

The District Leader's Guide to SEL and Equity

32 District Leaders Share Advice on Advancing Equity and Social-Emotional Learning

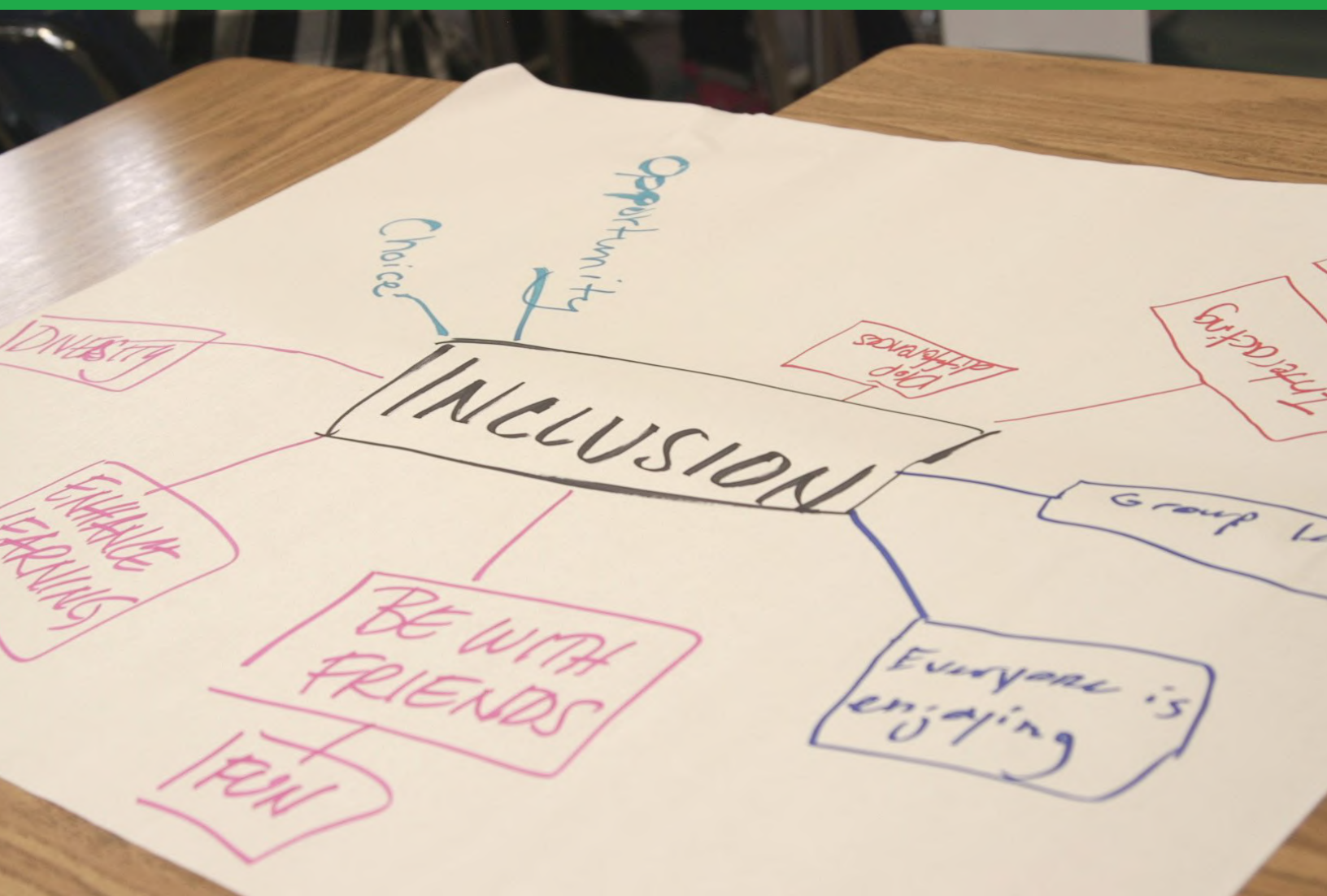


Table of Contents

- 3** Introduction
- 4** Featured Leader: Dr. Lorenzo Moore, Aldine ISD
- 5** Featured Leader: Dr. Bren Elliott, D.C. Public Schools
- 6** Featured Leader: Brenda Martinek, Portland Public Schools
- 7** Lesson #1: “It Starts From the Top”
- 9** Lesson #2: Align on a Common Definition
- 12** Lesson #3: Elevate Student, Family, and Staff Voices
- 15** Lesson #4: Focus on Strong Tier 1 Supports

Social-emotional learning and equity are interwoven.

