



# flipping the script

A new way to  
do, see, and understand  
social emotional learning

propel **SEL**

## WHAT IS SEL?

Thanks to generous funding from the **Carlson Family Foundation** and **Greater Twin Cities United Way**, Propel SEL was launched to help afterschool programs:

- Engage the community and youth to better understand SEL (social-emotional learning) needs,
- Infuse SEL into youth programs and measure its impact so more Twin Cities youth are ready to succeed after high school, and
- Look at SEL through an equity and identity lens, recognizing that successful SEL development occurs within the larger context of a young person's identity.

Along the three-year journey, Propel SEL evolved. Each phase of the project informed and transformed what came next. Through the process both youth and adult participants learned a lot about SEL – and also about themselves. And that, it turned out, dramatically changed how we do, see and understand SEL.



**This has been monumental for our youth, and for us as an organization."**

–MIGIZI staff member



**"I love Propel SEL!"**

–Trio Upward Bound Staff

**Social-emotional learning is a life-long complex and dynamic process** through which children, youth and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to:

- Understand and manage emotions
- Set and achieve positive goals
- Feel and show empathy for others
- Establish and maintain positive relationships
- Make responsible decisions

**We focus on SEL because it is fundamental to:**

- One's identity
- Health and well-being
- Ethical development
- Motivation to achieve
- Academic learning
- ...And is formed within the context of culture, family and community

There are many definitions of SEL – this was the one that appeared on the application for the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts that you'll read about in this report.





Propel SEL takes what we thought we knew about SEL and turns it upside down – **with dramatic and positive results.** We step back and start with community engagement and give adults space to understand their own SEL. Next, we involve intermediaries to ensure systemic impact. And we are always mindful of the need for youth to own their SEL.

**The work is just getting started. Together, we must:**

### **Address Bias.**

**Funders**, support programs as they do the necessary work to unearth and understand the complex nature of equity, culture and identity as it relates to SEL.

**Programs**, understand that SEL is personal and applies to youth and adults. Every level of the organization needs to be on board and have a commitment to looking at SEL through the lens of equity.

### **Be in it for the long haul.**

**Funders**, know that transformative change takes time. It requires listening to the community, and an ongoing investment in robust, cohort-based professional development.

**Programs**, take time to dig deep and give adults space to “unpack” their own SEL before selecting a framework. Build in staff time and resources for long-term professional development necessary for transformational change.

### **Embrace the complexity.**

**Funders**, see that one-time workshops and “one-size-fits-all” solutions are limited in their impact. Systemic change must start with the process – not the solution – to flourish.

**Programs**, include parents and community members in a way that strengthens your program. Following the full process takes effort, but will make your program more vibrant in the end.



Understanding the lived experience of young people is at the heart of how we thought about this.”  
–Propel SEL curriculum development team

## community engagement

## learning cohorts

### 3 YEAR JOURNEY

Propel SEL brought many people, programs & perspectives together.

**2015**

Carlson Family Foundation and Greater Twin Cities United Way pledge \$781,000 for a multi-year initiative to increase SEL skills in youth programming. Thus, Propel SEL is born.

**10/2016**

Nearly 30 afterschool stakeholders formed a Community Advisory Group that informed the Community Engagement process that shaped Propel SEL.

**10/2016**

First of 22 Community Engagement meetings. Nearly 300 representatives (25% of whom are youth) from 81 youth-serving organizations provide input over a four-month period.

**04/2017**

Community Engagement is complete. The resulting professional development recommendations have massive impacts in shaping the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts.

**02/2018**

21 youth programs begin their Propel SEL Learning Cohorts, following a carefully planned yet open-ended curriculum that kept youth and equity at the center.

**spring 2018**

March-May monthly meetings of the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts. Under the leadership of two curriculum developers and four trainers from regional and statewide intermediaries, it quickly becomes clear that this process will require going deep and changing assumptions.

