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*Circle Up: An Integrated Whole-School Model to Address Learners’ Social-Emotional and Learning Needs*

**U.S. DOE – Office of Elementary and Secondary Education – Education Innovation Research (EIR) Early-phase (CFDA 84.411C)**

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## **Circle Up: An Integrated Whole School Model to Address Learners' Social-Emotional and Learning Needs**

CAST, in partnership with the University of Minnesota, Lives in the Balance, Education Development Center (EDC), and the Aldine Independent School District (Aldine ISD, Houston, TX), proposes *Circle Up: an Integrated Whole School Model to Address Learners' Social-Emotional and Learning Needs*. *Circle Up* addresses Absolute Priorities 1 (Demonstrates a Rationale) and 4 (Meeting Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs), and both Competitive Preference Priorities, for underserved 4th and 5th grade students in the Aldine ISD. This focus on upper elementary students holds promise for the development of a comprehensive preventative intervention that can “stem the tide” of disengagement *before* high school. *Circle Up* is conceptualized as an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) with integrated supports for individual students at the classroom, teacher, family, school, and community levels. At each level, *Circle Up* will adapt and integrate research-based components—Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the Check & Connect mentoring program, and Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS)—that will improve student social-emotional learning (SEL) and engagement in school, leading to gains in academic achievement and attainment.

At the classroom/teacher level, we will train educators to implement UDL, a scientifically-valid framework for reducing barriers and maximizing learning opportunities by providing learners with multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (Meyer et al., 2014). To meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of all students (i.e., tier 1 in a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)), our approach to UDL will be enhanced through design-based research with Aldine ISD teachers and an advisor from CASEL, the national content experts on the development of social and emotional competence. Working together, we will develop *models of universally designed academic learning environments, classroom routines, and lessons with embedded SEL supports*. *Circle Up* will also address students' mental health challenges resulting in behaviors inconsistent with classroom expectations (disruptive externalizing behaviors and internalizing ones, such as depression and anxiety; tier 2 and 3 services), by leveraging CPS, an evidence-based model for reducing these behaviors by

addressing their root causes through one-on-one collaborative conversations between students and teachers (Greene et al., 2019). Insights gained from CPS conversations will also inform a teacher’s use of UDL to address classroom barriers, leading to fewer concerning behaviors.

At the family, school, and community levels, *Circle Up* will integrate C&C, an evidence-based mentoring model that promotes student engagement at school through relationship building and problem solving (Christenson et al., 2012). C&C Mentors are trained to consider multiple contextual influences on student disengagement and school dropout. This component will therefore not only meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of disengaged students who may not be attending class regularly (requiring tier 2 or 3 services), but also inform—through the efforts of school-based SEL teams—the support of students whose concerning classroom behavior is affected by issues arising in home, community, or extra-curricular settings.

The external evaluation of *Circle Up*, conducted by EDC, will assess the effect of the intervention on student academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes using a quasi-experimental design capable of meeting What Works Clearinghouse standards with reservations; test exploratory hypotheses about potential mediators such as teacher self-efficacy to support SEL; and determine the extent to which Circle Up was implemented with fidelity.

## **A. SIGNIFICANCE**

**A1. Problem Addressed.** Even before COVID-19, mental health challenges were on the rise, estimated to affect 13–22% of students, and often resulting in externalizing (e.g., bullying, defiance) and internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety) behaviors (U.S. Department of Education (ED), 2021; EAB, 2019; Geiser et al., 2019; Hertz & Barrios, 2020; Murgia, 2017; Walker, 2018). Furthermore, because these and other mental health challenges directly interfere with students’ engagement in school and with learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Wang et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018), students are also at risk for lower academic achievement and academic attainment (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Reschly & Christenson 2012; Lei et al., 2018; Schnitzler et al., 2021). The mental health needs of children and youth can have long-term impacts on their quality of life, health, and educational and career

development—especially if they are also subject to other risk factors such as poverty, the loss of a caregiver, or limited access to health care (Yoshikawa et al., 2020; Stark et al., 2020).

Whether, and the extent to which students with mental health challenges end up experiencing long-term impacts depends on a host of risk and protective factors. We consider one such risk factor to be the use of exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspensions, expulsions), as these practices “further exacerbate mental health concerns, interrupt access to and participation in learning, limit opportunities, and negatively affect outcomes” (ED, 2021); schools with high rates of exclusionary discipline “have lower academic quality, and poorer school climate” (American Psychological Association, 2006; Girvan et al., 2017, p. 392). Furthermore, as has been recognized for over 40 years (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975), these practices are applied disproportionately to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) students (Girvan et al., 2017; Danielson et al., 2018; Skiba et al, 2011; Skiba et al., 2018).

On the other hand, engagement can serve as a protective factor against suspension, drop out, and other negative outcomes (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Gregory & Skiba, 2019; Armstrong et al., 2015). Engagement is an extended process, as is disengagement, and each can be conceptualized as a continuum that spans a period of years. According to Finn & Zimmer (2012, p. 107), “without intervention, behavioral risk and academic risk grow in tandem through the grades.” By the same token, engagement can “overcome the obstacles presented by status and academic risk factors, [and] can protect students from harm that may accrue.” The proposed project will develop a universally designed intervention in grades 4 and 5 that promotes engagement and reduces early disengagement. Other actionable protective factors in the proposed innovation include caring relationships with adults and peers, and access to school-based mental health services and supports (Stark et al., 2020).

**Addressing the Impact of COVID.** Since the onset of COVID-19, the prevalence of mental health problems has only gotten worse (ED, 2021; St. George & Strauss, 2021; Kurtz, 2022; Belsha, 2021). As Hirsch et al. (2022, p. 103) note, “Given the external risk factors (e.g., poverty), concurrent academic, social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties; and potential

outcomes (e.g., suspension, drop-out) students with [emotional behavioral disorder (EBD)] already face in typical conditions, it is plausible that COVID-19-related regression will be even greater among students with EBD (Dorn et al., 2020).” *Circle Up* teachers and mentors will be particularly sensitive to students who are likely to experience additional, *post-pandemic learning loss* due to: a) having a harder time in classroom settings as in-person schooling returns (e.g., struggle due to barriers in learning environments); and b) being referred for behavior at even higher rates than before the pandemic.

*Circle Up* is also responsive to the needs of students impacted by trauma from the pandemic and other adverse childhood experiences. UDL offers supports and options for trauma’s impacts on language, executive functioning, and self-regulation (Cole et al., 2005). Similarly, CPS and C&C help to mitigate trauma’s impact on students by identifying feelings and fostering new perspectives by building strong relationships between students and adults in the school.