The [updated definition of social-emotional learning](#) from CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) has made this more clear than ever:

*“...SEL **advances educational equity and excellence** through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation.”*

As district leaders, bridging SEL and equity means acknowledging the environments, relationships, and contexts that shape learning and development. It also means taking a hard and honest look at adult beliefs, mindsets, and policies that affect students, families, and staff.

To explore what advancing SEL and equity looks like on the ground, we asked 32 district leaders the following question:

What is your district’s most important practice for promoting social-emotional learning and equity?

In this guide, we compiled their strategies and advice. We’ll begin with feature articles by three district leaders, then move into the key lessons drawn from our fantastic contributors across the country.

Additional Resources

- [Panorama Social-Emotional Learning Survey](#)
- [15 SEL Intervention Ideas for School and District Teams](#)
- [Adult SEL Toolkit for 2022-23](#)

SEL and Equity: The Same “Coin”



By Dr. Lorenzo Moore

Director of Social Emotional Learning and Culture
Aldine Independent School District (TX)



If you are talking about social-emotional learning and not equity, you are not talking about SEL yet. SEL and equity are not two sides of the same coin; **they’re both on the same side of the same coin.**

When the SEL Department at Aldine ISD was first formed in 2017, one in four black students in third grade were reading at grade level. Our Equity Leadership Council looked at what other school districts were doing to combat these disparities, and we found that they were using SEL programs and MTSS. **That was the beginning of my work.** How can a student come into the classroom ready to learn if they don’t have an appropriate relationship with their teacher; if their teacher does not respect their diversity or background?

PRIORITIZING SEL AND EQUITY

When you see disproportionalities in the data and realize that students of color are lagging behind their peers, **it is important to reflect on how much district leaders and goals currently prioritize racial equity and SEL.** How are you actively responding to these never-ending and ever-evolving concepts?

To raise the racial consciousness of our entire district, it means that we have to change the mindsets of people. One practical way to do this is to infuse equity and social-emotional learning into school-wide procedures.

When you consider how you deal with misbehavior, SEL and equity should be at the heart of any policy so that we can move away from punitive measures and shift to restorative practices.

STARTING WITH ADULTS

If we are not aware of implicit biases we hold, we continue to perpetuate systemic racialization in education. **When we began our SEL efforts, we started with adults.** Building adult understanding, capacity, and buy-in is key.

Coaching has been a priority, not just at the student level but at the adult level as well. Teachers are doing mindfulness activities before they come into the classroom, so that they are entering the classroom ready to teach. We also want all relationships on campus to be supportive relationships. Our students and staff need to have supportive relationships with everyone, from the bus driver to the principal.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

From my perspective, **SEL is always overarching.** We infuse MTSS practices into our SEL. At an organizational level, we want to have systems in place that are designed for our students to have excellence in their social and academic lives.

We started out by forming a team on every campus, comprised of a diverse group of individuals—ideally, a mixture of staff, teachers, and administrators with expertise in various efforts (e.g., data analysis, special education, trauma-informed education, and interventions).

Then we made sure that the teams are functional and meeting regularly to review a number of different data streams. We look at our [Panorama social-emotional learning data](#), discipline data, academic data, and attendance data. This helps us hone in on different practices on campuses at the Tier 1 level.

In Times of Crisis, Emphasize Safety and Connection



By Dr. Bren Elliott

Chief of School Improvement and Supports
District of Columbia Public Schools



With the health crisis that we are facing as a nation—combined with the racial violence and ensuing unrest—**DCPS has prioritized trauma-responsive practices.**

We know that all of our students will be coming back to us having experienced some level of trauma. **For our students of color, we know that the trauma is likely even more deeply rooted.**

5 TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

We wanted to be sure that we embedded practices in our schools and in every classroom that emphasized safety and connection to create the conditions for a calm brain.

We totally reprioritized our high-visibility work streams and made a decision to narrow our focus and concentrate on the most essential initiatives for our students. This included **mental health and increasing the quality of tier 1 SEL interventions**, specifically trauma-responsive practices.

