

Social Emotional Learning Demonstration Sites in Washington State



Support for Districts: School Prioritization of SEL

Schools and districts in Washington state are implementing the Washington Social Emotional Learning (SEL) standards and benchmarks. This includes using the [**Washington SEL Implementation Guide**](#) as a framework to address the four guiding principles (equity, cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed practice, and universal design) and the three essential elements of SEL (see sidebar).

Essential Elements

- Create conditions to support students' SEL
- Collaborate with families, communities, and extended learning opportunity (ELO) providers
- Build adult capacity that supports SEL for all

In response to the need for practical examples of SEL implementation, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has created a series of four briefs based on the implementation efforts at five demonstration site districts: Cape Flattery School District, Franklin Pierce School District, Renton School District, Richland School District, and Steilacoom Historical School District. This is the second brief in the series and answers the following guiding question:



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

How are local education agencies **encouraging school leaders to prioritize SEL?**

In addition to the examples from demonstration site districts, you will find reflection questions at the end of the document that your school or district can use to guide implementation.

How are local education agencies encouraging school leaders to prioritize SEL?

Cape Flattery School District

Cape Flattery is working to intentionally align SEL with other behavioral health efforts and family engagement. One way the district prioritized culturally sustaining SEL is by hiring an SEL leader, who is a member of the Makah Tribe, a teacher and former student of the district. In addition to the SEL leader, an SEL team was also created to support district-wide implementation.

To address mental health, well-being, and culture the district partners with the [Makah Tribe](#), ESD and community organizations. This includes [UW School Social Work](#) and the [Mariposa House](#) to support the work of counselors. The partnership between the different organizations helps to build on and reinforce good citizenship and cultural values. The district does utilize the Washington State SEL Standards and the [CASEL framework](#). To emphasize the [culturally responsive guiding principle](#), the district incorporates SEL with learning activities that support a communal cultural connection and positive identity development particularly with a school that has a high population of Native students.

“What it really comes down to is, we know that the one thread that has maintained our individualism and the strength that we have as a [Makah] people is our culture and our connection to our land. That’s where SEL fits in. I think that’s the premise behind social and emotional learning, is creating that identity within our students.”

— Cape Flattery School District leader

A districtwide SEL team was created to help develop effective wraparound services to best support students and their families across each tier of the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). The SEL team includes social workers, school psychologists, counselors, paraeducators, and others to coordinate SEL planning and implementation. The lead and team are refining the state-mandated Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP) through integrating SEL and MTSS for overall behavioral health, mental health, culture, and well-being. At that time, there was only one school counselor in the district, so connecting with the University of Washington School of Social Work has provided additional access to university-level interns for student counseling in the other two schools.

The counseling program has also focused on developing partnerships with the community to ensure cultural responsiveness and to mitigate negative effects of commonly misunderstood terms. This partnership addresses terms like historical trauma, which can impact families in different ways and may cause additional harm or fail to resonate. Some terms are avoided, while others are used to address the harm done so healing can occur. The partnership helps all entities improve. Leadership prioritized thoughtful communication to develop respectful relationships so schools can serve as partners in supporting students, families, staff members, and the district.

Franklin Pierce School District

Franklin Pierce has used the [Since Time Immemorial lessons](#), which also include the Washington SEL standards and benchmarks. The elementary schools developed a K–2 implementation plan to embed the lessons in their traditional curriculum pacing. This strategy was successful and is being expanded to grades 3–5 so all elementary schools have an expectation of when they are teaching lessons within the year. The expectation that all classrooms will use these resources provided a consistent experience for all students across the district.

Additionally, the district is undertaking the process of developing and connecting SEL at the secondary level. Recognizing the connection to post-graduation success in the [FPS Student Portrait](#), leadership has created a community of educators and leaders from across the district to build a vision and support. A book study on [Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy and School Transformation](#) has also helped to shift thinking, expand ideas, and move data-driven decisions from a need to fix gaps to a more asset-based focus on identifying both leading and lagging data. Individuals at each of the schools connect to build a team of educators that includes administrators, counselors, and teachers. This has provided diverse perspectives and insights, which created a better understanding of needs, helped align strategies across schools, and supported student development between middle and high school.

Renton School District

Renton School district leadership focuses on three guiding visions: service, excellence, and equity. In addition, they focus on three pillars, one of which is removing barriers. Under this pillar, social emotional learning has consistently been a key strategy. In 2021, the [Reimagining Student Experiences \(RISE\)](#) committee also identified SEL as one of the key areas to address. This included [recommendations](#) for addressing the student experience, providing educator support, and making district provisions. Having the vision, support, and policy helps center the work of SEL across all schools. The district also hired a SEL facilitator (a former student in the Renton school system), as well as a teacher and a counselor.