**Promoting Educational Equity.** COVID did not create new educational disparities but highlighted and exacerbated substantial inequities in educational opportunities and mental health support systems for; underserved students (ED, 2021), including for BIPOC students (CDC, 2020; Quirk, 2020); students living in poverty (Dooley et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020); English Learners (ELs), especially Latinx ELs with immigrant parents (Uro et al., 2020); youth who identify as LGBTQI+ (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020; The Trevor Project, 2021); and students with disabilities, especially those with or at risk for EBD, as noted above (Skaar, Etscheidt, & Kraayenbrink, 2020; Hirsch et al., 2022; Dorn et al., 2020; Lund & Gabrielli, 2021). In addressing these equity issues, the U.S. Department of Education (2021) has frequently cited UDL in its guidance to the field during COVID, and almost half of state departments of education named UDL as a strategic priority in their COVID response plan. Similarly, CASEL’s framework for SEL provides a foundation for all communities to use evidence-based SEL strategies to advance the goals of equity and excellence in ways that are most meaningful to their local context (Schlund et al., 2020). The time is right to address these issues in Aldine ISD as they are undergoing an equity audit this year.

**A2. How the Proposed Innovation Improves upon Existing Strategies.** In response to the

student health crisis, a spate of SEL programs have been implemented in recent years. When properly designed and implemented, SEL programs can support a broad array of positive student outcomes, including academic success and educational attainment; physical, family, and emotional well-being; civic and community engagement; and workforce and career readiness (Aspen Institute, 2019; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Despite this recent surge in SEL programs to address this crisis, many of these programs fall short. **Exhibit 1, below, presents six common shortcomings that are addressed by our proposed solution.**

SEL program challenge	Circle Up response to these shortcomings
Lack of integration with academic learning throughout the day	The integration of social, emotional, and academic content in SEL programs, as proposed in Circle Up, is regarded as an essential element of success, and one where models are sorely needed (Aspen Institute, 2019; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; <a href="https://drc.casel.org/promote-sel-for-students/integration/">https://drc.casel.org/promote-sel-for-students/integration/</a> ). Currently, we're "still stuck in a paradigm that views social and emotional development and mastery of academic content as competing priorities" (Aspen Institute, p. 22). However, integrated SEL-academic programs, that support the whole student, do not sacrifice rigor—and in fact, the research indicates that students in such programs are more likely to grasp difficult academic content (Aspen Institute, 2019).
Inability to reach students who are already disengaged/not attending school	Most SEL programs consist of lessons or activities for students in school, disregarding the absent or excluded students who may be most in need of mental health services. Circle Up includes a structured-mentoring component (C&C) that addresses this need, to re-engage students and leverage insights about the broader community to inform classroom- and school-based efforts. Also, C&C and CPS use complementary methods for identifying students in need of support: C&C mentors review engagement and academic data to identify students in need of intervention, whereas teachers use CPS with students not meeting expectations in the classroom. By casting a wider net, Circle Up accounts for diverse forms of disengagement.
Do not actively facilitate development of trusting relationships with at least one trusted adult	Circle Up recognizes that trusting relationships between a student and a teacher (using CPS) and/or mentor (through C&C) are another essential element of successful SEL programs, critical to providing a safe and equitable learning environment (Aspen Institute, 2019; Konishi & Wong, 2018; Caparas, 2021; Mahoney et al., 2020). Although schools may have structures in place (e.g., morning meetings) that promote such relationships, when problems occur they are often resolved outside the classroom, which deprives the teacher and student of the opportunity to deepen their relationship by addressing problems in a structured way (as does CPS).
Lack of training for educators to develop their own social-emotional competence	A key learning from CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative is "Don't jump over the adults" (CASEL, 2021) but instead to focus on educator SEL first—so that they can model SEL for students, build school capacity, and strengthen their own social-emotional wellbeing (also see Mahoney et al., 2020). Circle Up, unlike most SEL programs, will explicitly incorporate adult SEL training into its training model.

<p>Programs not accessible to all students</p>	<p>SEL programs that are not accessible to all students <b>cannot support all students</b>. Circle Up supports teachers to design accessible learning environments, classroom routines, and lessons by viewing SEL strategies through the lens of universal design. The integration of UDL and SEL promises to be a powerful combination, and to our knowledge would be unique among SEL programs.</p>
<p>Not explicitly addressing disproportionality of exclusionary discipline</p>	<p>SEL programs do not necessarily address disproportionality, despite its impact as a risk factor on students' mental health and learning opportunities, and on school climate and academics. In Circle Up, disproportionality will be monitored by school-based SEL teams, and reduced through the implementation of CPS, which has been shown to reduce exclusionary discipline (Greene &amp; Haynes, 2021).</p>

**A3. Use-Case Scenario.** Miguel, a fourth grader, was ashamed that he was still being pulled out to work with a small group of students to “improve his reading.” He felt this more and more acutely until one day he lashed out and pushed a classmate who made a comment. Miguel was sent to the principal’s office and suspended. This soon became a pattern of growing frustration.

Last year, Mrs. Brown, Miguel’s new fourth grade teacher, had been a part of the group of teachers who were implementing the new Circle Up program, integrating UDL and CPS and working with the C&C mentor on the school’s SEL team to identify, design for, and support students who were struggling. From the C&C mentor, she knew Miguel’s history and suspected that there were deeper reasons for his disciplinary incidents. She had learned, when one of these incidents arose, that a one-on-one collaborative (CPS) conversation with a student could help them establish a trusting relationship and surface information about the underlying problem, including academic aspects that often contribute to the problem. When the next incident occurred, Mrs. Brown chose a quiet moment of transition to approach Miguel. “Miguel, I’ve noticed that you are having difficulty when you leave for your reading group,” began Mrs. Brown. “Are you sending me to the office?” he reacted. “You’re not in trouble, I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on. There must be something bothering you and I want to understand it better.” Through their conversation, Mrs. Brown learned how much Miguel hated having to read “baby books,” and how ashamed he was of having to leave the main class. On that basis, Mrs. Brown began to rethink her approach to supporting Miguel’s reading skills. Having learned to use UDL to examine her classroom learning environment and lessons, she decided to redesign

