

## Second Step® Insights

# Educator Insights from Carrie White: SEL's Impact on Teamwork and Collaboration

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Ask students about collaboration and teamwork, and you'll probably hear grumblings about kids not pulling their weight, bossy students making unfair decisions, or thoughtful ideas getting ignored.

Whether it's recess play or high school presentations, learning how to collaborate is a crucial life skill kids need at school, at home, and in their communities.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) gives kids the tools to communicate effectively, consider multiple perspectives, share responsibilities, and hold peers accountable respectfully.

How does SEL foster these skills in a school environment? We got a real-world, expert perspective from Carrie White, a second-grade teacher in Schenectady, NY. Carrie is also her school's positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) coach for staff and one of our 2023 Second Step® Educator of the Year award winners. Here, she shares five tips on implementing SEL to boost collaboration and teamwork.

## **1. Teach social-emotional skills as a preventative strategy**

"Instead of waiting until disagreements escalate on the playground or kids are fighting about who's going to be classroom line leader, give them the SEL tools before these situations arise. Teach SEL as a preventative strategy," Carrie recommends. "When kids know the expectations and the language, and you've modeled the appropriate way to handle difficult things, conflicts are less likely to escalate."

## **2. Weave SEL throughout school and curriculum**

"Social-emotional learning can't be just a subject like math from 1:00 to 1:45 p.m.," Carrie explains. "It has to be intertwined with everything that happens. It's part of our school vocabulary, our signage, our schoolwide expectations." Teachable moments can happen while learning any subject. "If I see a student frustrated on a math problem and they break their pencil, I stop and make this a teachable moment. Kids will come up against these feelings individually and in groups. The lessons translate everywhere."

## **3. Create bonds with group meetings**

Whole-class check-ins at the start and end of the day are ideal opportunities for building connections and practicing social-emotional skills, Carrie says. Also known as community or restorative circles, Carrie points out that these meetings "give kids a way to practice waiting their turn to speak and how to listen to each other to really understand perspectives instead of getting in the last word." Those are important skills for teamwork. "Our circle conversations may talk about conflicts, but we try to focus on the wins from working them out," Carrie adds. She says that this less formal meeting time is bonding time because kids aren't focused on learning a new subject. Rather, they're talking about their experiences while learning.

## **4. Make SEL part of everyone's toolbox—including teachers and administrators**

At Carrie's school, all staff members learn and embrace SEL principles. "We are the students' role models," Carrie says. "When conflicts happen in class, we're using our own social-emotional skills to guide students to solve their disagreements. All staff get professional development training, and self-care is a big part of our school."

## **5. Rethink language and labels**

When conflicts happen, kids can be quick to label a peer as bossy or a bully. Carrie says that her school makes efforts to reframe complaints. Rather than labeling a person, which can trigger defenses, kids are encouraged to look at the action or event. Carrie explains, "If someone took your ball on the playground, that person isn't now forever a bully. They took your ball—that one time. You figure out the solution for that one event rather than labeling a whole person." This also helps students shift from blaming to problem-solving.

Kids will need to collaborate and work in teams throughout their lives. A strong foundation in social-emotional learning gives students the tools they'll need to contribute, to navigate conflicts, and to continue on a positive learning pathway.



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