Equitable, Sustainable Systems Change at Scale:

Lessons Learned From State Collaboratives

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Acknowledgments

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Systems Change for State Educational Agency Leaders

Over the past 5 years, the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety (CISELSS) at WestEd has had the privilege of providing universal, targeted, and direct technical assistance for state and local agencies. This report draws upon the experiences of participants in three long-term peer collaboratives that CISELSS facilitated for state agency teams from across the nation. The report conveys our insights, lessons learned, and recommendations. Each of these three state collaboratives focused on a different theme:

- Alignment and Coherence Collaborative (including strands on *Student Safety and Well-Being and Strategic Communication*)

- Data for Truth and Action Collaborative

- Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative

More information about these state collaboratives can be found on the CISELSS website and in Appendix A. Our state collaboratives allowed participating teams to learn with and from each other, nationally renowned subject experts from mission-aligned centers and organizations, and CISELSS staff during cross-state consulting sessions, public webinars, and regular team meetings. States formed multidisciplinary teams within and across state agencies (such as education, health, behavioral health, and public safety) to address a particular problem of practice. The CISELSS collaboratives also drew from several evidence-based resources either developed by our team or curated from the field. A sample of those resources can be found in Appendix B. Participants in the collaboratives frequently shared that they have valued three dimensions of the collaborative experience: dedicated time to collaborate in their teams, opportunities to learn from other states navigating similar challenges, and external facilitation from CISELSS staff.

The Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative (TKC) provided our state team with an important opportunity to reflect and plan for an early childhood vision for our state. The TKC not only created opportunities for us to connect with colleagues in our own state but [also allowed us] to connect with colleagues across the country who are doing amazing work for our field, learn about their efforts, and leverage their lessons learned to inform our plan. Our work to develop an early childhood vision helped us to create a sense of shared responsibility [and] common messaging and to reinforce the importance of working collectively to advance the work of our field in support of young children and their families.

The investments in early childhood in our state are exciting, and the TKC provided us a space to come together as a collaborative team to think about not only how we transition children from preschool into kindergarten but [also how] to ensure that our investments and gains in the first 5 years can be sustained through kindergarten and beyond. We are grateful that Massachusetts was able to be part of such an inspiring professional learning community.

— Donna Traynham, Early Learning Team Lead, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Equitable and Sustainable Systems Change in the Current Context

Though the topics for these collaboratives varied, they shared one essential quality: The state teams worked together toward *equitable and sustainable systems change at the nexus of social and emotional well-being, excellent outcomes for young people, and equity.*

State agency leaders are uniquely positioned to lead systems change. By virtue of their role in the ecosystem, state agency leaders are positioned to have deep, sustainable impact at statewide scale. For example, state agency leaders can advance a vision that promotes coherence through clear and compelling strategic communication. They can also create state policy and provide funding and capacity-building opportunities that promote equity-centered data use, deepen interest holder engagement, and shift educator practice.

Systems Change for State Educational Agency Leaders

Six Domains of Alignment and Coherence

Because the participants in the collaboratives all worked at the state agency level, teams articulated a shared vision and theory of change that leveraged some combination of six domains of alignment and coherence: shared goals, funding and policy, capacity building, data use, strategic communication, and interest holder engagement. These domains are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Technical and Adaptive Change
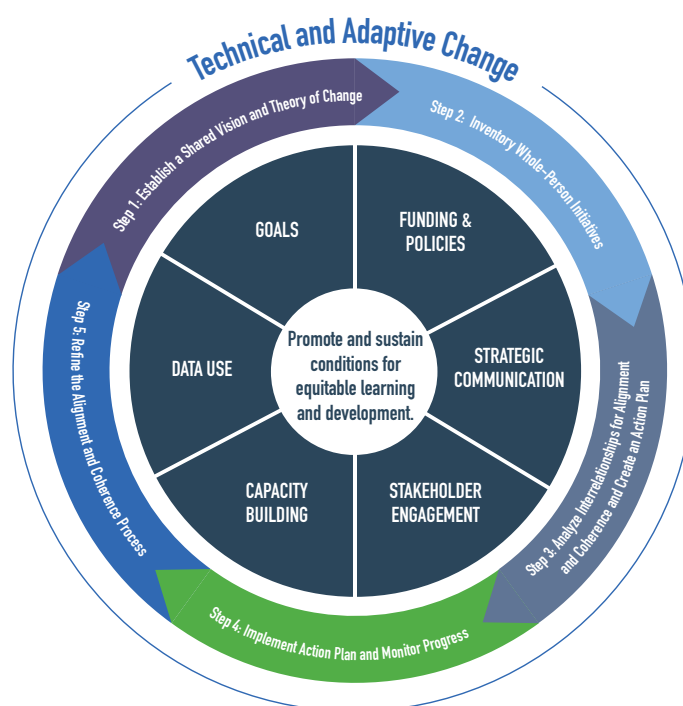
Note. Walrond & Romer, 2021

