



SUCCESS STORY

Meeting Mental Health Needs with Flexible, High-Impact Programming in Hillsborough County Schools

To support the emotional wellness and mental health of students across its large and diverse district, Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida leverages Second Step® digital programs in a dynamic and student-centered way. For a district like Hillsborough, a one-size-fits-all approach isn't enough. Leadership sought a curriculum that is both robust and flexible and that gives school leaders and individual instructors the agency to easily apply the program to meet the needs of their students. The result? Educators are better equipped, and students are thriving.



Hillsborough County Public Schools is the 7th largest district in the country.

Situation

Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida has been using Second Step classroom kits in elementary and middle schools for over a decade. Recently, the district started using Second Step digital programs at the elementary and middle school levels to further their impact with strong data and leadership tools. Additionally, the district launched Second Step® High School in 2025.

A wide-reaching district that includes the City of Tampa, Hillsborough County Public Schools has complex student needs and ambitious goals, such as fulfilling the state's character education standards, which include resilience, interpersonal skills, and conflict resolution. District leadership sought a curriculum that was innovative and relevant, capable of adapting to the evolving needs of students and educators while ensuring they could make data-driven

“Time is precious with our students. We need to have a program that’s ready to go, which is created for you. Second Step understands the teacher’s perspective.”



—Elizabeth Tanner,
Supervisor of Emotional Wellness,
Hillsborough County Public Schools

decisions. What they found in Second Step® programs was curricula that didn't just deliver content but also delivered flexibility to meet the needs of all students.

Approach

Districtwide fidelity, schoolwide flexibility: In Hillsborough County, each school has its own distinct needs. To honor that diversity, the district has embraced a Second Step implementation model that's both expansive and responsive, allowing schools to tailor the programs to their specific student populations. School leaders, teachers, and student services staff—which includes psychologists, counselors, and social workers—decide whether to teach Second Step programs on a small-group or schoolwide basis.

Elizabeth Tanner, the district's supervisor of emotional wellness, explains this hybrid approach: "We are leaving it up to the schools to implement Second Step based on their comfort level. . . . We have had some schools implement on a small-group basis for students with higher behavioral or social needs. Since then, some of those schools have started implementing schoolwide because they really loved and embraced the changes they were seeing in student skills and their behaviors as well."



Skills check to measure student progress: The district tracks implementation fidelity using the Lesson Completion Report in the Leader Dashboard—another powerful feature of Second Step digital programs. Additionally, teachers utilize the skills check in the final lesson of each unit to

“Second Step really leaves the door open for students to think and relate to their own experiences and share and learn the skills.”



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track student progress. When a teacher marks the unit as complete, this indicates that the students have mastered those skills.

"We are data-driven in Hillsborough," explains Tanner. "We want to know that students are feeling comfortable with the skill they've learned, they've practiced on their own, and they're ready to move on to the next concept."

Outcomes

Increased engagement and teacher buy-in: Since switching to Second Step digital programs, Hillsborough County has reported higher engagement from students and greater satisfaction from educators. Citing the relatable content and easy-to-teach lessons, both students and teachers are more bought in to human skills development as an exciting and important part of their classroom routine.

Elizabeth Tanner explains, "Instructors can pull up a particular concept or video and spend as long as they want to on it, then move forward with the curriculum when they know students understand. In the videos, they're not always hearing from adults. They're hearing from students or kids or younger adults who look like them. And that's very special for them. And with school licenses for the digital program, we are able to ensure that Second Step is available to all teachers and staff, and they can use it as they need, based on their classrooms."

Educator support and ease of use ensure student

success: Hillsborough County has seen increased student success due to the programs' support features for both leaders and teachers, including training videos, implementation plans, lesson completion data, and technical assistance from the Second Step® team.

Additionally, ease of use for teachers has been a catalyst for student growth. Scripted lessons ensure minimal prep time, while the digital flexibility allows teachers to customize lessons in real time. For both small groups and whole classes, Second Step programs have made it easier for instructors to deliver the high-quality instruction their students need.

“What I appreciate most is that it’s not a ‘one and done’ program. It gives kids a chance to practice what they learn, and teachers can easily refer to it throughout the year.”



—Kathy “Nikki” Counce,
School Social Worker,
Hillsborough County Public Schools

New approaches in high school: With Second Step® High School, Hillsborough is moving away from punitive disciplinary measures for students. They plan to allow schools to use the program to fit their unique needs, whether by supporting chronically absent students in small groups or building key skills like resilience and life-planning on a schoolwide level.

Conclusion

In transitioning to Second Step digital programs for K–12 schools, Hillsborough County Public Schools is empowering educators across their large and diverse district to use human skills instruction to address student needs on a case-by-case basis. While Second Step implementation is required, how schools choose to use the programs is up to them. As a result, schools have shown improvement in key areas, including increased student engagement and teacher well-being.

“We want teachers to be able to implement lessons with ease. That’s not the case for a lot of different programs, where a teacher would have the responsibility of gathering many materials, spending many hours reviewing this or that. Versus some of the other programs we were reviewing, it was night and day implementing Second Step.”



—Elizabeth Tanner,
Supervisor of Emotional Wellness,
Hillsborough County Public Schools

Ready to bring these results to your school or district?

