



Year Two of Harmony SEL Demonstrates Increased Implementation and Improved Student Outcomes

Research Brief of the Evaluation Study of the
Harmony SEL Showcase Schools

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Introduction

Educators and school leaders often strive to bolster student social and emotional development and will invoke multiple strategies and supports in doing so. Because they may not always see results right away or may experience pressure to complete content curriculum as a priority, educators may bypass SEL lessons in deference to academic instruction. However, we know from the science that all learning is social and emotional, making it important for educators to persist in their implementation of SEL programs and practices. While we recognize that putting into practice a schoolwide program like Harmony SEL can be challenging, especially during the initial execution, the research in this study supports the conclusion that when schools sustain their implementation past the initial growing pains, they find even more benefits beyond the first year.



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This report focuses on the second year of a multi-year, multi-cohort research project with Harmony Showcase Schools. In this study, researchers found that showcase school principals, teachers, and students (from Cohort One of the project) responded positively to Harmony in both years one and two. Findings in year two, however, were more positive than in year one. We found that teachers implemented the program more consistently and with greater quality in their second year. Participants in year two also tended to report more favorable perceived outcomes than in year one, possibly resulting from greater familiarity with and commitment to the program during a second year of use. In particular, areas in which year-two participants showed significant improvement included:

- an increase in program implementation,
- an increase in both student and teacher buy-in,
- an improvement in student perceptions of school climate, and
- an improvement in teacher perceptions of student outcomes.

This research brief will more closely examine each of the four areas of particular improvement shown by Cohort One schools in their second year with Harmony.

Methods

Researchers from the Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) at Johns Hopkins University followed five “showcase” elementary schools that implemented the social and emotional learning program, Harmony, beginning with Cohort One in the 2017-18 school year and continued implementation into the following school year. The showcase schools were situated in five different school districts in the San Diego (CA) metropolitan area. Researchers used a mixed-methods approach that included surveys, classroom visits, interviews with principals, and focus groups of teachers and students to determine perceptions of Harmony implementation and the influence of Harmony on outcomes such as student competencies and behavior and school climate. The present research brief examines data collected during two years of implementation to examine Harmony’s influence on students and teachers, and to learn more about the way the results improved or changed through a second year of implementation. To investigate these multiyear changes, researchers compared the data collected during the 2017-2018 school year (year one) to the data collected during the 2018-2019 school year (year two).



Program Implementation

Harmony includes several activities that promote harmonious relationships and belonging in schools through explicit SEL instruction and Everyday Practices (see Figure 1). In both years, teachers admired Harmony’s program quality and ease of use. They also reported that the most-used activities were the Everyday Practices of Meet Up and Buddy Up (with 90% of teachers reporting that they used them frequently or occasionally). When asked why they used them, they noted that the activities were fun and engaging, did not involve much planning, and could easily be used as routines in classrooms. Importantly, teachers commented on the value of the Everyday Practices to discuss and resolve classroom-related issues or problems that had arisen during the school day. In focus groups, students also mentioned that they engaged in Everyday Practices on a regular basis, with most students stating they engaged in Buddy Ups regularly, and about half engaged in Meet Ups regularly.

Harmonious Relationships

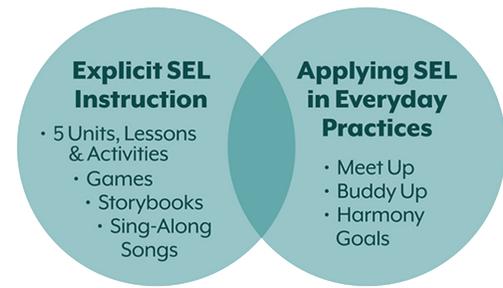
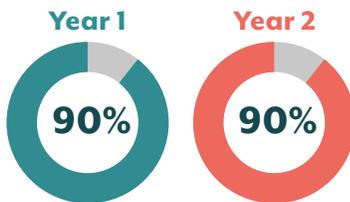


Figure 1.
Harmony Activities

Everyday Practices

% report occasional or frequently use



Lessons & Activities

% report occasional or frequently use

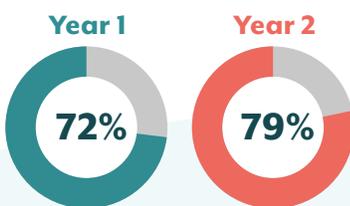


Figure 2.

Teachers implement lessons and activities more and continue to use Everyday Practices in Year 2

Although teachers reported using Everyday Practices regularly across both years, as expected teachers reported using the lessons and activities more often in year two than in year one (see Figure 2). This finding could be the result of schoolwide familiarity, word of mouth, and confidence in the program’s results.

