ESSER funding for SEL programs) and (2) State adoption of stand-alone SEL standards/competencies. Covariates included school-level structural/demographic variables (i.e., grade levels served, number of students enrolled, school locale or urbanicity, student race/ethnicity, and student participation in free/reduced-price lunch program). In addition, given that some states mandate that schools have counselors, we also included this variable as a covariate, as it may increase the likelihood of schools using a counselor-led approach. Finally, we included state government party control (Democratic, Republican, or divided between the two) as a covariate, given the influence of this factor on policies and funding.

We hypothesized that controlling for the covariates, schools with access to support for SEL programming would be more likely to use a teacher-facilitated implementation approach (and less likely to use counselor-facilitated) than schools in districts without these types of SEL support. We also predicted that schools in in states with stand-alone K-12 SEL standards/competencies would be more likely to use teacher-facilitated implementation, especially those that were early adopters of SEL standards/competencies.

Aim two

A second aim was to examine the SEL provider's perception of the context of counselor-facilitated implementation in schools. Given their direct interaction with both school/district leaders and counselors across a diverse range of education settings (e.g., urban, suburban, rural areas), Second Step staff could provide a unique view of multi-level factors (individual, school, district, macro) associated with the decision to have counselors facilitate the SEL program. Most existing implementation studies of SEL programs focus on schools utilizing teacher-facilitated implementation and what teachers need to be successful in their SEL instruction. Hence, there is a dearth of implementation studies that have explored what, if any, challenges counselors encounter when facilitating universal SEL programs. From a systemic SEL implementation perspective, it might be difficult for counselors to ensure that SEL is integrated into classroom and schoolwide practices given that organizationally, counselors have no authority over teachers' and other staff practices. Last, we sought to identify any promising practices associated with counselor-facilitated implementation, particularly related to whether this approach could be a pathway to teacher-facilitated implementation over time and if so, what types of support could help to facilitate that transition.

Materials and methods

Participants

The aims were examined in the context of a research-based SEL program, known as Second Step, which is used in schools across all 50 states. The digital curriculum includes lessons from kindergarten through eighth grade that teach social–emotional skills aligned with the CASEL framework of SEL competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making).

Aim one: Factors associated with implementation approach

Inclusionary/exclusionary criteria

A total of 7,918 sites (including public, private, parochial schools and non-school organizations) were identified as using the Second Step K-8 digital program during the 2021–22 school year. In the current study, the sample was restricted to only public-school users of the program, which made up the majority of schools using the program (87.1%). Schools outside the United States were also excluded from the study sample (0.9% of all schools). Teachers and counselors were the most frequent users of the program (based on job title entries), making up 92.7% of users. Users with other job titles (e.g., Principal, Assistant Principal, Support Staff, and Specialist), which made up less than 1% of all users, were excluded from the study sample. When these exclusionary criteria were applied, a total of 6,866 schools remained.

Study sample characteristics

When using the Second Step digital program, users are required to create "classes" representing unique groups of students for whom the lessons are being delivered. At the class level, a total of 109,629 classes from kindergarten

through grade 8 were registered by counselors or teachers in the Second Step digital program system during the 2021–2022 school year. These classes were located in 6,866 public elementary and middle schools and 1,820 districts. About 80% ($n = 87,223$) of the classes were facilitated by teachers and 20% ($n = 22,406$) were facilitated by counselors. Table 1 shows site-level demographic information, including the race/ethnicity of students, the percentage students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, average student enrollment, and representation of schools among regions of the U. S. User-level demographic information is not captured by the program.

Aim two: Interviews with Second Step support staff

Five Second Step client support staff who help district and school leaders in their implementation of the Second Step program participated in interviews with research staff, in which they reflected on their experience working with schools that utilized predominantly counselor-led implementation. These staff supported schools in primarily the Gulf Coast and Mountain Plains regions of the United States (years of experience working in this capacity ranged from 5 to 10 years). All staff provided informed consent for their participation.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics school- and state-level covariates

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range
Race/Ethnicity			
African American	13.2%	20.1	0–100
American Indian	1.2%	7.4	0–100
Asian	6.2%	11.7	0–98
Latinx	32.3%	29.8	0–100
White	46.8%	32.8	0–100
Free/Reduced lunch	55.7%	29.1	0–100
Number students enrolled	575	285	13–4,000
	N	**%**	
School grade span			
Elementary (K-5)	4,040	58.8	
Middle School (6–8)	2,826	41.2	
School locale			
Rural	936	13.6	
Suburban	2,298	33.5	
Town	647	9.4	
Urban	2,588	37.7	
State counselor mandate			
Yes	1,594	23.3	
No	5,257	76.7	
Political Party Trifecta			
Democratic	3,234	47.1	
Republican	1,939	28.2	
Divided	1,674	24.5	

