INTRODUCTION

This document provides a topic-by-topic summary of key insights obtained from in-depth interviews with educators about the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) and Restorative Practices (RP) across Atlanta Public Schools (APS). Hanover Research conducted 9 interviews with school administrators, counselors, and coaches across all three school levels (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school). Two individuals participated via an asynchronous open-ended survey.

Participant Summary

Total Participants: **11**

Number of School Levels Represented: **3**

Types of Roles Represented: **3**

Note that this is a preliminary analysis: final themes may be altered or expanded during the full analysis.

KEY THEMES AND INSIGHTS

Impacts on Students and School Climate

- **School Climate:** Participants perceive that the integration of SEL and RP has led to a noticeable improvement in school climate, characterized by reduced conflicts and enhanced relationships between students and staff. Schools that consistently implement these practices report lower suspension rates and better student health survey results, indicating a positive shift in the overall environment.

- **Academic Impact:** All participants believe SEL and RP contribute to creating a supportive and engaging learning environment, which indirectly supports academic achievement, engagement, and attendance. By fostering skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and effective communication, SEL helps students focus better in class and participate more actively in their learning. RP, by addressing conflicts and promoting a sense of community, reduces

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between high levels of SEL implementation and key student outcomes (behavior, attendance, and MAP data) within APS?

- What is the impact of Restorative Practices (RP) training on educator and student outcomes in APS?

- Which SEL investments are perceived by teachers and leaders in high-implementing schools as having the greatest impact on students and school outcomes?

disruption and creates a more conducive atmosphere for learning. While some participants note improvements in student engagement and attendance, which are critical for academic success, the direct impact on standardized test scores or academic performance is less frequently documented.

- **Student Behavior:** Participants perceive noticeable improvements in student behavior after the implementation of SEL and RP, including a decrease in disciplinary incidents and suspensions. Many credit SEL with equipping students with essential skills to express their emotions effectively, collaborate and communicate with peers, and build a sense of belonging, which in turn helps manage their behavior and keeps them engaged in the classroom. This positive change is attributed to the consistent and genuine integration of SEL into daily classroom activities.

  RP is seen as instrumental in resolving conflicts, repairing harm, and promoting empathy and understanding among students. These approaches help students reflect on their actions and understand the consequences, leading to more positive interactions and fewer disciplinary incidents.

> **"** Our overall student discipline data has really gotten a lot better. Our incidences have decreased a good bit. In terms of fights, of the disrespect, the communication with teachers, that's all decreased a lot. As far as working with the students, we've done a really good job, and you kind of see the fruits of your labor. **"**

■ **Role of RP in Conflict Resolution:** Participants value RP for its ability to address and resolve conflicts by promoting understanding, empathy, and communication among students and between students and educators. RP involves techniques such as restorative circles and conferences, which provide a structured environment for individuals to express their feelings, understand the impact of their actions, and collaboratively find solutions to repair harm. Participants report that these practices help students reflect on their behavior, recognize the consequences, and develop strategies to prevent future conflicts.

■ **RP and Relationship Building with Students:** Participants perceive the implementation of RP has been instrumental in building and repairing relationships between students and staff, addressing conflicts through dialogue and understanding rather than punitive measures. However, the effectiveness of these practices is often hindered by a lack of comprehensive understanding and consistent application among educators. Participants often highlight both the successes and challenges faced in integrating RP into the school culture, emphasizing the need for ongoing training and support to fully realize its benefits.

Current Implementation Challenges

■ **Participation in Professional Development:** According to participants, the challenges of SEL and RP training revolve around ensuring consistent participation and engagement from all educators, particularly school leaders. While training is generally well-received, some participants note not all leaders attend the sessions, which can lead to a lack of common understanding and inconsistent

implementation across schools. This gap can create misunderstandings about what both SEL and RP entail and how it should be integrated into daily practices.

■ **Consistent Implementation**: Despite the benefits, participants name challenges in achieving consistent and effective SEL implementation across all schools. They perceive some educators, particularly those with more traditional views, struggle to fully embrace restorative approaches. There is a need for ongoing professional development to shift mindsets and ensure that all staff understand the principles and practices of SEL and RP.

■ The systematic approach to SEL has been inconsistent, largely due to changes in district priorities and leadership. While some schools continue to prioritize SEL, others have seen a decline in its implementation, affecting its perceived importance and effectiveness. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated these efforts, with schools struggling to return to pre-pandemic levels of engagement and discipline.

> **"** Leaders send staff to RP training but do not attend themselves. They try to implement RP in their schools with no training. It is ineffective and often there is no common understanding of what RP is and is not. It creates lots of misconnections. **"**

Key Factors for Successful Implementation

■ **Integration of SEL and RP**: The combination of SEL and RP has been effective in improving student behavior and engagement. Educators noted that SEL programs like Second Step provide a structured approach to teaching empathy, goal-setting, and problem-solving, which are crucial for emotional regulation. Restorative circles complement these lessons by addressing conflicts and promoting reflection, leading to better communication and relationship-building among students.

■ **Second Step:** In interviews participants consistently highlight Second Step's structured approach, which

includes weekly lessons integrated into advisory blocks or morning meetings. The program is praised for its comprehensive curriculum that supports teachers by providing ready-made lessons, reducing the burden of lesson planning. Teachers and SEL liaisons utilize the Second Step platform to track lesson completion and monitor engagement, ensuring consistency in implementation.

- **Quality of Training:** Participants strongly agree training is essential for understanding and integrating SEL and RP strategies into daily interactions with students.

- ✓ *SEL Training:* Participants express appreciation for the comprehensive and supportive nature of the SEL training sessions. Many credit the SEL trainings and the SEL coordinators with equipping educators with essential skills and relevant classroom resources, such as lesson plans and strategies for fostering social-emotional development in students. Educators also note the value of adult SEL components, which help them reflect on their practices and improve communication with students.

- ✓ *RP Training*: RP training, often led by experienced district coordinators, is praised for its practical approach, providing educators with tools such as restorative question cards and strategies for conducting circles.

- **Dedicated District Support and Leadership:** Schools with dedicated SEL and RP coordinators or coaches report more significant impacts and smoother implementation processes. Successful SEL and RP implementation requires consistent practice, district support, and buy-in from school leaders and staff. For example, the district's SEL team is praised for providing comprehensive resources and ongoing support, including a dedicated website and regular communication through newsletters.

Participants believe the sustainability of SEL and RP initiatives is heavily reliant on consistent district support and leadership. Changes in district priorities, such as shifts in focus due to new leadership or external political pressures, can disrupt the continuity of these programs. All participants wish to ensure that SEL and RP remain a priority at the district.

> " Training from CASEL has been helpful. Additionally, district support from leaders such as superintendents and building leaders who prioritize SEL. "
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> " We need that top-down where people are talking about how important this work is so that they feel like they're being supported. "

CAVEAT

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