



SEL INDICATOR: SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES

Creating a Caring Culture Through SEL

Atlanta Public Schools (Georgia)

The **Practices of Promise** series provides snapshots of districts across the country bringing social and emotional learning (SEL) to life in their communities. Each of these real stories offers a glimpse into how one district is navigating a few of the opportunities and challenges that arise as part of their broader efforts to systemically implement SEL. The series expands on each of [CASEL's Indicators of Districtwide SEL](#), the essential components of systemic implementation.



THE OPPORTUNITY

How can districts weave social and emotional learning throughout their work to foster a systemwide culture of connection and trust?

This was a key question for district leaders of Atlanta Public Schools (APS), which serves 87 schools and 52,000 students. When a districtwide cheating scandal in 2011 was uncovered, it may have been the expected course to simply address the “bad apples” and return to “business as usual.” But APS recognized that what they had uncovered was an important symptom of districtwide issues: a problematic work culture and an overemphasis on academic outcomes at the expense of student and staff well-being. APS saw SEL as a key strategy for rebuilding its culture and redefining how to pursue its desired outcomes but knew it would require more than a standalone initiative. In this Practices of Promise, you’ll see how APS worked to weave SEL throughout the district to create a culture of trust, caring, and support.



THE STARTING LINE



In 2011, APS became aware of a cheating scandal involving district staff that artificially boosted standardized test scores. The investigation that followed revealed that major contributing factors included inordinate pressure on staff to achieve high scores and a staff culture of fear and intimidation. To address the underlying root causes of the scandal, the district undertook a variety of actions, which eventually impacted work in the Human Resources department in a way that supported adult SEL and a more positive work climate. These early, foundational actions included:

2015: The newly hired superintendent, Dr. Meria Carstarphen, made SEL an essential pillar in APS' five-year strategic plan. As she later expressed in her [op-ed published in Education Week](#), with SEL research as her "guiding star," she went "all-in on social and emotional learning" to achieve the district's mission, which is: With a caring culture of trust and collaboration, every student will graduate ready for college and career.

2017: The SEL Department moved from Student Programs and Services to Teaching and Learning to ensure that SEL could be readily integrated into academic instruction and classroom practice. The department later embedded SEL competencies into the definitions of and systems of support for teacher and leader excellence. The district also began providing SEL training to staff and school leaders across the district.

2018: APS hired 80 school resource officers (SROs) to replace reliance on the local police force to manage serious behavioral infractions and on-campus crime using funding from the National Institute of Justice. By re-envisioning the role of officers as centering on SEL, student arrests decreased by 34 percent in the first two years after APS took over the management of the Office of Safety and Security. The number of students arrested decreased from 253 in 2015-2016 to only five in 2020-21.

2015

2016

2017

2018

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS



Based on years of research-practice partnerships, CASEL has highlighted the importance of integrating SEL across district systems and structures to support all staff and students ([Mahoney et. al., 2021](#)). When SEL is embedded into every department, every school, and every role, it becomes a core part of all district work and a catalyst for achieving shared goals.

Conversely, research shows that schools can struggle with implementation when there is no consistent districtwide priority and culture around SEL ([Snipes et al., 2002](#)). Classroom efforts on their own, without broader district support, can show lackluster effects ([Kendziora & Yoder, 2016](#)). Furthermore, implementation problems, such as limited professional development or lack of administrative support, can lessen the positive impact of evidence-based SEL programming on student behavior and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

To address these issues, districts in CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative have focused on integrating SEL with core educational priorities and embedding opportunities for adult SEL and community-building throughout the district culture ([CASEL, 2021](#)). Districts can support adult SEL in many ways, including through professional learning and embedding SEL practices into routine meetings and structures. Research shows that when teachers tend to their own SEL, it decreases stress levels and increases job satisfaction, which helps them foster warm relationships and better outcomes for students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Adults' personal experience of SEL becomes a powerful catalyst, promoting student and staff well-being and deepening SEL as an integral part of all district work.

Additionally, when districts leverage SEL to cultivate a climate built on trust and a sense of shared purpose, research shows that it helps increase job satisfaction and reduce burnout (Lodisso, 2019) while creating a foundation for school improvement initiatives (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and student achievement ([Donohoo et al., 2018](#)). Trust among staff is developed over time through many interactions and is essential for creating buy-in, motivating staff to take risks and give extra time and effort, and spreading best practices throughout a school and district (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2013). *The missing piece: A national teacher survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools*. Civic Enterprises.

Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002) *Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform*. Russell Sage Foundation.

CASEL. (2021). *10 years of social and emotional learning in U.S. school districts*.

Donohoo, J., Hattie, J. & Eells, R. (2018). *The power of collective efficacy*. ASCD website.

Durlak, J., Weissberg, R., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

Kendziora, K., & Yoder, N. (2016). *When district support and integrate social and emotional learning*. American Institutes of Research.

