SEL PQA

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT

an overview of items & scales

the **forum**
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

DAVID P. WEIKART
CENTER FOR YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY

What is the SEL PQA?

The SEL PQA is an efficient and effective, research-validated observational tool for assessing the adult youth leader practices that support social and emotional learning.
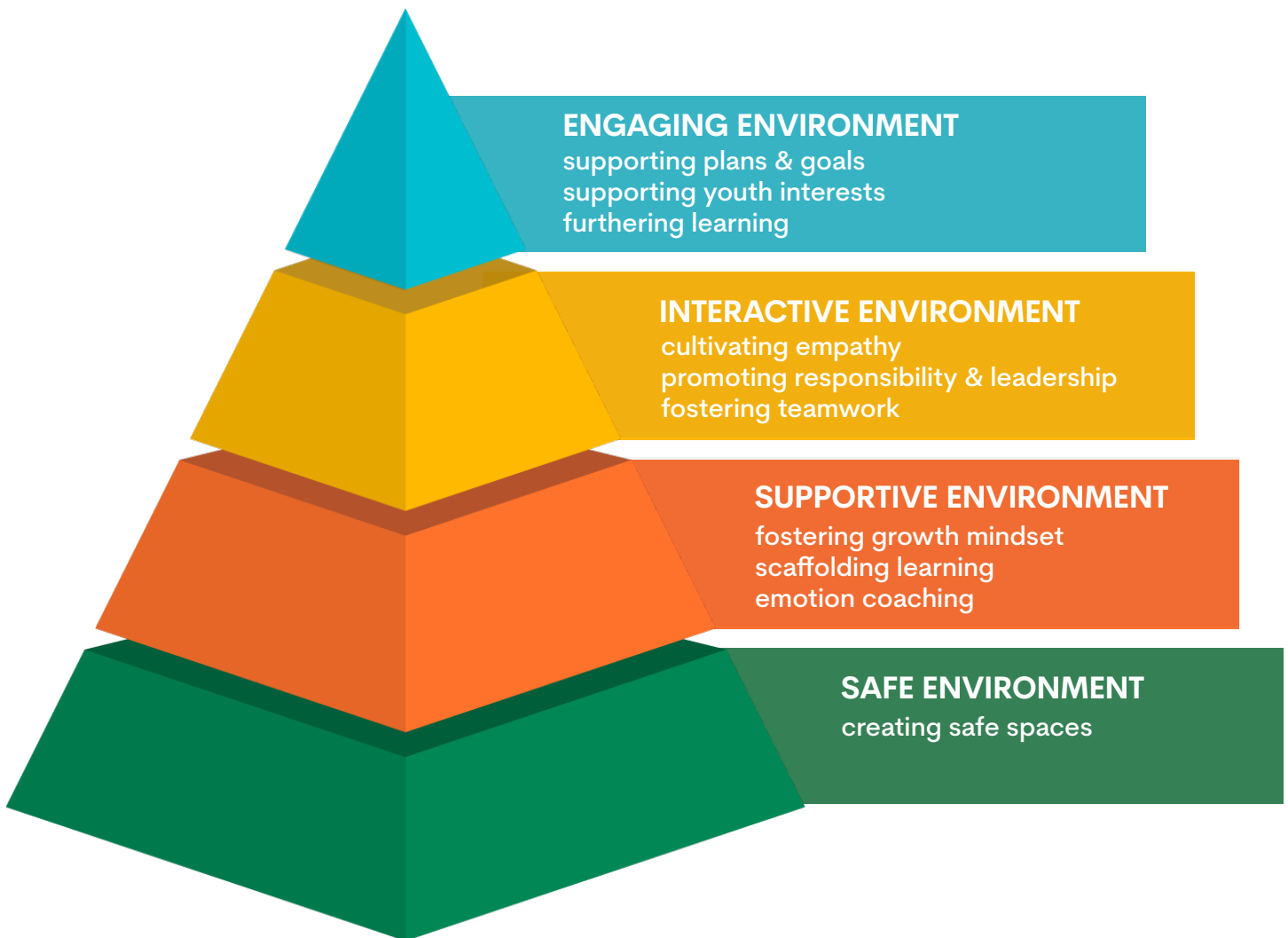
Who is it for?

It is intended to be used for programs serving young people in grades K–12. The instrument builds on the research-validated Youth PQA and over ten years of observational measure development. It also incorporates insights from the SEL Challenge, an initiative dedicated to developing exemplary practices to support social and emotional learning in young people.

How does it work?

