

Student well-being in RSU 57: An analysis of policy and practice

**Prepared for the RSU 57 School
Board**

February 2025



School Psychology Supports

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	Page 1
Executive Summary	Page 2
Introduction	Page 5
Conceptual Framework: Five Guiding Principles	Page 4
Report Methodology	Page 5
Findings and Analysis: Policy	Page 8
Findings and Analysis: Practice	Page 16
Communications Recommendations	Page 34
Appendix	Page 35

Executive Summary

This report presents an assessment of RSU 57's policies and practices concerning student well-being by staff at School Psychology Supports. It was commissioned by the RSU 57 school board in the summer of 2024 in an effort to fully understand the state of its current applicable policies and how those policies are "lived" at the school level. The assessment focuses on bullying, harassment, and student well-being at the middle and high school levels. Because we recognize the limitations of our understanding of the district's reality and our own implicit biases, our recommendations are not intended to be prescriptive. Instead, we hope they will elicit dialogue, reflection among stakeholders and support the school board's strategic decision-making.

The report has two major sections. The first section is a policy review. It provides a detailed review of key policies compared to the MSMA "model" policies and supportive district documents (i.e., website, family/student handbook, etc.), consideration of documented research and best practices in those areas and a discussion as to how those policies are being implemented in the district derived from our discussions with administrators, staff and students.

Our approach to the policy review included comparing each of key RSU 57 policies and the corresponding "model" policy issued by the Maine School Management Association (MSMA). We used the MSMA policies as a starting point for comparison because we assume these to be legally complete. MSMA recommends reviewing these policies carefully in users own contexts and adjusting as necessary. Thus, differences between the MSMA and district version are not to be viewed as an inherent defect in the RSU 57 school board's version.

Foremost, we were impressed by the thoroughness of the RSU 57 policies. Every policy we reviewed had been updated by the RSU 57 school board within the past year. Maintaining updated policies is a key school board responsibility and it is evident that the school board has taken that responsibility to heart. We were also impressed by the level of engagement of staff in the review of these policies. It is clear that the school board is committed to engaging key stakeholders in policy development. Our review looked at the following policies:

- JICK: Bullying
- JICK-R: Bullying Procedures
- JICA: Student Dress
- JK: Student Discipline
- JIC: System-wide Code of Conduct
- ACAA: Harassment and Sexual Harassment of Students
- ACAAA-R: Complaint Procedures

We also looked at the alignment between the policies and family handbooks. Our review found a clear and impressive effort to align and explain in detailed and more accessible language the district's policies. We did note that a couple of the policies do not reflect the proactive and

restorative perspective that was articulated by many stakeholders in our interviews. We addressed this through our recommendations for those policies.

The report's second section is a review of district practices related to student well-being. Our analysis is structured around the US Department of Education's March 2023 publication, "Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates."

For principles 1-3 and 5 (as Principle 4 was outside of the purview of this engagement) we articulated the following recommendations:

Principle 1: Fostering a sense of belonging through a positive, safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment:

- Develop comprehensive guidance for teachers on student relationship building and social-emotional learning (SEL), including targeted professional development to enhance skills in supporting student well-being.
- Optimize existing survey tools to foster deeper awareness, promote critical reflection, and facilitate strategic action planning across the district.
- Implement a guardian survey to gain insights into parent and guardian perceptions of school climate, with a focus on safety and inclusion.
- Review the implementation of Say Something to ensure all stakeholders are aware of the tool and how to use it (and create a plan to ensure annual training and communication).
- Convene a student workgroup to advise educators around how to make the reporting of bullying even more safe and effective and reduce the peer stigma of reporting bullying.
- Provide transparent reporting on resource allocation for student well-being, clearly articulating the systemic implications and potential unintended consequences of shifting resources.
- Consider crafting nuanced phone and social media use policies for campus settings with an emphasis on staff buy-in.
- Formalize digital citizenship and social media use instruction as part of the district's advisory program
- Develop and implement targeted strategies to create a consistently inclusive and supportive environment for all students regardless of economic or other circumstances.

Principle 2: Supporting the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of all students through evidence-based strategies

- Continue to work toward the development of a comprehensive social-emotional learning curriculum with an intentional progression of learning that builds on baseline understanding and common vocabulary from elementary to middle to high school.
- Explore reinstating a universal student screening tool with appropriate training and support..
- Explore opportunities to develop a systematic approach to data collection and reflection within the MTSS-B team structure at the high school and grade level teams at the middle school.

- At the high school level, continue to work to develop a viable alternative to the previous advisory structure to create a safe and predictable place for students to learn about and discuss difficult issues.

Principle 3: Adequately support high-quality teaching and learning by increasing educator capacity

- Institute district-wide universal training on de-escalation techniques and navigating challenging interpersonal conversations, equipping staff with essential skills to effectively support student emotional well-being.
- Develop a clear, consistent district-wide framework that explicitly defines the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders including classroom teachers and student support specialists in preventing and addressing bullying. The goal is to create a comprehensive, coordinated approach to student well-being that empowers every staff member to understand and effectively execute their specific responsibilities within a holistic prevention and intervention continuum.
- Evaluate the possibility of creating an RSU specific training program similar to the one implemented recently around suicide prevention leveraging outside resources such as NAMI, CASTL or other established service providers working in this space.

Principle 5: Ensure the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat students with dignity and respect

- Carefully review and consider policy revision recommendations as detailed in the policy section of this report.
- Strengthen guardian engagement opportunities.
- Reinforce alignment to the districts' values and requirement to create inclusive spaces for all students, including LGBTQ students and develop and implement targeted strategies to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

Our review of the district's practices showed a clear dedication to fostering a positive school climate and ensuring student well-being from the school board, administration and staff. We identified opportunities for improvement including enhancing teacher training and support, especially in areas such as de-escalation techniques and bullying prevention. By addressing the areas identified for improvement, the district can further enhance its support for students and create an even safer and more inclusive learning environment.

Introduction

This report provides district leadership with an assessment of the district's current policies addressing bullying, harassment, and student mental health. Our primary objective is to evaluate these policies against current best practices in educational research and offer targeted recommendations for improvement.

In response to the School Board's request, the report takes a holistic approach to examining student well-being at the district's middle school and high school. The analysis is structured to provide a review of both policy and practice.

The report is organized into the following sections:

1. Introduction
2. Conceptual Framework: Five Guiding Principles
3. Methodology
4. Findings and Analysis: Policy
5. Findings and Analysis: Practice
6. Comprehensive Conclusions
7. Communications Recommendations
8. Appendix

Conceptual Framework: Five Guiding Principles

Our analysis draws from the US Department of Education's March 2023 publication, ["Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates."](#) We found these five principles to be a useful framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities within the RSU 57 learning community:

1. Foster a sense of belonging through a positive, safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment;
2. Support the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of all students through evidence-based strategies;
3. Adequately support high-quality teaching and learning by increasing educator capacity;
4. Recruit and retain a diverse educator workforce¹;
5. Ensure the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat students with dignity and respect.

¹ Our engagement did not include an analysis of the district's educator workforce (Principle 4).

The Findings and Analysis section on practices is structured in alignment with these guiding principles.

