# Building Inclusive Environments Project: Integrating Academic, Social, and Emotional Skill Development

## A. Significance

The *Building Inclusive Environments Project: Integrating Academic, Social, and Emotional Skill Development* ("the Project"), led by Harmony SEL at National University and evaluated by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), will develop, implement, and test an innovative approach to academic and social and emotional learning (SEL) integration. The Project addresses ***Absolute Priorities 1: Demonstrates a Rationale*** and ***4: Field-Initiated Innovations, SEL;*** and ***Competitive Preference Priorities 1: Promoting Equity*** and ***2: Addressing the Impact of COVID-19*** and will focus on Grades 3–5 in 49 schools (potentially influencing 294 educators and 8,820 students[1]). District partners include New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE), San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD), and Washoe County School District (WCSD), which serve high-needs students, including those who are economically disadvantaged, English Language Learners (ELL), and/or students of color.

SEL is defined as an educational and human development process for students and adults to develop and apply core intrapersonal (e.g., self-awareness, perseverance, and self-regulation) and interpersonal skills (e.g., building relationships, awareness of others, and being inclusive) needed to succeed academically, have fulfilling lives, and be informed citizens.[1] SEL programs have a robust research base demonstrating effects on student social, emotional, and academic development,[2] yet many educators believe academic mandates (e.g., testing) make it difficult to find time to focus on SEL skills.[3] Despite state, district, and school leaders elevating SEL and supporting students' mental health and wellness from the impact of COVID, particularly for those who are most underserved, educators do not feel they can consistently implement SEL. Therefore, the proposed Project will support educators in developing strategies to support the inextricable link

[1] Project team assumes that, on average, two teachers per grade per school, with an average class size of 30 students, totaling 8,820 students, will be part of the evaluation for both school years of the respective cohorts.

between social, emotional, and academic development,[4] improving educators' ability to implement SEL despite testing mandates and other impediments to their time.

The proposed Project will test a model that combines an evidence-based SEL program, Harmony, with a taxonomy of academic-SEL integration[5] ("Harmony Integration" condition) and compares it to the standard SEL curriculum ("Harmony Standard" condition). SEL programs often integrate SEL into academics through language arts, structured activities, or extender activities.[6] While helpful, these strategies do not build educator capacity to intentionally help students transfer their SEL skills.[7] This Project will provide professional learning (PL), coaching, and tools to build educator capacity (a) to implement SEL that fosters skills and behaviors which enable student academic progress, (b) to develop trusting relationships between students (including underserved) and educators, and (c) to include rigorous, engaging, and well-rounded approaches to learning, leading to (d) improvements in student SEL and academic outcomes.

**A1. The Promise of SEL.** Extensive research demonstrates that when students engage in SEL programs implemented with fidelity, positive student outcomes occur.[8] For example, studies show improvement in academic achievement, prosocial behaviors, and school connectedness, and decreased emotional distress and behavior problems.[9, 10, 11] Science demonstrates that SEL development is critical to students' ability to learn.[12, 13] For example, students' emotions, self-regulated learning, and motivation interact to direct their energy toward or away from learning.[14, 15] Further, students retain more information when their cognitive challenges in classrooms are connected to social interactions.[16] Indeed, activities that build relationships prepare the brain for more complex learning experiences that allow students to develop, explore, and discover.[17]

***The Need for Support in Integrating SEL (Competitive Preference Priority 1: Promoting Equity).*** Educators promote SEL during instructional time,[18] yet they may perceive this as only

incidental or may feel limited in their efforts. Lack of robust academic–SEL integration is exacerbated by inequities that exist in the implementation of SEL[19] and high-quality professional learning (PL) that aligns SEL with culturally responsive practices.[20] Concern exists that if SEL does not account for and reflect students' culture and the local context, SEL programming could further marginalize students rather than lift them up.[21, 22] To support SEL, particularly with high-needs students, the proposed Project will build educator capacity for SEL implementation with an equity lens[23] and incorporate rigorous and well-rounded approaches to learning that are inclusive with regard to race, ethnicity, and culture. Indeed, research suggests that SEL programs may harm students if they do not center the students' lived experiences, affirming their personal and cultural assets.[24, 25] Moreover, these findings illustrate the importance of building educators' SEL and equity competencies to incorporate relevant, asset-based SEL.[26] For example, educators with higher SEL skills create environments that provide increased emotional and instructional support than colleagues with lower SEL skills.[27]

***Meeting the Moment (Absolute Priority 1: Demonstrates a Rationale).*** Research demonstrates that students experienced positive SEL and environmental outcomes when they participated in Harmony. In a quasi-experimental study of fifth-grade students, with over 40% being students of color, participation in Harmony ("Harmony Standard") improved students' peer relations, connection to school, feelings of inclusion, engagement in school, and increased friendships with diverse peers, as well as improved academic outcomes (i.e., increased writing and math performance) and decreased aggressive behavior among students.[28, 29] In a quasi-experimental study with pre-kindergarteners, Harmony students, relative to controls, interacted with peers more frequently and with a more robust variety of peers.[30] Students who participate in Harmony also perceive the school climate and their relationships with others to improve.[31]

***Competitive Preference Priority 2: Addressing the Impact of COVID-19***. COVID-19 and the shift to remote learning exacerbated long-standing inequities and limited access to resources for high-needs students, families, and educators.[32, 33] Now, more than ever, students need opportunities to navigate away from the trauma of the pandemic to form meaningful relationships and engage in inquiry-based instruction.[34] The Harmony program provides students opportunities to connect with each other and build SEL skills to manage emotions, set and monitor goals, and solve personal and interpersonal problems.[35] Furthermore, research demonstrates positive impact on student academic outcomes when educators help students use their SEL skills within academics, which is the foundation of Harmony Integration.[36]

