



# Rocky River Elementary School Case Study

*An Implementation of a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Curriculum and Sensory Integration Tools for all Students*

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## Acknowledgment

Thank you to Adrian Parry and the staff at Rocky River Elementary School for inviting the Friday Institute into their building to observe and experience the work they are doing to support students' social and emotional well-being. The team at The Innovation Project (TIP) is also grateful to Mrs. Parry and the Rocky River team for sharing their inspiring work with innovative educators across the state through TIP's networks.

After Rocky River completed its participation in the ELN, Mrs. Parry was asked to open a new school and is now leading Hickory Ridge Elementary, also in Cabarrus County.

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## Abstract

There is growing attention to the positive impacts of implementing social and emotional learning and sensory integration techniques in schools. The authors intend for this case study to showcase the design thinking and continuous improvement process at Rocky River Elementary school and the keys to success.

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## Introduction

It's 8:15 am in Mrs. Brenneman's class and one of her students is introducing his friend to the rest of the class during their morning meeting. "I'm Roger and this is my friend, Lucy. She has really cool sneakers." In another classroom, students are engaging in sensory stations designed to help them get the "jitters" out by moving their bodies, practicing mindful breathing techniques, and experiencing the power of laughter!

Rocky River Elementary School incorporated sensory integration techniques and tools, mindfulness and social and emotional learning (SEL) into daily lessons for some students. The school has a full-time sensory integration coach who works with students and teachers on a daily basis. Sensory integration tools range from flexible seating to body movement exercises to belly breathing. These tools promoted mindfulness, helping students recognize and accept their present thoughts and emotions, which can help students reset their brains for learning. SEL teaches students essential life skills based on five core competencies – self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Research from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) shows that students with SEL training "scored 13 points higher academically than their peers 3.5 years later, had 6 percent better high school graduation rates, and could even reap lifelong monetary benefits for their healthy adult lifestyle."<sup>1</sup> These morning activities were not always part of a formalized curriculum and were limited to only some students. Rocky River wanted to enhance these activities and implement an SEL curriculum for all students.

In the spring of 2018, The Innovation Project (TIP) received a three-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan, to empower principals and school teams to pioneer innovative approaches targeted at early learning to dramatically improve student outcomes. TIP and its partners created the TIP Early Learning Network (ELN) to bring together teams from across several districts to engage in this work. The ELN takes a concerted approach to three interrelated activities that together will enable schools to achieve transformative results: transformation through school design, coaching for entrepreneurial school leadership, and innovative district supports.

### The Innovation Project (TIP)

The Innovation Project (TIP) is a North Carolina-based nonprofit organization created to help school district leaders 'see around corners,' envisioning the future of education and designing equitable, learner-centered strategies to build that future

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.the74million.org/article/social-emotional-learning-boosts-students-scores-graduation-rates-even-earnings-new-study-finds/>

“ One of the best parts of the experience was bringing a group of professionals together, to learn and then to be able to apply it immediately in the classroom.

–Adrian Parry, Principal”

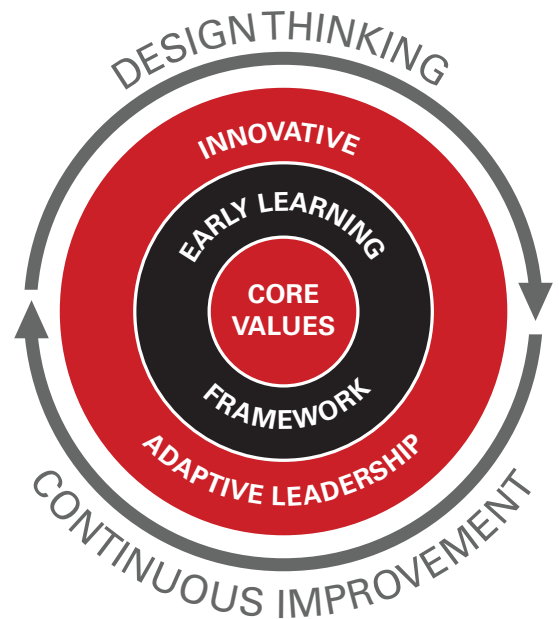
Through a formal application process, the ELN selected the first cohort of 17 schools from seven North Carolina school districts to participate in this program. Rocky River school leaders applied and were one of the 17 schools selected to participate in the ELN program. Through participation in the ELN, the Rocky River principal and teacher leaders engaged in a year-long design thinking and implementation process. As a result of this activity, three primary factors emerged that helped the Rocky River team successfully implement the SEL curriculum for all students.