Nonetheless, state participants in the collaboratives saw that these six domains were necessary but insufficient for sustainable systems change that is grounded in equity. These domains are *technical* solutions to an adaptive challenge (Heifetz et al., 2009). Because systems change is complex, it also depends on *adaptive* approaches—those that attend to mindsets, beliefs, values, relationships, and power dynamics. (For more on this topic, please see the Petty and Leach [2020] resource from Change Elemental listed in Appendix B.)

Systems Change for State Educational Agency Leaders

Systems Change Is Values-Driven Work

The greatest successes that teams saw in their systems change efforts often happened when they hewed closely to shared values that guided their approach and their decision-making. Teams reported that they saw more sustainable and equitable improvement in their systems when they

- **centered those closest to the impact of the system** they were hoping to improve by grounding their work in the history, culture, values, strengths, and aspirations of local communities;

- **worked across silos**, **in teams**, inviting partnership from colleagues in other divisions in their agency, colleagues in other child- and youth-serving agencies, and even external service providers supporting them in similar work; and

- **took an ecological**, **contextual approach**, focusing on the conditions of success rather than blaming the individual or lifting up "one-off" successes and stories of exceptionalism.

The Past 5 Years Created a Uniquely Challenging Context for This Work

During these collaboratives, state participants navigated a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic, a renewed call for equity and racial justice in response to continued oppression and racial violence, a rash of school shootings, a decline in youth mental well-being, and increased political polarization. In this environment, the state teams intensified their efforts to strengthen relational trust across child- and youth-serving agencies and from the state to the local level. Additionally, several state agency leaders shared that the challenging political climate created obstacles that needed to be navigated to advance equitable access, experiences, and outcomes. Leaders faced greater scrutiny of their staffing, of rhetorical choices in resources and guidance, and of the strategic supports they provided for local educators.

Six Key Themes: Relevant Insights and Recommendations

This section highlights six themes that emerged from the CISELSS state collaboratives, along with several relevant insights and recommendations for each. We hope these ideas may support other state leaders as they work to improve their systems at the nexus of social and emotional well-being, excellent outcomes for young people, and equity.

Theme 1 — The Importance of Connecting the Individual With the Collective

State teams often saw that a program, training, or toolkit—no matter how robust—cannot alone fix the systems they are working in. Overreliance on technical solutions can be extremely damaging to any change effort, as agencies may neglect the inherent complexity of educational challenges that depend upon the relationships among staff, students, families, administrators, and other members of a school community (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2016). For example, education policy and practice are interconnected, so even the most well-researched policy requires the full investment of the system leaders implementing it.

This idea is relevant from the state level to the district and school levels. When a school community lacks a strong sense of agency and relational trust, educators can find themselves in a cycle of school-level change in which new initiatives are announced half-heartedly with insufficient communication, funding, and/or capacity-building opportunities to support effective implementation. Inevitably in those conditions, reform attempts fail. Such failure frequently leads to demoralization among educators, which can manifest as pervasive distrust between colleagues, low expectations for students, and weak communication channels between practitioners and administrators (Payne, 2008).