Procedure

To address aim one, at the end of the 2021–22 school year, user- and class-level data were extracted from the Learning Management System (LMS). Data for the predictor variables and covariates were obtained from publicly available datasets or reports (see description below). Schools were defined as having teacher-facilitated implementation of Second Step if 50% or more of registered classes were facilitated by teachers and were otherwise defined as having counselor-facilitated implementation. To address aim two, during summer 2022, individual Second Step client support staff members participated in virtual semi-structured interviews with research staff.

Aim one measures

Predictor variables

Social–emotional learning support factors

District participation in CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative was obtained from the most recent report of district involvement in the initiative (CASEL, 2021). A binary indicator of participation was used, with 0 indicating that a school was not in a participating district and 1 indicating that it was in a participating district. In the current sample, a small percentage of schools were identified as participants of the Collaborating Districts Initiative (i.e., 239 schools or 3.5% of all schools in sample).

State ESSER spending plans for the 2021–22 school year were captured from a report created by an independent policy organization (FutureEd, 2022). FutureEd reviewed state education agency plans submitted to the United States Department of Education which delineated the types of programs and resources that states planned to prioritize to support students' learning recovery during the pandemic. Most of the allocated funding (90%) went directly to schools and districts. Based on these data, research staff identified those states that had plans to use funds for SEL programming. About 32% ($n = 2,197$) of schools in the sample were in states where ESSER funds were flagged for SEL programming. A binary indicator was also created for this support type (0 = no plan to use funds for SEL programming, 1 = plans to use funds for SEL programming).

For each school, a combined SEL support measure was obtained by summing scores across the two types of SEL support (range = 0 to 2), with 0 indicating no support, 1 indicating either type of support, and 2 indicating both types of support.

Macro-level policy

States with freestanding K-12 SEL standards/competencies were identified from the 2022 CASEL State Scan (Dermody and Dusenbury, 2022). States were assigned as either not having SEL standards/competencies or as having SEL

standards/competencies. Those with SEL standards/competencies were further classified according to adoption timeframe as follows: (1) early (adopted 2015 or earlier), (2) mid (adopted between 2016 and 2018), or late (adopted between 2019 and 2021).

Covariates

Type of Second Step program utilized (elementary or middle school) was obtained from Second Step LMS records. School-level student demographics (i.e., student enrollment, percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, and percentage of students by race/ethnicity) along with school locale (rural, town, suburban, and urban) were obtained via a data lease from Market Data Retrieval (i.e., MDR Education), which provides validated demographic information aggregated at the building level, capturing 100% of elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The building-level data in the Second Step LMS were matched with the MDR database. The source of the MDR school locale data is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classification system which is based on a school's physical address. Source of demographic information (student race/ethnicity, participation in free/reduced-price lunch) is also the NCES. For the student race/ethnicity covariate, a measure for the percentage of students who were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) was created by summing the individual race/ethnicity percentages representing BIPOC students (i.e., Asian, African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Latinx). School enrollment data was obtained from state enrollment reports.

States with mandates for counselors in K-8 schools were identified from a report produced by the American School Counselors' Association (American School Counselors' Association, 2022). State government political trifecta information was obtained from Ballotpedia (2022), which categorized states as Democratic or Republican if one of the parties held the governorship, a majority in the state senate, and a majority in the state house. States were categorized as being divided if neither party had trifecta control.

Criterion variable

An examination of the distribution of teacher- and counselor-registered classes in schools implementing Second Step indicated a bimodal distribution. Although some schools (i.e., 6.1% of the sample) had an approximately equal combination of both counselors and teachers facilitating lessons, classes in most schools (71.2%) were facilitated entirely by either counselors or teachers. As a result, we created a binary criterion or outcome variable for each school. Schools were defined as having teacher-led implementation of Second Step if 50% or more of registered classes were facilitated by teachers (assigned score of 1) and were otherwise defined as having counselor-facilitated implementation (assigned score of 0).

