

Yolo County Office of Education



5
school
districts

29,000+
students

Vision

To be a model of educational excellence, innovation, and impact.

Mission

To provide inspiration, leadership, support, and advocacy that ensures equity and access to high quality education for all students.

Background

The Yolo County Office of Education (YCOE) sits in a semi-rural area between the San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento. It serves five districts with 29,464 students, 53% of whom qualify for free and reduced price meals (FRPM) - ranging from 32% in Davis JUSD to 77% in Esparto USD.¹

Despite its small size, YCOE supports local educational agencies (LEAs) in implementing a wide variety of California statewide initiatives, including Community Schools, Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), Positive Behavior and Intervention Systems (PBIS), social and emotional

¹ CDE Dataquest, 2025-26

learning (SEL), College and Career Readiness (CCR), adult education, the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) Multi-Payer Fee Schedule, and Differentiated Assistance (DA).

YCOE also initiates its own projects, including the Roadmap to the Future, a long-term plan to coordinate services, supports, and opportunities for children, youth, and families across the county. YCOE has also successfully applied for competitive statewide grants, including the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence's High School Redesign Grant, with a focus on supporting LEA's in aligning instructional practice to their graduate profiles.

Interviews

This profile is based on interviews with six YCOE staff members:

Katrina Callaway, Assistant Superintendent

Cathie Irwin, Director of Prevention and Wellness

Dr. Garth Lewis, Superintendent

Ân Ta, College and Career Readiness, Transition Age Youth and Adult Education Programs Administrator

Strategies for Coherence

This profile focuses on YCOE's internal coherence - how staff work together across departments and initiatives. Superintendent Garth Lewis emphasized starting internally, "turning a mirror on themselves" to authentically embed whole child work throughout the organization. Key strategies include:



Focused Priorities

- (1) Leading with a culture of communication and improvement



Capacity Building

- (2) Engaging in a collaborative improvement process to align around a whole child lens



Collaborative Structures

- (3) Investing in shared understanding through Lunch & Learns

The staff see internal coherence as essential to YCOE's external work with LEAs and other partners. As a county office, YCOE's relationship with LEAs is consultative rather than mandated, making it essential that LEAs see YCOE as a dependable, long-term partner. Superintendent Lewis says, "Internal coherence allows staff to walk into relationships with districts with more confidence about what YCOE can offer, knowing that they can find support among their colleagues." This helps YCOE staff and LEAs work together more effectively in the Differentiated Assistance (DA) process and strengthens competitive grant applications by allowing YCOE to communicate clearly about its assets and strengths.



1. Leading with a culture of communication and improvement

This looks like...

- Creating structures for collaborative leadership
- Modeling calibration, shared language, and “radical candor”
- Providing opportunities for informal, authentic connections outside the hierarchy

Superintendent Lewis - named ACSA Superintendent of the Year in 2026 - prioritizes **collaborative leadership**. YCOE's Cabinet operates under a Cabinet Charter that sets the purpose and organizational practices of the Cabinet, including intentional and collaboratively planned agenda items. The Charter is reviewed and revised every two years by cabinet members

The Superintendent also emphasizes **calibration**, making sure people really understand each other. With this focus, staff are encouraged to spend time developing **shared language** so they can see the overlapping concepts embedded in their work. He also values “**radical candor**,” challenging people to interrogate their practice and reinforcing an improvement ethos that is fortified through staff professional development and improvement efforts within departments.

For staff, this culture of communication and improvement means they have opportunities to go outside of the hierarchy and make **informal, authentic connections** with people in positions above them on the organizational chart. This might be “walk and talks” with the Superintendent or other informal interactions with their supervisors. These connections allow staff to build trust, see opportunities for alignment and understand the thinking and values of leadership.



