

Strengthening Coherence Across Initiatives: A Whole-Child Lens

Educators across California are struggling with the number of different, but similar, projects and programs they are being asked to implement simultaneously. At the same time, the state is talking about meeting the needs of the “whole child” through all of these initiatives. This report is about **creating greater coherence across the state’s initiatives by applying a whole-child lens**, in order to highlight their common whole-child purpose, along with the specific and actionable whole-child practices that are consistent across them.

This work is intended to support:

- **Educators** to feel and be more aligned and less overwhelmed by the multiple initiatives they are asked to implement.
- **Education leaders** to prioritize and unite people around aligned initiatives.
- **State leaders** to communicate more clearly and consistently about the whole-child connections across initiatives.

In this report, we used the whole-child lens to see the consistent purpose and practices embedded in five initiatives: **Community Schools, Expanded Learning, Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**. 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.

Ultimately, the goal for all the featured California initiatives is to create positive, equitable learning experiences in which each and every young person can learn and grow. There are multiple ways to get there and multiple starting points. The essential work is helping interest-holders across the system understand the connections and coherence across their efforts.



**Read the full
TK-12 report**

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, student 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?



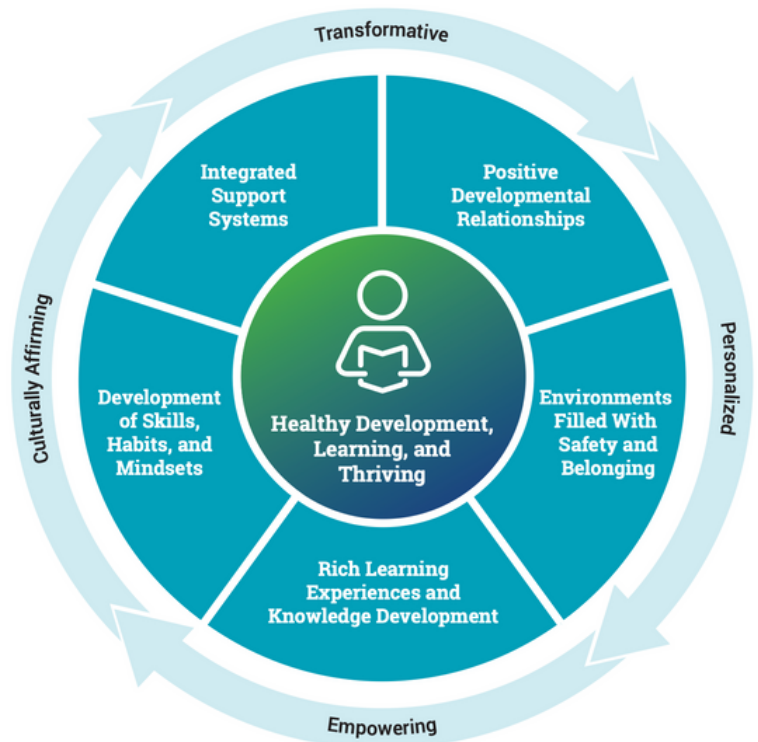
Learning Experiences: In what ways is this work providing meaningful, engaging and challenging learning experiences?



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: All five California initiatives are supporting complementary and coherent whole-child practices.

Far from implementing siloed strategies, the five initiatives are addressing a common whole-child purpose and many of the same practices across their districts, schools and classrooms. Using a whole-child lens makes this consistency visible and concrete so that educators at multiple levels of the system can see the connections and make sense of their work as part of a common purpose. Beyond these five initiatives, a whole-child lens could be applied to any initiative or strategy by using the [SoLD Design Principles for Schools Self-Assessment Tool](#).



Positive Developmental Relationships

Common across initiatives is a focus on positive developmental relationships for students and adults. 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 child 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:

- Ensuring time and space for relationships
- Structures for adult collaboration, learning and decision-making
- Communication with families
- Teacher-student-family conferences



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 even when it is difficult. This means designing together the school culture (e.g., co-creating classroom norms), as well as prioritizing mechanisms of support and repairing relationships, instead of only discipline, when challenges inevitably arise (e.g., using co-regulatory and restorative practices).

Examples in initiatives:

- Shared values, norms and consistent routines
- Educative and restorative approaches to discipline and conflict resolution
- Structures for building community
- Culturally affirming practices



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. Schools should provide meaningful, culturally connected work within and across core disciplines (including the arts, music, and physical education) that builds on students' prior knowledge and experience and helps students discover their potential.

Examples in initiatives:

- Universal design for learning
- Inquiry-based learning
- Scaffolds for mastery of complex skills
- Performance assessments that apply skills and knowledge



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. In classrooms, this means that academic instruction and student supports are most effective when they are driven by a holistic picture of the learner with unique skills, habits, mindsets, interests, relationships, experiences, knowledge and goals.

Examples in initiatives:

- Explicit social, emotional and cognitive skill instruction
- 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.

Examples in initiatives:

- (Tier 1) Staff collaboration structures for supporting students
- (Tier 2) Specialized support staff for academic and non-academic needs
- (Tier 3) Structures for interest-holder meetings and communication, among other supports

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 five 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 Schools initiative has allowed practitioners to continue deepening and strengthening the work they were already doing to integrate initiatives towards their community-developed whole-child purpose. Their mindset is, *“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 Sacramento City Unified School District, a principal attributes his success with SEL to finding out what teachers and staff are already doing and connecting to those practices and structures, rather than presenting SEL, or any other initiative, as something completely new. [Read the full TK-12 report](#) for more examples of whole-child work in action across California.

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 TK-12 report](#) for more information on these key actions for building coherence.