Positive, Engaged, Achieving Kids (PEAK): An Ongoing National Effectiveness Trial of a
Universal Social-Emotional Learning Program in the Primary Grades

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Background

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research linking children's prosocial behavior to a variety of positive life outcomes (e.g., Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Moffitt et al., 2016) has propelled administrative and policy efforts focused on the promotion of social-emotional learning (SEL) in schools (e.g., Dusenberry, Weissberg, Goren, & Domitrovich, 2014). In response, school personnel currently are faced with selecting, adopting, and supporting such evidence-based programming for students. In addition to evidence on student and teacher outcomes, information about practical considerations for implementation can be valuable for educational decision-making about scaling SEL programs in real-world school contexts. Randomized efficacy trials, in which the research is conducted under ideal conditions (i.e., extensive researcher support and training for implementation), have helped to further the SEL evidence base. Currently, however, very few effectiveness trials (implementation *under routine conditions by typical end users)* have been conducted on social-behavioral programs in schools. This poster describes an in-progress effectiveness trial evaluating a universal SEL program–the first of its kind funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Specifically, the poster will provide an overview of the trial, including goals, research questions, and lessons learned thus far.

Rationale, Intervention, & Objectives

The Social Skills Improvement System – Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP; Elliott & Gresham, 2008) is a universal program designed to promote students' positive classroom behavior. The SSIS-CIP includes instructional units targeting skills such as cooperation, self-control, responsibility, assertion, and empathy delivered by classroom teachers. The SSIS-CIP was the focus of an IES-funded Goal 3 efficacy trial ([R305A090438](#)) examining outcomes in primary grade classrooms Findings suggested that the SSIS-CIP had positive effects on students' social and learning-related behavior (DiPerna, Lei, Bellinger, & Cheng, 2015, 2016; DiPerna, Lei, Cheng, Hart, & Bellinger, 2018). Teachers generally found the curriculum relevant, feasible, and effective (Wollersheim Shervey, Sandilos, DiPerna, & Lei, 2017), and the average cost per student to provide the program was about $19 (Hunter, DiPerna, Hart, & Crowley, 2018). It is unknown, however, whether such findings will be replicated when the program is implemented under routine conditions by typical classroom teachers at diverse schools across the United States.

Currently in its second year of data collection, Positive, Engaged, Achieving Kids (PEAK) is a national trial ([R305A170047](#)) evaluating the effectiveness of the SSIS-CIP using a Multi-Site Cluster Randomized Trial (CRT) design and focusing on three key student outcomes: (1) classroom social behavior; (2) engagement and motivation to learn, and (3) fundamental academic skills. In addition, the trial is exploring practical implementation considerations, including approaches toward SSIS-CIP implementation, acceptability/sustainability, and cost effectiveness in the primary grades under typical conditions. Measures include:
   a) Direct assessments of student social-emotional, reading, and math skills;
   b) Direct observations of instructional quality, student behavior, and lesson implementation;
   c) Teacher ratings of student social behavior, motivation, and engagement; and

d) Teacher and administrator reports of instructional practices, implementation fidelity and social validity, and attitudes/beliefs regarding social-emotional learning.

Participants, Setting, & Design

During the first year of data collection (2018-2019), first and second grade classrooms ($N = 80$) across 13 schools, five districts, and three states were randomly assigned to business-as-usual control or treatment conditions (Figure 1). Local research staff were hired and trained to collect data within participating classrooms. After receiving active parental consent, a total of 725 students participated in project data collection (Table 1). Participating teachers (40/grade level) were primarily female, Caucasian, and certified as general education teachers (Table 2). Consistent with IES effectiveness trial requirements (i.e., implementation based on school's typical practices), *no* training or professional development was provided by research staff to participating teachers. Some schools chose to provide their own training, and their approaches were documented along with any supporting materials. Thus far in Year 2, approximately 60 first and second grade teachers have agreed to participate, and we anticipate collecting data with 700 students from those classrooms.

Data Collection & Analyses

The PEAK effectiveness trial has provided a unique opportunity for our research team to navigate the line between rigorous methodology and authentic, applied research in attempting to understand and evaluate real-world implementation of a universal SEL program. The primary goal of the trial is to use multilevel modeling to evaluate effectiveness for students when implemented by end users under routine conditions. We will also test for possible mediators and moderators of intervention effects. Although we have not yet finished data collection, we have already learned valuable lessons about all aspects of the research process that may be useful to others considering or currently completing effectiveness or other large-scale applied research projects. In addition, through our ongoing interactions with school personnel and stakeholders, we continue to gain important insights regarding their interest in universal SEL programs; factors they consider when adopting such programs; how they choose to implement programming to meet diverse student and school needs; and the barriers to implementing universal SEL. We also plan to share feedback we have received from teachers about the SSIS-CIP program more specifically, including their opinions about its utility as well as any adaptations they make (and the potential impact of these adaptations). We expect these insights to contribute toward the evidence base for the SSIS-CIP, help inform future effectiveness research within the SEL community, and provide insights for school personnel charged with scaling universal SEL programs in practice.

