



SERVING THE WHOLE PERSON

Preparing Students for Life Beyond the Classroom:
Spotlighting Success in North Dakota

The benefits of social emotional learning (SEL)
in two rural school districts

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INTRODUCTION

“Never once have I gone into a job interview where they’ve asked me, ‘How did you do in English when you were in high school?’ They want to know if I can work well with a team, think critically, and be creative and innovative.”

— ANDREW JORDAN, SUPERINTENDENT, WILTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Like many across the country, parents and educators in North Dakota believe that schools’ purpose is to help students become capable young adults who can reach their fullest potential and contribute to society. In North Dakota, this means becoming *choice ready*: graduating with the essential skills to succeed in college, the workforce, and/or the military.

As part of this goal, North Dakota has pursued social emotional learning (SEL), using the definition put forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”¹

Research shows that SEL can improve students’ skills in areas such as communication and collaboration² — essential skills for thriving in the 21st-century workforce. While academic knowledge is one important piece of the puzzle, SEL and other efforts are part of a *whole-person approach to learning* that attends

To support statewide adoption of SEL and other whole-person strategies, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction and North Dakota Regional Education Association have developed numerous resources and consortia that focus on these areas. A list of such resources and opportunities is included at the end of this case study.

¹ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *What is SEL?* <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

² Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432. <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/meta-analysis-child-development-1.pdf>

to individuals' development across multiple domains, including physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional. When schools and school systems adopt such an approach, they see improved student attendance and engagement, improved student connectedness, better social and emotional health, and improved academic outcomes.³

In order to fuel greater adoption of whole-person approaches to learning by districts across North Dakota, a team of leaders from the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) and the North Dakota Regional Education Association (NDREA) sought to identify districts that had been experiencing success with using whole-person practices. The national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd supported the team in using a mixed-methods research approach that it had developed for surfacing such exemplars.⁴ The team first analyzed a range of statewide student outcome data — including **academic achievement scores** and results from the **statewide Student Engagement Survey** — to identify districts with notably positive student outcomes, including among groups that sometimes perform at lower levels, such as students enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program. The team used this information to create a “short list” of finalist districts that appeared to have achieved notable success across a broad range of areas. Finally, the team interviewed leaders and educators from each finalist district, to determine whether these districts had intentionally and effectively implemented SEL and other whole-person initiatives that might be linked to these positive outcomes.

Based on this analysis, two districts rose to the top as *SEL exemplars*: Wilton School District and Richland #44 School District. In several ways, both districts resemble many others throughout the state: each enrolls close to the median district enrollment across North Dakota, about 250 students across PK–12, and each is located in a small, rural community.

To help inspire other districts throughout the state to adopt whole-person approaches and achieve a wide range of more positive and equitable student outcomes, this case study explores each district's strategies and some of the benefits they have offered to the district's students, staff, and communities — beyond the evident student performance data. The final section of this document includes resources and opportunities that NDDPI and NDREA offer for North Dakota district leaders who are interested in further exploring such strategies.

Key Strategies for Success

Although their contexts and approaches differ in some ways, Wilton and Richland #44 have invested in a number of similar strategies for supporting students, each with a strong evidence base, including:

- **Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS):** MTSS is a framework that focuses on providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, including monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals.⁵ A multi-tier approach is used

³ Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success (research brief)*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/educating-whole-child-report>

⁴ Caparas, R. (2021). *Spotlighting whole-person success: A guide for using statewide data to identify exemplar districts in SEL and school climate*. WestEd.

⁵ North Dakota's Multi-Tier System of Supports Project. (n.d.). *What is NDMTSS?* North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. <https://ndmtss.org/what-is-ndmtss/>

to differentiate instruction based on student need. Tier 1 (“universal”) supports are provided for all students. Tier 2 (“targeted”) supports are provided to groups of students who require additional support. Tier 3 (“intensive, individualized”) supports are provided to a few students who need more intensive support.⁶

- **SEL skills and curricula:** Educators help students develop SEL skills through dedicated SEL curricula and activities and/or by integrating SEL into existing academic lessons.⁷ The state has developed SEL learning goals related to self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.⁸
- **Restorative practices:** Restorative practices may take the form of small conferences between students and their peers (and/or educators), or may consist of larger “circles” in which students take turns sharing, listening to their peers, and reflecting. These restorative practices can include *proactive* practices that focus on building community, relationships, and social emotional skills, as well as *reactive* practices that focus on repairing harm, learning from mistakes, and restoring relationships.⁹ As both a preventative measure and an alternative to exclusionary discipline tactics such as suspensions, restorative practices can reduce the loss of instructional time and other associated inequities that can result from exclusionary discipline.¹⁰

