Coherence in Practice:
Profiles, Tools and Strategies from California Education

KATIE BRACKENRIDGE GRETCHEN LIVESEY LAURA SIKES

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Alaina Morris
Ana Maria Alvarez, EdD
Andrée Grey, EdD
Ân Ta
Bao Nguyen
Carla Gaymon-Davis
Carmen Hopkins, EdD
Cathie Irwin
Claire Fisher
Emma Falcon
Dr. Garth Lewis
Jolie Critchfield
Jose Luis Vargas
Kacy Grimes
Kate Hazarian, MSW, PDD, ACTC
Katrina Callaway
Kevin Schaefer
Lara Kain
Lauren Heusser
Leslee Cottrell, MEd
Lizzie Humphries
Dr. Lupe Gomez
Dr. Marla Silversmith
Michelle Jilly
Nashely Veronica-Mata
Nathaly Rodriguez
Patty Metheny, EdD
Rebecca Lacocque
Roman Stearns
Shanti Elliott
Stephanie Cecil-Spaulding
Stephanie Fernandez
Wakita Wilson

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About the Authors

Katie Brackenridge is part of the **Glen Price Group,** a consulting firm dedicated to inspiring and supporting local, statewide, and national public and nonprofit organizations to maximize their results through effective collaboration, analysis, planning, and resource development. Through this work, GPG contributes to a more just and equitable world and improved outcomes for all people, beginning at birth.

Gretchen Livesey and Laura Sikes are part of the **Center for Whole-Child Education** (built on the work of Turnaround for Children), part of Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation at Arizona State University. The Center advances key insights from educator practice, scientific research, and student experience so that together we can create equitable learning environments.

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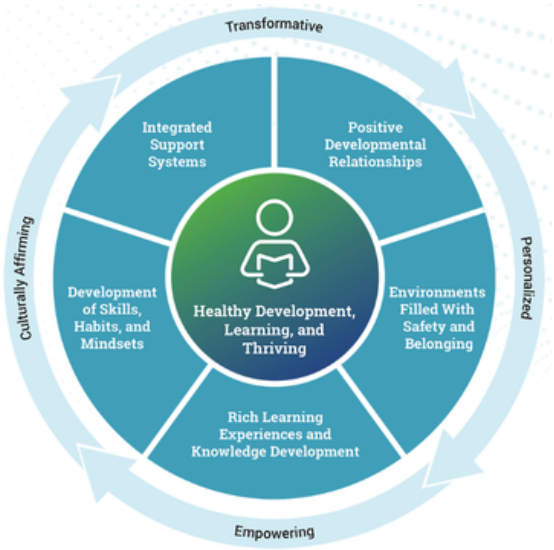
Introduction

California has embraced a whole child vision for education, acknowledging the science of learning and development and the interconnected social, emotional, physical and cognitive nature of learning. To support this vision, the state has launched a plethora of initiatives and is beginning to see positive impacts on students. This is great news.

Unfortunately, the profusion of initiatives has also created stress in the system, as educators struggle to sort through and prioritize across the initiatives' similar, but slightly different, language, goals, priorities and requirements. To counter this coherence challenge, the Glen Price Group (GPG) and the Center for Whole Child Education published Strengthening Coherence Across Initiatives: A Whole Child Lens in 2024 to demonstrate how California's initiatives are aligned around the same whole child practices designed to create positive learning environments for students.



Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design

This message is taking root as coherence efforts spread across diverse organizations and contexts in California. **This second coherence report highlights promising practices, strategies and tools for coherence in seven organizational profiles -** three school districts, two county offices of education, and two statewide initiatives. The profiles provide concrete examples of how to create coherence at different levels of the system along with resources and tools for educators to adapt to their own context. Taken together, the profiles offer insight into opportunities the state can leverage and challenges it should address to systemically deliver whole child education across California.

> ***A definition of coherence... derived from a Latin word meaning "to stick together." When something has coherence, all its parts fit together well.***

Methodology

This report is based on 28 interviews with staff in school districts, county offices of education and non-profit organizations:

Folsom Cordova Unified School District

Oakland Unified School District

Orange County Department of Education

Scaling Student Success

Supporting Innovative Practices

Sweetwater Union High School District

Yolo County Office of Education

These organizations were chosen based on their innovative work to shift from siloed implementation of initiatives and projects towards a more aligned and coherent system focused on whole child development. Together, they offer myriad examples of how LEAs can define and pursue a whole child vision for education, align strategies around that vision, and shift their internal cultures towards collaborative work. They intentionally represent different levels of the California education system - district, county and state - to help readers understand the various entry points and levers for coherence.

