Cliff Heights Elementary School was nearly overwhelmed with bad behavior. It is located in a working-class neighborhood in Chicago, and serves approximately 800 students from low- and middle-income families. Violent behavior, including random acts of assault and vandalism and occasional drive-by shootings, characterize the daily life of this neighborhood.

Before the implementation of Second Step, Cliff Heights teachers and staff were frustrated with the number of students in their classrooms who had low academic skills and poor school adjustment records. Teachers had to spend most of their time dealing with bad behavior; there were playground fights almost every day, despite the new requirement that two classroom teachers supervise recess, in addition to the three regular playground supervisors. At the same time, a small, vocal group of parents was asking Cliff Heights to do something about the situation. They were very concerned about drugs, gangs, and the disrespectful behavior toward adults and property they saw in the school.

Cliff Heights was lucky to have Ms. Gilfrey, a fulltime counselor, who ran anger-management, social skills, and self-esteem groups for selected students. They seemed to be effective and were popular with teachers, parents, and students; however, only a small number of students in the school were being reached by each group. Clearly, another strategy was needed if the problems at Cliff Heights were to be adequately addressed.

Ms. Gilfrey, together with the principal, decided to devote an entire staff meeting to a problem-solving session focused on what the school could do to decrease students’ aggressive, disruptive, and sometimes dangerous behavior. Teachers were concerned about Ms. Gilfrey’s groups since they were held during class time and pulled out the very students who most needed academic instruction and support.

As an alternative to the groups, Ms. Gilfrey described Second Step, a social and emotional skills training program that can be used classwide or schoolwide from preschool through grade nine. It is a “universal” intervention that supports good behavior in all children, but most especially in marginal children who are on the brink of becoming antisocial. Second Step teaches the same skills at each grade level—empathy, impulse control, social problem solving, and emotion management—to reduce impulsive and aggressive behavior and to increase social competence. Lesson content varies according to grade level, but all students have opportunities for modeling, practice, and reinforcement of skills.

In addition to its easy-to-use curriculum, the program offers training for educators, program evaluation materials, parent education videos, and teachers’ and administrators’ guides that
explain the underpinnings of the program and support implementation. Because the curriculum relies on the instructional skills most teachers already have, the recommended training consists of a one-day session for teachers—though teachers also have the option of using training videos and a discussion guide. (Schools or districts can also designate a Second Step coordinator who would participate in a three-day training and then be able to train new teachers as needed.) At each grade level, multimedia kits contain everything teachers will need—from songs and puppets for preschoolers to videos and overhead transparencies for adolescents.

The Cliff Heights teachers were interested in the program but were hesitant to take on anything more. They already felt extremely stressed by the demands and pressures of increasing class sizes, the complex needs of their students, reduced resources, and the diversity of students’ backgrounds and behavioral characteristics.

Ms. Gilfrey was determined to make a violence prevention program work at Cliff Heights. Too often, she had helped at-risk students make positive behavioral changes, only to watch them confront negative reactions from peers. Another recurring problem had been that, even when students were able to improve socially, the improvement tended to be restricted largely to her office (i.e., the training setting) and was reflected only in students’ talk, and not in actual behavior. Getting students to behave well throughout the school day tended to be difficult and ephemeral.

Following the staff meeting, however, Ms. Gilfrey decided that schoolwide implementation would have to be put on hold. She decided to approach only the third-grade teachers to conduct a trial test of the program.

Ms. Gilfrey struck a deal with the third-grade teachers: She agreed to take primary responsibility for preparing and teaching the lessons if the classroom teachers would make 30 minutes of classtime available twice a week for a two-month period. The teachers were also asked to participate in all role-play activities included in the lessons. After two lessons, one third-grade teacher, Mr. Michaelson, decided he would teach the curriculum himself. There were modifications he wanted to make, including teaching the lessons at different times during the day. Ms. Gilfrey agreed and made herself available for support and assistance.

After one month of leading students through the curriculum and demonstrating how to teach it, Ms. Gilfrey asked the other teachers to teach the lessons themselves. She offered to stay in the classroom and help when necessary as the teachers assumed the responsibility for Second Step. Apparently, the third-grade teachers had spoken with Mr. Michaelson, who was quite pleased with the program, and he had encouraged them to take charge of teaching it. It quickly became clear that Ms. Gilfrey’s presence was not needed to teach and manage Second Step successfully. The teachers were able to integrate Second Step instruction into their ongoing teaching activities and were able to review, practice, and reinforce the skills taught as students displayed them throughout the school day.

During this time, Ms. Gilfrey also trained all playground supervisors as well as the school principal. Her goal was for everyone (herself included) to help the third-graders practice the key social skills they were learning—especially when conflict arose. This was a smart move on Ms. Gilfrey’s part: It is extremely important that each student be recognized and praised by teachers, counselors, playground supervisors, the principal, and school support staff for displaying these skills in natural school settings.
Within two months of Second Step’s implementation, the principal observed a substantial decline in office referrals and the number of playground incidents reported to the front office—and support increased among the faculty for schoolwide implementation over the next few years. These results are consistent with the findings from formal evaluations of Second Step. In one such evaluation, trained observers recorded students’ behavior in intervention and nonintervention classrooms and found that in Second Step classrooms, aggression decreased 29 percent from fall to spring—but in nonintervention classrooms, aggression went up 41 percent. At the same time, while positive and neutral behavior increased by 10 percent in Second Step classrooms, it increased by just one percent in nonintervention classrooms. The following fall, six months after the end of the Second Step intervention, students who had been exposed to Second Step were still better behaved (see Grossman et al, 1997).