To counter these tendencies, system leaders can promote a collaborative, inclusive climate by forming connections across differences in role, culture, experience, and more with shared values and aspirations as a basis for bridge building and collaboration. Having opportunities for active listening and collective visioning enables school community members to situate their individual experiences and interests in relation to collective needs, moving the community away from individualism and toward a culture of shared responsibility in creating a better education system for everyone (Ishimaru, 2014).

In the *Strategic Communication* strand of the Alignment and Coherence Collaborative, the Delaware team shared its work to build a strong shared vision and commitment for serving the whole child within a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework and grounded it in the science of learning and development (Buckner, 2021). The Delaware team invited partners across the state educational agency into the work of strengthening the alignment of their various whole-child supports. Their work together yielded a new visual-ization of Delaware's MTSS framework, illustrating whole-child well-being as the "why" behind their work.

> *Key Insight:* When state system leaders have a sense of agency (that is, when they know how to influence the system of which they are a part and can influence the system without negative consequences) and belonging (that is, there is a sense of shared purpose and relational trust on their teams), they can make more progress in the technical dimensions of systems change.
>
> *Recommendation:* At the outset of any change effort, your team should engage in an activity of setting a shared vision and articulating a theory of change to clarify your sphere of influence and strategies for influence. Then they can build a coalition of colleagues who can help.

Theme 2 — The Importance of Praxis: Balancing Reflection and Action

The idea of praxis is related to the fact that systems change involves a constant cycle of theory, reflec-tion, and action, which ensures opportunities for continuous improvement in the work (Freire, 1972). These concepts can often feel at odds with one another, creating tension in the work.

In the CISELSS collaboratives, particularly when state teams were focused on addressing persistent disproportionality data and other inequities in their states, we noticed that some participants desired more time to slow down; to be reflective about their own mindsets, beliefs, values, and actions; and to connect with their colleagues, especially in role-alike and affinity spaces. Other participants felt an enor-mous sense of urgency to take action to dismantle systems of oppression. Participants were not always in sync about when to reflect or act.

> *Key Insight:* Systems change requires time and patience. It becomes particularly challenging with staff turnover. Some of our state teams were able to sustain their progress by creating enduring structures and routines for cross-agency communication and collaboration, which allowed the work to continue even if individual team members changed.
>
> *Key Insight:* Complex change does not happen in a straight line. Both reflection and action are essential for continuous improvement and change.

Recommendation: Take the long view of your change strategy but create milestones along the way. The work takes a long time, and identifying and celebrating milestones of progress can sustain both momentum and motivation.

Recommendation: Expect the bumps in the road. When things do not go according to plan, it is an opportunity to learn forward. Challenges are not failures. They can allow you to more deeply understand and respond to the system you are in.

Theme 3 — The Importance of Power Dynamics and Relationship-Building

Power dynamics are everywhere: within teams, across divisions and departments, and between state and local levels. Such dynamics can hinder the work if colleagues feel apprehensive about sharing their wisdom or offering feedback or if local leaders believe that state leaders are engaging with them primarily to evaluate their work for compliance or quality.

Therefore, an essential step in systems change work is building relational trust with your colleagues and interest holders. In the collaboratives, we found that trust building happened through both intentional activities and processes and organically through the work. We also learned that trust building often requires someone on the team to take a risk in their words or actions.

Further, we saw relational trust evolve in phases. Typically, teams began by deepening their trust with one another, helping to mitigate power dynamics among team members who operated in different parts and levels of their agencies. When relational trust was strong, teams benefited from clarity of vision, more transparent communication, and better decision-making. Then, teams often realized that they needed to strengthen relational trust with external interest holders in order to effect change. We saw several of the state teams work methodically and intentionally to communicate carefully, listen deeply, and work in authentic partnership with other state agencies and the local agencies they sought to serve. Finally, we saw that when trust was established, the work went much farther much faster.