These seven organizations are definitely not the only ones doing innovative work. GPG's conversations with educators are constantly revealing examples of organizations implementing creative strategies for coherence. Nor is the work of these organizations perfect or complete. Their strategies are works in progress - continuously adapting as they learn.

Key Findings

The interviews for this report revealed common practices falling into three categories: Focused Priorities, Capacity Building, and Collaborative Structures. These categories align with recommendations from the first report, Strengthening Coherence Across Initiatives: A Whole Child Lens.

Focused Priorities

Communicating consistently and clearly about a focused set of priorities aligned with a whole child vision.

Capacity Building

Intentionally building the skills and conditions for adults to work effectively together toward shared priorities.

Collaborative Structures

Creating structures that support and sustain collaboration as part of the system.

NOTE: *As you read this Overview,* ***click on the profile links*** *to get more detail about specific practices in the seven profiled organizations. See Appendix A for implementation tools, including how to decide what to explore further. Appendix B is a table with links to all the profiles and concrete examples and resources from their work.*

Focused Priorities

Communicating consistently and clearly about a focused set of priorities aligned with a whole child vision.

Education leaders in the profiled organizations support coherence by focusing on - and clearly communicating about - a limited number of priorities. In Oakland USD, for example, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) create common language and direction for staff from the Linked Learning Office to collaborate with other departments, like Community Schools and Special Education. The KPI on “rigorous and relevant learning,” for example, offers concrete grounding for cross-departmental professional learning based on Zaretta Hammond’s *Ready for Rigor* framework. In Folsom Cordova USD, the Superintendent established a districtwide priority around "Connectedness" which guides an array of strategies to connect staff across roles and hierarchy so they can better understand and leverage each other’s work. Like Oakland, Folsom Cordova USD has defined and pursues Performance Targets (e.g., 3rd grade literacy) and Process Targets (e.g., coaching) that inform decision-making.

These priorities don't emerge in isolation. They connect to a "north star" - a vision, learner portrait, strategic plan, or the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) - developed through genuine engagement with community interest-holders. Sweetwater UHSD gathered input from 16,000 community members - staff, students, and families - to better understand the community’s hopes, dreams and priorities for education. Scaling Student Success encourages districts to develop Portraits of a Learner through processes that ask interest-holders to define the skills and competencies students need for future success. Through these processes, community interest-holders are not just buying into an LEA’s existing vision, they are co-creating a vision that reflects their ideas, interests and experiences. Once created, these shared vision statements are consistently communicated and actively used to guide decisions and set priorities that make sense to the community and can be implemented collaboratively by staff.

Examples of Focused Priorities from the profiles:

Organization	Practical Example(s) of Focused Priorities
Folsom Cordova USD	• Modeling and communicating coherence from district leadership
Oakland USD	• Using the Strategic Plan and Graduate Profile to guide decision-making • Defining common instructional priorities

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Organization	Practical Example(s) of Focused Priorities
Sweetwater UHSD	• Unifying Cabinet leadership around a whole child approach • Gathering input to define priorities
Yolo COE	• Leading with a culture of communication and improvement
Scaling Student Success	• Developing a Portrait of a Learner • Advocating for aligned state and local policy

Capacity Building

Intentionally building the skills and conditions for adults to work effectively together toward shared priorities.

Profiled organizations invest significant attention, time, and resources to build the capacity of adults in the system to make decisions and take actions that support coherence. This focus is grounded in mutual respect and trust, and a culture of continuous improvement, among leadership, managers and staff who value skill building as an essential part of reaching their shared goals. In Oakland USD, Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) from 16 high schools convene for districtwide summits where the district models the collaborative planning and shared leadership ILTs can replicate at school sites. In the summits, team members, representing different initiatives and functions in the school, practice looking at data, discussing options and voting on areas of focus that help them align their work.

Sweetwater UHSD runs a districtwide community of practice for Community Schools and Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) staff, building shared understanding of whole child practices and identifying areas of alignment across their practices. Orange CDE also leverages the Community Schools approach to bring together different initiatives. At their countywide Community Schools Network meetings, district staff learn how Community Schools can act as an organizing framework for coherence across multiple initiatives in their districts. They also explore how they can integrate Community Schools work into existing planning documents and processes, like the LCAP, School Site Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) and Differentiated Assistance (DA).

The statewide initiative, Supporting Innovative Practices, helps districts provide inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities by building staff capacity, starting with shifting their mindsets and core beliefs about students with disabilities. They also help connect districts and school staff with resources and initiatives that can support inclusion. Scaling Student Success brings districts together to learn about implementing their Portraits of a Learner, moving beyond what is written on their posters to setting up systems and practices that build the student skills and competencies defined in the portraits.

