

BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA

Reimagining Middle Grades

A SUCCESS STORY

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The Story

In 2017, Florida's Broward County Public Schools—the sixth largest school system in the nation—launched a middle-level strategic initiative to engage students in project- and problem-based interdisciplinary learning. The initiative also aimed to support students in a caring environment where their unique educational needs would be met. The initiative's goals included increasing academic achievement and helping students make successful transitions to high school.

As part of the initiative, Broward County's education specialists targeted sample school populations to assess which students needed the most support. Middle schoolers showed the largest need in the assessment, performing around the tenth percentile nationally in self-management, social awareness, and peer and teacher relationships.

To focus on improving students' social-emotional competencies, the Reimagining Middle Grades (RMG) initiative was launched in 2018. Planning for the initiative included a focus on research- and evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) practices. This five-pronged RMG endeavor was designed to address a variety of students' needs. As part of the RMG framework for SEL, select schools in Broward County implemented Second Step® Middle School to provide explicit SEL instruction.

The Challenge

“When it comes to student engagement, it all boils down to student safety and connectedness.”

Tanya Thompson | Reimagining Middle Grades Project Coordinator | Office of School Performance and Accountability | Broward County Public Schools

Middle school is an inherently challenging time for kids. Beyond adolescents' physical and social growing pains, the transition from a single-classroom setting to multiple teachers and learning environments can bring a lot of uncertainty. Through various data points, research studies, and lived experiences, district leaders in Broward County understood their students were facing all these challenges. District leaders selected Second Step Middle School to establish a common culture and language with the goal of increasing students' feelings of safety and connectedness.



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In its first year, the RMG leadership team provided Second Step® Middle School to participating schools, allowing each school to decide how to implement it, when to teach it, and which students would receive instruction. School administrators independently decided how they would accommodate SEL instruction in their schedules.

At the end of the first year, data showed program fidelity and implementation rates weren't as strong as the RMG SEL team had planned for. Knowing that time is so limited within the school day, some school leaders concluded it was necessary to carve out dedicated time for SEL instruction via a homeroom block or an elective SEL course. Other school leaders chose different scheduling models for the program.

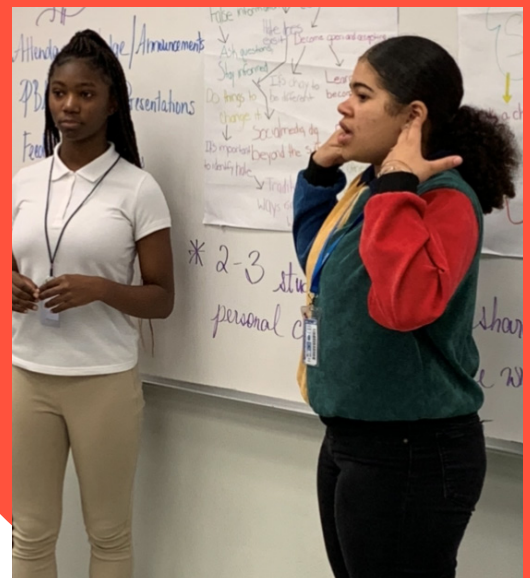
The Solution

“We have to constantly refine our approach [to implementation] based on the data we get.”

Tanya Thompson | Reimagining Middle Grades Project Coordinator
Office of School Performance and Accountability | Broward County Public Schools

Based on first-year results, the RMG team concluded that they needed to be more actively involved in program success, specifically in guiding uniform implementation practices. District and site leaders established a collaborative environment for school staff to share best practices, and provided a structure for staff to make the most of the RMG initiative and Second Step® programming. Within this structure, district leaders honored the autonomy of each school in terms of each school's daily schedule.

Additionally, the RMG coordinator, along with the RMG research team, identified student subgroups that were the most fragile academically. These students were given additional supports in personalized classes, where explicit SEL lessons were also taught. This personalization of classes was made possible in part by a grant from the Community Foundation of Broward; the funds were also used to help support Broward County Public Schools' general SEL programming and a community liaison whose primary role is to bridge the gap between home and family.



