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SEL in Context: Exploring the Relationship between School Changes and Social-Emotional Learning Trajectories in a Low-income, Urban School District

Social-emotional competencies stand to benefit children in terms of academic, mental health, and longer-term life outcomes (Mahoney et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017). However, school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are often ineffective in low-income urban school districts (Farahmand, 2011), calling into question whether they adequately address student needs. One possibility is that programs do not effectively address sources of stress that are more prevalent in these contexts (Gonzalez et al., 2020). The purpose of the present study is to understand whether and how one source of stress—school mobility (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1994)—impacts SEL for African American students living in low-income urban districts.

This study focuses on SEL outcomes (emotional health, self-awareness, and self-regulation) for a sample of 1,567 elementary and middle school students in a low-income urban district in the southern United States. Participants were all from low-income families and most (97.3%) were African American. We administered social-emotional learning and school climate surveys to participants two times per year across two school years. We also collected student enrollment and school accountability information to identify when students moved, and to compare the types of schools they moved to and from in terms of relative academic performance and school safety ratings. Using a series of multi-level linear growth models (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Shadish et al., 2013), we were able to estimate (a) how SEL trajectories differed for students after changing schools, (b) whether these differences in trajectories were related to when students moved, and (c) what types of schools students moved to and from.

In contrast to other studies which found universally negative impacts of mobility on student outcomes, (e.g., Grigg, 2012; Lleras & McKillip, 2017) we found only sparse evidence that mobility in general is detrimental for students in a low-income urban school district. We did find some evidence that the relative safety of the schools to which students moved had a consistent and potentially long-lasting effect on SEL for middle school students, whereby moving to safer schools improved trajectories and moving to relatively less safe schools had a detrimental effect. Our findings support the idea that SEL is influenced by school climate (Berg et al., 2017) and schooling experiences more generally (Loeb et al., 2018), meaning that effective SEL programs need to address the larger environments in which students learn instead of focusing merely on individual

competency development (as suggested by Berg et al., 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

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