

SEL-focused instructional coaching

Supporting learning in rural contexts — Summary of findings from New Teacher Center's EIR mid-phase grant

This brief summarizes research funded through the federal Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program and conducted by SRI International. The study found **New Teacher Center's (NTC) SEL-focused professional learning for instructional coaches had large positive, statistically significant effects on student achievement in English Language Arts (ELA) in high-implementing partner sites.** Researchers also found **statistically significant improvement in student self-awareness** during the two-year study period at treatment schools, along with **improved student perceptions of classroom discussion, collaborative inquiry, and student voice in the second year.**

While exposure to coaching alone was not associated with improved student perceptions, there were positive associations between SEL-focused classroom practices and student SEL, perceptions of instructional support, and school climate. Partners reported that NTC data-collection and strategic planning support were valuable for creating enabling conditions for successful implementation. There also was a small, nonsignificant but potentially practical impact on teacher retention. These findings have informed our ongoing refinement of NTC professional learning content and program implementation supports.

Background

While research indicates that strong social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies impact academic achievement and life outcomes, SEL is often treated as an isolated rather than integrated aspect of instruction. Effective integration requires explicit focus on daily SEL application through systemic prioritization, professional learning, and sustained support. New Teacher Center's professional learning model for instructional coaches is designed to increase student social and emotional learning through the creation of [Optimal Learning Environments](#) (OLE).

Based on [findings of positive effects of NTC coaching from prior federal studies](#), NTC received an Education Innovation and Research (EIR) mid-phase grant designed to evaluate how SEL supports may improve learning in rural contexts. The project, *Advancing Social Emotional Learning with Rigorous Content Through a Whole-School Professional Learning Model*, explored the link between SEL and student academic outcomes in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics (math). The study also explored the relationship between SEL-focused instructional support and student social-emotional competencies, and the impact of SEL-focused coaching on teacher retention.

Project summary

SRI International conducted a quasi-experimental study to evaluate the impact of NTC's SEL-focused instructional coaching on student achievement. NTC recruited 39 treatment schools working with two rural regional consortia partner sites, each serving multiple districts and schools. Treatment schools received NTC coaching support from the 2021–22 through 2023–24 school years. Researchers selected comparison schools within the same states or district using school-level baseline data, matching each treatment school to two comparison schools.

The study assessed impacts on student outcomes by analyzing student achievement in ELA and math for grades 5–8, including all eligible general education students in both treatment and comparison schools who were tested in spring 2022 (baseline) and spring 2024 (two-year outcome). More than 10,000 students were included in this analysis. Teacher retention analyses used the same quasi-experimental matched comparison design as the student achievement analysis. Fidelity of implementation was measured with 25 indicators across six components of project implementation.

In addition, researchers performed descriptive analyses of student survey data examining changes in student SEL competencies, perceptions of instructional practice, and school climate in treatment schools participating in the NTC SEL initiative.

Research questions focused on:

- Effects of two years of exposure to NTC's SEL-focused coaching model on grade 5–8 students' elementary and middle school ELA and math achievement compared to business-as-usual conditions
- Relationships between implementation measures and teacher retention
- Changes over time in
 - student SEL competencies
 - student perceptions of instructional practices
 - school climate measures
- Associations between implementation measures, including coaching dosage and learning walk indicators, and student-reported instructional practice, SEL competencies, and school climate outcomes

NTC's SEL-focused instructional coaching model was implemented as a whole-school approach. NTC prepared school-based coaches to strengthen teacher instructional practice through job-embedded coaching focused on improving student SEL and academic learning. Strategies for scaling included activities designed to build capacity at the individual coach, school, and site levels.

Partners reported that NTC data-collection and strategic planning support were valuable for creating enabling conditions for successful implementation.

Program components included:

- **Suite of aligned, high-quality, SEL-focused coaching tools**, including standards, frameworks, and coaching protocols and curriculum
- **SEL-focused professional learning for coaches** and in-field support
- **School leader training and consultation** to create school-level conditions for high-quality coaching
- **Capacity building for site and district leaders** to replicate and sustain the coaching model
- **Data-driven planning processes and formative feedback loops** to support implementation and scaling within schools to reach all eligible teachers

Implementation fidelity and findings

Although implementation fidelity was high on NTC-supported program components (tools and resources, site-level capacity building, and instructional coach development), fidelity was not as high on components that depended solely on school staff. Across the entire analytic sample, the study found no statistically significant impacts of the coaching model on student achievement in either ELA or math or teacher retention. However, analysis of relationships between fidelity and implementation levels and outcomes of interest included the following positive findings.

Positive impact on ELA achievement in one high-implementing regional partnership

Where program implementation was strong on key measures, in particular scaling within schools, NTC’s coaching model had large statistically significant effects on student achievement in ELA (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Impact of two years of NTC SEL-focused coaching on student achievement in high-implementing site

ELA

Teachers w/ traditional support



Teachers w/ NTC coaching



6.9 months of additional learning¹

Source: Laguarda, K., Jennerjohn, A., Wang, H., Kelley-Kemple, T., & Klute, M. (2026). *Advancing social and emotional learning integrated with rigorous content through a whole-school professional learning model: Evaluation of the New Teacher Center EIR grant*. SRI.