Developing trust between LEAs and SEAs requires open communication as well as clear understanding of the SEA's role. In Wisconsin, the social, emotional, and mental health work is managed by the Student Services Prevention and Wellness Team. The SSPW team does not function as compliance officers but rather serves to create resources based upon the shared needs of the field, align the developed resources with content best practices, and provide technical assistance and consultation upon request. The SSPW also recognizes the power of the LEA's experience and creates opportunities for LEAs to share successes and challenges with one another. Successful systems change and program implementation rely on many local factors and contexts. One size does not fit all, and SSPW focuses on building local and regional capacity to identify and utilize resources that will best meet the needs of the local community, including students, families, and educators. Seeing ourselves as partners to LEAs rather than as experts creates an environment that allows for innovation and collaboration resulting in better outcomes for schools, students, and families.

> *— Beth Herman, Assistant Director, Student Services Prevention and Wellness Team, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction*

Key Insight: Building relationships takes time and must be intentional, but, once established, relationships fuel the work.

Key Insight: Building relationships requires vulnerability.

Key Insight: Whole-group, small-group (e.g., role-alike, small-group collaboration), and one-on-one settings each provide valuable opportunities for relationship building.

Recommendation: Form a team of individuals who represent various levels of the agency.

Recommendation: Begin with relationship building and pay attention to relationships and power dynamics all along the way. Create the time throughout the work to sustain relationships. Meet in person sometimes, especially in the beginning.

Recommendation: Reflect on your own power and positionality in your state system and how such power might impact both your relationships and your understanding of the young people and families you ultimately serve. Make a routine of exploring difference, taking the perspective of those you serve, and being open to shifting your thinking.

Six Key Themes: Relevant Insights and Recommendations

Theme 4 — The Importance of Working Across Disciplines, Divisions, and Sectors

Systems change and systems improvement takes deeper root when the work is owned across disciplines, divisions, and sectors. The collaborative teams often brought together colleagues who shared a vision for equity, excellence, and well-being but rarely had the opportunity to collaborate on a problem of practice. Several teams indicated that the opportunity to have this kind of protected "team time" felt incredibly valuable. Additionally, the state teams that built coalitions and worked across agencies often indicated that their systems had experienced meaningful, lasting change. By working together, they were able to amplify key messages, approach the work from multiple directions, leverage resources, share efforts, and reach greater scale and impact.

For example, in the *Student Safety and Well-Being* strand of the Alignment and Coherence Collaborative, the Ohio team worked across its state departments of Education, Public Safety, and Mental Health and Addiction Services to build a shared vision of comprehensive school safety. This vision informed policy, resource allocation, and capacity building, which advanced that vision at the local level (Ali, 2022).

Key Insight: Building a coalition beyond your team extends and deepens both your understanding of the opportunity you are working toward and your sphere of influence to effect change. Multiple, diverse perspectives allow your team to create something new that could not exist from individual perspectives alone.

Recommendation: Form teams across divisions, disciplines, and sectors. Consider all child- and youth-serving agencies that influence the dimensions of well-being and excellence you are focused on and that share your values of equitable access, experiences, and outcomes. Make connections to other, similar initiatives.

Recommendation: Include all interest holders authentically, including young people and families. Authentic engagement means preparing all members to contribute their wisdom with courage and to receive the wisdom of others with curiosity.

Recommendation: Expand your understanding of what constitutes "credible" data. Include youth, family, and community insights in the constellation of data you gather for data use and action planning.

Six Key Themes: Relevant Insights and Recommendations

Theme 5 — The Importance of Policy and Practice Loops

System leaders often design or initiate change efforts with the assumption that discovering and effectively implementing new evidence-based practices or programs is enough to yield better or more impactful outcomes for community members. Leaders should engage in systems-thinking by seeing and understanding how all policies, practices, and people involved in systems interact with each other (Meadows, 2008). To ensure that each level of the system is working in tandem, leaders should create structures—such as statewide capacity-building opportunities or statewide gatherings—to more deeply understand challenges that inhibit effective practice at the start of any change effort (National Implementation Research Network, n.d.). These structures can serve as feedback mechanisms by routinizing the collection and analysis of data regarding new programming or policies. Such feedback loops incentivize educators to thoughtfully implement changes, monitor progress, and eventually engage in collective sensemaking with system leaders on the impact of shifts in practice on students, families, and educators.

