



To: Emily Parks, Superintendent
From: Allison Borchers, Assistant Superintendent
Cc: Abigail Hanscom, Director of Student Services
Date: November 5, 2020
Re: SEL update

One of the Westwood Public Schools' strategic priorities for the past two years has been to "develop and implement a district-wide plan to meet students' social and emotional learning needs." The pandemic has fueled a heightened sense of urgency among educators and families about supporting our students with opportunities for social emotional learning. In response, SEL Coordinator Erin Kuehn is pursuing several initiatives that will keep Westwood moving forward with this priority.

Elementary

At the elementary level, WPS has focused on professional development that helps teachers learn to embed SEL instruction into their daily class routines and academic lessons. We have identified [Responsive Classroom](#) (endorsed by CASEL as a strong, evidence-based program) as an effective approach. Our first cohort of thirty elementary educators was trained last year, and we plan to continue training additional cohorts year by year until we have common practices in place across all elementary schools and classrooms.

In order to continue training efforts during the pandemic, we are examining two possible options for a second cohort: 1) sponsor another in-house training session during February or April vacation or 2) send individual teachers to training sessions sponsored by other districts. If we are able to fill all available seats (30) for an in-house training, that will be the more cost-effective option. If not, we will pursue the second option.

For teachers who have already completed initial Responsive Classroom training, the district will provide opportunities to attend evening workshops designed to bolster SEL integration skills (e.g., "Connecting Morning Meeting to Academics").

To supplement training, all current classroom teachers, specialists and special educators were provided with teaching resources from Responsive Classroom (purchased with grant funds from the Foundation for Westwood Education), including the following texts:

Energizers!

80 Morning Meeting Ideas for Grades K-2

80 Morning Meeting Ideas for Grades 3-5

Closing Circles

Responsive Classroom for Music, Art, PE, and Other Special Areas

Recognizing that the pandemic has created some instructional challenges for teachers, Ms. Kuehn culled these resources to create some “at a glance” guides to Morning Meeting and Closing Circle that she shared directly with staff and posted on the [WPS Elementary Curriculum Collection Website](#). Erin has also visited elementary classes to provide coaching and support to teachers. Finally, she has both created and curated specific SEL lesson plans for teachers to use during remote learning.

Middle School

The middle school’s focus has been on identifying curriculum that can promote consistent and effective SEL instruction. Grant funding from the Foundation for Westwood Education allowed WPS to invest in [Second Step](#), a research-based program that the middle school has used components of in the past for bullying prevention. Second Step has robust online resources as well as print materials. This year, the curriculum will be implemented during health classes in grade 6 and rotating arts classes in grades 7 & 8. In addition, a team including the SEL coordinator, middle school administrators and middle school guidance counselors is looking at options for a fuller implementation of the program next year and beyond.

The district is also investigating a grant that would support SEL through service learning at the middle school. Ms. Kuehn is working with the middle school Humanities Department Head Marisa Olivo and the 8th grade social studies faculty to consider whether an SEL/service learning approach could be aligned with the new Civics project requirement for 8th graders.

Finally, while it is important to acknowledge the differences between SEL and mental health support, there is also a strong connection: developing students’ social emotional competencies is a critical step in promoting positive mental health, and programs aimed at supporting mental health often do so in ways that also support SEL. This year, the middle school will continue to implement the [Signs of Suicide \(SOS\)](#) program in grade 7. This program includes age-appropriate lessons on prevention strategies (namely the ACT strategy of “acknowledge, care, tell”) as well as a safety screening.

District Wide

In addition to the focus on professional development for elementary educators and curriculum at the middle school, WPS has invested in an assessment tool that can be used district wide. The [Panorama Social-Emotional Learning Survey](#) was first administered in 2014 and has been taken by millions of students since then. WPS will use the survey to gather information about students’ sense of efficacy in critical social emotional competency areas including grit, growth mindset, self-management, and social awareness. With this data, we can both support individual student growth and assess the impact of our SEL expansion efforts over time. The district will be making some decisions about baseline assessment over the next month and our goal is to administer that assessment by the end of January at the latest.