



# SERVING THE WHOLE PERSON

Breaking Down Barriers, Building Relationships:  
Delaware's Collaborative Approach to Inventorying  
Whole-Child Efforts

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In 2019, the national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd (The Center) solicited ideas from state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) regarding their most urgent and important needs to successfully support whole-person development. The concept of the “whole person” refers to a comprehensive notion of human development that includes several domains, such as physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Feedback from discussion with education leaders indicated that LEAs and SEAs wanted support to improve alignment and coherence of their whole-person initiatives. SEA leaders specifically requested resources and facilitation to establish a statewide vision for serving the whole person, to inventory and map the relationships among social and emotional learning and other whole-person initiatives, to create plans for aligning initiatives, and to communicate with internal and external stakeholders about this work.

In response, WestEd drafted and piloted the guide, *Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for State Education Agencies*. This guide outlines an adaptable process for SEA staff to review whole-person initiatives, increase alignment and coherence among them, and monitor progress over time. It is intended to be used to promote more equitable conditions of learning and development for students, families, and educators, which are more likely to result when whole-person initiatives are implemented within aligned and coherent systems.

**Alignment:** refers to all policies, practices, processes, and roles in a system working together in similar or consistent ways

**Coherence:** refers to integration and interconnection between the parts of the system in a way that mutually reinforces shared understanding and overall progress toward a clear vision and set of goals

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“The theory of change behind this guide is that if educators at every level of the K–12 system work in aligned and coherent ways to sustain equitable conditions of success that support whole-person learning and development, then each and every student will have the experiences that support personal purpose, healthy relationships, a sense of place in community, success in school and the workplace, and engaged citizenship.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walrond, N., & Romer, N. (2021). *Serving the whole person: An alignment and coherence guide for state education agencies*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/wholeperson-alignment-and-coherence-guide-for-state-education-agencies>

The guide provides guidance for five steps in a cycle of improvement: (a) establishing a shared vision and theory of change, (b) inventorying whole-person initiatives, (c) analyzing interrelationships for alignment and coherence and creating an action plan, (d) implementing the plan and monitoring its progress, and (e) refining alignment and coherence over time. It encourages SEA staff to adapt each step to their needs, contexts, and decision-making power and to engage with key leaders and other stakeholders to complete the steps of the guide. It also invites users to connect their work with the guide to other approaches and frameworks already in use, such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) or Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems.

To ensure the guide is useful and useable, WestEd piloted it with several SEAs as part of a cross-state collaborative. Center staff provided SEA teams with support for adapting their work with the guide, facilitating meetings, and compiling data.

In Delaware, Department of Education (DOE) leaders used the guide to review initiatives that serve the whole school, whole child, and whole community (hereafter referred to as “whole child”), tailoring the inventory process to align with their collaboration goals. To create the inventory, SEA leaders relied upon a strong leader who had cultivated a foundation of trust and support with each of the contributors. The aggregated inventory data prompted discussion among Delaware leaders about how to formalize agencywide collaboration, leverage existing relationships to strengthen future work, and examine whole-child outcome data to promote more equitable outcomes for young people. This case story describes how Delaware DOE leaders used and adapted the guide and shares key insights that may benefit other SEAs as they consider their own efforts to improve the alignment and coherence of their whole-person or whole-child initiatives.

## Delaware’s Statewide Efforts to Provide Trauma-Informed Supports

In October 2018, Delaware Governor John Carney signed an executive order to make Delaware a “trauma-informed state,” instructing state agencies that serve children and families to integrate trauma-informed best practices into their services. In response, the Delaware DOE created a new position — Education Associate of Trauma-Informed Practices and Social and Emotional Learning — and hired Teri Lawler, a school psychologist and school district leader, to fill it. Lawler quickly began to expand awareness among her colleagues of the neurobiology of stress and strategies to build resilience, identify nonacademic barriers to learning, and explore every community member’s role in eradicating those barriers.

