



SUCCESS STORY

How One School Built a Stronger School Community

Kent Laboratory Academy has reimagined what a unified school community can look like by aligning Second Step® human skills instruction across grades. Through the implementation of Second Step programs at every level, the school has cultivated a shared language and culture that fosters belonging, confidence, and academic growth.

Situation

Kent Laboratory Academy is an innovative school serving students in Grades 3–12 in Kent, Washington, just south of Seattle. Drawing students from across the Kent School District's 75-square-mile region, Principal Stephanie Knipp, EdD, explains that part of the school's unique mission is to create a community that bridges the barriers between elementary, middle school, and high school.

"When students come to Kent Lab, we often find they're coming from somewhere where they didn't feel like they really fit in," says Dr. Knipp. It's a top priority to create a learning environment where every student experiences a strong sense of belonging.

After using Second Step® Elementary and Second Step® Middle School for many years, Kent leadership leapt at the opportunity to add Second Step® High School in 2025. With the new program, the school can now offer skills development for all students. The school invested in this



Kent Laboratory Academy has reimagined what a **unified school community** can look like.

"The biggest transformation we've seen is the community that has been established through the cohesiveness of the curriculum."



—Dr. Stephanie Knipp,
Principal,
Kent Laboratory Academy

K-12 solution with the objectives of promoting a stronger sense of belonging and community, raising attendance, alleviating the need for punitive discipline, and improving academic motivation and performance.

Approach

With the addition of Second Step® High School, Kent Lab seized the opportunity to create an aligned curriculum for the entire school, focusing on the community-building elements of all three programs. School counselor Vicky Bledsoe leveraged the flexibility of Second Step programs to align them with the school's unique objectives, which include building community, improving student agency and confidence, and boosting academic motivation and future-readiness.

Vicky Bledsoe explains, "Student attitudes and student behavior really change when we're able to change the teacher-student relationship. What the Second Step High School program has done is give the teacher an opportunity to be vulnerable with their students. With that vulnerability brings authenticity to the relationship, which helps build that sense of belonging. . . . Students who feel a sense of belonging and a purpose feel motivated to be here, and they really start excelling on an academic level."

Outcomes

Boosting community-building: An aligned approach has helped Kent students connect across grade and school levels. "We've seen our elementary, middle school, and high school students come together because they're using the



"Our students are far more gracious with each other. . . . They recognize their own agency in their behavior and within their relationships with each other. We've found that our students' behavior is more about restorative work instead of punitive reactions."



—Dr. Stephanie Knipp,
Principal,
Kent Laboratory Academy

shared language and understanding around human skills," explains Dr. Knipp.

As a result of a stronger community and shared language around human skills, students are more willing and able to work through conflict, which has positive ripple effects on student behavior.

Second Step High School is the missing piece: At Kent Lab, a healthy school culture is the result of cohesion around human skills-based standards.

"Now we're able to look at human skills standards across every grade level at the same time," says Vicky Bledsoe, school counselor. "When everyone is working towards the same goals, it's giving students the ability to lift each other up and say, 'I know you're working on this, too. I see you doing that. Great job!'"

Building academic skills through authentic relationships:

School leaders and teachers have witnessed improvements in student-teacher relationships schoolwide, which has an immediate impact on student academics and motivation. Bledsoe explains, "When a student develops their ability to understand themselves and how they relate to other people, that builds their confidence. And when their confidence

“Having the high school program in our school was the missing piece.”



—Vicky Bledsoe,
School Counselor,
Kent Laboratory Academy

is built, their skills grow. When their skills grow, their academics grow.”

Excellence in attendance and teacher morale: While attendance at Kent Lab was already relatively high, Second Step® programs have made a difference for students who had historically struggled with chronic absences.

Attendance rates are currently around 93%. Dr. Knipp attributes this to the programs’ emphasis on building student agency and strengthening community.

Flexible staff training, schoolwide supports, and educator practices have had a positive influence on teacher morale. Vicky Bledsoe elaborates, “Just like our students are learning more about themselves, our staff are also learning more about themselves as educators so they can be better teachers and show up for their students every day.”

Conclusion

Kent Laboratory Academy’s commitment to human skills instruction has reshaped its school climate, strengthened student-teacher relationships, and elevated both attendance and academic motivation. By aligning Second Step programs across all grade levels, Kent Laboratory Academy has built a community where students lift each other up and educators grow alongside their learners.

Ready to bring these results to your school or district?



Strengthening Human Skills for Student Success

The Second Step team is the trusted partner for educators, reaching over 20 million students annually with our evidence-based, research-backed human skills programs. By adopting a districtwide approach, we prioritize key outcomes, such as academic achievement, a positive school climate, and student mental wellness, while also addressing issues like absenteeism, school safety, and educator well-being.