



Public Schools Post-Pandemic:

Making the Case for Tier II SEL Small Groups

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We may be in the midst of the global pandemic, but it isn't too early to start planning for how to meet the anticipated enormous emotional needs of students once we return to more normal, in person learning.

As a behavior intervention teacher at an elementary school during normal in-person school, I experienced smiles every day. Does that surprise you? It surprised me when I first started teaching social emotional learning (SEL) small groups. My school started this intervention as a response to escalating behaviors in the classroom and school in general. The office was overflowing with students sent out of class. Our counselor always had an endless stack of major and minor behavior referral forms to process. Yet, after starting Tier II small groups, many of those same students would greet me with eye contact and a smile. They often wave excitedly and say:

“When do we have group this week?”
“Are we meeting today?”
“Are you coming to get me right now?”
“Do I get to come with you today?”

“Something is working and it is working well,” I have thought to myself while at work. Previously I taught English language learners, struggling readers, middle school and elementary school students but have *never* experienced so many smiling students in response to school-based interventions as I have teaching Tier II SEL small groups.

If you are unfamiliar, Tier II is the second of three layers of support schools can adopt through the PBIS model to improve student behavior at school. PBIS stands for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Tier I interventions are completed in the classroom setting with all students participating. Tier II are small group interventions targeting students who need even more support. Tier I are individuals who need personalized behavior plans.

The universal mental health screener data collected from our school (2019/20) affirms what we had hypothesized qualitatively for the previous two years: Tier II SEL small group students decrease disruptive behaviors. A side benefit is that they seem to enjoy attending the intervention. I want to inspire other schools to start their own Tier II SEL small groups post-pandemic. Whether your school will be face-to-face or a hybrid model, this work will be critical to get students back on track learning and developing in healthy ways.

Post-pandemic students will need to be taught and retaught school expectations. Self-regulation techniques like mindfulness, breathing, mind/body connections, counting and positive self-talk will need to be explicitly taught to help students de-stress from the pandemic. Many of our students have experienced significant trauma in their lives and time away from school will have only amplified their hurdles to feeling successful at school. Teaching self-soothing skills will help students manage anxiety and reconnect with schools in a supported way. It will give students an emotional life preserver, of sorts, as they wade back into the school waters once more (whenever that is!).

Our elementary school recently won an award for Washington State student growth (<https://vansd.org/seven-vancouver-schools-earn-awards-from-the-state-board-of-education/>). We speculate that small group Tier II interventions were part of this success. The impact of Tier II SEL small groups has been overwhelmingly positive. Here is what we noticed:

Disruptive Behaviors Decrease During 2019-20 school year we administered the Universal Mental Health Screener(UMHS) to all students K-5. 69% of students in our Tier II small SEL groups had externalizing behavior scores improve or stay the same. What other behavior intervention has an almost 70% success rate? This success rate is almost unheard of in public schools where disruptive behaviors continue to be a concern. The data confirms what we have noted anecdotally for years: Students served in Tier II SEL small groups see improvement in disruptive behavior.

Trauma-informed/Not Punitive Many students at our school experience trauma and face many emotional challenges. As groups of 3-6 students learn social/emotional skills, they can better apply them successfully in relationships at school with peers and adults. Contrast that to the historical punitive approach to discipline where students are reprimanded or receive discipline for lagging social/emotional skills. Tier II SEL groups are a trauma-informed way to support students.

Parents Love It We have almost 100% parent support for Tier II intervention. Only two parents out of 36 students invited to participate in Tier II small groups refused services for their child 2019/20 school year. Most parents appreciate the support their child receives with this intervention. In addition, we have had disappointed parents when their child improves and exits our Tier II program. When was the last time a parent was thanking you for detention, in-school suspension or expulsion of

Compliments MTSS and PBIS Efforts Tier II SEL small groups are only part of the fabric that is woven to form the PBIS and MTSS frameworks. Teaching social emotional skills can enhance academic outcomes. Our school, Hough Elementary, was honored with an award for making gains in academic outcomes and student attendance during the 2018-19 school year by the state’s School Recognition Program based on the WA School Improvement Framework (three year average continual progress). This is the same timeframe we implemented Tier II SEL small group intervention. It worked with, not against, our complex school systems.

Supports Underserved Students There are not enough mental health professionals to provide one on one counseling for the overwhelming amount of students who need social/emotional support. Post- pandemic, those needs will be even greater. There will be an increase, no doubt, in the gap that exists between those with access to social/emotional resources, like counseling or therapy, and the students without resources. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), we have an opportunity to “...leverage the power of social and emotional learning...[post-pandemic].”

I encourage schools to create strong SEL Tier II systems of support for students post-pandemic. This model can help meet the growing social-emotional needs of students as we return to classrooms, whenever that is. Tier II small groups are the most efficient and effective way to meet this challenge. The smiles and hugs will be data enough to let you know your school is changing lives and that we are well on our way to healing post-pandemic.

For further information:



WA State SEL Standards Implementation Guide

<https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/health-safety/mental-social-behavioral-health/social-and-emotional-learning-sel>

National Social Emotional Competences by CASEL

<https://casel.org/covid-resources/>

PBIS- Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports

<https://www.pbis.org/resource/returning-to-school-during-and-after-crisis>

Universal Mental Health Screener Information

<https://www.pbis.org/resource/systematic-screening-tools-universal-behavior-screeners>

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