Each school administers a climate survey and is required to have a SEL goal as part of its school improvement plan. The district provides an SEL screener assessment to look at implementation and to plan for additional tiered support. In addition to the screener, schools review attendance, behavior data, and school climate surveys to reflect on successes or needs. Some schools administer a student survey asking questions such as “Do you feel welcome?” and “Do you have friends?”

The SEL school teams work with the SEL facilitator to review the data and determine actions. For example, one school determined that students were connected to the adults in the building but not to each other. To address this, they identified ways to incorporate SEL opportunities and skills into morning meetings.

In another example, screener data and discussions led multiple schools to focus on goal setting. One school implemented it, working with students to build those skills, and then shared their successes and strategies with other SEL teams. It was very beneficial to have a central office staff member support multiple school teams and bridge ideas and actions across the schools in an intentional way.

“Every school—high schools, middle school, elementary—are required to have a social emotional learning goal. We're not fighting anything. We're all moving in the same direction, and it's just a matter of the balance between the grass roots and the directive that we're working to keep going.”

— Renton School District director

Richland School District

Richland’s [strategic plan](#) focuses on five priorities for leadership, staff members, and community partners to support student success. There are focus areas within each priority, as well as progress benchmarks. For example, the well-being priority’s focus areas address mental health supports, nurturing resource networks, extracurricular activities, athletics, and staff supports. Progress benchmarks and a data dashboard help the district understand and meet indicators of success. These progress benchmarks include monitoring the percentage of students who report a sense of belonging and who engaged in at least one extracurricular activity or support. Student success is connected to adult supports, so the district also reviews the percentage of staff members who feel supported and satisfied as an employee.

Another example of how Richland connects SEL to other initiatives is through the [MTSS cohort](#) and the [Inclusionary Practices Professional Development](#) project. Through both projects, district and school leaders obtained professional learning and coaching with OSPI and regional experts to align the processes of tiered support for all students. District and school leaders connected in teams, as well as within their area.

Steilacoom Historical School District

Steilacoom focuses on six core elements in their instructional model of Enriched Core Instruction (ECI). As one of the core elements, SEL has been instrumental in ensuring students and staff members are positioned to welcome incoming students, especially military-connected students enrolling at various times throughout the year, as those students may not have been present for beginning-of-year activities. Through ECI, the district also ensures skills are taught throughout the year and not just at certain times, to ensure all students can learn and practice SEL skills regardless of when they come into the district. Having leadership prioritize the integration of the core elements has benefited the district by capturing multiple grants to provide additional resources to support families, engage students in academics, and promote leadership skills for youth and staff members.

We have "Student 2 Student" programs at the middle school and the high school that are led by military-connected kids who welcome the next military student that comes in through school tours and activities throughout the year. This way, new students are not missing out on developing a sense of belonging, because we're not only going to do that in the first two weeks of school, we're embedding those practices all through the school year.

— Student Supports Director

Focusing on the [integration of neuroscience with SEL](#), the district has produced district calendars that not only provide information about district events, but also increase community awareness and understanding of neuroscience concepts and their application in education. These resources assist staff members, students, and families in using terms such as "amygdala hijack" and "neurotransmitters" to explain interactions with others and share tips to promote social emotional development and increase cognitive engagement.

Reflection Questions and Considerations

- In what ways does your district gather and discuss SEL data to determine a key concept or practice to address?
- How might a cross-departmental and school team be developed to actively participate in planning and decision-making?
- How might the use of a dedicated district SEL staff member or team provide intensive support to begin districtwide implementation?
- What might be the benefits of hiring staff members who reflect the community and have multiple years of experience within the district?
- How might connecting other initiatives such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), leverage SEL implementation, as opposed to competing with SEL implementation?
- How might the use of pilot sites provide insight to district organization of support for schools to address SEL implementation?

To Learn More

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is committed to supporting schools, districts, and community partners in implementing SEL that is equitable, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and universally designed. Read more about SEL in Washington and access additional resources here: <https://ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/social-emotional-learning-sel>

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Download this material in PDF at [OSPI's Social Emotional Learning webpage](#). This material is available in alternative format upon request. Contact the Resource Center at 888-595-3276, TTY 360-664-3631.

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