



PRACTICES OF  
PROMISE



SEL INDICATOR: SHARED OWNERSHIP FOR SEL

# Exploring Ways to Share the Power Toward Equitable Decision-Making

Portland Public Schools (Oregon)

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

For the SEL team in Portland Public Schools (PPS), the process for selecting SEL programs raised some compelling questions:

- **How could they ensure that the programs selected aligned with the district's needs and priorities—particularly its commitment to equity and social justice?**
- **How could the process itself demonstrate and deepen that commitment?**
- **What could the district learn by taking their time with the process, experimenting with shared decision-making, and deepening the interconnection between SEL and equity?**

In their effort to answer these questions, the district's SEL team developed a new, promising approach to program selection—a process rooted in meaningful, sustained collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders.

This need for a collaborative process was particularly compelling in PPS. The district had made great strides in centering equity, but in this majority-white district, some stakeholders felt their voices were not heard. The SEL team wondered how they could design a process that would contribute to choosing the right programs while bringing more voices to the table, sharing decision-making power, building trust in the process, and offering one more way to center the district's work on equity.



## THE STARTING LINE



In PPS, equity has long been a key district priority, as led and implemented by the district's [Racial Equity and Social Justice Department \(RESJ\)](#). In 2011, PPS first developed its [Racial Education Equity Policy](#) as a means to identify disparities in its schools and chart a path for the district to address them.

As the work progressed, the district began to explore how SEL could benefit students and adults in the district, an effort led by SEL Assistant Director Jill Bryant. She and her team believed that SEL could not only support students' academic achievement and well-being, but also the district's existing commitment to racial equity and social justice. With the SEL team residing with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Department, it was well-positioned to collaborate with RESJ to develop strategies for increasing engagement with their culturally responsive partners in the process for adopting an SEL program.

The work received a boost from a bond measure in November 2020, which provided funding for curriculum in all areas, including SEL. As a result of her collaboration with RESJ, Bryant advised the district to choose a program that would meet the needs and reflect the experiences and identities of the diverse student population. By applying a lens of racial equity, she hoped to avoid choosing a program that might risk excluding, alienating, and even disadvantaging some students based on their heritage or racial or cultural identity.

Bryant also cautioned against leaping into program selection too quickly.

"We knew that if we just gave teachers a curriculum, for most teachers that box of curriculum would just end up in their closet after a year or two," she says.

"As leadership changes, so will initiatives, and before long, that program would be forgotten."

The adoption committee spent the first several months developing their foundational knowledge in [Transformative SEL](#), a form of SEL that applies an equity lens by engaging young people and adults to work toward just and equitable schools and communities.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT SHARED OWNERSHIP



*"Teacher ownership also recognizes that those responsible for change must have a voice in creating and directing that change; teachers are not simply the implementers. Further – teacher ownership recognizes and requires the power of the collective—that is, a shared understanding and shared commitment among those implementing the effort."*

— Annenberg Institute (2017). [Getting to teacher ownership: How schools are creating meaningful change.](#)

*"These features—skillful participation, vision, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and student achievement—interact to create the new tasks of shared instructional leadership. An abundance of research into school improvement suggests that these features are vital to the school improvement process."*

— Lambert, Linda (2002). ["A framework for shared Leadership."](#) ASCA.

*"We found a significant positive relationship between shared leadership and team performance, supporting the claim of its positive benefits."*

— D'Innocenzo, Lauren, Mathieu, John E., & Kukenberger, Michael R. (2014). ["A meta-analysis of different forms of shared leadership—team performance relations."](#) Journal of Management. 20(10).



## ROUNDING THE CURVE



Once the foundation was set, it was time to begin identifying potential programs. Bryant recognized that the process of selecting programs was as important as the outcome. The district had faced the disruptions of the pandemic and staff turnover in key district leadership roles. Added to this was an ongoing challenge around equity in decision-making. The team recognized an opportunity to hear from stakeholders who had often been marginalized in the past.

The team began by seeking wide-ranging input on their selection criteria for the programs. Once the adoption committee created an initial draft of the criteria, they experimented with ways to get feedback and input on those criteria from a broader range of stakeholders reflective of the larger PPS community. Using that feedback, they were able to revise and finalize their selection criteria.

