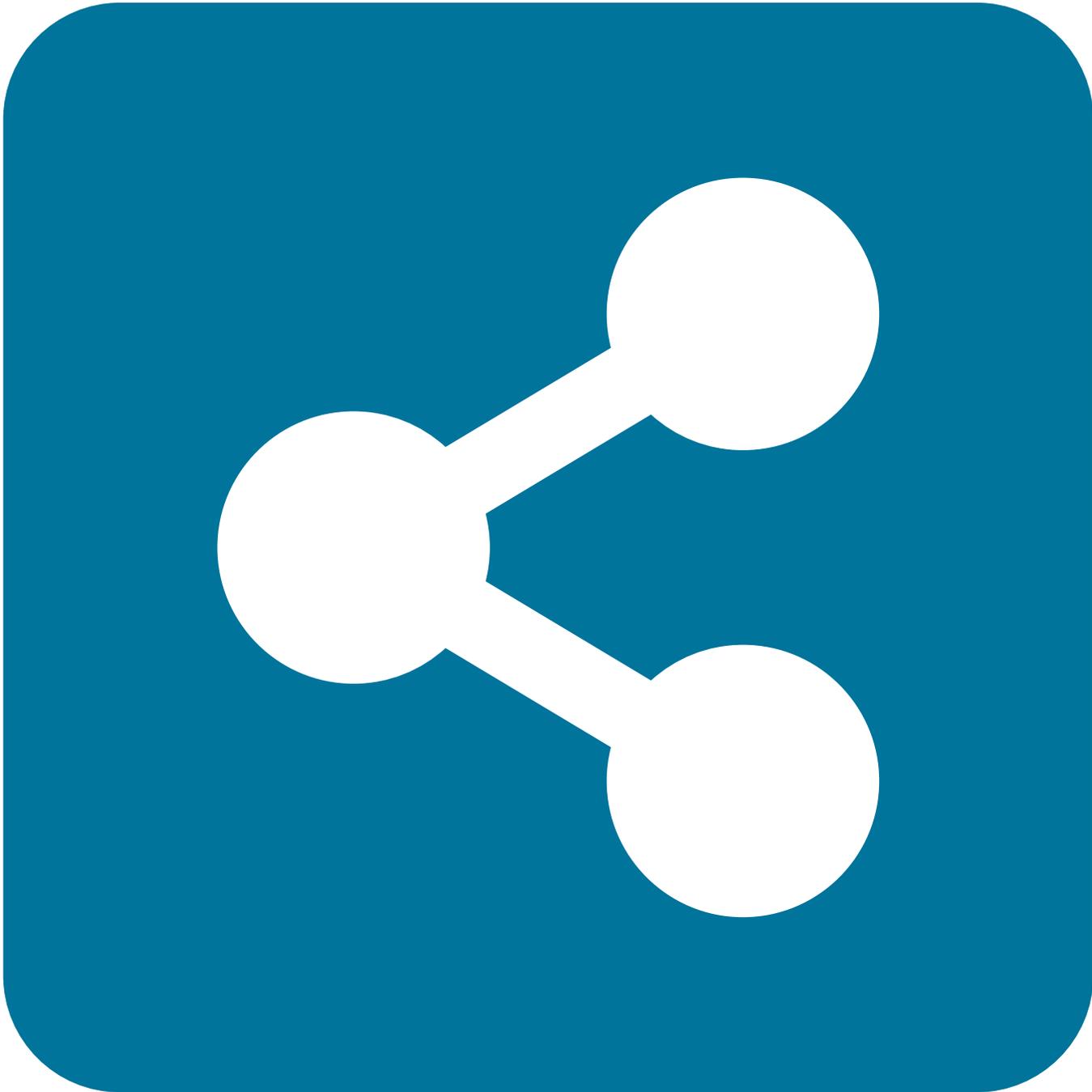


Portland Public Schools receives \$8.2 million to collaborate with universities, build ‘principal pipeline’



PPS officials say the funds will continue work already in progress to support new and aspiring principals.