Capacity building is not only about professional learning. Sometimes it means literally creating more time for essential work. In Folsom Cordova USD, for example, district staff create capacity for principals to focus on instructional leadership by guarding space on their calendars and reducing the amount of time they spend on administrative tasks, including district meetings and emails. The need to reduce the

administrative burden is a statewide issue as referenced in Getting Down to Facts III: "Overlapping plans, repeated reporting, and procedural duplication consume time and weaken local capacity for instructional improvement and strategic planning."[1] With additional capacity, principals can focus on helping teachers create positive, whole child learning environments.

Examples of Capacity Building from the profiles:

Organization	Practical Example(s) of Capacity Building
Folsom Cordova USD	• Creating space for school administrators to focus on instruction
Oakland USD	• Strengthening Instructional Leadership Teams to build coherence across school sites
Sweetwater UHSD	• Using a districtwide Community of Practice to align initiatives at schools
Orange CDE	• Designing professional learning that connects Community Schools, CA MTSS, and planning processes • Developing tools and resources to make coherence visible
Supporting Innovative Practices	• Starting with mindsets • Providing flexible, meet-you-where-you-are support • Connecting districts with resources, organizations and initiatives
Scaling Student Success	• Implementing the systems and structures to actualize the portrait of a learner

[1] *Getting Down to Facts III, p. 3*

Collaborative Structures

Creating structures that support and sustain collaboration as part of the system.

Profiled organizations build internal structures that allow staff to plan and implement strategies collaboratively. As in Sweetwater and Orange County, Folsom Cordova USD leverages Community Schools as an organizing framework for coherence for all schools - not just those with state funding for Community Schools. Most concretely, the Folsom Cordova Community Schools Coordinator has developed Coordination of Services Teams (COST) at every school site. Coherence becomes tangible when staff with diverse roles - for example, teachers, counselors, school administrators, attendance clerks - are meeting together to figure out the specific mix of services and actions across initiatives that will address the unique needs of each student. COST meetings have reduced staff time on disjointed services, and increased follow through on student supports.

By providing time and space for relationships and reflection, collaborative structures address the "below the green line" issues that are essential for coherence. Yolo COE's "Lunch & Learn" sessions bring leadership and program staff together to learn about each other's work while enjoying food and each other's company. Each "Lunch & Learn" session focuses on one department's work, with staff presenting how they support whole child practices and the group exploring how the work being presented intersects and interacts with their own approach. Greater understanding of each other's work and personal connections have made staff more likely to go to each other with ideas and resources for collaboration.

Supporting Innovative Practices is intentional about who gets to the table-ensuring district teams include people who are both grounded in the work and able to make decisions. The mix of participants in Inclusion Academy teams - superintendents, SPED and general education directors, union representatives, community partners and families - is essential for creating change that makes sense in practice, is accepted by those who are doing implementation, and can move forward through the decision-making hierarchy.

Examples of Collaborative Structures from the profiles:

Organization	Practical Example(s) of Collaborative Structures
Folsom Cordova USD	• Leveraging Community Schools as a coherence driver • Strengthening COST structures • Prioritizing collaboration through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

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Organization	Practical Example(s) of Collaborative Structures
Yolo COE	• Investing in shared understanding through “Lunch & Learns” • Align around a whole child lens
Supporting Innovative Practices	• Getting the right people to the table for impactful collaboration

Implications Across the State

For district and county office leaders, this report offers a starting point. Focusing on key priorities, building adult capacity, and creating collaborative structures are three broad and achievable categories of action that innovative districts and county offices of education are using right now. The planning tools in Appendix A are offered as guides for reflection and next steps. The profiles and resources linked in Appendix B provide the specific detail to make these strategies real in your context.

For state education leaders and policymakers, this report reveals both the organic innovation growing across California and the challenges that educators face with the state's many initiatives. Recent statewide reports recognize these challenges and offer recommendations that would strengthen coherence and encourage the types of innovations that are documented in this report.

- Getting Down to Facts III suggests systemic changes - for example, consolidate and align accountability and governance systems, reduce administrative burden and support disciplined innovation - that would support coherence. Particularly relevant is the report's emphasis on building a system that learns from the innovations and experiences of pioneering organizations like those profiled in this report.

- The Statewide System of Support: Core Working Group Recommendations similarly calls for systemwide learning and continuous improvement infrastructure as well as clear statewide goals for education and systemwide alignment and coherence.

- Community Schools Impact on Student Outcomes: Evidence from California offers a compelling case for Community Schools as an organizing framework for coherence-building as demonstrated by several of the profiles in this report.

