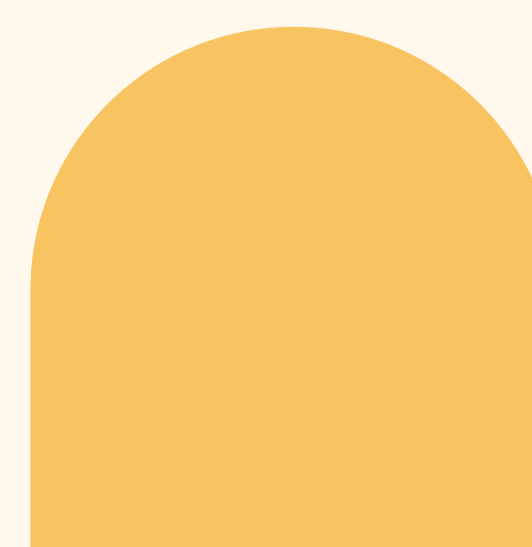





Partnering with Teachers to Strengthen Student Support in Port Washington-Saukville (WI)

Empowering educators with tools and strategies to better support students with trauma

A mid-size district, the Port Washington-Saukville School District serves just over 2,500 students. 19.2% of the population receives free and reduced lunch. 16% of students are identified as special education students, which is slightly higher than the state average.





Our approach to student support used to follow a more traditional pyramid of academics and behavior, but over the past few years we noticed a significant need for social and emotional learning and mental health services to be integrated into that, and a new model was created to guide practices at our schools,” Director of Special Services Duane Woelfel explained.

The Challenge

When staff started to see a rise in behavioral and mental health concerns, they reported it to their district administration. They felt they needed additional training for teaching students with trauma.

The district started to investigate tools and resources available to meet the gap in student support services.

What they initially found and invested in was a universal screener centered around mental health. While this was a good start, the district was looking to focus on character education in order to meet a broader range of students’ needs. By implementing life skills, every student’s mental well-being could improve. The district would also be able to address barriers to learning and promote every student’s ability to thrive.

* How to Teach Students with Trauma

The staff knew it was time to acquire teaching strategies for students with trauma. Upon doing research, district support staff discovered the DESSA, a strength-based suite of assessments. A strength-based approach appealed to the district because of its number of significant advantages including: encouraging school success, promoting educational equity, and supporting strong relationships between students and teachers.

“With the DESSA-mini only being eight questions it was a more realistic ask for rolling out an assessment district-wide compared to the 26-question assessment we were previously using. In addition to the DESSA being more efficient, we liked that it was more resilience-focused instead of being mental health diagnosis-focused,” shared one Port Washington-Saukville counselor.

Any students flagged by the DESSA-mini gets assessed using the full DESSA by their teacher.

The district has positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) teams review students’ DESSA data. Then, the teams make recommendations for the added services, like small group meetings, students should receive. From there the classroom teacher or an interventionist follows up with a student’s family to explain how they will develop students’ areas for growth.



* Meeting Staff Where They're at for Buy-In

Another priority of the Special Services department was making sure that intervention was consistent across every school in the district.

"We have found success with more individualized conversations at the department/content area level," said Jen Eason, a high school psychologist. "Conversations are going to be more fruitful when we develop a purpose and common course of understanding regarding the DESSA screener at the content level."

For larger buy-in, Port Washington-Saukville started with setting expectations at their large all-staff meetings.

"We have teachers at high school connect the 'why' behind character education," said Duane. "Our staff at the high school were the ones who initially raised concerns for needing more support services. For us it was a matter of going back to those comments and developing purpose around the fact that we're doing

* Data-Informed Supports

The DESSA measures skills including Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision Making, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Optimistic Thinking. All of these skills can be easily taught and learned by students. Data from the assessment reflects if a student is "in need of support," is in the "typical" range of competence, or if an area is a "strength."

For example, if a student easily shows gratitude or empathy toward other students, but often turns homework in late, that student may have high Social Awareness but low Responsible Decision Making skills. Working on students' skills will help them succeed during their school years and even after they graduate high school.

Usually, each school can expect for 59.1% of students to be in the "typical" range, 17.8% of students to be in the "need for support" range, and 23.1% of students to be in the "strength" range.

The Port Washington-Saukville District approached life skills the same way they approached reading and writing exams, hearing and vision exams, and any other assessments they conducted.

"It's built into our testing model as a part of [student standards] not a separate component we assess," said a school psychologist.



* Supporting All Students

“When we looked at the data it confirmed the students we knew would have a [need for instruction in social and emotional skills] but it also caught a handful of students at each school that would have been missed if we didn’t use the DESSA. It helped us make sure we didn’t look over any students who may have fallen through the cracks and needed support,” explained a school psychologist.

“With the robust data we get from the DESSA we look at groups of students [with areas for growth] and craft strategies and activities that we integrate into our curriculum that leverage their pre-existing strengths to develop their skills. We try to layer in social skill and small group activities as much as we can,” said a school psychologist.

* Establishing Roots for the Future

Port Washington-Saukville is looking forward to further establishing their behavioral skill roots within the community. Their plans include taking advantage of the DESSA’s progress monitoring capabilities to track students’ strength development over time. They also are interested in digging deeper into the data to explore how to differentiate interventions to make student services even better.

“Our long-term goal is to see a reduction in students’ behavioral infractions, [an improvement in how students are coping with trauma], and that students’ skill deficits are addressed through interventions,” said Duane.