Although Wilton and Richland #44 began adopting such strategies at different times — with Wilton starting its journey around 2013 and Richland #44 in 2018 — leaders and staff from both districts emphasized the importance of **sustainability**. That is, by adopting these practices gradually and improving them over time, schools can more easily incorporate them into their regular routines and are more likely to sustain these approaches in the long term. As Wilton High School Principal Lisa Klabunde describes, this approach is essential for helping staff embrace these practices as part of a school’s culture, rather than seeing them as just “another new thing to do.”

⁶ OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. (2021). *Positive behavioral interventions & supports*. <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tiered-framework>

⁷ Jones, S. M., & Kahn, J. (2017). *The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic development — Consensus statements of evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists*. National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, The Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/SEAD-Research-Brief-9.12_updated-web.pdf

⁸ North Dakota’s Multi-Tier System of Supports Project. (2018). *Statewide initiatives: NDMTSS social emotional learning goals*. North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. <https://www.ndrea.org/index.php?id=103>

⁹ Wachtel, T. (n.d.). *Defining restorative*. International Institute for Restorative Practices. <https://www.iirp.edu/restorative-practices/defining-restorative>

¹⁰ Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckenbur, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2019). *Restorative justice in U.S. schools: An updated research review*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/resource-restorative-justice-in-u-s-schools-an-updated-research-review.pdf>

SPOTLIGHTING SUCCESS IN WILTON

BENEFIT #1: Awareness of What Each Student Needs to Succeed — and Ability to Provide It

Wilton School District’s journey toward SEL began with a desire to better understand students’ unique needs and help all students reach their full academic potential. Eight years ago, this prompted Wilton’s leaders and staff to adopt MTSS as a more individualized approach to instruction and intervention; they participated in training through North Dakota’s Multi-Tier System of Supports (NDMTSS) Project, a collaborative effort led by state, regional, and local leaders.

Wilton’s approach to MTSS begins with reviewing its students’ academic and behavioral data and determining which supports might be needed for each student. This includes Tier 1 supports that all students receive, such as Wilton’s Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program, which encourages, models, and rewards positive behavior. Early on, Wilton’s leaders also realized that SEL was a critical Tier 1 support for equipping students with the social and emotional skills to meet schoolwide behavior expectations — as well as to succeed academically and in life outside the classroom. Consequently, district leaders adopted Second Step, an SEL curriculum for grades K–8; they are also working on integrating SEL concepts into the core curricula at the high school.

Wilton was one of the first of the state’s small, rural districts to adopt MTSS. Superintendent Andrew Jordan shares that in the years since the district adopted SEL and PBS, referrals to the principals’ offices have plummeted. What’s more, Jordan now serves on the NDMTSS State Advisory Team and provides the state with insight into what MTSS looks like on the ground.

The adoption of MTSS included helping some staff shift the ways in which they view student performance and, as Jordan says, “get to the root of the problem.” Consequently, whether a student appears to be struggling with academic concepts, motivation, behavior, or attendance, Wilton’s staff think about what they can do to support the student in overcoming those barriers, rather than lowering expectations or jumping to disciplinary consequences.



As reflected in its hallway décor, Wilton celebrates students’ individual strengths and emphasizes the importance of social and emotional skills.

Additionally, if staff determine that a student’s interventions need to be adjusted, they take a strengths-based approach to tweaking the student’s plan, with teachers identifying the student’s strengths alongside the areas in which the student is struggling. “Sometimes we can use those strengths to make the intervention better,” explains Wilton High School Principal Lisa Klabunde. “They’re more than just students sitting in a chair, learning academics. They’re people.”

Wilton's leaders also connect this whole-person approach to the concept of equity — that is, providing the necessary resources and support for every student to reach their fullest potential, regardless of background. Klabunde notes that, although North Dakota is less racially diverse than many other states, it has diversity in terms of "socioeconomic status, and mental health, and familial supports." Such environmental factors can affect students' ability to learn, and so Wilton's staff have prioritized getting to know each student on a personal basis, building trusting relationships, and learning about such circumstances.

