



SUCCESS STORY

Proven Results: How Atlanta Public Schools Boosts Academic Achievement with Second Step® Programs

Atlanta Public Schools (APS), a large and diverse district serving nearly 50,000 students, is showing how a thoughtful, data-informed approach can transform student outcomes. By implementing the Second Step® family of programs, the district is strengthening academic achievement, improving student well-being, and equipping every learner with essential life skills to thrive in school and beyond.

Schools that completed 75% or more of Second Step lessons saw:¹



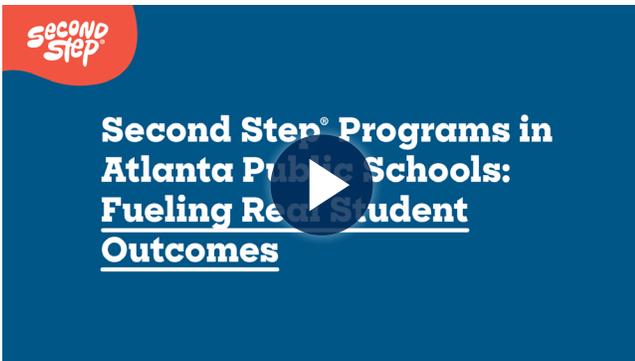
32% fewer chronically absent students



61% higher performance on key academic benchmarks (MAP and GMAS)



Nearly 20% fewer behavioral referrals



Hear from Atlanta Public Schools about how their Second Step implementation fueled student outcomes.

Situation

With around 50,000 students across 87 learning sites, Atlanta Public Schools is focused on clear, student-centered goals: improving literacy and core academics, reducing disciplinary incidents, strengthening school climate, and preparing every student to graduate “enrolled, enlisted, employed, or as an entrepreneur.”

“It’s not just that their behavior changes—it’s that they actually have the skills and the language to make different decisions and choices.”



—Lindsay Wyczalkowski,
SEL Coordinator for Atlanta Public Schools

Approach

Supporting every learner PreK–12: Atlanta Public Schools has been implementing Second Step® programs in PreK through Grade 8, supporting positive skill-building and improving school climate for over a decade.

In 2025, the district deepened its commitment to human skills instruction by implementing the all-new Second Step® High School program, building toward a unified PreK–12 approach. This ensures students continue developing the key skills that allow them to thrive in and out of the classroom throughout their academic career at APS.

Comprehensive data monitoring: Atlanta Public Schools has taken a holistic, data-driven approach. Through a districtwide dashboard, leaders track Second Step program data in tandem with academic achievement, behavioral, and attendance data, allowing school and district leaders to make holistic and data-driven decisions. This empowers them to understand the links between Second Step implementation and other key performance metrics.

“We want people to implement Second Step lessons because we know what the outcome of consistent instruction is,” explains Dr. Lindsay Wyczalkowski, SEL Coordinator for Atlanta Public Schools. “We trust that the program works, so we just have to show up for our leaders and support them with data and guidance.”

Three social and emotional learning (SEL) coordinators oversee Second Step programming across grade bands: Dr. Lindsay Wyczalkowski (K–5), Dennis Toliver (6–8), and Dr. Veneschia Bryant (9–12). Additionally, APS designates key on-the-ground leaders—such as assistant principals, counselors, behavior specialists, and restorative practices coaches—to strengthen implementation and engagement across school communities in the district.

This team of coordinators leverages Second Step data to view lesson completion rates for every teacher, ensuring fidelity and consistency in instruction. Their data-driven approach fosters staff buy-in and continuous improvement, which are critical for achieving strong program implementation and student outcomes.^{2,3}

Outcomes

Student outcomes: An independent study by Hanover Research of Atlanta Public Schools showed that schools that implemented Second Step programs with fidelity, 75% or more of the program, consistently outperformed others in several key areas, including academic performance, attendance, and behavior.¹

Overall, the study showed that academic proficiency was 1.6 times greater in schools implementing with fidelity.

“If you teach the lessons with fidelity, not only will it change the students, it will also change you.”



—Dennis Toliver,
SEL Coordinator for Atlanta Public Schools

A separate qualitative study by Hanover Research echoed these findings.⁴ Schools with higher lesson completion rates demonstrated stronger results in student referrals, attendance, and academic achievement.

has shown that higher staff buy-in correlates with stronger implementation fidelity, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes.^{2,3}

“Seeing students in our district show improvements in these areas is really powerful. We’re seeing that when you focus on implementing Second Step with fidelity, you get really great results.”



—Lindsay Wyczalkowski,
SEL Coordinator for Atlanta Public Schools

Teacher buy-in and satisfaction: APS has also seen strong satisfaction among educators using Second Step® programs. After a skills-focused professional development session, 90% of teachers reported that they received useful, actionable guidance for their classrooms.

This feedback suggests that educators feel equipped and supported in delivering Second Step instruction. Research

Conclusion

Through strategic leadership, consistent data monitoring, and a long-term investment in human skills instruction, Atlanta Public Schools is proving how Second Step programs can drive districtwide change, bringing drastic improvements in attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Their experience shows that when schools implement Second Step programs with fidelity and intentionality, both students and educators thrive.

“I celebrate what’s next for our students because I know that they have a toolkit of resources and skills that they’ll carry with them in the next chapter.”



—Dr. Veneschia Bryant,
SEL Coordinator for Atlanta Public Schools

Ready to bring these results to your school or district?



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