Next, they did something that had been successful in other districts: they assembled a range of stakeholders to advise and guide the program selection process, striving for representation from families, teachers, and community members. The idea, says Bryant, was to “center engagement from the ground up—not just put a gold stamp on our choice.” Feedback from the PPS community was collected and analyzed with the help of the district research and evaluation team. The adoption committee reviewed the summative data to guide their decision-making process and ultimately identified five promising programs, which were invited to make presentations to the committee.

To ensure the equity of voice in the selection, the committee then created a feedback process for all educators to give input on the programs under consideration, which included a survey and a five-minute video on each program. Drawing on this input, the adoption committee was equipped to determine which programs should be field tested.

For the field test, the team asked for volunteer teachers who would implement the pilot programs for a full seven weeks. From these volunteers, they sought to recruit a balance of teachers, schools, and classrooms that reflected the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the district. The goal: Gain insight into how these programs served (or failed to serve) all Portland students, regardless of their race or socioeconomic status.

The field test included:

- Weekly forms filled out by the participating teachers about the implementation and student reactions
- Classroom observations using a protocol to standardize the data collected
- Interviews with teachers on how the process was going
- Teacher focus groups led by a CASEL facilitator
- Student surveys about each program (see box)

### Asking the Students

A notable element of the PPS’s field test was the student surveys they conducted about each program. Processes like this offer an opportunity to solicit and listen to student voice as part of the effort to encourage agency, a key component of Transformative SEL. Not only do these surveys provide valuable feedback on the programs (Did you like the program? Did it engage you? Did it seem right for your age group?), they offer one more avenue for supporting student agency and communicating to students that they have a say in their education.

The district used these data to inform the final selection of elementary and middle school SEL curriculum. The team plans to conduct a similar process to select high school curriculum.

Bryant readily admits that this process took much longer than is typically allotted for selecting, adopting, and piloting a program. Usually, programs are rolled out in two months, whereas PPS spent two months on the field testing alone. But, as she notes, the time invested reaped exponentially greater dividends. By pursuing this more robust process, the district identified programs that best matched their needs, knowing that they would make adjustments to the curriculum as needed to align with their selection criteria, particularly in relation to their commitment to trauma-informed instruction and racial equity. They also felt more confident that these programs spoke to the wishes of the stakeholders—a key aim in a district that centers its work on equity. Plus, since teachers were directly involved in selecting the program, they were more likely to use and sustain it.

The process also put into practice the district’s commitment to power-sharing and equity of voice, and the committee feels hopeful that their approach has built trust around this effort. In this way, the new strategy offered a dual gain, not only identifying promising programs but also helping to serve and deepen the district’s commitment to racial equity and social justice with multiple stakeholders.



## PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS AT A GLANCE



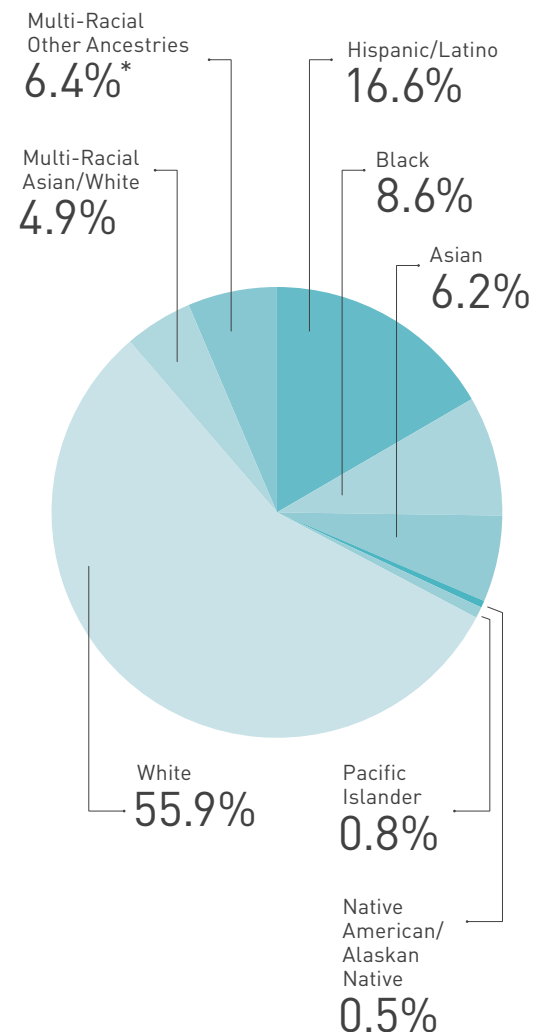
**47,000 STUDENTS**



**81 CAMPUSES**



**7,900 STAFF**



**\* MULTI-RACIAL-OTHER ANCESTRIES:**

- 8%** English learners
- 22%** Free lunch
- 15%** Special education



### CONTINUING FORWARD



With the success of this first pilot and field test, the district is eager to maintain and deepen the gains it has made in its commitment to shared decision-making, equity, and establishing a district culture of trust. Since some stakeholders on the curriculum adoption team are joining the SEL advisory team, the district anticipates a continued commitment to power-sharing and equity of voice in SEL implementation.

The district’s next key step will be to communicate out about the decisions that were collectively made and how the district will proceed. The district has created a public-facing website, [K-12 Social Emotional Learning Program Adoption Site](#). This resource summarizes the process and provides information about the program selection criteria, the field testing, and the programs that were ultimately selected. The site also shares the agendas and goals for the committee meetings that were part of the process.

Bryant believes that this part of the process—ongoing communication and follow-up—is critical to continue to build trust in leadership and a district culture where everyone feels they have a seat at the table. For Bryant, this trust and partnership is the core of the work. **“SEL is the work of the whole district,” she says.**

# APPLYING THIS STORY TO YOUR JOURNEY



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Declaring a commitment to equity is not enough in and of itself. Look for opportunities to share decision-making power and solicit input from all stakeholders: staff, students, families, and community members.
- Sharing decision-making means any given process will likely take longer than traditionally expected. But it is time well-spent for districts that want to ensure equity of voice and a sense of shared ownership of SEL implementation.
- Building trust and engagement is never done. To ensure that stakeholders continue to be engaged, follow up and communicate out about decisions that are made. If stakeholders see the impact of their involvement, they'll continue to be supportive and engaged.
- Collect input from a range of stakeholders through a variety of procedures. Surveys, focus groups, classroom observations, and interviews all have a place in the process, depending upon the input sought and the stakeholders who are engaged.
- Be sure to engage students when seeking feedback. They offer a valuable perspective on what's working and what's not. Plus, by asking their opinion, you can bolster their feeling of agency in their own education.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR SEL TEAMS

- How are the voices of campus staff, central leadership, students, and the community centered in your SEL leadership decisions?
- What processes or protocols do you use to gather input from stakeholders?
- How does the way your district makes SEL decisions demonstrate its commitment to inclusion and equity?
- How do stakeholders in your district perceive their relationship to district leadership? Do they feel included and heard?
- What voices in your district have traditionally been excluded from decision-making? How can you invite and encourage them to participate in ownership of SEL implementation?



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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

- [A Process for Developing Family and Community Partnerships](#)
- [Equity Considerations for SEL Implementation](#)

[District SEL Best Practices: Cultivating Shared Leadership for Schoolwide SEL](#), video from Austin Independent School District

[Selecting an Evidence-Based Program](#) This tool offers guiding questions and a rating table template to determine whether an evidence-based program answers the needs of your students, families, teachers, school, and district.

[Family/Caregiver Survey on Schoolwide SEL Implementation](#) (also in [Spanish](#)). Includes a sample letter and survey items to learn from families and caregivers about their perceptions and experiences of social and emotional learning at their child's school.

[Districtwide SEL Program and Initiative Inventory](#) A tool to learn about past and current SEL-related work being implemented across the district.

[Group Reflection Protocol for SEL](#) Guidance for leading discussions about the CASEL SEL framework, suitable for a wide range of stakeholders.

[SEL 101 Sample Introductory Presentation](#) Download and adapt this sample presentation to introduce SEL to staff, families, community partners, and other stakeholders.

## 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