2. Engaging in a collaborative improvement process to align around a whole-child lens

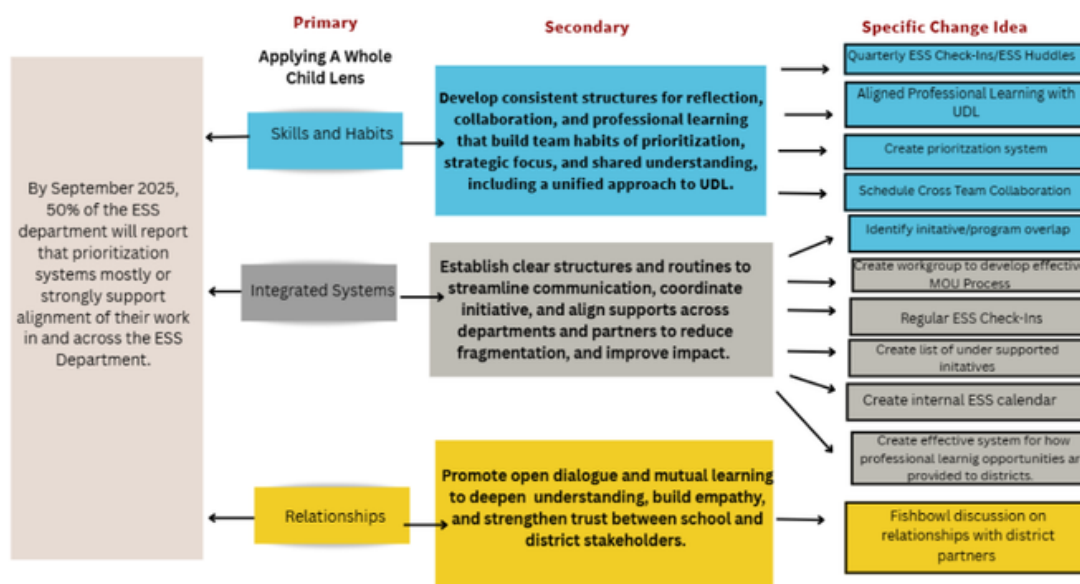
This looks like...

- Identifying the whole child practices that drive coherence across initiatives
- Following a defined improvement science process
- Documenting decisions and progress
- Creating opportunities for intentional collaboration through cross-team working groups
- Embracing data to inform improvement

The Equity and Support Services (ESS) Department has spent the past 18 months using improvement science to increase coherence across its department and throughout YCOE. ESS spans Prevention and Wellness, Special Projects, Alternative Education, and Equity and Support Services. Its central problem of practice is: “How can we ensure our programs, projects, and practices are aligned, coherent, and integrated?” Their aim - as detailed in the [Lunch and Learn slides](#) - is to “engage in continuous improvement cycles to develop coherent policies, practices, and systems across Yolo COE to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families through a whole child lens.”

In 2024, ESS staff participated in a workshop series on **whole child practices and coherence** presented by the Center for Whole Child Education and the Glen Price Group, based on their report [“Strengthening Coherence across California Initiatives.”](#) The report demonstrates that many California education initiatives - MTSS, PBIS, Community Schools, ELO-P, SEL, College and Career Pathways - share similar whole child practices. Energized by the workshop series, the ESS team decided to use improvement science to build alignment across their shared whole child practices.

In the 2024-25 school year, the ESS improvement process started with the development of a [Driver Diagram](#) (*see following page*) that defined the aim of its work: “By September 2025, 50% of the ESS department will report that prioritization systems mostly or strongly support alignment of their work in and across the ESS Department.” They chose components of the [Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design](#) as the three primary drivers - Skills and Habits, Integrated Systems, Relationships - to move them towards their aim. They mapped out secondary drivers and identified specific concrete change ideas that staff could begin to implement. Examples include scheduling quarterly ESS check-ins, creating an internal ESS calendar, and developing an effective MOU process.



Driver Diagram, ESS Department, Yolo COE

Decisions and progress in the improvement process are **documented in a running set of slides** - the Strategic Planning Deck - see Session 1. At any point, staff can look back at a record of their actions and learning across the process. In keeping with the stop-and-go reality of the education environment, several staff transitions in the spring of 2025 slowed the work temporarily.