Aim two: Interviews with Second Step support staff

Virtual interviews (*via* Zoom) were conducted with selected Second Step client support staff who each represented hundreds of schools utilizing a counselor-facilitated implementation approach. Each interview was conducted by two research staff (one served as the primary interviewer; the other took notes). Individual interviews lasted approximately 30–45 min, and with the permission of the interviewee, all sessions were recorded. The primary interviewer asked a series of questions about their experience supporting schools utilizing counselor-facilitated implementation of Second Step. Although all interviewees received the same initial prescribed questions (see Appendix), there was more flexibility in the framing of follow-up questions, given the variability of interviewee's responses to the questions.

Recordings of interview sessions were transcribed. For each session, a thematic analysis of responses was conducted using the grounded theory method of coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). A single coder, trained in qualitative analysis methods, identified themes directly from the participant responses to each question. A second coder independently coded 20% of the interviews. Any discrepancies or disagreement between the coders were resolved through discussion. Inter-rater reliability was high, ranging from 90 to 100%. Using the Domitrovich et al. (2008) model, the primary coder and a third coder with experience utilizing the model in research studies, independently categorized themes for each question according to level of the system represented (i.e., macro-, district-, school-, or individual). Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion.

Data analytic plan

Because schools were nested within states, potential dependencies in the outcome measure within states was examined using the intra-class correlation (ICC). Although schools could also be nested within districts, on average there were less than five schools per district, with a substantial portion having only one school per district. As a result, this level was not included in the analysis (Brauer and Curtain, 2018). The ICC for the effect of clustering of schools within states was 0.13 indicating intra-state dependencies in the data. As a result, a Generalized Linear Mixed Model (GLMM) was used to account for these dependencies, which was run using the GENLINMIXED procedure in version 27 of SPSS. Given the inclusion of a binary outcome measure (i.e., school-level implementation approach with teacher-facilitated coded as 1 and counselor-facilitated coded as 0), a logit link function was used. State was included as a random effect in the model. The following fixed effects variables were examined as primary predictors of implementation approach: (1) Access to support for SEL programs (i.e., district participation in CASEL's

Collaborating Districts Initiative and/or utilization of ESSER funding for SEL programs) and (2) State adoption of stand-alone SEL standards/competencies (early, mid, late adopters). The following fixed effects school-level structural/demographic variables were included as covariates: (1) School grade levels served (elementary vs. middle school), (2) Number of students enrolled in school, (3) School locale/urbanicity (rural, urban, suburban, town), (4) School percentage of students who are BIPOC, (5) School percentage of students in free/reduced-price lunch program, (6) State-level school counselor mandates, and (7) State-level political party trifecta (democratic, republican, divided).

Descriptive statistics for each of the predictors/covariates and the criterion measure is shown in Table 2. Bivariate correlations were used to examine potential collinearity among continuous covariate/predictor variables, which was confirmed using collinearity diagnostics (i.e., large variance inflation factor (VIF) coefficients). Chi-square tests and Cramer's V were used to examine potential dependencies among categorical predictor variables.

Results

A total of 209 schools were missing demographic data, reducing the total number of schools included in the analysis to 6,657. Schools with missing data did not differ from the rest of sample on predictor or outcome variables. The correlation between the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch and the percentage of students who identified as BIPOC was in the higher range ($r = 0.66$). However, follow-up collinearity diagnostics were acceptable (i.e., tolerance >0.1 and VIF < 5), and both variables were retained in the GLMM analysis. Dependence between categorical predictors and covariates were examined using chi-square tests and Cramer's V as the measure of the strength of association between variables. All relationships were in the small to medium range (i.e., Cramer's V < 0.30).

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics for predictor variables and criterion variable.

Variable	*N*	%
Support for SEL		
0 (neither type of support indicated)	4,513	66.6
1 (ESSER funding or CDI participant)	2,091	30.9
2 (Both funding and CDI participant)	172	2.5
State K-12 SEL standards		
Early adopter	959	14.0
Mid adopter	1,247	18.2
Later adopter	2,335	34.0
No	2,310	33.6
Implementation approach		
Counselor-led	1,649	24.0
Teacher-led	5,217	76.0

Aim one: Factors associated with implementation approach

Based on the cut score criteria, the majority of schools (76%) were identified as having teacher-led implementation of Second Step. About a quarter of the schools (24%) were identified as having counselor-led implementation. Higher percentages of the counselor-led approach were in schools in the Southeast (39.1%), Gulf Coast (36.5%), and Mountain Plains (32.1%), compared to the West Coast (12.9%), Central (19.8%), and Northeast regions (25.8%).