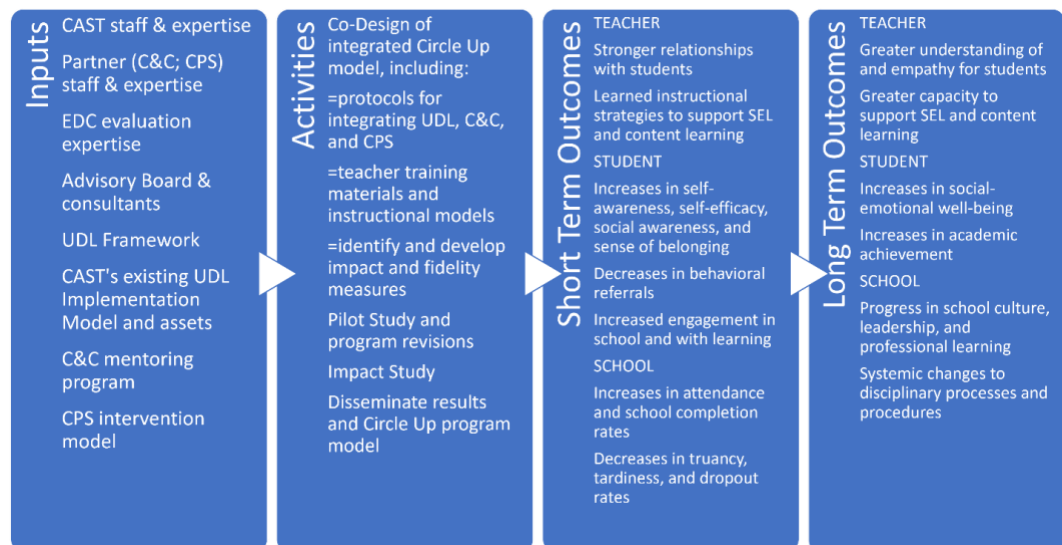
her approach to reading to support students with a range of reading abilities and also to boost their engagement by empowering them to set their own weekly reading goals (from a list based on comprehension standards; e.g., summarizing a paragraph) and to select their own books. These changes not only helped Miguel, but the entire class.

## B. QUALITY OF PROJECT DESIGN

**B1. Conceptual Framework & Quality.** Circle Up can be conceptualized as an ecological model within systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to this model, the responsibility for meeting a student’s social, emotional, and academic needs is distributed among the contexts in which the student learns and develops: classroom, school, family, and community. Because social, emotional, and academic needs vary across individuals, UDL is an appropriate tier 1 framework for instructional differentiation as it draws from seminal work in the learning sciences, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience that highlights variability among learners (Luria, 1973; Piaget & Cook, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). The more targeted (tier 2) and intensive (tier 3) services provided by both CPS and C&C draw on cognitive-behavioral theory (August et al., 1992; Hayes, 2004; Hayes & Hoffman 2017).

**Logic Model (See Exhibit 2; larger version in Appendix G).** The logic model shows how inputs will support activities in different contexts (classroom/teacher; family/school/community)

as well as  
how activities  
will be  
coordinated  
by school-  
based SEL  
teams. These  
activities will  
result in  
short- and





long-term outcomes for teachers (e.g., stronger relationships with students → greater understanding and empathy for students); students (e.g., increased engagement in school and with learning → increases in academic achievement); and schools (e.g., decreases in behavioral referrals → progress in school culture, leadership, and professional learning).

**B2. Goals, Objectives & Outcomes.** The primary goal of Circle Up is to develop, implement, and test a whole-school, integrated model for meeting students’ social, emotional, and academic needs, particularly for high-needs students. To meet that goal, activities will be aligned around four objectives: Objective 1 is to develop a training program and set of materials for Circle Up; Objective 2 is to launch and conduct a pilot of Circle Up with two partner schools from Aldine ISD; Objective 3 is to conduct an impact study of Circle Up with 24 schools from Aldine ISD; and Objective 4 is to support dissemination of Circle Up. Project activities will be conducted in three phases across five years. The following narrative describes the key activities that align to each project phase and objective.

***Phase 1: Iterative Co-design and Design-Based Research.*** In Phase 1 (January 2023 to June 2024), we will use design-based research (DBR) methods (Fishman et al., 2013; Penuel et al., 2011) with teachers and their students to create engaging and effective student learning experiences and a whole-school system of SEL supports. In particular, we will co-design: a) models of universally designed learning environments, classroom routines, and academic lessons with embedded SEL supports; b) protocols for capturing the relevant information from the implementation of *Circle Up* components to ensure that they inform and strengthen each other; and c) a teacher training program, incorporating *their own* learning environments, routines, lessons and protocols into *Circle Up*. The iterative development processes will be conducted with a participatory design cohort (Spinuzzi, 2005; Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018). The Co-Design Team, from one selected Aldine ISD school, will include an administrator, 2-3 Master teachers, their students, and 1-2 C&C mentors (most likely guidance counselors or academic and SEL instructional specialists). Working with the external evaluators, we will also test and refine surveys and other data collection instruments, develop fidelity measures, refine the evaluation

plan for the impact study, and recruit schools and staff for the Phase 2 pilot study. Our advisor from CASEL, the national content experts on SEL, will play a key role in contributing to the design of integrated academic and SEL model environments, routines, and lessons and fidelity measures for their implementation.

The Co-Design Team will partner with the project team to co-develop and test learning environments, classroom routines, and lessons as well as protocols for integrating information from *Circle Up*'s components. They will work through multiple cycles of an iterative design process in response to feedback from diverse stakeholders; they will also be "champions" of Circle Up as the project goes forward, helping to build capacity throughout the district by collaboratively documenting practices to be integrated into future training. Teachers' entire classrooms will try the practices as they are developed, with students providing feedback as described below. Protocols for integrating *Circle Up* in classrooms and for coordinating information across the school, will be developed, implemented, and revised as students use these more targeted/intensive services. For example, one protocol might include an explicit reflection after each CPS conversation so practitioners can identify barriers to address with UDL strategies. Other protocols will be school-wide, including establishing a "SEL team" in each school building that receives referrals, reviews data to identify students who need intensive supports, and monitors referrals for potential disproportionality; these school-based teams will support the work of Aldine's district-wide SEL team.

Researchers will use qualitative research methods during Phase 1 to rapidly generate richly detailed data about the learning environments and protocols. Each development cycle of 1) co-design, 2) implement, and 3) collect data and analyze, will be used to address *Circle Up*'s **clarity** (How well are the goals of the learning environments/protocols understood?), **accessibility** (How easily are the learning environments/material used?), **value** (To what extent are learning environments/protocols valuable in supporting project goals?), and **promise** (To what extent do learning environments/protocols lead toward the development of desired outcomes?). We will rely on multiple data sources including observations conducted by the master teachers and mentors; anonymous student surveys (e.g., exit tickets) collected by teachers and mentors; and

student focus groups (for a sample of students) conducted by researchers. Coding and analysis of data will be ongoing and qualitative during Phase 1 design development (Creswell, 2007; LeCompte & Preissle, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These analyses will provide a perspective on which learning environments and protocols are most likely to support students' social, emotional, and academic development.

