

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SECONDARY EDITION

Strengthening Coherence Across Initiatives: A Whole-Child Lens in Secondary

In February 2024, the Center for Whole-Child Education released a report, *Strengthening Coherence Across Initiatives: A Whole-Child Lens*, focused on TK-12 education initiatives. The report was designed to help educators, education leaders and state leaders recognize the coherence across the multiple initiatives being implemented across California. This executive summary describes a Secondary Edition of the report that is focused on the initiatives that impact high school educators and students. This version – as well as the initiatives it examines – addresses the unique developmental needs and opportunities that come with adolescence.

The report uses a whole-child lens to explore the common practices embedded in four initiatives: **College and Career Pathways**, **Community Schools**, **Dual Enrollment** and **Social Emotional Learning**. Staff from organizations that lead these initiatives filled out an adapted version of the [SoLD Design Principles for Schools Self-Assessment Tool](#) to identify which practices their initiatives support, based on their guiding documents.

The findings highlight complementary whole-child practices across the initiatives that could be leveraged for a comprehensive whole-child approach. They also reveal several gaps in supports, offering an opportunity for initiatives to strengthen their guidance and practice.

We hope that educators, education leaders and state policymakers will:

- Recognize the shared and complementary whole-child practices across the initiatives, and therefore feel less overwhelmed and more aligned around their work, and
- Invest in strengthening whole-child practices, knowing that the science of learning and development clearly defines these practices as critically important to adolescent development.



**Read the full
Secondary Edition**

What does “Whole-Child” Mean?

Whole-child education is not one singular framework, program, initiative or curricula. Grounded in the science of learning and development, whole-child education creates learning conditions in which young people build essential cognitive, social and emotional skills and mindsets, develop their identities and self-worth, and overcome barriers to healthy development, learning and thriving. It focuses on addressing relationships, environments, students’ skills, habits and mindsets, learning experiences, and integrated supports.

Takeaway: We can apply a whole-child lens through a set of six guiding questions.

Based on the “[Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design](#)”, a whole-child lens offers six guiding questions to identify aligned purpose and practices in any initiative.



Whole-Child Purpose: In what ways is this work focused on students’ healthy development, learning and thriving?



Relationships: In what ways is this work fostering trust, connection and belonging?



Environments: In what ways is this work creating spaces that are physically, emotionally and identity safe, supportive and inclusive?



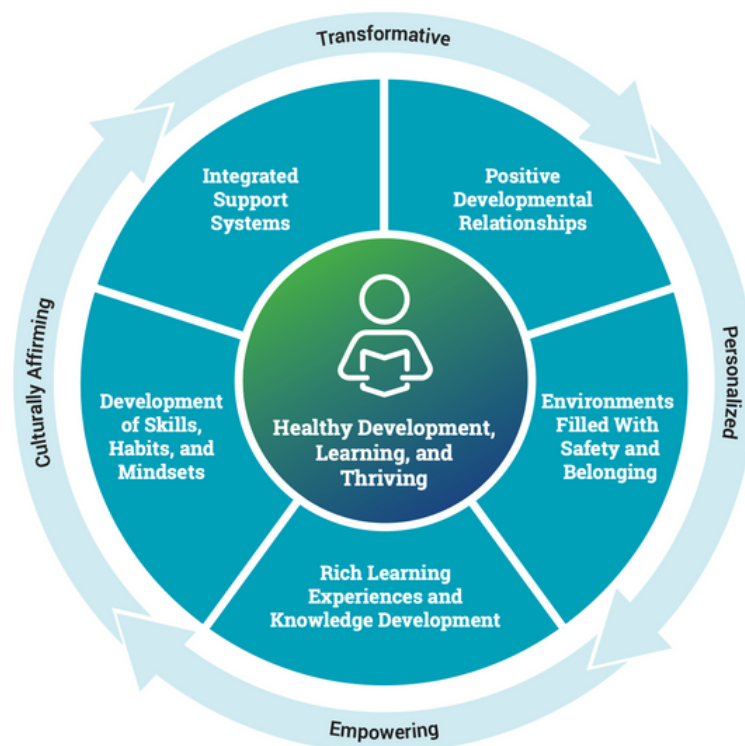
Learning Experiences: In what ways is this work providing meaningful, engaging and challenging learning experiences?



