



EDC SOLUTIONS & WELLESLEY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

# Strengthening SEL Supports

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## 🔍 Introduction

Teachers and administrators in Wellesley Public Schools have long prioritized student mental health and social and emotional learning (SEL) needs. To strengthen their approach, they sought support in creating a coherent Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) for SEL. In 2022, Wellesley hired EDC Solutions to conduct an SEL audit to help them identify opportunities to strengthen the district's system of SEL and mental health supports.

## 📷 School Snapshot

Wellesley Public Schools (WPS) is located in a suburb 17 miles west of Boston, Massachusetts. The district's 4,069 K–12 students enjoy a strong education—97.1 percent of students graduated in 2018, teacher retention is high, and students perform well-above state averages on MCAS, Massachusetts' standardized testing system.

In recent years, district administrators and educators have been concerned about students' SEL and mental health needs. Stress levels among adolescents were already high before March 2020. Then, school closures due to the pandemic created a heightened sense of isolation and loss. Since their schools reopened for in-person learning, elementary principals have expressed that in-school guidance counselors do not have the capacity to see every student who requests services.



## WHAT IS MTSS?

A Multi-Tiered System of Support is a framework designed to meet the needs of all students by ensuring that schools optimize data-driven decision-making, progress monitoring, and evidence-based supports and strategies with increasing intensity to sustain student growth. A comprehensive MTSS approach requires the active participation of administrators, faculty, and staff working throughout the school community.



## CHALLENGES

Before the audit, WPS was confronting a number of issues related to SEL and mental health:

1. Health surveys revealed increasing rates of depression and suicidal ideation among middle and high school students.
2. The district was facing the discontinuation of Open Circle, an evidence-based SEL program used for years by the district's elementary schools. With no replacement yet determined, the WPS leadership was seeing gaps in the ability of schools and classrooms to provide Tier 1 supports to students.
3. Limited behavioral health staffing impacted the district's ability to offer, track, and evaluate Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.

Addressing all of these concerns was seen as necessary for both health and scholastic reasons.

## 👁️ A Focus on SEL



Photo credit: Getty Images/Willie B. Thomas

The mission of WPS specifically calls out their commitment to “provide a high-quality, comprehensive educational experience that supports each student’s academic, social, and emotional development.” District leaders, including Superintendent David Lussier and Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning Sandra Trach, saw a strong MTSS as important to students’ success and have done extensive work on delivering academic support through that lens.

At a Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents conference in November 2021, Lussier and Trach saw a presentation by EDC’s Jim Vetter and Shai Fuxman that inspired them to think more concretely about their district’s MTSS for SEL.

“Jim challenged superintendents and board members in the audience to actually name their schools’ Tier 1, 2, and 3 programs,” recalls Lussier. When few people could, he had a realization. “It really struck me that at the end of the day, we have to be thinking about social and emotional and academic supports being tiered at all levels if we’re really going to move the needle.”

Following that presentation, WPS approached EDC to conduct an SEL audit for their district.

Lussier hoped that the audit would help WPS better inventory and categorize the SEL- and mental health-related programs, approaches, and expectations that were being used across the district.

**“We know based on research, the more students are successful with their SEL components, the more likely they’ll be successful with their academics.”**

— Sandra Trach, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning

"It was hard to wrap our arms around SEL," says Lussier. "We talked about it in such generalized terms that it didn't really have a form or structure. It sort of got used as a broad category of things."

Vetter, who served as lead consultant for Wellesley's SEL audit, says that many districts do have a system of SEL supports, but that those supports are often complex and not well-aligned.

"When it comes to improving that system, the big question typically is, 'Where do we start?'" says Vetter. "One good answer to that is the SEL audit."

## ✔ Conducting the Audit

In March 2022, Vetter met with members of the WPS leadership to begin the EDC Solutions SEL Audit. Together, they reviewed existing school data on SEL, identified goals for the audit, and established a timeline of deliverables.

One of the first steps was to create an inventory of Wellesley's existing SEL programs. This process revealed considerable activity but also a patchwork approach across the district, as different programs, materials, and lessons were used across different schools.

"So much of the SEL instruction was a combination of formal and informal curriculum," says Trach. "It made me appreciate why we were doing the audit."

To gather data about the current SEL and mental health interventions in use across the district, Vetter convened five listening sessions with more than 70 teachers and staff. Using collaborative tools such as Jamboard and Google Docs, participants mapped out what components of an MTSS for SEL were already in place in the district. Vetter also conducted a survey of Academic Council members, a group of district and building administrators and department heads from across the 10 WPS schools.

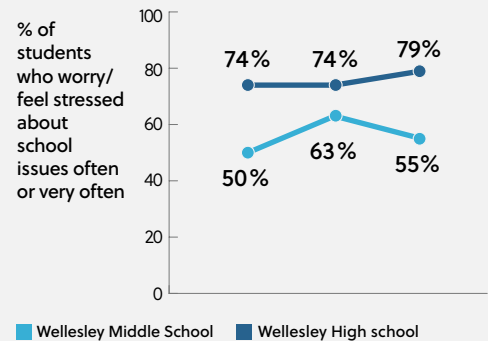
The interviews surfaced a number of positives about WPS's existing work to support SEL. They found that staff were skilled, supportive, and understood the importance of SEL and mental health. They also revealed that Tier 1, 2, and 3 supports were available at all schools, although these supports were not always provided consistently or in a coordinated manner.

