SERVING
THE WHOLE
PERSON

Safety Through Collaboration
Ohio's Comprehensive Approach to Student Well-Being

Shaun Ali

WestEd
WestEd.org

WestEd
WestEd.org

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

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide, from Massachusetts, Vermont, Georgia, and Washington, DC, to Arizona and California, with headquarters in San Francisco. More information about WestEd is available at WestEd.org.

INTRODUCTION

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.

ALIGNMENT	COHERENCE
refers to all policies, practices, processes, and roles in a system working together in similar or consistent ways	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

In response, WestEd drafted and piloted *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; such conditions are more likely to result when whole-person initiatives are implemented within aligned and coherent systems.

> "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."[1]

The guide provides direction 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 (PBIS).

To ensure the guide is useful and useable, WestEd invited several SEAs to pilot the guide as part of a cross-state collaborative. Center staff provided SEA teams with support for adapting their work with the guide by facilitating meetings and helping synthesize their data about whole-person initiatives. Other states in the collaborative included Delaware, whose Department of Education used and adapted the SEA alignment and coherence guide to comprehensively review their statewide initiatives, as outlined in a publication released in 2021, *Breaking Down Barriers, Building Relationships: Delaware's Collaborative Approach to Inventorying Whole-Child Efforts*.[2]

Like the Delaware publication, this piece will summarize the experience of an Ohio-based team in using the SEA guide and share key insights that may benefit other SEA leaders as they consider their own efforts to improve the alignment and coherence of their whole-person or whole-child initiatives. In 2019, in response to a mass shooting in the state, Ohio governor Mike DeWine issued an executive order to establish the Ohio School Safety Center (OSSC). This Center's charge is to assist educators and law enforcement in preventing, preparing for, and responding to threats and acts of violence, including self-harm. To inform the OSSC's work, the governor also created a cross-disciplinary School Safety Working Group to help the OSSC develop an efficient, effective, and comprehensive approach for school safety; the working group included more than 40 experts from across the state, led by the Ohio Departments of Public Safety (DPS), Education (DOE), and Mental Health and Addiction Services (MHAS). These agencies are together responsible for the full spectrum of violence prevention, intervention, response, and recovery.

---

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

[2] Buckner, L. (2021). *Breaking down barriers, building relationships: Delaware's collaborative approach to inventorying whole-child efforts*. WestEd. https://www.wested.org/resources/serving-the-whole-person-delaware-case-study/

WestEd and its cross-state collaborative worked with a core team of leaders from the three partnering state agencies to closely coordinate their safety and well-being efforts across the state, with intensive facilitation provided by dedicated technical assistance liaisons from the Center. The process included

- identifying a vision for success in the school safety work and aligning school safety with components of Ohio's Whole Child Framework;[3]

- creating an inventory of their existing programs and initiatives; and

- ultimately developing a statewide approach to comprehensive school safety to serve as a foundation for future cross-agency collaboration, including technical assistance resources.

Getting Started: Aligning Around a Common Vision for School Safety

In 2019, a core team of four leaders from across the three Ohio state agencies joined the new *Alignment and Coherence* SEA collaborative offered by the Center. They wanted to collaborate more meaningfully across agencies, specifically in their efforts to serve the whole child. Each respective agency felt their individual efforts were effective but knew that prioritizing a strategic coordinated process between all three agencies was a good way to maximize both their efficiency and their effectiveness. At the same time, the state had several related initiatives—including Ohio's Whole Child Framework; its K–12 Prevention Education Initiative;[4] changes to the health curriculum that add instruction on social inclusion, suicide awareness, and violence prevention; and new school threat assessment protocols, including plans, teams, and training[5]—that signaled meaningful support for whole-child efforts in Ohio but required greater cross-agency coordination.