With these reports and the testimony of education leaders across the state, there is growing consensus and momentum around the policy and system reforms that can alleviate the state's coherence challenges and amplify successful innovations that LEAs have already adopted.

Conclusion

This report captures only a fraction of the promising coherence work happening across California. We hope the profiles inspire readers with strategies, resources, and tools - and spark curiosity about what others nearby are doing. While the feeling of being overwhelmed is real, so is the opportunity for California's talented educators to innovate, explore, and improve together.

Appendices

13 | Appendix A: Tools

Reflect on your Starting Place

Chart your Path

Record your Thinking

16 | Appendix B: Linked Resources

APPENDIX A

Reflect on your Starting Place

If something in this report resonated with you, we want to help you act on it. Reports like this don't always include tools - but we wanted to give you a hand translating these ideas into next steps. The tools that follow can help you reflect on where you are, decide what to explore further, and map out concrete action steps for your own context.

Directions:

1. **In each row, circle** the phrase that best describes where your organization is right now.
2. Then, **add up your total number of points** for each area of practice to see your areas of strength and growth (when it comes to creating coherence).

Focused Priorities	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts
Our whole child vision:	We don't have one	We have one but staff don't know it	Staff know and use it to guide decisions
Our priorities:	Scattered across many initiatives	Clear to leadership but not staff	Shared and consistently communicated
Community input:	Not yet engaged	Consulted but not co-creating	Actively shaping our vision and priorities

= TOTAL: ( )

Capacity Building	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts
Adult relationships:	Staff in different roles rarely interact	Some connection but mostly siloed	Strong cross-role relationships and trust
Professional learning:	Separate for each initiative	Some connections being made	Explicitly designed to link initiatives
Leader capacity:	Leaders buried in admin tasks	Sporadically able to coach and collaborate	Leaders have space to coach and collaborate

= TOTAL: ( )

Collaborative Strucures	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts
Cross-role meetings:	Staff rarely meet across roles	Some meetings but not regular/structured	Regular, purposeful cross-role collaboration
Decision-makers:	Often absent from collaborative spaces	Sometimes present	Consistently at the table in collaborative spaces
Coordination:	Each initiative operates independently	Occasional coordination	Systematic structures for cross-initiative alignment

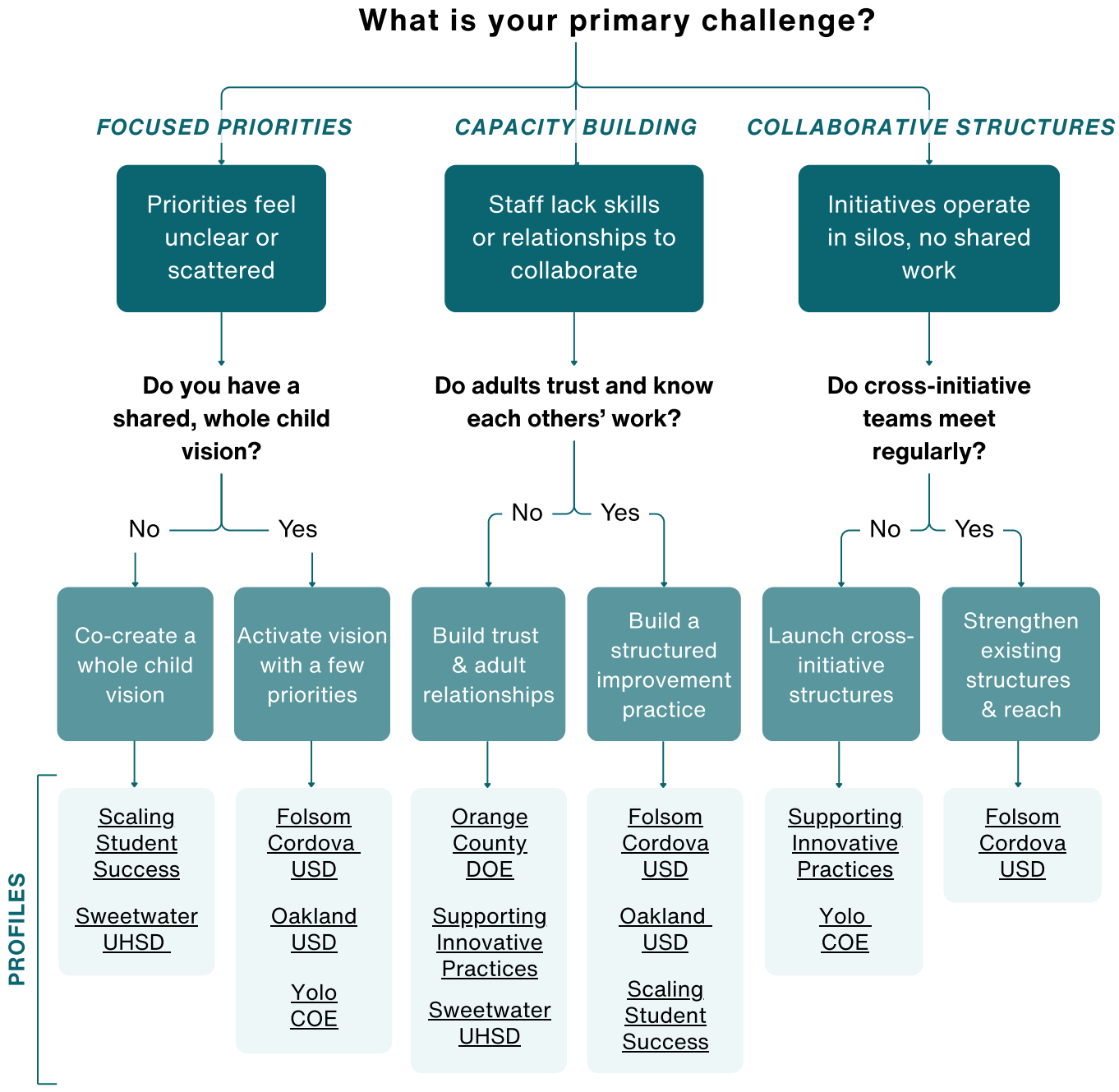
= TOTAL: ( )