**A2. Program Innovation *(Absolute Priority 4: Field-Initiated Innovations, SEL).*** To address the gap of equity-focused academic and SEL skill development, Project partners plan to integrate Harmony with a taxonomy for integrative skill development[37] to build educator capacity to address how students use SEL skills during academics (e.g., navigating perspectives in science or collaborative problem solving in social studies). The Pre-K–6th-Grade Harmony program includes two core components: Everyday Practices and Units and Lessons. Designed to address conditions in the learning environment, foster relationships, and build community, the three Everyday Practices of *Meet Up, Buddy Up,* and *Harmony Goals* create quick, fun, and predictable routines where students collaborate, connect, and solve problems. Students share strengths, backgrounds, interests, identities, and needs—with educators ensuring all voices are heard. The Grade-Level Units and Lessons engage students in explicit SEL instruction to nurture students' relationship-driven SEL skills through storybooks, play-based activities, interactive games, role-plays, and discussions[38, 39] (see Appendix J.1 Overview of Harmony Units).

For the Project, Harmony is adding a third component: Taxonomy of Integration and Educator Integrative Support. Educators who support high-needs students will engage in intentional and localized planning to ensure that students have the SEL skills needed to engage in academics, inclusive of the four taxonomy components, which showcase how SEL skills (a) are explicitly noted in the academic standards, (b) are needed to engage in content-specific practices, (c) promote effective ways of interreacting, or (d) encourage ways of being. The Project will strengthen students' use of SEL skills in academics, mitigating concerns about SEL being "one more thing."[40] Through Harmony Integration, students will receive more opportunities to use their SEL skills in academics that honor their assets and identities, deepen their engagement and effort, and prepare them with skills they need to navigate college, the workplace, and civic life.

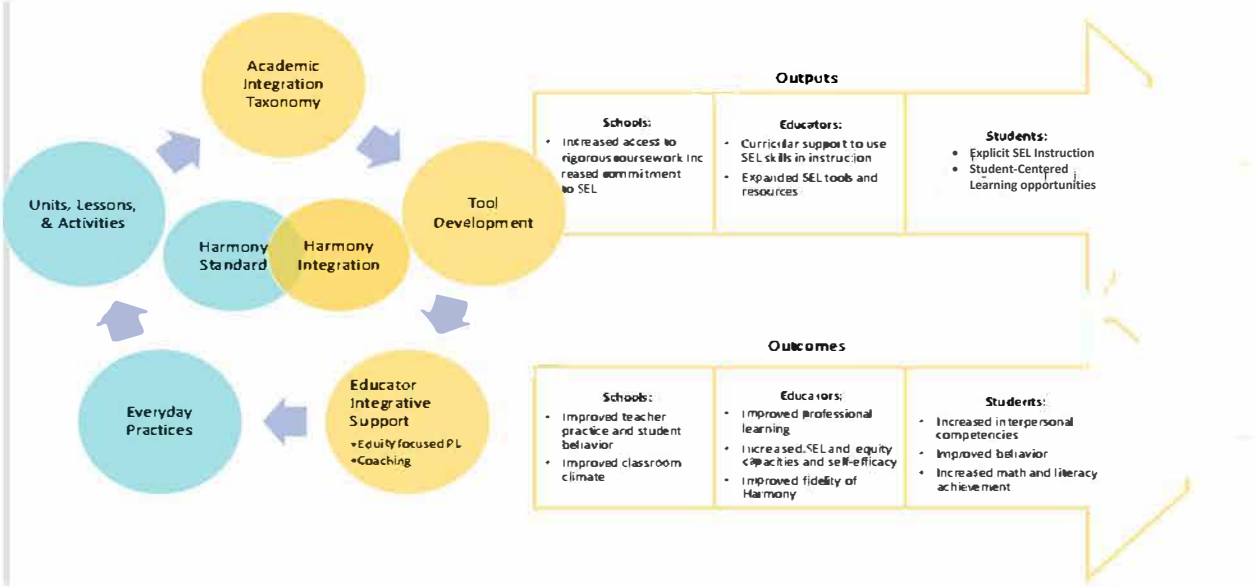
Educator integrative support will use the science of learning and development,[41] SEL principles,[42] and instructional practices that promote holistic development[43, 44] to develop educators' interpersonal SEL and equity competencies, inclusive of culturally responsive practices,[45, 46] developmental indicators,[47] adult SEL,[48, 49] and interactive pedagogy (e.g., discussions and feedback[50]). To do this, educators will engage in high-quality job-embedded PL over two years designed to increase engagement and belonging and build asset-based mindsets for educators. The PL (year 1) and coaching support (year 2) will prepare educators to facilitate trusting relationships between students as they engage in collaborative and experiential learning, increasing student self-efficacy, self-direction, metacognition, and motivation.

**B. Quality of the Project Design**

**B1. Conceptual Framework.** Harmony uses intergroup contact theory and socio-cognitive theories of development that suggest students need purposeful interactions to engage with diverse others and need to receive explicit SEL instruction that leads toward harmonious

[51, 52] To ensure that the benefits of the Harmony program (Everyday Practices and Units and Lessons) extend throughout the school day, educators will receive the Taxonomy of Academic Integration framed within culturally responsive practices, tools, and educator support (PL and coaching) (See Figure 1). These supports for educators will improve students' access to quality SEL instruction by facilitating educators' capacities to integrate SEL, center students' assets, and build environments that allow them to thrive. **Project partners hypothesize** that student outcomes (e.g., academics, SEL skills, and classroom climate) will improve when educators have greater confidence, capacities, and competencies to implement academic–SEL integrated strategies.