We have focused on five trauma-informed practices in particular:

1. Every student is greeted with positive and affirming language each day.
2. Teachers intentionally create space for relationship building.
3. Teachers provide space for emotional regulation for their students.
4. Prioritizing adult self-care.
5. Creating environments of mutual respect between adults and students.

We've offered some early professional development focused on trauma-responsive practices because we recognize that this is nuanced work. We've needed to do training across many levels—teachers, practitioners, and school leaders.

In addition, we are hosting a number of “Parent University” sessions to help caregivers feel less overwhelmed and understand how they can be resources to their children when it comes to extending the social-emotional learning work we are doing in classrooms into the home.

USING DATA TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS

During this time, we also realized that we need to have more indicators to track student well-being. We are using [Panorama](#) to survey students this fall and get an early sense of how they are doing.

We've also learned that it's important to **create more time for conversations about this data and about equity in general.** At DCPS, this meant creating opportunities for adults to have real conversations about race, racism, and its impact on education through racial affinity groups or cross-racial affinity groups.

[Access a packet](#) that includes DCPS's Equity Framework, Social-Emotional Learning Framework, and Trauma-Responsive Model.

Fixing Systems, Not Students



By Brenda Martinek
Chief of Student Support Services
Portland Public Schools (OR)



As the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said: **“Fight for things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”** As district leaders, this is what we have to do to change the hearts and minds of students, staff, and families.

When I got to Portland Public Schools, we had a new superintendent. Since then, we’ve worked to align our systems so that MTSS is not just about academics or behavior, but also about **racial equity and social justice, social-emotional learning, pro-social behavior, and restorative justice** so that we are repairing harm in a supportive way. All of these key pieces work as one unit to support students and families.

A BOLD THEORY OF ACTION

We have aligned our MTSS to our guaranteed and viable curriculum and professional learning in order to focus on all aspects of the instructional core. **We continue to break down silos across departments** in order to braid our systems and align our terminology, philosophy, and practices so that **all students, especially our black and native students, can experience success in school.**

We’ve also worked to embed trauma-informed practices within our MTSS. **We have a bold theory of action that focuses on our Black and Native students.** We have implemented diverse hiring practices, culturally responsive and trauma-informed curriculum, and programs to support the health and safety of our students. We have culturally specific partners that support the trajectory of our Black, Hispanic, and Native families and students, and have prioritized different services at different schools based on what the community has requested.

SEL AND EQUITY DURING COVID-19

When we closed buildings on March 13 and our plans went into disarray, I’m proud that we were able to decide on guiding principles by centering ourselves on racial equity and justice. These guiding principles were to:

1. Ensure health and wellness for staff, students, and buildings.
2. Strengthen and innovate our instructional core.
3. Cultivate connections and relationships.

Relationships are at the heart and soul of social-emotional learning. They can’t be an add-on; they have to be woven into everything you’re doing with the support of your principals and superintendents. That’s the only way can change the way we support students and truly break down institutional racism.

STRENGTHENING TIER 1 WITH STUDENT VOICE DATA

In order to strengthen our Tier 1, we first identify priorities from student voice data using Panorama’s [school climate survey](#). We start to look at the strengths of our community, as well as one or two focus areas to strengthen further.

One area we’ve prioritized is sense of belonging. Our principals take student voice data and, working with Panorama, align it with best practices from our [Tiered Fidelity Inventory](#), which we have adapted to include culturally responsive components. Our school leaders then incorporate the student voice data into school improvement plans, examining each system shift with a racial equity and social justice lens.

Lesson #1:

“It Starts From the Top”

The biggest piece of advice from district leaders when it comes to promoting SEL and equity? Start with the adults and work your way down. Leaders *must* create the conditions to engage in this work.

“Facilitate and encourage meaningful conversations, paired with active listening! **Start from the top and work your way down.** Take care of your leaders, so that your leaders can take care of your teachers, so your teachers can take care of your students... families... community... and so on.”



Dr. Amanda H. Allen
Executive Director of Social and Emotional Learning
Johnston County Public Schools (NC)

“District-wide training is necessary to **create a culture of care and concern** among faculty, staff, students and parents alike. At New Paltz, teachers have had training in delivering curriculum infused with SEL concepts. School counselors and clinicians deliver regular push-in SEL lessons to students. The Board of Education has an equity committee who leads the district in promoting equity, access, and inclusion. The director of student support services has certifications in school counseling, multicultural education, and restorative practices, and regularly shares resources in these areas to school building leaders.”