**Phase 2: Pilot Study.** During Phase 2 (July 2024 to June 2026), we will conduct a pilot study, including: a) training teachers and mentors; b) supporting the ongoing implementation of *Circle Up* by teachers, mentors and school-based SEL teams; c) testing and refining instruments for measuring outcomes, mediators, and fidelity; and d) revising the teacher training program. We will also recruit schools for the Phase 3 impact study. In Year 1 of the pilot study, we will work with six teachers (three grade 4 and three grade 5) and their students from two elementary schools in Aldine ISD (excluding the school participating in Phase 1). The implementation teams will also include C&C mentors, an administrator, and an instructional specialist. In Year 2, we will scale to all 4th and 5th grade teachers in the pilot schools, which we anticipate having 6-7 teachers at each grade level based on their size. Because Phases 2 and 3 are staggered, data from Year 1 of the pilot will inform the design, materials, implementation, and measures used in Year 1 of the impact study; similarly, Year 2 of the pilot will inform Year 2 of the impact study.

**Phase 3: Impact Study and Dissemination.** Phase 3 (July 2025 to June 2027) consists of an impact study to evaluate the *Circle Up* program in 24 Aldine ISD elementary schools (12 intervention and 12 comparison; excluding the schools from Phases 1 and 2). Phase 3 will include: a) training for teachers, mentors, instructional specialists, and administrators; and b) support for the ongoing UDL-CPS design cycle, C&C mentoring, and school-based SEL teams. As in the pilot study, Year 1 training in the impact study will concentrate on a core set of six teachers (three at each grade level), and Year 2 training will scale to all 4th and 5th grade teachers in the intervention schools. Our evaluation partner, EDC, will execute a quasi-experimental design study with a matched comparison group designed to meet What Works Clearinghouse Standards with reservations, and analyze and report on fidelity of implementation and the contrast with business-as-usual schools (evaluation plan detailed below). We will

disseminate the results of the impact study and project resources (including Circle Up learning environments, classroom routines, and lessons, and documentation developed in collaboration with master teachers). Dissemination efforts will support scaling of efforts in Aldine, as well as other schools and districts to adopt the integrated approach.

**B3. Core Components. Universal Design for Learning (UDL).** The basic premise of UDL is that barriers to learning occur in the interaction between learners’ strengths and challenges, and the curricula. UDL ensures that the curriculum is designed to account for systematic student variability without lowering expectations by providing students with 1) multiple means of engagement, 2) multiple means of representation, and 3) multiple means of expression and action (Meyer et al., 2014). UDL enables educators to anticipate and reduce barriers to learning by making the goals, methods, materials, and assessment flexible. (See Appendix J-1.)

The research evidence underlying the UDL framework is substantial, growing, and draws from neuroscience, educational psychology, special education, educational technology, and implementation. A review of empirical studies by Rao, Ok, & Bryant (2014) reported studies with statistically significant positive effects with UDL in literacy, math, and science content knowledge as well as student engagement. Experimental studies have demonstrated impacts for UDL solutions in science (Blackorby et al., 2018; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2020) and social studies (Blackorby et al., 2018), with effect sizes ranging from .20 to .90. Accordingly, the U.S. Congress has defined UDL as “a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that: (a) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways learners respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways learners are engaged; and (b) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all learners including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient” (20 U.S.C. § 1003(24)). UDL is noted in the ESSA (2015), IDEA (2004), the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA; 2008), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, as well as in the 2010 and 2016 National Education Technology Plans (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, 2016). At least 24 states have mentioned UDL in their state ESSA (Lowrey et al., 2020). UDL has been identified

as a critical focus or need in COVID response plans by 12 states (CAST, 2020a).

**Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS).** (See Appendix J-2.) CPS is an evidence-based psychosocial treatment model, that has been shown to reduce challenging behaviors and to solve the problems that are causing those behaviors, enhance the lagging skills that are contributing to those problems (Ollendick et al., 2015; Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2016), improve communication and relationships between students with behavioral challenges and their teachers, and reduce or eliminate discipline referrals and the use of suspension, restraint, and seclusion (Greene et al., 2004; Booker et al., 2016; Greene & Winkler, 2019; Greene & Haynes, 2021). An important premise of CPS is that concerning behavior occurs in conditions in which students are having difficulty meeting specific expectations. This drives the goal of intervention—to help teachers and students engage in collaborative and proactive efforts to solve those problems, thereby reducing or eliminating the concerning behavior they cause (Greene & Winkler, 2019).

In schools, application of the CPS model involves two primary components: (1) moving away from assessments that quantify overt behavior and towards instruments that identify a child's lagging skills and unsolved problems, through use of the *Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP)*, see Appendix J-3; LITB, 2020); and (2) engaging students in solving problems collaboratively and proactively. The problem-solving process, known as the *Plan B* conversation (see Appendix J-4), involves three steps: 1) The *Empathy* step, in which the teacher gathers information from the student about their perspective on an unsolved problem, with a focus on what's making it difficult for the student to meet a specific expectation; 2) The *Define Adult Concerns* step, in which the teacher articulates their perspective on the same unsolved problem, with a focus on why it's important that the expectation be met (health, learning, safety of the student and/or others); and 3) The *Invitation* step, in which the student and teacher collaboratively arrive at a solution that addresses the concerns of both parties.

**Check & Connect (C&C).** (See Appendix J-5.) C&C is a comprehensive intervention designed to enhance student engagement at school and with learning for marginalized, disengaged students in grades K-12, through relationship building, problem solving and capacity

building, and persistence. It is comprised of four components: 1) A mentor who works with students and families for a minimum of two years; 2) Regular checks, utilizing data schools already collect on students’ school adjustment, behavior, and educational progress; 3) Timely data-driven interventions to reestablish and maintain student connection to school and learning and to enhance student social and academic competencies; and 4) Engagement with families. Given the importance of multiple contextual influences—home, school, and community—on student disengagement and school dropout, C&C mentors work to create positive relationships in and among all three environments in order to provide consistent standards for educational performance and supports for students to attain them (Christenson et al., 1997).

Research has shown that C&C significantly increases the likelihood that students will stay in school. It is the only dropout prevention intervention reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse to show “positive effects” for staying in school (WWC, 2006). In the two random assignment studies upon which that conclusion was based, the students receiving C&C were “significantly less likely than similar control group students to have dropped out of school at the end of the first follow-up year . . . 9% compared with 30%”— and were “significantly less likely to have dropped out of school at the end of the fourth follow-up year . . . 39% compared with 58%)” (Sinclair et al., 1998; Sinclair et al., 2005, as quoted in WWC, 2006, p. 3). C&C also increased student engagement variables such as participation (attendance), behavior (social skills ratings), academics (credits earned), and a five-year graduation rate for students with disabilities were also shown in these studies.

**B4. Action Plan to Integrate & Implement.** The four objectives of the Circle Up intervention, with accompanying strategies, activities and expected outcomes are outlined below.