The results of the logistic GLMM are summarized in Table 3. The model correctly classified 73.5% of the cases. Results of the fixed effects estimates indicated that having support for SEL (i.e., plans to use ESSER funds for SEL programming or from a district participating in CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative) increased the likelihood of schools being teacher-facilitated (OR = 1.64, $p < 0.01$). In addition, schools in states that were early adopters of stand-alone K-12 SEL standards/competencies tended to be more likely to use teacher-facilitated implementation of Second Step than schools in states without K-12 SEL standards/competencies, although this association was marginally significant (OR = 1.70, $p = 0.06$). No significant increase in the likelihood of teacher-facilitated implementation was found for mid-adopters (OR = 1.11, $p = 0.73$) and late adopters (OR = 0.94, $p = 0.81$).

Schools in states with a Democratic trifecta (OR = 1.70, $p < 0.05$) were more likely to use teacher-facilitated implementation than those with a Republican trifecta. When examining school demographic and structural factors, schools in rural areas (OR = 0.63, $p < 0.01$) and schools in towns (OR = 0.73, $p < 0.05$) were less likely than schools in urban areas to have teachers facilitate Second Step programming. Elementary schools were less likely to use teacher-facilitated implementation than middle schools (OR = 0.59, $p < 0.01$). Schools in states with a mandate that schools have counselors were less likely to be teacher-facilitated compared to schools in states without a counselor mandate (OR = 0.56, $p < 0.001$). Student demographic characteristics had no significant association with implementation approach, but a significant association, in the direction of increased likelihood of being teacher-facilitated, was found for number of students enrolled (OR = 1.001, $p < 0.01$).

Aim two: Interviews with Second Step support staff

Themes identified from the Second Step support staff interviewers are described according to the macro-, district-,

TABLE 3 Results of generalized linear mixed model analysis: fixed effects.

Parameter	*F*	Coefficient (SE)	OR	Value of *p*	CI
SEL support (ref = none)					
Either type	7.393**	0.495 (0.182)	1.640	0.007	1.148–2.342
Both types	2.858	−0.966 (0.571)	0.381	0.091	0.124–1.167
SEL K-12 standards (ref = none)					
Early adopters	3.508[a]	0.529 (0.282)	1.697	0.061	0.976–2.952
Mid adopters	0.115	0.104 (0.306)	1.109	0.734	0.609–2.020
Late adopters	0.056	−0.060 (0.255)	0.942	0.813	0.571–1.553
Locale/Urbanicity (ref = urban)					
Rural	9.542**	−0.467 (0.151)	0.627	0.002	0.466–0.843
Suburban	2.126	−0.157 (0.108)	0.855	0.145	0.693–1.055
Town	4.382*	−0.320 (0.153)	0.726	0.036	0.538–0.980
Program					
(0 = Elementary, 1 = Middle)	12.786***	−0.531 (0.148)	0.588	0.000	0.440–0.787
State party trifecta (ref = Republican)					
Democratic	4.380*	0.535 (0.256)	1.707	0.036	1.034–2.817
Divided	2.535	0.445 (0.279)	1.560	0.111	0.902–2.697
State counselor mandate					
(0 = none, 1 = state mandate)	7.833**	−0.588 (0.210)	0.556	0.005	0.368–0.839
Student enrollment	7.507**	0.001 (0.000)	1.001	0.006	1.000–1.001
Percent free/reduced lunch	0.256	0.001 (0.002)	1.001	0.613	0.997–1.006
Percent BIPOC	1.599	0.004 (0.003)	1.004	0.206	0.998–1.009

[a]$p = 0.06$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.
SE, standard error; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence Interval.

school-, and individual-level factors that staff perceived to be associated with decisions to assign counselors as facilitators of the Second Step program. All staff interviewed reported challenges with counselor-facilitated implementation. Themes for challenges were organized according to the same system-level factors that gave rise to decisions to assign counselors as facilitators. See Table 4 for a summary of each system-level factor related to implementation approach decision-making as well as implementation challenges encountered by counselors.

Macro-level factors

Macro-level factors that appeared to steer schools in the direction of counselor-facilitated implementation included policies related to SEL and interpretation of national guidelines related to school counselors' roles and responsibilities. Four of the five participants stated that in states where new stand-alone K-12 SEL standards or competencies were adopted, districts subsequently purchased the Second Step program given the need to comply with new SEL standards teaching requirements. However, in this context, staff indicated that district and school leaders likely perceived counselor-led facilitation of SEL programs as the most efficient way to immediately comply with the new SEL standards.