Fredericka R. Butler
Director of Student Support Services
New Paltz Central School District (NY)

“We send self-care challenges on Mondays to help focus us all. **Mental health MATTERS!**”



Dr. Gabrielle Schwemmer
Superintendent
Sparta District 140 (IL)



It is important to understand that **SEL and equity work is not just about students, but also about staff**. You must have SEL and equity centered into your organization's mission, vision, and strategic plan. In addition, **leaders have to start with the heart** when influencing others' work with SEL and equity. Share stories of growth, and customize a clear message of improvement that centers around examples of building students' and staff hearts."



Christopher Hand

Director of Assessment, Evaluation, and Testing
Liberty Public Schools (MO)

[Read More: "How Liberty Public Schools Drives Systemic Change Across MTSS and SEL"](#)



This work is difficult and requires a mindset change for some educators. The equity work has to **start with the adults before we can begin cultivating those competencies with students**. We can't teach/model what we don't know. Also, make it a priority from the top down. This includes having an equity statement collaboratively drafted and adopted by your Board. Then, any decision that is made needs to pass through that lens.

We have a **District Equity Statement** that focuses our success on the success of our typically marginalized students, including Black, LatinX, Emergent Bilinguals, and Students with Disabilities. Every staff member (past and new hires) has gone through "[Beyond Diversity](#)" and most have also gone through [SEED](#). Last year, we did a district-wide book study of White Fragility including district administrative and school staff. We use the [Courageous Conversations Agreements and Conditions](#) as part of our norms for all meetings, including our Board meetings, staff meetings, and department meetings."



Donna Cross

Director of MTSS and SEL
Evanston/Skokie School District 65 (IL)

Lesson #2:

Align on a Common Definition

Prioritizing SEL and equity means having a shared understanding of what these concepts mean to your community—all the way from the Board, to families and students, to teachers and staff.

“ For us, promoting SEL and equity meant **writing a Strategic Plan** that centered on those two items. Our Strategic Plan was written in partnership with 150 members of our community, adopted by our Board of Education, and publicized widely throughout our region through print, social media, and community and staff meetings.

As a result of the Strategic Plan, two full-time positions were hired to lead implementation of these two areas: a Director of SEL and a Coordinator of Diversity and Engagement. Cultural shift within a school district is slow, but planning and **putting both human capital and financial resources behind these two areas is already starting to make a difference** in our district.

My biggest advice is to **start slowly**. Read and learn what others have done, and use research-based resources to inform all of your decisions. There are many vendors who are willing to sell a product—stick with resources that are tried and true. Community involvement is also very important.”



Angie Salava

Director of Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health Services
Olathe Public Schools (KS)



We promote SEL and equity by **including the community in our efforts**. We decided that we must **use common language and supports** that extend beyond the school day. Social-emotional wellness and learning shouldn't simply happen to some families or students; it should be available for all, at all times.”



Dr. Tiffany Gholson

Director of Parent and Student Support Services
East St. Louis School District 189 (IL)



SEL is a tool for **advancing access to education** for all students. As a district, we regularly communicate that the mastery of social and emotional skills allows each child to **access the type of instruction our educators want to provide**. The foundational understanding of SEL as either a stepping stone or roadblock to academic engagement is the most crucial element of promoting SEL and equity.

Start where your community is. Do they want to see changes in student behavior? Then start with self-management and responsible decision-making skills. Do they want students to engage in discussion? Start with social awareness skills. Do they want to see more community and parent engagement? Then start with culture, climate, practices, and policies. Do they want to see social change? Start with equity work by analyzing the school experience for different types of students. There are so many entry points to SEL work. Think about your community needs and wants, and build off of them.”



Dr. Katie Ahsell

Assistant Superintendent for Student Services and Assessment
Community Consolidated School District 59 (IL)



We are promoting SEL and equity via an integrated approach within each classroom district wide. Furthermore, we have connected our SEL, Trauma Sensitive Schools, and Portrait of a Graduate frameworks as synonymous.

Consider creating a centralized task force for the school and community, and then school wide committees. SEL and equity work are done differently depending on the grade levels involved, the training/PD needed for all staff, including non-teaching staff (paraprofessionals, custodians, administrative assistants).”