Skills, Habits, and Mindsets: In what ways is this work developing students’ social, emotional and cognitive skills, habits and mindsets?



Integrated Supports: In what ways is this work integrating school and community resources to address students’ strengths and needs?



Takeaway: There are consistent and complementary whole-child practices across the four secondary initiatives, which together can be leveraged for a comprehensive whole-child approach.

Far from implementing siloed strategies, the four initiatives are supporting many of the same whole-child practices across their districts, schools and classrooms. Not every initiative supports every practice, but a district or school that is implementing multiple initiatives with fidelity would offer students a robust and holistic set of supports.



Positive Developmental Relationships

All of the initiatives support positive developmental relationships. This focus is grounded in the science of learning and development, which describes how relationships build strong brain architecture, providing critical avenues to learning and growth. Beyond “being nice,” intentional developmental relationships can fundamentally change the way a young person develops, directly facilitating social, emotional and cognitive growth and empowering students as active agents, rather than passive recipients, in the learning process.

Examples in initiatives:

- Time and space for relationships
- Adult collaboration structures
- Adult learning and decision-making
- Family communication

Because students in secondary schools interact with multiple teachers and other adults throughout the day, the structure and types of relationships are different than in elementary schools where classroom teachers are usually central to students’ experience. Community Schools create opportunities for students to connect with adults in different settings and from the broader community. High school counselors provide individual guidance to students about College and Career Pathways, Dual Enrollment, post-secondary and career options.



Environments Filled with Safety and Belonging

A supportive school environment is physically, emotionally, and identity safe, while creating a strong sense of belonging. A true sense of safety and belonging requires a shared, authentic commitment to giving power and voice to all community members – students, staff, caregivers, etc. – practicing inclusion

Examples in initiatives:

- Shared values, norms and consistent routines
- Educative and restorative approaches to discipline and conflict resolution

(Environments Filled with Safety and Belonging cont.)

even when it is difficult. For high school students, a positive school environment means having respectful, bi-directional communication with adults. This might result, for example, in students having a voice in school culture and governance and a choice of activities to express their interests and perspectives. It also requires mechanisms for supporting and repairing relationships, instead of only discipline and punitive consequences, when challenges inevitably arise (e.g., using co-regulatory and restorative practices).

(Examples cont.)

- Identity and interest-based opportunities
- Culturally affirming practices

Dual Enrollment – which does not address school-wide practices – is best offered in collaboration with supports like school-wide SEL or Community Schools so that students are experiencing safety and belonging throughout their day.

**Rich Learning Experiences and Knowledge Development**

The science of learning and development demonstrates that children are motivated when tasks are relevant to their lives, pique their curiosity, and are well scaffolded so that success is possible. Particularly at the high school level, learning that is applied to authentic tasks and collaborative projects engages higher-order skills of analysis, synthesis, critical thinking, and problem-solving and allows knowledge to be remembered and used in new situations. High school students also benefit from having the flexibility to choose their learning pathway, based on their needs, interests and aspirations.

Examples in initiatives:

- Inquiry-based learning
- Scaffolds for mastery of complex skills
- Culturally responsive pedagogy

College and Career Pathways and Dual Enrollment are specifically designed to offer learning experiences that respond to students' interests and motivations. These approaches can re-engage disaffected students by offering course options that feel relevant to their immediate and long-term needs, and by giving them the opportunity to see themselves as college students.



Development of Skills, Habits, and Mindsets

In the brain, students are building anatomically cross-wired and functionally interconnected neural networks that facilitate skills like self-regulation while also helping them think, learn and remember content knowledge. These networks are changing rapidly in the adolescent brain, becoming faster, more streamlined and stronger. In high schools, this means that educators and students working together can make significant advances in learning when that learning is driven by a holistic understanding of students' unique skills, habits, mindsets, interests and goals.