The SEL PQA comprises a set of items representing the conceptual nuances of social and emotional learning across 10 theoretically derived scales. Items and scales have been named to indicate *staff practices* rather than youth experiences or skills. Scales are organized into the original YPQA domains, which have also been renamed to clairfy the focus on *characteristics of quality learning environments* rather than youth behaviors. See Figure 1 for the revised pyramid of program quality.
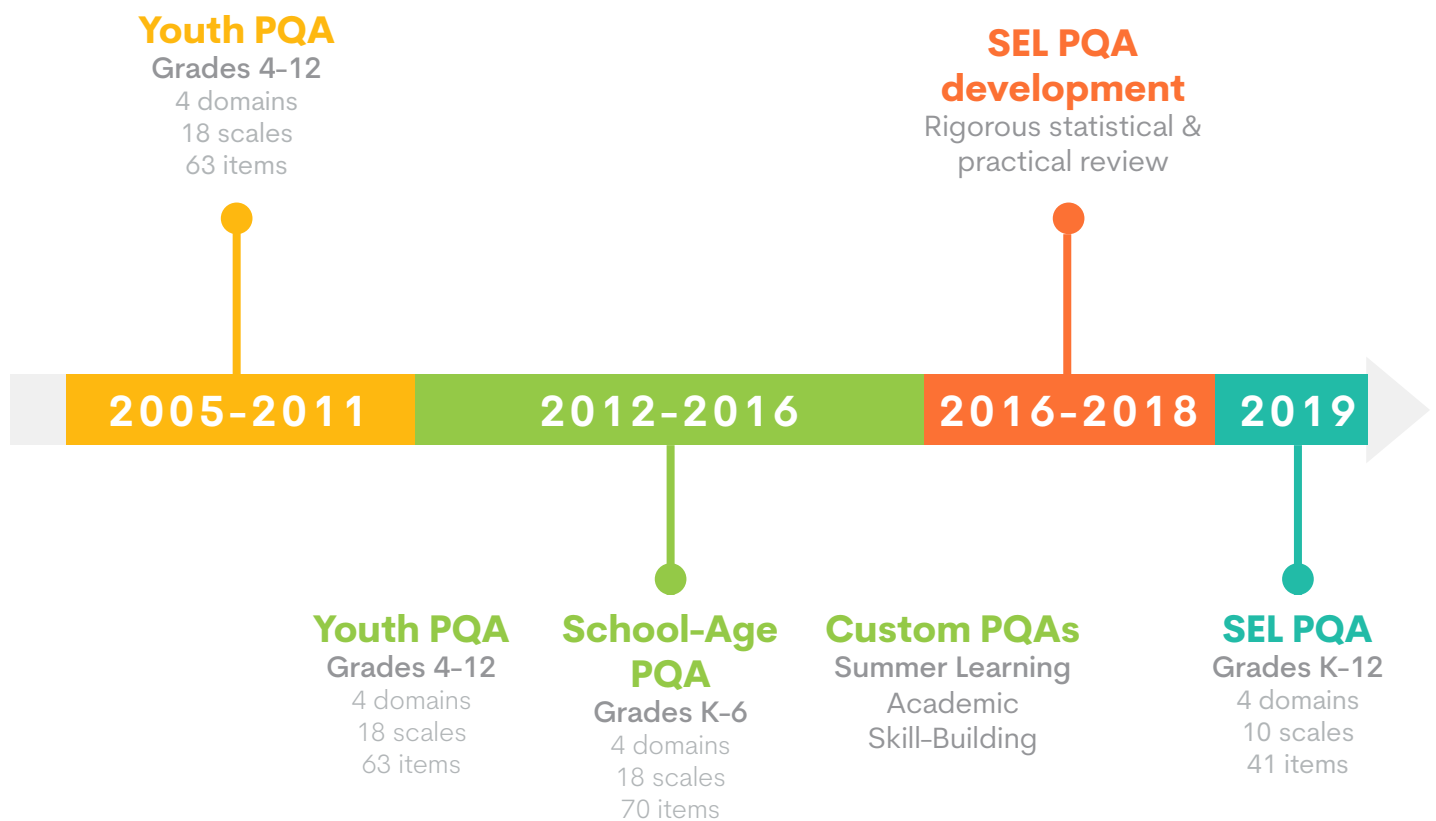
Figure 1. SEL PQA Pyramid of Program Quality

ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT
supporting plans & goals
supporting youth interests
furthering learning

INTERACTIVE ENVIRONMENT
cultivating empathy
promoting responsibility & leadership
fostering teamwork

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT
fostering growth mindset
scaffolding learning
emotion coaching

SAFE ENVIRONMENT
creating safe spaces

SEL PQA DEVELOPMENT

After fielding a 70-item beta version of the SEL PQA in the 2017 and 2018 program years, we learned that the full set of items resulted in a tool that was overly long and too time-consuming to score. We also found that not all of the items performed well in our statistical analyses; they were not adding value to our measure of SEL program quality. We also conducted an extensive conceptual review and iterative refinement process with a team of researchers and youth development professionals (Figure 2). The SEL PQA was first released in October 2019.

Figure 2. SEL PQA Development Timeline

Youth PQA
Grades 4–12
4 domains
18 scales
63 items

SEL PQA development
Rigorous statistical & practical review

2005–2011   **2012–2016**   **2016–2018**   **2019**

Youth PQA
Grades 4–12
4 domains
18 scales
63 items

School-Age PQA
Grades K–6
4 domains
18 scales
70 items

Custom PQAs
Summer Learning
Academic
Skill-Building

SEL PQA
Grades K–12
4 domains
10 scales
41 items

The SEL PQA built on prior program quality assessments by drawing items from the Youth PQA, the School-Age PQA, and the Summer Learning PQA. Table 1 (next page) shows the number of items and percentage of new items in each of the 10 scales in the SEL PQA. With the exception of two scales, all remaining include some or all of the items that appeared in previous versions.

Two scales, Emotion Coaching and Cultivating Empathy, contain entirely new items that were developed for the SEL PQA, highlighting its explicit focus on social and emotional learning.

Table 1. Number of Items & Percent of New Items by SEL PQA Scale

domains	scales	# items	% new
SAFE ENVIRONMENT	Creating safe spaces	6 items	17%
SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT	Emotion coaching Scaffolding learning Fostering growth mindset	4 items 4 items 3 items	100% 0% 0%
INTERACTIVE ENVIRONMENT	Fostering teamwork Promoting responsibility & leadership Cultivating empathy	3 items 5 items 4 items	0% 20% 100%
ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT	Furthering learning Supporting youth interests Supporting plans & goals	5 items 3 items 4 items	20% 0% 50%

Note: The current version of SEL PQA contains 41 items that demonstrate relatively normal distributions. Every scale shows good or excellent fit in confirmatory factor analysis.