Report Methodology

School Psychology Supports (PSP) was engaged to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the district's policies and practices related to student well-being during the Fall of 2024. The engagement followed a structured three-phase approach:

1. Intake
2. Policy and Practice Analysis
3. Recommendations and Communication Assistance

Policy Review

We collected and analyzed the following district policies, comparing them to model policies issued by the Maine School Boards Association (MSBA):

- JICK: Bullying
- JICK-R: Bullying Procedures
- JICA: Student Dress
- JK: Student Discipline
- JIC: System-wide Code of Conduct
- ACAA: Harassment and Sexual Harassment of Students
- ACAAA-R: Complaint Procedures

Document and Data Analysis

Our review included:

- Youth Truth survey results (Middle School and High School)
- District survey result presentations
- Family Handbooks
- Maine Integrated Health Youth Survey (MIHYS) results
- High School Community Forum Presentation

Stakeholder Engagement

We conducted comprehensive interviews and focus groups across multiple levels:

Massabesic Middle School:

- Administration (1 interview, 2 people)
- Classroom teachers (1 focus group, 8 participants)
- Student support staff (1 focus group, 6 participants)
- Students (2 grade-level focus groups; 6 7th graders, 8, 8th graders)

Massabesic High School:

- Administration (1 interview, 3 participants)
- Student support staff (2 separate interviews; 1 single participant, 1 with 2 participants)
- School staff (1 mixed focus group, total of 5 participants)
- Students (1 focus group, 10 participants total)

District Level:

- School Board President (1 interview)
- School Board Policy Committee (2 focus groups)
- Superintendent (1 interview)

Research and Best Practices

Our analysis drew from authoritative sources across key domains, including, but not limited to:

Bullying Prevention:

- NAMI Bullying Resources ([NAMI Bullying: Let's Talk About It](#), [BullyingWarning Signs](#))
- Center for Safe Schools Prevention Practices ([Bullying Prevention Best Practices](#))
- National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) Preventive Interventions ([Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice - NCBI Bookshelf](#))
- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) ([Bullying Prevention](#))

Student Discipline:

- U.S. Department of Education Guiding Principles ([Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates](#))
- Government Accountability Office (GAO) School Dress Code Equity Research ([K-12 Education: Department of Education Should Provide Information on Equity and Safety in School Dress Codes](#))

Social-Emotional Learning:

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Research ([What Does the Research Say?](#))

Approach to Findings

After synthesizing policies, data, documents, and stakeholder insights, we developed recommendations intended as collaborative "conversation starters" for district leadership. These recommendations reflect our holistic assessment and draw on our professional experience in similar educational settings. They are intentionally exploratory rather than prescriptive, designed to provoke thoughtful dialogue and strategic planning.

Findings and Analysis: Policy

The policy review included reviewing each of the RSU 57 policies listed above and the corresponding “model” policy issued by the Maine School Boards Association (MSBA). We were impressed by the thoroughness of the RSU 57 policy reviews. Every policy we reviewed had been updated by the RSU 57 school board within the past year. Maintaining updated policies is a key school board responsibility and it is evident that the RSU school board has taken that responsibility to heart.

It is important to note that we use the MSMA policies as a starting point for comparison because we assume these to be legally complete and correct. MSMA stipulates that districts should review these policies carefully in their own contexts and adjust as necessary. Thus, differences between the MSMA and district version are not to be viewed as an inherent deficit in the school board’s version. We highlight those discrepancies and note where we think they should be revisited in light of conflicts with on the ground practices or the research literature/best practices in the field.

Our review highlights places where the policy and current practice differ. This is based on our understanding of the implementation of the policy based on conversations with key informants during the intake phase. Where we see the possibility for closer alignment between policy and best practice in the field, we note this.

Where applicable, we also provide a summary of the key best practices considerations on which we ground our analysis. We summarize our recommendations for action for each policy.

JICK Bullying (last revised in February 2024)

Comparative Analysis (to MSBA Model Policy):

- Overall very similar policies.
- RSU policy does not specifically include the definition of sexual orientation or gender identity.
- RSU policy does not specify that the decision of the superintendent is final when the complainant is dissatisfied with the district’s initial decision– appears to open the door for appeal to the School Board; however, the administrative procedure states that the Supt’s decision is final. This should be reconciled.

Policy Implementation:

- Staff reported being familiar with this policy.
- Users report this policy represents the district’s “zero tolerance” toward bullying and that it does not account for the volume and complexity of “bullying” reports.
- Some users reported that they “triage” or attempt to triage reports at their level before sending them to administration.
- Some users report that they would like to address bullying reports at their level but do not

feel that they have the time, resources or license/charge to do so.

- Both students and staff report often being unclear on the resolution to bullying allegations.
- Bullying training was reported to happen during staff meetings for employees and grade level assemblies for students at the high school.
- In focus groups, some students reported that they have been discouraged by school staff for reporting bullying.

Best Practice Considerations:

- Bullying prevention should be guided by a multi-tiered prevention approach such as outlined [here](#).
- The school board should determine what, if any, appeal role they want to have in day to day implementation of policies; where the school board does not have an appeal role, we recommend that the school board specifically state where the final decision rests (i.e., principal, superintendent).

Recommendations:

See below (under procedures)

JICK-R Bullying Procedures (last revised February 2024)

Comparative Analysis (to MSBA Model Policy):

- RSU Procedure does not require the superintendent to be updated on an investigation; in RSU procedure it is sent to superintendent “as necessary.”
- RSU Procedure in “Form of Reports” does not include: “The building principal will forward a copy of the report to the Superintendent by the end of the next school day.” replacing it with the requirement that this be done “as necessary.”
- RSU Procedure in “Investigation” does not include the following paragraph from MSMA sample: *The determination of whether particular conduct constitutes bullying requires reasonable consideration of the circumstances, which include the frequency of the behavior at issue, the location in which the behavior occurs, the ages and maturity of the students involved, the activity or context in which the conduct occurs, and the nature and severity of the conduct.*
- RSU Procedure in “Response to Bullying” does not include the following language: “In order to remediate any substantiated incident of bullying to counter the negative impact of the bullying and reduce the risk of future bullying incidents, the principal [**OR:** _____] may refer the targeted student/victim, perpetrator or other involved persons to counseling of other appropriate services” NOR “If the bullying behavior appears to be a criminal violation, the building principal will notify local law enforcement authorities.”
- See note in policy section re: reconciling superintendent’s final say on bullying appeals.

Policy Implementation:

- Some users reported informing the superintendent of every bullying investigation as a matter of course.

- No-contact contracts were reported as a frequently used tool to resolving bullying reports that were investigated and found to be cases of inter-student conflict rather than bullying.

Best Practice Considerations:

- In some settings, bullying definitions are expanded to include:
 - the requirement that there exist a real or perceived *power imbalance* between the parties and/or
 - The need for a “*pattern*” (generally understood to be more than one incident and/or alleged bullier).
 - See <https://iga.in.gov/laws/2022/ic/titles/20#20-33-8-0.2>
- The inclusion of these more nuanced definitions within procedures could provide stronger examples of what constitutes a claim of bullying.
- Building in an expectation that the school board considers restorative, therapeutic and disciplinary as appropriate responses for addressing bullying.

Recommendations:

- Align the requirements for superintendent notification between the policy and procedure.
- Align the role of the superintendent as the final decision-maker in policy to match with the procedure (it is not clear in the policy that the superintendent is the final appeal).
- Include the language from the MSMA policy that makes the referral of parties (victim and perpetrator) to counseling as an appropriate “response to bullying.”

