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The Effect of the Advocacy Social-Emotional Learning Program on Emotional Competence

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Abstract: School leaders are integrating social and emotional skills content into their academic curriculum to create a supportive learning environment and improve the implicit curriculum. The Generation Schools Network (GSN) Advocacy Program is a comprehensive, multi-component schoolwide initiative designed to promote students' social-emotional competence, college and career readiness, and academic success. Overall, the GSN Advocacy Program represents a holistic approach that promotes the interconnectedness of social-emotional development and academic success, aiming to prepare students for the challenges and opportunities they will encounter. The study aimed to test for baseline equivalence between the comparison and intervention groups regarding school climate, leadership, school connectedness, emotional distress, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. This quasi-experimental process compared secondary students in the intervention group (125) participating in the yearlong GSN Advocacy Program with students in the comparison group (115). After controlling for pre-assessment variables of social-emotional competence, the analysis of covariance revealed significant improvements among students in the intervention group for total social-emotional competence and constructs of school climate and school connectedness. The program's multi-component approach, including structural support through professional development for implementers and specific social-emotional learning lessons, helped students develop social-emotional skills. Accordingly, students also demonstrated increased interaction with others, an improved sense of school connectedness, and an enhanced ability to handle emotional distress, which is crucial for academic stressors. This study suggests that the multi-component approach, including student-centered social-emotional competency instruction and environmental focus, engendered the intervention group's acquisition of social-emotional skills. Accordingly, by adopting a multi-component approach that addresses these various aspects of social-emotional programming, school leaders can create a holistic support system that nurtures students' social-emotional competence, resilience, and overall well-being. This comprehensive approach enhances students' academic success and equips them with the skills and attitudes necessary for success beyond the classroom.

Keywords: school climate, advocacy program, social-emotional learning, school-based intervention

1. Introduction

Next to family influence, the United States public school system has been described as the most influential contributor to the socialization of young people into their roles as adults [1]. To better prepare students and attempt to mitigate the impact of systemic racism, trauma, and poverty on traditionally underserved groups, many school systems have taken steps to intentionally integrate social and emotional skills content into their explicit, academic curriculum to foster a more supportive learning environment and improve the implicit curriculum. Developing strategies and supports to improve social and emotional competence as a learning outcome materialized as a response to the emerging understanding of neuroscience and the impact of trauma on children's development [2, 3] This understanding, along with the recognition that effective and equitable learning depends on a sense of safety, secure attachment, and meaningful relationships, has created opportunities for school districts to integrate new evidence-based programs to proactively improve students' overall experiences in school, rather than just reduce at-risk behaviors [4, 5]. While this recent trend of deliberate inclusion of social-emotional learning (SEL) in K-12 curricula has been largely led by educators, SEL has evolved out of different traditions, including social work, public health, and psychology [6]. The efficacy of SEL integration into learning environments increases with collaboration between educators and school professionals from diverse disciplines, such as school social workers [7] who work as integrated practitioners across multiple systems to address barriers that impact student success inclusive of non-academic spaces of family, school, and community.

SEL is a student-centered approach that seeks to create opportunities to promote equity and excellence in learning [8]. To achieve learning goals, creators design instruction for developing strategies for self-regulation and meaningful student-teacher-staff-community relationships. Specific SEL interventions seek to

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improve educational outcomes for all students as part of general instruction, not just for students identified as needing special education services [9].

Actively focusing on students' social-emotional competence has been suggested to affect students' expression and demonstration of prosocial skills positively [10]. When students develop their social and emotional skills in the context of their school environments, they engage better in learning and demonstrate an increased capacity to meet desired learning targets [11]. SEL interventions have also been shown to contribute to improved high school graduation rates and readiness for college success [12].

Although many SEL programs claim to produce these benefits, it is important to rigorously evaluate each program's context and specific outcomes to ensure that students are receiving evidence-based programming. As such, the current study evaluated the efficacy of an SEL intervention, the Generation Schools Network (GSN) Advocacy Program, implemented in secondary schools, on specific indicators of social-emotional well-being. This quasi-experimental study tested the hypothesis that:

> Students who participate in the GSN Advocacy SEL curriculum will demonstrate significantly higher levels of social-emotional competence compared to students who do not receive the intervention, after controlling for baseline levels of social-emotional competence.

