



Implementing the Second Step Program for Social-Emotional Learning: Strategies from Two Schools

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The Second Step curriculum is a social-emotional learning (SEL) program developed by the Committee for Children, a non-profit organization based in Seattle.¹ The program is designed for students in grades K-8, with a focus on promoting students' self-regulation skills. The middle school program for grades 6-8 also emphasizes the development of skills for decreasing aggression and preventing both bullying and substance abuse. These skills are taught by school staff with the use of Second Step kits, which provide the resources needed to deliver the lessons. Staff from the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) spoke with two schools implementing Second Step: Laura W. Waring School, in December 2019, and Cayuga School, in November 2020.² We talked to principals and teachers to incorporate their perspectives on what strategies and approaches were in place that helped Second Step work well in their school. Based on the interviews and focus groups, ORE put together this list of strategies as a resource for other schools implementing Second Step.

Strategy 1: Identify Second Step as a priority and clearly communicate that to school staff.

- Both schools' administrators made Second Step implementation a priority and communicated to their staff both the priority level and why they were choosing to make it a priority. If staff are unclear about the priority, it reduces buy in and schools may struggle with implementation.
- Administrators should set an expectation with teachers about when they should be implementing the program, and then hold teachers accountable for implementing it in order to reinforce the priority. One principal mentioned doing walk-throughs during the time scheduled for Second Step. Afterward, the principal would send an email to all teachers summarizing how many teachers were doing Second Step, as a reminder to teachers that the program was a priority.
- When reminding teachers about implementation, it is helpful to emphasize the goals of the program in order for teachers to understand the value and buy in to the program.
- If Second Step intersects with any other school programs, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), be clear about how the school intends the programs to align and work together.

¹ <https://www.secondstep.org/what-is-second-step>

² Data collection was delayed due to school closures related to COVID-19.

What are the benefits of Second Step?

Here's what teachers and principals highlighted as benefits of the program:

Teachers shared that if Second Step went well, it made the academic side of their classroom go better as well. Students are more open about how they are feeling and expressing themselves, which leads to fewer behavior issues.

- ❖ “I think, a lot of times, students don't address their feelings and acknowledge what's happening, so they act out, but with understanding their feelings and talking about their feelings, they learn how to deal with them.”
- ❖ “I think it's a whole-body experience for the kids. It's not just about learning how they're feeling, it's also about how to pay attention. It's all benefiting them as a learner. For them to stay focused.”

Teachers said they saw students more often taking responsibility to intervene when it was necessary to help their classmates out.

- ❖ “Maybe when that little kid is left out in the recess yard, and he doesn't have anyone to play with, and they are just going about their day playing and they might not realize that, hey, that kid's left out and he feels kind of sad. The program I think teaches you to be more observant to others.”

A principal shared that Second Step provides useful steps for students to use to regulate their emotions.

- ❖ “It gives them practical steps to calm down. It also helps to teach students that you may not be happy with the result of a conflict, but you still have to regulate how you respond.”

Strategy 2: Make Second Step a part of the whole school's culture.

- Second Step should be implemented across all grades and classrooms to convey the message that it is a priority. It may be helpful to find other ways to embed Second Step in school culture, such as how the concepts align with any school mission statements. Both schools recommended talking about Second Step during morning announcements, for example, mentioning the common theme of the lessons for that week.
- Set a dedicated time for all teachers to implement Second Step in their schedule. Anecdotally, teachers shared that mornings seemed to work well for younger students, to help them start their day off calmly. Teachers said that afternoons might be better for older students, especially as a transition back from lunch or recess. The takeaway is to have a consistent time that is reserved only for Second Step to help ensure the time is not overwhelmed by other things.
- Set aside time as needed during teachers' common planning time, professional learning communities, or grade-group meetings to discuss Second Step. This serves as a support for teachers and professional development when teachers discuss strategies for implementation and model successful strategies to other teachers.
- Making Second Step a part of school culture also helps to ensure the program and its benefits persist throughout the school year and in the future. Teachers said that schools need to commit to the program for several months before they will begin to notice changes with their students.

Additionally, teachers mentioned cumulative benefits for students who received exposure to social-emotional learning over several years.