JICA Student Dress (last revised in April 2024)

Comparative Analysis (to MSBA Model Policy):

- Where MSMA sample places ultimate responsibility for dress and appearance with parents, RSU 57’s policy approaches it from a perspective of attire conveying “respect for the school community by being appropriate to the educational environment” which places the district at the center of judging student appearance and dress.
- MSMA offers four “restrictions” to enforce (tobacco, gang, lewd and destructive).
- RSU 57’s policy spells out 4 requirements (3 “must haves” and 1 “don’t have” along with 9 “regulations.”
- MSMA policy calls for the superintendent to develop administrative procedures; it appears that the RSU 57 policy is designed to encompass what could have been those administrative procedures.

Best Practice Considerations:

- Requirement #4 (see through/mesh garments) and Regulation #7 (manner of grooming) creates the potential for uneven and biased application for specific groups. (See <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105348>).

Recommendations

- Consider revising to shift responsibility for attire to families as in the MSMA model policy.

- Consider and address as appropriate the potential for disparate implementation for specific requirements noted in best practices consideration section above.
- Consider developing procedures to correspond with the policy; it appears that the current policy serves the purpose normally reserved for procedures.

JK Student Discipline (last reviewed April 2024)

Comparative Analysis (to MSBA Model Policy):

- RSU 57 policy excludes educating for “ethical behavior” from the primary responsibilities of schools outlined in the preamble to the policy (MSMA includes it).
- In the principles (Principle A) the RSU 57 policy excludes responsibility for teaching prosocial alternatives to problem behaviors (which is included in the MSMA model).
- Language in Principle C includes the stipulation that “Administrators shall have discretion to tailor discipline to the facts and circumstances of the particular case.” This stipulation is missing from Policy JIC (Code of Conduct) and should be added there.
- RSU 57 Policy excludes a specific reference specifying that discipline for students with disabilities needs to be consistent with applicable federal and state laws and regulations (which is in the MSMA policy).

Policy Implementation:

- Administrators report a significant decrease in negative disciplinary outcomes (expulsions and suspensions) in the recent past.
- RSU 57 disciplinary outcomes reported in the [Office of Civil Rights](#) data reporting does not appear consistent with on-the-ground reporting (i.e., only four out of school suspensions)
- Specifically, while administrators reported sharp declines in suspensions and expulsions in recent years, it did not appear to be limited to 3 students as reported to OCR.

Best Practice Considerations:

- We based our analysis of discipline policies on the USDOE [Guiding Principles](#) for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates; as such, we note where the actual policies do not reflect the restorative approach favored in the research (and consistent with the approach and dispositions of the RSU 57 personnel we interviewed).

Recommendations:

- Align with policy JIC, specifically consider the role of administrator discretion which exists here in revising that policy.
- Evaluate adding specific language from the MSMA sample policy that is not present in this policy around teaching ethical behavior and prosocial behavior as alternatives to problem behaviors, reinforcing that discipline for students with disabilities is subject to specific legal requirements that may be different from non-identified students.

JIC System-wide Student Code of Conduct (January 2024)

Comparative Analysis (to MSBA Model Policy):

- RSU 57 policy has a much shorter Preamble that specifically excludes references to school community member accountability for their own behavior, a commitment to community engagement in developing this code of conduct and requirements for distribution.
- It also excludes a reference to the code applying off school property, although this is addressed in Article 2 of the policy.
- It also excludes a specific reference in the MSMA policy to “positive and restorative interventions” as a disciplinary action; however participating in “restorative interventions” is noted as a potential reason for loss of recess by elementary school students.
- Standards for Ethical and Responsible Behavior are ordered differently from the MSMA version.
- In Article 3 (General Behavior Expectations), RSU 57 includes “academic dishonesty” in item I without a specific definition. This is in addition to “cheating” and “plagiarism” which are also included in the MSMA version.
- Article 4 (Discipline) omits reference to positive and restorative interventions as a specific form of disciplinary action in the introductory paragraph.
- RSU 57’s Policy states that consequences “depend upon the seriousness of the violation and the student’s prior disciplinary record.” This language replaces a specific reference giving administrators “discretion to tailor discipline to the facts and circumstances of the particular situation.” While administrative discretion is implied in the RSU 57 statement, the fact that it was specifically omitted may lead to confusion about the intent around who has the authority (school, district, school board).
- RSU 57’s policy specifically adds that the school may refer behavior that violates the law to “law enforcement authorities.” This may place school administration in the position to interpret whether a school based discipline violation being investigated is illegal.
- The RSU 57 Policy includes another reference to referral to Law Enforcement (Article 8). This places responsibility for this decision on the district superintendent in most cases which is preferable to the more open clause under Article 4-Discipline referenced earlier. It should still be noted that these provisions place school administration in the position to interpret the legality of a school based discipline violation. It should be noted that the MSMA model policy does not include any consideration of law enforcement referrals.

- The two policies differ in other ways that may or may not be significant (detailed in this footnote²).

Policy Implementation:

- Reported discipline implementation had a more restorative and positive feel than what is conveyed by this policy.

Best Practice Considerations:

- See [Guiding Principles](#) document from US Dept of Ed for perspective on discipline.
- See this National Institutes of Health [report](#) on the role of police officers in school settings.
- If referrals to law enforcement are to be included in the policy, include a clear lead for these referrals.

Recommendations:

- Consider revising the policy frame to make it consistent with the district's practice of restorative and proactive discipline
- Align with policy JK (Discipline), specifically consider the role of administrator discretion in administering this policy
- Evaluate adding specific language from the MSMA sample policy that is not present in this policy
- Evaluate the references to referrals to law enforcement; if included, we recommend that responsibility be at the district level.

² Article 4 (Discipline) and Article 5 (Expectations) are inverted from where they appear in the MSMA policy. It would appear to make sense to have Expectations follow directly after General Behavior Expectations.

- RSU 57's policy cites related policies throughout the policy (i.e., for Article 4- Discipline as well as for each enumerated Expectation). MSMA compiles them all at the end as do most other RSU 57 policies.
- RSU 57's policy cites Policy JKB- Detention of Students as a related policy under discipline (where MSMA does not)
- RSU 57's policy inverts the order of expectation "Hazing" and "Bullying" from the MSMA sample
- Expectation "Hazing" references co-curricular and athletic activities. MSMA differentiates between co-curricular and extra-curricular. Elsewhere RSU 57 policies combine them as "extra/co-curricular."
- Expectation E- Discrimination and Harassment/Sexual Harassment adds "gender identity" as a protected category whereas this is not included in the MSMA policy.
- Expectation F- Drug and Alcohol Use excludes "bath salts" from the MSMA policy
- Expectation H- Conduct on School Buses includes a reference to School Board policies in addition to school rules. MSMA does not include policies.
- Article 6 includes reference to 20-A MSRA Section 4009-Protection from Liability, MDOE Rule Chapter 33-Physical Restraint and Seclusion of Students and Policy JKAA/JKAA-R as related policies. None of these are referenced in the MSMA model policy.
- Article 6-Removal of Disruptive/Violent/Threatening Students limits the use of seclusion and restraints to the following statement: "any use of physical restraint or seclusion of students must comply with applicable regulations and Board policy. MSMA's model policy stipulates that force should be used "only to the minimum extent necessary to protect any person from imminent physical harm..."