Objective 1: Develop a training program and set of materials for Circle Up

Strategy	Activities	Outcomes
1.1 Recruit Aldine Co-Design Team and gather information to inform co-design Activities 1.2-1.5.	Recruit from one school: an administrator, 2-3 master teachers, 2 mentors, instructional specialists, provide initial training in UDL and CPS (4 days), and gather information about environments, routines, & lessons.	Initial learning environment considerations and lesson designs.
1.2 Co-design with Aldine Co-	Engage team in a multiple cycle co-design process	Models of practice

Design Team: classroom learning environments, routines, and lessons using UDL with embedded SEL supports.	using UDL to develop concepts for learning environments, routines, and lessons with SEL embedded supports. Document the process. Develop a plan for gathering and analyzing data.	using UDL to embed SEL strategies in learning environments, classroom routines, and lessons.
1.3 Co-design with Aldine Co-Design Team: protocols for UDL / CPS integration.	Engage team in a multiple cycle co-design process to develop protocols, implement these to inform practice, and revise to increase usability and usefulness.	UDL / CPS Integration protocols
1.4 Co-design with Aldine Co-Design Team: protocols for school SEL teams, including C&C mentors and other staff.	Engage team in a multiple cycle co-design process to develop protocols, implement these to inform practice, and revise to increase usability and usefulness.	School SEL Team protocols
1.5 Co-design with Aldine Co-Design Team: complete training program, with models of practice and protocols.	Draft complete training program, share with advisors and Aldine ISD district-level partners, revise on the basis of feedback.	Circle Up Training Program
1.6 Develop instruments to measure fidelity and impact of intervention	Identify impact measures based on expected outcomes; develop fidelity measures based on key components.	Impact measures for implementation; Circle Up fidelity measures.
1.7 Refine evaluation plan for impact study.	Refine evaluation plan for impact study based on training program, impact measures, fidelity measures.	Refined evaluation plan for impact study
1.8 Recruit schools and staff for Phase 2 pilot study.	Recruit schools for pilot study after determining the pool of candidate schools for impact study. Recruit staff from pilot study schools.	Two pilot study schools

Objective 2: Launch and conduct a pilot of Circle Up with two partner schools from Aldine ISD<sup>1</sup>

Strategy	Activities	Outcomes
2.1 Implement the Circle Up program in two pilot schools.	Implement the Circle Up program as outlined below.	Launch of Circle Up
2.2 Test the impact and Circle Up fidelity measures.	Implement the impact and fidelity measures and analyze the results	Pilot data and results from measures
2.3 Revise the Circle Up program and measures	Make changes to training, protocols, and measures to support increased usefulness and usability.	Revised training, protocols, and measures.
2.4 Recruit schools and staff for Phase 3 impact study.	Recruit schools for impact study. Recruit staff from impact study schools.	24 impact study schools (12 intervention, 12 comparison)

<sup>1</sup> See objective 3 for an outline of the pilot intervention itself.

Objective 3: Conduct an impact study of Circle Up with 12 intervention and 12 comparison schools from Aldine ISD

Strategy	Activities	Outcomes
3.1 Implement Circle Up training: foundation, Year 1.	Build foundational UDL, CPS, and SEL knowledge and practice of core staff in 12 impact study schools based on revised training.	Increased teacher capacity to anticipate barriers, design for accessibility and inclusion, and SEL basics.
3.2 Implement Circle Up training: SEL-academic integration, Year 1.	Design classroom learning environments, routines, and lessons using UDL with embedded SEL supports based on piloted models.	Learning environments, classroom routines, and lesson designs with embedded SEL strategies leading to increased student engagement, self-awareness, self-efficacy, social awareness, relationship skills, and sense of belonging.
3.3 Implement Circle Up training: UDL / CPS integration, Year 1.	Implement integrated UDL/ CPS problem solving and design cycle based on revised UDL / CPS Integration protocols.	Investment in teacher SEL, stronger trusting relationship between students and teacher, decrease in behavioral referrals, and increased student engagement in school and learning.
3.4 Implement Circle Up training: school SEL Teams, including C&C mentors, Year 1.	Implement integrated C&C mentoring based on revised school SEL Team protocols.	Trusting relationships between mentors and students; reduced rates of truancy, out-of-school suspension, and course failures; increased rates of attendance
3.5 Implement Circle Up training: scale up, Year 2.	Implement activities 3.1-3.4 with all 4th and 5th grade teachers in impact study schools.	Circle Up whole-school implementation in upper elementary grades. Outcomes 3.1-3.4 expected for all students and teachers in grades 4 and 5.
3.6 Collect impact data on Circle Up implementation	Collect impact data in Years 1 and 2 using revised impact measures	Impact data on Circle Up implementation
3.7 Collect fidelity data on Circle Up implementation	Collect fidelity data in Years 1 and 2 using revised fidelity measures	Fidelity data on Circle Up implementation
3.8 Analyze impact and fidelity data on Circle Up implementation	Assess the effect of Circle Up on student academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes; test exploratory hypotheses; evaluate the fidelity of program implementation	Evidence about impact capable of meeting What Works Clearinghouse standards with reservations; evidence about potential mediators; evidence about the extent schools implement Circle Up with fidelity to the key components of the program model

Objective 4: Support dissemination of Circle Up.

Strategy	Activities	Outcomes
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4.1 Share models and research in practice and research conferences (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children; American Educational Research Association) and journals (e.g., <i>Journal of School Psychology, Learning and Instruction</i> ).	Share results and practices that emerge from Circle Up across the varied contexts where UDL, CPS, and/or C&C are typically discussed.	Additional interest in implementing Circle Up and identification of future partners for research and development opportunities.
4.2 Collaborate with Aldine ISD to use the materials and capacity developed to broaden the scope of implementation across the district.	Work with Aldine to expand program to comparison schools and to more grade levels in all schools.	Increases in engagement, SEL, academic achievement, and attainment for more students across Aldine ISD.

**B5. How Project Activities Address Population Needs.** The Aldine Independent School district (ISD) is an excellent partner for this project. Serving portions of Houston and unincorporated Harris County, TX, Aldine ISD comprises 83 schools, serving 63,000 students. Almost 88% of their students are classified as economically disadvantaged, while nearly 71% are considered to be at-risk. The demographic make-up of the student body is: 75% Hispanic, 21% African American, 2% white, and 1% Asian; 17% English Language Learners, and 9% receiving special education services. *Circle Up* is highly responsive to Aldine’s needs and concerns. The project offers Aldine ISD a valuable opportunity to implement UDL at the school level in concert with the more intensive supports drawn from CPS and C&C. The project’s approach to reducing disproportionality is also of tremendous interest to the district. (See Appendix J-6.)