2. Literature Review

SEL is a strategy that educators utilize to develop students' social-emotional competencies, which are the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors individuals need to construct successful choices [13]. Previous research has demonstrated that SEL can have positive effects on youth development, but there is limited research regarding the effects for secondary students. The development of social skills is essential for students to be able to navigate relationships, collaborate with peers, and succeed in various aspects of life beyond academics [14]. In addition, given that emotions influence learning because emotions impact student attention, perception, and motivation, cognitive processes are essential to learning [15]. Because SEL teaches students to regulate maladaptive emotional responses, improved SEL competence can increase the capacity for learning rather than processing negative emotions [15]. Additionally, when schools build SEL skills gradually and systematically, students have a deeper understanding of the academic content, higher student engagement, and reduced behavioral interruption [16].

Most educational professionals are aware of the detrimental impact of marginalization in schools. Although the experience of marginalization differs amongst populations, common occurrences are negative messages about the marginalized group and social exclusion. Social forces, like racism, sexism, religious hatred, homophobia, and elitism, can lead to marginalization. While SEL can give students the foundation to develop cultural knowledge that can transfer to other contexts beyond the classroom, some SEL initiatives that lack cultural inclusivity may encourage students to behave per hegemonic norms rather than promote genuine inclusivity of all students [17] and fail to acknowledge students' cultural capital as a lever for success [18]. Many traditional classroom management systems control students' behaviors within a specific context using rigid structures and consequences for compliance. Consequently, the learning environment may disproportionately leave many students vulnerable to the inequitable application of exclusionary discipline measures, including suspension and expulsion [19]. Therefore, it is imperative to implement SEL that builds on the cultural wealth of the students being served to create an authentic sense of belonging [20]. Consequently, effective implementation of SEL programming is founded upon a holistic team approach including teachers, mental health professionals, and educational leaders [21].

SEL serves as part of the continuum of services that promotes positive mental health outcomes for students but should not be considered a substitute for mental health services [22]. With one in six students showing signs of a mental health disorder each year and many others remaining at risk for developing a mental health disorder [23, 24], SEL is a strategy to help students self-manage emotion regulation through the development of coping mechanisms to reduce stress, improve attitudes, and increase prosocial behavior [10, 25].

2.1. Secondary students and SEL

High school students respond favorably to learning social-emotional competencies and feel that schools should do more to help them to develop skills to handle emotional challenges [26]. Social-emotional competencies are imperative for secondary students as they navigate the challenges of increasing academic rigor along with independence in making adult-like decisions. Trepidation and anticipation are feelings that are pervasive for many teens. It has been long known that their stress often rivals that of adults and can contribute to poor educational outcomes and deleterious behavior such as skipping meals or school [27].

One protective factor that can mitigate the stress of schooling for teenagers is access to structural supports that increase feelings of connectedness. Advisory programs create opportunities for students to feel connected to their academic and social environments and have been found to enhance student-adult relationships [28]. Schools generally organize advisory-type programs in reoccurring blocks where small groups of students are paired with an adult to create support systems and a sense of community that students need to succeed academically. Effective SEL-informed advisory programs provide interventions and supports that attend to students' physical, social, and emotional needs in addition to their academic ones. These small community systems help students overcome challenges such as lack of routines, social isolation, and out-of-school events or issues that impact students' capacity to engage fully. One key role for the adult advisor (often a classroom teacher, counselor, social worker, or another school professional) is to advocate for the student, listening to concerns and helping students seek answers [29].

2.2. Theoretical framework

As a result of substantial research on school climate, the U. S. Department of Education [30] has put forth guidelines meant to foster positive, respectful, and safe school climates. Likewise, positive youth development is connected to a feeling of support and sense of belonging within the school context [31]. Common among major developmental theories is the idea that school climate is multi-dimensional [32]. Ultimately, the four domains most prevalent in the literature have been academic, community, safety, and institutional environment [32, 33].

Education is one of the many-layered systems in students' lives that impact student outcomes. Because of the complexities of interconnected systems, we have approached this study of SEL within the context of school climate through the conceptual framework of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner asserted that to understand human development, it is essential to "consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs" [34]. More specifically, within the Systems View of School Climate (SVSC), school climate is defined as the

"affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, safety, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school" [35]. The SVSC framework is well suited to investigate the phenomenon of SEL programming, which occurs within the context of the school climate where the students are "at the center of a series of nested and interactive contexts that work synergistically to support or detract from students' experiences in school" [35]. Focusing on the nanosystems allows researchers to investigate the smaller systems nested within the school microsystem. Additionally, studying the interactions between contexts allows a deeper understanding of the processes that influence school climate. Social-emotional competence is a set of skills that can be positively influenced by supportive school climates and can also contribute to improving school climates. Consequently, attempting to isolate one concept from the other is impossible, given the interactions that govern the efficacy of either.