*Figure 1. Harmony Conceptual Model*




***Academic Integration Taxonomy.*** Despite the robust research elucidating that social interactions and emotional engagement maximize learning,[53, 54, 55] many educators report they lack the capacity and resources to implement SEL given the pressure on academic mastery.[56] Yet, educators already engage in multiple practices that promote holistic development,[57] and many experts have created alignment documents with explicit examples.[58, 59] However, this has not built educator capacity to intentionally integrate SEL, nor enabled better access to the educational opportunities students need to succeed and reach their full potential. The Project partners propose

that educators need PL on an organizing framework that builds their capacities and provides supports that address learning barriers to enable healthy development and response to students' needs and avoids a deficit-based approach. The Project will use a recently developed taxonomy that intentionally supports students' use of SEL skills from explicit SEL programs to foster the skills and behaviors that enable academic success.[61]

The taxonomy provides four ways in which SEL competencies align with academic standards, are present in classrooms, and influence classroom interactions (see Appendix J.2 SEL–Integrative Taxonomy and Examples). The four approaches include: (a) explicit skill alignment[62]—SEL skills are explicitly stated in academic standards; (b) explicit strategy alignment[63]—SEL skills are required to engage in a content practice; (c) ways of interacting[64]—students use SEL skills to interact with others to master academics; and (d) ways of being[65]—students use the same SEL skills across content areas, but the SEL skills look different in each content area. It is anticipated that when students understand how their SEL skills developed in Harmony transfer to other aspects of their school and social lives, students will become more engaged in their Harmony and academic programs, thus increasing engagement in rigorous coursework, accelerating their learning, and building trusting relationships (see Figure 1).

***Tool Development.*** The Project team will create multiple tools for educators to use for their academic-SEL integration journey with a focus on continuous improvement. First, Project partners will develop a toolkit that (a) defines the four approaches within the taxonomy; (b) identifies how to translate Harmony SEL skills and activities to academic instruction; and (c) provides concrete examples of each approach. The Project team will also develop a planning document for educators to plan their own lessons, a coaching document to support students, and a student reflection tool on SEL and academics. Finally, the Project team will build an additional tool for each taxonomy

approach that elevates localized examples of integration and lessons learned from educators on how to translate SEL into academics.

***Educator Integrative Support.*** Educators need high-quality PL opportunities to increase engagement and belonging and to build asset-based mindsets. Often, however, educators are given lists of examples that demonstrate how SEL and academics are linked, rather than coaching for building their own capacities around intentional integration.[66] Educator support will build capacity to align academic and SEL standards[67] through the taxonomy and interactive pedagogy. Educators need sufficient support to implement a new innovation. Job-embedded PL provide educators time to process, plan for, test, and receive feedback on new practices.[68, 69] In this Project, educators will engage in nine hours of PL across (in-person and virtual) that blend observations, discussions, and action planning, building their knowledge of how to use the taxonomy. Educators will also receive two coaching sessions (in-person and virtual).

The first sessions will reintroduce the Harmony program, discuss the science of learning and development, and introduce the taxonomy, including educators' analysis of lessons to determine how SEL shows up in those lessons and creating action steps to test integration. Once educators have a good understanding of integration, they will dig into each of the four taxonomy approaches. Educators will analyze model lessons and observe videos to determine how they align to the taxonomy, while also building their localized integrative lessons and deepening their cultural knowledge of their students. For example, they will analyze explicit skill alignment or how SEL skills manifest in academic standards (e.g., presentation skills within ELA), explicit strategy alignment or determining the SEL skills needed to engage in content (e.g., students perspective take as they think of multiple solutions with peers in mathematics), or the SEL skills to interact successfully with their peers (e.g., handle materials responsibly in science).

**B2. Goals, Objectives, Outcomes.** The Project will measurably improve the academic and SEL skills of high-needs students in grades three through five over the five-year grant period (and establish baseline), as reflected in the specific and measurable goals, objectives, and outcomes in Table 1 (see Project Evaluation section, for a detailed description of the measures).

**Table 1. Measurable Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes**

| Objectives | Measurable Outcomes |
|---|---|
| **Goal 1. Design and implement an educator-led approach to academic and SEL integration using an evidence-based SEL program and professional learning (PL).** | |
| 1.1. Develop and refine SEL tools and materials that align SEL skills with academics<br>1.2. Develop and refine integration PL experiences<br>1.3. Increase number of high-needs students having access to academic–SEL instruction<br>1.4. Revise existing coaching and fidelity tools | 1.1. 80% of educators (174 across formative design cohort [FDC] and randomized controlled trial [RCT] cohorts) report materials were useful to implement integrative model by Year 4 (source: surveys and/or focus groups).<br>1.2. 80% of educators (174 across FDC and RCT cohorts) report PL enhanced abilities to implement integrative model by Year 4 (source: surveys and/or focus groups).<br>1.3. 8,820 students have access to educators who participated in the integrative model by Year 5.<br>1.4. Finalized coaching tool and two implementation fidelity tools (observation and self-assessment) by Year 4. |
| **Goal 2. Increase educator capacity and efficacy to amplify social and emotional skills within their academic curriculum.** | |
| 2.1. Engage in academic–SEL integration PL<br>2.2. Implement Harmony with fidelity<br>2.3. Implement academic–SEL integrative strategies<br>2.4. Increase educator capacity and efficacy to use integrative strategies<br>2.5. Increase educator interpersonal competencies in SEL and equity | 2.1. 294 educators engage in PL by Year 4.<br>2.2. 70% of educators implement Harmony with fidelity by Year 4 (source: surveys and observations).<br>2.3. 70% more treatment educators (compared to control) integrate academics and SEL by Year 4 (source: surveys and observations).<br>2.4. Overall and across educator subgroups, treatment and control teachers report increased use of equity practices by .315 standard deviations (SDs) on average by Year 4 (source: surveys).<br>2.5. Overall and across educator subgroups, treatment and control teachers report increased job satisfaction by .315 SDs on average by Year 4 (source: surveys). |
| **Goal 3. Improve high-needs students' academic performance and engagement through relationship-focused, inclusive social and emotional skills and embedded instruction.** | |