Along with gaining a greater awareness of students' circumstances and what they need in order to succeed, Wilton's leaders have secured resources to address these needs. This included joining North Dakota's Full-Service Community Schools Consortium, which helps districts provide more comprehensive services, such as health care and job training for students, through partnerships with local service providers. Using a combination of general district funds and additional funding sources available to North Dakota Full-Service Community Schools, Wilton has expanded its services to include a psychologist and a social worker on campus to serve both students and families. The psychologist provides mental health services for students, and the social worker has helped eligible families sign up for Medicaid and find summer child care. For many families in the district, accessing such services on their own would be difficult. They would have to miss school or work to drive to Bismarck, and even then, getting an appointment can be challenging. Klabunde explains that offering these services on campus has provided numerous benefits, including improving attendance and strengthening students' sense of belonging.

In order to find out what each student needs to succeed — whether it's a universal tool such as SEL, a targeted intervention, or services offered through Wilton's Full-Service Community School approach — Wilton relies on the strong, trusting relationships between its students and staff. Wilton leaders and staff note that, although the district is small, intentional relationship-building is still critical for advancing equity and student success. For example, during a professional development day before the start of school two years ago, Wilton's educators participated in a relationship-mapping exercise. Administrators printed a long list with every student's name, posted the list on the wall, and asked staff to place stickers next to the names of students with whom they have a close relationship. As Wilton's counselor, Savannah Hogue, explains, this provided staff with "a visual of which students already have strong relationships with staff here and which students we need to reach out to." For each student who didn't yet appear to have any such strong relationships, staff collaboratively determined who would be the best fit for connecting with that student.

In addition to the intentional building of one-on-one relationships, Wilton's educators model a positive school climate by learning students' names across grade levels, looking out for them, and striving to help students see every staff member as an adult whom they can trust. Hogue sees this camaraderie every day in the hallway. "Teachers treat all students like the kids in their own classrooms," she says.



BENEFIT #2: Safety, Healing, and Resilience

Having previously spent 25 years of his career in law enforcement, Chris Potter, Richland #44's high school counselor, understands what it takes to ensure student safety. While Potter also attends to the school's emergency preparedness and drills, he sees support for student mental health — and building a positive, open, trusting school climate — as among the most powerful investments we can make in school safety.

This need was underscored in early 2018, in the semester before Potter joined Richland #44's staff. An investigation surfaced a series of hazing incidents at the high school. The news splashed across local headlines, fragmenting trust between the school district and the Richland community, and prompting a turnover in administration. As Potter describes, the new leaders immediately recognized that "relationships, resilience, coping, and the emotions of the kids were going to be a key focus for us in order to rebuild and heal a community that had been deeply wounded."

Through a collaborative effort, Richland #44's administrators, faculty, parents, and community members explored possible strategies for rebuilding trust and creating a districtwide environment in which every student feels physically and psychologically safe, supported, and ready to learn. As one key strategy, the district adopted restorative circles, first modeling them with staff during professional development in the fall, and then leading them with students on the first day of school. The circles provided a space for voicing emotions, building empathy, and supporting one another.

Observing the immediate, positive impact, Richland #44's staff have continued to use circle activities for the past three years. In some instances, these are short classroom circles in the morning, in which students share what's on their minds and verbalize any emotions that might be impeding their ability to learn. In other instances, staff use restorative circles — which they refer to as *accountability conferences* — to help students gain the skills to resolve conflicts with their peers. Richland #44's superintendent and high school principal, Dr. Britney Gandhi, explains that the use of restorative circles has led to a significant decline in behavioral issues and disciplinary responses, because these practices allow students to "actually find a solution, instead of just having a consequence."

Gandhi shares that it was important to convey the purpose of restorative circles to parents and staff, especially in the beginning. Many adults in the school community were used to traditional notions of discipline that focused on "laying down the law" and doling out punishment. However, since then, feedback on Richland #44's restorative circles has been overwhelmingly positive.

As a complement to these restorative practices, Richland #44 invested in Second Step, the same curriculum in use in Wilton. With the help of its Parent Teacher Organization, the district initially purchased a one-year license for grades K–6, but after observing the value of these lessons, the district invested in a five-year license for grades K–8. Potter also carries SEL concepts into his

workshops for grades 9–12 and helps other high school teachers draw out SEL concepts within their academic lessons.

According to Richland #44's staff, SEL and restorative practices have helped students recognize and articulate their emotions, show compassion toward others, and create a more actively caring school climate. For example, as students stream through the hallway on the way to class, an upperclassman notices a student with special needs who is having a bad day. She stops to give him a hug and tell him that everything will be okay. As Potter says, "That exemplifies the kids we've got here."