In the 2025-26 school year, ESS moved forward with change idea #4 from the driver diagram - “Schedule cross-team collaboration” - with a series of Strategic Collaboration Meetings to “intentionally collaborate across departments to connect systems, reduce duplication of efforts, and create aligned structures and practices that foster coherence and maximize impact. Through this process the team will strengthen relationships and engage in strategic planning that supports sustainable, system-wide improvement.”² Organized into three working groups - Community and Professional Learning, Countywide Youth Engagement, and Strategic Partnerships and Collective Impact, they have begun identifying overlapping efforts and linking to YCOE’s Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) goals - documented in these Strategic Collaboration Group tables.

As part of the improvement process, staff are **embracing data** as a core part of their feedback loops. They are regularly compiling reports that document their learning through themes, numbers, and feedback from participants. These reports are presented at ESS meetings and in one-on-ones with supervisors. Programs Administrator, Ân Ta, says, compiling the reports “... can feel like busy work until you see the connections and how the tools help you to do deeper work.”

² Strategic Planning Deck, slide 4



3. Investing in shared understanding through Lunch & Learns

This looks like...

- Scheduling regular opportunities for staff to share work across departments
- Structuring presentations around common whole child practices
- Ensuring time for questions, feedback, and discussion
- Serving food and keep it welcoming

Beyond the ESS department, staff across Yolo COE were struggling to find meaningful ways to share their work with each other. As an outgrowth of the improvement process, YCOE launched Lunch and Learns in January 2025: **regularly scheduled presentations** by staff about how their work supports whole child practices. They happen quarterly and include a mix of cabinet-level directors (for example, SELPA, Early Childhood Education, Special Education) and ESS staff.

Presenters are **required to address three specific components from the five Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design** - Purpose, Relationships, and Integrated Systems - then may choose a fourth (from Experiences, Environments, or Skills and Habits). The agenda includes time for the **presentation, questions, feedback, and discussion** about connections across work. Example presentations have covered College and Career Readiness, PBIS, the Multi-Payer Fee Schedule, and Differentiated Assistance. Presentations are compiled in a running slide deck (see [Strategic Collaboration Meeting sample slides](#)).

Staff value the peer and leadership feedback, which helps them shift how they describe their work. They also report that **food** makes the environment more open and welcoming.

Challenges

- **Deadlines from multiple initiatives compete.** COE staff struggle to find the time and capacity to sustain their collaboration efforts.
- **Departments and tasks can be beyond the locus of control of staff.** Staff that work directly with districts have little opportunity to make changes in departments like contracting and personnel where competing timelines can slow the work. By focusing on whole child components as the drivers of their change process, staff were able to prioritize their efforts and identify new ideas in their locus of control - like scheduling regular ESS team check-ins - while also using structures like Lunch and Learns to share the urgency of their work with different departments.
- **There is vulnerability in collaborating across areas of expertise.** Cathie Irwin, Director of Prevention and Wellness, shares: “It can feel overwhelming to sit in a room with people who are very knowledgeable and experienced, and have different words and ways of thinking. Having conversations in a structured way is creating an opening for the vulnerability we need to do the work even without that structure. I may need to stand in a place where I don’t understand what people are saying (research, vocabulary, context) - that’s a different way of working.”

Impacts

YCOE’s coherence work is a work in progress, but early signs of impact are visible. Staff report greater clarity across the organization and the ability to assess and prioritize opportunities based on capacity and readiness. YCOE staff pause when new work arises to ask how it connects to what already exists.

The Strategic Collaboration Meetings and the Lunch and Learns have increased people’s willingness to talk to other departments. They have relationships and find it less daunting to find and talk to someone in another department: “I think - who else can I pull into this work? I can just go and talk to them.” (Michelle Hamilton, former Executive Director, Special Projects)

While there has not yet been an intentional rollout of coherence work to the districts in Yolo County, staff are organically starting to collaborate on joint projects for the field. The College and Career Readiness (CCR) and Community Schools staff are working together on a new community of practice for apprenticeships. CCR has also opened free adult education classes to Community School partners and has been involved in training wellness coaches as part of the CYBHI Multi-Payer Fee Schedule. Community Schools staff have helped CCR tailor the training more specifically to what TK-12 schools need. Districts have been extremely enthusiastic about YCOE helping them connect the dots across initiatives.