Policy ACAA- Harassment and Sexual Harassment of Students (last revised in October 2024)

- This policy is substantively similar to the MSMA model policy.

Policy ACAA-R-1 Student Discrimination and Harassment Complaint Procedure (last revised in October 2024)

- This procedure is a near replica of the MSMA model policy.
- The district has separated this complaint procedure from the student sex discrimination and harassment complaint procedure (ACAA R-2) in this most recent revision.

Policy ACAA-R-2 Student Sex Discrimination/Harassment Complaint Procedure (last revised in October 2024)

- This procedure is a near replica of the MSMA model policy³.
- The district has separated this complaint procedure from the student sex discrimination and harassment complaint procedure (ACAA R-2) in this most recent revision.

Policy Implementation:

- Administrators reported treating bullying allegations with the same level of scrutiny that is called for in this policy.

Best Practice Considerations:

- As revised these policies/procedures represent the best practice in conducting harassment/sexual harassment investigations.
- Stay abreast of developments in federal (and state) policy associated with these investigations. Over the past two federal administrations there have been significant changes in this policy and this may be true for the new federal administration.

Recommendations:

- None

Policy Findings Summary

Overall, all of these policies have been updated within the last year; this is impressive. In our experience, school districts struggle to systematically update all of their policies. We are also impressed by the level of engagement of staff in the review of these policies. It is clear that the school board is committed to engaging key stakeholders in policy development.

³ There is a repetition on page 13 (Section C, 5 subsection “d”) which is repeated from previous subsection “c”. This should be edited to reflect the appropriate action. In the MSMA model policy this is: “provide the parties a reasonable and equal opportunity to make a statement in support of, or challenging, the outcome”. Presumably this is what the school board intended here.

Our review of the alignment between the policies and family handbooks shows a clear and impressive effort to align and explain in detailed and more accessible language the district's policies. This is always challenging to do, but it is well worth the effort.

We did note that a couple of the policies do not reflect the proactive and restorative perspective that was articulated by many stakeholders in our interviews. We noted this in our recommendations for those policies. We recommend scrutinizing policies and procedures as indicated in the recommendations for each policy.

Findings and Analysis: Practice

Understanding the implementation of district policies is crucial for promoting student well-being. While policies provide a critical framework, the true impact lies in how these policies are translated into practice—both in their intended design and actual execution. This section presents our findings and recommendations, which are grounded in:

- Comprehensive data analysis from our engagement including holistic review of district documents and our interviews and focus groups
- Our professional expertise in similar educational settings
- Our knowledge and understanding of current best practices in education

As noted in the introduction to this report, our analysis in this section is structured around the US Department of Education's March 2023 publication, "Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates":

1. Foster a sense of belonging through a positive, safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment;
2. Support the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of all students through evidence-based strategies;
3. Adequately support high-quality teaching and learning by increasing educator capacity;
4. *As previously noted, this principle fell outside the scope of our current inquiry;*
5. Ensure the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat students with dignity and respect.

It is important to acknowledge the inherent complexity of school ecosystems. These principles are deeply interconnected, creating natural overlap in themes and implementation. As a result:

- Some themes could potentially align with multiple principles;
- We have made intentional decisions about principle categorization;
- Cross-references to other sections of the report will highlight these interconnections.

Key Considerations

By design, our recommendations are not prescriptive. Instead, they are designed as "conversation starters" to:

- Provoke meaningful dialogue
- Encourage reflective practice, and
- Support strategic decision-making

Principle 1: Fostering a sense of belonging through a positive, safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment

This principle focuses on work that school communities can do to promote a positive school climate, ensuring access to staff dedicated to students' mental health and wellbeing and fostering rigorous, culturally competent, engaging and welcoming learning environments.

We note that while the focus in our report is safety in the context of emotional safety, students at both the high school and middle school cited concerns about their physical safety in the context of school shootings. We recognize that these two issues are interconnected in that students who fear for their physical safety are more at risk for mental health challenges. This is not unique to RSU 57 students. A 2022 [report](#) from the American Psychological Association draws causal links between students' fears over school shootings and mental health issues. Additionally, we are aware that our student focus group conversations happened shortly after a widely publicized school based threat at Massabesic High School.

Caring Adults

In our conversations, it was apparent that the district prioritizes supporting teachers who care about students. Students mentioned access to caring adults as one of the strongest aspects of their experience with RSU 57. In our conversations with administrators, they reported prioritizing relationship building as a key expectation for themselves and their staff. Teachers in our focus groups affirmed their understanding of this priority and expressed their commitment to developing relationships with their students.

A specific example of this is the expectation that teachers be in hallways during passing periods. This is seen by both teachers and the students we engaged with as an informal opportunity to check in, see how students are doing and to establish rapport that can carry over into more formal situations. Some teachers noted that this is one of the ways that they assess student well-being.

Students in our focus groups reported that, while in general, teachers are accessible and caring, there is some variability in the degree to which they feel comfortable bringing their problems to individual teachers. Teachers in our focus groups also noted different levels of personal comfort addressing students' mental health concerns. This is not unique to RSU 57 staff. In our experience as educators, the variability in teacher practice is a reality across schools and jurisdictions. We address this in Principle 3 later in the report.

It was also clear that staff in RSU 57 schools understand their role in supporting student well-being by accessing the resources available for that purpose. School counselors and social workers were identified by administrators and classroom teachers as the linchpin of the district's

strategy for ensuring student well-being. Counselors and social workers we met, understood and welcomed the centrality of their role in maintaining student well-being.

Students in our focus groups also named counselors and social workers as key resources they rely on when they, or their peers, are in need of mental health support. Students saw them as helpful and very accessible.

The district has made a commitment to this counselor-centered approach. There are currently four counselors and five social workers at the high school level and three counselors and two social workers at the middle school level. These staffing levels are at, or exceed, the recommended ratios for these positions⁴. It should be noted that a significant portion of the social work resources are earmarked for students with Individualized Educational Plans and Section 504 Plans.

While stakeholders value these resources, two different themes came up in our staff focus groups that should be noted and sought to be understood:

1. A concern that the district has elevated student mental health supports at the detriment of academic learning. This was discussed, in particular at the high school level;
2. That resourcing student wellbeing in this manner has been done at the expense of other resources (i.e., ed tech staffing) which shifts the onus away from teachers and onto the student support staff. This was noted, in particular at the middle school level. The implication is that because of the lack of other adults in a classroom, teachers were often unable to delve into concerns raised by students and had to forward those concerns to the student support staff or administration.

In our experience, these two themes are reflective of the tensions that school district leaders face when managing limited resources. It was clear to us that staff understand the importance of addressing student well-being and value the resources that have been devoted to this endeavor— both in terms of time and staff. At the same time, we aim to make these tensions visible to the administration and school board as they engage in difficult budgeting decisions and highlight opportunities for communication about these investment choices.

Student Engagement in Extracurricular Activities

The school district has articulated a strategy for enhancing student wellbeing by engaging them in school activities. This approach was clearly articulated by district and school administration in our interviews. In our high school student focus group, several students highlighted access to a variety of extracurricular programs as a positive aspect of the Massabesic experience.