In the Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative, the Nevada state team shared its work on creating alignment and coherence across its early learning and early grades systems (Buckner, 2023). Nevada drafted a policy statement on developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten that was designed to promote alignment among key aspects of the systems, including educator preparation and retention. This policy review seeded a strategic plan to strengthen coordination among agencies, divisions, and coalitions, as well as new capacity-building opportunties for educators at the local levels.

> Through this Kindergarten Collaborative, we were able [to] bring together a cross-sector team at the state level, including four different offices that touch PreK–Grade 3 within NDE (OIE, Family Engagement, OSRLE, and OELD), which was key to rolling out our DAP Kindergarten Policy Statement endorsed by the state ECAC and NDE and presented to the state board of education. This work will also strengthen our DAP K cohorts and professional learning opportunities across the state, . . . having state policy support teacher practices at the local level.
>
> — *Anna Severens, Education Programs Professional, Nevada Department of Education*

Key Insight: Attending to policy or funding without intentional strategies for shifting practice is insufficient for changing outcomes for young people. Similarly, insights from practices must have clear avenues to inform policy.

Six Key Themes: Relevant Insights and Recommendations

Recommendation: Create systems at the local levels (such as communities of practice and other capacity-building opportunities) to ensure that equity-centered policy incentivizes equity-centered shifts in practices and to ensure that practices illuminate implementation facilitators and barriers that can inform policy.

Theme 6 — The Importance of Strategic Communication

In this particularly complex time, the state collaborative teams noticed a lot of misconceptions and miscommunication among their interest holders. Further, at a time when the education system can feel chaotic, we have seen local education leaders reverse course on initiatives and approaches, such as restorative justice, before these initiatives have sufficient time to take root and demonstrate impact. State participants in our collaboratives frequently sought support with strategic communication to support their well-being and equity efforts.

We define strategic communication—as distinct from regular communication—as being *purposeful* and *bidirectional*. It is purposeful because it intends to inspire action in the listener. It is bidirectional because it not only shares important messages but also invites important opportunities to learn more about the strengths, needs, and desires of interest holders.

The state teams crafted careful approaches tailored to their particular contexts. In some states, turning to the science of learning and development (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020) helped clarify communication. For others, illuminating shared goals and values across political and cultural divides was more powerful. We observed that regardless of approach, communication that was clear, consistent, evidence-based, and values-driven was essential for the state teams in our collaboratives.

Key Insight: Strategic communication can be an important engine of your systems change work.

Key Insight: The political, social, and cultural contexts will inform your approach to strategic communication.

Recommendation: Value the bright spots in your state. Make a plan for dissemination and capacity building so that you are not inadvertently lifting up stories of exceptionalism.

*Recommendation:* Be consistent, and communicate your good work.

Recommendation: Consider strategies to reframe your work so that its value is understood and received positively.

Final Thoughts

The promise of the public education system is that it should meet the needs and celebrate the gifts of every single person who is a part of it—regardless of their background, identity, or circumstance. Thus, system leaders are accountable for the success of every student and adult who is a part of the diverse systems they serve. Your role as a leader is to create the equitable and sustainable conditions in which each member of the system can thrive. In your work to effect equitable and sustainable systems change, remember the successes and lessons learned from social justice movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement. Work together across silos to build a coalition, set a shared vision, and engage grassroots partners.

We leave you with this illustration (Figure 2) which has been adapted from widely publicized anonymous cartoon. We know the work is hard and we are cheering you on.

