

# Social Emotional Learning Demonstration Sites in Washington State



## Support for Districts: Community Engagement

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 final brief in the series and answers the following guiding question:



Washington Office of Superintendent of  
**PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

How are local education agencies **engaging students, families, and community partners in SEL?**

In addition to the examples, you will find reflection questions that your school or district can use to guide your implementation efforts.

## **How are local education agencies engaging students, families, and community partners in SEL?**

### **Cape Flattery School District**

Cape Flattery focused on increasing opportunities for community members to come into the schools to volunteer or teach cultural practices. The district has developed a partnership with the [Makah Tribe](#) that allows tribal employees to spend one hour of their work week at the school. They are also working to certify members of the community through the [First People's language and oral traditions](#) certification. Tribal employees, certified educators, and other community members support students by creating a safe space in the school. Community members also share information with students about community spaces and events, and students feel more comfortable in community spaces because these educators are present. The collaboration with community members who are trusted by families also helps families feel more connected to school settings.

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*"We have community members that are experts come in and work with our children ... So, creating a truly safe place for them ... That involves the community, but it also makes those connections with the parents. Those parents that might not know who to go to, they might not know where ... Their child comes home, and they talk about what they learned in school. They can make that connection. When they see that individual in the store, a conversation can be started because of that interaction that took place."*

— Cape Flattery School District leader

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The schools are also strengthening their engagement with community partners by facilitating student attendance at community events and activities, including those that happened during the school day. Students not only attended the events but also engaged in community service by helping with set up or planning.

In addition to the Tribe, the school and district have partnered with several other organizations to support students' behavioral and mental health. Some of these partnerships developed organically based on a single collaboration or event that then evolved. The district has worked to streamline communication with these community partners to identify and address emergent student needs more quickly. The district's openness to partnering with community organizations was noted and appreciated by multiple people we spoke with.

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*"I feel very welcomed by this district, appreciated, and excited because they want to partner and they want their community to be healthy. And that's refreshing. That's so refreshing to be in a community that wants to be healthy."*

*– Community partner*

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The district is expanding its SEL-focused family and community engagement efforts. For example, they have reached out to family members and community members who have specific skills that can support cultural programming during the school day and in after-school programs. They also invite families to join schoolwide celebrations and events, particularly those focused on Makah culture.

Recently, a powerful partnership has developed between the district and the Makah Tribe Wellness Team. Together, they coordinate monthly workshops for families and quarterly Makah Strong assemblies. The SEL lead supports and promotes these family engagement opportunities. The meetings include the tribal council, the general manager and directors from each tribal department and the tribal clinic, and district school board members. Topics are determined based on community concerns or needs. This partnership does not shy away from tough topics, including fentanyl use and depression and their impact on the community and students. The team addresses each issue with a Makah tribal teaching, which connects to positive community values and helps students build resilience. The team receives support, training, and resources from health, tribal, and education experts so they are equipped to deal with each topic. The first assembly ended with the following unprecedented event:

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*"One of the things that was most touching was our students and our staff performed a tribal wolf dance ... There's a different sense of responsibility and importance that's laid on the floor during a dance like this. Our students are the ones that are leading the way. Their parents and their grandparents are there to support. What an honorable way to say thank you for what you've done over the years."*

*– Cape Flattery School District leader*

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## Renton School District

Renton began its community engagement around SEL by planning a districtwide conference. The idea was to include breakout sessions in which participants could present their own SEL-related work and share ways to support school and district needs in their role. Classified staff members worked with conference organizers to both submit and review presentation proposals. This resulted in a two-day virtual conference with more than 400 participants. In addition to the presentations, participants engaged in pre-readings, online discussions, and post-conference activities. The district also engaged in small-group books studies throughout the year, including [Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators](#).

The district initially found it difficult to engage bus drivers. The drivers were not clear about how SEL related to their jobs and were reluctant to take time out of their day to participate. The SEL facilitator realized that bus drivers do not sit at a desk or use computers on the job. To address this, the facilitator went directly to the [transportation office](#) between 10:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m., when drivers were not on their routes. This proved to be a more effective and inclusive approach.