What does it mean that the SEL PQA is a higher bar?

The findings from our field test of the beta version of the SEL PQA suggest that scores tend to be lower overall for the SEL PQA than scores for the YPQA. One reason is that the SEL PQA does not include several of the Safe Environment scales that appear on the YPQA that assess program features related to the physical environment. We often see programs with very high scores on Healthy Environment, Emergency Preparedness, Accommodating Environment, and Nourishment, none of which are included in the SEL PQA. Taken together, these four scales account for 17 items that are typically high-scoring on the YPQA but not assessed on the SEL PQA.

Second, some items were adapted from the YPQA for inclusion in the SEL PQA to *intentionally* raise the bar related to social and emotional aspects of the learning environment. For example, the first item on the YPQA, focusing on positive emotional climate, is also the first item on the SEL PQA, but the practices that are associated with a score of 5 on the YPQA now represent a score of 3 on the SEL PQA. Instead of the highest quality practice (score of 5) on the YPQA being "the emotional climate of the session is predominantly positive; any playful negative behaviors are mediated by staff or youth," Level 5 on the SEL PQA is "the emotional climate is always positive; young people and staff are observed offering encouragement, affirmations, or support to others."

The gold standard for creating safe spaces that are intentional about the social and emotional growth of young people is ensuring that the emotional climate is consistently positive. We observed this standard in action in the exemplary programs profiled in *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices in Social and Emotional Learning*.

SEL PQA
ITEM, SCALE, & DOMAIN OVERVIEW
VALIDITY & RELIABILITY
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

The remainder of this document contains overviews of each scale along with domain–, scale–, and item–level descriptive statistics from our validation study. Footnotes are used in each section to describe modifications to items from previous versions of the SEL PQA.

Summary of Validation Sample

SEL PQA data was collected across the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 program years. Over that time, SEL PQA data was collected in 22 networks representing 412 program sites and 773 program assessments. Each of these assessments was conducted by a reliable external assessor. Only complete external assessments using the SEL PQA were used for these analyses. In keeping with typical practice for analyses using the PQA, if sites submitted multiple external assessments within a single program year, the ratings were aggregated to produce one average set of scores. The final analyses reported here were conducted using the aggregate data file that included 512 SEL PQA cases.

SEL PQA Domain Analyses

Figure 3 displays the average scores for the four domains of the SEL PQA. Detailed analyses of the scales and items are summarized in the following section.

Figure 3. SEL PQA Mean Scores by Domain
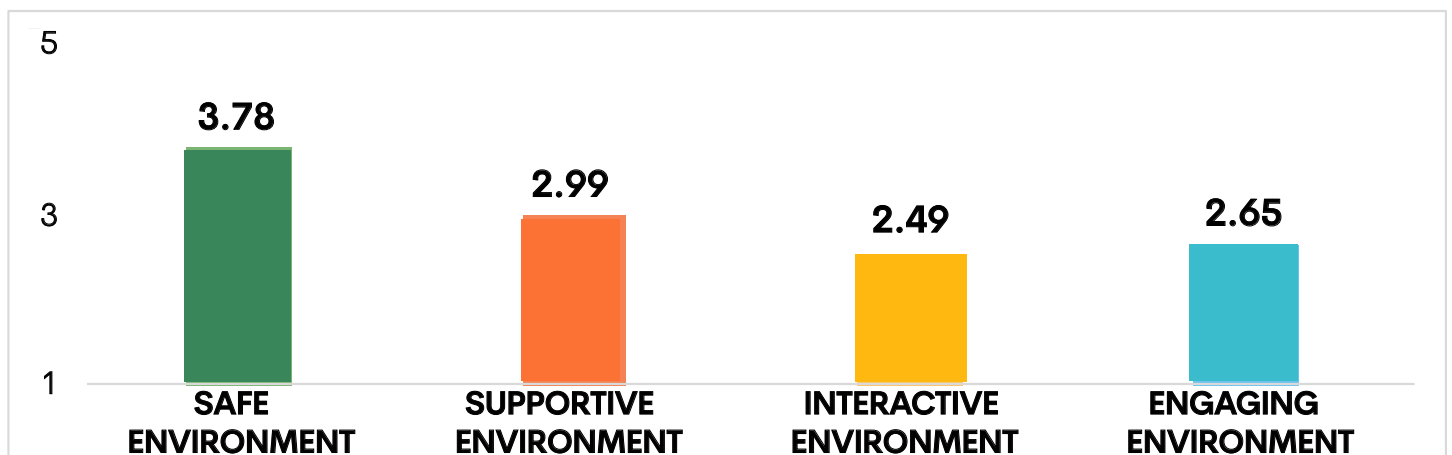
SEL PQA SCALE ANALYSES

Reliability and validity analyses were conducted to explore the statistical properties of the SEL PQA in order to demonstrate its success in capturing the constructs of interest. The following is a list of the reliability and validity analyses completed. These analyses were primarily conducted at the scale-level and are incorporated into the scale sections below.

Reliability Analysis

Internal Consistency
Internal consistency analyses describe how well the items in a scale measure the same underlying construct. Overall, these analyses demonstrated that most of the SEL PQA scales had acceptable levels of reliability (Cronbach's alpha > .60) in our validation sample and represented a single factor. When acceptable levels of internal consistency were not met (e.g., Fostering Growth Mindset and Promoting Responsibility & Leadership scales), scales were revised as noted in the sections below to improve reliability metrics.

