



RethinkEd

Houston ISD

Creating a Safe, Healthy, and
Supportive Learning Environment
Through Social-Emotional Learning
and Mental Health Education

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Case Study

Houston Independent School District is the 8th largest public school system in the country and is the largest district in Texas with 276 schools, over 194,000 students, and about 27,000 employees, (making them one of the largest employers in the Houston area). Houston is also one of the most diverse districts with over 100 languages spoken, and about 62% Hispanic students, about 22% Black students, about 10% White students, and about 4% Asian students.

Houston ISD has been using the RethinkEd SEL curriculum for 2 years and they have about 1600 staff using the program. The district implemented SEL during the 2020-2021 school year and the RethinkEd Mental Health suite the 2021-2022 school year. They expanded to include all staff in the 2022-2023 school year. SEL is “really important” in the district and is a major focus of the culture, reports Renikki Alexander, School Counselor and Restorative Discipline Coordinator at Meyerland Middle School. Neeka Polk, the Senior Manager in the Social Emotional Learning Department, also thinks that SEL is paramount in their district, especially since the pandemic started.

They met with Rethink for 2 weeks, “and within 3 weeks, (they) had Rethink Mental Health implemented across the district,” says Ms. Polk. She believes that “the level of mental health support that’s needed for students and staff has heightened” during the pandemic and Rethink was a critical solution. While the district is already showing success, they intend to expand SEL and Mental Health services further and to become an SEL district. Ms. Polk describes how they are “really putting their resources and funding behind training for teachers in trauma-informed practices, first aid in mental health, SEL, and using Rethink lessons in their daily curriculum and lesson planning.” Elementary schools use SEL with students in their morning meetings or in a daily meeting before lunch. Schools are targeting students at all levels including Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. In high school, there are designated times throughout the week to target SEL and Mental Health.

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Mental Wellness of Students

“Mental health is important because it’s one of the non-academic barriers that we continue to see” and as educators, “we have to think about the non-academic components that can hinder our students’ growth,” explains Dr. Roberta Scott, the Director of Social Emotional Learning and Student Discipline in the Houston

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Independent School District. Dr. Scott and her team oversee more than 270 campuses and “provide support for crisis response and intervention, positive behavior support, SEL, and student discipline”. Ms. Polk shares the belief that “learning will not happen when students are not able to deal with their emotions or behavior.” In her department,

they “champion the work” to make mental health and SEL effective throughout the district.

Ms. Alexander states that “the most common mental health issues for students are anxiety, depression, and self-harm.” Coming back from the pandemic, she reports that there has been a “high increase in anxiety and depression” due to “a lot of students being isolated at home” and when they returned this year, “they were really closed off and it was hard to reach them.” The pandemic “really took a toll on them emotionally.”

Marta Priego-Alquezar, a Counselor at Marshall Middle Academy of Fine Arts, has also noticed that “unfortunately, self-harm has skyrocketed” and they are making mental health a priority and working with students and families. Ms. Priego-Alquezar has also seen an increase in student anxiety and stress, as has Blondine Narcisse, a Counselor at Sam

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Houston High School, who notes that the pandemic has led to more “trauma at home while students still have the pressure of academics; some students feel like they have no outlet.” Students also often struggle with conflict resolution, explains Ms. Priego-

Alquezar, which can be “a personal complaint or something that has appeared over social media.” Students often cannot “find an effective solution or lack the skills to communicate” so using SEL can help “find an effective solution that is a win-win for everyone.”

Parents are also front and center in Houston ISD and a variety of resources are available to help them with anxiety and coping strategies, in addition to other SEL resources on their public website.

How Houston is Helping Staff with Mental Wellness and SEL

“Sometimes, teachers can struggle as well when they’re trying to co-regulate with a student, or when they are trying to teach a student certain behavior,” says Dr. Scott. She explains that “student outcomes don’t change until teacher behavior changes, and so we always start with the classroom teacher first.” Ms. Alexander points out that “a lot of teachers have the same issues as students” such as “anxiety, burnout, stress, and depression.” She believes that “it’s very important to focus on teacher wellness” because “when teachers are not okay, students are not okay.” “When we have happy teachers, we have happy and motivated learners.” Houston

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prioritizes teacher wellness and makes sure that staff feel supported and that there are outlets for them to focus on themselves and to get help when they need it. Ms. Priego-Alquezar also notes that “when teachers are not 100%, they are not going to have the same energy or perform the same” and “if they are burned out, if they feel that they are not being supported, it can paralyze them” and

“when the cup is empty, there is nothing left to give.”

