

Supporting Student Success Through Aligned and Coherent Systems

Natalie Walrond // 2025

State and local agencies employ a range of initiatives, programs, and funding streams to support student success. However, even well-intentioned evidence-based efforts often fall short of desired outcomes when they operate in silos because this fragmentation creates barriers to effective implementation. In contrast, when these efforts are implemented within aligned and coherent systems, they can result in better experiences and outcomes for young people, families, and communities.

Understanding the Principles of Alignment and Coherence

When state and local agencies have systems that are aligned and coherent, their efforts work in concert to achieve the intended goals. WestEd defines alignment and coherence as follows:

Alignment

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

Think of a jigsaw puzzle. Alignment describes how all the pieces fit together.

Coherence

Coherence refers to integration of 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 the jigsaw puzzle analogy, coherence describes the full, recognizable picture that the puzzle pieces create.

There are three broad types of alignment and coherence:

- **internal**—alignment and coherence of departments and divisions within an agency, often through strategic planning
- **vertical**—alignment and coherence from state to local levels within the same sector, often via system improvement efforts
- **horizontal**—alignment and coherence across child- and youth-serving sectors, often through cross-sector collaboration or collective impact efforts

Achieving systems alignment and coherence is complex work that involves both technical dimensions (such as organizational structures, processes, and regulations) and adaptive dimensions (such as mindsets, relationships, and power dynamics).



Practical Examples: What Alignment and Coherence Look Like in the Field

Internal Alignment	Vertical Alignment	Horizontal Alignment
A state education agency implements regular routines for its academic, student supports, and special education divisions to share data and coordinate capacity-building services. So, instead of the state's schools receiving separate—and potentially conflicting—guidance or supports, they now get coordinated guidance that reinforces shared student success goals.	A state education agency announces a major statewide initiative to support community schools as a strategy for whole-person success. In addition to offering grant opportunities for districts and schools, the agency standardizes data collection and invests in technical assistance for system leaders, school leaders, and educators. These efforts ensure that the state has clear and consistent approaches to supporting evidence-based practices in community schools, and schools and districts can provide standardized data and valuable feedback about community schools to the state agency.	A county aligns its education, health, and social services departments around a shared vision for family outcomes by helping them share data and braid funding sources. Now, when a student struggles, the school can quickly connect families to mental health services, housing support, or other relevant supports without requiring them to retell their story multiple times or navigate separate bureaucracies.

Benefits of Alignment and Coherence

- Implementation is more likely to be effective and efficient, minimizing internal redundancies and contradictions.
- Impact is more likely to be sustainable.
- Strategic communication becomes clearer and more resonant.

How Can State and Local Policymakers Ensure Systems Are Aligned and Coherent?

1. **Invest in policies and practices that promote systems alignment and coherence.**

Enhance alignment and coherence by investing in strategies like interagency coordination, cross-sector workgroups, and children's cabinets. These approaches facilitate collaboration across agencies serving children, youth, and families. Leverage statewide policy mandates and tax-funded initiatives to strengthen

alignment and coherence from state to local levels. Within agencies, create ongoing opportunities for divisions and departments to collaborate and align their work toward a shared vision and set of goals.

2. **Prioritize relational trust—both within your own agency and with your external partners.**

Relational trust is the engine for collaboration and alignment across interest holders, agencies, and sectors. Trust enables smart risk-taking, honest reflection, and strategic action. To achieve greater relational trust, set clear expectations about roles, processes, and goals. Dedicate time in meetings and collaborative settings for relationship building.

3. **Build a broad coalition to collaboratively deepen your understanding of shared issues and enhance impact.**

By building a diverse coalition, you can gain deeper insights into interconnected issues, design more comprehensive solutions, and foster mutual support and shared purpose.

This ecosystem of potential partners should include a variety of perspectives to enrich collective understanding and approaches to change. Key partners might include young people, families, practitioners, administrators, departmental teams, community-based organizations, and policymakers. Partnerships could span sectors such as education, health, social services, and economic development.

How WestEd Can Help

Our Services

WestEd offers a range of services to support systems leaders at state, regional, and local agencies with strengthening intra- and inter-agency alignment and coherence.

Drawing on our expertise in evidence-based practices across child-, youth-, and family-serving sectors, we offer strategic planning, consultation, facilitation, and leadership coaching tailored to the strengths and needs of the communities you serve. We help you

- strategically align programs and systems to support improved outcomes,
- apply research- and practice-informed frameworks and tools to strengthen the alignment and coherence of whole-person initiatives,
- build conditions for effective cross-sector and intra/interagency collaboration, and
- develop and continuously improve whole-person initiatives.



We support state, regional, and local agencies in aligning their systems across six interrelated domains:

- *goals*
- *funding and policies*
- *strategic communication*
- *interest holder engagement*
- *capacity building*
- *data use*

These domains are part of a continuous improvement approach (as outlined in the figure) in which WestEd helps teams establish a shared vision and theory of change, inventory the whole-person initiatives that advance that theory of change, analyze the interrelationships among them for alignment and coherence and create an action plan, implement the action plan and monitor progress, and refine the process for the next

cycle. This approach acknowledges the technical and adaptive nature of systems change.

Resources to Support Aligned, Coherent Systems

[Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for Local Education Agencies](#)

[Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for State Education Agencies](#)

[Essential Conditions for Advancing and Sustaining Cross-Sector Collaboration: A Reflection Guide for Child-, Youth-, and Family-Serving Agencies](#)

[Establishing Organizational Clarity Within a Changing Ecosystem: A Guide for Nonprofits](#)

[Systems Alignment and Coherence: Opportunities for Alameda County's Early Care and Education System](#)

Ready to improve alignment and coherence for student success? Work with WestEd.

 WestEd.org/systemsalignment-service