Validity Analyses

Score Distributions
One way to examine validity is to explore the normality of scale distributions to assess whether the observed scores follow a normal distribution pattern. These analyses included creating histograms for SEL PQA scale scores and computing the skewness (a measure of the symmetry of the scale distribution) and kurtosis (a measure of the steepness of the scale distribution) statistics as presented in the sections that follow. A reasonable benchmark for the normality of scale distributions is if skewness and kurtosis levels are less than +/-1.

Predictive Validity
As part of the validation process, we examined the relationship between staff instructional practices as measured by the SEL PQA and changes in youth SEL skill growth as measured by the Staff Rating of Youth Behavior (SRYB). SEL PQA scores were gathered in the fall of program year 2017–2018 along with staff reports of students' SEL skills using the SRYB, which was gathered twice over a span of 16 weeks. To estimate the relationships between SEL PQA scale sores and youth SEL skill growth, a multi-level (students nested within programs) structural equation model was estimated exploring the predictive relationships between program-level SEL PQA scale scores on student skill growth (SRYB) over 16 weeks. Despite hypothesized patterns, standardized coefficients suggested that there were no relationships between youth behavior growth and staff instructional practices (SEL PQA scores) in this sample. This was most likely due to minimal SEL skill growth over this time-period, resulting in less variance to be explained by the SEL PQA.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Creating Safe Spaces: Staff provide a warm & welcoming atmosphere.

This scale is made up of six items (refer to Table 2). We found that these 6 items represent a single construct, best represented as a single scale for creating safe spaces rather than multiple subscales (as confirmed by factor analysis). Cronbach's alpha was .76 for the items in the scale, indicating good internal consistency and reliability. Figure 4 displays the histogram for the Creating Safe Spaces scale scores; the skewness (–0.57) and kurtosis (0.32) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a normal distribution of scores.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for "Creating Safe Spaces" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Foster positive emotional climate	SEL.es.1	512	1	5	3.74	1.04
Convey warmth and respect[1]	SEL.css.1	512	2	5	4.12	0.75
Provide support for safe space	SEL.es.3	512	1	5	3.63	1.05
Demonstrate positive group management style[2]	SEL.css.2	510	1	5	4.32	0.99
Demonstrate mutual accountability	SEL.ai.3	417	1	5	3.25	1.13
Show active inclusion	SEL.es.2	512	1	5	3.42	0.80
Scale: Creating Safe Spaces	scale	512	1.5	5.0	3.78	0.65

[1]Two previous items related to conveying warmth and respect via words and tone and via body language combined to form a single item. Descriptive information for this item represents the average of the original two items.
[2]Item revised to 'group management' rather than 'behavior management' to emphasize importance of proactive or positive approaches.

Figure 4. Frequency Histogram for "Creating Safe Spaces" Scores
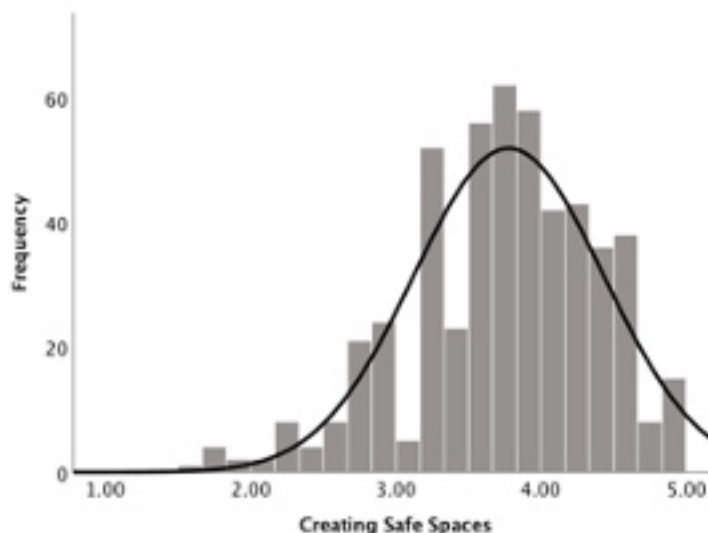
SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT
Emotion Coaching: Staff prompt young people to be aware of & constructively handle their emotions.

This scale is made up of four items (refer to Table 3), all of which are new for the SEL PQA. Cronbach's alpha was .83, indicating very good internal consistency and reliability; and factor analysis showed that all four items represent a single factor. Figure 5 displays the histogram for the Emotion Coaching scale scores; the skewness (0.85) and kurtosis (0.07) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a relatively normal distribution of scores. Given that these items are completely new, It is not surprising that scores in this scale tended to be a bit lower on average.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for "Emotion Coaching" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Acknowledge emotions	SEL.EmCo.1	512	1	5	2.41	1.22
Support young people to name emotions	SEL.EmCo.2	512	1	5	2.22	1.38
Discuss constructive handling	SEL.EmCo.3	512	1	5	1.91	1.13
Discuss emotion causes	SEL.EmCo.4	508	1	5	1.96	1.29
Scale: Emotion Coaching	scale	512	1	5	2.13	1.02

