

Finding a Focus for Systemic SEL

West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools, Minnesota

How can you bring together disparate bright spots and promising practices of SEL-related work to create a unified and consistent approach to SEL? That’s the challenge that faced SEL Fellow Sara Lein, director of special services at West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools in Minnesota. “There were a lot of pockets of really good things, but nothing we could hang our hats on,” she says. Here are some of the ways she approached the work in Focus Area 1 to bring unity to SEL in her district.

Crowdsourcing a Vision

To help encourage buy-in and enthusiasm for SEL, the district hosted a “World Café”-style forum to help identify and articulate the district’s shared goals and values. The forum welcomed 400 participants, both in-person and online, and asked for input on four key questions:

- What do our students need to learn to be ready for the future?
- What do you value most about our schools?
- What are some opportunities we should explore?
- How can you and our community connect to support our schools?



Meet SEL Fellow

Sara Lein

Director of Special Services

Welcome to West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools

- 5,140 students
- Started the SEL journey in 2019
- SEL Vision: “Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, We Thrive.”

Input & Planning

2019-20 school year

200+ people in person + 200+ people online gathered to provide input in small group discussions

35 individuals—students, parents, school and district staff, and community members met to design the strategic frame work



Challenge: Unifying pockets of SEL work into a systemic approach

“ You can’t do this work in isolation. You need to collaborate, commiserate, and share knowledge with others ...We are all learners. ”

The themes that emerged revealed the district’s chief priorities: interpersonal skills, real-world life skills, well-being, character, critical and creative thinking skills, lifelong learning, one’s own role in community, and self-confidence.

With these priorities in mind, Lein’s team developed a vision for the district’s work—**Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, We Thrive.** That gave them the foundation to build a broader framework for supporting three key areas: **relationships, equity, and achievement.**

Collaborative Leadership

This framework offered a way to ensure SEL wasn’t isolated and build shared ownership of SEL priorities early on. Lein and other district leaders banded together as a cross-disciplinary team to head up work in each of the three framework goals. As the resident SEL expert, Lein heads up the SEL strand of the work, while the assistant superintendent drives the work in equity and the director of curriculum leads college- and career-readiness. The team is rounded out by the the superintendent, for a total of four leaders working collaboratively—the self-titled “Quartet.” Through their efforts, the Quartet ensures an aligned, integrated approach to student support in all the three key areas.

For Lein, the thread woven throughout their work is the willingness to listen to multiple voices. “Be curious; be a question-asker,” she advises. “Figure out what the needs are. Take the time to get input and community interaction. Getting student and staff voice is critical.”

SCHOOL DISTRICT 197

Nurture. Inspire. Prepare. Together, We Thrive.

School District 197 is committed to caring relationships, equitable practices, and high achievement for all.

GOALS

- All students are academically and socially ready for school.
- All 3rd graders can read at grade level.
- All racial and economic achievement gaps are closed.
- All students graduate from high school.
- All students are ready for career and college.

WE BELIEVE...

RELATIONSHIPS

- People thrive when they feel connected, trusted, and affirmed.
- Communication and collaboration strengthen school, family, and community relationships.

EQUITY

- Our diversity makes us stronger.
- Seeking to understand each other strengthens the individual and community.
- We are all accountable for removing barriers and creating equitable systems.

ACHIEVEMENT

- High expectations and personalized support are critical for student success.
- Innovative environments promote curiosity, creativity, and courageous action.
- Everyone has the ability to continually grow.

1

Establish a district-wide system of social-emotional learning and support

2

Build equitable systems and support throughout the district

3

Increase E-12 opportunities for career exploration and preparation