Propel SEL is **flipping the script** on the way we do-see-understand SEL



**Propel SEL brought us closer together as a staff. Now we're having deeper conversations that just weren't happening before.** –MIGIZI staff

## reflection & impact

**05/2018**

Midterm evaluations. Every organization reports that they've tried something new inspired by what they learned in their Propel SEL Learning Cohort.

**summer 2018**

All Propel SEL Learning Cohort participants embark upon an individualized summer project to advance SEL in their organizations. The work continues to challenge deep-set ways of thinking.

**11/2018**

An equity consultant interviews youth workers in the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts. They describe challenges and disconnects experienced by youth of color, as well as hopeful insights about culture and equity.

**02/2019**

Propel SEL Learning Cohort organizations create a final implementation plan. Each receives \$2,000 to continue the work that they've begun.

**04/2019**

Final evaluation of the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts. This includes a "Ripple Effect" map that captures 47 primary and 52 secondary impacts of the cohorts.

**05/2019**

Intermediaries who led Learning Cohorts have the first of many conversations to identify ways to continue the momentum started by Propel SEL.

**What's Next?**

Propel SEL set in motion a groundswell of excitement that is already spreading into something bigger as programs, youth workers and young people are shaped by a deeper understanding of SEL.



**Propel SEL changed everything about the way we thought of SEL. We stopped thinking about how to teach kids better, and started thinking about how to train staff better, how to respond to youth better, how to do our programs better. The experience has changed not just how we do things for youth, but how we see youth and their needs.** –SPPL staff



## Propel SEL started with listening.

We brought together hundreds of afterschool stakeholders, both youth and adults, to hear about their hopes and dreams as well as needs and barriers around SEL.

## We wanted to make a big, system-wide impact.

So we gathered experts in equity and professional development to design a curriculum that was led by four afterschool intermediaries. That meant system-wide impact was built right in to the process.

## After that, things really started to take off.

When individuals from 21 youth-serving organizations came together to transform how they see and understand SEL, they didn't learn about tools and frameworks. (Not right away, anyway.) We "flipped the script" by asking those who work with youth to dissect their own ways of thinking, their assumptions, their culture and identity.

THE STORY OF  
**PROPEL SEL**



## Through Propel SEL, we came to the following beliefs:

- **Start with the adult.** Our beliefs and assumptions about young people shape how we work with youth. We adults need time to unpack our own “stuff” first.
- **Youth must own their SEL.** Our role is to walk alongside young people in their SEL journey, not to do it “for them” or “to them.”
- **Racism must be acknowledged and addressed.** It is embedded in our systems, structures, policies and practices. We have to be able to recognize this and intentionally break it down in order to bring an equity lens to our SEL work.
- **It’s a worthy investment.** It takes time and dedication for afterschool programs to go deep into “owning their SEL,” and funding partners who understand the need for a longer-term investment. The payoff is worth it.
- **There is no “one size fits all” SEL framework** that makes sense for every context, community and program. We have to put in the effort to learn about different frameworks to select or adjust the best one for each individual organization.
- **Go “all in” for a transformative impact.** Intermediaries, organizational leaders and program staff need to walk alongside parents, communities and young people themselves to go broad and deep to truly influence SEL. We’re all in this together.
- **We need to do this now.** Funders and systems-builders are key to providing the support that can transform the way young people develop the SEL skills they need for success.



**We are proud supporters of Propel SEL. We started this journey with the United Way four years ago because of our shared passion for making a positive difference in the lives of young people in our community. What we accomplished went well beyond what we imagined. This innovative process started with community engagement, including feedback from youth, intentionally building the Propel SEL cohort design and curriculum, and giving space to practitioners to work collaboratively with each other and experts in the field. It resulted in organizations building on their own SEL and sparking systemic change in their organizations and practice. We’re proud to join United Way in sharing the story of Propel SEL and excited to see how this work will inform the field for years to come.”**

–David Nelson, Executive Director,  
Carlson Family Foundation





**“One of the biggest surprises was how much SEL was built into our culture and cultural practices. Propel SEL gave us a chance to recognize that.”** –Migizi staff

# community engagement

## Listening before doing.

Propel SEL set out to build SEL into youth programs. To do this, our original impulse was to spend time evaluating SEL frameworks, selecting “the best” one, and then teaching it to youth-serving programs across the state.