Implications

These findings suggest that it may be important to scaffold implementation for teachers, providing them opportunities to first become expert in the implementation of SEL routines with students, prior to full-scale implementation of an explicit SEL curriculum. Further, this finding implies that teachers believe both types of SEL instruction—Everyday Practices and explicit instruction—are important given that they continued frequent use of Everyday Practices and increased their use of lessons in year two.

Student and Teacher Buy-In

An SEL program cannot succeed without schoolwide support, inclusive of principals, teachers, and students, among other members of the school community. In their interviews, school principals noted that Harmony implementation was initially driven by a desire to meet student, teacher, and community goals for social and emotional learning. Some principals took an asset-based approach to Harmony implementation, noting that they desired to promote kindness in students, help students build relationships, and improve the extent to which students get along, whereas other principals wanted to address behavior problems in schools. Regardless of their reasons, principals expressed a high level of program buy-in across both years.

Along with principal buy-in, teachers and students were also supportive, but needed time to become familiar with the program through its implementation. As indicated by the degree to which they utilized the program, teacher buy-in continued to increase over the two years of implementation. Although teachers in year one responded positively to Harmony, they were even more likely in year two to agree that participating in the program was beneficial for their students.

Similar to the teachers, student buy-in was not immediate. During focus groups, teachers reported that it took several months to build a supportive environment and for students to actually trust the strength and safety of the co-created environment between students and the teacher. Because Harmony was implemented in the entire school, the trust and comfort with Harmony and SEL became more apparent, allowing for a smoother implementation in the second year.

Implications

These findings suggest the importance of coming together as a school community to discuss the significance of SEL and the approach the school will take to implement SEL. Although the principal bought into Harmony right away, it took time for the broader school community to understand what SEL is, the goals for SEL within the local community, and how Harmony can support locally identified outcomes. Teachers and students bought in more to Harmony once they began to see the relevancy to themselves and the school community, so perhaps implementation in the first year would improve if school leaders brought teachers and students into the decision-making process to implement Harmony.

Further, the results indicate that it takes time for teachers and students to develop the safe and inclusive environments necessary to implement Harmony, suggesting that it takes time to implement SEL and Harmony fully in classrooms, and teachers and students should therefore be patient with the process.

School Climate

As previously noted, teachers felt that implementation got better once students felt that they were in a safe and trusting environment. Our findings confirm that although overall the climate in the school was positive across both years, there were notable improvements in school climate in certain areas. Students in grades three through five responded to a questionnaire about their perceptions of school climate and behavioral outcomes across five categories: social relationships, support for learning, individuality/diversity, safety/bullying, and discipline. We observed improvements in the vast majority of questionnaire items, though more notable improvements from year one to year two include the following (see Figure 3 for a sample of items for each construct in which we saw improvements):

- ***Social relationships***

More students agreed that other students in the school liked each other (+11.0 pts) and cared for each other (+8.6 pts).

- ***Support for learning***

More students reported that their classmates helped one another learn (+12.6 pts) and that students behaved well in school (+10.2 pts).

- ***Diversity***

More students felt that students of different races and backgrounds were treated fairly (+8.2 pts).

- **Safety and bullying**

More students felt that students in their school generally got along with one another (+11.9 pts) and that their fellow students respected each other (+14.3 pts).

- **Discipline**

More students felt that their fellow students knew what the school rules were (+6.2 pts).