Portland Public Schools was one of eight school districts in the country to be awarded an \$8.2 million, five-year grant from the Wallace Foundation to focus on supporting principals and building a pipeline for new school administrators.

The district will work with Portland State University, Lewis & Clark College, the Teachers Standards and Practices Commission, the Oregon Educator Advancement Council, and local organizations to better support current principals while also bringing along “equity-centered” principals and other staff.

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A colorful banner made by parents hangs on the playground for a meet and greet with the incoming Rigler Elementary School principal, Chris Silvas, May 28, 2021. The Northeast Portland school has seen several principals come and go, with the current principal at the school for eight months.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

“Currently, we at PPS do our own thing, and our university partners who are named in this grant do their own thing, and this is an opportunity for us to come together to create common goals and strategies to bring our commitment to equity to life,” said Loretta Benjamin-Samuels, PPS senior director for partnerships for human resources.

Benjamin-Samuels said the money will pay for professional development for current leaders, as well as support principal coaches within PPS. For the universities, Benjamin-Samuels said the funds will help pay for technical support and provide an opportunity to rethink policies for educational leadership programs.

“This five-year grant will disrupt historic patterns in our education system by better preparing equity-centered leaders in our schools,” said PSU and Lewis & Clark in a shared statement in a press release announcing the grant.

“We look forward to partnering with PPS to engage in more innovative and transformative practices that will make a meaningful difference in the lives of students.”

The grant is also about diversifying school leadership in Portland schools.

“It is important that every student has the opportunity to observe school leaders that are representative of our diverse community,” said PPS Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero in a release announcing the grant. “Our students of color in particular benefit when they see themselves reflected in school leaders, they see possibility, opportunity and belonging.”

Like the school teaching staff, PPS administrators are not representative of the student diversity at the state’s largest district. Of PPS’ 195 school administrators, 70% are white. 12% are Black, 13% are Latino, 3% are Asian, and 2% are multi-racial, according to the district. By comparison, district data shows the student population is 56% white, 9% Black, 17% Latino, 6% Asian and 12% multi-racial.

Some of the work in the grant is a continuation of, or will financially support things the district is already doing to improve retention, like [mentorship](#) for new principals and [hiring](#) principal coaches.

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“We have been employing many strategies in the past for retention, this will just expand our ability to do so,” Bird said.

This year, the district expanded its leadership academy for new principals, another training opportunity.

“It’s part of the retention strategy that we have, of developing people when they first enter the system, instead of letting them be here for a while, and then we are having conversations — unpleasant conversations, because they’re leaving us...we’re trying to build the bench,” Benjamin-Samuels said.

The first year of the grant will focus on a timeline for implementation what works in better supporting principals. The district plans to share its findings and successful strategies with other districts around the state. Bird said PPS officials already collaborate with Salem-Keizer and Eugene 4J, two other large Oregon districts.

The Wallace Foundation will also conduct research based on what PPS and the other grant recipient districts find. Others receiving grants include districts in Maryland, Ohio, Washington, D.C., California, Kentucky, and Texas.

Principal turnover has been an issue both in Portland schools and nationally. Eight Portland elementary schools have had at least five different principals in the last eight years, [according to PPS data](#).

Bird said turnover is typical for a district like Portland, and several principals have been promoted to central office positions.

In the six weeks since the new school year started, building leaders have continued to move to the district office or leave the district altogether.

Last week, The Oregonian [reported](#) four principals have left their posts since the start of the school year. Whitman Elementary principal Stephanie Murdock also [recently announced](#) her new role in the district office, but told families she will stay at the school until a replacement is found.

Bird said the late timings of promotions are a reason for some of the changes. With the grant, he said one goal is to provide longevity in schools, to help principals feel supported and stay in their roles.

Benjamin-Samuels agrees.

“We’re hoping...to really identify some systemic changes we can make to reduce the turnover, eliminate the turnover,” Benjamin-Samuels said.