**Figure 5.** Frequency Histogram for "Emotion Coaching" Scores
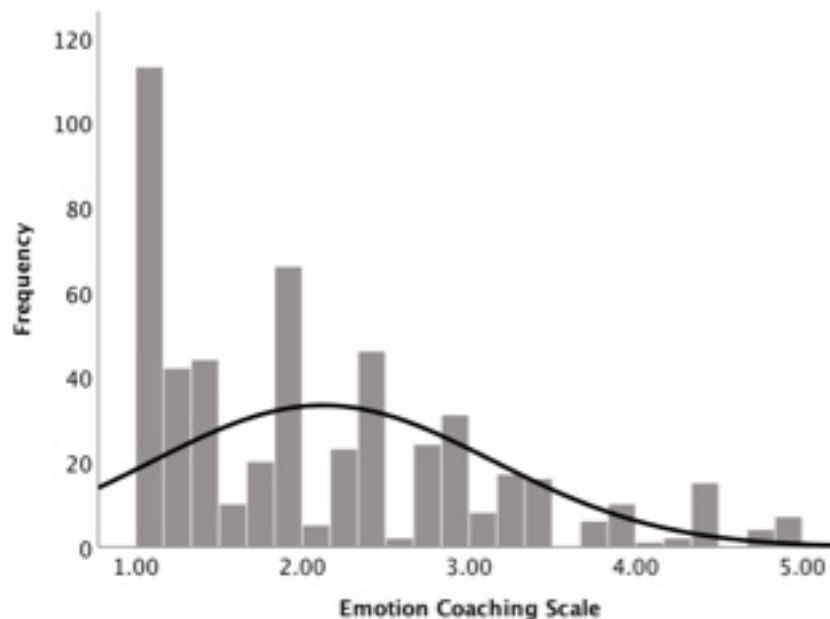
Scaffolding Learning: Staff scaffold tasks for optimal learning.

This scale is made up of four items (refer to Table 4). It was named "scaffolding learning" to represent its focus on staff practices to support skill–building. Cronbach's alpha was .66, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency and reliability; factor analysis showed that all four items represent a single factor. Figure 6 displays the histogram for the Scaffolding Learning scale scores; the skewness (–0.08) and kurtosis (–0.63) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a normal distribution of scores.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for "Scaffolding Learning" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Break task into steps	SB.4	511	1	5	3.14	1.42
Model skills	SB.3	512	1	5	3.21	1.45
Encourage young people to improve performance	SB.2	511	1	5	3.39	1.36
Monitor challenge level	A.Sc.3	512	1	5	3.56	1.07
Scale: Scaffolding Learning	scale	512	1	5	3.32	0.94

Figure 6. Frequency Histogram for "Scaffolding Learning" Scores
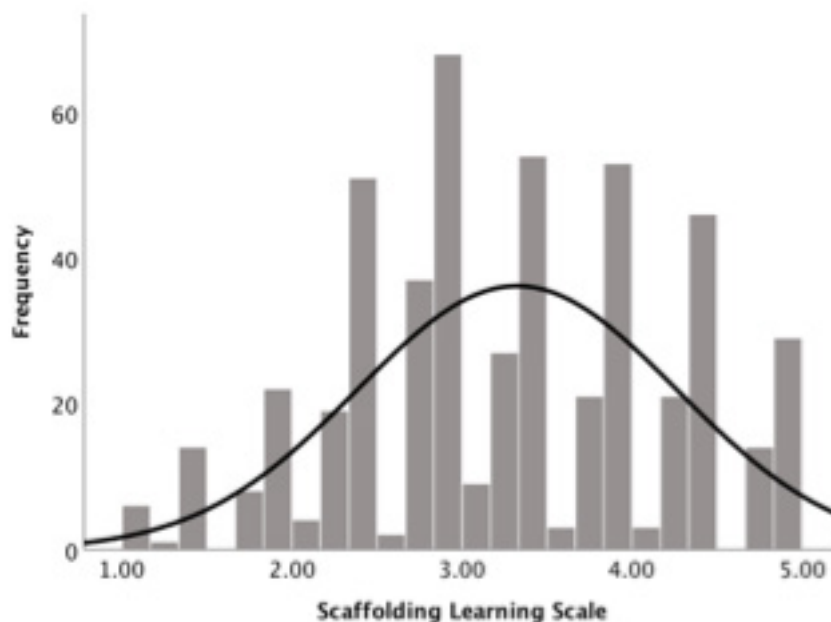
Fostering Growth Mindset: Staff supports youth to have a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset.

This scale is a made up of three items that point to fostering a growth mindset as an important component of social and emotional learning, with all three items representing a single factor (refer to Table 5). Cronbach's alpha was poor for this scale (.41), and there was a high degree of missing observations, particularly for the first item. The item was revised as described in the footnote below to address reliability concerns. Figure 7 displays the histogram for the Fostering Growth Mindset scale scores; the skewness (–0.26) and kurtosis (–0.05) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a normal distribution of scores.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for "Fostering Growth Mindset" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Guide young people to self–correct[3]	LS.1	395	1	5	3.34	1.42
Use non–evaluative language	Ec.1	512	1	5	3.76	0.99
Attribute achievement to effort	A.LS.3	509	1	5	3.36	1.01
Scale: Fostering Growth Mindset	**scale**	**512**	**1**	**5**	**3.52**	**0.77**

[3]Item was revised to remove 'when youth make errors or need to make improvements' in order to broaden the opportunity to observe this behavior and make it more likely this item will be scored.