Previous studies have provided evidence that the implementation of SEL programs can enhance students' social and emotional competencies. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the efficacy of programs, especially for secondary students [36]. This study attempts to fill that gap by examining the GSN Advocacy Program. In the following sections, we describe the evidence-aligned components of the program and then use a pre- and post-design to examine changes in student's competencies as a result of participation in the GSN Advocacy Program.

2.3. Advocacy program model

GSN's Advocacy SEL Program is designed to support a positive school climate and improve students' social-emotional competencies. GSN uses the term "advocacy" rather than "advisory" for its SEL program. Advocacy connotes an active process in which professional staff is trained to advocate for students, and students learn to advocate for themselves and one another while exploring challenges and opportunities in a supportive peer environment. A fundamental tenet of the GSN model is for each student to have daily access to a supportive community system, including a caring adult who is motivated and committed to helping that student succeed.

The GSN Advocacy Program reinforces student's SEL, college/career readiness, and academic success through five goals:

1) **Build relationships** (e.g., student-teacher, student-student, and teacher-family),
2) **Support academic success** through goal setting and monitoring,
3) **Overcome barriers** through establishing a community referral process,
4) **Develop essential life skills** (e.g., teamwork, communication, and problem-solving), and
5) **Plan for college and career** through completion of an individualized career and academic plan using a distributed guidance model.

This five-goal strategy aligns with the five broad and interrelated areas of the CASEL SEL competencies [8], which are widely recognized as a framework for promoting SEL in educational settings. Additionally, the GSN Advocacy Program intentionally incorporates four recommended practices associated with previously effective skill training (SAFE: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit) [11]. As a sequenced approach, students learn intrapersonal skills before interpersonal skills.

The full implementation of the GSN Advocacy Program includes a dedicated time block for the program, trained faculty advocates, and the use of the advocacy structure, along with activities designed to develop student skills in a supportive peer environment.

2.3.1. Advocacy block

Advocacy is a daily or weekly 30- to 45-minute session. Students meet with their faculty advocate during the Advocacy block to engage in activities that support their social and emotional growth, career readiness, and academic success. Each session includes a Circle, Welcome, and Warm-Up followed by activities. Advocates choose from banks of resources or may develop activities specific to their advocacy group.

1) **Circle** – Advocacy begins with everyone sitting in a circle so that all see and welcome each other.
2) **Welcome** – The Welcome sets a positive tone where everyone is greeted by name respectfully and in a friendly manner, and each student and adult are encouraged to use eye contact.
3) **Warm-Up** – This can be sharing, a check-in, or a quick game where participants, including adults, practice public speaking and active listening.
4) **Activity** – Students participate in activities that include SEL curriculum units, college and career guidance, academic conferencing, and team building.

2.3.2. Faculty advocates

Faculty advocates are adult leaders of small groups of 9–15 students who serve as the primary contact between the school and students and their families. They provide students with a sense of safety and belonging through the Advocacy group, advocate for students, and coach them in advocating for themselves.

2.3.3. Advocacy activities

The GSN Advocacy Program activities are designed to reinforce the development of the CASEL SEL competencies in students.

1) **SEL Curriculum Units** – These units provide a comprehensive, standards-aligned SEL program that focuses on developing skills such as flexible thinking, persistence, collaboration, and the ability to focus. Thematic units generally include five lessons and a project. Each of the lessons integrates activities, discussions, and reflections that develop skills related to the CASEL competencies. For example, starting with a mindfulness exercise to help students become self-aware of their emotions and thoughts before beginning the material. Likewise, students may discuss scenarios or case studies where students analyze options, consider consequences, and make decisions aligned with ethical principles which increase the capacity for responsible decision-making.
2) **College And Career Guidance** – Students undertake specific tasks to prepare for post-secondary transition, such as career exploration, post-secondary pathways mapping, and application completion. Students develop social awareness as they develop their skills for networking and building professional relationships with peers, mentors, and professionals in their field. Additionally, students learn the value of diverse networks and how these networks can provide access to opportunities and support throughout their career journey.
3) **Academic Conferencing** – Advocates support students in reviewing academic data and setting goals. Goals typically are built around grades, attendance, behavior, and high school course credits. Students monitor progress toward achieving these goals to create momentum toward growth and achievement. Incorporating goal-setting exercises is a way to assist students'

development self-management through identifying academic or personal goals and develop plans to achieve them.

