



Making School Feel Safe for Kids

A Story About Second Step and
Orland School District 135 in Illinois

second
step®



Dave Snyder

Director of Curriculum
Orland School District 135
Orland, IL

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feel safe, they can't be
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Second Step provides
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social-emotional support."**

The Story

In 2015, the state of Illinois began requiring that schools implement a social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. As a result, Orland School District 135 immediately began searching for an SEL program that was easy for staff to use, engaging for kids, and in alignment with the district's school schedule. Dave Snyder, the district's director of curriculum, helped choose the Second Step SEL program.

While an SEL program was, at first, simply an administrative box to check, Dave quickly saw the effects Second Step was having on both students and staff. He and other district officials decided to broaden their scope beyond having social workers visit classrooms to deliver a weekly lesson. In addition to the social workers' visits, district officials decided to have teachers and staff teach Second Step and integrate its concepts throughout the school day.

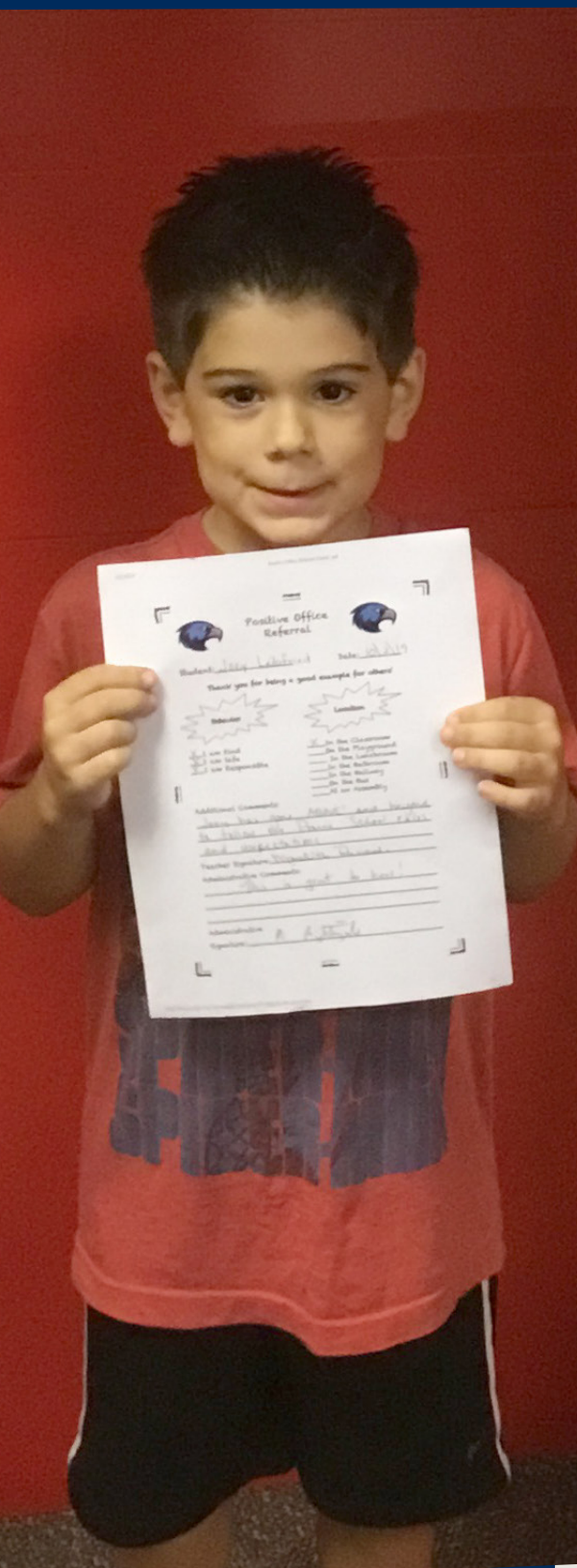
The Challenge

Orland School District 135 officials knew that to successfully expand implementation of Second Step, the district would need buy-in throughout the school community. This meant convincing educators and staff of the program's effectiveness, as well as reaching out to students and families to get them invested. With the whole school community on board with Second Step, everyone could share a common vocabulary to communicate more effectively and develop stronger connections.

District leadership also hoped to better understand and manage rising student anxiety and stress, which was often rooted in issues at home. In a district with a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, leadership recognized that every child enters the classroom with their own unique circumstances and needs. District officials' aim was for all students to think of school as a secure space.

"Unless our students feel safe, they can't be prepared to learn. Second Step provides that foundation of social-emotional support," Dave says.

"The more we learn, the clearer it becomes that SEL and academic curriculum can't be separated."