- Whole-school implementation provides all staff and students with a common language to use. It is helpful for students to hear the same language being used by teachers, administrators, and other school staff, especially when applying discipline. One teacher shared that if he sees a student misbehaving in the hallway, he can engage them in a conversation using Second Step language knowing that they have had that exposure.
- Have teachers include Second Step as part of their lesson plans as another step to reinforce the dedicated time. This also helps teachers set aside time to review the lesson before using it with students.

Strategy 3: Provide room for flexibility in teaching lessons.

- Second Step provides scripted lessons for teachers, which makes it easy for a teacher with no experience in teaching social-emotional learning to pick up the program. However, the schools we spoke with also suggested allowing some flexibility for how teachers implement the lesson, primarily based on the needs of their students. This may mean letting a lesson run long on time if students are engaged with the topic and want to discuss it longer. For this to happen, teachers need to feel that Second Step is valued as an important part of the day and that it will be okay to run over.
- Teachers also said that sometimes it would be difficult to do every activity and question listed for the lesson in the

What other challenges might schools experience?

Here's advice from teachers and principals for avoiding the challenges they experienced:

- ❖ Plan to provide teacher training on Second Step at the beginning of implementation and on-going as necessary. Have a plan for how new teachers will be trained to keep the program sustainable across years. Staff shared that having someone model lessons is most helpful, especially tips to engage students and administer the lesson within the provided time frame.
- ❖ Ensure that all teachers have the Second Step materials they need and budget for replacement materials in later years as materials might be lost or damaged, especially as teachers turn over.
- ❖ Choose a dedicated time for Second Step that will work in practice for all teachers (either as a whole school or by grade). Teachers mentioned challenges with teaching the lesson first thing in the morning when other constraints often forced them to start the lesson late (e.g., students being tardy, serving breakfast, taking attendance, and students getting settled in the classroom). If teachers went over to accommodate Second Step, they would run into their mandated literacy block.
- ❖ Recognize that teaching social-emotional learning might be uncomfortable for teachers at first. Teachers shared that Second Step may be less likely to work if teachers do not lower their guard and discuss the concepts with students. Administrators can emphasize the importance of building relationships with students for their academic success and that Second Step is the tool they are using.

scheduled time. In those cases, they would choose which parts they felt would best support students learning the lesson, based on how the lesson went so far. If a teacher felt like students understood the idea of the lesson, they might move on. If not, they might keep talking about a specific concept. Additionally, it is important for students to have time to express their feelings and reflect on the questions. Teachers felt it was more important to give students that space to reflect than to try to do every activity included in a lesson.

- Teachers also mentioned a need for them to be flexible and try the different activities with their students. Some teachers said they thought students might not like the puppets and songs provided with the lessons, so they were hesitant to use them, but then they found their students really liked them. Teachers also said that sometimes an activity might seem superfluous to the lesson but wound up being the thing that drew students in and engaged them.

Strategy 4: Integrate Second Step concepts into instruction as a tool to support positive behavior and as a way to reinforce the concepts for students.

- Teachers said when they see a student struggling with their anger or getting frustrated, they remind them about the strategies they learned during Second Step to calm themselves down, such as the cool-down corner or belly breathing.
- Teachers across all grades said Second Step concepts dovetail nicely with both social studies and literacy lessons. For social studies, the lessons tie in with how to be a good community member and why it is important to have and follow rules. During literacy instruction, a story might have a similar theme as something covered during Second Step or students might recognize a situation that is similar to one covered during Second Step.
- Staff also mentioned using Second Step as a way to manage student interactions and increase empathy among students. This is especially helpful during transitions, such as coming back from lunch/recess when students may have had negative interactions. Teachers can remind students what they talked about during Second Step and ask them to think about another way they might have been able to handle the situation. Teachers may also want to revisit a previous Second Step lesson if there is a concept that students seem to be struggling to implement.

Setting Second Step as a priority, making Second Step part of the whole school's culture, providing room for flexibility, and integrating Second Step concepts into instruction will help schools successfully implement Second Step, which may lead to improvements for their school climate. For more information about the program, visit <https://www.secondstep.org/>.