

Confronting Youth Suicide

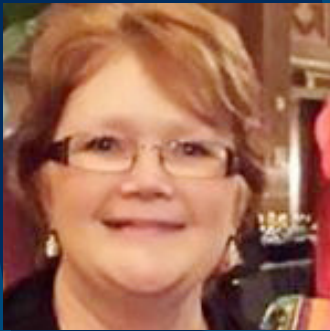
A Story About Second Step and Hamilton Township
School District in New Jersey

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The Story

As a psychologist in the Hamilton Township School District in Atlantic County, New Jersey, Jeff Wellington provided counseling for special education students in early learning to middle school classrooms. One day in the late '90s, he stumbled upon a Second Step curriculum box belonging to another counselor.

As he thumbed through the lessons, Jeff was impressed by the materials' focus on social-emotional learning (SEL). "I realized that many of the objectives and skills complemented, and sometimes directly overlapped with, the goals written into my students' Individualized Education Plans," he says. Rather than pull kids out of class to work on social-emotional skills individually, Jeff began to incorporate Second Step lessons in self-contained classrooms as part of his counseling efforts.

Years later, as supervisor of special projects for the district, Jeff turned to Second Step in a time of crisis—a startling uptick in student suicides.

The Challenge

In just two years, three students from the Hamilton Township district took their own lives. District administrators recognized the need to implement a comprehensive mental health initiative with social-emotional skills at its core. Jeff and his boss Marylynn Stetcher, supervisor of special education and child study teams for the district, spearheaded the effort.

In addition to adding more counselors and increasing suicide-risk assessments, Jeff and Marylynn used Second Step to empower kids to regulate strong emotions and become confident problem-solvers, and to strengthen student-teacher relationships.

"We knew implementing a strong SEL curriculum like Second Step would be crucial to the initiative's success," Marylynn says.

Authentic enthusiasm for Second Step was another key factor.



The Solution

Implementing SEL schoolwide was critical. In the first year, the administration required that all staff be involved in delivering the program. Accordingly, Jeff and Marylynn developed a plan to support staff who were implementing Second Step.

The aim was for every staff member to be able to incorporate Second Step skills throughout the school day, in addition to the time set aside for SEL instruction. To support that goal, Jeff and Marylynn started making classroom visits to observe teachers' interactions with students and ensure they were building social-emotional skills.

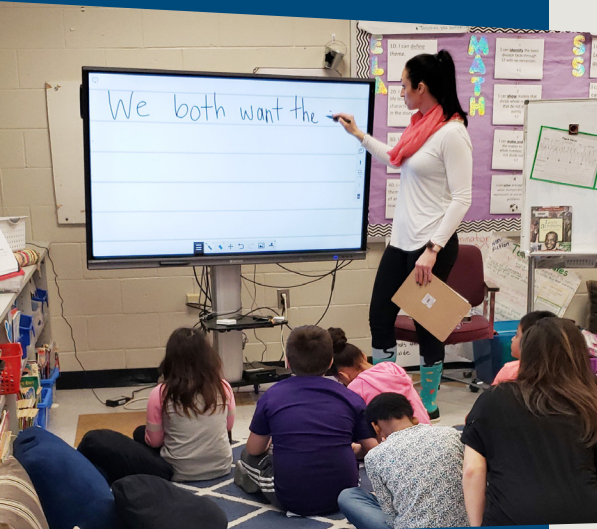
Authentic enthusiasm for Second Step was another key factor: When educators are excited about teaching the program, students get excited, too. Families were also encouraged to practice Second Step skills at home, so the learning didn't stop at the end of the school day.

"Second Step benefits the teachers as much as the students."

In the first year of the implementation, all teachers, therapists, child study team members, and school counselors were responsible for delivering Second Step with fidelity. Speaking the same language and developing a parallel skillset allowed for existing connections between educators to deepen and provided opportunities for positive relationships to form.

Students also learned coping and communication skills that could be used beyond the classroom, from impulse control to assertiveness to perspective-taking. Additionally, students learned to recognize and manage strong emotions, including thoughts about suicide.

"Second Step benefits the teachers as much as the students," Jeff says. "Educators who went to school for science, history, or math were now learning a vocabulary and social-emotional skillset they hadn't capitalized on before."