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| 3.1. Increase student academic performance<br>3.2. Improve student behavior (e.g., learning strategies, effort, engagement) in classroom learning environments<br>3.3. Increase student interpersonal competencies (i.e., SEL skills)<br>3.4. Improve classroom interactions (teacher practice and student behavior)<br>3.5. Improve classroom climate (i.e., climate, teacher-student relationships, belonging)<br>3.6. Improve student behavior (i.e., attendance) | 3.1. Overall and across student subgroups, treatment students will increase ELA and mathematics standardized test scores by .172 SDs on average by Year 4 (source: district student achievement scores).<br>3.2. Overall and across student subgroups, treatment students' reports of positive student behavior in the classroom will increase by .172 SDs on average by Year 4 (source: student surveys).<br>3.3. Overall and across student subgroups, treatment students' interpersonal competencies will increase by .172 SDs on average by Year 4 (source: student surveys).<br>3.4. Treatment classroom interaction scores will improve by .421 SDs by Year 4 (source: classroom observations).<br>3.5. Overall and across student subgroups, treatment students' classroom climate will increase by .172 SDs on average by Year 4 (source: student surveys).<br>3.6. Overall and across student subgroups, treatment students' behavior will improve by .172 SDs (source: attendance records). |
| **Goal 4. Codify and disseminate tested model to integrate academic and social and emotional skills within academic instruction.** | |
| 4.1. Codify strategies that educators used within learning environments to integrate academics and SEL<br>4.2. Share Project practices and findings nationally | 4.1. Three tools (e.g., toolkit, PL experiences, coaching tools, or exemplars) will be developed that will help others integrate academics and SEL.<br>4.2. Two publications will be developed (e.g., white papers and research briefs), and findings presented at four national conferences and two webinars. |

**B3. Successfully Address Needs of the Targeted Population.** The Project will occur in NYC DOE, SAISD, and WCSD (see Appendix C, Letters of Support) with 49 participating schools to provide a more affirming and holistic educational experience for high-needs students. High-needs students include those who are typically underrepresented within SEL programs, including students of color, ELL, and/or economically disadvantaged.[70] By working with NYC DOE, SAISD and WCSD, the Project has sufficient access to recruit schools with a high percentage of high-needs students. NYC DOE serves over 1,000,000 students, with 82% students of color, 13% ELL,

and 73% living in poverty;[71] SAISD serves over 48,000 students, with 97% students of color, 20.7% ELL, and 89.4% economically disadvantaged;[72] and WCSD serves over 60,000 students, with 57% students of color, 14% ELL, and 47% receiving free and reduced lunch.[73] Harmony will work with the district partner staff to intentionally recruit schools that are representative of the district population, ensuring high-needs students are the target audience.

Traditionally, SEL programs—in development and implementation—have not taken an equity lens.[74] Specifically, programs implemented with high-needs students often do not provide sufficient attention to uplifting personal and cultural assets, opportunities for students to voice their lived experiences, activities to build relationships with diverse others (e.g., based on gender, race, or interests), or strategies for meaningful academic learning. Educators may also lack high-quality PL connecting SEL through a culturally responsive lens, which may result in unintended consequences. For example, educators may use SEL programs as a strategy to manage students from a deficit model[75] or as an approach that puts the onus of success solely on students.[76]

***Supporting high-needs students.*** To exacerbate the lack of access to equity-focused SEL programs, the trauma from the pandemic has revealed inequities in the social and emotional wellness and supports for high-needs students.[77] For example, high-needs students are more likely to face food insecurity and historical trauma, receive fewer support services, and are more likely to experience less quality access to remote learning.[78,79] These elevated disparities require all educators to develop the capacities and SEL and equity competencies to create environments where all students feel safe and supported and to promote skills (e.g., perseverance, problem solving, goal setting) that help them process their experiences, as well as develop healthy relationships and core resiliency skills[80, 81] — core goals of Harmony and the proposed Project.

Although embedding SEL skills within academics appears to be a promising approach to address equitable outcomes,[82, 83] particularly in accelerating learning loss from the pandemic,[84] the Harmony program, along with educator supports, attempts to mitigate concerns surrounding equity and SEL. First, the Harmony program was refreshed in 2022 to incorporate more culturally responsive practices. Specifically, lessons intentionally provide more inclusive and representative storybook characters, scenarios, and activities. Furthermore, it provides more opportunities for students to identify their own (and their classmates') assets and creates intentional opportunities to share their experiences and build relationships with diverse others.

Second, Harmony Integration provides opportunities for students to understand the relevance of academic instruction through authentically experiencing how SEL skills used during rigorous instruction transfer into other domains of their lives (e.g., careers, family). Integrating SEL and academics into the Harmony Standard program will have additive effects compared to Harmony Standard alone, especially in high-needs schools, as students will have engaging, relevant, and affirming learning experiences. **Project partners hypothesize** that building educator capacity to integrate SEL skills within academic instruction with an equity lens through Harmony will improve (a) their capacity, efficacy, and SEL and equity competencies needed to implement academic–SEL integrative instruction, (b) implementation quality of the Harmony program, and (c) capacities to use more interactive and culturally responsive instructional practices. These improvements will lead to improved (d) classroom climate and interactions, and (e) a variety of student outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, SEL skills, engagement, learning strategies, and classroom behaviors) (see Appendix G, Project's Logic Model).

Finally, Harmony Integration further enhances equity work, as the PL is centered within adult SEL and culturally responsive pedagogy. In other words, PL will provide opportunities for

educators to reflect on their own biases and assumptions and provides strategies to ensure inclusive and affirming interactions with students as they apply their SEL skills within academics. This provides opportunities for educators to hear student perspectives and lived experiences and build closer relationships with them.