4) **Team Building** – Participants engage in activities, exercises, and initiatives aimed at cultivating a positive and supportive environment where students feel connected to their peers, work effectively together, and develop interpersonal skills. These cooperative learning activities require students to communicate effectively, collaborate, and resolve conflicts to help students build relationship skills.

2.3.4. Professional development

1) **Initial** – Educators participate in virtual or in-person training with a GSN expert in 1- to 4-hour segments.
2) **Ongoing** – Educators receive coaching to monitor school culture, student behavior, and achievement. Additionally, advocates are trained in integrating SEL into the classroom environment.

Educator training, through professional development, is deemed integral to the success of the advocacy program and is customized to meet the unique needs of each district and school. Therefore, during the initial planning and throughout implementation, school leaders, key teachers, counselors, social workers, and the school's SEL team (if applicable) are involved in core training. School leaders collaborate with staff to choose from a menu of support services to build educator capacity to advocate for students and create an environment where students learn self-advocacy skills. During professional development, educators receive technical support on implementing the SEL curriculum resources along with strategies for progress monitoring and data analysis. Customization may include choosing SEL curriculum units and developing the scope and sequence of activities based on the school's programmatic structures.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

This quasi-experimental study compared students in the intervention group (125) participating in the yearlong GSN Advocacy Program matched with students in a comparison group (115) who did not receive the intervention. The University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct the study.

We developed the measures utilizing multi-item subscales that represent constructs of student' social-emotional competence. Each subscale along with the total scale was tested for reliability before checking assumptions for analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). Next, we tested for difference based on student's characteristics including gender, racialization, urbanization, and socio-economic status. Finally, a between-groups ANCOVA was carried out to evaluate differences between post-assessment scores while controlling for differences in the pre-assessment variables of social-emotional competence.

3.2. Participants

Participants were high school students in grades nine through twelve in schools that attended one of 21 schools that utilized the Indigo Assessment to measure social-emotional competencies. Student data for the comparison group represented 13 schools unaffiliated with GSN. Student data for the intervention group represented eight schools that participated in the GSN Advocacy Program. For students' scores to be included in the analysis, student responses had to be at least 90% complete for both the pre- and post-Indigo Assessments and the period between the pre- and post-assessment had to be at least 113 days and no longer than 400 days (median days equaled 243 days). The final data set included 125 student responses from the intervention group and 115 from the comparison group. Table 1 displays student demographic information for the comparison and intervention groups.

Table 1
Participant characteristics

	C	I	All
Racialization & Ethnicity			
Native American	5.2%	2.4%	3.8%
African American	4.3%	0.8%	2.5%
Hispanic or Latino	22.6%	33.6%	28.3%
Asian or Pacific Islander	8.7%	2.4%	5.4%
European American	45.2%	46.4%	45.8%
Two Races	11.3%	12.8%	12.1%
Unknown or prefer not to say	2.6%	1.6%	2.1%
Gender			
Female	50.4%	49.6%	50%
Male	49.6%	49.6%	49.6%
Prefer not to say or Unknown	0.00%	0.8%	0.4%

Note: C = Comparison, I = Intervention

The two groups were similar in racial and ethnic diversity, with the overall sample of students identifying mainly as European American (45.8%), Hispanic (28.3%), or Two Races (12.1%). African American students were underrepresented in both the intervention and comparison groups as compared to United States trends, whereas Native American students were overrepresented. The distribution of students who identified as male and female students was relatively equal in both groups.

3.3. Intervention

Students' social-emotional health was measured in both groups by the Indigo Assessment. Table 2 presents the high-level differences between the comparison and intervention groups.

Students and teachers had access to the Indigo Assessment Insights Report. This detailed, student report helped make meaning of students' behaviors, motivators, social-emotional perceptions, and career-ready skills and act accordingly. To build student competence, both comparison and intervention group teachers were provided consultation on how to help students apply insights from the Indigo Assessment. The comparison group received consultation from Indigo staff, while the intervention group received consultation from GSN implementation specialists trained by Indigo staff. Teachers in the intervention group facilitated the GSN Advocacy Program modules, a social-emotional program intended to boost individual students' social-emotional skills as well as the overall school climate. Teachers in the intervention group received initial in-person training along with ongoing coaching provided by GSN implementation specialists.