⁴ According to the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), the recommended ratio for social workers to students is 1:250. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) also recommends a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1.

Research consistently supports the positive impact of extracurricular activities on students, such as improved academic performance and social skills, increased self-esteem, better mental health, and post secondary preparedness. There are [studies](#) showing that students who participate in extracurriculars often have higher GPAs and are more likely to graduate high school. Key points from the research on extracurricular activities highlight:

Academic success:

Studies link participation in extracurriculars to higher grades, better standardized test scores, and increased likelihood of college enrollment;.

Social development:

Extracurricular activities foster teamwork, leadership skills, communication abilities, and positive peer relationships;.

Mental health benefits:

Participation in extracurriculars can improve self-esteem, reduce stress, and contribute to positive mental wellbeing;.

Life skills development:

Extracurricular activities can teach valuable life skills like problem-solving, time management, and adaptability.

Community engagement:

Volunteering through extracurriculars promotes civic responsibility and a sense of community involvement

We recognize that investing in extracurricular programming is a deliberate choice in a resource constrained school budget environment. It was apparent that key stakeholders such as the superintendent, high school administrative team and students value and support this choice. We urge the school board to consider these perspectives and endeavor to ensure that all students have access to these engagement options regardless of their family's economic means. We also recommend that the district explore how to track student participation and how it impacts overall wellbeing and communicate about this strategy as part of the RSU 57 value proposition to stakeholders.

Middle School Model

The district has adopted a “Middle School Model⁵” which is structured so that students are connected to a consistent group of peers and teachers. This allows teachers to build strong relationships and to collaborate with each other to understand students more holistically. Teachers have regular time to collaborate within their teams in order to identify which students need additional support. This model promotes relationships and ensures the adults can keep a pulse on how students are doing. It leverages a consistent advisory structure that ensures one educator knows a small group of students well. Interviews with Middle School administrators and

⁵ The Middle School Model is informed by an article published by the Association for Middle Level Education called “[This We Believe](#)”.

educators illuminated the importance of this structural model for enabling strong relationships and attentiveness to students' evolving needs. Staff were grateful for and do not take for granted the district's ongoing commitment to the investment in this approach.

Access to Mental Health Supports

Counselors

School counselors occupy a central role in the district's support structure for student well-being. The high school has recently organized so that all students are assigned to a counselor as 9th graders, partly in recognition of the importance and challenging nature of that specific transition point, and that the same counselor remains with them for the duration of their high school experience. This represents a significant departure from past practice and is a practice associated with building strong lasting relationships with students (and families). It demands a great deal from counselors who in more traditional counselor assignments may specialize in certain aspects of the job (i.e., scheduling or college search) but have less understanding of the evolution of students in their charge.

This recent evolution at the high school was modeled off a long-standing practice at the middle school level where there is one counselor assigned to each class who loops with the students for all three years.

External Partners

Additionally, schools reported strong relationships with community service providers (e.g., Sweetser) to supplement in house mental health resources. These services were noted as supplementing school capacity with both added resources and specialization in areas where in-school staff may not have the requisite depth of clinical expertise. We encourage the district to continue to pursue and build on these partnerships.

Surveys

One key aspect of creating and sustaining a positive school climate is understanding the present state. As part of our engagement, we reviewed the district's Youth Truth survey data as well as previous years' Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS).

With respect to the YouthTruth survey, we commend the district for having taken the proactive step to implement a student survey for years. We did note significant discrepancies between the data at the middle school and high school levels. However, at all levels, we noted that there was a consistent theme of distrust and questioning of the value of this specific survey tool.

The reasons cited include the low representation of schools like Massabesic schools (very few rural New England schools are in the sample), low participation rate by students (at the high school level) and non-representativeness in those responding (at the high school level fewer than half of the students completed the survey). There were also stated concerns about the nature of the reporting (i.e., a question where 40%-50% of students reflected positively on the school on

that measure, but where that response generated a low percentile ranking when compared to other schools taking the survey). It was also reported that this survey was selected by central office staff who are no longer in the district, leading to some of the implementation challenges noted.

We do not have a specific commitment to the Youth Truth survey tool and recognize that staff transitions can have a negative impact on the administration of a complex survey. However, there is evidence that some form of student attitudinal data collection is a critical aspect of creating a safe, welcoming and inclusive learning environment that the school board is committed to providing. There are other tools that achieve this and we encourage the district to consider the opportunity of transitioning to a new tool that will enjoy more buy-in to ensure it can promote inquiry and reflection. We also encourage extending surveys to include family perceptions about safety and inclusion at school.

As part of our review, we looked at the district's most recent Maine Integrated YouthHealth Survey (MIYHS). This is a survey that is administered every other year to every secondary school in Maine (and in most states as part of the Center for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Survey). This survey benchmarks student well-being in risk behaviors (substance abuse, sexual health, etc.) against the County and State. Massabesic High School did not administer this most recent survey. School administrators reported not being made aware of the administration dates, but expressed an interest in administering it in the future. This survey could be a powerful triangulation tool for assessing progress on important measures of student well-being that RSU 57 cares deeply about. We encourage the district to embrace its use, including reporting on it to the school board and broader community.

Say Something and GoGuardian

RSU 57 has made significant investments in technology to support student well-being. The district has adopted "Say Something", a free and anonymous reporting system (ASR) developed and promoted by the SandyHook Promise. A link to the tool is available on the front page of the website for both the high school and middle school. However, in our discussions with school board members, district staff and students there was minimal awareness of how the reports are handled. Neither school references it in its family handbook.

More recently, the district has adopted GoGuardian. This web filter tool helps the district to meet student internet safety requirements, but more importantly, based on our interviews with school administrators and school support personnel, it provides surveillance of student technology use while on devices controlled by the school and notifies school staff if students are searching for self-harm information, among other things.

As with student surveys, these tools have significant potential with robust implementation. Their usefulness will be moderated by the extent to which staff understand the uses, have time to act on the information they receive and communicate effectively to others about its uses. We

encourage the district to ensure that the implementation of these two tools receives the attention they require.

Social Media and Personal Devices

Our focus group interviews with the school board, educators and students illuminated that a significant amount of teasing or bullying originates on social media outside of school and often on personal devices. There are limits to what schools can control. Already, the district has a policy (JFCK) and procedures that prohibit the use of cell phones on school premises except for specific carve-out options (HS before, after and during passing periods and lunches and for all students in school buses and with specific teacher authorization). These policies are documented in student handbooks.

We recognize that these policies are difficult to enforce consistently; however, consistent implementation is the key to their success. In a recent Pew Research Center [report](#), 82% of K-12 teachers in the U.S. said their school or district has a cellphone policy of some kind. At the same time, one-third of public K-12 teachers and 60% of high school teachers report that being distracted by cellphones is a major problem in their classroom.

Thus, we encourage the district to communicate and enforce its policy on student use of personal electronic devices and social media in school settings. Engaging stakeholders, especially administrators and teachers in revisiting this policy with a focus on buy-in and enforcement is a commonly used approach to increasing the effectiveness of these policies.

Additionally, because most of the concerns we heard resulted from social media interactions that occurred outside of school, we recommend formally teaching students about social media use as part of digital citizenship training, either in existing courses such as Health or through other structures. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) (2024) points to several free, evidence-based curriculums designed for middle and high schoolers that can support educators in teaching about digital literacy in a school setting.