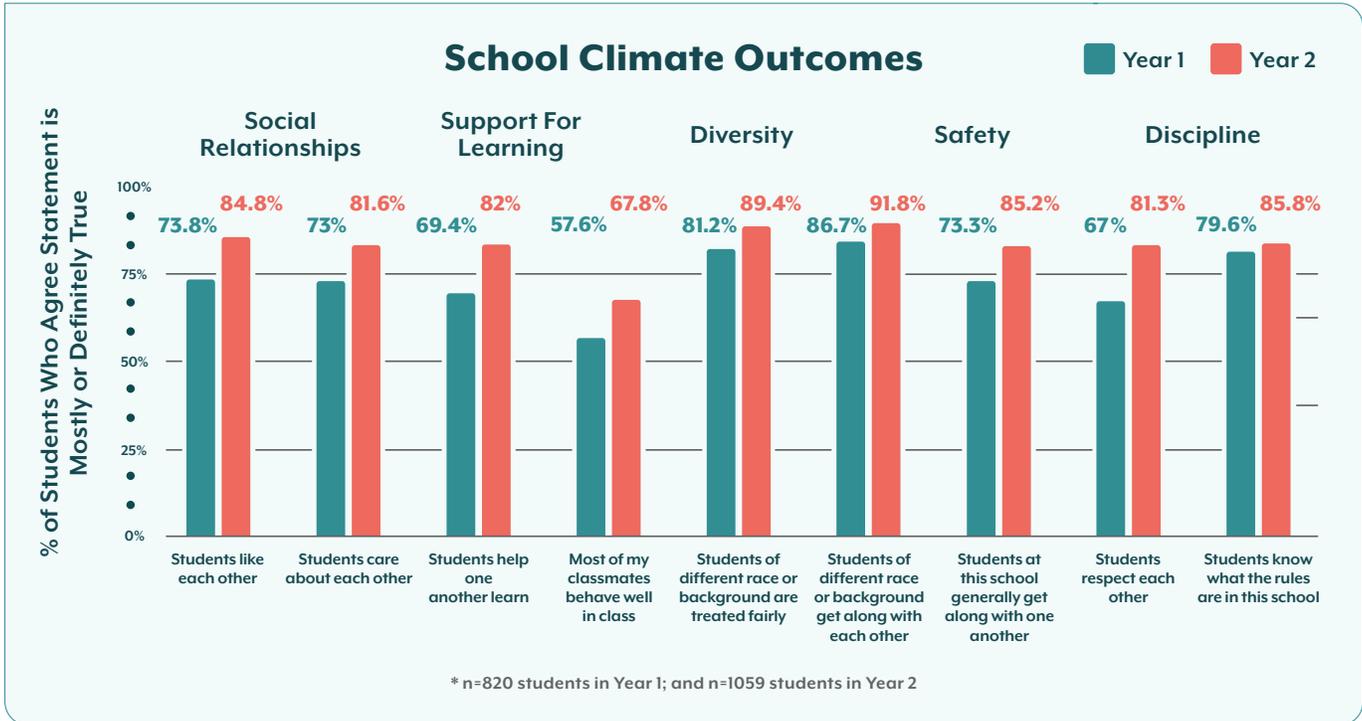


Figure 3. From year 1 to year 2, student perceptions of school climate improve across multiple domains*

Implications

Similar to the previous findings, a healthy school climate is necessary for students to fully engage with SEL practices. SEL and climate are distinct but are both needed to create the conditions students require to thrive in their learning environments. Students who have deeper social and emotional competence are more likely to develop social relationships, support their peers' learning, and embrace diversity—which in turn provide greater opportunities for students to develop their competencies. As schools begin their SEL and Harmony journey, these findings suggest it is also critical to attune to the environments in which students are learning.



Student Outcomes

Harmony is a comprehensive SEL program targeting the five core competencies outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness (including acceptance of diversity and empathy for others), relationships skills (including respect for one another), and responsible decision-making. To determine if Harmony influenced these social and emotional competencies and skills, teachers completed a questionnaire about their perceptions of student outcomes (thinking about their class as a whole). Over both years, teachers reported that Harmony was somewhat effective or very effective across the assessed student outcomes (see Figure 4), with notable improvements in year two compared to year one. The most substantial improvements in questionnaire responses were observed for self-management (+16.0 pts), respect for one another (+12.9 pts), acceptance of diversity (+12.3 pts), and self-awareness (+11.8 pts).