3.4. Measures

The Indigo Assessment Program (IAP) for social-emotional growth was utilized to measure social-emotional competency. The IAP measures how students perceive their external and internal worlds at one moment in time. The IAP is a multi-dimensional, comprehensive tool to help students and educators gain insights

Table 2
Comparison vs. intervention group components

Component	Comparison	Intervention
Assessment	1) Indigo Assessment	1) Indigo Assessment
Student Competence	1) Consultation with teacher to apply insights from the Indigo Assessment Report	1) Consultation with teacher to apply insights from the Indigo Assessment Report 2) GSN Advocacy modules delivered by teachers via live instruction tailored to the school context and individual student needs.
Teacher Professional Development	1) Training to help students apply insights from the Indigo Assessment Report	1) Training to help students apply insights from the Indigo Assessment Report 2) Coaching 3) Initial in-person training from GSN staff with ongoing support

through awareness of students' behaviors, motivators, skills, and social-emotional growth. The assessment, a 45-minute survey, is based on the Target Training International Success Insights assessment (TriMetrix HD Talent Questionnaire) designed to identify a person's talents [37].

The research team utilized extended Hartman scores from the Hartman Values Profile portion of the Indigo Assessment, which measures social-emotional competence. Utilizing 58 of the extended Hartman elements, the researchers created a construct of student's social-emotional competence (TTL SEC) including nine multi-item subscales of social-emotional competence matching the constructs of students' social competence, individual competence, and the five CASEL competencies. Students' social competence represented their attitudes and aptitude to relate to others in the school and included the sub-constructs of school climate (SCH CLM) and leadership (LDR). Students' individual competence represented their dispositions and included the sub-constructs of school connectedness (SCH CON) and emotional distress (EM DIS). Finally, the CASEL competencies included constructs of self-awareness (SLF-AW), self-management (SLF-MAN), social awareness (SOC-AW), relationship skills (REL SKL), and responsible decision-making (RDM). Table 3 provides the pre- and post-assessment alpha coefficients and the included Hartman element for each construct.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was utilized to examine the reliability of the scale and its factors for the comparison and intervention groups at the pre- and post-assessment time points. Overall, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole scale consisted of 58 HVP elements and was found to be highly reliable for the comparison group ($\alpha = 0.982$) and for the intervention group ($\alpha = 0.990$) at pre-assessment, and again for the comparison group ($\alpha = 0.989$) and for the intervention group ($\alpha = 0.986$) at the post-assessment.

Data represented an average of seven months between the pre- and post-assessment for all student groups. Pre-assessment data for the analysis were collected for the intervention group in the fall of 2018 and post-assessment data in the late spring of 2019. To develop a comparison group, data were randomly pulled from students in four cohort years (cohort 1: fall 2016-spring 2017; cohort 2: fall 2017-spring 2018; cohort 3: fall 2018-spring 2019; cohort 4: winter 2019-winter 2020). All assessments were completed by January 18, 2020. Given the naturally occurring variance in the number of days between assessments, we used the date of the test to calculate the time between the pre-test and post-test for each participant. There was no significant difference in the time between tests based on group membership, $t(238) = 7.369$, notwithstanding that the intervention group ($M = 246.35$, $SD = 60.52$) time was greater than the comparison group ($M = 314.25$, $SD = 81.44$).

3.5. Missing data

Missing data were handled utilizing listwise deletion in the analysis for the constructs of social-emotional competence. To be included in the analysis, each participant had at least 90% of the total assessment completed and all pre-assessment and post-assessment data for the HPV portion. When demographic data, including gender or race and ethnicity, were missing, it was counted as unknown, and pairwise deletion was employed. Missing demographic data occurred with fewer than two percent of cases in any category.

Table 3
Indigo Assessment pre-assessment and post-assessment internal reliability coefficients by construct

		TTL SEC	SCH CLM	LDR	SCH CON	EM DIS
Items		58	5	5	6	5
C	Pre	α = 0.98	α = 0.96	α = 0.90	α = 0.86	α = 0.89
	Post	α = 0.98	α = 0.97	α = 0.94	α = 0.91	α = 0.91
I	Pre	α = 0.99	α = 0.97	α = 0.94	α = 0.93	α = 0.93
	Post	α = 0.99	α = 0.97	α = 0.95	α = 0.94	α = 0.93
		SLF-AW	SLF-MAN	SOC-AW	REL SKL	RDM
Items		6	7	4	4	8
C	Pre	α = 0.92	α = 0.91	α = 0.89	α = 0.91	α = 0.95
	Post	α = 0.91	α = 0.93	α = 0.93	α = 0.95	α = 0.96
I	Pre	α = 0.94	α = 0.94	α = 0.92	α = 0.95	α = 0.97
	Post	α = 0.93	α = 0.93	α = 0.94	α = 0.96	α = 0.98

Note: C = Comparison, I = Intervention, TTL SEC = Total student social-emotional competence, SCH CLM = School climate, LDR = Leadership, SCH CON = School connectedness, EM DIS = Emotional distress, SLF-AW = Self-awareness, SLF-MAN = Self-management, SOC-AW = Social awareness, REL SKL = Relationship skills, and RDM = Responsible decision-making.