**That’s not what happened at all.** Instead, we started by listening to the community. We embarked upon an ambitious Community Engagement process designed to answer questions like:

- ➔ **What SEL skills are a priority for youth?**
- ➔ **What are programs currently doing to support SEL in youth?**
- ➔ **What needs and supports will help us do even more to support SEL?**

Through the Community Engagement sessions, we learned that practitioners and youth understand the value of SEL. We learned that programs focus on more than 34 different SEL skills, with no one set of SEL skills or single SEL framework rising to the top. But most importantly, we learned that instead of frameworks, we need to start with Professional Development for youth workers.

The Community Engagement sessions changed the entire trajectory of the project. It showed us the importance of taking time to listen and make sure we’re heading in the right direction before taking action.

The following **Professional Development Recommendations** were a direct result of the Community Engagement sessions:

- 1 **Support youth workers to intentionally foster cultural and identity exploration among youth**
- 2 **Include a community of practice to encourage learning within programs and between different organizations**
- 3 **Support intentional practice, program design and evaluation**
- 4 **Remain tool and framework neutral**
- 5 **Maintain youth voice throughout the process**
- 6 **Offer topic-specific trainings to address systems-level challenges and build capacity**
- 7 **Use a continuous improvement approach and use data to help inform changes to practice**

### NEWS BRIEF:



**Nearly 85%** of programs report that they support SEL skills in youth. Yet culture and identity is a primary focus for only 27% of those programs, so the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts are intentionally designed to help address that gap.



22

community engagement sessions over 4 months: that's 45 hours of thoughtful discussion!

300

participants from 81 organizations

Plus 180 survey responses

25%

of community engagement participants were youth

## CASE STUDY

**MIGIZI: Ojibwe SEL Wheel**

While exploring different SEL frameworks in their Propel SEL Learning Cohort, the MIGIZI team gravitated toward CASEL's Core SEL Competencies Wheel, but it wasn't quite right for their needs.

A meeting with an Ojibwe elder sparked a connection between the modern-day work they were doing and SEL concepts that have been embedded in the Ojibwe's Seven Grandfather Teachings for generations. Using translations provided by the elder, the team created their own customized wheel by incorporating the 7 grandfather teachings – responsibility, honesty, humility, love, bravery, truth and wisdom – and placing family at the center.



**We created a tool that is easy for our students to recognize, because the language and concepts are familiar. It was really impactful for us to be able to come together as a staff to create a tool that is being widely used in our organization. We train our youth workers on how to use the wheel to build trust, talk about emotions and deepen the ways we relate to youth.** –MIGIZI staff

**Ah-Ha**  
moment

There is strong support for getting more intentional about SEL – as long as it's not done in an overly "one size fits all" way.

# learning cohorts

Start with adults to impact youth.

**“The experience of being part of the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts was raw and intense. It was powerful. It’s rare in your professional life to have this kind of depth of learning.”**

–SPPL staff

The Community Engagement sessions set the stage for the creation of two simultaneous Propel SEL Learning Cohorts. They were guided by a **Theory of Change**: If the training curriculum engages participants and meets their needs, then we will see a shift in both practice and program design that will ultimately lead to improved social and emotional learning outcomes for youth.

Along with two professional development providers, four intermediaries stepped up to support the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts. They brought expertise to the table, and even more importantly, set systemic change in motion by increasing capacity for intermediaries to support SEL in a wide range of afterschool programs.

The Propel SEL Learning Cohorts “flipped the script” by starting with adults. Participants were surprised by how much of the training focused on them. Understanding their own SEL through an equity lens had a profound impact on how they viewed their role as youth workers.

The Propel SEL Learning Cohort model was completely unique – and was KEY to the impacts and outcomes achieved. The year-long process provided:

- consistent leadership by intermediaries
- financial support so programs could participate fully
- and dedicated team time for in-depth SEL learning

The Propel SEL Learning Cohorts provided a supportive space to work out challenges and complexities of SEL. Participants were able to address specific organizational SEL needs – like trainings and frameworks – in a more collaborative and individualized way while also building closer connections to other youth-serving organizations.