Principle 1 Recommendations:

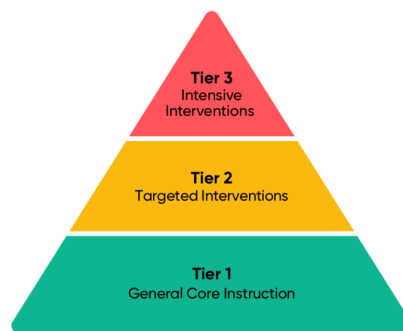
- Develop comprehensive guidance for teachers on student relationship building and social-emotional learning (SEL), including targeted professional development to enhance skills in supporting student well-being.
- Optimize existing survey tools to foster deeper awareness, promote critical reflection, and facilitate strategic action planning across the district.
- Implement a guardian survey to gain insights into parent and guardian perceptions of school climate, with a focus on safety and inclusion.
- Review the implementation of Say Something to ensure all stakeholders are aware of the tool and how to use it (and create a plan to ensure annual training and communication).
- Convene a student workgroup to advise educators around how to make reporting bullying even more safe and effective and reduce the peer stigma of reporting bullying.

- Provide transparent reporting on resource allocation for student well-being, clearly articulating the systemic implications and potential unintended consequences of shifting resources.
- Consider crafting nuanced phone and social media use policies for campus settings with an emphasis on staff buy-in around implementation and enforcement.
- Formalize digital citizenship and social media use instruction as part of the district's advisory program
- Develop and implement targeted strategies to create a consistently inclusive and supportive environment for all students regardless of economic or other circumstances.

Principle 2: Supporting the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of all students through evidence-based strategies

This principle focuses on the structures, routines and programs that schools can put in place to support the overall wellness of the school community.

As noted by the National Institutes of Health (2016) “an increasingly common approach to the prevention of emotional and behavioral disorders is the three-tiered public health model that includes universal, selective, and indicated preventive interventions.” This model is commonly represented by the following visual:



RSU 57 uses this model in its work to ensure that students' needs are met. Both the high school and middle school have established a multi-tiered structure to organize and advance their student well-being efforts.

In this section of our report we look at the structures and supports that enable a multi-tiered system of support. We organize the section into three separate areas. One focuses on the overarching structures and supports (common across all three tiers) and then we highlight the structures that are specifically associated with the implementation of Tier I and those that are in place to support Tiers II and III.

Multi-Tiered System of Support Structures

Overarching Structures and Practices

Teams

The team structure is central to the middle school's efforts. The middle school has moved away from convening a MTSS-B team formally because their team practices and routines are a match with the overarching design of an MTSS-B team. As a result, the middle school relies on the team structure to regularly convene to discuss students and identify who needs additional support. The middle school teams pull in specialists (e.g. counselors, special educators, etc.) to ensure a comprehensive perspective on identifying student needs and generating strategies. Administrators report that they have found it is more effective to use the MTSS-B routines within the teaming structures rather than to use a singular MTSS-B team with fewer educator representatives.

The team approach at the high school indicates an understanding of the importance of school-wide ownership in creating a safe, welcoming and inclusive school environment. Tiered interventions and treatments in place include the counselors' central role in guiding universal and selective interventions, the student support resources represented by social workers and the high school's investment in a school culture and accountability coach to allow for the implementation of the formal MTSS structures.

As part of a larger reorganization of how faculty use their professional learning time, the school has created two committees MTSS-A (focused on academics) and MTSS-B (focused on behavior). The MTSS-B focus is most closely aligned to the student well-being work, but in the course of our interviews, we learned about the MTSS-A work as well and commend the leaders of both of those groups for their close collaboration and deep understanding of the intersectionality of their work. Both workgroups meet regularly and have strong voluntary interdisciplinary representation from across the school.

Data

A foundation of a healthy MTSS system is the use of data to drive reflection about the degree to which the school and classroom environment are promoting a supportive and inclusive culture as well as to systematically reflect on and identify which students need additional support.

At the middle school level, the administration noted that the combination of their veteran staff, well internalized systems and routines, and the middle school teaming structure support an approach that considers each student and the broader patterns across the grade level or team. They did acknowledge that they have used different tracking systems in the past and that they no longer adhere to all of these tools as they proved inefficient and did not add significant insight or value to their understanding of student needs or ability to recommend individuals for additional support. That said, during our conversations they acknowledged that taking a more systematic

approach to data collection and reflection is something that they will continue to evaluate as they mature their approach to MTSS.

High School Culture and Accountability Coach

The district has invested in a culture and accountability coach position at the high school. This resource has multiple roles that leverage the flexibility of a full release to de-escalate situations as they arise, build relationships with students in the halls and cafeteria and advocate with staff for students' identified needs. The staff person assigned to this role was highlighted as adding tremendous value by students, staff and administration at the high school.

A similar role does not currently exist at the middle school level.

Tier 1 Structures and Practices

“Universal or Tier 1 supports are designed to serve as a foundation in which educators build a proactive, positive, supportive, and connected school community⁶.” Universal prevention programs are aimed at reducing risks and strengthening skills for all youth within a defined community or school setting. Through universal programs, all members of the target population are exposed to the intervention. Using universal prevention approaches, a set of activities may be established that offers benefits to all individuals within that setting (e.g., school) (National Institutes for Health, 2016).

Universal Screener

Administrators reported that the district implemented a universal screener in the past. The screener, The Student Risk Screening Scale-Internalizing and Externalizing (SRSS-IE) is a brief (12 question), universal screening tool that helps teachers identify students who may be at risk for challenging behaviors and poor outcomes. Teachers rate the frequency of behaviors described on the SRSS-IE, and scores are calculated to indicate a risk category for students and help schools to identify students who may need additional support.

The use of the SRSS was discontinued at both schools because it was a significant time commitment for staff and there was a perception that results were too variable or didn't add significantly to the staff's knowledge about students. We recognize this tool requires a significant time commitment to be implemented effectively. We acknowledge, in particular, the complexity of implementing this at the high school level where every student is seen by five or six teachers per semester and teachers can have upwards of 100 students on their caseload. However, having some form of universal screening is a best practice for an effective MTSS system because it creates a common framework, creates a common language among staff and places value in understanding every student through that common framework.

⁶ 2023, *Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates*, United States Department of Education

Social Emotional Learning Curriculum/Program

At this time, the district does not have a foundational universal program such as a social emotional learning curriculum that intentionally sequences learning from elementary through high school. At different points in the recent past, structures were in place to attempt to provide universal programming. District administration reported working with an outside specialist (Crystal Leh) to explore a systematic approach to this at this time.

Currently, the middle school is pulling from multiple resources (including the Ruler program) to create a tailored set of social emotional learning lessons. Counselors design these lessons and advisory teachers deliver them during extended advisory on Wednesdays. In some cases the counselors push-in to deliver the lessons when they require particular clinical expertise. Classroom teachers reported that they appreciated this because it prized depth of clinical expertise that they did not possess. We did hear mixed perspectives from educators on the degree to which these lessons are being implemented and having their intended impact.

At the high school level, student support staff (i.e., counselors, social workers) previously developed lessons that were then delivered at the classroom level by classroom teachers during an advisory period. In our conversations with staff, they explained that these lessons were inconsistently implemented, that staff sometimes felt under-prepared to be able to take the lessons to the next level and felt generally “un-authentic.” There is no established alternative to this prior approach at this time.