Joseph F. Baeta

Superintendent
Norton Public Schools (MA)

“ We are prioritizing SEL and equity by **creating a common definition around the word equity**, to begin with. On a deeply systemic level, our focus is on culturally responsive practice, policy, and procedures.

Make sure your district has a common definition of what these words mean in both theory and practice. What does equity sound like when you listen in on a class or walk the halls? What does SEL look like when you visit a department meeting or classroom?”



Mirah Anti
Director of Equity and Inclusion
Township High School District 113 (IL)

“ Our SEL Summer Task Force developed a road map for the fall. They are sharing SEL tips for staff, but also developed an SEL choice board for teachers to use with students. This offers teachers and students some choice in trying new techniques that work for them, while directly providing them with the resources. **Make sure everyone has the same definition and framework before diving into the work.** Also, make sure leaders are modeling!”



Ellen Martin
Assistant Superintendent
Marshfield Public Schools (MA)

“ Our high schools are developing school-wide action plans with an equity and social justice focus. SEL schools are using an "advisee" approach to address students' social and emotional needs. I'd recommend **convening a 'demographical and representative' stakeholder group** at the district and school levels. **Draft goals and actions** to address curriculum, access to honors and AP level classes, biased dialogue or actions via social media, and more.”



Dr. Anthony Irvin
Director of Urban Education
Archdiocese of Philadelphia

Lesson #3:

Elevate Student, Family, and Staff Voices

After creating clear goals and plans, consider how your district will collect data and gather stakeholder feedback to measure progress.

“ Data and relationships are central to our strategic planning and execution. We **listen to stakeholder voices** through a variety of modes; i.e., conversations, surveys, focus groups, and community forums. [SEL surveys](#) start a conversation with our students, and it is up to us to listen to their responses, take action on it, and keep continuing this conversation with them. We strengthen our relationships through listening to and elevating stakeholder voices and measuring our progress using data. **My biggest advice is to be comfortable being uncomfortable.**”



Deb Engelfried
 Director of Data Analysis and Programs
 Morris School District (NJ)

[Read More: "How a Focus on Equity and Inclusion at MSD Improved Academic Achievement and Behavior"](#)

“ We are embedding Race, Equity, Social-Justice, and Social-Emotional Learning into the next iteration of our District's Strategic Plan. Currently, we are utilizing [Panorama SEL Surveys](#) for students and teachers, K-12, and piloting [Panorama Student Success](#) in select elementary, middle, and high schools in our district in 2020-2021.

My biggest advice is to engage your leadership and key stakeholders in the importance of this work to support all students and staff. **Surveying district-selected SEL and equity competencies** will empower district and school leaders to **paint a data picture** of student, staff, and community well-being.”



Adam W. Smith
 Executive Director, Student Services
 Mehlville School District R9 (MO)



SEL done well is equity work. Everything comes back to relationships. If a student has an adult in their life who is giving priority to their social-emotional needs, the student will be more likely to connect with that adult and engage in learning.

In the MSD of Lawrence Township, we place a lot of focus on **rigorous expectations** and **student-teacher relationships**. We measure those indicators through student perception surveys with Panorama, and do things like Morning Meetings and explicit teaching of the behaviors we want to see using PBIS strategies. We also have teacher leaders who serve as SEL specialists in their buildings.

In addition, having a tool like Panorama to measure our [student perceptions of equity and inclusion](#) can produce hard data that can bring to light hard truths, help us get past emotions, and look at the data for what it is and what it's telling us. It will give us a platform for student voice that we haven't had before, and a new and different urgency to take action."



Shawn Bush

Director of Student Services
Metropolitan School District Lawrence Township (IN)

[Watch My Webinar Presentation: "Leading SEL as a Lever for Equity"](#)



We have been gathering data (from staff and students) on administrative support, interventions, policies, and training. My biggest advice is to gather data to **establish a foundation** of where you're presently at, so that you can use that data to determine future initiatives."



Keith Reynolds

Director of Training for Equity and Diversity
Wichita Public Schools (KS)



Our most important practice has been to provide most intensive services to students with greatest challenges. We've done this by **administering SEL "screening" surveys** to identify areas of need.

