SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)

WHY SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)?

About Frederick County Public Schools

Frederick County Public Schools (FCPS) is a successful school system in a diverse and growing community. With an enrollment of over 40,000 students, FCPS continues to celebrate its increasing diversity annually. In 2019, 41% of students were considered students of color—an increase of 6% since 2015. In addition, FCPS serves students with varying needs, including 26% of students who receive free/reduced-priced meals, 11% of students with disabilities, and 7% of English Learners.

Systemic Needs

In FCPS, the necessity of mental health services is increasing among students. At the forefront of education, FCPS school administrators and teachers have been requesting help in addressing student mental health and behavioral needs for many years. Combined with anecdotal evidence, local data on student academic and non-academic indicators support this call to action.

► Since 2017, the number of office referrals increased by approximately 40% each for classroom disruption and fighting and 10% for physical attack on another student.[*] Furthermore, the number of referrals made by FCPS schools seeking central behavioral support has increased from 2017 to 2019.

► Since September 2018, law enforcement has sent notifications on 320 FCPS students who have been identified at the scene of a traumatic event.[†]

► On average, 40 FCPS student threat assessments, i.e., threats to hurt someone else or school property, occur per school year.[‡] National and local events impact the number of assessments in any given year.

► From 2014 to 2018, the number of incidents related to FCPS students intending to hurt themselves or commit suicide continues to rise—i.e., increase by 206% for elementary, 121% for middle, and 5% for high.[*]

► Chronic absenteeism is more predominant in FCPS middle and high schools. Gaps exist for student groups, such as, English Learners and students with disabilities.

► Local survey favorability rates among secondary students in topic areas—school climate and safety, health, and wellness—have been consistently low.

► Achievement gaps exist among certain student groups.

Supported by Research

Mental health concerns affect children of all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds as well as those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences.[1-3,5,9] Studies have shown a direct and positive correlation between students' mental health and academic achievement and behavior in school.[10,12,14] The ability to function in school decreases among students with unmet mental health needs resulting in negative outcomes, such as, academic and behavioral issues, school dropouts, and delinquency. Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs have shown to improve students' academic achievement and produce prosocial benefits throughout their educational career and into adulthood.[6,8,13-15] Furthermore, SEL in education has been correlated with students being less likely to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., drugs, violence) as well as responding to and managing stress, depression, and/or the effects of trauma.[7-8]

WHY PROMOTING ALTERNATIVE THINKING STRATEGIES (PATHS)?

Based on the review of SEL research and national guidance, three different SEL programs were chosen to be field tested in designated FCPS elementary schools in the 2018-2019 school year (SY). Specifically, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) was field tested at Monocacy Elementary School (MoES). Research studies have shown that PATHS has positively impacted behavioral and academic outcomes, including (but not limited to) a reduction in aggression among students, increases in social competence, regulating emotions, and prosocial behaviors, as well as increases in academic

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[*] Reporting is by incidents/referrals and not unique students; thus, an individual student may have more than one incident/referral.
[†] Source: https://handlewithcaremd.org
[‡] Average based on seven years of data, 2012-2019.