In addition, two participants suggested that national guidelines for the professional standards and competencies of school counselors may be interpreted by district and school leaders as meaning that SEL programming should be the primary responsibility of counselors. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) professional standards and competencies, counselors are responsible for identifying evidence-based curricula to support student "mindsets and behaviors" along with plans for ensuring effective implementation of instruction (American School Counselors' Association, 2022).

District-level factor: Budgeting for social–emotional learning within school systems

Participants also noted budgeting as another factor associated with counselor-facilitated implementation. In some of the schools supported by Second Step staff, they observed that SEL programming is budgeted under the counseling department. Two participants mentioned that once a precedent is set in a district or school that SEL resides within counseling vs. general education, it becomes difficult to engage stakeholders in exploring a more collaborative approach to implementing SEL programming. As one participant explained, "SEL is budgeted to counseling teams so that becomes the lane it lives in."

School-individual-level factor: Low social–emotional learning buy-in

Impact on decision-making

All participants mentioned low SEL buy-in among school leaders and teachers as a reason that schools choose

TABLE 4 Summary of Second Step staff interviews: Factors related to SEL program decision-making and implementation challenges experienced by counselors.

System level	Factor	Impact on counselor-facilitated decision-making	Implementation challenges experienced by counselors
Macro	SEL-related policies	• Need to comply with new SEL state standards • Interpreting the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model as guidance that SEL should fall only within the realm of counselor responsibilities	• Less support for schoolwide implementation from district and school staff
District	SEL budgeting	• Placing budget for SEL within counseling departments	
School/Individual	Low SEL buy-in among teachers/ leader	• Lack of understanding among leaders/teachers of what SEL is and how it benefits students drives perceptions of SEL as more in the realm of counselors' roles and responsibilities.	• Little influence on building capacity for systemic SEL (i.e., lack of shared language/understanding of SEL) and thus few opportunities for each adult in school building to consistently reinforce SEL skills in students outside of lesson instruction time
	Limited staff capacity	• Teacher turnover/burnout: Rather than adding new initiatives for overburdened teachers, school leaders tend to assign SEL program facilitation to counselors.	• Counselor burnout due to lack of support from leaders/teachers and competing priorities (i.e., managing SEL implementation along with counselors' other job responsibilities) • Class-wide instruction not aligned with counselors' expertise (e.g., lack of training in pedagogy, classroom management)

counselor-facilitated implementation over teacher-facilitated implementation. Three of the five participants elaborated that a lack of understanding of what SEL is and how it benefits students makes educators more likely to assign SEL to the domain of counselors (or other support staff, such as social workers and school psychologists).

Implementation challenges

In the context of low buy-in among teachers and administrators, four of the five participants indicated that counselors feel isolated because they receive little implementation support from school leaders and teachers. Three participants mentioned that teachers often leave the classroom during the counselor-facilitated lesson instruction time, even though some counselors indicate that it would be helpful to have teachers' instructional support during this time. Although counselors might have more formal training in children's social and emotional development, one participant indicated that serving as an instructor of an SEL curricula is in many ways not aligned with counselors' expertise. Specifically, counseling staff often lack professional training and experience related to effective pedagogical practices and classroom management.

Additionally, three participants mentioned that when principals are not bought in, it leads to issues with schoolwide reinforcement of the program. As one participant explained, "If you do not have principals and classroom teachers guiding and supporting as well, there is no one to think of the big picture outcomes – no one directing the reinforcement."

School-individual-level factor: Limited staff capacity

Impact on decision making

Three of the five participants stated their clients rely on counselors to own and implement the Second Step program because teachers do not have the time or capacity to take on SEL programming given their existing workloads. In the context of the pandemic, in which many schools experienced high rates of teacher turn-over, overwhelm, and burnout, school leaders tended to refrain from asking teachers to take on any additional duties or initiatives.

Implementation challenges

Unfortunately, with limited support from leaders and teachers, counselors implementing SEL programs end up experiencing high levels of burnout themselves. Three participants highlighted that being solely responsible for implementing a schoolwide, universal SEL program can hinder a counselor's ability to fulfill their other important responsibilities (e.g., diagnostic testing, working directly with individual students). As a result of these competing priorities, counselors may be unable to implement the SEL program in a high-quality manner (e.g., limited engagement in program planning and adherence to program requirements). Alternatively, they might deprioritize other important duties to accommodate the SEL program. As a result, while trying to protect teachers from taking on the additional work of implementing an SEL program, schools and districts can thus inadvertently saddle counselors with more than they can handle.