***Project Design.*** The Project design includes continuous and iterative improvement to determine if Harmony Integration positively addresses high-needs students. To understand if and how an SEL program, Harmony, can extend SEL skills developed within the program to academic instruction, Project partners will first pilot the academic–SEL integrative taxonomy with the formative design cohort (FDC). In the 2023-24 school year, nine schools and 54 educators will test the taxonomy tools and PL. In the 2024-25 school year, FDC educators will receive coaching support in the Fall and Winter. Coaching support will focus on building interpersonal competencies in SEL and equity, including strategies for educators to evaluate their own assumptions about how they develop and use their SEL skills, and how to understand students' use of SEL skills in context.[85] Project partners will use data (feedback from educators and students and outcome data) as early indicators to gauge the initial impact on student outcomes and to consider possible changes in implementation (tools and PL) prior to the randomized control trial (RCT) design. In the 2024-25 school year, an additional 40 schools that were not part of the FDC cohort will be randomized where half will receive the Harmony Standard control condition and half will receive the Harmony Integration treatment condition.

**C. Quality of Project Personnel**

Project partners have a long history of supporting schools (Harmony for the past 14 years, in over 40,000 schools and organizations), conducting evaluations (AIR has served as the evaluator for numerous early- and mid-phase EIR projects), and partnering together (Harmony and AIR have

partnered for the past two years). Project partners bring a highly qualified team with expertise to ensure successful implementation of the Project (see Table 2). At Harmony, the team uses intentional hiring practices to employ persons who are members of groups that have been traditionally underrepresented and have diverse work experiences. For instance, Harmony recently hired a Director of Professional Learning and Equity, who partners with the Social Justice, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (S-JEDI) Office at National University to ensure hiring practices, PL, and employee support adhere to high-quality S-JEDI principles. Harmony ensures staff bring diverse experiences and skills from the education system to effectively develop tools, resources, and PL that support students' social, emotional, and academic development.

**Table 2. Qualifications of Key Personnel (Appendix B. Resumes)**

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| **Principal Investigator** | [redacted] Sr. Director, Whole Child & Adult Center |
| [redacted] is an innovative SEL leader with over 18 years working in education, partnering with states, districts, school leaders, and educators towards high-quality SEL implementation. He has worked with multiple SEL programs to use data for continuous improvement, to design PL, and to advance integration of SEL and academic skills. As a researcher and practitioner, [redacted] is a leader in helping educators identify strategies to support SEL through interactive pedagogy and reflect on their own SEL skills. **In this Project**, he will lead Harmony in development and execution of Harmony academic integration. | |
| **Project Manager** | [redacted] EdD, Research Assistant |
| [redacted] is an experienced educational researcher and educator. Her research agenda is grounded in the underlying principle that all students, especially those who are underserved, deserve equitable access to robust learning opportunities. She completed her postdoctoral appointment at Drexel University, funded by the US Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods Grant. [redacted] is also a former special education teacher and reading specialist. **In this Project,** she will serve as the project manager ensuring effective completion of tasks across the implementation, product and innovation, research, and district teams. | |
| **Harmony Implementation Team** | [redacted], Implementation Specialists at Harmony |
| The implementation team is composed of former educators, instructional coaches, and administrators who provide expert support to schools and districts. For example, in the past year, the team conducted 377 trainings. In a recent survey with 595 users, 80% of users stated the training was effective or very effective to prepare educators to implement the program. **In this Project,** the implementation team will continue to provide expert PL and support to | |

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| treatment and control schools and will help collate expert examples of academic integration. | |
| **Harmony Product and Innovation Team** | [redacted], Sr. Director, Operations and Innovation; [redacted], Director of Professional Learning & Equity, [redacted] Sr. Education Content Manager |
| [redacted] bring expertise to product and innovation, PL, and equity—leading Harmony curriculum, tools, and PL. They have successfully transitioned the Harmony program onto a no-cost, digital platform, developed tools and resources to promote Harmony with families (e.g., Game Room App), and revised the Harmony program to include more culturally responsive practices, trauma-informed principles, and adult SEL. **In this Project,** this team will lead the development of the taxonomy, PL support, and the tools educators need to effectively implement localized instruction based on the taxonomy. | |
| **Oversight Committee** | Harmony's Strategic Advisory Group |
| Harmony's Strategic Advisory Group is comprised of 10 individuals, including national experts, researchers, district leaders, and educators. The Advisory Group has provided oversight in key initiatives at Harmony (e.g., Harmony Third Edition refresh, Educator SEL, and measurement work). **In this Project**, **the Strategic Advisory Group** will provide direct oversight of the Academic Integration efforts, providing high-level direction; review of tools, products, and PL; and strategy to disseminate and scale the work. | |
| **AIR Team (external evaluators)** | [redacted]., Principal Researcher (evaluation PI), and [redacted]., Researcher (evaluation PD) |
| [redacted] specializes in research design, advanced quantitative methods, and evaluations of social and emotional and school climate programs. Her methodological specialties include RCTs and quasi-experimental designs, such as interrupted time-series analysis and advanced quantitative modeling, including multilevel modeling. She has extensive knowledge of youth development and has considerable experience in evaluating education programs.<br><br>[redacted] specializes in research, evaluation, and practice projects with a focus on positive youth development, social and emotional learning, safe and supportive learning environments, and the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD). She has over 13 years of experience conducting mixed methods research, supporting the translation of research to practice, and supporting federal policymaking. **In this Project,** the AIR team will lead evaluation design, data collection and analysis, and write-up of results. | |
| **District Teams** | NYC DOE, SAISD, WCSD |
| Each district has been partnering with Harmony for over three years, providing expert oversight and support to educators who are already implementing Harmony. **In this Project,** each district has a designated SEL lead and team to partner with Harmony and AIR to lead the Project, provide guidance and support in tool development, engage in their own PL, and develop capacities to promote sustainability of Harmony Integration. | |