performance on state assessments.[§] FCPS selected PATHS not only because of its national evidence but its positive and promising local outcomes at one FCPS elementary school; see preliminary data in the next section, Promising Results—FCPS Preliminary Data (MoES).
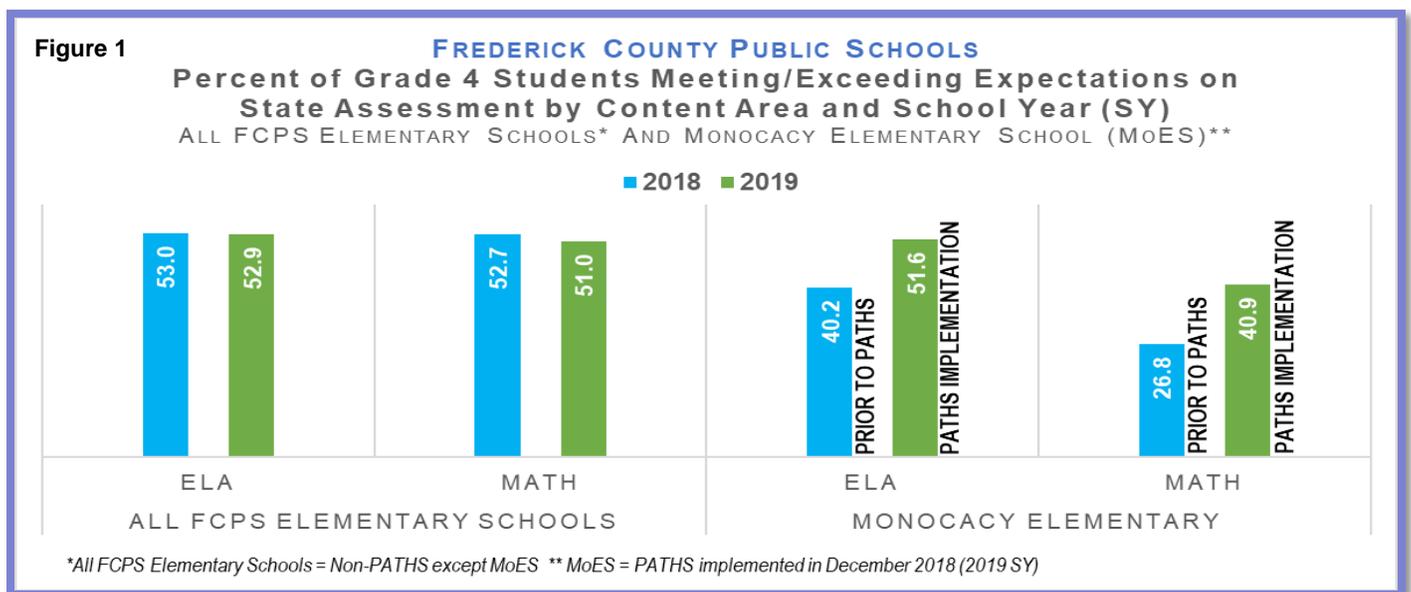
PROMISING RESULTS—FCPS PRELIMINARY DATA (MoES)

Beginning in December 2018, MoES implemented PATHS in about one-third of all its classrooms—one full-day pre-kindergarten (PK), one special education program, one first grade, two second grade, one third grade, all fourth grade, and one fifth grade classroom(s). Preliminary data from the first year of PATHS implementation at MoES are promising. While the results are promising, causal inferences are not being made at this time regarding the impact of PATHS. To date, no formal research or evaluation activities have been conducted on PATHS implementation within FCPS. FCPS staff are currently developing an evaluation plan to measure the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of PATHS.

Academic Achievement—Monocacy Elementary

Overall, school-wide performance on the state assessment for English language arts (ELA) and math, Grades 3-5, increased from the 2018 to 2019 SY. Specifically, the percent of students meeting/exceeding expectations in ELA increased from 38.6% to 45.8% and from 30.9% to 38.6% in math. These percents are still relatively low when compared to all FCPS elementary schools (53.0% in ELA and 50.6% in math in 2019); however, the significant increase in both content areas from 2018 to 2019 appears to be isolated to MoES when comparing data from all FCPS elementary schools as well as elementary schools with similar characteristics.

While school-wide results are promising, PATHS was only implemented in all MoES classrooms for Grade 4 in the 2019 SY. Thus, when looking at state assessment performance for only fourth grade students at MoES, the results are positive. Figure 1 shows little to no change in the percent of fourth grade students meeting/exceeding expectations in ELA and math in all FCPS elementary schools. However, significant increases in both ELA and math are evident among fourth graders at MoES from 2018 (prior to PATHS) to 2019 (PATHS implementation year). While not shown in Figure 1, increases in performance in both content areas are evident among black/African American (26.1% to 55.6% in ELA; 17.4% to 40.7% in math) and Hispanic/Latino (26.7% to 36.7% in ELA; 13.3% to 26.7% in math) students in Grade 4 at MoES from 2018 to 2019.