The Propel SEL Learning Cohorts didn’t start with tools, frameworks and solutions. They started with youth workers taking a deep dive into understanding their own SEL and how they show up for youth because of it.

Ah-Ha moment

2 cohorts

- › Suburban
- › Minneapolis/ St. Paul)

comprised of teams from 21 organizations with 43% of individuals self-identified as people of color





**12 months**

diving deep into SEL,  
which included:

- > 4 trainers
- > 2 curriculum designers
- > 20 meetings
- > 19 summer projects



**NEWS  
BRIEF:**

**Six months into the Propel SEL Learning Cohorts, EVERY organization reported** that they introduced something related to what they learned in their cohort. Examples include sharing about SEL with colleagues, assessing their current SEL content, and implementing SEL in their programs.

**St. Paul Public Library:  
Welcoming Youth &  
Strengthening Relationships**

Propel SEL fundamentally changed the way SPPL thinks about youth. Instead of trying to “fix” the way youth experience the library, library staff now frames it as “What do teens need from us?” That has started to change nearly every interaction library staff in every part of the organization has with youth – from how and which rules are enforced to program offerings and creating a more welcoming space for young people.



**I know we would have gone about this a different way if we hadn't been part of Propel SEL. The Propel SEL training initially impacted staff, but ultimately is impacting youth because they are having a better library experience.”** –SPPL staff

**\$2K**

amount each organization received to continue implementing their SEL action plan at the end of the cohorts

**CASE STUDY**



# reflection & impact

**We did it! We want to keep doing it.**

**“We need to understand the principles of inequity, and more importantly, how they are lived out in people’s experiences.”**

– Development and Training, Inc. Consultant

**The complex reality that SEL occurs within inherently racist systems** came through loud and clear in one-on-one interviews with youth workers. These insightful conversations reveal a “silent skill set” of youth workers who are guides, mentors and advocates helping young people from backgrounds different than the dominant culture navigate biased systems.

Recognizing that **“part of this work is not running away from the hard stuff,”** their voices inspire us to continue to work toward broader systems change.