## D. Quality of the Management Plan

The Project partners, Harmony, AIR, three districts (NYC DOE, SAISD, and WCSD), and a Strategic Advisory Group, will be able to accomplish each activity and milestone on the Project's 5-year timeline to meet Project goals (see Table 3 and Appendix J.3 Project Design and Timeline). As the lead, **Harmony will provide** project management to hit key milestones; lead the development, implementation, and refinement of the academic integration taxonomy, PL, and tools; organize face-to-face meetings; lead the dissemination of tools; and provide coaching to district leaders to promote sustainability. **AIR will be responsible** for the research design, data collection and analysis, and evaluation of change. They will provide concrete recommendations on the tools and resources based on results from focus groups, surveys, and observations. They will also support the PI in writing federal grant reports, evaluation papers, and other dissemination activities. **District partners will** be responsible for helping to recruit schools (district lead will help identify schools that meet high-needs definition), support data collection efforts, provide guidance and oversight on tool development, and build their own capacities to support sustainability. **The Strategic Advisory Group will** serve as an oversight committee, meeting quarterly, to ensure that the Project meets the stated objectives on budget, while also providing guidance and feedback on the tools and PL offered.

**Table 3. Milestones and Key Responsibilities**

| Milestones | Due Dates | Lead (in bold) and Partners |
|---|---|---|
| **Project Management** | | |
| Develop detailed work plan, updated annually from feedback. | Y1-Y5 (Q1) | **Harmony** |
| Develop detailed indicators of success to ensure all components of Program are moving forward. | Y1 (Q1) | **Harmony**, districts, AIR |

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| Hold bi-weekly Project meetings with Harmony, district leads, and evaluator. | Y1-Y5 (Q1-4) | **Harmony**, districts, AIR |
| Hold annual all-partner meeting to review data to make improvements and identify integration best practices. | Y1-Y5 (Q1) | **Harmony**, districts, AIR |
| **Evaluation (Goals 2, 3, & 4)** | | |
| Secure approvals for IRB and district research entities. | Y1 | **AIR** |
| Secure educator and student/parent consent for participation in evaluation. | Y1, Y2 | **AIR**, Harmony |
| Collect data for use in evaluation analyses. | Y1-Y4 | **AIR, districts** |
| Identify findings and develop reporting to share findings with Harmony (annual memos, annual reports). | Y1-Y5 | **AIR** |
| Share evaluation findings through presentations and publications. | Y5 | **Harmony,** districts, AIR |
| **Tool Development (Goals 1 & 4)** | | |
| Create implementation toolkit that incorporates taxonomy and examples aligned with Harmony units and lessons, revising based on feedback obtained from cohorts. | Y1 (Q1); Y2-Y4 (Q3-4) | **Harmony,** districts |
| Create coaching tool to support lead educators and instructional coaches to promote academic integration, revising based on feedback from both cohorts. | Y1 (Q1-Q4); Y2-3 (Q2-3) | **Harmony**, districts |
| **Professional Learning (Goals 1 & 2)** | | |
| Design enhanced PL on academic-SEL integration (nine hours of PL). | Y1 (Q1) | **Harmony**, districts |
| Provide all schools PL on Harmony by cohort (three-hour strong start). | Y1-3 (Q3) | **Harmony,** districts |
| Provide "Harmony Integration" condition PL (Fall, Winter, Spring in cohort year). | Y1-3 (Q1, 3) | **Harmony,** districts |
| Provide "Harmony Integration" coaching support in year 2 of implementation (Fall and Spring). | Y2-Y4 | **Harmony**, districts |
| Obtain feedback on utility and effectiveness of PL and revise based on feedback. | Y2-Y4 (Q2-4) | **Harmony**, **AIR**, districts |

| Codification and Dissemination (Goal 4) | | |
|---|---|---|
| Document findings, as well as best practices from expert teachers, in at least two publications. | Y3, Y5 | **Harmony, AIR,** districts |
| Present at two each (a) practitioner national conferences, (b) research national conferences, and (c) national webinars. | Y3, Y5 | **Harmony, AIR,** districts |
| Provide open-source access to the findings and tools. | Y5 | **Harmony** |

Project costs are reasonable with the depth of support educators receive and teamwork between partners to use actionable feedback and codify localized integration strategies. The Project team will use the taxonomy framework to create a toolkit that educators can use with their students by collecting artifacts, observing lessons, obtaining information in PL and coaching sessions, and conducting focus groups. Project partners will identify exemplars that allow educators to translate explicit SEL skill instruction into academics to enhance the toolkit and PL. To scale learning, Harmony will leverage its digital platform to ensure its hundreds of thousands of educators can access the Harmony program and the developed taxonomy at no added charge, only requiring Integrative Educator Supports costs to sustain this work. Further, the Project includes additional funds to the evaluation to add to the research that demonstrates that dynamic, blended, PL can be accomplished,[86, 87] particularly when it is inclusive of pedagogical and content domains, and tailored to the participating educators' needs.[88, 89]

**E. Project Evaluation**

AIR will conduct an independent evaluation to understand impact and implementation of adding Harmony Integration to Harmony Standard compared to the use of Harmony Standard alone. The impact evaluation uses a school-level randomized design to **meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards without reservations**, and the implementation evaluation will provide **feedback and periodic assessment of the Program towards achieving intended outcomes.** In the descriptions of these components that follow and Appendix J.4, the **key project**

components, mediators, outcomes, and a measurable threshold for acceptable implementation are found. Table 4 lists the research questions (RQ) for the evaluation.