Figure 7. Frequency Histogram for "Fostering Growth Mindset" Scores
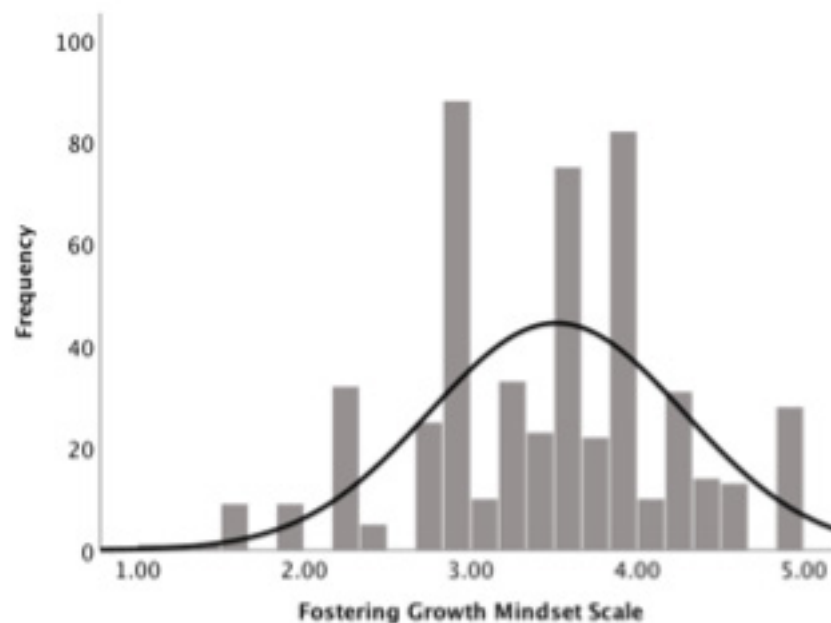
INTERACTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Fostering Teamwork: Staff provide opportunities to collaborate & work cooperatively with others.

This scale consists of three items, previously referred to as "collaboration," with all three items representing a single factor (refer to Table 6). Cronbach's alpha was very good (.77), indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability. Figure 8 displays the histogram for the Fostering Teamwork scale scores; the skewness (0.03) and kurtosis (–1.08) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a normal distribution of scores.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for "Fostering Teamwork" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Promote active collaboration	SEL.Co.1	512	1	5	3.13	1.43
Establish shared goals	Y.Co.3	512	1	5	2.83	1.60
Provide group-process opportunities	Y.Ld.1	511	1	5	2.98	1.47
Scale: Fostering Teamwork	scale	512	1	5	2.98	1.25

Figure 8. Frequency Histogram for "Fostering Teamwork" Scores
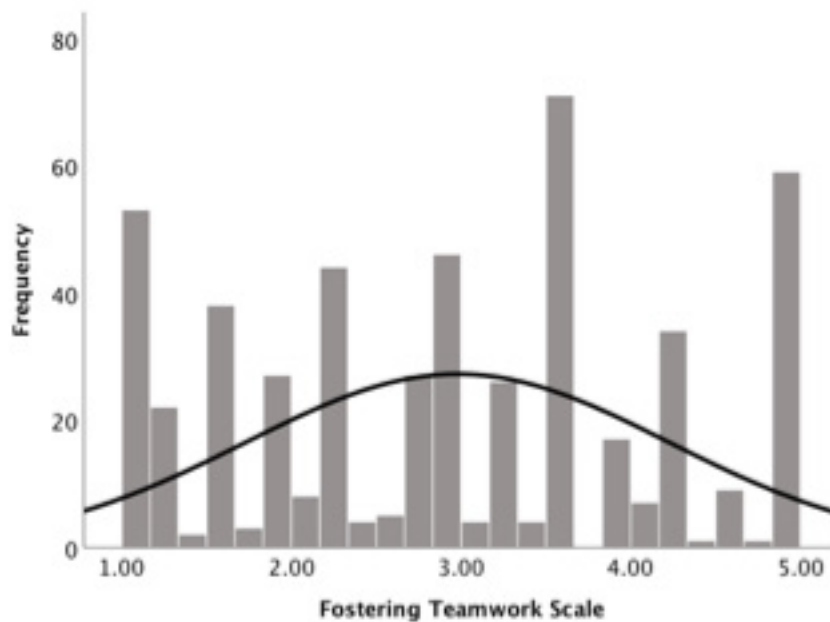
Promoting Responsibility & Leadership: Staff provide opportunities to grow in responsibility & leadership.

This scale currently consists of five items (refer to Table 7). With the exception of one new item, all other items were drawn from previously validated PQA instruments, though these items had not previously been organized into a single scale. Cronbach's alpha showed very poor internal consis–tency reliability (.32), and factor analysis showed that the scale represents two factors (responsibility and leadership) *separately*, rather than as a single construct. In response to this, we have revised the items as described below and added a new item to strengthen the scale. Because responsibility and leadership are critical constructs for social and emotional learning, we are continuing to monitor and improve this scale. Figure 9 displays the histogram for the Promoting Responsibility & Leadership scale scores; the skewness (–0.47) and kurtosis (0.16) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a normal distribution of scores.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for "Promoting Responsibility & Leadership" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Assign responsibility for tasks	SEL.Rs.1	509	1	5	3.55	1.34
Support carrying out responsibilities independently	SEL.Rs.2	449	1	5	4.43	0.95
Provide mentoring opportunities[4]	SEL.RL.1	512	1	5	1.48	0.82
Provide leadership opportunities	SEL.RL.2	511	1	5	1.69	0.92
Provide opportunities to present[5]	SEL.RL.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Scale: Promoting Responsibility & Leadership[6]	scale	512	1	5	2.63	0.76

[4]Provide mentoring opportunities (SEL.RL.1) and leadership opportunities (SEL.RL.2) revised so that a level 5 score requires more than one youth have an opportunity, rather than all youth. This change is likely to result in higher scores for these items in the future.
[5]This item was newly created for the October 2019 version of the SEL PQA. Item descriptives will be available after 2019–2020.
[6]Scale descriptives shown are based on available data and therefore exclude item SEL.RL.3.