Dual Enrollment classes, often taught by college-level instructors, have traditionally not focused on students' development beyond subject-specific skills and knowledge. Here again, we see the opportunity for aligned and complementary initiatives, like SEL, Community Schools, and College and Career Pathways that ensure students are receiving intentional supports around more holistic knowledge, skill and mindset development in other settings in the school.

Examples in initiatives:

- Explicit social, emotional and cognitive skill instruction
- Integrated opportunities and routines for practicing skills, habits and mindsets
- Instruction that develops executive functions, self-awareness and metacognition, and interpersonal and communication skills



Integrated Support Systems

The science of learning and development tells us that each student is on their own unique developmental pathway. Students reach their full potential when they have access to intervention and enrichment that matches their unique learning profiles and collectively supports their social, emotional and academic growth. When students face challenges, which they all will, those challenges need to be addressed without stigma or shame in order to successfully support their learning and growth.

In all schools, and particularly in secondary schools, students should have a voice in identifying needs, designing supports, assessing their effectiveness and advising on areas for improvement in the system of support.

Examples in initiatives:

- Staff collaboration structures for supporting students at Tier 1
- Time for students to receive extra support at Tier 2
- Intensive intervention for students at Tier 3

Takeaway: The whole-child lens reveals gaps in whole-child practices in some secondary initiatives.

Secondary education has historically been focused on delivering academic content, with an assumption that foundational mindsets, skills and habits have already been mastered by adolescents. Therefore, it is not surprising that initiatives geared towards secondary schools have limited guidance for how educators develop these skills, build relationships and nurture supportive environments. And yet, with rapidly developing brains, the experiences that high school students have in their classrooms can deeply impact their learning, decisions and actions.

Fortunately, initiative leaders are increasingly aware of the need to support college-level instructors and high school teachers in providing a more holistic approach that is grounded in the science of adolescent brain development. Structures, like advising and counseling, are essential for supporting students' skill development, identifying their specific assets and needs, and connecting them with resources and opportunities.

Takeaway: Effective leaders blend initiatives together in pursuit of a shared vision.

To deepen our understanding of how whole-child practices actually show up in the field, we talked to practitioners that were identified as having deep experience and expertise with at least one of the four initiatives. **We discovered that these experienced school and district leaders are blending initiatives together in pursuit of a strong, shared vision, and employing a variety of strategies to help staff connect their work around that vision.**

For example, in Anaheim Union High School District, the Community School initiative has allowed them to continue deepening and strengthening the work they were already doing to integrate initiatives towards their community-developed whole-child purpose. *“If it’s not connecting to our goals, then why are we doing it?”* They have focused on classroom interactions, student voice, staff empowerment and development, and consistent, clear messaging. In Los Angeles Unified School District, the administrator for College and Career Pathways knows the importance of understanding each school’s individual profile and having a clear process for change that starts with the “why.” She asks schools to consider how the proposed work fits with or enhances something that is already being implemented.

Takeaway: Key actions for coherence include clear communication, thoughtful implementation, and inclusive collaboration towards a shared whole-child purpose.

These success stories from the field yielded some critical discoveries about what works in developing and sustaining a coherent approach to whole-child work across initiatives.

- Revisit your school/district vision statement with your interest-holders.
- Communicate coherence.
- Engage interest-holders in talking about each existing and new initiative.
- Invest in relationships and supportive environments for adults in the system.
- Unify your LCAP (Local Control and Accountability Plan) around your whole-child vision and the initiatives that support it.
- Apply the whole-child lens to other initiatives.
- Pursue continuous improvement.

Read the full Secondary Edition of the report for more information on these key actions for building coherence.

Looking through a whole-child lens reveals common purpose and practices embedded across California's education initiatives for secondary schools, magnifying where they are already complementary and mutually reinforcing. It also reveals where there are opportunities to strengthen practices that are grounded in the science of how adolescents learn and develop.

Educators and education leaders can use a whole-child lens to point out shared purpose, vision, and goals, to understand the consistency across initiatives, to make decisions based on existing assets and community needs, and to collaborate on the implementation of a coherent set of supports - all leading toward the learning conditions where young people can thrive.