

# S4L Outcome Evaluation Results

## District School Board Report

### WHAT IS SKILLS FOR LIFE?

*Skills for Life (S4L)* is a bilingual teaching resource designed to support the development of social emotional learning skills in five lessons, in alignment with the Grade 10 Civics and Careers curriculum. Since research shows these skills to be associated with success in many areas of life, the broader aim of *S4L* was to support students' positive mental health and well-being across the lifespan, particularly while transitioning from high school into post-secondary school, the workplace, or other pathways.

### WHAT CONTENT DOES S4L COVER?

*S4L* is designed to help students develop:

- Knowledge, skills, and attitudes foundational to positive mental health and resilience
- Language to talk about emotions, identity, and strengths
- The ability to recognize when they need support, and the skills to seek support effectively

*S4L* focuses on social emotional learning skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These skills help students handle the ups and downs of everyday life. While *S4L* was specifically designed to support Grade 10 Careers, it also complements the two new Mental Health Literacy Modules developed for that course by SMH-ON (to roll-out in the 2024-2025 school year) and builds on curriculum supporting positive mental health and well-being in Grades 7, 8, and 9.

The *S4L* resource was developed with input from teachers, mental health experts, researchers, and youth. School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) collaborated with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), a non-profit research organization and the evaluation partner, to develop, implement, and test *S4L*, with financial support from a private foundation and the Ontario Ministry of Education (through SMH-ON). Feedback was gathered from the SMH-ON student advisory (THRIVE SMH), Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, and Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association.

## WHAT WAS THE S4L OUTCOME EVALUATION?

Mental health promotion initiatives in schools hold great promise but should demonstrate evidence of effectiveness. The S4L outcome evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness of the resource using a robust evaluation that compared feedback from students who received S4L in their Careers class in Fall 2023, with those who had not yet taken the course. Two different district school boards in Ontario participated in the evaluation. A larger evaluation was planned and several district school boards were invited to participate; however, representatives indicated that schools were still dealing with the after-effects of COVID-19 and were not ready to embark on an evaluation.

## WHO WAS INVOLVED?

In the Fall 2023 semester, five classes in three schools participated in the S4L Outcome Evaluation. All Grade 10 students were invited to participate in two brief online surveys about student well-being, once they had received parental permission. Students who completed the surveys received two community service hours and an honorarium. In total, 158 students completed the survey. Five students also participated in online focus groups to share their experiences and feedback on the S4L lessons.

## WHAT WERE THE RESULTS FOR STUDENTS?

### Students' experiences

**Students valued class discussions and interactive activities.** In focus groups, students said they enjoyed activities that included opportunities for class discussion, and that the chance to exchange thoughts was an important part of reflecting on and better understanding their own experiences. Overall, students appreciated:

- Activities that included student participation (e.g., reflecting on students' identities and social roles)
- Actively listening to class discussions, even if they did not necessarily feel comfortable sharing their personal opinions with their class

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*"I felt like my class was really interactive.  
Not like, quiet - the class was actually sharing with each other" – Student 1*

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S4L students particularly **valued discussions of stress and mental health.** In focus groups, students reported that they benefited from:

- Having a dedicated space to talk about mental health
- Knowing you are not the only one experiencing stress
- Feeling heard



## Student outcomes

While the sample of students responding to the survey was too small to detect statistically significant effects, a few areas were promising in terms of effect size, particularly when analyzed together with qualitative data. Specifically, *S4L* students tended to indicate using **strategies for stress management, self-care, and social support** as ways to cope with stressful situations, more so than students who did not receive *S4L*. In focus groups, students reported using diverse strategies to cope with stressors and to communicate, such as:

- Breathing exercises to help with anxiety
- Talking to others about stressful situations
- Acknowledging stress and using multiple strategies to manage it
- Using “I” statements to communicate feelings

*S4L* students also reported modest **improvements in self-management and mental wellbeing**. Analysis of survey data suggests that students who received *S4L* experienced slight increases in their sense of self-efficacy in managing their own emotions, whereas there was little change amongst the comparison group.

*S4L* students reported **improved ability to communicate with adults and peers**. Students who received *S4L* had slight increases in their use of assertive and respectful communication with others while the comparison group had slight decreases in this same measure.

## WHAT WERE TEACHERS’ IMPRESSIONS?

Teachers found the resource easy to use and made minimal adaptations to it. They also reported that planning and preparation time was reasonable.

Generally, teachers indicated that *S4L* lessons and activities were well-received by their classes. During interviews, the following activities and lessons appeared to have resonated most:

- Classes were most engaged when prompted with open-ended discussion questions
- Reflection activities also appeared to be interesting to students, who indicated they appreciated the time to consider their personal experiences and draw connections with the lesson materials

Although teachers recognized the limited timeframe to observe changes, they said they did notice some **positive shifts in classroom dynamics** immediately after using *S4L*:

- More camaraderie among students, such as “stronger” students being more inclusive or supportive of other students
- More rapport and trust built between teachers and students

A couple of teachers highlighted **concepts they felt resonated with and were new to students**, and for them too:

- **Promoting mattering** was considered a valuable lesson to teachers, who thought it was relevant and important for students to reflect on why we matter and encouraged students to say kind things. As one teacher said, “*It shows that I matter*”



*to you and you matter to me.”*

- **Exploring identity** was also important to teachers and likely covered less in other classes. Teachers recognized this lesson could be impactful for students who might be exploring their own identity. It was also an opportunity for teachers to learn about students’ experiences

## CONCLUSION

While the *S4L* outcomes evaluation wasn’t the definitive test of effectiveness that was planned, these results align with the results of an earlier pilot test, with program theory, and with the research literature on social emotional learning interventions. Together, these results indicate that *S4L* is a promising mental health promotion initiative and appropriate for Grade 10 students in Careers.

## WHAT’S NEXT FOR *S4L*?

Given the promise of *S4L* as a mental health promotion initiative, SMH-ON will continue to explore opportunities where *S4L* can enhance development of students’ social emotional learning skills.

For more information about the evaluation, please contact Dr. Alexandra Fortier, SMH-ON consultant for innovation, scale up and research mobilization, at [afortier@smho-smso.ca](mailto:afortier@smho-smso.ca).

For more information about the *S4L* resource, please contact Dr. Deanna Swift, SMH-ON Area Lead for mental health promotion, at [dswift@smho-smso.ca](mailto:dswift@smho-smso.ca).