Lawler then formalized this initial work by adapting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s “[Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child](#)” framework to the state’s context.<sup>2</sup> She also identified several groups and individuals throughout the DOE who were already working on whole-child initiatives that incorporated trauma-informed practices and other related approaches, and she began building a network of colleagues with shared interest in supporting the health, safety, and well-being of students and families. These efforts helped Lawler build a strong foundation for whole-child support in Delaware as well as trust and relationships across the department and state.

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<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Whole school, whole community, whole child (WSCC)*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc/index.htm>

When Delaware began working with The Center to pilot WestEd’s guide in 2020, the state had established a mission and vision that included mention of “safe and healthy environments,” “engaged families,” and “equitable access” to services and supports.<sup>3</sup> Given this context of existing statewide and SEA priorities, leaders in Delaware recognized a need to strengthen the alignment and coherence of the whole-child supports they offered. Lawler identified chapter 2 in the guide, “Inventory Whole-Person Initiatives,” as a starting point to articulate what each program or initiative offered, who it served, and how it could be accessed. While DOE leaders wanted to get a full picture of whole-child supports statewide, they also wanted to keep the initial process manageable; as such, they opted not to include programs conducted by other state agencies, such as the Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families, (Selecting an appropriate scope is part of the initial process outlined in the guide; more information can be found in the guide’s “Prepare to Use the Alignment and Coherence Guide” section.)

## Getting Started: Enabling Cross-Department Collaboration

Lawler began by introducing the SEA guide and the inventory process at a meeting with the DOE’s highest-ranking secretaries and directors as an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships across the department’s various “work groups,” or subdepartments, and to create a tool for examining all of the DOE’s whole-child initiatives.

### Delaware Snapshot\*

# School districts: 19

# Charter schools: 23

# Public schools: 192

# Students: 138,414

- % Low-Income: 26.73%

High school graduation rate: 87.7%

#### Race/ethnicity breakdown:

- American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0.41%
- Asian American: 4.27%
- Black or African American: 30.5%
- Hispanic or Latino: 18.25%
- Multi-Racial: 4.62%
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 0.14%
- White or Caucasian: 42.25%

#### Inventory collaborating groups:

- Office of Equity and Innovation
- Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development
- Office of School Supports
- Office of Exceptional Children Resources
- University of Delaware’s Center for Disability Studies

# of initiatives identified in the inventory: 64

\* Delaware Report Card (2021). *Delaware State Snapshot*. <https://reportcard.doe.k12.de.us/detail.html#about-page?scope=state&district=0&school=0>

<sup>3</sup> Delaware Department of Education. Vision and Mission of the Delaware Department of Education. <https://education.delaware.gov/about-doe/vision/>

Each work group was invited to document their own whole-child efforts in the inventory. Five work groups contributed to the inventory, with the highest number of initiatives housed in the School Supports work group, which includes School Climate, After School, and other key programs. Other contributing work groups included Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development; Exceptional Children Resources; Educator Effectiveness; Early Childhood Support; and the Office of Equity and Innovation (which houses the state’s trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning work). In total, 64 initiatives were identified as serving Delaware’s whole-child priorities.

Because of the breadth and volume of these initiatives, Lawler modified the guide’s suggested process. Although the template offered in the guide includes over 40 response fields for each initiative, Lawler found that narrowing these fields to one or two key fields in each domain (for a total of about 12 questions per initiative) helped make the work more manageable for contributors while also enabling direct comparisons across initiatives.

The guide also suggests that work be done in teams, but Delaware took a disaggregated approach in compiling the inventory data. As the leader of the inventory process, Lawler attended meetings with the contributing groups to present on the benefits of whole-child frameworks, answer questions about the purpose of the inventory, identify which initiatives should be included, and clarify what was being asked in each of the fields. These meetings served as another opportunity to build relationships across groups with related goals.

## Insights from Delaware’s Work with Inventorying Whole-Child Supports

### 1. Adapting the steps in the guide to meet the goals and current realities of an SEA comes with both benefits and trade-offs.