The Results

Zero Suicides

Since introducing the districtwide mental health initiative, there have been no reported student suicides in the Hamilton Township School District. Jeff and Marylynn credit this to their dedicated suicide prevention program, with Second Step's social-emotional skills at the core.

Their Second Step curriculum continues to support children struggling with chronic stress, trauma, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation.

Improved Coping Strategies

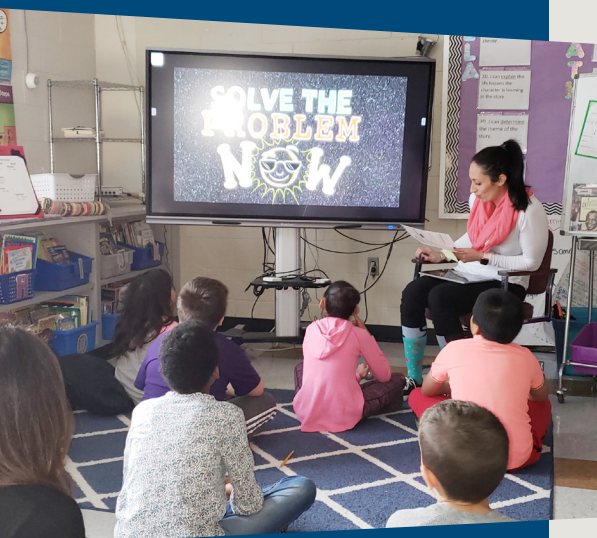
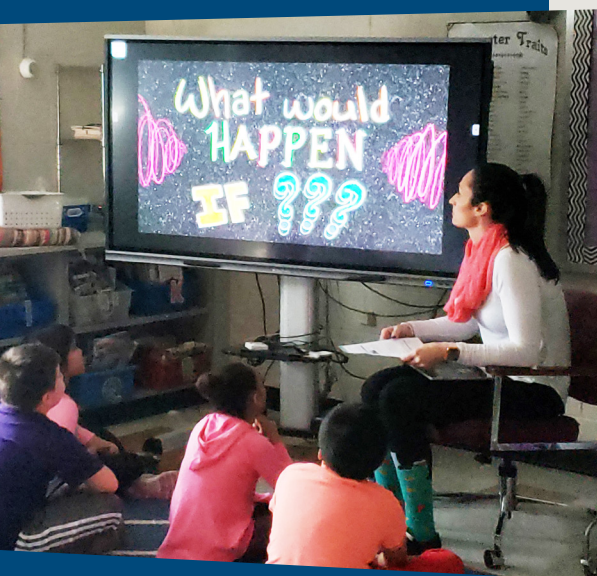
Jeff and Marylynn have also found that Second Step is helping students confidently and independently resolve peer-to-peer conflicts—and teaching self-regulating strategies to adults, too. Staff have shared their experiences of students putting their social-emotional skills in action.

One teacher shared an account of a student—who was placed in her classroom for behavioral reasons—defusing a heated argument by instructing telling his classmates: "State the problem without blame." This same student's risk assessments dropped from 23 to one the following year.

Another staff member received an email from a grateful preschool parent: "My daughter came home today and saw that I was very upset. She taught me how to take deep belly breaths like she'd learned in school to help me calm down. These are lifelong lessons I wish I'd learned growing up."

Strengthened Student-Teacher Relationships

Second Step provides all staff with specific guidance and relationship-building vocabulary, helping to strengthen the bonds between teachers and their students. This includes everything from practicing belly breathing to problem-solving throughout the day. As a result, both students and staff have reported feeling more connected—and students have expressed feeling safer to openly communicate with their teachers.



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The Future

The Hamilton Township School District will continue to track its progress, using surveys to identify positive trends and opportunities for growth. The district also plans to make year-over-year comparisons on key behaviors like self-regulation, student-teacher relationships, and problem-solving skills.

Since upgrading to the online version of Second Step for Middle School, district principals plan to continue using the administrator dashboard for tracking student progress. Having successfully gained buy-in from many educators in the district, Jeff and Marylynn hope to reach a point where 100 percent of staff members realize the importance of embracing Second Step.

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social-emotional learning at cfchildren.org.**

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