My work now within equity causes me to **focus on strengths**: What's working, and what assets do we have? We don't want to overlook our identified areas of need; however, in doing the work of equity, it's important we keep our eye trained on the strengths of our community that are too often overlooked."



Chris Ridge

Director of Pupil Services
Oxnard School District (CA)

[Read My Article: "Our 8-Step SEL Intervention Process at Oxnard School District"](#)

Lesson #4:

Focus on Strong Tier 1 Supports

Create the conditions for *all* students to succeed by building consistent Tier 1 practices that promote SEL and equity.

“ District 49's most important SEL practice was embracing **Restorative Practices (RP)** as our primary method for addressing conduct and discipline issues. RP proactively sets expectations, empowers individual voices, and accountably heals harm with the goal of restoring people to our district community. Restorative justice (RJ) is just one well-known component of RP, but the district strives to create an environment where RJ is rarely required.

If a district is serious about SEL/equity work, then the district's school board must be open to aligning the district's policies to support the desired outcome. You cannot expect real change to happen if you are not also willing to change the rules that govern the culture.”



Dr. Louis L. Fletcher
 Director of Culture and Services
 School District 49 (CO)

“ Embed SEL strategies directly into content curricula. Train staff on the significance of social-emotional competencies and the relationship between those skills and student social emotional well-being, behavior, and academic learning. **Provide a toolkit of SEL practices and strategies by school level.**

Take a systems approach. Research, collaborate with other divisions, and evaluate existing practices and beliefs. Be strategic—set an action plan for ongoing, job-embedded professional learning to **support the paradigm shift**. Identify resources, tools, and supports staff will need. Plan how to collect feedback and monitor.”



Tiffany Hardy
 Director of Student Services
 Hampton City Schools (VA)



Our most important practice is **an advisory for all students** at all grade levels, with a maximum of 25 students. My biggest advice is to start with where people are at—**what is their personal experience with race, equity, and social-emotional connections?** Build their empathy muscle to support teachers and building leaders as they build their empathy muscles for kids.”



Carla Gay

Executive Director, Innovation and Partnerships
Gresham-Barlow School District (OR)

[Read My Article: "Using an Early Warning and Intervention System to Promote College and Career Readiness"](#)



As we look to implement SEL as a lever for equity in our district, we like to emphasize core Tier 1 practices. Especially during a time of remote learning, we are focused on **teachers embedding this work into their instructional practices** so we can ensure students have access to learning experiences.

For example, we start off with **morning gatherings** that allow students to develop their self awareness skills and express how they’re feeling. For our adults, it allows them to check in and connect with their young people. SEL invites the idea of students having voice in the curriculum, and **helps students see that their cultures, backgrounds, and experiences are an asset in the classroom.**”



Dr. Charlos Banks

Senior Executive Director of Student Services
Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (NC)

[Watch My Webinar Presentation: "Leading SEL as a Lever for Equity"](#)



When we talk about SEL work, if we are not careful, we can impose a white-washed ideology onto our students of color that forces them to become someone they are not. Having morning meetings and check-ins at CHCCS—and really getting to know the child—**opens up the child to be seen and appreciated.** It helps enhance student self-awareness about themselves racially and ensures every student’s brand is showing up in a genuine way.”



Lee Williams

Former Executive Director of Equity
Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (NC)

“ We are moving from a research-based SEL curriculum being taught by school counselors to the curriculum being taught by classroom teachers. In terms of equity, each month we are analyzing HAL enrollment, office or behavior referrals, positive recognitions, and Sped numbers by gender, race, and ethnicity, and comparing these results to district demographics.

My recommendation is to **build SEL and equity by tiers**, starting with Tier 1. Tier 1 must provide a solid basis, or other tiers will be either weak or overstretched.”



Susan Lindblad
Aware Grant Director
Hastings Public Schools (NE)

“ The most important practice we have is ensuring there is **dedicated time in every campus's master schedule devoted to SEL**. At our elementary campuses, this time is daily right after breakfast, which allows teachers and students to get their day started off on a positive note.

My biggest advice is to remember that you can't do it all, and you can't do it alone. Reach out to other districts that have a few years behind them.”



