

Lessons from the Field in California: Continuous Improvement, Whole-Child Design and Differentiated Assistance



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the experience and learning generated by a collaborative effort between the Butte County of Education (BCOE) and Turnaround for Children (now known as the Center for Whole-Child Education, a part of Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College) to address Dashboard findings in the Palermo Union Elementary School District (PUESD). It highlights the opportunity to integrate whole-child design into California's State System of Support, specifically into the way county offices of education (COEs) support districts in Differentiated Assistance (DA) through the continuous improvement process. It also identifies structural challenges in the existing DA support system and has implications for ongoing work within the State System of Support, particularly as the number of districts eligible for DA continues to grow. The brief concludes with recommendations for county offices of education in their work with districts.

BCOE, Turnaround and PUESD worked together between the spring of 2022 and the spring of 2023 to address PUESD's Dashboard findings around chronic absenteeism with an improvement community focused on the science of learning and development, whole-child practices, and equity. The district's three school sites participated in teams including the principal, teachers, and student support staff, as well as the superintendent. The structure, process and content of this Whole-Child Improvement Network (WCIN) is described in the full report.

Areas of Learning

Throughout the year, BCOE and Turnaround debriefed the process, gathered site team feedback and reviewed their progress. This reflection yielded several areas of learning:

- The structure of the series strengthened PUESD's capacity to do continuous improvement as part of their ongoing practice and to address other issues and needs.
- The year-long process, rather than one or two meetings, allowed participants to focus and deepen their understanding of issues and possible areas for improvement.
- Action steps between meetings kept participants engaged and accountable.
- The participation of people beyond the superintendent and the leadership team deepened and broadened the learning.
- Participants were given significant agency over the problems and improvement ideas they implemented.
- The process was asset-based, encouraging participants to recognize and build on existing work and strengths.
- The consultancy model allowed school sites to learn from each other.
- Components of the WCIN could be blended with other approaches that BCOE is implementing.

BCOE and Turnaround acknowledge that there are many outstanding questions, for example, understanding the longer-term impact of this intervention, and ultimately whether and when this work will result in improved Dashboard results. These questions, among others, are tied to complicating realities and limitations of the DA process overall.

Challenges and Implications for the State System of Support

Structural issues within the State System of Support, and specifically within the process for supporting districts in DA, raise barriers to the very improvement process COEs and LEAs are trying to implement. Some of these challenges include:

- Change requires intentional, sustained and focused work over time, but the current DA structure expects rapid improvement with little support in an already stressed system. The expectation for the DA process has already been expanded from one to two years, but more time is needed.
- Within the DA process, there is tension between COE's charge to build capacity for improvement over time and the need to address Dashboard findings in the short term. COEs struggle to communicate with their LEA partners about what they are doing and why, including working for transformational change, when the incentive system rewards more transactional change that may result in more visible and immediate percentages on the Dashboard.
- There are also logistical challenges with the Dashboard timeline: With data being released in the winter, COEs have little time to engage meaningfully with districts before the summer break. Acknowledging this challenge, the state is working to release Dashboard data earlier in the school year, with hopes of ultimately having it available each year in September.
- While the language of "whole-child education" is widely used around the state, including by the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education, it is largely invisible in the State System of Support and the DA Process. COEs, districts and state agencies have limited shared understanding of what it is, how it translates to educator practice, or how it might help districts address their Dashboard findings.

Recommendations for COEs

The report concludes with a set of recommendations for COEs interested in adopting a whole-child aligned approach to continuous improvement. Examples of recommendations include ensuring that participants represent a cross-section of stakeholders from across the district, allocating sufficient time for learning across the school year, grounding in a shared understanding of the science and practice of whole-child design, and explicitly focusing on building capacity for improvement.

Despite this stressful period in education, PUESD was able to participate whole-heartedly in the change process. While they represent only one district, their experience provides a concrete example of the challenges within the DA process as well as the opportunity to intentionally integrate whole-child approaches and capacity building strategies into the State System of Support.

FULL REPORT

This report documents the experience and learning generated by a collaborative effort between the Butte County of Education (BCOE) and Turnaround for Children (now known as the Center for Whole-Child Education) to address Dashboard findings in the Palermo Union Elementary School District (PUESD). It highlights the opportunity to integrate whole-child design into the State System of Support, specifically into the way county offices of education support districts in Differentiated Assistance (DA) through the continuous improvement process. It also identifies structural challenges in the existing DA support system and has implications for ongoing work within the State System of Support, particularly as the number of districts eligible for DA continues to grow. The brief concludes with recommendations for county offices of education in their work with districts.