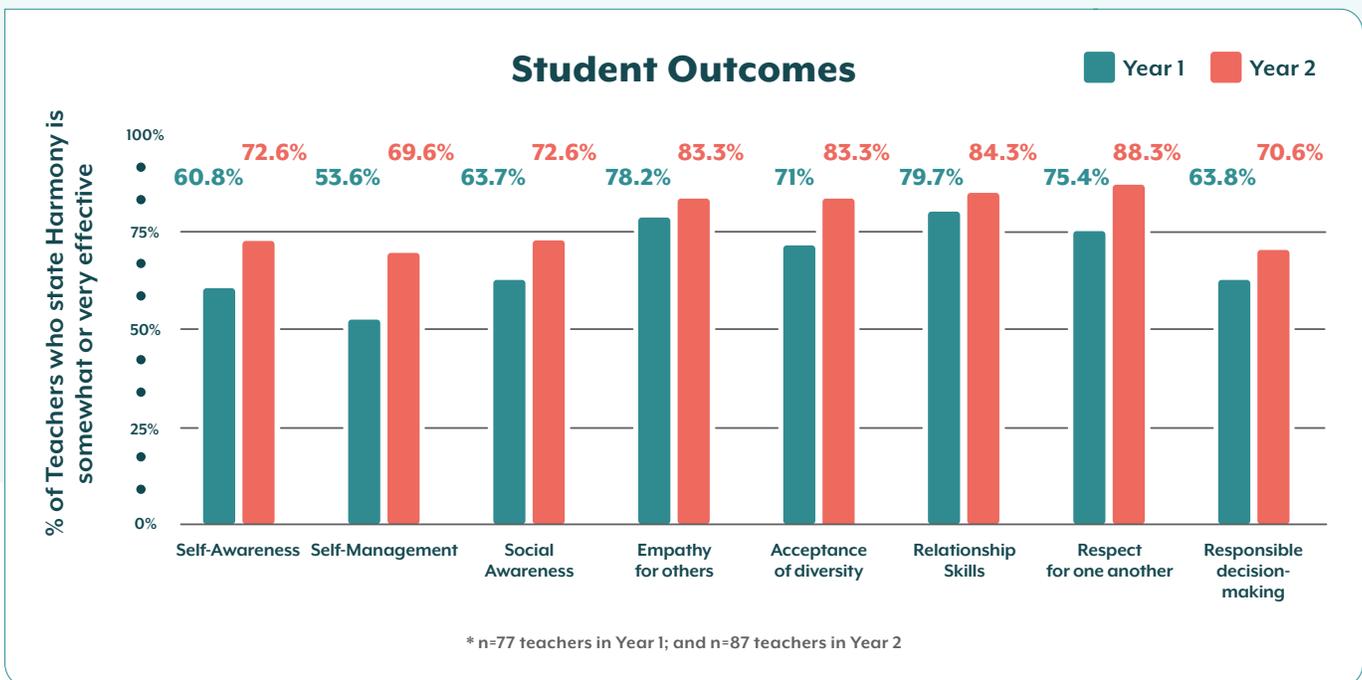


Figure 4.

Teachers believed Harmony improved student social and emotional outcomes more in year 2 compared to year 1*

When asked in focus groups why they felt that Harmony helped improve student social and emotional outcomes, teachers reported that Harmony taught students the vital skills of connecting with and understanding one another and gave students a common language and vocabulary to use when talking about their feelings. Teachers asserted that Harmony helped students and teachers alike to build relationships and develop a classroom culture of empathy and mutual respect.

Students confirmed these adult perceptions within focus groups. Students provided anecdotes from their own lives that referenced Harmony-related lessons and strategies such as learning to listen to other students, not judging students who are different, providing comfort to classmates, and action plans for de-escalation and managing feelings. A few examples of student comments include the following:

- We have a circle in the morning. We listen to each other. We get along starting with the circle. Sometimes we don't get along and she reminds us of the Harmony goals.
- I think making people feel like they belong starts inside of that person, they have to not be shy and open up so that other people can know. Harmony helps us have those conversations.
- At the bus stop, kids talk about a kid they don't like. (They) talk behind his back. With Harmony you know how to speak up and defend that person.
- My brother and sister were bored, so I played a game from Harmony, friendship web. (You) hold one end of yarn, (then) throw it to another person, (and) give a compliment.

Implications

These findings indicate that teachers and students alike believe that Harmony has an impact on student competencies, behaviors, and interactions. Harmony lessons have the potential to transfer to interactions outside of the school setting when teachers intentionally support student skill development. Furthermore, teachers report even greater outcomes in students in their second year of using the Harmony curriculum; teachers implement explicit instruction consistently, which helps students develop the language and understanding of what the skills are and how to use them. Further, they have more time to build and practice their new skills when provided more opportunities. This suggests that it is important to not only sustain the Harmony program over time, but also increase implementation of the core components across years.

Conclusion

Results from the second-year evaluation of the showcase schools demonstrate that schools see increased implementation, a more positive climate, and improved perceived student outcomes with continued use of the Harmony program. Implementing a new SEL curriculum like Harmony can be challenging, but schools who work through the growing pains are rewarded with gains that increase over time. With the Harmony program in particular, research shows that even first-year implementers report widely favorable perceptions and outcomes, with principals, teachers, and students all agreeing that the program is making a positive impact in their schools. These benefits continue to grow through the second year of use, with second-year implementers reporting even more encouraging results. These results provide implications for how a school community can embrace SEL and Harmony to reach fuller implementation of the program and to sustain utilization of the program for even greater benefits. Additional research is needed to further explore the way these results change over time, but this CRRE study offers hope to schools at the beginning of their SEL journey.