**Propel SEL had a big impact on SEL practices in youth programs.**

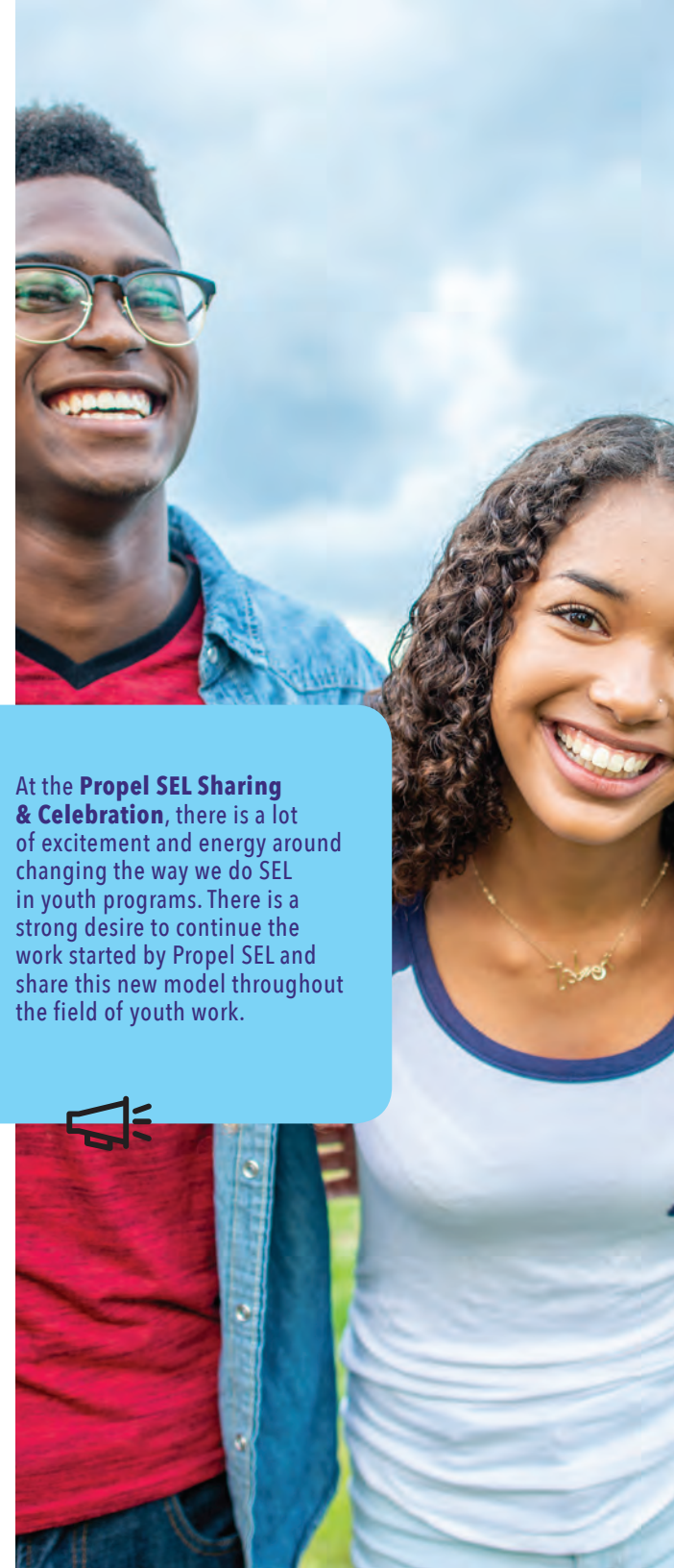
Participants brought what they learned about SEL back to their organizations, which resulted in many big changes. Organizations adjusted their theories of change and/or logic models, advanced goals or strategies around SEL and youth voice, improved their assessments of SEL practices and made policy changes around topics like hiring and student discipline.

Participants took part in a “Ripple Effect” mapping process to document the impacts – both intended and unintended – of the Propel SEL Learning Cohort experience. Through this process we uncovered 47 primary and 52 secondary impacts. We learned that Propel SEL participants:

- ➔ **Addressed specific SEL needs**
- ➔ **Developed closer connections with other youth-serving entities**
- ➔ **Created (or revamped) training opportunities**
- ➔ **Found a safe and supportive place free from day-to-day distractions to work through challenges in understanding and implementing SEL**
- ➔ **Sparked discussions, reflection and new work around SEL**

## NEWS BRIEF:

At the **Propel SEL Sharing & Celebration**, there is a lot of excitement and energy around changing the way we do SEL in youth programs. There is a strong desire to continue the work started by Propel SEL and share this new model throughout the field of youth work.



47 + 52  
primary secondary

impacts noted through "Ripple Effect" evaluations show that cohort participants brought new models, strategies, assessments *and more* back to their organizations.

90% of cohort organizations showed measurable positive improvement in the areas Propel SEL was designed to address

intentional support of practices

implementing strategies

measuring outcomes

knowledge of outcomes

## CASE STUDY

Even after the official end of Propel SEL Learning Cohorts, some organizations are still meeting together to continue the work.



### Trio Upward Bound: SELFocus

Trio Upward Bound modified one of the group exercises from their Propel SEL Learning Cohort and built it directly into their program. Called SELFocus – as in time to focus on SEL and yourself – students are given three minutes to talk uninterrupted. Sometimes youth are given a prompt (recent topics have included family, school, body image, money issues) and sometimes they're just given the floor.



**They might start talking about the prompt, and end up talking about something completely different that's really on their mind. Our program has become so much stronger since we added SELFocus. Youth hear that they're not alone in their worries or that others might have it worse than they do. This has helped build empathy and showed them how to be real. If they can come to space where they can trust, share and feel loved, they do better academically."**

–Trio Upward Bound staff

We have a new way to  
do-see-understand SEL,  
thanks to all of you.