In our high school student focus group, students voiced concern that they do not have a place to learn about and discuss important issues in a predictable and safe setting. We recommend that the school continue to work to develop a viable alternative to the previous advisory structure to create a space for critical issues and teaching social emotional skills.

Advisory (Mustang Time)

The middle school implements a daily advisory or homeroom structure, which is supplemented with an extended Wednesday advisory period. This structure is intended to provide a time to proactively teach social emotional learning skills, to build community and to ensure the same adult is able to observe and check in with a small group of students daily.

As discussed in the previous section, Massabesic High School revised its advisory structure three years ago. As part of the transition away from the previous advisory approach, the high school has implemented *Mustang Time*— a 20 minute block in the middle of the day— that administrators report is used for numerous initiatives and meetings to happen, whether it be a student council meeting, a student culture meeting or a club activity. However, this block is reported as largely self-directed time for students and staff, except for times staff are given talking points to use during to communicate key issues with the students in their care.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 Structures and Practices

Tier 2 and 3 targeted supports provide both additional instruction and individualization to increase the likelihood of student success⁷. Our interactions showed the following structures and practices are in place in RSU 57.

Check-in/Check-out

Both the middle and high schools use a “check-in/check-out” program as part of their MTSS work. In this program, students who staff believe would benefit from this support are assigned to a staff member who is their “go-to” person in times of challenge. This relationship is intended to act as a sounding board, co-regulator and advocate for the student. The extent to which staff are trained and the selection and assignment of students recognizes a variety of student needs is an important consideration for check-in/out to realize its full potential.

School Counselor Groups

At the middle school level, individual students are recommended for counselor groups by the educator team, guardians and/or by students. The goal of these small group interventions is targeted and shared with guardians (e.g. “to develop peer connections”). These small groups meet weekly or bi-weekly and sometimes during lunch. All counselors lead Tier 2 groups and sometimes they coordinate tier 3 groups (more targeted, smaller, more intense).

While the high school did not report the equivalent structure, there are specific groups around such things as substance abuse recovery facilitated by a combination of internal and external resources. The school culture and accountability coach supports this for specific students as well through direct support or referrals.

Academic Behavioral Emotional Learning Support (ABELS)

At the top tier, Massabesic High School has established the ABELS program as a resource to address many of the more significant issues facing students. ABELS, staffed by a special education teacher and a social worker serves a number of interrelated functions that range from drop in support to assist in student emotional regulation, self-contained alternative services and school re-entry for students who are returning from a school disciplinary consequence. One assistant principal is assigned as the primary administrator for the program, but understanding of the program is widespread among the staff and students we met and widely valued as a key resource in the school’s student wellness efforts.

Related Structures

The high school has other structures to support students with more significant needs. The in-school suspension/detention program provides an intermediate space where students can be held accountable for mid-level infractions while continuing to access learning. Administrators

⁷ 2023, *Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates*, United States Department of Education

reported a supportive design that allows teachers to have access to students in detention/ in-school suspension to complete assignments with support.

Administrators also reported that they established a program for intervening with substance abuse that is used as an alternative to harsher penalties. This program is evolving and the administration has a vision for a more robust program.

Principle 2 Recommendations

- Continue to work toward the development of a comprehensive social-emotional learning curriculum with an intentional progression of learning that builds on baseline understanding and common vocabulary from elementary to middle to high school.
- Explore reinstating a universal student screening tool with appropriate training and support..
- Explore opportunities to develop a systematic approach to data collection and reflection within the MTSS-B team structure at the high school and grade level teams at the middle school.
- At the high school level, continue to work to develop a viable alternative to the previous advisory structure to create a safe and predictable place for students to learn about and discuss difficult issues.

Principle 3: Adequately support high-quality teaching and learning by increasing educator capacity

This principle addresses the professional learning environment that enables the adults in the school community to deepen their understanding of youth development and provides opportunities to develop the skills that they need to support student well-being.

District Level Training

As required by law, RSU 57 has a series of required annual training sessions in a number of subject areas. This includes training in areas such as harassment and discrimination and suicide prevention that are directly related to the topics covered in this report.

Staff reported that they do participate in these training sessions. Most of those sessions are self-paced and on-line. Staff reported being given sufficient time for the training. Some of the training requires an “exit ticket” type of activity at the end, but not all. Staff reported variable quality of the materials, but generally they reported that most of the online training was not very engaging. Some described it as legalistic and more of a requirement than a real learning opportunity. The staff in our interviews also reported that some of the information in the on-line materials is out-dated (i.e., the contact person listed as the district point person for that topic is no longer employed with the district).

Staff were more positive about training that is more tailored to the moment. For example, staff highlighted recent training on suicide prevention provided by an outside party as something that was deeper, more personalized to RSU 57's context and where they learned new concepts and skills that they found helpful.

We recognize the complexity of balancing the extensive legal training requirements in the limited time available in the course of school schedules and calendars. We recognize the school board's commitment to providing all of this required training and acknowledge that reliance on existing outside platforms for this work (i.e., MSMA, DWM) allow the district to meet the required training within the existing limitations. We also note and endorse the district's efforts to provide more intensive and personalized training in areas identified as requiring more tailored and intensive training.

De-Escalation Crisis Intervention Training

The district has trained some staff— mostly special education staff— in crisis intervention strategies. This training provides tools and a common language for intervening in situations that have the potential to escalate to crisis levels. This training is expensive and requires ongoing re-certification.

As previously noted, the high school has shifted away from addressing topics of student well-being in a classroom based advisory structure. These shifts were reported, among other reasons, as a recognition that classroom level staff do not have the universal skills and dispositions to effectively carry out lessons on those topics. While by and large staff (and students) valued the relationships that developed in those settings, they cited lack of in-depth training as one of the variables why they were supportive of this shift. We recommend that the district consider implementing universal training for all district staff around de-escalation and having difficult conversations along with grade level appropriate professional learning opportunities on youth social emotional development.

Bullying Training

Bullying prevention training is not a part of the required district package. In our review, we learned that training on this topic happens at the school level during the early part of the year. It is delivered by school administrators as part of staff meetings and to students in assembly settings. As with other training we discussed in the district level training section of this report (previous page), this reflects an effort to balance the importance of this topic with the specific needs of each school.

Reports from our staff focus groups suggest that bullying is seen as in the purview of administrators. Staff report that all bullying is expected to be reported to administrators. Administrators reported treating bullying allegations similarly to the most serious forms of harassment and discrimination involving a high level of investigative work.

While we understand and appreciate the seriousness with which the district sees bullying implied by this “zero tolerance” and “high priority” messaging, we recommend that a carefully developed and consistent district-wide message around the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in preventing and addressing instances of bullying. Although district-wide, this message should be sensitive to school and grade level appropriateness. The goal is for all staff to be able to understand their specific roles in preventing and addressing bullying in a continuum of student well-being programming.

Principle 3 Recommendations

- Institute district-wide universal training on de-escalation techniques and navigating challenging interpersonal conversations, equipping staff with essential skills to effectively support student emotional well-being.
- Develop a clear, consistent district-wide framework that explicitly defines the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders including classroom teachers and student support specialists in preventing and addressing bullying. The goal is to create a comprehensive, coordinated approach to student well-being that empowers every staff member to understand and effectively execute their specific responsibilities within a holistic prevention and intervention continuum.
- Evaluate the possibility of creating an RSU 57 specific bullying prevention training program similar to the one implemented recently around suicide prevention leveraging outside resources such as NAMI, CASTL or other established service providers working in this space.