Figure 9. Frequency Histogram for "Promoting Responsibility & Leadership" Scores
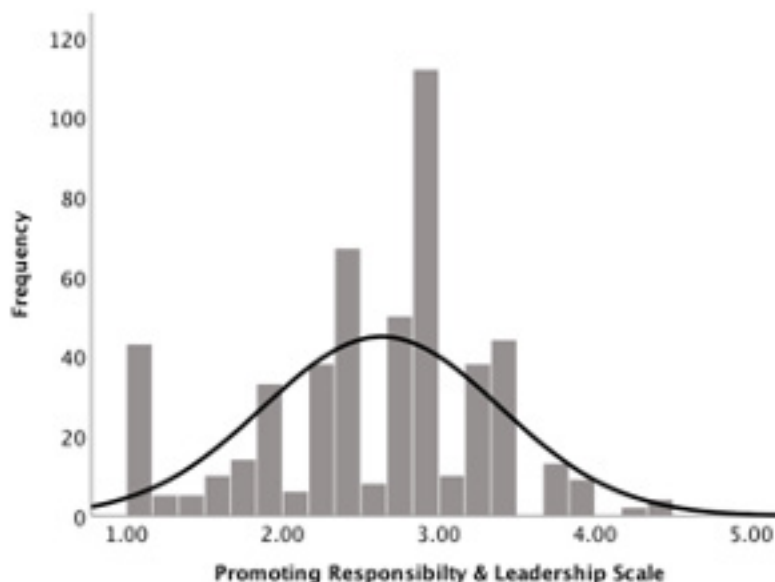
Cultivating Empathy: Staff support young people in practicing empathy skills.

This scale consists of four items which were created for the SEL PQA (refer to Table 8). Cronbach's alpha for this scale indicates acceptable internal consistency and reliability (0.61); factor analysis showed that all four items represent a single factor. Figure 10 displays the histogram for the Cultivating Empathy scale scores; the skewness (0.98) and kurtosis (0.35) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a relatively normal distribution of scores. Given that these items are completely new, it is not surprising that scores in this scale tended to be a bit lower on average.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics for "Cultivating Empathy" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Structure activity for sharing and listening	SEL. Emp.1	512	1	5	2.39	1.49
Encourage understanding of other's emotions	SEL. Emp.3	512	1	5	1.83	1.18
Structure activities for showing kindness	SEL. Emp.4	512	1	5	1.61	1.06
Support valuing of differences	SEL. Emp.5	512	1	5	1.62	1.06
Scale: Cultivating Empathy	scale	512	1	4.5	1.86	0.82

Figure 10. Frequency Histogram for "Cultivating Empathy" Scores
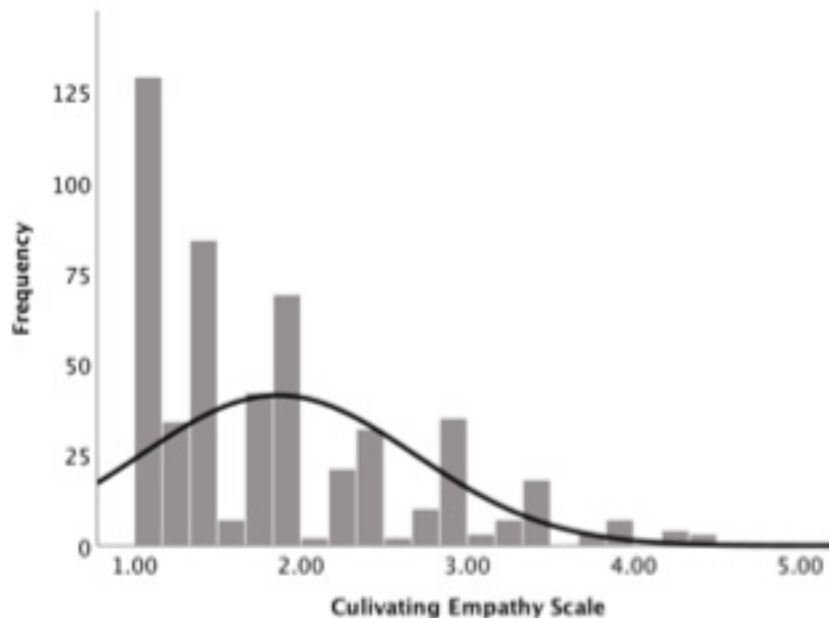
ENGAGING ENVIRONMENT

## Furthering Learning: Staff encourage young people to deepen their learning.

This scale is made up of five items representing practices that help youth reason and make connections in their learning (refer to Table 9). In some ways, this scale may help determine the difference between a purely recreational activity and one that promotes learning. Cronbach's alpha for this scale indicates good internal reliability and consistency (0.73); factor analysis shows that all five items represent a single factor. Figure 11 displays the histogram for the Furthering Learning scale scores; the skewness (0.40) and kurtosis (–0.37) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a normal distribution of scores.

Table 9. Descriptive Statistics for "Furthering Learning" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Support connecting to previous knowledge	SEL.PS.1	511	1	5	2.60	1.36
Link examples to principles	SEL.PS.2	512	1	5	1.86	1.19
Encourage extending knowledge	A.HT.3	512	1	5	2.59	1.38
Encourage logical reasoning[7]	SEL.FL.1	511	1	5	1.58	1.02
Guide discovery	A.Sc.4	512	1	5	3.33	1.37
Scale: Furthering Learning	scale	512	1	5	2.39	0.89

[7]This item was revised to have a more general focus on the use of logical reasoning, rather than on developing or evaluating arguments, strategies, or solutions.