# acknowledgments

*Thank you to the funders, sponsors and participants who made Propel SEL possible. And youth, we thank you especially, as you're what this work is all about.*

## Community Engagement Advisory Council members

- ↻ Big Brothers Big Sisters Twin Cities
- ↻ Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth
- ↻ Carlson Family Foundation
- ↻ Generation Next
- ↻ Greater Twin Cities United Way
- ↻ Ignite Afterschool
- ↻ MENTOR Minnesota
- ↻ Minneapolis Public Schools
- ↻ Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board – Minneapolis Afterschool Network
- ↻ Minnesota Comeback
- ↻ Minnesota Department of Education
- ↻ Minnesota Education Equity Partnership
- ↻ MnAEYC-MnSACA
- ↻ New Lens Urban Mentoring
- ↻ Northside Achievement Zone
- ↻ Saint Paul Public Libraries
- ↻ Saint Paul Public Schools
- ↻ Search Institute
- ↻ Sprockets
- ↻ Suburban Ramsey Family Collaborative
- ↻ University of Minnesota – Center for Youth Development
- ↻ University of Minnesota – College of Education and Human Development
- ↻ Voyageur Outward Bound School
- ↻ Wilder Foundation – Youth Leadership Initiative
- ↻ YMCA of the Twin Cities
- ↻ Youthprise





## Propel SEL Learning Cohort Participants

### Minneapolis/St. Paul Cohort:

- ➔ Arts Us (Saint Paul)
- ➔ Fred Wells Tennis and Education Center (Saint Paul)
- ➔ Hennepin County Library (Minnetonka)
- ➔ MIGIZI (Minneapolis)
- ➔ Plymouth Christian Youth Center (Minneapolis)
- ➔ Sejong Academy (Saint Paul)
- ➔ Simpson Housing Services (Minneapolis)
- ➔ Saint Paul Public Library (Saint Paul)
- ➔ Urban Roots (Saint Paul)
- ➔ WE WIN Institute (Minneapolis)
- ➔ Youth Farm (Minneapolis)

### Suburban Cohort:

- ➔ Anoka-Hennepin School District (Anoka)\*
- ➔ Big Brothers Big Sisters Twin Cities (Saint Paul)
- ➔ Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth – Brooklyns Youth Council (Brooklyn Center)
- ➔ Burnsville Youth Collaborative (Burnsville)\*
- ➔ FamilyMeans (Stillwater)
- ➔ Hennepin Technical College (Brooklyn Park)
- ➔ North Hennepin Community College (Brooklyn Park)
- ➔ Osseo Area Schools – ISD 279 (Maple Grove)
- ➔ Robbinsdale Area Schools (Plymouth)
- ➔ Roseville Area Schools Community Education (Roseville)

\*Did not complete the full year



**I learned that SEL starts with oneself; I show up at work with my own baggage and emotions. Reflecting on myself helped reminded me that as an adult, I cannot minimize young people's experiences or emotions, because at that age, whatever they are going through is all they know. I have to honor the human connections and emotions."**

–Trio Upward Bound staff

## acknowledgments



### Community Engagement Consultants

- Dale Blyth, University of Minnesota (retired), Initiative Advisor
- LaCroix-Dalluhn Consulting, Community Engagement Process & Recommendations
- Sprockets, Community Engagement Process

### Equity Advisor & Consultant

- Development and Training, Inc.

### Propel SEL Learning Cohort Curriculum Design & Lead Facilitators

- Youth Work Learning Lab and Beacons

### Propel SEL Learning Cohort Facilitators

- Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth\*
  - Ignite Afterschool\*\*
  - Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board
  - Sprockets
- \*Also served as Learning Cohort Evaluators  
 \*\*Also provided project management for Learning Cohorts & Next Steps



**Propel SEL got results and took us further than ever before. We need to keep going to deepen the impact with youth and advance SEL in afterschool.”** –Ignite Afterschool staff



propel **SEL**



This is a summary of Propel SEL activities between 2015-2019.

Learn more at: [igniteafterschool.org/propel-sel](https://igniteafterschool.org/propel-sel)

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