Delaware leaders carefully considered and tailored the inventory’s scope and design to meet the needs of the DOE, including focusing only on programs within the agency and prioritizing a limited number of fields to facilitate group contribution. This included bypassing chapter 1 in the guide, which includes articulating the vision for aligned and coherent whole-person work. At the time that Lawler’s work with The Center began, the DOE had already coalesced around an MTSS framework that included addressing the nonacademic needs of students, described as “behavioral, social and emotional, etc.” (See [Delaware’s MTSS Framework](#)).<sup>4</sup> With MTSS set as the regulatory framework for all Delaware DOE work groups, it did not make sense to rewrite the statewide vision for supporting the whole child. Instead, Lawler found that discussions with colleagues about the inventory and what to include in it naturally led to deeper exploration of what “serving the whole child” meant in both the context of each work group and the overarching MTSS framework. These conversations served as an abridged yet significant version of the guide’s recommendations for setting the vision.

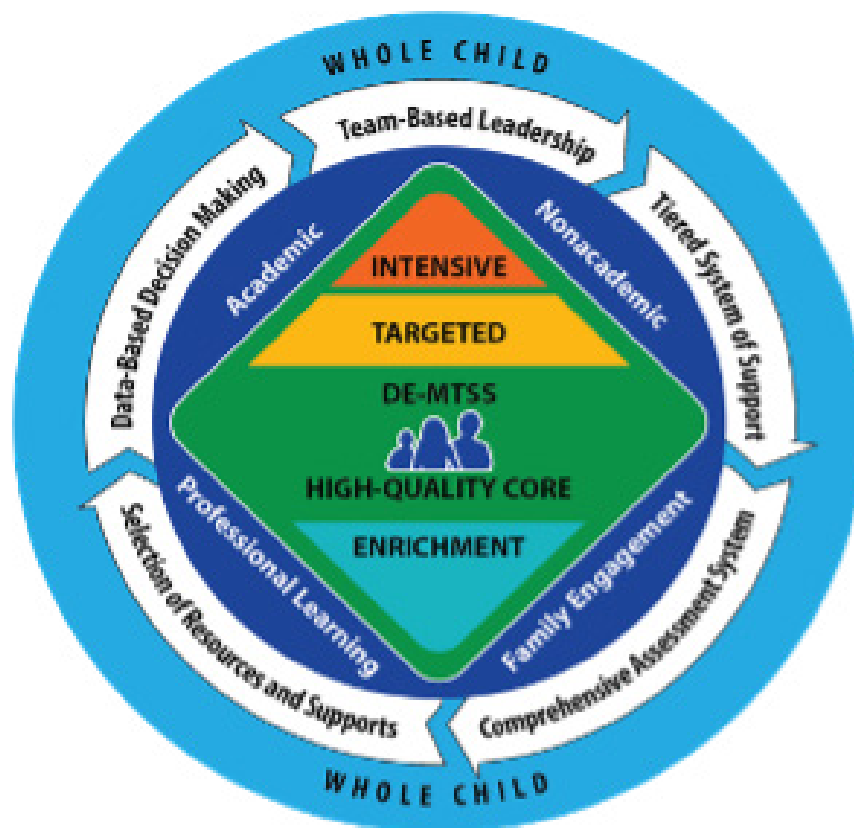
However, starting with chapter 1 in the guide might have enabled faster completion of the inventory because the contributors would have already articulated their shared vision. Instead,

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<sup>4</sup> Delaware Department of Education. *Delaware’s MTSS framework*. <https://www.doe.k12.de.us/Page/4413>

this calibration happened during the inventory process, which added time. In the five months that it took to complete the inventory, much of Lawler’s time was spent working with individuals and groups to help them understand where and how their work connected to the nonacademic supports described in the statewide MTSS framework and how it contributed to an overall vision of whole-child development. During the inventory process, the DOE updated its MTSS framework to name whole-child development as the outcome of successful implementation (See Figure 1: Updated Delaware MTSS Framework). This thoughtful and collaborative approach helped Delaware leaders strengthen connections between related bodies of work across the state.

Figure 1: Updated Delaware MTSS Framework



**2. A collaborative approach to the inventory process can offer opportunities to build and strengthen relationships.**

The collaborative spirit and intellectual curiosity with which Delaware leaders approached the inventory process was key to its success. While the primary and most tangible outcome was the inventory itself, the creation of the inventory allowed Delaware leaders to build relationships and deepen their collective commitment to equity and to serving the whole child.