Pathway toward schoolwide social–emotional learning

Because of these various challenges associated with counselor-facilitated implementation, students may be less likely to benefit from SEL instruction. However, Second Step staff also described some promising practices observed in counselor-facilitated implementation that could promote a pathway toward more schoolwide SEL. All five participants indicated observing two main forms of counselor-facilitated implementation in schools: (1) one in

which only counselors served as implementers of the program and (2) a second "transitional" form in which implementation begins with only counselors as facilitators but over time, teachers gradually take ownership of lesson facilitation as they begin to feel more comfortable with the SEL program content.

To support counselors in transitioning implementation to teachers, all five participants endorsed the need to adapt program resources or create case-specific resources for districts and schools. Two participants indicated that increasing teacher and leader buy-in for SEL programming was a critical step toward the transition to teacher-facilitated implementation. To increase principal buy-in, one participant recommended emphasizing that teacher-facilitated implementation can support broader schoolwide improvements (e.g., establishing consistent SEL language, addressing behavioral challenges). Strategies for gaining teacher buy-in included identifying a few teachers in the building who show greater interest in the SEL program and inviting them to observe counselors teach SEL lessons or co-teach lessons with counselors. In this type of diffusion of innovation model, these teachers would serve as early adopters of the program who can help counselors champion the program among other teachers.

In addition to creating opportunities for teacher buy-in via an early adopter model, participants also indicated that SEL program developers should pre-adapt implementation and lesson planning resources and provide them directly within the program, which would reduce the burden on counselors who often need to adapt the resources themselves. Counselors could then have more time to follow up with teachers on the SEL skills covered in class, which would make teachers more likely to reinforce the skills. For example, one participant recommended creating multi-grade bundles of planning materials in addition to a flexible pacing guide so that counselors tasked with facilitating lessons across multiple grades would need to spend less time compiling resources needed for implementation and more time engaging teachers and leaders to gain buy-in.

Finally, providing easy-to-use and easy-to-access materials that counselors can directly share with school leaders and classroom teachers was another suggestion made by interview participants (e.g., brief unit overview videos, tools to support use of SEL vocabulary in the classroom). These resources would support reinforcement of SEL knowledge and skills learned during SEL lessons and encourage teachers to learn more about the language and strategies their students are being taught.

Discussion

A goal of SEL programs is to help support generalization of social–emotional skills so that SEL becomes integrated into the fabric of the school community. Previous studies and best practice recommendations suggest that teachers are integral to supporting generalization of SEL skills and improvement of students' social–emotional competencies (Mashburn et al., 2008; Burchinal et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Downer et al., 2012; CASEL, 2020a). In the current study, teacher-facilitated implementation of the Second Step program was overall more frequently utilized than counselor-facilitated, although the use of counselor-facilitated was higher in specific regions of the United States (i.e., Gulf Coast, Southeast, and Mountain Plains).

Controlling for several robust covariates, having some type of support for SEL, whether that be access to federal funding for SEL programming (*via* ESSER funds) or direct support for systemic SEL (*via* CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative), was associated with a 64% increase in the likelihood of schools using teacher-facilitated implementation. The most pervasive type of support that could be documented in the current study was funding for SEL programming based on state plans for using ESSER funds. Of course, access to SEL funding was based on school *plans* for spending ESSER funds. It is possible that some schools delayed use of funds. In fact, recent reports of ESSER fund expenditures indicated significant variation in school districts' actual spending relative to what was planned (DiMarco and Jordan, 2022; Edunomics, 2022). Given that the study sample included schools that actually purchased the Second Step program, they may have been more likely to utilize ESSER funds for the SEL program. Regarding consultative support for systemic SEL, only a small number of schools in the study sample had access to direct programming support by way of CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative. Studies of the Collaborating Districts Initiative have in fact shown that participating schools have more positive indicators of systemic SEL than non-participating schools (Kendziora and Osher, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2022). In the current study, the strength of the association between SEL support and implementation approach may have been higher if we were able to capture other sources of SEL support at the local or state level to which schools may have accessed. In fact, CASEL has developed a collection of accessible resources that schools and districts can utilize to help support their strategic planning for systemic SEL. The recommendations involve multi-year efforts in which district and school leaders engage all community stakeholders (school staff, students, parents) in supporting and sustaining SEL in schools. Utilization of a teacher-facilitated SEL program does not mean that these conditions for systemic SEL fully exist, but it is, nevertheless, a critical component of the work (CASEL, 2020a; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Regarding state adoption of stand-alone SEL standards/competencies, we found a marginal association between this factor and implementation approach, but only for schools in states that were early adopters of SEL standards/competencies. That is, the likelihood of schools being teacher-facilitated tended to increase in states that were early adopters of SEL standards/competencies. Currently, 54% of states have stand-alone K-12 SEL standards/competencies, the majority of which are located in the Central, Northeastern, and West Coast regions of the country (Dermody and Dusenbury, 2022). A recent evaluation of the role of partisan politics in state adoption of K-12 SEL standards/competencies indicated that there were as many Democratic states with K-12 SEL standards/competences as there were Republican states (Committee for Children, 2020). For those

