



CONSULTING SERVICES

Lincoln Public Schools:

Evaluation of Social, Emotional and
Behavioral Supports and Services,
Grades PK-8



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Executive Summary

Purpose

This Program Evaluation was conducted for the Lincoln Public Schools to assess the effectiveness of the district's organization and delivery of social, emotional, and behavioral supports in meeting the needs of all students, including those with and without disabilities. The goals of the evaluation were to identify strengths, highlight areas for improvement, and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing the structure and delivery of these supports across Grades PK-8.

Several guiding questions were developed based on conversations with district administrators to help frame the scope of this evaluation. These guiding questions included:

- 1) *What services are currently provided by the school-based mental health team, and how effectively do these services address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students?*
- 2) *What interventions, supports, and services are necessary to comprehensively meet the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students in the district, and what systems or structures need to be established or improved to ensure equitable access to these supports?*
- 3) *What is the current capacity of the school-based mental health team, and how can the existing structure be leveraged or adapted to develop a culturally responsive, multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) for social, emotional, and behavioral needs?*

Assessment Methods

A variety of assessment methods were utilized to evaluate the quality of specific indicators related to social, emotional, and behavioral supports and services throughout the program evaluation process. The *Massachusetts Model 3.0 Framework for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs: Program Audit Tool* (2020) was used as the primary assessment measure. This framework, developed by the Massachusetts School Counselors Association (MASCA) in collaboration with the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), includes an assessment to determine the degree to which a school counseling program is aligned with key evidence-based practices and establishes a baseline for program growth and accountability. Additionally, portions of the DESE *MTSS Self-Assessment* tool were also used as a supplementary measure to inform programmatic recommendations.

These tools were utilized in combination with comprehensive reviews of state data collected by the DESE, documents provided by the district, and reviews of a representative sampling of student Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) from Grades PK-8. Direct observations of services, discussions with district administrators, and feedback provided by school staff via virtual focus groups also provided valuable insights and were integrated into the evaluation process.

Summary of Findings

The evaluation identifies several notable strengths as well as opportunities for improvement relative to the organization and delivery of a comprehensive framework for social, emotional, and behavioral supports. A summary of these findings are captured below:

STRENGTHS

1) District Commitment to Inclusive Practices and SEL

- The District Improvement Plan and revised master schedule reflect a strong commitment to inclusive practices and SEL, including daily Connections blocks that prioritize relationship-building
- Professional development for staff has supported SEL-aligned practices through initiatives such as Responsive Classroom, Wayfinder curriculum, and Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) training
- Consultation with McLean Hospital and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for the school-based mental health team further demonstrate a systemic investment in students' social-emotional development

2) Robust Special Education Support Staff

- Lincoln Public Schools maintains a higher-than-average ratio of special education support staff, inclusive of School Adjustment Counselors and School Psychologists, compared to both state and comparable district rates
- This infrastructure enables a strong foundation to meet the growing mental health and behavioral needs of students with disabilities

3) Strong Foundation to Implement SEL

- Responsive Classroom practices and grade-level SEL activities support positive school climates
- Physical spaces within each school including grade-level “hubs” are utilized for community building and peer collaboration
- A district-wide “Connections” block provides a consistent structure for SEL integration into the school day

4) Mental Health Team Expertise and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

- The district's mental health professionals work collaboratively with teachers, nurses, and related service providers to deliver integrated social, emotional, and behavioral supports
- Staff operate with a “whole child” mindset, actively participating in team-based intervention processes across both campuses
- Tier 2 affinity groups, such as Newcomers, LGBTQ+, and Deployment groups, created to promote equity and student connection



5) Creation of Specialized Therapeutic Programs

- The Foundations and Bridge programs were recently developed in response to rising emotional and behavioral challenges, offering in-district alternatives to more restrictive and costly out-of-district placements
- These programs are staffed with low student-to-staff ratios and demonstrate some emerging positive instructional practices

6) Family Partnerships

- Staff consistently emphasize proactive family communication, particularly around transitions and elevated student needs, to foster trust and alignment
- Counselors serve as liaisons between school and home, ensuring continuity in supports and responsiveness to families' concerns

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

1) Strengthening Tiered SEL Supports

- The district lacks a universal, evidence-based Tier 1 SEL curriculum, resulting in inconsistent classroom implementation and variability in the use of the Connections block
- SEL screeners are not consistently used across K–8, limiting early identification of students needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports

2) Addressing Overidentification for Special Education

- The district's special education identification rate exceeds both state and comparable district rates, suggesting a need for stronger general education interventions
- Inconsistent access to tiered supports may contribute to students being over-referred for special education services

3) Student Support Team (SST/CST) Process Alignment

- Across schools, SST processes are fragmented and inconsistent, in some cases with separate processes to address student academic and social-emotional needs, contrary to best practices
- Staff reported challenges with some students being “bounced” between different referral processes, delaying access to interventions

4) General Education Support Staff Roles

- The district has invested heavily in special education staff but has fewer allocated general education roles, such as “School Counselors”, than both state and comparable district rates
- This structure limits Tier 1 SEL delivery and targeted Tier 2 interventions for general education students
- Current staff are overextended, and some prevention-based services have been deprioritized due to mandated IEP-service delivery demands



5) Mental Health Team Roles and Workload Clarity

- Staff caseloads are high and inconsistently documented, especially for Tier 2 and 3 services provided to general education students
- Role confusion and competing non-clinical responsibilities contribute to burnout and reduced service delivery capacity

6) School Discipline and Restorative Practices

- The Safety Care Team is overutilized for minor behavioral incidents, often impacting these staff members' ability to provide scheduled services
- Reentry protocols for students returning to the classroom after a significant behavioral incident lack a restorative focus, missing opportunities for relationship repair

7) Specialized Therapeutic Program Structures and Instructional Practices

- Inconsistencies exist between the two Foundations programs in theoretical framework, staffing models, and instructional quality
- Staff reported a lack of clarity regarding the program's "therapeutic" practices, leading to inconsistent application and heavy reliance on reactive strategies
- Targeted PD, clearer academic expectations for tutors, and improved programmatic structures would improve program fidelity and outcomes across both campuses

Recommendations

Several detailed recommendations were formulated based on the findings from this evaluation to assist the district in establishing a well-defined model for delivering social, emotional, and behavioral supports to all students, with and without disabilities. Recommendations are organized into three main categories: *Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)*, *Specialized Programs*, and *Additional Considerations*.

These recommendations underscore the need for a comprehensive, systemic approach to strengthening the district's MTSS framework with an emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL). Key themes include the need for educator training in MTSS, adoption of an evidence-based Tier 1 SEL curriculum such as Wayfinder, and the implementation of universal SEL screeners across grade levels to ensure early identification and intervention. Recommendations also highlight the importance of unifying and clarifying Student Support Team (SST) processes, expanding Tier 2 interventions, and redefining staff roles to ensure alignment with prevention-based best practices. With regards to the district's specialized therapeutic programs, there is a need for a clear theoretical orientation, consistent staffing structures, targeted professional development, and enhanced academic interventions. Additional strategies include expanding restorative practices districtwide and exploring a BRYT program model at Lincoln Middle School. A districtwide, differentiated professional development plan is also recommended to build capacity, ensure alignment, and promote sustainability.