



Customer Spotlight

NORTH STAR ELEMENTARY | ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

DISTRICT OVERVIEW

Location: Anchorage, AK



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- Marcus Wilson

Former Principal
North Star Elementary

The DESSA System Customer Spotlight

NORTH STAR ELEMENTARY

Way up in Anchorage, Alaska, North Star Elementary is making remarkable strides in helping their students build social and emotional skills, overcome trauma, and develop a path toward success early in their academic careers.

A staggering 90% of the school's students are from a low socioeconomic background, and 84% qualify for free and reduced lunch. Many of these students are dealing with adverse childhood affects caused by parents who are or have been incarcerated, suffering from alcoholism, or have mental health issues. In 2010, Principal Marcus Wilson knew some dramatic changes needed to be made in order to properly support students. "A lot of our students don't come from stable homes," Wilson explains. "They aren't being taught social and emotional skills at home, yet they are expected to demonstrate these skills on day one at school." Wilson knew that in order to help his students the school needed to find a way to connect with them, understand their needs, and create a caring environment where they would feel safe and ready to learn.

Why North Star Selected The DESSA System

A School-Wide Approach

Wilson and his staff began by taking a careful look at the school mission statement and examining what was most valuable at their school. The staff looked at every aspect of the school from the classroom environment and the ways in which educators communicate with students to the look and feel of student common areas such as the playground and lunchroom.

The school began with a trauma program to help address the unique needs of their students and their challenging backgrounds. They also built social and emotional learning (SEL) into the school plan and were awarded a grant from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) that provided funds to train their staff. SEL became a main focus of the school in a variety of ways, including through assessment and reporting using the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA); in-service, community buy-in; professional development; and promoting SEL throughout the school day, including extracurricular activities.

SEL Data Informs North Star's Next Steps

The DESSA provided North Star with insight into the greatest areas of need and helped staff design an SEL program specifically targeted to their population. Teachers used the individual student data to understand the unique needs of each student. In looking at school-wide data provided by the DESSA, North Star was able to identify two areas that needed the most attention: goal-setting and optimistic thinking. Based on this data, the staff developed a plan to build students' skills.



Developing Stakeholder Buy-In for Your SEL Implementation

3 EASY STEPS TO PREPARE STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS FOR A NEW SEL PROGRAM

PARENTS

1

In-service: Connecting the Community, Parents and Students

Community buy-in was a critical element to the success of North Star's SEL program. The school made sure to get buy-in from the start, and the community remained closely involved throughout the school year. One of the first things the school did to involve the community was to host a kickoff in-service event and invited parents, students, and community members to participate. The event centered on learning about social and emotional skills and sharing stories about how leaders within the community overcame struggles.

Additional family nights were hosted throughout the year to help teach parents about setting goals with their kids. Business partners were brought in to share their stories. This was a particularly powerful strategy because it gave the parents and students hope that they themselves can overcome challenges and achieve success. The family nights also helped teach parents and students how to develop a plan for after high school. "Too often all the attention is given to the big celebration that comes after graduation," Wilson explains. "But what happens next? Too many of our families haven't thought beyond graduation, and in those family nights we worked hard to change that."

TEACHERS

2

Equipping Teachers with SEL Skills to Better Support Students

Adult interaction within the school was another area that received close scrutiny. Wilson explains, "We learned that we needed to take the time to build on our interactions with one another and practice SEL in our own actions and conversations." The school began holding monthly full-day workshops to help educators learn about and develop their own social and emotional skills.

Wilson stresses, "One of the greatest things our team got from the monthly workshops was time. They were able to learn about one another and interact with one another. Too often educators lack this experience, which is really important for their own professional development. By being able to talk through teaching experiences and methods for working through problems, our staff became better teachers."

STUDENTS

3

SEL In Class and Out

The school also took steps to incorporate SEL into the entire school day, including within extracurricular activities. For example, they began a running club called Girls on the Run to build empowerment skills in girls and teach them how to interact with one another in a positive way. This helped address a severe bullying problem in the school. There was a similar program for boys that helped teach manners, leadership skills, and workplace skills such as how to dress professionally. The boys' program was featured on the local news, and it was so engaging that students continue to participate even after they graduate.

Seeing the Impact of SEL

By setting a school-wide expectation around the importance of building social and emotional skills and encouraging parent involvement, North Star's SEL program has become fully integrated into the school's daily operations. This has led to the high fidelity of the program. Wilson comments, "We learned that our students' behavior could be turned around through repetition and practicing every day. By understanding how their brains are wired and where they are coming from, we were able to address their unique needs and provide the necessary supports."

Ready To Take SEL Further?

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING IDEAS:

- Use the DESSA-mini every 4-6 weeks to monitor progress.
- Ask parents to complete the DESSA on their children and compare results in a parent teacher conference.
- Consider including DESSA competencies on office referral forms to see trends between behavioral infractions and SEL needs.