states in which there is interest in adopting SEL standards, some recommendations include reaching out to neighboring states that do have SEL standards so that they can share their experience with the adoption process, for instance, communicating how the standards were successfully positioned or framed (e.g., as a way to improve school safety or student health) as well as how the standards have positively impacted school learning environments (Committee for Children, 2020).

Having a more recent adoption of SEL standards/competencies (i.e., mid- and late adopters) was not associated with any increased likelihood of teacher-facilitated implementation. Perhaps over time, more schools in later adopting states will extend implementation to teachers, particularly if there are efforts to engage in strategic planning around schoolwide SEL. This idea aligns with Second Step support staff interviews. In states that were more recent adopters of SEL standards/competencies, interview participants indicated that schools seemed to comply with the new standards by initially charging counselors with the role of teaching SEL lessons. Thus, they perceived a *negative* association between having K-12 SEL standards/competencies and teacher-facilitated implementation in the schools that they supported. This perception may be a result of the fact that the respondents primarily worked with schools in the Gulf Coast and Mountain Plains regions, which tend to be more recent adopters of SEL standards/competencies.

Importantly, participants also indicated supporting schools that were, in fact, interested in transitioning from counselor-facilitated to teacher-facilitated implementation. Toward this end, they suggested that a critical step is gaining buy-in for SEL among leaders and teachers. One example of a buy-in strategy described by support staff was based on a diffusion of innovation approach whereby counselors engage a few highly motivated teachers in implementation by inviting them to co-teaching lessons or observe counselors teach lessons. Over time, additional teachers may take up the program as they hear feedback from their colleagues about the ease of implementation and observe positive effects on students. SEL program developers can also help support this process by providing implementation and lesson planning resources for counselors directly within the program along with resources to support classroom and schoolwide reinforcement of SEL skills.

Other potential factors that might make schools more likely to use counselor-facilitated implementation were uncovered from the qualitative study with Second Step support staff. At the district−/school-level, Second Step support staff pointed out that counselor-facilitated implementation might be more likely in districts in which the budget for SEL programming falls under the counseling or student services departments. This factor was not captured in the aim one analysis. However, the analysis did include state-level counselor mandates as a covariate, which as hypothesized, decreased the likelihood of schools utilizing teacher-facilitated implementation. Perhaps schools in states with counselor mandates have larger counseling departmental budgets, which might allow them to have greater discretion in using funds for universal SEL programs. Some urban school systems have intentionally situated SEL within their teaching and learning departments (e.g., Atlanta Public Schools), as a signal that SEL should be prioritized equally alongside other academic subject areas.

Additional factors at the individual and school-level that Second Step staff suggested were related to decisions to utilize counselor-facilitated implementation included: (1) low SEL buy-in among leaders and teachers and (2) limited staff capacity. Lack of buy-in from leaders is especially concerning as support from school leadership is a consistent predictor of successful SEL program implementation (Elias et al., 2000; Durlak and Dupre, 2008). In addition, assigning SEL to counselors could be an attempt to reduce the burden on already overwhelmed teachers. The interviews further indicated that district and school administrators may assume that compared to counselors, teachers do not have as great a level of expertise in social–emotional development, and some may also interpret ASCA guidelines to mean that SEL should be strictly in the lane of counselors.

