



## Creativity From Necessity: A Practical Toolkit for Leaders to Address Teacher Shortages

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JANUARY 2023

### Case Study

#### How One Charter Network Is Rethinking Health and Wellness

##### Context

Prospect Schools is a network of six schools serving students in grades K-12 in Brooklyn, New York. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the school community into lockdown, the leaders of Prospect, like many school leaders across the country, assumed it would be a short-term disruption. “We thought we would be back in two weeks,” says Dwight Thomas, Prospect’s network director of school culture. “But then it turned into months where we were completely remote, and there was a lot of uncertainty.”

Amid the ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic, leaders’ first instinct was to find ways to support their students. “We knew our students were dealing with trauma and loss, so our initial focus was on their social-emotional well-being,” says Thomas. Despite this initial focus on students, Prospect soon realized it would also need to focus on its staff. “We surveyed our staff, and we found that adults didn’t feel prepared to support students’ social-emotional learning,” explains Thomas. “We found an overwhelming need to support the mental health and well-being of our adults.”

Armed with this insight, the leadership team pulled together a task force to identify ways to support the social-emotional well-being of staff and students. Team members from various roles across the network met regularly to discuss ideas and build a bank of resources tied to three related spheres: social emotional learning (SEL) teaching practices, whole-school SEL models, and

healing methods for adults. These resources were then compiled and shared with school teams, who could pick and choose what to use within each of the three spheres.

From the beginning, the task force had an intentional focus on the well-being of Prospect staff. “We wanted to make sure adults had the resources to practice SEL in their own lives if we were expecting them to teach SEL to students,” says Thomas. With this in mind, the team curated and invested in a set of resources to support staff well-being over the past two-plus years.

##### Advice From Prospect Schools

###### Listen First

“This sounds so simple,” says Thomas, “but every school community has different needs.” He advises regularly surveying staff to see what they are feeling and what they are saying they need. “You are better able to target supports based on trends and throughlines in the data,” he says.

###### Communicate Consistently

As they have rolled out SEL initiatives across the network, the leaders at Prospect have been intentional about regularly following up with staff. “This is not a one-time thing,” says Thomas. “For a while, we did weekly surveys, used that data to implement changes, and then continued to talk about those changes with staff.”

## Use Existing Structures

Pre-pandemic, Prospect used restorative practices across its network, which allowed it to leverage routines like community circles to implement its adult well-being initiatives.

## Allow Opt-In

"I think it can be counterproductive to mandate mental health initiatives," advises Thomas. "We were intentional about creating opportunities that staff could opt in to."

## Center on Students

Leaders at Prospect describe how their work to support adults is directly tied to their mission to support students. "Our expectation was that we were practicing SEL skills so that we could better support our students — that was nonnegotiable," one Prospect leader says.

## Impact

While cautioning that results for this work are difficult to quantify and don't happen overnight, Prospect leaders point to a few indicators of impact:

- **Increased teletherapy usage:** More staff are taking advantage of the free and subsidized mental health supports, including teletherapy sessions, which may signal a growing number of adults who are actively investing in their own well-being.
- **Decreased staff leave:** During the 2021-22 school year, Prospect had some staff members per school out on mental health leave at any given time. This year, those numbers have decreased dramatically.
- **Increased fluency in SEL:** "Anecdotally, most, if not all of our teachers feel confident teaching SEL," says Thomas, a marked improvement over staff sentiments at the start of the pandemic that should translate into stronger support for students.
- **Improved student social awareness:** When students first returned to in-person learning, staff at Prospect noticed that many of their younger students were struggling socially. "We had third graders coming in [who] behaviorally were, at times, like first graders," explains Thomas. "That has gone way down as we've focused on SEL skills and students' social awareness has improved."

## Funding

Leveraging ESSER dollars, Prospect has invested over \$500,000 in SEL and mental health well-being coming out of the pandemic. Looking ahead, the network anticipates scaling back some of its services, in part as a result of the wind-down of ESSER funds and in part as a response to the changing needs of staff. "These issues have not gone away," says Tresha Ward, CEO of Prospect Schools. "We will continue to invest here, but the need was different during and immediately after the pandemic than it is now and will be in the next few years."

## Resources for the Field

### Teletherapy

Through [BetterHelp](#), staff have access to one free teletherapy session per month, with additional sessions subsidized by the network.

### Staff Yoga

Staff have access to free yoga classes through [Black Mat Yoga](#).

### Community Circles

Leaders across the network are trained in restorative practices and offer opt-in [community circles](#).

### Affinity Spaces

During the first couple of years of the pandemic, the network created healing spaces for staff of color and other affinity groups to meet regularly on an opt-in basis.

### Climate Surveys

Staff complete a brief weekly survey to indicate how they are feeling and identify what kinds of support they may be seeking.

### Staff-Led Services

Prospect sets aside funds to compensate staff for doing work outside their traditional roles, like leading diversity, equity, and inclusion sessions or supporting health and wellness efforts in other ways.