**C. QUALITY OF PROJECT PERSONNEL**

**C1. Commitment to equitable hiring practices.** CAST has policies and practices that promote the hiring and advancement of diverse personnel without regard to race, religion, color, national origin, gender, age, sexual orientation, or disabling conditions—including procedures that support the employment and advancement of qualified individuals with disabilities. Currently 51% of CAST’s staff of 57 and 36% of its Board of 11 are individuals with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, or members of a minority group.

**C2. Qualifications of key personnel.** Overall, project leadership will be the responsibility of [REDACTED], Senior Research Scientist at CAST. [REDACTED] has a successful track record with i3- and EIR-funded projects, both from the perspective of grant recipient and that of the external project evaluator. He will have responsibility for the overall design, implementation, analysis,

reporting, fiscal management, and dissemination of *Circle Up*. [REDACTED] will be supported in this work by a multi-disciplinary team structure. (See Exhibit 3, below; c.v.s in Appendix B; and management chart, Appendix J-7.)

**Exhibit 3: *Circle Up* Teams & Team Leadership**

<p><b>Leadership Team</b></p> <p>[REDACTED], (CAST), [REDACTED] (CAST), and [REDACTED] (EDC). [REDACTED] is a cognitive scientist with expertise around executive functioning, student engagement, and self-regulation. [REDACTED] is one of CAST's UDL Implementation Specialists; he has extensive experience in whole-school implementation of UDL, and has experience implementing CPS at a school focused on integrating academic, social, and emotional learning. [REDACTED] is a Research Scientist at EDC and has significant experience in researching diverse populations, research methods and EIRs with similar RCT designs.</p>
<p><b>Design &amp; Implementation Team</b></p> <p>[REDACTED] and [REDACTED], LICSW will lead design and development efforts for <i>Circle Up</i>. [REDACTED] is a CAST Implementation Specialist with particular expertise around trauma informed school environments and restorative justice practices. They will be supported in these efforts by [REDACTED] (Lives in the Balance - CPS) and [REDACTED] (UMN - C&amp;C).</p>
<p><b>Evaluation Team</b></p> <p>[REDACTED] (EDC) will lead the independent evaluation efforts including instrument design, procedures, data collection, impact analyses. [REDACTED] will be CAST's primary liaison with EDC and contribute to research protocols. The team will also receive guidance from EDC evaluators with content expertise, including [REDACTED] [REDACTED], a behavioral health expert and Senior Research Scientist at EDC and head of EDC's SEL &amp; Mental Health Academy.</p>
<p><b>Advisory Board &amp; Consultants</b></p> <p><i>Circle Up</i>'s advisors will lend their expertise approximately one day each year for either group wide or targeted advisory board meetings. Board members include: [REDACTED], Lasell University, researches the implementation of comprehensive school reform efforts using evidenced-based models to address disproportionality and the specific needs of English language learners. [REDACTED], Plymouth State University, brings direct experience and insight into the integration of CPS and UDL. [REDACTED], University of Georgia, is an expert on student engagement and school completion, with particular focus on measurement. She also has direct experience as a C&amp;C Mentor. [REDACTED], CASEL, has deep content expertise and experience working at the nexus of research, practice, and policy: she oversees the design and management of CASEL's research agenda at the level of states, districts and school communities, and leads CASEL's internal continuous improvement and learning agenda.</p>

**D. QUALITY OF THE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**D1. Strength of organizations & partnerships.** Our partners (see Exhibit 4) in this effort have shared missions of improving outcomes for all learners and have collaborated on multiple projects over many years. Each organization has the experience, expertise, and infrastructure to perform the proposed work on time and on budget as evidenced through much prior research,

development, implementation, and evaluation projects. Collectively, staff from across our partners will work in interdisciplinary teams to ensure a cohesive approach to project activities.

**Exhibit 4. Circle Up Organizational Partners**

<p><b>CAST:</b> Founded in 1984, CAST is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to expand opportunities for all individuals, especially underserved learners, through innovative uses of UDL. A leader in UDL, CAST has earned international recognition for its innovative educational products, classroom practices, and policies. CAST has extensive experience in developing and testing technologies that are used in authentic classroom settings. We also have a long track record of providing professional development to districts and schools.</p>
<p><b>University of Minnesota - Institute on Community Integration (ICI):</b> UMN-ICI has developed, implemented, and conducted research on the Check &amp; Connect (C&amp;C) mentoring intervention that will be integrated as a key component of <i>Circle Up</i>. For more than 30 years, C&amp;C mentors have helped keep thousands of students on track toward graduation. C&amp;C is the only dropout prevention intervention listed on the IES What Works Clearinghouse found to have positive effects on staying in school.</p>
<p><b>Lives in the Balance - Collaborative &amp; Proactive Solutions (CPS):</b> CPS is an evidence-based model of care that helps caregivers focus on identifying the problems that are causing concerning behaviors in kids and solving those problems collaboratively and proactively. The model is a departure from approaches emphasizing the use of consequences to modify concerning behaviors. LITB has overseen implementation and evaluation of the CPS model in hundreds of schools, inpatient psychiatry units, and residential and juvenile detention facilities, with dramatic effect: significant reductions in recidivism, discipline referrals, detentions, suspensions, and use of restraint and seclusion.</p>
<p><b>Education Development Center (EDC)</b> is a global nonprofit that advances lasting solutions to improve education, promote health, and expand economic opportunity. Since 1958, we have been a leader in designing, implementing, and evaluating powerful and innovative programs in more than 80 countries around the world. EDC is well known for mounting large-scale evaluations of real-world policies and programs, including several i3 and EIR initiatives, and will oversee the evaluation study for <i>Circle Up</i>.</p>

**D2. Management structure.** Circle Up’s interdisciplinary, cross-partner teams are described, above (see C2). An organizational chart for the project can be found in Appendix J-7.

**D3. Timelines, milestones, & responsibilities.** Please see Exhibit 5, below.

**Exhibit 5. Timeline and Milestones**

Strategy	Milestones	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Personnel
Objective 1: Develop a training program and set of materials for Circle Up.							
1.1	Recruit Co-Design Team and gather information	√					1
1.2	Co-design learning environments, routines, lessons	√	√				1, 2
1.3	Co-design protocols for UDL / CPS integration	√	√				1, 2
1.4	Co-design protocols for school SEL teams	√	√				1, 2
1.5	Co-design complete training program	√	√				1, 2
1.6	Develop fidelity and impact instruments		√	√			1, 3