A poster created by Richland #44 Elementary School students

Richland #44's leaders and staff point out that talking openly about emotions and mental health has not always been easy. In recent years, the district has been administering a mental health survey to its grades 7–12 students, alongside the North Dakota Youth Risk Behavior Survey provided by the state. When Potter presented a summary of results to district and school board leaders in early 2019, they were stunned by how many students were experiencing serious mental health concerns, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. This prompted the school board to allocate funding for a full-time counselor at both the elementary school and the high school, rather than sharing a single counselor between the two school sites. Not only has this improved students' access to counseling services, but it has enabled the counselors to support SEL implementation in the classroom.

As is the case in Wilton, Richland #44's staff have found that SEL has been a powerful tool in giving students the confidence to speak up and let staff know when something is troubling them. As Gandhi describes, this greater awareness has led to "self-harm prevention, suicide prevention — literally saving lives."

Parent and school board member Nicole Rostad Holdman agrees, noting that in a close-knit community like Richland, where families have attended the same schools for generations, people often feel that they're "in a safe little bubble." The schools' student survey data helped the board realize that their students' mental health risks were no different from those of students across the country. Rostad Holdman hopes that other districts recognize that school safety in any district requires active investments in SEL and student mental health. "Even if it's not coming at you with a newspaper headline, it doesn't mean it isn't there," she notes. But thanks to Richland #44's intentional efforts to build an open, trusting school culture in which everyone looks out for one another, its staff, students, and community members feel more confident that their students are safe, resilient, and thriving.

BENEFIT #3: Essential Skills to Thrive in the Workforce and in Society

In their adoption of SEL and a whole-person approach, Richland #44 and Wilton share many of the same goals, benefits, and strategies. One goal that they share with many other districts statewide is to prepare students for success beyond the classroom. Both districts view SEL as a key strategy for achieving North Dakota's statewide goal of preparing every student to become *choice ready* and prepared to succeed in life after high school.

Chris Potter, Richland #44's high school counselor, also manages the district's Career and Technical Education (CTE) Career Development program. As required by the state, the district has a volunteer CTE Advisory Board that includes parents, students, staff, and business leaders. When these stakeholders were asked which skills they believe are most important for students to learn, they identified the same skills that guide North Dakota's Choice Ready framework: *critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication*. Richland #44's leaders quickly realized that these skills — also referred to as the "Four Cs," "Essential Skills," or "21st Century Skills" — closely align with SEL skills.

In his CTE role, Potter has spoken with industry leaders and job services groups, who say that these skill sets are more important than academic success or even technical skills. These industry leaders explained that they can always provide technical training, but they have found that essential skills like collaboration and communication cannot be so easily learned on the job.

Consequently, and since Richland #44's dedicated formal SEL curriculum only spans K–8, Potter weaves SEL instruction into his career development classes. He also collaborates with the rest of the high school teaching team, sending out a simple survey to determine which SEL and career development skills the other teachers already touch upon in their classes. Then, Potter reinforces those concepts and fills in any gaps through his career development courses. For example, Richland #44's Social Studies teacher, Spencer Timm, describes how his lessons for seniors on personal finance and budgeting connect closely with SEL skills such as goal-setting and responsible decision-making. Likewise, the high school's Family and Consumer Science



Richland #44 School District's vision statement

teacher, Carol Braunberger, prepares students to participate in job interviews, which hinge on effective communication.

In Wilton, district leaders and staff also connect SEL to the skills needed to succeed in adulthood. The district has created a Profile of a Graduate, featuring the five competencies that parents, community members, and prospective employers felt were most essential for students have upon graduation: communication, responsibility, critical thinking, digital literacy, and perseverance.

Wilton’s administrators frequently refer back to the district’s Profile of a Graduate during staff development sessions, and they highlight how SEL directly contributes to students’ development of these competencies. The Profile of a Graduate helps remind the full team why SEL is so important: “If we want students to be contributing members of society in the future, these are the skills that they need,” explains Wilton High School Principal Klabunde.

Wilton’s leaders and educators also recognize the power of modeling SEL skills in their day-to-day teaching and collaboration, as a way of showing how critical these skills are for all adults. During professional development sessions, Wilton’s staff lead circles and practice other SEL activities. Wilton also created a Profile of an Educator, which maps the five competencies that the district most values in its staff — including communication, which is also featured in the Profile of a Graduate, as well as relationship building, collaboration, passion, and growth mindset — and specific examples of what these competencies look like in practice. Wilton’s leaders use the Profile of an Educator during interviews and hiring, onboarding for new staff, and ongoing professional development sessions. According to Superintendent Jordan, this investment in Wilton’s staff has helped improve retention — and has helped embed SEL into Wilton’s school culture.