**Figure 11.** Frequency Histogram for "Furthering Learning" Scores
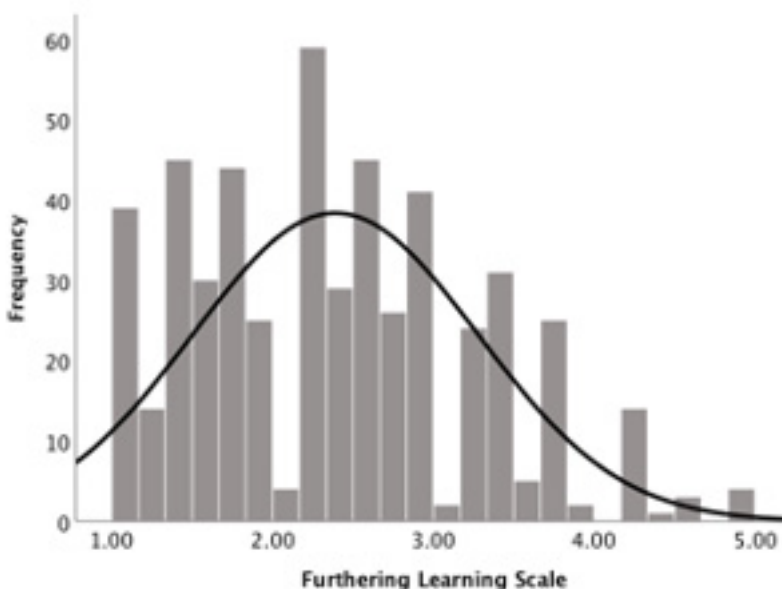
Supporting Youth Interests: Staff shape opportunities for young people to make choices based on their interests.

This scale is made up of three items (refer to Table 10). Cronbach's alpha indicates that internal consistency and reliability are good (0.77); factor analysis shows that all three items represent a single factor. Figure 12 displays the histogram for the Supporting Youth Interest scale scores; the skewness (–0.74) and kurtosis (–0.41) statistics were within the normal range, suggesting a normal distribution of scores.

Table 10. Descriptive Statistics for "Supporting Youth Interests" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Provide open–ended choice	SEL.Ch.4	512	1	5	3.83	1.33
Provide multiple opportunities for choice	SEL.Ch.3	512	1	5	3.55	1.42
Support creativity	A.HT.5	512	1	5	3.62	1.05
Scale: Supporting Youth Interests	**scale**	**512**	**1**	**5**	**3.67**	**1.05**

Figure 12. Frequency Histogram for "Supporting Youth Interests" Scores
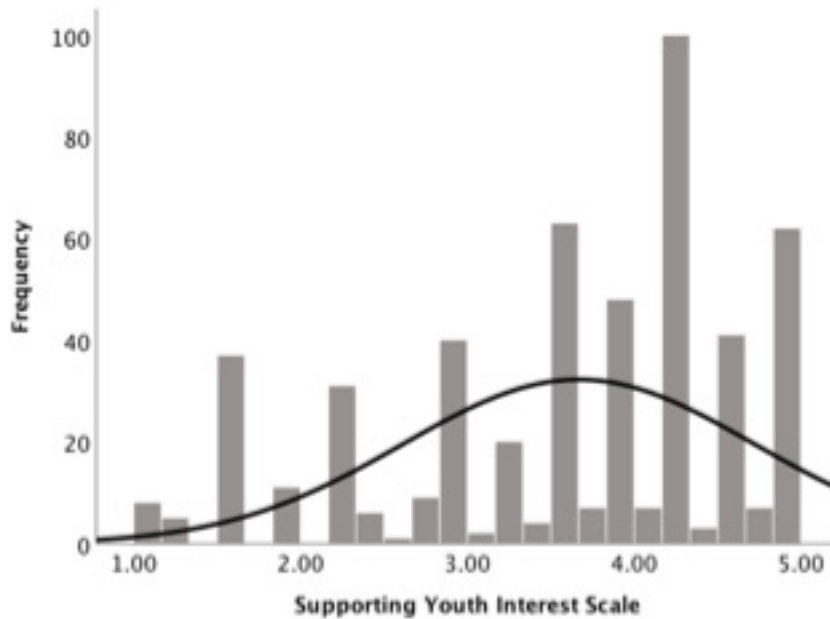
Supporting Plans & Goals: Staff provide opportunities to plan, set goals, & solve problems.

This scale is made up of five items that identify key skills for staff to support planning and goal–setting with youth (refer to Table 11). Cronbach's alpha indicates acceptable internal consistency and reliability (0.68); factor analysis showed that all five items represent a single factor. Figure 13 displays the histogram for the Supporting Goals and Plans scale scores. Skewness (1.12) and kurtosis (1.15) statistics were slightly above the normal range but not enough to cause concern around the distribution of scores.

Table 11. Descriptive Statistics for "Supporting Plans & Goals" Items

Item	Label	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Set up planning opportunities	SEL.PG.1	512	1	5	2.12	1.27
Ensure young people record or represent plans	SEL.PG.2	512	1	5	1.68	1.03
Facilitate monitoring progress toward goal	SEL.Pn.1	511	1	5	1.54	0.95
Support problem-solving alternatives	SEL.PG.3	512	1	5	2.19	1.18
Scale: Supporting Plans & Goals	scale	512	1	5	1.88	0.80

Figure 13. Frequency Histogram for "Supporting Plans & Goals" Scores