Overall, Second Step staff agreed that counselor-facilitated implementation has its challenges, including counselor burnout, little reinforcement of students' SEL skills outside of direct instruction, and lack of alignment with counselors' skills as a classroom instructor. Research shows that these types of challenges are associated with lower quality of program implementation which, in turn, makes students less likely to benefit from the program (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Durlak and DuPre, 2008). Some of the challenges identified are not specific to counselors – even when teachers are the facilitators of SEL lessons, they may face similar challenges in regard to burnout and difficulty reinforcing skills outside of SEL lesson instruction time (Ransford et al., 2009; Durlak, 2016). One challenge mentioned that may be of particular concern for the quality of counselor-facilitated implementation is the lack of training that counselors receive in classroom management. Good classroom management is a core pedagogical competency needed for effective instruction and student learning. Poor classroom management is associated with student problem behaviors and low student engagement (Korpershoek et al., 2016). Furthermore, in SEL implementation studies, teachers' efficacy for classroom management positively predicted fidelity of program implementation, as measured by dosage of lessons completed (Rimm-Kaufman and Sawyer, 2004; Thierry et al., 2020). If counselors are charged with implementing lessons in classrooms, it would be important to provide them with professional learning in classroom management.

Study limitations and directions for future research

The current study identified factors that may contribute to more schoolwide SEL, with support for SEL emerging as a significant factor associated with teacher-facilitated implementation. No previous studies have examined the frequency of counselor-facilitated implementation of SEL programs in general or how different school/district- and macro-level factors are associated with implementation approach. However, several limitations of the study

should be mentioned. Although we controlled for school-level demographic characteristics, we did not have access to other variables that could make a difference in implementation approach, including utilization of other sources of support for systemic SEL, how SEL is situated within the organizational hierarchy of districts (e.g., within Teaching and Learning, Student Services, etc.), and direct indicators of systemic SEL (e.g., SEL integration with academic instruction, supportive disciplinary policies and practices, positive school and classroom climate).

Also, the only outcome measure examined was type of implementation approach. We did not have access to reliable data capturing the fidelity with which the program was implemented (i.e., completion of digital lessons). In addition, because the outcome measure was bimodally distributed and we lacked school-level data on the specific context of implementation approach being utilized, we were unable to capture schools that may have been in a more transitional phase, as described in the qualitative portion of the study. Last, the qualitative portion of the study focused on the perspective of only five support staff representing one SEL provider (i.e., Second Step) and did not directly capture the voices of counselors, administrators, teachers, and other support staff in schools.

These limitations could be addressed in future studies by including these additional predictor and outcome variables, perhaps using a longitudinal cohort design. For instance, schools in states that are recent adopters of K-12 SEL standards/competencies could be studied over time to more closely examine decision-making processes involved in implementation approaches, especially related to explicit strategies for those that utilize counselor-facilitated approaches and strategies in any transitions to teacher-facilitated implementation. Additionally, the inclusion of the voices of all stakeholders (school leaders, counselors, support staff, teachers) would allow for a deeper understanding of how factors within school systems, particularly the individual- and school-related factors highlighted by Second Step support staff, affect implementation decision-making and subsequent quality of program implementation.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because we do not have approval to share the datasets outside the organization. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to KT, kthierry@cfchildren.org.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Pearl IRB. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

KT contributed to conception and design of study, statistical analysis, and writing of the manuscript. AP contributed to conception and design of the study and wrote sections of the manuscript. CC contributed to design of the study, data collection, and wrote sections of the manuscript. JP contributed to acquisition of data and interpretation of results. YL performed statistical analysis. JC contributed to design of the study and wrote sections of the manuscript. HR organized the database, helped with data collection, and performed the qualitative analysis. PR helped with data collection and qualitative analysis. TK and SW contributed to manuscript revision. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Interview questions:

1. What does counselor-facilitated implementation mean in your context?
2. Why do districts/schools choose counselor-facilitated implementation over teacher-facilitated implementation?
3. Do counselors experience any challenges in implementation that are distinct from those experienced when teachers are the implementers? If yes, what are those distinct challenges?
   a. Have you heard of counselor-specific challenges around school-level outcomes (like creating a shared language or common strategies that all educators can support?)
4. How are we (i.e., Second Step) currently able to effectively support counselors through these challenges? Please be specific about services and/or resources that currently exist in the platform and those created by client-facing staff.
5. Do we (i.e., Second Step) provide counselors with any guidance or resources to support transitioning implementation to teacher-facilitated? Please describe the guidance or resources provided.