**Table 4. Evaluation RQs**

| RQ Type | RQ |
|---|---|
| Confirmatory | RQ1. What are the **impacts** of adding Harmony Integration to Harmony Standard on (a) students (e.g., intrapersonal SEL competencies and behaviors, attendance, achievement in literacy and mathematics), (b) classrooms (e.g., classroom interactions, classroom climate), and (c) educators (e.g., equity competencies, SEL beliefs, teaching satisfaction)? |
| Mediators (Exploratory) | RQ2. To what extent are the **impacts** of adding Harmony Integration to Harmony Standard on student and classroom outcomes mediated by educator outcomes and Harmony implementation? |
| Moderators (Exploratory) | RQ3. To what extent are the **impacts** of adding Harmony Integration to Harmony Standard on classroom environment and student outcomes moderated by student characteristics or demographics? |
| Implementation | RQ4. To what extent do educators (and why or why not) **implement** Harmony Integration and Harmony Standard with fidelity? |
| | RQ5. To what extent (and why or why not) are early indicators of success present in classrooms **implementing** Harmony? |
| | RQ6. How can Harmony Integration be improved to increase **implementation** fidelity and the presence of early indicators of success? |

**E1. Evaluation Methods Designed to Meet WWC Evidence Standards Without Reservations.** The impact evaluation will address RQs 1–3; the sample, design, outcomes, analysis plan, and power analyses are summarized below (see Appendix J.4: Harmony EIR Evaluation for more details).

***Impact Evaluation Sample.*** The sample will include a minimum of 40 schools (randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions) that began implementing the Harmony Standard program prior to the 2024–25 school year. The schools from the partnering districts will be evenly distributed between treatment and control groups. The impact evaluation (and Project) focuses on Grades 3–5 across two school years (2024–25 and 2025–26), including a minimum of 240

educators and classrooms (six classrooms/educators per 40 schools) and a minimum of 7,200 students (30 students per classroom) participating in both years.

***Impact Evaluation Design.*** The impact evaluation features a cluster randomized comparative effectiveness design. To address potential school-level attrition and meet the goal of at least 40 schools (20 matched pairs) in the final sample, AIR will recruit 48 schools to participate in the study and match schools within districts and based on student demographics, prior student academic achievement, and any available SEL and school climate survey data to create pairs of schools that are similar on these observable characteristics. AIR will **randomly assign** one school in each pair to treatment condition and one school to control condition. For the final sample, AIR will compare student, classroom, and educator outcomes from the 20-24 schools in the treatment condition to those from 20-24 schools in the control condition. The team expects **minimal school-level attrition** because the schools in the study are already implementing the Harmony Standard program, there is strong support from districts to encourage school participation, and the team will take proactive steps to minimize school, educator, and student attrition. The internal validity of the pair-matched randomization design is robust to school-level attrition if it occurs. AIR will **calculate overall attrition rates** for schools, educators, and students and **differential attrition rates**[2] for educators and students using WWC guidelines. The pair-matched, cluster randomized comparative effectiveness design **increases the likelihood of baseline equivalence** in the analytic sample between students and educators within treatment and control schools. AIR will measure and (as needed) account for baseline equivalence in the impact design. Finally, **joiners pose minimal risk of bias**.

[2] There cannot be any differential attrition at the school level in this design because with a paired design, if one of the schools in the pair drops out of the study, the other school in that pair will be removed from the analysis, effectively removing treatment and control schools at equal rates.

***Outcome Measures***. To assess program outcomes, AIR will use research-validated measures with reliabilities above 0.50 to meet WWC reliability standards (further detailed in Table 3 in Appendix J.4). The impact evaluation will include multiple types and sources of data for Grades 3–5 students and classrooms in the RCT sample. **WWC-eligible outcomes** for the study include student-level general literacy and mathematics achievement from district-administered state assessments, student-level intrapersonal competencies and behaviors (i.e., SEL competencies) measured by student self-report data from a survey administered by AIR (using measures from the Panorama Student Survey [90]), student attendance through extant district attendance data, and classroom climate from student self-report surveys administered by AIR (using measures from the Panorama Student Survey[91]). For half of the educator sample (selected through a stratified random sample by grade) across all sample schools, AIR will measure WWC-eligible outcomes of classroom-level teacher practice and student behavior (i.e., classroom interactions and climate) through twice-annual (fall and spring) video observations using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS)[92].

In addition, AIR will collect data on other outcomes and factors for analyses. AIR will measure **educator outcomes** (e.g., equity competencies, SEL beliefs, teaching satisfaction) through an online educator survey (using existing survey scales listed in Appendix J.4) of all educators in the sample. In addition, AIR will collect **student demographic data** and **implementation data** (described in the formative implementation evaluation section) for use in impact analyses. AIR will collect **outcome measures** at all treatment and control schools including student demographic and test data; student and teacher surveys administered in fall of 2024 (baseline), spring of 2025, and fall and spring of the second year of the RCT (2025–26). AIR will also collect video classroom observations in fall and spring of each RCT school year. In 2023

(baseline), AIR will collect extant data on the previous school year (e.g., student attendance, achievement test scores).

***Impact Analysis Plan.*** AIR will use survey scale scores (produced through psychometric analyses using the Rasch rating scale model[93]), CLASS observation scores, attendance statistics (e.g., percent of school days present), and student test scores in an "intent-to-treat" model, including all schools regardless of level of implementation. AIR will conduct impact analyses using a hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) approach to accommodate the nested nature of the design. AIR analysts will estimate two-level models with educators (Level 1) nested in schools (Level 2) to estimate the effects of Harmony Integration on classrooms and educators **(RQ1b, c)**. AIR analysts will estimate three-level models with students (Level 1) nested in classrooms/ teachers (Level 2), nested in schools (Level 3) to estimate the one- and two-year effects of Harmony Integration on student outcomes (**RQ1a**). AIR analysts will estimate treatment-control differences in outcome measures within blocks. AIR conducted a **power analysis** (based on a minimum final sample of 40 schools) to estimate the minimum detectable effect size (MDES) for the impact models and estimate a MDES of 0.172 for student outcomes, 0.421 for classroom interactions, and 0.315 for educator outcomes. The team will **account for missing data** in the impact analyses in accordance with WWC guidance.