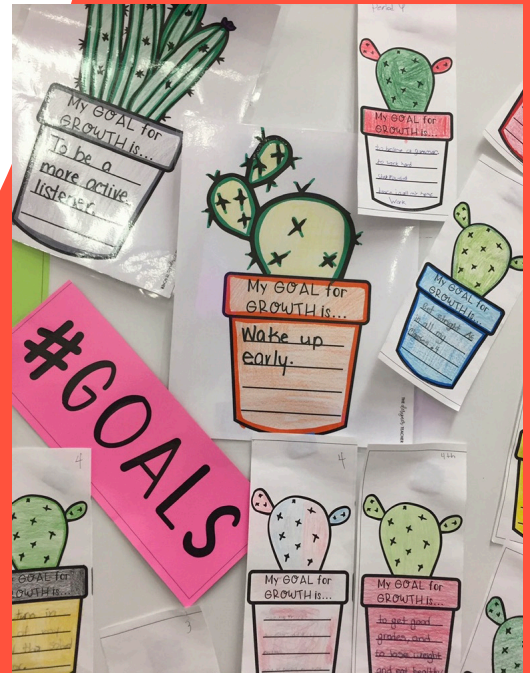
The Results

District leaders found that the sharing of best practices positively affected SEL program implementation. Additionally, more-consistent program implementation has led to a one- to three-percent increase in students' performance in self-management, social awareness, and peer and teacher relationships skills. This growth is important to note because it typically takes three to five years of program implementation to see any positive quantitative changes. To be able to see this growth within two years of the initiative's launch indicates that RMG is on the correct path and could potentially see greater results with consistent implementation and improved levels of fidelity.

Qualitatively, there's a lot to report, too. In January and February of this year, the RMG initiative team interviewed 55 teachers with the highest usage rates in their schools after two months of implementation. This varied between teachers that completed 14 percent of the program to those who completed 65 percent. Average usage rate was 35 percent. These teachers reported the following:

- 1. Students showed increased prosocial behaviors (behaviors intended to help others)**
- 2. Teachers felt more positively connected with their students, and also saw more positive connections between students**
- 3. Students showed increased academic performance**
- 4. Students showed increased self-management and social-awareness skills**

Along with these improvements, school leaders observed that students' new skills enabled them to better support one another in the hallway, in the cafeteria, and in their classes. Educators, too, reported benefiting from the social-emotional skills they've been teaching. This was an expected and welcomed secondary effect of the initiative.



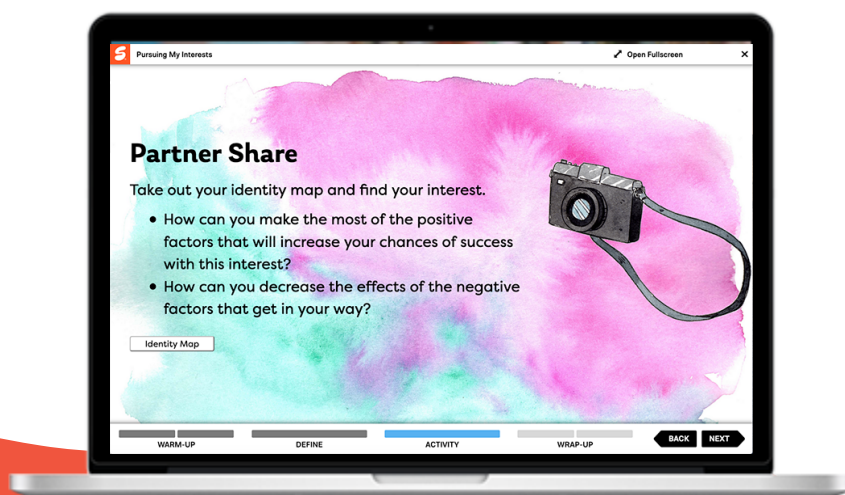
The Future

“We’re carefully planning collaboration activities among school-based administrators, teachers, and district-based staff who are grounded in school climate to connect research with the realities of implementation and our students’ lives.”

Deborah J. Cardoso | Account Client Support Specialist
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Broward County Public Schools’ Student Support Initiative and Recovery Division now has a department dedicated to SEL. District leaders are working with the RMG team to find other possible applications for SEL instruction across the district. They’re also evaluating the logistics of implementing schoolwide programs in the district so the positive effects of SEL programming can be even greater in depth and breadth.

The RMG team will continue monthly operational meetings with principals, assistant principals, and classroom teachers. Among the many topics discussed at these meetings, educators will be invited to share how Second Step® Middle School is used in their schools. Broward County Public Schools leadership will continue to learn about the program and explore how to grow its reach.



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