Lodisso, S. (2019). *The effects of interpersonal relationship on employees' job satisfaction: The case of education department*. Hawassa City Administration.

Mahoney, J., Weissberg, R., Greenberg, M., Dusenbury, L., Jagers, R., Niemi, K., Schlinger, M., Schlund, J., Shriver, T., VanAusdal, K., & Yoder, N. (2021). *Systemic social and emotional learning: Promoting educational success for all preschool to high school students*. *American Psychologist*, 76(7), 1128-1142.

Schonert-Reichl, K. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 137-155.

Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement*. MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools.



ROUNDING THE CURVE



With new leadership, a strategic plan prioritizing SEL for both staff and students, and changes in organizational structures in place, the SEL team deepened its relationship across central office departments. In particular, the SEL team focused on forging connections with two of its “sister departments”—the Office of Safety and Security and the Human Resources Department. Partnering with these entities helped ensure that SEL was interwoven into work to create and support a caring culture focused on student and staff well-being.

Office of Safety and Security

- With a new mission, vision, and motto, Chief of Police Ronald Applin of the Office of Safety and Security elevated positive relationships as a strategy to promote school safety with the belief that “all students can achieve when they are supported and nurtured in a safe, secure, strong learning environment.”
- The Office of Safety and Security used the [NASRO triad school policing model](#), anchored in SEL, to emphasize the role of “counselor” and “educator” over “police officer.” As part of their job, SROs were expected to teach students skills to build healthier relationships, self-monitor their behavior, and express emotions in healthier ways.
- The office put in place a three-day foundational training on restorative practices that included SEL competencies for all SROs during their first 6 to 12 months on the job. The training was led by the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP). A few years later, a cadre of officers (who were also certificated instructors), together with SEL staff, took part in a train-the-trainer initiative to expand training options for all staff. To sustain these efforts, the office plans to hire a full-time staff position to lead restorative practice and SEL training in May 2022.



Human Resources Department

- Taking seriously the idea that “happy and cared-for employees stay longer,” Skye Duckett, chief human resources officer and veteran SEL leader and supporter, saw the power of SEL not only for building teacher excellence but for staff retention. As signs of burnout and stress began to emerge in exit interview and teacher absentee data, Ms. Duckett noted, “We don’t have a teacher candidate shortage, we have a teacher retention issue.”
- To incorporate SEL into every staff position across the district, Human Resources has embedded SEL language into recruitment efforts, job descriptions, interview questions, and staff recognition programs such as Teacher and Principal of the Year and the Aspiring Leaders Program. As more staff have received training in SEL, Dr. Rose Prejean-Harris, director of SEL, says that leaders have realized that “SEL is here to stay.” She says, “If you’re going to be a leader in APS, you’re going to be an SEL leader.”
- During the first 30 to 60 days of employment, every staff member receives training on SEL 101 during new staff orientation. Referred to by some as the “oxygen mask” for new employees, this high-energy, interactive training models adult SEL and focuses on helping participants understand and apply the five social and emotional competencies of the [CASEL wheel](#).
- Across the district, managers are creating job-embedded learning opportunities, including holding regular check-ins and incorporating SEL activities into monthly division and principal meetings. The SEL and Human Resource teams have also collaborated on a live all-staff “Wellness Wednesday” initiative with educational resources using Facebook’s interactive Workplace.

Responding to challenges

 **Staff resistance:** Despite robust training efforts, the district did not always achieve the desired changes, and sometimes positive changes lapsed. Some leaders, especially those new to the district, did not always take ownership of SEL in their buildings. In response, the district identified SEL champions to lead SEL efforts in every school building and focused on cultivating expertise in its most passionate leaders.

Chief Applin proved one such champion, working to create an environment of trust among his team by modeling SEL in his interactions with his SROs. In addition to centering SEL in the way SROs interact with students, he incorporated SEL into the internal workings of the team. This was reflected in his efforts to create a culture of collaboration and collective efficacy by emphasizing the success of the team over any one individual and utilizing restorative practices and team circles during team meetings.

 **The workplace challenges of COVID:** Like many districts across the country, working and teaching remotely made it difficult to maintain communication and relationships among staff. With the many demands on staff, time and resources to train and support teachers and prioritize school climate have been scarce. Yet, as in many districts, working remotely also presented some opportunities, including the creative use of technology to make training more efficient and accessible to staff and support communication with parents.

 **The emotional challenges of COVID:** Recognizing the emotional toll of the pandemic, the Human Resource Department significantly ramped up its services for staff as they returned to in-person teaching.

In addition to a Wellness Coordinator, the department added an in-house Employee Assistance Counselor and licensed therapist position to offer ongoing supports (e.g., free chatline, childcare subsidies, PTO) put into place pre-COVID. Additionally, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselors were available to support staff in addition to the 10 licensed mental health therapists (one per school cluster) available through a partnership with Emory University. Finally, “Zen rooms” were created in every school, and approximately 1,600 teachers (50 percent of the teacher population) participated in a mindfulness program led by a community partner, Namaste.