3.6. Data analysis

To test the hypothesis, we used several statistical techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of the GSN Advocacy Program in enhancing social-emotional competencies among secondary students. We employed a combination of *t*-tests and ANCOVAs to assess baseline equivalence, examine differences based on student's characteristics, and analyze pre- and post-intervention scores. The details of the methods and the findings are provided in the next section.

4. Findings

4.1. Test of baseline equality of means

To test for baseline equivalence between the comparison and intervention groups, independent samples *t*-tests were run on the variables that represented the skills of School Climate (SCH CLM), Leadership (LDR), School Connectedness (SCH CON), Emotional Distress (EM DIS), Self-Awareness (SLF-AW), Self-Management (SLF-MAN), Social Awareness (SOC-AW), Relationship Skills (REL SKL), and Responsible Decision-Making (RDM). These analyses revealed there was a significant baseline difference between the two groups on all the constructs except for school climate; therefore, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that the actual difference between these groups means was zero. The results of the independent samples *t*-test are displayed in Table 4. To control for baseline differences in intervention and comparison groups, the analysis utilized an ANCOVA to adjust for initial differences between the comparison and intervention groups.

Table 4
Sample descriptive using *t*-test for equality of means

Variable	Comparison *M* (*SD*)	Intervention *M* (*SD*)	*t*-value	*p*
TTL SEC	6.17 (1.42)	5.31 (1.89)	3.96	0.000
SCH CLM	6.67 (1.97)	6.16 (1.95)	1.98	0.050
LDR	6.43 (1.53)	5.63 (1.91)	3.57	0.000
SCH CON	6.34 (1.33)	5.45 (1.98)	4.03	0.000
EM DIS	5.42 (1.83)	4.5 (2.21)	3.50	0.000
SLF-AW	5.46 (1.76)	4.59 (2.23)	3.33	0.000
SLF-MAN	5.92 (1.49)	5.06 (1.97)	3.80	0.000
SOC-AW	6.75 (1.91)	5.95 (2.05)	3.12	0.000
REL SKL	6.69 (1.53)	5.87 (1.96)	3.62	0.000
RDM	5.47 (1.60)	4.52 (2.13)	3.89	0.000

Note: $^{*}p < 0.05$.

4.2. Differences due to student's characteristics

To determine whether there were differences in the post-intervention due to the demographic characteristics of participants, data were analyzed by ANCOVA, using the pre-assessment results as a covariate. The assumptions of normality and the homogeneity of regression coefficients were met. The assumption of variance homogeneity was violated, but this violation was not overly concerning given the roughly equal sample sizes between the intervention and comparison groups [38]. The analysis showed that there was no statistically significant interaction between gender and total social-emotional competence [$F(1, 237) = 0.472$, $p = 0.49$, $\eta 2$ partial $= 0.00$]; between racialization and total social-emotional competence [$F(2, 233) = 1.523$, $p = 0.17$, $\eta 2$ partial $= 0.04$]; urbanization and total social-emotional competence [$F(6, 230) = 1.49$, $p = 0.18$, $\eta 2$ partial $= 0.04$]; or district Title I eligibility (a proxy for social-economic differences) and total social-emotional competence [$F(61 \quad 235) = 0.48$, $p = 0.49$, $\eta 2$ partial $= 0.00$].

4.3. Analysis of pre- and post-assessment scores

A between-groups ANCOVA was carried out to evaluate differences between post-assessment scores while controlling for the differences in pre-assessment scores. The GSN Advocacy Program intervention was considered the independent variable, and the results corresponding to the dependent variables of the pre-assessment were considered covariables. Thus, the differences between groups were estimated with the differences in pre-assessment results removed. The summary of the results of the ANCOVAs for total social-emotional competence, along with each of the subscales, is reported in Table 5.