APPENDIX A

Chart Your Path

Directions:

1. Use your lowest results from the previous page to identify your primary challenge.
2. Follow the decision tree to find an organizational profile(s) that best match your context. (Note: You can see specific tools/resources from each profile in Appendix B)
3. Circle the profile(s) you want to prioritize, and dig in.



APPENDIX A

Record your Thinking

1. What stood out from the profile(s) you read?

2. What are some ideas that are bubbling up for you?

3. What are some concrete steps you might take?

4. Who else would you share this information/your ideas with?

APPENDIX B

Linked Resources

Resources linked in the seven coherence profiles, organized by the three practice categories from the Coherence Overview.

Profile	Focused Priorities	Capacity Building	Collaborative Structures
Folsom Cordova USD (District)	• Iceberg of Ignorance • Collective commitments • Performance and process targets • Community Schools update to the Board		• Community Schools webpage • LCAP and SPSA • Welcoming School District Guidelines • Building Student Success through Collaborative Leadership (video) • COST workshop slides • Visual of the COST Team process
Oakland USD (District)	• Strategic Plan • Graduate Profile • Community Health and Education Pathway	• ILT Playbook	• Capstone Project
Sweetwater UHSD (District)	• LCAP • Strengthening Coherence Across California: A Whole Child Lens • Coherence (Fullan) • Whole child graphic organizer	• Community of Practice session 1 slide deck • Community of Practice culminating event slide deck	
Orange County DOE (County Office)	• Maximizing Impact: CA MTSS and Community Schools - A Beginner's Toolkit • Crosswalk of the Frameworks • Six Conditions for Systemic Change	• Street Data (Safir) • Workshops for Beginners • Four-session slide deck (CA MTSS + Community Schools)	• Community Schools Network Meeting • Joint Network Meeting

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APPENDIX B

Profile	Focused Priorities	Capacity Building	Collaborative Structures
Yolo COE (County Office)	• Roadmap to the Future • Cabinet Charter	• Lunch and Learn purpose • Strengthening Coherence across California Initiatives • Driver Diagram • Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design • Strategic Planning Deck (session 1) • YCOE Strategic Collaboration Groups	• Strategic Collaboration sample slides
Scaling Student Success (Statewide Initiative)	• Bringing a Graduate Profile to Life: A Blueprint • Encinitas USD Learner Profile • Encinitas Superintendent newsletter • Encinitas USD case study • Reimagining California Schools Innovation Pilot • 2025 Policy White Paper • CA State Board Portrait of a Learner	• Bringing a Graduate Profile to Life: A Blueprint • Community of Practice • Community of Practice member districts • District case study briefs • Santa Ana USD Graduate Profile	
Supporting Innovative Practices (Statewide Initiative)		• SIP website • Results Pyramid • Marysville JUSD professional development slides • East Valley SELPA • SIP Blueprint for Inclusion • SIP Blueprint organizational inclusion self-assessment • Booth and Ainscow Index for Inclusion • Open Access	