> The Ohio team began with an important conversation and exercises to set a shared vision for school safety, including a series of brainstorming sessions between the Ohio team and Center staff in which they discussed the various aspects of school safety, how they relate, and how they impact students individually and collectively. For example, the Ohio team brought both physical and psychological or emotional safety together under the category of school safety. Since each agency operated in slightly different realms of education, justice, and mental health and with different language and priorities, it was important to develop a shared vision that articulated what they wanted to accomplish collaboratively rather than individually.

---

[3] Ohio Department of Education. (n.d.). *Ohio's whole child framework*. https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Ohios-Whole-Child-Framework

[4] Ohio Department of Education. (n.d.). *Prevention education*. https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Creating-Caring-Communities/Prevention-Education

[5] Ohio Department of Education. (n.d.). *Safety and violence education students (SAVE Students) act*. https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Safety-and-Violence-Education-Students-SAVE-Stude

Digging In: Taking an Inventory of Related Initiatives and Programs

The next step was to dig deep into the current landscape through an inventory process in which the Ohio state teams identified all relevant whole-person initiatives in the state; gathered and organized information with more detail about these initiatives; and identified common trends, interrelationships, and opportunities for greater alignment and coherence among the initiatives. The Ohio team needed to complete this step because the breadth and depth of the whole-student supports being provided by the Ohio team's various agencies—as well as the assumed gaps and opportunities—were limited and largely anecdotal. To identify areas of improvement, they needed details that were more concrete and a clearer idea of where the initiatives overlapped.

To begin creating the inventory, the Ohio team had to first define the parameters for the initiatives and programs they would include. The key was to be broad enough to include everything that serves supporting whole-child and school safety needs but not to be so exhaustive that any subsequent analysis would be impossible. Each agency representative took the inventory template developed by the Center back to their respective team and began populating the inventory with information on their initiatives, such as lead agency, partners, topic area, setting, legislative mandate information, and funding mechanisms.

> This process lasted a few months, with the Ohio team stopping a few times to modify the template to better fit their needs. For example, the team quickly realized that many initiatives spanned the entire spectrum of prevention, mitigation, and recovery rather than fitting neatly into one of these categories. In one meeting, one person suggested adding a column that had a singular selection of the primary function and some basic filtering across the whole inventory, which would allow them to see who was doing what in each area. The team then added a column to the template that noted the primary function of the initiative so that gaps could be more clearly identified and resolved.

Once the Ohio team decided to formally categorize their initiatives into distinct points on the spectrum of supports—**prevent, protect & mitigate, and respond & recover**—and added filtering functionality to the spreadsheet, the opportunities for improvement became clear. The inventory showed that while initiatives were housed within one state agency and mandated by a particular piece of legislation, each state agency was operating all along the spectrum and should therefore be more aware of and involved in those other initiatives. Furthermore, the inventory showed that there were several initiatives with the same goal, such as those in threat assessment. Through this process, the Ohio team increased their awareness of redundancies and hopes to reduce them so they can achieve their intended goals in a more efficient and effective manner.

Translating Insights Into Action: Establishing and Communicating a Comprehensive School Safety Model

Though the inventory was a crucial first step in gaining awareness, it shed light on a larger concern: How should the state create greater awareness and aligned support of school safety and well-being at the local level? As the Ohio team began to talk about how to increase alignment and coherence across initiatives, they realized they did not have a statewide approach for comprehensive school safety. Though this seemed like a step backward from where the Ohio team had been going, it was an important realization that nothing could happen in districts and in schools until the state clearly defined what everything meant, where things fit, and who should do what.

In response, the Ohio team decided to establish a comprehensive school safety model. While the existing frameworks used in the state—such as the Whole Child Framework, MTSS, and PBIS, as well as emergency management plans and the approach used by threat assessment—provided support through the different agencies, there was not yet any coordination between them that would ensure that all students were safe and thriving.

To develop a model that would fit Ohio's needs, the Center team started by reviewing existing school safety frameworks developed by other states and by national associations of various school-based professionals to determine what best practices or lessons learned were available from previous efforts—particularly those that fit into the Ohio team's shared vision. The team found one framework, the Framework for Safe and Successful Schools developed by the National Association of School Psychologists, that almost entirely aligned with that shared vision and thus used it as a foundation for their own approach.