For example, during the meeting to review the aggregated inventory data, individuals expressed enthusiasm for using the inventory as a tool to further identify opportunities to work together. Several expressed interest in understanding the individual and collective impact of the initiatives included in the inventory, raising questions about how the DOE is measuring the impact of its whole-child efforts and whether the impact is equitable for all students. During this process, staff members identified a need to access, examine, and interpret data related to student well-being while engaging in honest, vulnerable, and courageous conversations about disparate outcomes — primarily for students of color.

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**“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”**

*—AFRICAN PROVERB AND A FOUNDATIONAL TENET IN DELAWARE’S APPROACH*

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The process of completing the inventory also helped break down perceived barriers among work groups by convening individuals that did not typically have opportunities to interact with one another. Through this process, Lawler sought to affirm the positive work being conducted by each work group and to explore opportunities for strengthening that work through collaboration. Individuals were asked to set aside their egos and to engage their intellectual curiosity about how their programs worked, who they affected, and why. Exploring these ideas together built collective will among these leaders and staff members to find new and better ways to work together.

Although several individuals and groups were initially identified to contribute to the inventory, several more were brought in later as they expanded their definition of a whole-child initiative. This shift made the process more thorough and inclusive.

### **3. A motivated and effective leader is crucial for engaging others to support the inventory process.**

Although many shared the work of completing the inventory, Lawler drove the process forward and was committed not only to the outcome but to the process itself. As a strong leader, Lawler relied on the social capital she had established with colleagues across the Department to garner their commitment and to draw others into conversations about how the DOE could align its whole-child initiatives. During the five months it took to complete the inventory, Lawler continued to strengthen the important relationships she had developed early in her role and to foster connections among the other contributing DOE work groups. Lawler’s leadership enabled others to contribute their “pieces of the puzzle” to create a complete picture that will inform the collective work of the participating DOE work groups going forward.

### **4. An inventory can provide a concrete record of the great work happening in a state and can be used to build opportunities for collaboration.**

The staff members involved in creating the inventory found that it was affirming and motivating to see all of the Delaware DOE’s whole-child initiatives and programs listed together in one place



and in a way that clearly articulated what each work group was doing to support whole-child development. Furthermore, at the final meeting to review the inventory, leaders identified possible points of collaboration across initiatives and work groups. Together, the list and these points of collaboration helped contributors to see where their work intersected with that of others and to begin thinking about how they might better partner to strengthen their impact and achieve more equitable outcomes for young people. Some areas for combining efforts that emerged from the initial review of the inventory included behavioral health, school climate, and discipline.

As discussed above, the outcome of this work in Delaware was not only the inventory but also the important conversations that were initiated during the process of creating and examining the inventory. Establishing a tangible list was the “means to an end” of strengthening relationships and building opportunities for collaboration among those who support whole-child development, which will ultimately help state leaders foster better, more equitable outcomes for the young people they serve.

## Looking Ahead

Shortly after the meeting to review the inventory, the contributors identified several actions to take to continue strengthening the vision for equity and whole-child supports that had been established through the process. First, work groups with whole-child initiatives established an ongoing process to communicate with each other about the progress of their work. Second, leaders revised new staff orientation to explain why focusing on whole-child development is central to the DOE’s work and to provide examples of whole-child initiatives across several work groups.

As policymakers revise the state’s Education Code to include social and emotional learning as a universal approach in Delaware’s MTSS framework, it appears likely that whole-child initiatives and outcomes will remain a top priority in Delaware. The collaborative work of creating the inventory established healthy whole-child development as an enduring goal of the DOE, and the inventory itself will be used as a reference for continued conversations about how to best conduct and evaluate work that serves the “whole school, whole child, and whole community.” Those who participated in the inventory process have reaffirmed their dedication to building partnerships throughout the DOE and to achieving individual and collective program impact. These leaders plan to commit over the long term to the work of aligning their programs and services to ensure that Delaware’s children achieve more equitable outcomes