Table 5
ANCOVA results for social-emotional competencies

Source	SS	MS	*F*	*p*	η^2	r^2
TTL SEC	234.16	234.16	151.26	0.000	0.39	0.39
SCH CLM	181.67	181.67	92.06	0.000	0.28	0.29
LDR	207.73	207.73	126.27	0.000	0.35	0.35
SCH CON	240.95	120.48	66.22	0.000	0.35	0.36
EM DIS	339.58	339.58	145.85	0.000	0.38	0.39
SLF-AW	321.93	321.93	144.35	0.000	0.38	0.39
SLF-MAN	247.94	247.94	142.37	0.000	0.38	0.38
SOC-AW	255.83	255.83	114.46	0.000	0.33	0.33
REL SKL	222.71	222.71	122.41	0.000	0.34	0.34
RDM	297.87	297.87	145.35	0.000	0.38	0.39

Note: $p < 0.05$, dependent variable post-assessment

The ANCOVA analysis showed statistically significant differences for all measures of school climate and student competence, as well as the aggregate score of social-emotional competence. The intervention group showed higher social-emotional competence in total and for each of the subscale scores compared to the comparison group. Based on this, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results demonstrated a statistically significant contribution of the GSN Advocacy Program (independent variable) in promoting social-emotional competence (dependent variable).

5. Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the effect of participating in the GSN Advocacy Program during an academic school year for secondary students. Using a quasi-experimental design, SEL skills and school climate indicators were measured at the beginning and end of the intervention using the Indigo Assessment.

According to the Indigo post-assessment scores, there was an increase in the total social-emotional competence of students in the intervention group that was significantly greater than students in the group that did not receive the intervention, suggesting that students' social-emotional competence improved as represented by the constructs of school climate, leadership, feelings of connectedness to school, and ability to cope with emotional distress. Additionally, students' social-emotional competencies improved in each of the five CASEL constructs of SEL. Therefore, this study contributes to the evidence base for the GSN Advocacy

Program as a promising practice for improving student learning environments and increasing social-emotional competence. These findings corroborate previous research that social skill building has the ability to improve students' social-emotional competence [39].

These findings suggest that the multi-component approach of the GSN Advocacy Program, including structural support built into the school day and specific SEL lessons, assisted students in developing social-emotional skills. Furthermore, students demonstrated an increased ability to interact with others, which teachers and professional staff modeled through the advocacy program structure. This finding aligns with previous research on the importance of adult relationships in developing student social-emotional competence [25].

Students in the intervention group demonstrated substantial growth in school connectedness as defined by sub-constructs of higher accountability for others, willingness to develop others, following directions, respecting policies, and having a greater sense of belonging. Previous research has indicated that students with a higher sense of school connectedness demonstrate less risky behaviors such as smoking, drug use, and binge drinking [40, 41]. Likewise, school connectedness has been found to be a protective factor in reducing reports of suicidal thoughts and behaviors [40, 42]. As such, a benefit of participating in the GSN Advocacy Program includes increasing students' overall sense of school connectedness which can serve as a protective factor.

We found that students increased their ability to handle emotional distress, which is noteworthy considering the stress often resulting from academic press. Academic stressors are known to be connected to a wide variety of academic and non-academic outcomes, including mental health [43], sleep [44], and physical health [45]. Although some research has focused on reducing stressors related to school, our findings suggest that the GSN Advocacy Program's multi-component instructional model enhanced students' ability to respond to these stressors. Additionally, when students have higher levels of social-emotional competence, they also exhibit lower levels of emotional distress and high level of academic efficacy beliefs [46].

Altogether, these findings are consistent with previous research about universal school-based SEL programs, which have shown significant effects of participation on increased student social-emotional competence [39]. Both the comparison and intervention groups had access to the Indigo Assessment Insight report to understand individual strengths and weaknesses, a strategy that has been shown to significantly increase students' social-emotional skills. These results suggest that students in the intervention group benefited from an environment where systemic structures were implemented along with direct skill instruction which are key components of the GSN Advocacy Program. Based on the SEL theory of change [47], it was the multi-component approach (student-centered SEL competency instruction and environmental focus), that engendered intervention group students' acquisition of social-emotional skills. Additionally, our study indicates that students had improved attitudes about self, others, and the school environment.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Recommendations for practice

This study's findings suggest that using a multi-component approach to programming supports positive youth development within the school setting. To gain the benefits of social-emotional programming, we offer several implications for practice: (1) data-based decision-making, (2) implementation of a continuum of evidence-based practices, and (3) a transdisciplinary team approach.

The foundation of promoting equitable outcomes is to systematically collect data to inform decisions. The GSN Advocacy Program components and professional development were informed by using the Indigo Assessment as a universal screener that illuminated students' internal and external needs [48]. We recommend that school teams integrate data collection and evaluation into implementing a SEL program as part of a comprehensive approach.