These efforts appear to have paid off as APS has experienced lower staff turnover rates since the onset of the COVID pandemic than national trends, and employee satisfaction surveys show more positive results.



CONTINUING FORWARD

APS has no plans to rest on its laurels. Not only does SEL remain a strategic priority for the district, but the recently developed 2020-2025 strategic plan emphasizes and elevates the importance of adult SEL. Dr. Lisa Herring, who has taken over as superintendent since Dr. Carstarphen's departure, the Whole Child framework that encompasses SEL has made SEL one of five priorities (referred to as the “APS 5”) to boost academic success. The district also partners with West Ed to use science to deepen implementation of SEL. Plans include establishing a second evaluation mechanism on teacher quality and teacher retention, using continuous improvement science at the school level, and examining data related to the distribution of teachers in high- versus low-poverty schools.

With strong ties to SEL, equity and social justice have also been made a strategic priority. In 2021, the district established the Center for Equity and Social Justice and hired its first chief equity and social justice officer. The Center will partner closely with the SEL department via cross-functional teams to create inclusive and just conditions for all students. These efforts include a commitment to a comprehensive approach that addresses the social, emotional, and academic development and needs of all students.

The investment in SEL at the staff level is showing up in the district's workforce. Every adult at APS is trained on SEL, and every school has an SEL ambassador who serves as a liaison between buildings and the district.

Adult SEL has also helped to shift attitudes and build stronger relationships among adults and students. Principals are changing mindsets about punitive responses to student behaviors and considering alternatives to exclusionary discipline. SROs are developing relationships with students by getting to know them as individuals and reinforcing positive choices. Several SROs are taking the extra step to participate in school activities and lead student mentoring programs.

Just as APS rebounded from earlier setbacks, Dr. Prejean Harris notes that “COVID helped to bring about an understanding of the true importance of this work” as well as its role in creating a caring culture for staff. With an intentional focus on staff well-being, increased allocation of SEL funds, and “true believers” emerging as leaders across the district, APS has restored its public image to one that Chief Duckett confidently describes as “a district that cares about you.”

APPLYING THIS STORY TO YOUR JOURNEY



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Embed SEL into systems and structures** (e.g., strategic plan, roles, curriculum, teacher competencies) with attention to using consistent language and aligning with existing frameworks.
- **Cultivate cross-departmental leaders and involve internal and external stakeholders** in decision-making regarding formal partnerships and collaborations.
- **Offer comprehensive and high-quality professional learning** for all district staff to build their SEL expertise. Use external partners to build initial capacity and plan job-embedded professional learning to maintain and sustain the learning.
- **Keep humanity in the work** by focusing on people, building trusting relationships, and engaging in authentic collaboration.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR SEL TEAMS

- In what systems and structures is SEL currently embedded in your district? Are there opportunities to expand or integrate?
- What are some ways to maintain momentum and sustain your SEL efforts? How do you get new leaders to “own” the work?
- How do you ensure that every staff member—whether in central office or school buildings—feels that SEL is a part of their job?
- What gets in the way of a more positive culture in your workplace? Are there any opportunities to embed SEL into systems and structures to make a cultural shift?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[CASEL's District Resource Center](#) Follow a districtwide process for supporting SEL implementation across schools and access to a library of SEL resources with step-to-step guidance from leading districts on these topics:

- [Organizational Structure](#)
- [Systemic Integration of SEL Into District Priorities](#)
- [Strengthening Central Office Expertise](#)
- [Design and Implement an SEL Professional Learning Program for Schools](#)
- [Adult SEL and Cultural Competence](#)
- [Promoting Trust, Community, and Collective Efficacy Among Staff](#)
- [Organize District to Promote Collaboration Around SEL, Academics and Equity](#)

[A Culture of Care: How Schools Can Alleviate Educator Stress This Year](#) Read about what education leaders can do to create a “culture of care.”

[The Importance of Teaching and Learning Conditions: Influences on Teacher Retention and School Performance in North Carolina](#) Learn about teacher working conditions and their relationship to teacher retention and school performance.

[It's Time to Go All-In With Social and Emotional Learning](#) Former Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools Meria Carstarphen describes why and how she made SEL a district priority. Education Week October 2, 2018

[Overview of Atlanta Public School's Department of Social and Emotional Learning](#) View the Department of SEL's website to see how SEL is making a difference at APS.

Districtwide Indicators of SEL Implementation

High-quality SEL implementation can take three to five years to fully scale across a district. The indicators provide evidence of high-quality implementation throughout the process. Learn more <https://drc.casel.org/what-is-sel/indicators-of-districtwide-sel/>



Shared ownership



Systems & structures



Sustained commitment



Staff SEL



Explicit SEL programs



Instruction & climate



Youth voice



Family partnerships



Community partnerships



Continuous improvement