In addition to the professional development modules in RethinkEd the district provides an internal website with tips and strategies to help staff with mental health and SEL. This site includes information and resources for working with students and

for adult mental wellness. “If there’s something that a teacher needs, they can click on a link, and it will take them there, so everything that they need is right at their fingertips.” Dr. Scott also developed an app for school leaders that includes a “crisis hotline that is manned by individuals” on her team and “there are also tools added to the app with SEL trainings, a calendar, interventions, resources, and all things SEL.” Rooms are available on campuses throughout the district for teachers to engage in mindfulness activities such as meditation, relaxation, and to focus on themselves.

RethinkEd Professional Development

RethinkEd’s Professional Learning series is an integral part of Houston’s SEL and Mental Health initiatives. Staff participated in many PD training activities for SEL, Mental Health, and Mindfulness.

Like students, teachers need to “juggle family at home and what is going on in school” explains Ms. Narcisse. “They need to re-learn how to teach, how to engage students, and how to incorporate SEL into academics.” She continues, “if the teacher is not okay, their frustration will show through their lessons and their frustration will come out in how they speak to students.” She believes that professional development in SEL helps build “compassion and empathy in teachers” and it helps them “to better relate to people, to their students.” She believes that “SEL is not just important for the students, but for the teachers as well.” In her school, they often do “a lunch chat and chew” where they talk about things like stress and other SEL topics. They take the time to give teachers strategies and to practice. For instance, they teach them how to “do yoga stretches, breathing exercises” and other stress management skills that they can use daily.

SEL training is not just for teachers, as Ms. Polk describes, the district has been training bus drivers to help them “de-escalate behavior challenges” effectively and to

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help with the high turnover of bus drivers. “If you think about it, the first person the student engages with is their school bus driver” and that experience on the bus “can set the tone for how they walk into the classroom that day.” In Houston ISD, they “consider all stakeholders including bus drivers, cafeteria workers, campus

Impact of SEL on Students

For students to succeed, schools must ensure that students are in a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment. Without “self-regulation, self-awareness, and relationship building, as well as other SEL skills, students cannot succeed academically,” points out Dr. Scott. Ms. Alexander concurs and adds that “when students struggle outside of the classroom and have issues that they are dealing with at home, it can take away from their motivation and can lead to more disciplinary issues.” She feels that “when students are happy and in a good mental space, they’re able to perform better and that makes everything better in the classroom.”

Ms. Polk describes SEL as “the plate” that is the “foundational piece that will help students not only to be great students, but to be great humans.” She explains that “some students may be learning these things at home, but some are not” and that having the opportunity to learn SEL in school gives educators the chance to feed the students “not only from an academic standpoint, but also from an emotional standpoint.” Ms. Narcisse thinks that the RethinkEd SEL lessons are “practical and keeps the students

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engaged” and feels that “the videos are the best tools that really help facilitate group discussions and activities.” She also likes to look at the data in RethinkEd so that she can “see that teachers are actually doing the lessons and students are logging in and

Ms. Priego-Alquezar “is also a big fan of everything SEL” and is a strong advocate for using the “RethinkEd self-assessments at the beginning of the year” to help determine student needs for SEL.

completing lesson quizzes.” Like a lot of us growing up, school counselors were mostly for “helping us with our schedules” but now, says Ms. Narcisse, it is “nice to be able to show and teach SEL once a week” and students now know “that they have a support system and can go to their counselor” for minor and more serious issues. Ms. Priego-Alquezar “is also a big fan of everything SEL” and is a strong