Figure 1

FREDERICK COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Percent of Grade 4 Students Meeting/Exceeding Expectations on State Assessment by Content Area and School Year (SY)
ALL FCPS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS* AND MONOCACY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (MoES)**

■ 2018 ■ 2019

*All FCPS Elementary Schools = Non-PATHS except MoES ** MoES = PATHS implemented in December 2018 (2019 SY)

Attendance and Referrals—Monocacy Elementary

► The overall attendance rate for MoES (all grades) was 94.3% in 2019; thus, very little change from 2018 (94.9%). Similarly, there was little change in attendance rates for students in Grade 4 at MoES (95.0% in 2018 and 94.9% in 2019). However, attendance rates increased for black/African American (94.9% to 95.4%) and Hispanic/Latino (94.3% to 95.9%) students in Grade 4 at MoES.

[§] Source: https://pathsprogram.com/outcomes

▶ School-reported data showed a decrease in the number of referrals written at MoES since PATHS implementation. In the three months prior to PATHS, 177 behavioral-related referrals were written compared to 27 referrals since PATHS implementation (i.e., December 2018 – June 2019). A decrease in the number of incidents related to physical aggression, 55 compared to 18, were also noted during this same reporting period.

Satisfaction Surveys—Monocacy Elementary

▶ Satisfaction surveys were administered by MoES staff throughout the 2019 SY regarding PATHS implementation. MoES reported that over 80% of its teachers implementing PATHS indicated satisfaction in the following areas: building school community and relationships between staff and students, improvement in student behavior, student engagement, fewer classroom disruptions resulting in meaningful teaching, students' ability to effectively express feelings, problem-solving among students, and student engagement. Likewise, MoES reported that between 85% and 95% of its students, depending on grade, who participated in PATHS were satisfied in the following areas: ability to express feelings, resolve conflicts, improved student behavior, increased classroom engagement, and improved academics.

TESTIMONIAL EVIDENCE

▶ **Students**: *"We don't have any more playground drama because of PATHS... I remember my control signals...calm down, take a deep breath, think about what the problem is, and how to problem solve." "Now that I have PATHS, I am better at spilling my emotions. It helps and also it helps me to solve problems, like friendship problems...So now it's helping me have more friends because it's helping me to solve the big problems we were having...Now that I have PATHS, I have these amazing strategies. Everyone should have PATHS because it helps them with their feelings and it also builds up their communication."*

▶ **Teachers**: *"PATHS naturally creates a classroom culture. It creates kindness in your classroom. Students express their feeling and emotions more. It creates a class family." "I've noticed more empathy among students." "With PATHS, students are trying to solve problems or situations independently... they are using steps taught in PATHS to problem solve."*

▶ **Parents/Guardians**: *"What are you teaching my child? She came home and told me I was frustrating her. In all seriousness, she is verbalizing how she is feeling and it is working nicely." "My child sat down with a group of friends who were arguing and took them through the problem-solving steps." "My child is using strategies at home to help calm her brother."*

PROGRAM COSTS, EXPANSION, AND NEXT STEPS

▶ PATHS is being implemented in the current school year (2019-2020) in all FCPS classrooms in PK-Grade 2. The total cost to fund PATHS implementation in these classes was $288,427. This includes $258,507 for PATHS kits/materials and $29,920 for online training for all classroom teachers/staff supporting and implementing PATHS. Grant monies and some local funding primarily funded PATHS.

▶ Given the promising results of PATHS implementation to date, FCPS is looking to expand PATHS to Grades 3-6 in all FCPS schools by the beginning of the 2020-2021 SY, budget depending. Expansion of PATHS to Grades 3-6 in all FCPS schools will cost approximately $241,775. PATHS kits/materials will cost approximately $220,197 and training for staff will cost approximately $21,578. FCPS is seeking additional grant monies to cover these costs. Local funds, if and when identified, will be used to help fund this PATHS expansion.

▶ It is important to note that research suggests that implementation of SEL education in secondary schools is beneficial to students.[4,5,11] Furthermore, FCPS data shows that social-emotional needs extend into secondary grades. FCPS understands that early intervention is critical and it will initially focus on SEL in PK-Grade 6; however, it will continue to explore SEL curricular programs for secondary grades.

▶ Plans to monitor PATHS implementation and its related impact (to the extent possible) are currently in progress. Proposed quantitative and qualitative data to measure program implementation and progress include academic performance, attendance, and discipline, and stakeholder perceptions (students, staff, and parents/guardians) on PATHS implementation, SEL competencies, and/or school culture and climate, when applicable and/or appropriate.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

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