Ultimately, the Ohio team built on the Framework for Safe and Successful Schools to develop their own school safety model for Ohio that

- defines what school safety is—including both physical and emotional safety;
- states their vision, principles, and goals;
- describes the roles and activities for the three state agencies involved in the project as well as for districts and schools; and
- sets short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals.

Finally, the Ohio team realized that it would be critical to communicate about vision and model to other state leaders, to education leaders and educators, and to the public. They wanted to be sure that all these stakeholders understood the state's approach to school safety, how it would unfold, and the role of each state agency. Though the approach itself was still a work in progress, the Ohio team invited the Center team to present at their annual Ohio School Safety Summit, which dozens of school safety professionals and other school leaders from across Ohio attended. During this presentation, the Center team discussed the evolution of school safety generally, the need for a comprehensive and collaborative approach, and the Ohio team's plans for moving forward.

KEY INSIGHTS: WHAT OHIO LEADERS LEARNED FROM USING THE ALIGNMENT AND COHERENCE GUIDE

1. **True and meaningful collaboration must be intentional.** Stronger collaboration was the original goal for the Ohio team in joining the Center collaborative, so they prioritized collaboration throughout the process in order to set the stage for representatives of the three Ohio state agencies to collaborate meaningfully with one another over time. Though this sounds simple, many government agency leaders (particularly in human-serving agencies) struggle to collaborate, which hinders many efforts. The Center's facilitated process allowed each Ohio agency's representative to step away from daily tasks to examine how they could more effectively accomplish their shared mission together. For example, the agencies had not yet established routines of authentic collaboration around this issue, so members worked hard to ensure that the work was shared through their meetings and through the work they completed between meetings. Over time, the Ohio team members developed enormous trust in one another, which allowed them to make decisions even when a team member was not present. It became common for members to say, "I will not be there, but the team will know how I feel, and I am okay with whatever they decide."

2. **Defining an aligned and coherent approach can clarify the state's role and work in service of districts and schools.** Although state leaders generally set policies and allocate funding to local entities, they often do not operate with a clearly defined vision, let alone specific roles for those involved and implementation guidance for districts and schools. Though the state does not provide any direct education or safety services, it is the overarching entity that sets policy and allocates funding, both of which state leaders can use to ensure all involved are aligned and coherent. As such, the Ohio team began to think through how their new approach would define what Ohio state leaders would concretely do about local schools' safety, including defining a vision for school safety but also advocating for policies in alignment with that vision, earmarking funds to support that vision, and building the capacity

of districts and schools to implement school safety measures and programs on the ground. The Ohio team also recognized that a critical role of the state was to communicate coherently about the work and decided to raise awareness about their emerging school safety work among school and safety professionals by presenting during the Ohio School Safety Summit.

3. **One step backward to take two steps forward.** After the Ohio team completed the detailed inventory of all the state's school safety and related whole-child initiatives, it became clear that what they needed next was a bigger picture consensus on what school safety is and what it takes to achieve it. Though this "zooming out" felt like a change of plan or perhaps a step backward, the Ohio team knew the redirection was the only way to achieve truly comprehensive school safety—and that developing a broader foundational document would enable them to provide more effective guidance and support to districts and states.

Looking Ahead

As the Ohio team continues to develop their new statewide approach to school safety, they have focused on how to provide practical guidance to districts and schools. Since the state already has numerous related frameworks in place (including their own Whole Child Framework as well as MTSS and PBIS), the Ohio team realizes that practical guidance would be the most useful product. Therefore, they are creating a web-based tool that not only explains the state's approach to school safety but is also accompanied by technical assistance resources and supports. The team is also committed to ensuring that the state's approach really takes root among districts and schools and plans to publish and disseminate its web resources widely and deeply in 2022. The interagency Ohio team continues to meet once or twice per month to share progress, get feedback, and maintain alignment and coherence in their pursuit of comprehensive student well-being and safety.