The Solution

The district got everyone involved: educators, administrators, and support staff. All adults participated in lessons, with many co-teaching, and Second Step concepts were connected to assemblies and activities.

"We also invited community members and district office staff to participate," Dave says. "One of our crossing guards is a regular!"

Schools used the Principal Toolkit to create scheduled SEL learning targets for using Second Step vocabulary and lessons on a schoolwide level. The targets reinforced lesson concepts and provided common terminology when talking about SEL, anchored in a "word of the day" or "word of the week." Students also participated in class and schoolwide meetings where they talked about applying their skills to challenges at school and beyond the classroom.

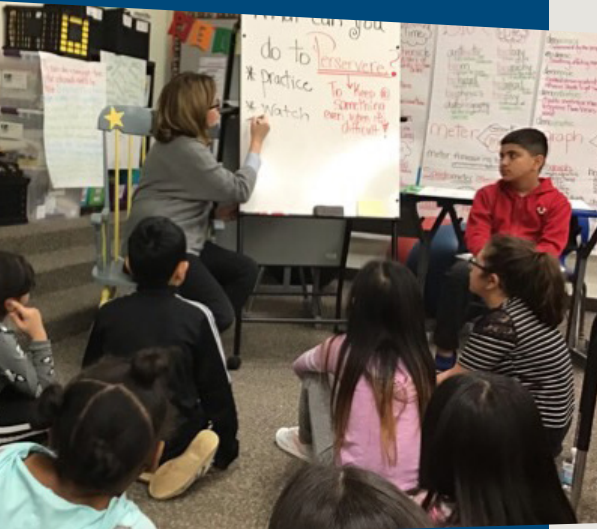
Family involvement was an important step. Teachers shared Second Step concepts and vocabulary with families through parent newsletters. Some schools attached lessons to their disciplinary referrals, encouraging parents and caregivers to review the topics with their kids.

Second Step gives students and teachers a shared vocabulary to talk about strong emotions and develop trust.

The district also identified student stressors related to homework and grading, and staff worked to minimize or remove related emotional threats.

In a district where many students experience anxiety because of their home lives, homework is not considered a reliable assessment of a student's capabilities. For instance, in any given classroom, there might be a student caring for younger siblings, or one whose parents are going through a difficult divorce. Another student might be living in a shelter. "Their day isn't set up for success," Dave notes. "When some students are told to turn in their homework and they don't have it, it can trigger a fight-or-flight response."

As a result, teachers are rethinking their responses and using supportive ways to provide feedback. District leaders are considering students' home circumstances and adjusting homework and grading policies as needed. Now, while homework is still assigned and feedback is encouraged, homework no longer counts toward a student's overall grade.



The Results

Stronger Student-Teacher Relationships

Second Step gives students and teachers a shared vocabulary to talk about strong emotions and develop trust. With better insight into their students' home lives, teachers can recognize a shift in behavior or an uptick in anxiety. With Second Step concepts in place at Orland School District 135, students report feeling more comfortable talking about their concerns with teachers and staff.

Increased Attendance, Improved Behavior

The district has also seen an increase in attendance, coupled with fewer suspensions and daily referrals. District officials have found that Second Step helps create a safe space for students to feel socially and emotionally connected, making more students want to be at school. Teachers report their students are making more positive choices and are better able to regulate strong emotions.

After implementing Second Step, suspensions dropped by 37 percent from the 2018–2019 school year to the 2019–2020 school year, while referrals for minor infractions from the first to the second trimester of the 2019–2020 school year dropped nearly 50 percent. A group of students with attendance issues showed a 57 percent increase in attendance from the previous year.

Higher Test Scores

Widespread integration of SEL through Second Step has also influenced the district's approach to academics, with dramatic results. In 2018 the district's state test scores weren't as strong as district leaders would have liked. The following year, all 10 schools made advancements in state test scores.

"I don't think all 10 schools could have improved the way they did if we weren't taking these social-emotional steps at the same time," Dave says. "The more we learn, the clearer it becomes that SEL and academic curriculum can't be separated."



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The Future

Orland School District 135 will continue to track attendance, referrals, and academic gains to gauge districtwide SEL progress. District officials also plan to continue educating families about SEL and promoting parent involvement.

Additionally, district leadership will focus on helping teachers use a growth mindset when providing classroom feedback, encouraging them to recognize what might be causing a behavior rather than react to the behavior itself. Guided by language and strategies from Second Step, teachers will be encouraged to draw upon their existing relationships with students to resolve issues.

Second Step has also sparked interest in concepts like trauma-sensitive classrooms and restorative practices. "The changes we've made in our grading and overall instruction have opened our eyes to what we can do with SEL," Dave says. "With Second Step, we have a great foundation on which we can build."

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social-emotional learning at cfchildren.org.**

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