1.7	Refine evaluation plan for impact study		√	√			1, 3
1.8	Recruit schools and staff for Phase 2 pilot study		√	√			1, 2
Objective 2: Launch and conduct a pilot of Circle Up with two partner schools from Aldine ISD.							
2.1	Implement the Circle Up program in two pilot schools		√	√	√		2
2.2	Test the impact and Circle Up fidelity measures		√	√	√		1, 3
2.3	Revise the Circle Up program and measures		√	√	√		1, 2
2.4	Recruit schools and staff for Phase 3 impact study			√			1, 2
Objective 3: Conduct an impact study of Circle Up with 12 intervention and 12 comparison schools.							
3.1	Implement Circle Up: foundation			√	√		2
3.2	Implement Circle Up: SEL-academic integration			√	√		2
3.3	Implement Circle Up: UDL / CPS integration			√	√	√	2
3.4	Implement Circle Up: school SEL Teams			√	√	√	2
3.5	Implement Circle Up: scale up				√	√	2
3.6	Collect impact data on Circle Up implementation			√	√	√	2, 3
3.7	Collect fidelity data on Circle Up implementation			√	√	√	2, 3
3.8	Analyze impact and fidelity data				√	√	3
Objective 4. Support dissemination of Circle Up.							
4.1	Share models and research in conferences, journals					√	1, 3
4.2	Work with Aldine ISD to expand model					√	2

Leadership Team=1; Design & Implementation Team=2; Evaluation Team=3

**D4. Costs are reasonable and appropriate.** The proposed budget totaling \$4,000,000 over five years is reasonable and adequate to support the effort of project staff, partners, and contractors to fulfill project goals and objectives. We will leverage existing assets, including CAST’s UDL Implementation Model and the CPS and C&C mentoring interventions, in order to maximize what can be accomplished with the investment of EIR funding.

**D5. Procedures for ensuring feedback and continuous improvement.** Feedback and continuous improvement procedures will be implemented for all activity categories to ensure that project objectives are addressed. Formative evaluation of implementation products will also provide data for meeting benchmarks and making improvements to ensure the quality, usability,

and effectiveness of *Circle Up*. Regular and ongoing communication between the project team and EDC will ensure that data are used to inform project improvement. See Section E, below.

## **E. QUALITY OF THE PROJECT EVALUATION**

EDC will conduct an external evaluation of *Circle Up* that aims to (1) produce evidence about the effect of the intervention on student outcomes using a quasi-experimental design capable of meeting What Works Clearinghouse standards with reservations, (2) answer other exploratory questions important for understanding mediators and improving and scaling the intervention, and (3) determine the extent to which the intervention was implemented with fidelity and differentiated from business-as-usual activities. **Research questions** include:

**1. Impact:** What are the effects of attending a Circle Up school on student academic, socioemotional, and behavioral outcomes?

**2. Exploratory:** a) Does the teacher's self-efficacy to support students' SEL mediate student outcomes? b) To what extent do outcomes and participant experiences vary for different subgroups of students and teachers?

**3. Implementation:** a) To what extent do schools implement Circle Up with fidelity to the key components of the program model? b) How do Circle Up schools' systemic supports for social emotional learning and emotional-behavioral issues differ from business-as-usual practices in the district's non-participating elementary schools? c) How does implementation fidelity relate to student, teacher, and school outcomes? d) What are the facilitators and barriers to successful implementation (especially academic/SEL integration and UDL-CPS-C&C coordination)?

**E1. Impact study design:** Evaluators will use a short interrupted time series with matched comparison schools (C-SITS) study to estimate the effect of attending a Circle Up school on student outcomes. In this design, we assess whether the pre/post difference in mean cohort outcomes within Circle Up schools is different from the pre/post difference in a matched set of non-participating schools over the same time period. Outcome data for successive cohorts of students in the four years preceding the intervention will be used to establish a baseline mean, which will be compared to the cohort in the second year of the field test (when Circle Up is rolled out schoolwide). Because schools will not be randomly assigned to the intervention, this

quasi-experimental design addresses selection bias by using a matched comparison group of schools that are equivalent in their student body and other characteristics before the intervention begins. The inclusion of multiple prior baseline cohorts within each school yields a more precise pre-intervention baseline that strengthens the internal validity of intervention effect estimates.

**Sample:** The impact analysis will exclude schools that participated in the design and pilot activities. The analytic sample will comprise all 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students attending the 12 Circle Up schools, and all 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students attending 12 comparison elementary schools in the district selected from the remaining schools that did not participate in the intervention or the pilot. With an estimated 75 students per grade per cohort year at each of 12 intervention and 12 comparison schools, and four pre-intervention years of data, the study is powered to detect a moderate *minimum effect size* of 0.33 (Dong & Maynard, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

**Exhibit 6. Time periods for Comparative Short Interrupted Time Series**

Year	Intervention cohorts	Comparison cohorts	How used in analyses
2021/22	Baseline cohort A	Baseline cohort A	Pre-intervention mean baseline estimated from cohorts A-D
2022/23	Baseline cohort B	Baseline cohort B	
2023/24	Baseline cohort C	Baseline cohort C	
2024/25	Baseline cohort D	Baseline cohort D	Baseline equivalence assessed for cohort D
2025/26	Partial intervention <sup>3</sup> (limited introduction of Circle Up)	Business as usual	
2026/27	Full intervention (whole school)	Business as usual	Intervention effect estimated for this year

Comparison schools will be selected using coarsened exact matching or a similar approach based on pre-intervention measures, including aggregate student demographics as well as SEL and academic outcomes for baseline cohorts, and school characteristics such as total enrollment. Per WWC guidelines, evaluators will establish school-level baseline equivalence of the intervention and comparison schools for the most recent baseline cohort year (2024/25) on key student demographic characteristics and on each of the outcome measures.

<sup>2</sup> Power calculations assume  $\alpha = .05$ ,  $\beta = .80$ , variance between cohorts = .02 (Bloom, 1999), 10% variance explained by cohort covariates.

<sup>3</sup> Because full intervention effects are not expected to be observable in the partial treatment year before full school implementation, outcome data from this year will not be included in estimation of intervention effects, and will not be used as a baseline measure.

Three-level models will take into account the clustering of students within cohorts within schools, and will estimate a school-cohort intervention effect since the program is designed to involve the whole school. Covariates will include student demographic characteristics. The study will estimate separate intervention effects for students in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade, because some 5<sup>th</sup> graders in Circle Up schools will experience the “partial intervention” in year 1 of the program while 4<sup>th</sup> graders will not. (See Appendix J-8 for model equations.)

**Measures:** The impact study will estimate differences in the following student outcomes, eligible for review under the WWC (2021) protocol for social, emotional, and behavioral interventions:

**Exhibit 7: Domains and Measures**

Domain	Measures
Academic achievement	represented by letter grades in mathematics and English language arts, two subject areas in which all students in the 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> grades receive a grade; and the state standardized assessment scores (STAAR) in mathematics and reading
Social emotional well-being	represented by student self-report Panorama surveys administered throughout the district at the end of the year, including measures of: student-teacher relationships, self-efficacy for academic achievement, self-management (including social awareness and relationship skills), sense of belonging in school, and student engagement <sup>4</sup> with school.
Behavioral	number of absences, truant days, tardy days, suspensions, behavioral referrals during the year

Each of these student outcome measures will be obtained from administrative data routinely collected in the district. Aldine ISD has agreed to negotiate a data sharing agreement with the evaluators to make these data available if the grant is awarded. We have selected measures of these outcomes that have demonstrated evidence of reliability and validity (see Appendix J-9).