Starting with the foundation of using Renton's Signature Practices, the drivers identified their own ways to incorporate those practices and SEL behaviors. From there, the drivers asked for guidance on how they could be more proactive in addressing student needs, such as students who are going hungry or who need better clothing. The drivers wanted to be connected into the system to support the students. While Renton has social workers and community partners to help students and families in times of need, the first person to see them in the morning may have the most insight into how students enter the learning day. Now, Renton school bus drivers have a short form and process they can use to submit requests for student support. The district then organizes community partners and social workers to provide the necessary support. Even with leadership and staff changes in the transportation department, there is still dedicated time to train drivers in understanding and supporting SEL across the full student experience.

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*"So, what do you need and where are you and how do I serve you? Our leadership style is very much servant leadership. We try to do as much of the lifting as we can to make sure it's their voices that are at the center."*

*—SEL facilitator*

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## **Richland School District**

Richland School District engaged parents throughout an intensive and deep [textbook adoption process](#). Usually, a small group of educators met to identify a content area's program and instructional materials. Once the program was chosen, sample materials were available to view in the district office.

In the case of SEL materials, Richland wanted to have more community involvement to identify key standards to emphasize and to consider program elements, including instructional materials, teaching strategies, and professional development. More than 120 committee members were involved in understanding Washington's [SEL framework](#) and [standards](#) and how they differ from the [CASEL model](#). Committee members included administrators and teachers from prekindergarten to high school, parents, and other community members. The committee identified key standards to elevate based on information about the district, as well as instructional approaches to use. They developed a criterion-based rubric to review potential evidence-based programs in the [CASEL program guide](#) and [Navigating SEL from the Inside Out](#). They thought carefully about continuity of language and application across the entire district. They also determined that there should be dedicated time across all classrooms to teach SEL skills specifically. Previously, counselors provided SEL lessons as part of a push-in strategy. Another key element involved being intentional about how the SEL materials reflected the Richland community and using multiple methods of communicating with families and the broader community.

After identifying several programs that could meet their needs, district staff members organized program providers to pitch their products to the committee. The providers were given access to the criterion-based rubric, and committee members used it to score the presentations. From the presentations, they identified three top choices. Program staff members provided a two-week trial period set of teaching resources and trained all committee members on using them. During the two-week trial period, teachers and students provided feedback on the engagement and skills application of the lessons. Each program was trial tested and compared to the developed rubric. The committee shared the feedback to promote discussion on benefits and potential needs for each program adoption. Once the selected programs were chosen, all committee members helped build buy-in from the school board and identified ongoing ways to support and implement the chosen instructional materials across the district. In keeping with the central role family engagement plays in SEL implementation, one of the program's hosted a [family night](#) to share about SEL and the instructional materials adopted.

## Steilacoom Historical School District

Steilacoom Historical expanded [SEL and Neuroscience](#) training to include food service, maintenance, and front office staff members. They also thought deeply about how to include bus drivers. When administrators received calls for additional support, it was often related to an incident on the bus.

To proactively build skill and competency, the director of student supports began meeting with drivers monthly to facilitate a short training followed by discussion and questions. This encouraged drivers to identify ways they could use the same neuroscience language and strategies on their bus that teachers were using in the classroom, leading to increased consistency for students. Bus drivers have been trained to focus on safety and moving safely from location to location, so district training focused on the importance of certain aspects of SEL engagement, such as greeting students with a smile, and how they support safety on the bus. Drivers were able to share specific ways they were already doing some of the actions and ways they could incorporate more in their daily activities. Transportation staff is contracted by the district, but the organization works with district staff members to provide beginning-of-year training and ongoing support. During the training, district staff members and transportation leaders identified a driver who was a SEL champion and well-skilled. The bus company and district leveraged that skill set and shifted her into a training position. In addition to providing direct training about neuroscience and SEL integrations on the bus, she completes ride-alongs with other drivers to coach and support ongoing implementation.