## Design Process in Action

As TIP's primary partner, the Friday Institute for Education Innovation (Friday Institute) designed and implemented the ELN curriculum with the ultimate goal of training school leaders to engage in a continuous improvement process based on design thinking and the Friday Institute's Innovative Leadership Framework. The Friday Institute's design thinking process helps principals and school leaders identify challenges of practice and develop strategic steps to rethink and reimagine teaching and learning. Core values and innovative, adaptive leadership are at the center of the design thinking process.

Over the course of the academic school year, school design teams from each ELN school, composed of the principal and 4-5 teachers, attended four in-person and one virtual Friday Institute professional learning sessions to engage in an in-depth design process. Each school team completed a single design cycle with a focus on identifying a problem and prototyping a solution. The Friday Institute hosted three in-person sessions to introduce school leaders to the concept of an innovative mindset when re-imagining a student's learning experience. These sessions also focused on learning about key leadership characteristics; innovative practices to build school culture; the change management process; the design thinking process; and communication strategies to gain stakeholder buy-in.







## Rocky River Elementary Design Process

Through the course of the 2018-19 academic school year, the Rocky River team completed a single design cycle with a focus on identifying a problem, prototyping a solution and implementing the prototype.



### Identify the Problem of Practice

Rocky River created a school design team that included the principal, Adrian Parry and four teachers to lead the design thinking process. The Rocky River school design team included teacher leaders, classroom teachers and support staff, bringing diverse perspectives and experiences to the team. The ELN process provided an opportunity for school leaders and teachers to engage in professional development and collaboration and then share that knowledge with other teachers at the school. During these brainstorming sessions, the school design team discussed the need to expand social and emotional learning activities to include all students. The team also discussed some of the barriers that Rocky River students face. Many students at Rocky River experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on a regular basis, whether it's food scarcity or being transient. ACEs can lead to trauma and toxic stress. Although not included in the definition of ACE, experiencing a global pandemic can also cause significant stress and trauma for students. Behavior issues often disrupted instructional time and character traits such as honesty, integrity and respect were difficult concepts for many students. The Rocky River school design team decided to expand the sensory integration concept and identified the need for a structured SEL curriculum for all students to address the specific needs of their students and families.

### The school design team considered these questions:

- 1. How do we help our students overcome that trauma?**
- 2. As a school, what can we do to help our students cope?**
- 3. What can we do to help our kids become better citizens of society not only academically, but socially?**



*We have high expectations of ourselves, of our kids and we want to continue learning as professionals.*