Figure 2. Your Plan Versus Reality
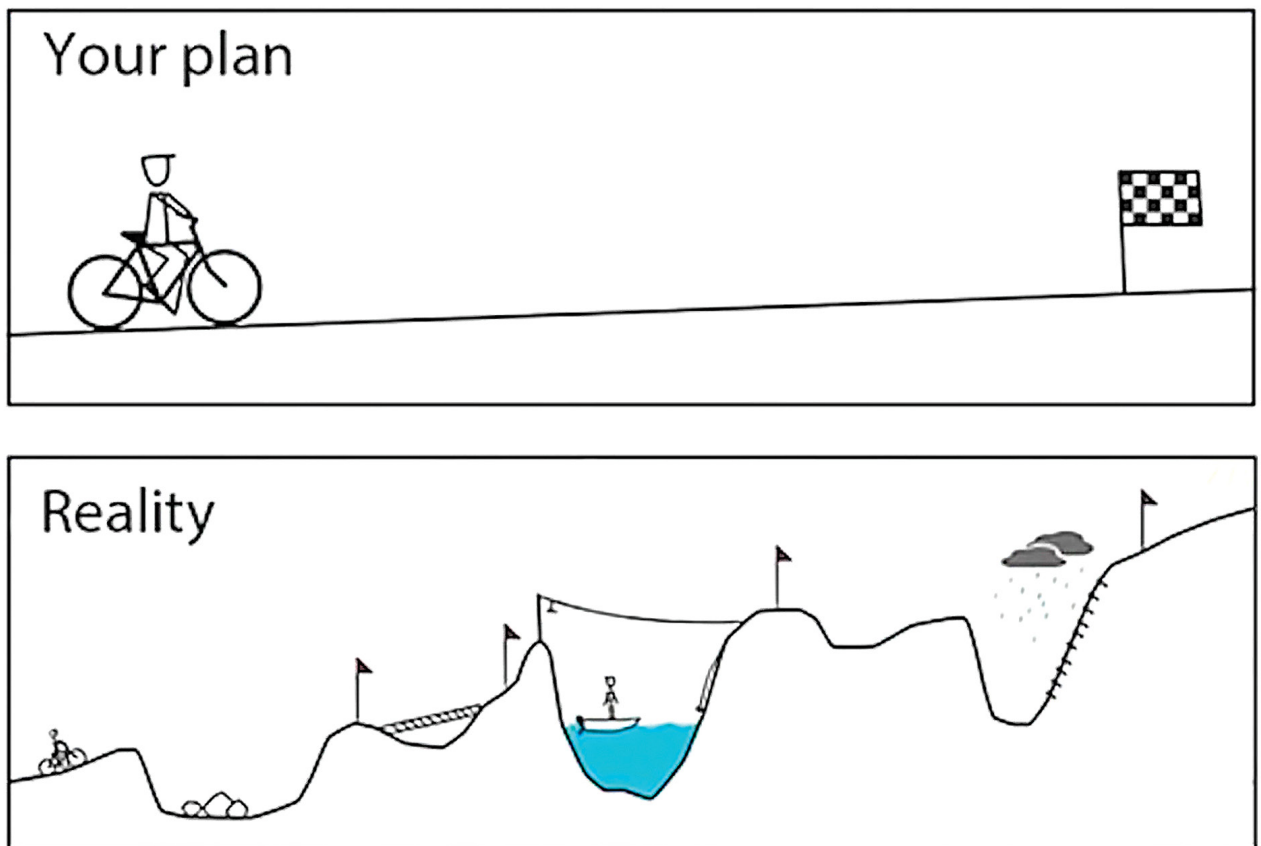
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Appendix A. State Collaboratives Facilitated by CISELSS

The Center for Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety (CISELSS) at WestEd has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. The center's charge is to support state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) in their work to adopt evidence-based programs and practices in social and emotional learning (SEL) and school safety.

As part of our targeted tier of technical assistance, the center offers peer-to-peer collaborative opportunities for SEAs and LEAs to work on a shared problem of practice relevant to the broader field. This work yields codesigned and participant-tested tools and resources that are then disseminated more broadly to the field.

Our technical assistance through CISELSS is grounded in the science of learning and development (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020), which synthesizes a vast body of research and science about how humans learn and develop. In brief, learning is integrated and contextual (Cantor et al., 2018; Osher et al., 2020).