Conclusion

Although their districts have been identified as statewide SEL exemplars, leaders in both Richland #44 and Wilton wish to improve and deepen their SEL work even further. For example, both aim to integrate SEL further into the general high school curriculum, and Wilton hopes to introduce a capstone project for seniors, connected to Profile of a Graduate competencies. While Richland #44 and Wilton may yet have further to go on their journey into SEL and other whole-person strategies, the benefits for their students — academic and nonacademic — are already clear.



The five competencies of Wilton’s Profile of a Graduate, developed in collaboration with the district’s community



GETTING STARTED: STATE AND REGIONAL RESOURCES

In its Strategic Vision for PK–12 Education, North Dakota has identified efforts to promote *safe and healthy behaviors* as a key state priority.¹¹ Consequently, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) and the North Dakota Regional Education Association (NDREA) have developed numerous ways to support schools and districts in advancing this priority. Local education leaders who are interested in exploring whole-person strategies to support student success can make use of the following state and regional resources. Where possible, the title of each resource links to its website.

Online Resources and Opportunities for Technical Assistance

North Dakota’s Multi-Tier System of Supports (NDMTSS):



NDMTSS includes a framework — to provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally in school — as well as guidance and implementation support provided by NDDPI and NDREA to districts across the state.

The NDMTSS website includes the [NDMTSS Playbook](#), implementation guidance and tools for educators and leaders, information about upcoming NDMTSS trainings, and information on how to access individualized technical assistance.

NDMTSS SEL Learning Goals:

Introduction to SEL Goals

SEL Goals by Grade Level

SEL Goals by Competency

SEL Scales

NDMTSS has developed SEL learning goals to provide reasonable expectations for what North Dakota students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade span. These goals are organized by SEL competency: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

¹¹ North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. (n.d.). *ND PK–12 education strategic vision framework*. <https://www.nd.gov/dpi/nd-pk-12-education-strategic-vision-framework>

NDMTSS Trauma-Informed Practices for Schools (TIPS) Framework:

This framework includes a set of five components that help schools become *trauma-informed systems* that recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress on students, families, staff, and others. These components are: (1) enhancing psychological safety through relationships, (2) promoting SEL, (3) engaging families, (4) implementing and maintaining restorative discipline practices, and (5) collaborating with community partners.


NDDPI's Online Trauma Sensitive Schools Resources:

These online resources offer an introduction to trauma-informed (also known as trauma sensitive) school systems. Additionally, REAs offer [Trauma Sensitive Schools trainings](#) and training on how to conduct a [Trauma-Informed Practices for Schools \(TIPS\) Needs Assessment](#).

Leading Implementation of Systemic SEL Virtual Learning Series:

This annual, multi-day, team-based training series is designed to support district and, in some instances, school building leadership teams in creating the conditions for optimizing social emotional learning through the application of the NDMTSS Essential Components and continuous improvement.

Behavioral Health in Education: Resources and Opportunities (B-HERO) Technical Assistance Center:

 Through a partnership with the North Dakota Department of Human Services (DHS)'s Behavioral Health Division and the Central Regional Education Association (CREA), the B-HERO Technical Assistance Center develops, curates, and disseminates resources and opportunities to school sites' Behavioral Health Resource Coordinators (BHRCs) to further distribute to appropriate school personnel. Contact your school's BHRC for additional information.

Collaborative Networks

ND SEL Network:



The ND SEL Network is an established community of practice for teams of North Dakota educators. This collaborative, ongoing space assists North Dakota school representatives in sharing experiences, celebrating successes, and problem-solving related to the systemic implementation of SEL.

North Dakota Education to Workforce Pathways through SEL Coalition:

In partnership with the South East Education Cooperative, NDDPI, the North Dakota Governor’s Office, and the North Dakota Department of Commerce, CREA leads a statewide coalition to break down barriers and support greater implementation of SEL in the development of K–12 workforce pathways. This effort creates greater opportunity for state-level initiative alignment and cohesion and strengthens partnerships between education and business/industry in order to build respect and shared responsibility in preparing students to become *choice ready*. Contact [Erin Oban](#) at CREA for additional information.

North Dakota Full-Service Community Schools Consortium:



This consortium of schools is actively partnering with service providers to serve as neighborhood hubs where comprehensive supports are coordinated and provided for students and families through an integrated approach in their local communities.