Retention trends of interest

The study also included an exploratory teacher retention analysis for one regional partner site with publicly available data, using the same quasi-experimental matched comparison design as the student achievement analysis. The final analytic sample included 168 teachers in 22 treatment schools and 392 teachers in 44 matched comparison schools. Across all teacher retention outcomes examined, no statistically significant impacts of the coaching model were detected, and additional exploratory analyses examining relationships between implementation measures and teacher retention outcomes also yielded largely null findings. However, researchers identified some positive differences in school-level retention that may be practically meaningful if not statistically significant (Figure 2). Future studies should continue to explore the linkage between key aspects of coaching support and teacher retention.

¹ Research has consistently documented the variability in the amount of annual learning gains by grade level; therefore, the overall impact on months of learning may vary by grade level.

Figure 2

Percentage of teachers retained within schools after two years

Comparison

70%

Treatment

76%

Note: Not a statistically significant difference but potentially practically significant

Source: Laguarda, K., Jennerjohn, A., Wang, H., Kelley-Kemple, T., & Klute, M. (2026). *Advancing social and emotional learning integrated with rigorous content through a whole-school professional learning model: Evaluation of the New Teacher Center EIR grant*. SRI.

Increased student self-awareness

Analysis of student survey data indicated statistically significant improvement in student self-awareness over the course of the study period. The sustained improvement suggests NTC coaching, with its emphasis on reflective instructional practices, coaching conversations, and focusing teachers on students' emotional experiences, strengthened practices related to helping students better understand themselves, their emotions, and their learning processes. Self-awareness in academic contexts supports students to recognize their strengths and areas for growth and develop confidence and sense of purpose.

Associations between SEL-focused classroom practices and student SEL, perceptions of instructional support, and school climate

SRI researchers conducted additional exploratory analyses to investigate whether student-reported SEL competencies, perceptions of instructional support, and school climate outcomes were associated with SEL-focused classroom practices implemented through the intervention. While these analyses can only provide evidence of associations, not causal relationships, evidence suggests that strengthening SEL-focused instructional practice through coaching and professional learning can support students' social-emotional competencies.

For example, learning walk indicators reflecting teachers' ability to model and explicitly address social-emotional competence, cultivate a sense of belonging, and shift academic struggle to students were positively associated with multiple indicators across student outcome domains. Notably, learning walk observations of student self-reflection were positively associated with student perceptions of school climate, teacher practices, and student social awareness.

NTC provided tailored, data-driven strategic planning and implementation support

To assess implementation supports, SRI researchers collected qualitative data across two project phases — Phase 1: Discovery Process and Phase 2: Creating Enabling Conditions. Data collection and analysis activities included:

- interviews with teachers, principals, district leaders, coaches, instructional leadership team members, and other program staff
- observations of strategic planning sessions
- learning walks and learning walk calibration sessions
- landscape analysis and holistic needs assessments

Participants highlighted the alignment of the following NTC supports as being “well-designed and valuable” in supporting implementation:

- **Learning walks:** Leaders used NTC-designed rubrics as a central strategy for collecting data for a better understanding of their schools’ existing practices and growth areas. Participants reported the tools were “particularly valuable for validating concerns, pinpointing areas for growth, and offering actionable feedback.”
- **Meaningful data debriefs:** NTC supported school teams to review multiple data sources, including student survey data and learning walk debriefs, to inform strategic planning goals.
- **Support for SEL integration:** NTC supported partners with the integration of their SEL curricula throughout the instructional day.
- **Collaborative strategy sessions:** NTC designed opportunities for leaders to share and learn from other schools while still tailoring discussions to their own contexts.
- **Coordinated Engagement Plans:** NTC supported partners to develop detailed professional learning and implementation plans based on their goals and vision for the work.

Conclusion

While not statistically significant across the full study sample, large positive effects on student performance in one high-implementing regional partnership suggest the potential of SEL-focused coaching to improve student outcomes.

The consistent positive relationships between the observed instructional conditions through learning walks and student SEL measures provide evidence that stronger SEL-focused teacher practices may have contributed to more positive student SEL development. Given contextual factors, including post-pandemic recovery, staffing instability, and concurrent district initiatives, SRI researchers concluded that the fact “some student SEL outcomes showed positive movement may represent encouraging signals of the intervention’s potential under stronger or more sustained implementation conditions.”

This summary is based on a report prepared by SRI International² with funds provided by the New Teacher Center under an Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Mid-phase grant from the U.S. Department of Education (grant S411B200057). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the U.S. Federal Government.

² Laguarda, K., Jennerjohn, A., Wang, H., Kelley-Kemple, T., & Klute, M. (2026). *Advancing social and emotional learning integrated with rigorous content through a whole-school professional learning model: Evaluation of the New Teacher Center EIR grant*. SRI.