The interviews also indicated some challenges that needed to be addressed. For example, WPS had no clearly established district-level team coordinating the MTSS for SEL and mental health. Efforts to support SEL were well-intentioned but unorganized. There was also no universal screening process in place around SEL and mental health.

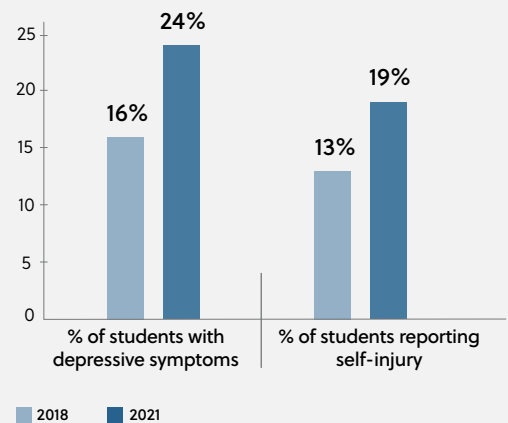


## RESPONDING TO STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

### Trends in Stress 2016–2018

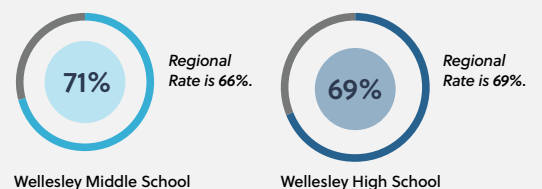


### Depression and Self-Harm in Wellesley High School



### Connectedness

In 2021, the percent of youth indicating they have at least one teacher/adult to talk to at school if they have a problem



Data Source: MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey, 2021





## WHAT IS SEL AUDIT?

SEL audits help school and district leaders consider how to strengthen overall SEL systems to support student success and wellness.

EDC's SEL Audit is a comprehensive, MTSS approach to SEL auditing. Our experts facilitate a three-month examination of your SEL-related programs and practices, helping you prioritize transformative improvements to SEL and mental health supports.

Based on the inventory and interviews, EDC prepared a series of recommendations for the district. One of the recommendations was the creation of a three- to five-year action plan to address the following:

- Selection, implementation, and monitoring of elementary school Tier 1 SEL program(s)
- Strengthening of middle school and high school advisory programs
- Creation of more consistent Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports across buildings
- Selection and implementation of a universal screening tool and process for elementary, middle, and high school
- Systematic, sustained professional development and support to help all staff understand and implement their roles in the MTSS for SEL and mental health

Findings from the SEL audit were shared with the WPS Administrative Council during a retreat in July 2022. Vetter presented an overview of the existing SEL supports and challenges and highlighted opportunities to take action. According to Trach, the findings provided a road map for the district.

"Jim was very supportive in outlining how we would bring policies, practices, and materials all together," says Trach.

Vetter incorporated notes from these conversations in the final report to the district, which was delivered in August 2022.

"The audit surfaced a lot of information, and the conversations during the retreat helped the final report be as rich and useful as possible," says Vetter.



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## Taking Action

Equipped with the final report, WPS administrators began to make changes to strengthen their MTSS for SEL and mental health.

First, they rebuilt their approach to Tier 1 SEL programming. Second Step, an evidence- and skills-based SEL curriculum, is being piloted in grades K–5. They are also scaling up use of Responsive Classroom, a prosocial approach to teaching and school discipline. As of February 2023, Trach has trained more than 90 educators on how to implement the new program and has begun to see its impact.

"I visit classrooms regularly, and there is evidence of Responsive Classroom beginning to flourish in practice," Trach says.

The district has also addressed its staffing shortage by hiring three new positions specifically to address SEL and mental health: a board-certified behavioral analyst, a district psychologist, and a director of school adjustment counselors.

Finally, the district was pleased to be accepted into the School Mental Health Leadership Institute to help understand and address system-level needs in a team approach model.

**"The SEL audit has framed the space for us to consider a coordinated, districtwide response."**

— David Lussier, Superintendent

"The SEL audit has framed the space for us to consider a coordinated, districtwide response," says Lussier. "The timing of this audit will also allow us to use these recommendations in the development of our new strategic plan. This clearly represents multiple years' worth of work, and while we want to move with urgency, we want to be sure we are attentive to the bandwidth of our team of educators, particularly coming out of the pandemic."



### SEL AUDIT RESOURCES

EDC Solutions offers free coaching on our MTSS approach to SEL audits through these accessible resources:

[SEL Self-Audit Checklist](#)

[Sample SEL Audit Report](#)

[SEL Audit Webinar](#)

### PARTNER WITH US

EDC Solutions partners with schools and districts on SEL integration, systems change, and strategic planning. We help districts implement programs and policies that help every student succeed.

Contact us at [solutions@edc.org](mailto:solutions@edc.org) to discuss partnerships and services.