Mark Medley
MTSS Coordinator
Bastrop Independent School District (TX)

[Read More: "How Bastrop ISD Moved From RTI to a Whole Child MTSS"](#)

“ We have **3 signature practices** for all classrooms: welcoming activities, engaging practices during instruction and optimistic, and reflective closure. Start with the mindset and practices of the adults. My biggest advice is to help school leaders understand their own emotions and model empathy before expectations are put upon students.”



Trena Hatcher
Executive Director of Student Support
Hampton City Schools (VA)

“ Our most important practice is conducting **daily check ins with students**, and my biggest advice to is communicate expectations of SEL goals with staff.”



Rick Aceves
Director of English Learners
Niles Township High Schools District 219 (IL)

“ Our most important practices were creating an SEL framework for grades K-12 that includes lesson plans, and making sure that SEL and PBIS work together. My biggest advice is to **make it a top priority**.”



Chad Simms
Director of Student Engagement
Boone County Schools (KY)

“ Our most important practice is to **explicitly teach SEL** utilizing district-approved curricula. Be intentional with planning and implementation as well as providing professional development to all stakeholders.”



Dr. Bonita E. Jamison
Executive Director of Integrated Supports and Accelerated Learning
Ferguson-Florissant School District (MO)

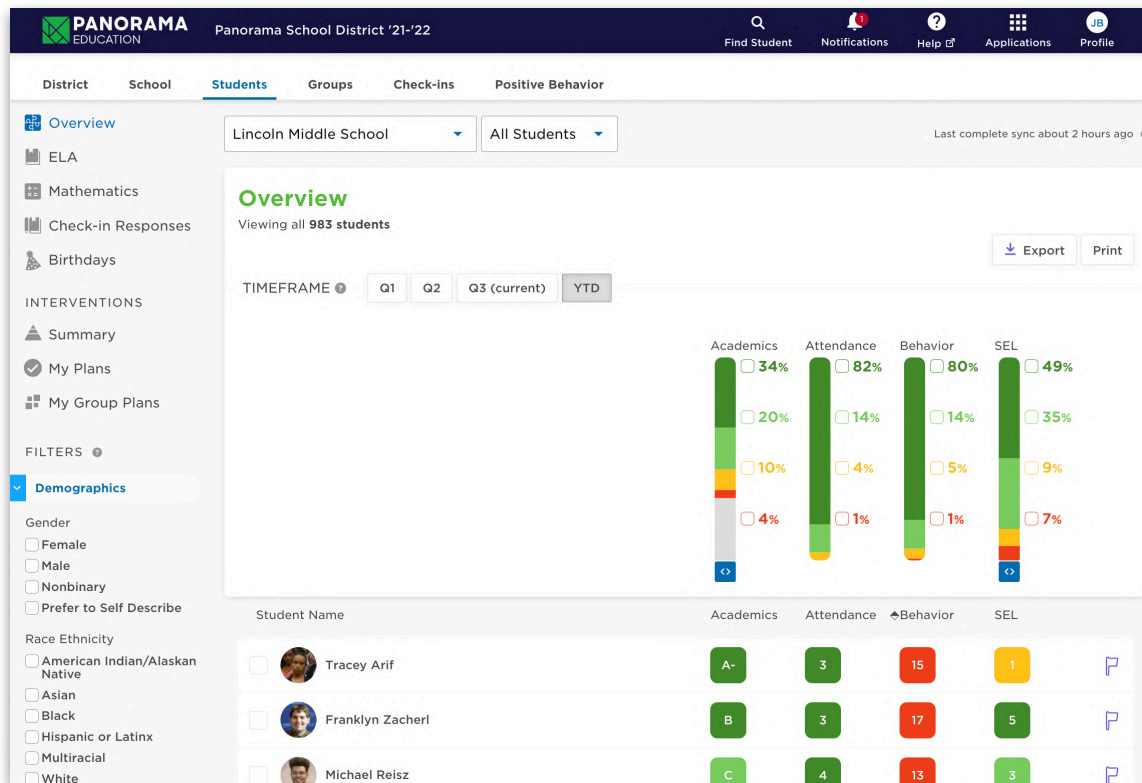
“ We are working to ensure **all students have access**, whether that is to resources, staff, or technology as well as the means to fully participate.

My biggest advice is to take a look at the culture in your buildings. If the culture is not positive or if beliefs need to be normed, do that work first.”



Jennifer Hoffman
Senior Executive Director of Special Education and Pupil Services
Hartford Public Schools (CT)

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