



Antwan Wilson, a longtime champion of social and emotional learning, a former superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District, and an active member of CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI), recently became Chancellor of DC Public Schools (DCPS) in the nation's capital. He discusses how he plans to make SEL a strategic priority, with a mix of top-down support and bottom-up innovation. One of his five districtwide goals calls for 100 percent of DCPS students to feel "loved, challenged, and prepared." He spoke to us the day he released the district's new [strategic plan](#), which will guide DCPS' work through 2022.

What are some of the key steps you're taking to advance SEL?

First, we will build understanding of SEL and how it works—what it is, why it's needed, and how it is integrated with academics. I'm also shining the light on the SEL work that's already happened and encouraging others to pursue it and lean in. And I've appointed a deputy chancellor for SEL who will help integrate SEL into all that we do. I try to talk about SEL every opportunity I get. It's how we educate kids.

What have you been hearing from those stakeholders?

There's overwhelming support for a greater emphasis on SEL. Our new strategic plan reflects what I heard at the listening sessions we conducted with over 4,000 teachers, principals, parents, students, and community members. At those meetings I shared my story and my values—the importance of students first, teamwork, and collaboration. But I also universally heard that we need more supports—to help students navigate school, take on rigorous tasks, deal with traumatic events, relate to each other and with adults. That's true across all levels, elementary through high school.

You'd mentioned there are many bright spots in DC. What's new now?

We've seen strong results from DCPS' School Climate Initiative. About 20 schools participated in a small pilot, studying how to embed SEL practices like mindfulness throughout the school day. We're now at about 75 schools doing this work and hope to implement it in all schools.

We are purposefully not starting with an SEL curriculum. Behavior and mindsets are more important, since strong SEL is about relationships and connectivity. Schools can do a lot, whether it's morning meetings or restorative circles or other strategies. We're providing lots of central guidance and professional development, such as

frameworks for how to integrate SEL into academics or align with after-school partners. But my interest is always to highlight best practices from the school level.

What do you think will look different in classrooms?

We're trying to help teachers understand strategies to support students in more collaborative ways. You'll see more student voice and student talk. Teachers will lecture less and assign fewer worksheets. You'll see students and teachers engaging with each other more deeply. And you'll see a lot more writing and self-reflection.

What lessons are you bringing from Oakland and the CDI?

In Oakland we built understanding that it's OK if teachers and kids bring things that are on their minds into school. It's part of the learning process. From Washoe County, Nev., I'm struck by the clarity of vision, all the way from the superintendent to the classroom. And from Cleveland, I admire the strong ownership at the school level and the many ways they're promoting and advancing student agency.

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- Embed social emotional learning in our classrooms.
- Offer new middle school courses and extracurriculars.
- Expand access to college and career preparation.
- Strengthen instruction for special education students and English Learners.
- Focus on early literacy.

From the DCPS Strategic Plan

But I'm not coming in with the mindset of Thou Shalt Do It this way. It's not about how I'd do it, but about making clear what doing this work well looks like, providing supports from the district office, and modeling the behaviors. Then we will shine the positive light on what's happening from the ground up.

RESOURCES

[DC Public Schools Strategic Plan and related resources, A Capital Commitment: 2017-2022.](#)

[Oakland Unified School District PreK through adult SEL standards.](#)

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