AIR analysts will examine whether the effects of Harmony Integration on student and classroom outcomes are **mediated** by educator outcomes, mechanisms through which Harmony SEL aims to affect student and classroom outcomes (**RQ2**). To answer **RQ3** and explore the extent to which Harmony Standard (alone and combined with Harmony Integration) increases equity of student outcomes, AIR will examine whether the effects of Harmony Integration are moderated by student characteristics (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender).

**E2. Provision of Performance Feedback and Assessment of Progress.** The implementation evaluation will address RQs 4–6 and monitor progress towards goals, objectives, and outcomes specified in Table 2. **The sample, design, data sources, analyses, and feedback processes are summarized below** (see Appendix J.4 for more details).

***Sample.*** AIR will collect formative evaluation data starting with the FDC of nine Harmony Implementation schools (2023–24 and 2024–25 school years) and with the RCT impact evaluation cohort of 40-48 additional schools (2024–25 and 2025–26 school years). Across the two studies (formative and impact) up to 294 educators and 8,820 students will participate, providing data on implementation measures.

***Data Sources.*** The implementation evaluation will include multiple data sources. AIR and Harmony SEL will use a **fidelity of implementation matrix**[94] to determine cut points for adequate fidelity of implementation based on program inputs and outputs. Implementation data regarding **inputs** include (1) educator participation in professional learning and coaching activities and (2) educator use of the Harmony dashboard to access program materials (collected by Harmony). Implementation data regarding **outputs** include (3) AIR-collected, twice annual **observer ratings of implementation** from video lessons from half of the educators in the sample (in fall and spring for the FDC and RCT schools) based on the Harmony implementation rubric, which measures implementation of key ingredients for Harmony and quality of implementation (rated on a 4-point scale; co-developed by AIR and Harmony SEL), (4) **educator self-reports of implementation** (i.e., percent of desson components implemented; for all educators, collected by Harmony), and (5) survey scales from Panorama[95] Teacher and Staff Survey added to the **educator surveys** (analyzed in relation to outcomes measures discussed in the impact study and also collected for FDC schools) regarding educator efficacy and competence (e.g., teacher efficacy), intrapersonal competencies in

SEL (e.g., self-reflection; growth mindset), and professional experiences (e.g., professional well-being, belonging). To complement the fidelity of implementation data, AIR will conduct spring **focus groups with students and educators** at a subsample of Harmony Integration schools (four FDC and six RCT schools) to provide context for implementation and outcome data and inform improvements.

***Calculating fidelity.*** Using these data, AIR will calculate levels of fidelity, aggregating to obtain quantitative values of fidelity. Fidelity is defined as composed of treatment inputs and outputs, which will account equally in overall measures of treatment fidelity (i.e., 50% of the fidelity score is from inputs and 50% is from outputs). For each component of inputs and outputs, measures will be calculated first at the individual level (e.g., classroom, teacher, or student), average individual ratings to obtain a school-level average, and then average school-level averages to obtain a district-level average. AIR will weight submeasures equally to then obtain an overall measure by averaging across those components. For example, observation ratings will be taken for individual classrooms for each measure on the observation rubric, average them to obtain a classroom-level observation score, then average the classroom-level scores to obtain a school-level score and subsequently for a district-level score. The school-level observation score for classroom instruction will then be averaged with the school-level teacher practices score and student experiences score for an outputs score and again for schools and districts to obtain overall fidelity measures.[3] At the time of this proposal, the team **defines implementation fidelity** as meeting or exceeding a score of .60 and will use the first year of the FDC to finalize fidelity cut-levels for the RCT. The team will assign overall treatment fidelity scores at the school- and district-levels, to a

[3] AIR will convert measures to a value between 0 and 1 (if not already in that format) prior to calculating group averages. For example, Harmony implementation rubric ratings for submeasures (on a scale of 1 to 4) will be averaged for individual teachers and then divided by 4.

level of implementation category (i.e., low, moderate, and high– also defined in the first year of the FDC) to provide descriptive information on how fidelity varied across treatment components, schools, and districts.

***Analysis Plan.*** AIR will use multiple analyses in the formative evaluation to answer **RQs 4-6** and report on progress toward performance measures. AIR will analyze focus group transcripts to identify key themes with NVivo software, psychometrically analyze scale survey data,[96] and summarize quantitative data (e.g., survey scale scores, survey item responses, fidelity of implementation data) using descriptive statistics (i.e., multiple measures of central tendency and distribution information). To answer **RQ4**, AIR will examine levels of implementation fidelity (for both Harmony Standard and Harmony Implementation) overall and across educators, schools, districts, treatment/control conditions, and years. AIR will use themes from focus group data and responses from implementation items added to the educator surveys to understand facilitators and challenges of implementing the programs and the relationships between these factors and implementation fidelity levels. To answer **RQ5**, AIR will analyze outcomes data overall and across educators, schools, districts, treatment/control conditions, and years. AIR will analyze relationships between these data and responses from educator surveys (for early indicators of progress) and implementation fidelity data and use themes from focus group data to provide additional context. To answer **RQ6,** AIR will identify themes across these findings and consult the research literature to develop recommendations throughout the evaluation for Harmony to use towards continuous improvement during and after the Project. Through regular **feedback processes to support continuous improvement**, AIR will use biweekly meetings with Harmony to share preliminary findings and annual memos (winter) and reports (summer) to share final findings to leverage and surface opportunities for improvement.

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