*–Adrian Parry, Principal*

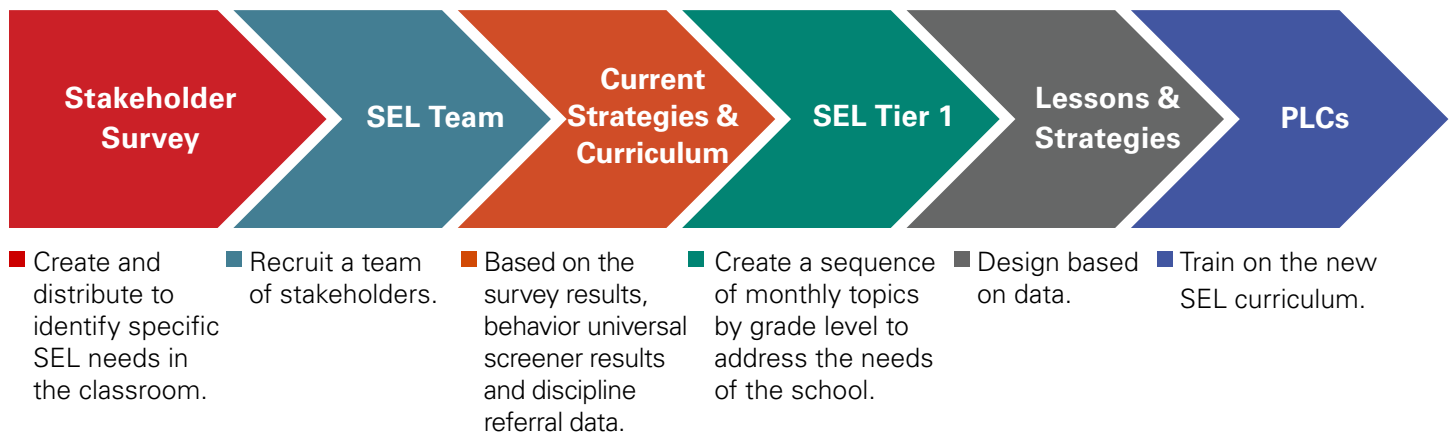


## Create the Prototype

Rocky River determined that an off-the-shelf SEL curriculum would not meet the specific needs of their students. Rocky River decided to develop their own SEL curriculum that was grade level specific and addressed the Tier 1 needs of the school. Rocky River recruited teachers to be part of the curriculum development team. The team created six weeks of SEL curriculum for all grade levels. The student services team, counselors and teachers reviewed the curriculum and provided feedback. Rocky River encouraged reviewers to ask questions and provide rigorous feedback so that they could fine-tune the curriculum. The school design team trained the teachers on how to use the new SEL curriculum and provided examples of what it looks like in the classroom.

Throughout the process, Rocky River engaged in a continuous feedback loop. School leaders reviewed discipline data, talked to teachers and students, and sent out surveys to teachers, students and families to determine what was working well and what wasn't.

Rocky River took several action steps to address this problem and develop a prototype solution. In the span of six weeks Rocky River created and implemented the new SEL curriculum by taking these action steps:







## Implement the Prototype

Teachers designed the SEL curriculum, focusing on specific topics that they know their students need help understanding. The teacher-designed SEL curriculum is implemented during Morning Meetings, which happen in each classroom every day at the school. Teachers are also implementing techniques introduced in sensory stations to help students manage their behaviors and refocus.

The Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) team analyzes behavior data on a monthly basis and shares that information with each grade level. In reviewing this data, teachers can see the highest referral areas and determine what particular concepts in the SEL curriculum could address these issues. In addition to helping students' SEL so that they are better able to learn, discipline referrals and the time students spend outside of class has decreased. Consequently, teachers are able to spend more time on instruction.

Teachers are empowered to help students using SEL tools and sensory integration techniques. For example, a teacher was able to help a student who struggled with external behaviors, meltdowns and disruptions, by using some of the tools of the SEL curriculum, such as belly breathing and moving heavy objects. Historically, this teacher would have contacted a counselor or another teacher for assistance and the student would have to leave the classroom. This teacher was able to help the student reset and get her mind back to learning without requiring additional support.

“Becoming part of the team, doing the in-depth work and writing the curriculum has opened my eyes to how much the students need the SEL curriculum and how much it has benefited the students.

–Teacher”

## Keys to Success

Through participation in the ELN program, the Rocky River team successfully implemented the SEL curriculum for all students. Three primary factors emerged as the keys to success.



### Embrace Distributed Leadership

The *Transforming Early Learning by Reimagining School Evaluation Report 2019* states that distributed leadership appeared to make a significant impact through school design teams. This is evident at Rocky River where the SEL curriculum development team included any teacher who was interested in participating in the project and not just instructional leaders.

Teachers with different experiences and skill sets positively contributed to the curriculum development process. The school design team took on leadership roles within the school and trained the teachers on how to use the new SEL curriculum.

“Teachers wanted to be part of the team. They understood the process, the work, and the importance of the SEL curriculum.”

—Cyndal Brenneman, Teacher



### Develop a Positive School-wide Culture

Initial success around the implementation of SEL fostered a positive culture. It was important to directly involve a variety of teachers

in researching strategies and tools when creating the SEL curriculum to foster stakeholder buy-in. Teachers reported that they were more responsive to implementing the SEL curriculum since it was created by their peers and not just pushed on them from the administration. The inclusion of many teachers with varying expertise on the design team generated positive attitudes among teachers.



Cyndal Brenneman shares her thoughts on the importance of whole-school buy-in.

“If you pre-correct behavior now, hopefully it’ll be better going forward.”

—Cyndal Brenneman, Teacher



## Promote Sustainability

The SEL curriculum is part of the school culture. Morning meetings are built into the schedule and non-negotiable. The SEL lessons are succinct and accessible online and through the learning management system. Each lesson is easy to understand and deliver. Teachers have bought into the concept and recognize the benefits of spending less time on discipline issues and more time on instruction.



“ Teachers were over the moon excited about being part of a team that was going to make an impact on the school.

–Adrian Parry, Principal

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## Looking Forward

The events in this case study occurred before the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic and nationwide school shutdown. During remote learning, districts across the country focused on providing continuity of learning for students, while also supporting the social and emotional needs of students and their families. The SEL curriculum, designed by staff at Rocky River, can be applied both during traditional face-to-face instruction and remote learning, with some adaptation. View the [Instructional Design Principles for Remote Teaching and Learning](#) resource to learn more about instructional design during COVID-19.