Principle 5: Ensure the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat students with dignity and respect

While this principle is framed around student discipline policies, we use it to address the broader implementation of all policies related to student well-being in RSU 57.

Policy to Practice

As previously noted, we were impressed by the team approach evident at both the middle and high school level. We detailed a layered set of interventions and treatments in the section on MTSS. Those supports range from the pivotal role of counselors in guiding universal and selective interventions to the existence of a student support infrastructure, the ABELS program and the in-school suspension program at the high school level and the intentional teaming structure at the middle school level. Together, they demonstrate an understanding of the importance of school-wide ownership for creating a safe, welcoming and inclusive school environment.

In our policy review, we highlighted a limited number of instances where the policy language does not reflect the same level of commitment to a preventative and restorative approach to student well-being. Examples of this are the overall policy approach to student dress code, the decision to exclude references to positive and restorative practices as a disciplinary action in the student code of conduct, and the absence of referral to counseling or other services as a step in the bullying policy.

We believe there is value in a careful evaluation of those specific policies to incorporate an orientation consistent with the positive, preventative and proactive practices that was evident from our discussions with staff on the ground.

School Administration

At both the high school and the middle school, staff and students reported that administration is proactive and consistent in their discipline approach. Staff highlighted the accessible, calm and predictable nature of interactions with the administration in contrast to prior experiences. Students reported trusting their administrators and praised the accessibility and disposition of their administrators.

Staff recognized the significant amount of work that administrators are responsible for, however, some report often not knowing how incident referrals are ultimately resolved. Administrators acknowledged that this is sometimes true and something that they struggle with at times because of sheer volume, but more often due to the need to safeguard student privacy.

No Contact Contracts

The district reports making use of no-contact contracts as a resource to interrupt significant (severe and ongoing) instances of student conflict. These contracts are brokered by student support staff and administrators as a pact between students (and families) to avoid each other. Structural changes to schedules, including passing periods, lunches and seating arrangements are made in order to prevent contract subjects from encountering each other while in school.

The district has implemented a system for reporting to staff about the existence of these contracts through weekly updated lists visible to all who need to know. In our conversations with administration and staff, this was recognized as a helpful and well administered structure.

Guardian Engagement

Throughout our conversations, staff discussed efforts that they make to ensure that student's guardians are made aware of and enlisted in efforts to address student well-being challenges. As is the case elsewhere, these efforts achieve variable results. Staff noted that families understood how to access the school and made use of their access when necessary, but it is unclear that this is true for all families. Most likely there are families that do not feel comfortable accessing the school or have had negative interactions with the school and don't access the resources that are available.

In some cases, both students and staff claimed that some of the more significant cases the school confronts are the result of misalignment between the school's values and those of some homes. Specifically, staff and students alike referenced instances where the school's efforts to be a safe, welcoming and inclusive place for LGBTQ students clashed with attitudes fostered in home settings that were openly dismissive or oppositional to the school's stated values.

While this is not unique to RSU 57, the legal structure in Maine, as reflected in the school board's policy framework, makes inclusiveness a requirement. Strong and consistent articulation of this orientation needs to be reinforced across the school system. Guardians, and their students should not be given the option of opting out of that construct.

Community Engagement

During our engagement, Massabesic High School hosted a community forum to share the structures and programming in place, specifically around student well-being. Roughly 40 people attended that session and many of those in attendance included staff, current students and school board members. Those in attendance found the session to be helpful and were impressed with the wide array of programming and supports in place. Some reported being dismayed that so few people attended and urged the district to find ways to share this valuable information more broadly within the community.

In all of our conversations, participants lamented that a few individuals who use social media to discredit the district's work forge the narrative, and with it the perceptions of RSU 57. While this challenge is endemic in our national public discourse, we encourage the district to work to counteract this with diverse programming with multiple entry points for the community.

Student Voice

As part of our engagement we had the opportunity to host three focus groups with RSU 57 students. We were impressed by how thoughtful these students were and how committed they are to improving their schools.

RSU 57 has student school board representatives. This is a valuable structure for enabling the school board to see and prioritize student perspectives in its decision-making. Traditional school structures such as student council/student government, etc., are also in place and provide a forum for those voices to be heard.

In our high school focus group, students voiced interest in having structures in place that allow for student led dialogue around challenging topics. This is worth exploring, but requires a significant investment and commitment on the part of staff to ensure that it contributes to safety and inclusiveness. The research on these types of structures tells us that these structures can have negative effects when not well supported as part of a larger multi-tiered approach to student wellness.

Principle 5 Recommendations:

- Carefully review and consider policy revision recommendations detailed in the policy section of this report.
- Strengthen guardian engagement opportunities.
- Reinforce alignment to the districts' values and requirement to create inclusive spaces for all students, including LGBTQ students and develop and implement targeted strategies to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

Communication Recommendations

As part of our engagement with the district, we committed to providing recommendations for how to share this report's key findings with RSU 57 stakeholders. Communication about any issue needs to be contextualized to the setting. Thus, after deliberations with the district, we are not providing specific recommendations. We understand and endorse the school board's policy committee discussing the report during a workshop in the near future, as this is the direction determined by school board leadership and administration. We remain committed and available to support the district's discussion and action on the report.

Appendix

About School Psychology Support LLC

Our organization specializes in working with education clients to develop their capacity to address the educational needs of their staff and students. Founded in 2020 during the pandemic as a way for school based psychologists to remain engaged in professional learning, SPS has expanded to provide coaching support for school leaders, educational organizations and families. For this engagement, Xavier Botana and Melea Nalli were the consultants supporting RSU 57 leadership. Their qualifications are summarized below:

Melea Nalli

Prior to her role as an educational consultant and leadership coach, Melea was an interim superintendent and assistant superintendent in Portland Public Schools. During this time she oversaw the redesign of the district's continuum of services for students with emotional and behavioral health needs. She also created a department of Behavioral Health, oversaw the development of a district vision for Social Emotional Learning (SEL), supported the implementation of SEL curriculum and the expansion of social work services.

Prior to her role in district leadership, Melea worked in education non-profits focused on school and district leadership development. She also co-founded a Maine based nonprofit that brings trauma-informed yoga to marginalized populations throughout the state. She started her career as a special education teacher, primarily supporting students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

She has a Bachelor of Arts from Bowdoin College and a Masters in Education Leadership from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Xavier Botana

Xavier retired as the superintendent of the Portland Public Schools last year, capping a forty year career in education as a teacher, principal and central office leader in four states. During his seven year service in Portland, Xavier helped to shape a district strategy focused on four core strategies centered around a commitment to elevating marginalized voices by focusing on academics, personalization and caring adults. Under his leadership, the district established progressive policies around harassment and discrimination for marginalized populations.

Since retiring, he has coached principals, served as an advisor to educational organizations and launched a non-profit to support foreign trained professionals to achieve their full career potential.

He holds a Bachelor's and Master's Degree from Chicago State University. He completed his superintendent licensing entitlement program as part of his doctoral coursework and was admitted to candidacy at Northwestern University.