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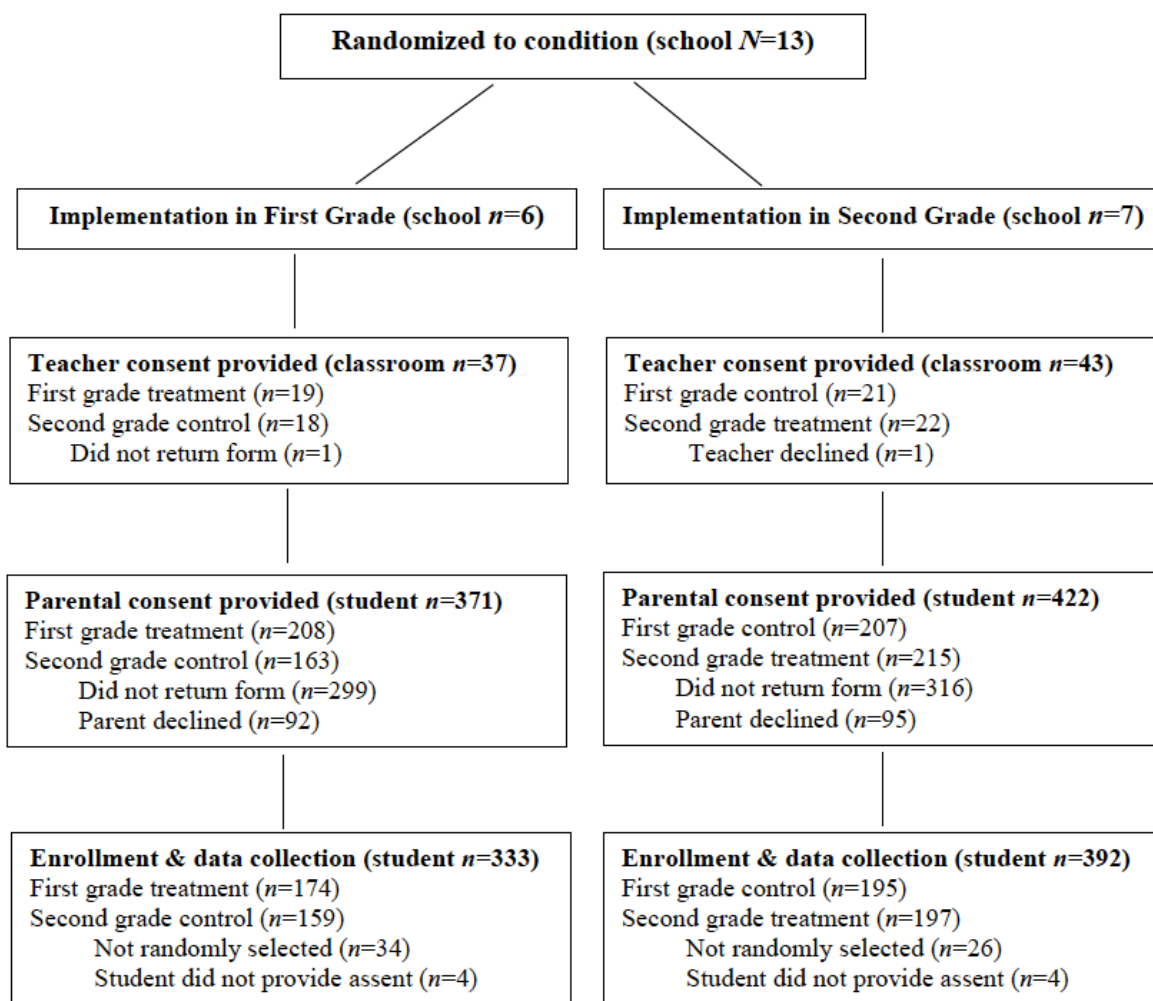
Figure 1. *Flow of Schools, Classrooms, and Students in 2018-19 Cohort*

Table 1

Student Demographic Characteristics by Treatment Condition

	Grade 1		Grade 2	
	CIP	Control	CIP	Control
	N=174	N=195	N=197	N=159
Male	45.40	56.92	47.21	40.25
Special Education	2.71	4.07	4.49	3.65
Speech/Language Impairment	1.90	2.44	1.69	1.97
Learning Disability	0.81	2.71	2.25	0.84
Emotional Behavior Disorder	0.00	0.54	0.28	1.12
ADHD	0.00	0.27	1.40	0.84
Intellectual/Cognitive Disability	0.27	0.81	0.28	0.56
Autism	0.00	0.54	0.28	0.00
Supplemental service	10.30	13.01	14.04	11.24

Note. CIP=Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Program. Percentage within condition and grade is reported for all variables.

Table 2

Teacher Demographic Information by Treatment Condition

	Grade 1		Grade 2	
	CIP	Control	CIP	Control
	N=19	N=21	N=22	N=18
Male	0.00	0.00	18.18	27.78
Female	100.00	100.00	81.82	72.22
Regular Education Certification	100.00	94.74	100.00	100.00
Special Education Certification	15.79	14.29	13.64	11.11
Reading Specialist	10.53	14.29	9.09	5.56
White	78.95	90.48	81.82	83.33
Asian	0.00	0.00	4.55	5.56
Black/African-American	5.26	4.76	4.55	0.00
Hispanic/Latino	15.79	4.76	0.00	11.11
English as primary language	78.95	95.24	100.00	83.33
Spanish as primary language	21.05	4.76	0.00	16.67
Bachelor's degree	47.37	71.43	63.64	66.67
Master's degree	47.37	28.57	22.73	33.33
Other degree	5.26	0.00	13.64	0.00

Note. CIP=Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Program. Percentage is reported all variables.