



Janice Jackson



Justina Schlund

*Chicago Public Schools is the country's third largest district, with about 650 schools and programs and 371,000 students. It has partnered with CASEL for nearly two decades to advance social and emotional learning. We recently spoke with newly appointed CEO Janice Jackson (formerly a teacher, principal, and chief education officer, among other roles) and Justina Schlund, executive director of the district's Office of Social and Emotional Learning.*

### **On her personal conversion**

*Jackson:* I was a principal for 11 years and when CPS first started talking about things like restorative practices, I was skeptical. I believed in a punitive discipline policy. But now I'm the biggest supporter. I've seen first-hand how SEL has had a positive impact on student achievement. It's led directly to gains in student performance. And out-of-school-time suspensions and expulsions were down 76% between 2012 and last year, the lowest level ever and the fourth straight year of declines.

### **Proudest accomplishments**

*Schlund:* I'm proudest of our ability to take this work to scale in an incredibly large district and the scope of work we've been able to accomplish.

We've sustained a model for developing supportive school communities through our focus on positive relationships among all members of the school and the development of our district School Climate Standards. In the past five years, nearly all district schools have engaged with SEL at some level. More than 90% have taken our school climate self-assessment, and more than 335 schools have earned certification for creating a supportive school climate (see sidebar, next page). That's really made a difference.

We've also spent a lot of time developing trauma-sensitive practices that are focused on SEL. We received a federal grant that allowed us to create a comprehensive trauma support model in 10 high schools that have been impacted by community violence, and those schools have reported improvements in school climate, relationships, and students' SEL skills.

We were one of the first districts in the country to focus on restorative practices and have spent the past decade working with the community on this. It's not just alternative discipline, but about building community and positive relationships.

A unique part of CPS' SEL office is that we are responsible for adjudicating referrals for student expulsions. In nine of 10 cases, students are routed to interventions that focus on SEL skills development rather than expulsions.

**What CPS will show off during CASEL's upcoming Cross-District Learning Event**

*Jackson:* People will be very impressed and pleasantly surprised with the speed of implementation and core commitment in such a large district. We've been having success for quite a few years. And we are implementing in schools where you wouldn't expect to see comprehensive programs like this, such as large high schools.

*Schlund:* We'll be visiting a cross-section of our district schools representing all parts of the city and the full diversity of our students and staff. SEL implementation may look different across these schools, but in every one, SEL is a fundamental part of their ecosystem. Their school improvement plans integrate SEL into all aspects of school life—teaching academics, creating climate, building relational trust, using restorative approaches to discipline, and providing targeted SEL and trauma supports.

**Impact on students and staff**

*Schlund:* We've been improving on basically every academic and SEL indicator. Graduation rates and reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress are up. Out-of-school suspensions are down 76 percent since 2012. Our annual student and teacher surveys show strong and steady growth on indicators such as supportive environment, safety, student-teacher trust, future orientation, and postsecondary expectations.

**SEL Certification**

To help promote quality implementation, the school district has developed a supportive school climate certification. In the last three years, 335 schools have earned their "emerging" certification, which means they have a shared leadership team that has taken the climate self-assessment and completed a school climate action plan. Of those schools, 107 have gone on to earned an "established" certification, which means they have submitted and the SEL team has reviewed their evidence of SEL implementation, including SEL strategies embedded in their overall strategic plan and SEL professional learning opportunities for staff. Finally, 48 schools have earned an "exemplary" certification, which means they have demonstrated high levels of implementation; a cross-departmental team has conducted a site visit and interviews with staff, parents, community partners and students. These schools also serve as models for site visits. Schlund says the program has "really made a difference" and helps provide the public with an additional indicator of school quality beyond test scores.

## Where SEL fits in CPS overall strategy today

*Jackson:* We see the connection between the district’s focus on SEL and our growth in academics, and we know we don’t have to sacrifice one for the other. SEL is a huge and growing priority that’s embedded in our district’s three-year vision. In 2016-17, about 200 of our schools had received a Supportive School Certification. Last year, 335 earned the certification. And by the end of this year more than 400 schools will have demonstrated their commitment to SEL through this process. That’s a big jump. It speaks to our values. Despite our financial challenges, we haven’t made any significant cuts in SEL because it’s working.



*Schlund:* SEL is embedded across so many areas of our district. For the past few years, we’ve been thinking about leadership development through a lens of adult SEL and community building. Our work with CASEL on the *Supportive Schools Guide* (a comprehensive resource for schools implementing schoolwide SEL) has helped create a clear framework for how to intentionally develop school climate, and this is aligned to our district’s School Excellence Framework that guides schools’ overall improvement plans. We’re also integrating Illinois’ SEL standards into core academic courses and have developed model lesson plans that demonstrate this alignment. Like many districts, we’re working with CASEL on the intersections between race and culture and SEL, a key value in the district.

## Biggest challenges

*Schlund:* Our size sometimes makes it very challenging to implement best practices with fidelity. To help, all 13 of our Networks have SEL specialists, each supporting 30-40 schools and leading cross-school professional learning communities. We also have two SEL specialists working with our alternative schools, and central office specialists focused on districtwide guidance and support. We’ve leaned on research partners such as AIR (the American Institutes for Research) to help us identify best practices and support schools in using rubrics and surveys to stay on track.

We’ve identified schools that host site visits with principals and their teams, so that schools are learning from others who are implementing SEL on the ground. At the school level, we’ve seen schools ingraining SEL into their school improvement plans to avoid it becoming just one more competing priority.

## **CPS RESOURCES**

[School Climate Standards and Self-Assessment](#)

[CPS CASEL Supportive Schools Guide](#)

[Restorative Practices Guide & Toolkit](#)

[OSEL Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Description](#)

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