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*"She was co-training with me, and it was really nice, because it added a level of credibility to what we were saying. She was an experienced bus driver and was integrating SEL, and so other drivers trust her when she says, 'You can do it!' in a more sincere way."*

*—Steilacoom Historical School District leader*

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This focus on SEL and relationship-building between drivers and students also helped address student needs more quickly. When students were dysregulated on the bus, the driver wasn't always able to address it in the moment. So, after students were safely dropped off at their school site, the driver could return to the student's school to meet with the student and have a counselor facilitate a conversation. These conversations were meant to correct student behavior before suspension from the bus, increase SEL competencies, and directly teach skills to ensure more successful bus rides back and forth to school. Using neuroscience concepts and vocabulary, students, staff members, and drivers could discuss responses to stress, an amygdala hijack, and how to better address needs in the moment on a bus.



The relationship with the transportation company also provides an opportunity to engage with families before students step onto a bus. In the K–5 schools, Steilacoom uses Success Conferences to build positive relationships with parents at the start of the school year. During these conferences, students and families receive a school passport. This passport encourages students to interview staff members throughout the school and to practice going through the lunch line, interacting with the library, and going to the music room. At least one bus driver is also stationed at the school with a bus to engage with families and students. Students receive coloring books that illustrate bus rules, and they and their families are invited onto the bus for a tour. This practice helps reduce anxiety about route times and bus procedures.

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*“We really have an opportunity to listen to what parents want for their students and then we get to hear from the kids what they wish their teacher knew about them, and so that's been a really important. We had 96 percent positive feedback. Some parents were a little bit sad that they didn't have more time to spend with their teacher, and so we're making some adjustments to the schedule this year. We're super proud of the fact that we're allowing ourselves to spend more time with families.”*

— Steilacoom Historical School District leader

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The superintendent and leadership teams value student voice and incorporate student perspectives into discussion about rigor, academics, and SEL. There is a Student Advisory Council to the Superintendent, which includes representatives from all grade spans, elementary to high school. The students meet with the superintendent monthly and provide feedback about what is happening across the district from their perspectives. Students are chosen to represent the student population. One meeting with the elementary Student Advisory Council led to problem solving to increase access to the library and allow students to check out more books.

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*“That was a really interesting awareness for us, and I think for others, who are trying to elevate student voice. We anticipated they wanted more play and recess, which they do care about, but in this instance, they really were recognizing that post-COVID, some of the practices had changed at the school. Their access to the library had been reduced and they weren't happy with that.”*

— Steilacoom Historical School District leader

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Steilacoom Historical is also home to many military families, who often have [atypical stressors](#). These may include families being relocated to new areas with little notice, which impacts social networks, as well as differing academic expectations and extracurricular opportunities. The district leverages Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) grants to support military families. An example of a grant that focuses on military families, but also supports non-military connected students is the [Inspire Grant](#), which aligns to neuroscience and after-school activities and promotes interest, engagement, empowerment, and connection to STEM courses. Another support is [Military and Family Life Counselors](#), which are housed at the most impacted schools to address the needs of students and families. Students are also engaged by leading Student2Student organizations so that incoming students are welcomed and feel a sense of belonging as soon as they arrive.

Staff members also facilitate evening sessions called "Parenting from Inside the Brain," during which parents learn about neuroscience and the impacts on learning. During COVID, staff members realized that parents were more involved with the learning space, so they offered Family Academy Zoom sessions to share ideas about how to set up learning spaces and time while in their own homes. Community librarians joined to discuss how to get library cards and access those services. Occupational therapists also hosted sessions about posture, mobility, muscle coordination, and how to disengage from a screen and go outside. The district shared resources directly with teachers so that parents could access them right in the Google classroom and not have to navigate across the district webpage for specific information.



## Reflection Questions and Considerations

- How does your district currently engage with families and community partners to build understanding and support for SEL?
- What are some ways you have seen SEL make a positive impact on the school community, including beyond the typical school day?
- How are families involved in policy and curriculum decisions regarding SEL?
- What types of SEL skills do families and community partners think are important to learn in school?
- How does your school or district talk about SEL with families and listen to their thoughts, needs, and concerns?
- What partnerships are currently in place in your district? How can you leverage these partnerships to build on strengths and address needs?

## 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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