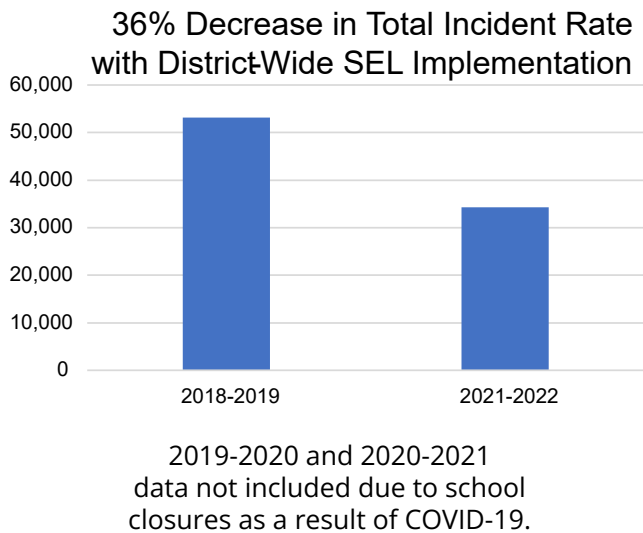
advocate for using the “RethinkEd self-assessments at the beginning of the year” to help determine student needs for SEL ; and uses the RethinkEd SEL lessons on a weekly basis. She likes to “start the school year off with self-knowledge and self-awareness and then work through the social skills throughout the year.” She thinks that “the videos are age-appropriate and engaging” and that they “touch on an array of topics that are important for social and emotional learning.”

SEL has had an important role in helping students “focus on their emotions, manage their emotions, and self-care”, says Ms. Alexander, and these skills “go hand in hand with their mental health.”

She reports that “Rethink has been great for (her) campus” and “students have been very engaged in the videos and discussions”; and the curriculum has been “extremely effective” and “it has had a very big impact on students.” Ms. Priego-Alquezar describes how mindfulness and stress management lessons have helped students “de-escalate and continue functioning at school” and has helped them to better “understand their emotions and manage their behavior.”

The adoption of SEL has had a significant impact on students including, as Dr. Scott describes, “a reduction of negative behaviors across the district.”

The adoption of SEL has had a significant impact on students including, as Dr. Scott describes, “a reduction of negative behaviors across the district.” The number of incidents (i.e. in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals) was over 50,000 in the 2018-2019 school year and almost 40,000 in the 2019-2020 school year although the decrease that year was “most likely due to the elimination of in-person instruction beginning March 13th, 2020 on account of the coronavirus pandemic” according to the Student Disciplinary Action Report, 2019-2020 by Student Disciplinary Action Report, 2019-2020 from Grenita Lathan, Ph.D., Interim Superintendent of Schools. Similarly, the incident rate for the 2020-2021 school year was very low (408 in-school suspensions and 820 out-of-school suspensions) and “the drastic decrease can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the time that students spent in virtual learning environments” according to the Student Disciplinary Action Report, 2020-2021 from Millard L. House II, Superintendent of Schools. When students returned to full-time, in-person instruction in the 2021-2022 school year and the district was able to fully implement SEL across the district, the incident rates decreased to under 35,000. Many schools are reporting drastic jumps in behavior referrals for the 2021-2022 school year, so this decrease is remarkable.



Ms. Polk has also noticed that “the impact that SEL has had on behavior and discipline is tremendous.” She explains how they are not only looking at the discipline data, but “at the behaviors that lead up to discipline” and educating staff to “look at why students are acting out, understanding the root causes of behavior, and helping students give a voice to how they feel.” She thinks that SEL “is the foundational core for learning appropriate behaviors, making better decisions, and managing emotions” and that as students embrace and understand SEL, they are better able to manage their behavior.

SEL also helps students interact with each other more effectively and resolve conflicts. It teaches them “how to connect, how to have empathy, how to ask questions, how to notice things and not just point fingers; and how to relate to each other in a calm and respectful manner,” explains Ms. Priego-Alquezar.

In addition to the RethinkEd SEL curriculum, campuses offer a calm room or “The Thinkery” to students that is similar to the mindfulness rooms available for staff. Ms. Alexander describes it as a safe place where “students can come with adult supervision and focus on mindfulness activities to help them calm down and re-focus.”

Conclusions

The most important outcome of SEL and Mental Health awareness is relationships because, as Ms. Polk states, “building great relationships between staff and students is foundational”. Successful implementation of SEL and Mental Health resources builds student trust and lets them know teachers have their best

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interests at heart which motivates and improves student behavior. Above all else, “it’s important that staff be really genuine and intentional”. Utilizing RethinkEd’s solution fosters connections with students and that is why SEL and understanding Mental Health is essential.



Case Study



RethinkEd

Together We Power Potential

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About Us

RethinkEd was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The RethinkEd solution is part of Rethink First, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to Rethink First's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, RethinkEd is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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