Implementing a continuum of evidence-based practices serves to create and sustain equitable outcomes for all students. Prioritizing primary prevention practices, such as the GSN Advocacy Program, helps to establish positive, predictable, and safe environments by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors. Given students' diverse and intersecting identities, it is implausible to think that one program will serve the needs of all students. Therefore, we recommend that students have access to secondary and tertiary supports as needed to support positive youth development [49, 50]. Additionally, there is a more urgent need to implement preventative and supportive mental health interventions as the isolation, social distancing, and remote learning that students experienced during COVID-19 adversely effected the mental health of children and college students [51].

Finally, sustainable implementation is predicated on a transdisciplinary team approach and cannot be left to the purview of mental health staff, such as social workers and school counselors. Developing educator capacity (e.g., administrators, classroom teachers, school nurses, community health workers, school liaisons, teacher assistants, behavior coaches) to support schools' Tier 1 (promotion /prevention) and Tier 2 (early intervention) programming can contribute to more healthy development and better educational outcomes for all youth. Therefore, partnering with organizations such as GSN, which can provide training and coaching, can strengthen educators' social-emotional and mental health competence [52, 53]. Consequently, when educators have a greater capacity to support at the Tier 1 level, social workers and other mental health professionals can focus on targeted (secondary) and intensive (tertiary) interventions to increase the total mental health support provided within schools. Finally, school social workers and other mental health professionals can use school and community data to inform and align systems of support [54] and act as liaisons between school teams and community mental health organizations to enhance support for mental health [55]. Schools are encouraged to leverage the expertise of various team members to maximize the potential benefits of multi-component SEL programs.

6.2. Recommendations for future research

Based on the current study, several lines of future research are warranted to further the knowledge foundation around the GSN Advocacy model for SEL, including long-term impact, teacher training and support, and cultural adaptation. First, understanding the program's long-term impact beyond immediate school years will allow researchers to know if the skills gained depend upon the school's contextual support using the advocacy program or if the skills are transferable to other life experiences. This type of information can help SEL program developers place greater emphasis on aspects that provide a more significant benefit.

Second, the approaches to teacher training and support and how they impact student capacity for SEL are an area for consideration [52]. The current model includes both initial training and ongoing support; however, with teachers having less time for any type of training, discovering how to reduce the soft cost of training without

minimizing the impact on student capacity is a viable research focus. This includes identifying best practices for teacher professional development, coaching, and ongoing support to enhance educators' capacity to cultivate a positive classroom climate, model SEL skills, and effectively address students' social-emotional needs.

Finally, exploring how cultural adaptation impacts the results is essential to the applicability of the program model. Most of the students in this study lived in rural and suburban areas; therefore, determining the aspects of the program that may need to be culturally altered to meet the needs of urban students is necessary to ensure its effectiveness across diverse populations. This includes examining cultural values, norms, and practices that may influence social-emotional development and augmenting the curriculum in a manner that resonates with the cultural backgrounds of students and their communities.

7. Limitations

This study has significant and promising results, but as with any research, limitations impact the interpretation of the results. The comparison group demonstrated some differences from the intervention group. The data for the comparison group were collected from four cohorts over four academic school years and was geographically more suburban and less likely to be eligible for Title I Funds, whereas the intervention group was more geographically rural and socio-economically disadvantaged. However, the results of independent samples *t*-tests indicated that there was not a significant difference based on either student's characteristic; therefore, it is not likely that these demographic indicators impacted students' social-emotional competence.

The participant sample did not adequately represent proportionate numbers of African American students compared to the United States national average in the comparison or intervention groups. As such, its applicability to this population is largely unknown. Given that there was not a significant interaction due to racialization and ethnicity, it is a promising sign of the racially inclusive nature of the GSN program. Still, more research is needed to better establish an evidence base amongst diverse populations.

Despite these limitations, this quasi-experimental study used a rigorous design and valid and reliable measures that enhanced the likelihood of attributing effects to the specified intervention. Nonetheless, to increase confidence in the effectiveness of the GSN Advocacy Program, this study should be replicated with a larger, more diverse sample.

8. Conclusion

In keeping with the positive youth development model of change [56] and the SVSC [35], a holistic approach to SEL promotes short and long-term developmental results, including positive behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes. As a result of this study, it can be concluded that the GSN Advocacy Program improved students' social-emotional competence. This study demonstrates that the comprehensive multi-component program was beneficial, as evidenced by student self-reported competence. Broader implementation of the GSN Advocacy Program approach, such as described here, is encouraged based on this evidence of efficacy.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Thomas Lee Morgan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Amie Beth Cieminski:** Conceptualization, Validation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Suzanne Marmo:** Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Keisha Kayon Morgan:** Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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