**E2. Exploratory analyses:** To answer additional questions about teacher self-efficacy as a hypothesized mediator, as well as the moderating effects of student and teacher characteristics, evaluators will use correlational and descriptive approaches, summarized in Exhibit 8. To supplement the Panorama survey data available districtwide on these constructs, the Circle Up team will administer a pre- and post-intervention survey to teachers in Circle Up schools.

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<sup>4</sup> Researchers will explore the possibility of administering an additional Student Engagement Instrument to intervention and comparison students to better understand dimensions of engagement (Betts, Appleton, Reschly, Christenson, & Huebner, 2010).

**Exhibit 8: Exploratory analyses**

Analysis	Measures (See Appendix J-9 for details)	Sample
RQ2a: Does the teacher’s self-efficacy to support students’ SEL mediate student outcomes?		
Hierarchical regression models with students nested in schools; mediation model	Teacher self-efficacy to support student SEL, based on Panorama teacher surveys administered at the beginning and end of each year districtwide; number of behavioral referrals made for their students.	12 intervention and 12 comparison schools, 2026/27 cohort of 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> graders (~150 students and ~10 teachers per school)
OLS regression models with teacher post-intervention efficacy scores regressed on pre-scores	Teacher collective self-efficacy and belief in value of SEL administered at beginning and end of the 2-year program intervention school year in Circle Up schools (Sanchez-Rosas et al, 2022)	12 <i>intervention</i> schools only, 2026/27 cohort of 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> graders (~10 teachers per school)
RQ2b: To what extent do outcomes and participant experiences vary for different subgroups of students and teachers?		
Hierarchical regression models, students nested in schools, using interaction terms to test student characteristics as moderators	Administrative data on student characteristics	12 intervention and 12 comparison schools, 2026/27 cohort of 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> graders (~150 students per school)

**E3. Implementation:** EDC will conduct an implementation analysis of *Circle Up* to assess participating schools’ adherence to intervention components during each year of pilot and field study implementation, and document the contrast between *Circle Up* and business as usual practices. In addition, the implementation study will aim to understand variation in how *Circle Up* works in practice across schools and participant subgroups, provide feedback for improvement, and identify conditions necessary for scaling and full-scale implementation.

**Implementation fidelity (RQ3a):** Evaluators will measure the following dimensions of implementation fidelity (Dane & Schneider, 1998): (1) adherence – whether the components of the intervention are being delivered as designed; (2) exposure– the number, length, or frequency of activities; (3) quality of delivery – the extent to which the program is delivered using the prescribed techniques, processes, and methods; and (4) participant responsiveness and engagement – the extent to which participants are engaged by and involved in the activities and content of the program. EDC will construct implementation fidelity measures using CAST program data and participant interview data from participating schools.



*Implementation fidelity measures.* EDC will assess the degree to which Circle Up’s key components are implemented with fidelity and utilize other implementation data, all of which will yield information for program improvement and replication or testing in different settings. EDC will work with CAST to co-develop fidelity measures with specified thresholds to assess whether the intervention was implemented with acceptable fidelity, and to design data collection tools and protocols. CAST program staff and Aldine ISD staff will collect fidelity data, and EDC will analyze and report on it. Fidelity data sources will include attendance logs, observations, mentors’ feedback forms, surveys, and focus groups. Districtwide Panorama surveys also provide measures of school climate, school-wide supports for SEL, and family perception of how well the school fits their child. Appendix J-10 shows each of the components of the intervention, examples of the types of indicators, the data sources, and potential values for thresholds indicating fidelity of implementation. Based on research on fidelity (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Hill & Erickson, 2019), EDC researchers will establish thresholds defining fidelity for each component of the intervention: e.g., less than 60% participation of teachers in an activity might indicate ‘below the expected implementation’ threshold, 60%-80% might be scored as ‘adequate implementation,’ and above 80% as ‘exemplary implementation. An overall numeric score for fidelity will be computed for use in quantitative models.

***Treatment contrast (RQ3b):*** Evaluators will assess whether critical features that distinguish the program from the comparison condition are present or absent during implementation. Circle Up will administer an end-of-year survey of school administrators at the 24 intervention and comparison schools in 2026/27 on instructional and SEL/emotional-behavioral support and disciplinary practices, and EDC will analyze and report on results. In addition, EDC will analyze school-level aggregated measures of school climate and resources for student support from Panorama teacher surveys administered at the end of the year districtwide.

***Fidelity’s relationship to outcomes (R3c):*** Researchers will calculate an overall fidelity score for each school, based on attainment of fidelity thresholds for key components, and determine cut scores based on descriptive statistics that indicate “below expected,” “adequate,” and “exemplary” implementation. Aggregated student outcomes will then be compared descriptively

and statistically across the three categories.

**Implementation evaluation methods.** EDC will use a mixed-methods evaluation approach. During the project's first three years, CAST will utilize multiple data sources to inform program design and decision-making. These include surveys, coaching and mentoring logs, and implementation checklists collected from pilot schools in years 1-3. CAST will provide EDC with program data on all Circle Up components. In addition to quantitative data from surveys, EDC will receive interview and focus group transcripts, and will code them according to a structure designed to provide comparative information among participating schools and identify factors and themes contributing to any differences.

**Data analysis approach.** EDC will use descriptive and bivariate statistics to analyze quantitative implementation data, to the extent that sample sizes allow. During the field study years, implementation survey responses will be analyzed using t-tests, chi-square tests, or ANOVA to identify any variation in implementation and participant experiences among subgroups (such as more and less experienced teachers and students with and without an IEP). Qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to make inferences about qualitative data, including open-ended survey items and interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

**Reporting.** EDC's reports will be structured to inform ongoing program development and implementation during the first three years. EDC will hold **bimonthly meetings** with the Circle Up team to discuss formative data collected by school and project staff and provide feedback at the school level. Feedback on implementation will be provided to Circle Up staff to identify schools for a more in-depth examination, e.g., teachers at schools with below-expected fidelity of implementation may be interviewed to identify important barriers and challenges. In addition, EDC, Circle Up, and Aldine IDS staff will meet regularly to discuss developments in evaluation and emerging findings. EDC will produce a report each year for Circle Up that contains analyses and recommendations designed to prompt reflection on the program and its implementation. In the final field test year, EDC will produce a report on fidelity of implementation demonstrated by field test Circle Up schools and document the contrast with business as usual schools.