- *Integrated.* Learning happens along four interrelated and reciprocal developmental domains: social, emotional, cognitive, and physical. Strength in one supports the strength of the others, and challenges in one may impede the development of the others. This research base undergirds the idea of serving the whole person and supports the practice of attending to social and emotional well-being in ways that are integrated with school climate, academic teaching and learning, and all of the ways schools serve their students.

- *Contextual.* Learning is shaped by the learner's experiences, relationships, and environments across their lifetime. The quality of these conditions for young people and educators has a powerful impact on teaching, learning, and development.

Our technical assistance is also grounded in equity. While there are many strong definitions, our center focuses on the role of power as essential to understanding equity. Beyond encompassing only diversity or inclusion, the concept of equity includes notions of agency, self-determination, and liberation. Therefore, working to advance equity must include considering whose values, histories, and aspirations set the vision of the work; determining which outcomes matter; controlling the resources to achieve those outcomes; implementing the work; measuring success; and governing the system. A belief in equity is fundamentally a belief that all members of a learning community deserve to be a part of creating and sustaining relationships, environments, and systems in which each person can thrive.

Over the past 3 years, CISELSS has facilitated three long-term peer collaboratives for state agency teams from across the nation. The following sections describe these collaboratives in more detail.

Alignment and Coherence Collaborative

January 2020–August 2021

Participating States: Delaware, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Washington, and Wisconsin

State agency staff have shared that the boundaries and relationships among SEL, school safety, and other whole-person initiatives often feel unclear, resulting in misaligned efforts that work at cross-purposes with one another. They have also shared that their child- and youth-serving work is often misaligned and uncoordinated with other child- and youth-serving agencies in their states. They also see misalignment with the work happening at the district level.

In response, CISELSS developed a 2-year peer-to-peer collaborative for teams from SEAs to address individual and shared problems of practice related to alignment, coherence, and strategic communication. WestEd also deployed foundation funding to develop several guides to help SEAs and LEAs improve the alignment and coherence of their whole-person efforts. The guides have been piloted with the states of Delaware, Michigan, North Dakota, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

Data for Truth and Action Collaborative

January 2021–September 2023

Participating States: Delaware, Kentucky, and Michigan

State agency staff have shared with CISELSS that they clearly see from their existing data the disparities in experiences and outcomes in their states; but, for a variety of reasons, the pace of progress toward more equitable outcomes remains stubbornly slow. Specifically, individual mindsets and beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and systemic policies and practices have created obstacles to deeper, more lasting equity work.

To respond to this need, CISELSS launched a peer collaborative opportunity for SEA teams. Building from their existing well-being data, participants explored innovative approaches to developing a more nuanced, strengths-based understanding of student well-being. This collaborative supported SEA teams to work together and with peers in other states to build deeper, fuller truths about the experiences of young people in their states; discern the root cause of inequitable experiences and outcomes in their states; and then take courageous action to advance equity. Through the collaborative, participants

identified a sustainable equity practice or set of practices that they have planned to integrate into their existing processes in an ongoing way.

Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative

April 2022–January 2023

Participating States: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Hawai'i, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, and Vermont

A transformative kindergarten experience can be a powerful lever for equity. Social and emotional development and well-being in early education experiences are essential to creating the conditions in which young children become successful lifelong learners.

The Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative was a multistate, yearlong experience for SEA leaders. It was designed to support their work to ensure that young children experience equitable and developmentally appropriate conditions for learning. Learn more about the Collaborative by viewing a webinar recording that highlights participants' insights and lessons learned from taking action to support young learners.

> This Transforming Kindergarten Collaborative and TA [technical assistance] with WestEd was instrumental in helping us draft, present, and move forward our DAP K Policy Statement while also giving us key cross-office collaborative team time with our K–3 counterparts from across the country to help spread the whole-child work and its importance to policy and implementation.
>
> *— Anna Severens, Education Programs Professional,*
> *Nevada Department of Education*

Appendix B. Reading List

Ali, S. (2022). *Safety through collaboration: Ohio's comprehensive approach to student well-being*. WestEd.

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