Executive Summary

The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Challenge was designed to identify promising practices for building skills in six areas: emotion management, empathy, teamwork, initiative, responsibility, and problem solving. The Challenge was a partnership between expert practitioners (youth workers, social workers, teachers) delivering exemplary programs in eight unique communities, a team of researchers, and a national foundation.

Although each of the exemplary out-of-school time (OST) programs that were studied uses a different curriculum, their approaches to building social and emotional skills have important similarities, and these are the subject of the guide. This guide presents 32 standards and 58 indicators of SEL practice in six domains as well as four curriculum features that were shown to be foundational for supporting SEL practices.

For teens, social and emotional learning helps build resiliency and a sense of agency—skills critical for navigating toward positive futures of their own design. Social and emotional skills are the skills for
action that help youth on that path. These skills go by several names—21st century skills, soft skills, character education, experiential learning, positive youth development. We focused on translating “the action” that staff and youth see in exemplary out-of-school time (OST) settings to share widely and in plain language how professionals can embed practices that support social and emotional learning with greater intentionality. This guide is designed to start conversations about the kinds of social and emotional skills readers hope will flower in the adolescents they know and care about, and to support the adult practices that help these skills to grow.

We hope that readers will use the guide to create and pursue their own action plans for implementing SEL in their OST programs and networks. The guide is designed for readers to use on their own terms and not a book to be read from front to back—so advice to readers is provided at the end of the introduction. In addition to the guide, a technical report for SEL performance measures used in the Challenge and a website where you can plug into more findings and tools are available at SELpractices.org.