Background on the Organizations and the Partnership

BCOE, Turnaround and PUESD started working together in the spring of 2022 with support from the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE). BCOE was meeting with PUESD's District Leadership Team about their DA findings and invited Turnaround to share information about the science of learning and development and lead a brief session on using data and the results of empathy interviews to define problems of practice. After the session, PUESD agreed to work with Turnaround and BCOE for the full 22-23 academic year to address those problems of practice through a continuous improvement process grounded in whole-child strategies, called the Whole-Child Improvement Network. The series of seven sessions is described below. BCOE advised and observed the process in order to better understand the opportunity to embed whole-child design into their work. This year-long project was funded jointly by CCEE, BCOE and PUESD.

Butte County Office of Education is located in rural Northern California. BCOE serves 13 districts, 15 charter schools as well as COE-operated schools. BCOE also supports educators and students in all 58 counties through several statewide programs.

In June, 2023, Turnaround for Children, a national nonprofit education organization, officially transformed into the Center for Whole-Child Education as part of Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. The Center will continue Turnaround's work of supporting educators to embed whole-child approaches into classrooms, schools and districts across the country. The Center/Turnaround translates the science of learning and development into practices, structures and systems that help teachers, support staff, principals and system leaders create the conditions in which each and every child can learn, develop and thrive. The Center/Turnaround's menu of services includes the Whole-Child Improvement Network, a multi-session series of workshops focused on improvement through the lens of whole-child design and equity. (For clarity – because this project was done under Turnaround's name - the Center will be referred to as Turnaround throughout this report.)

Palermo Union Elementary School District is a three-school, TK-8 district in rural Northern California, 30 minutes south of Chico. In 2021-22, PUESD became eligible for DA under several categories including high rates of chronic absenteeism, particularly since the pandemic. With support from BCOE, PUESD

staff have been working to strengthen their social-emotional learning for students and focus on relationship-building between staff, students, and families for the past several years.

Background on Differentiated Assistance

In brief, Differentiated Assistance is the process that Local Educational Agencies (LEAs)¹ enter into when the data on their Dashboard indicates a “red” finding for various state indicators under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) priorities.² Districts in DA are eligible for support from their county office of education (COE). At a minimum, LEAs are required to participate in one meeting with the county office of education to review data and engage in some form of continuous improvement for at least one area of eligibility under DA. This meeting often involves LEA leadership, sometimes a full leadership team, meeting with COE staff and includes review of the data, root cause analysis, next steps for improvement and implications for the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP).

After this initial meeting, LEAs have the option, but are not required, to continue working with their COE to address their Dashboard findings. Whether or not LEAs continue their work with COEs directly, the initial meetings inform COE staff about the types of support they provide countywide for LEAs.

In this project, PUESD chose to continue working with BCOE - in partnership with Turnaround - to reduce chronic absenteeism by adopting whole-child strategies to improve attendance and engagement. CCEE plays a critical role in such partnerships by bringing collaborators together, providing funding and other resources, and showcasing innovative and effective efforts across the state.

Background on Whole-Child Aligned Continuous Improvement

In Turnaround’s Whole-Child Improvement Network (WCIN), district and school leaders learn about the science of learning and development and whole-child design and use this knowledge to address problems of practice through cycles of continuous improvement. Participants collaborate in highly interactive sessions to anchor in a shared vision for student and school success, define problems of practice grounded in their communities’ needs and input, learn from one another, consider implications for equity, and apply their learning to move their system or school closer to true whole-child education and integrated developmental practice. Blended throughout the sessions is an intentional focus on strong shared leadership and ownership practices that fuel any continuous improvement effort.

The specific number, timing and cadence of sessions varies between LEA partners but always includes three to six week pauses between sessions so that participants can try out strategies they identify in the sessions.

¹ A Local Education Agency (LEA) is a local entity involved in education, including but not limited to school districts, county offices of education, direct-funded charter schools, and special education local plan area (SELPA). [[https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/certification-glossary/Local-Education-Agency-\(LEA\)](https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/certification-glossary/Local-Education-Agency-(LEA))]

² For more information on DA eligibility, please see <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp>

Whole-Child Improvement Network in Palermo UESD

In PUESD, school teams worked together through seven 2-hour sessions across the school year. To address their Dashboard finding around chronic absenteeism, their focus was on improving attendance and engagement by implementing practices, strategies and systems to deepen developmental relationships and foster supportive environments for learning. BCOE and Turnaround worked together to design and facilitate the Improvement Network and throughout the process shared practices in order to inform future work, including integrating whole-child approaches into BCOE's district supports.

Some of the **key practices** within the PUESD WCIN included:

- Taking action - School teams identified realistic, small action steps at the end of each session. For middle sessions 3 to 6, participants tried out whole-child related improvement ideas at a small scale (for example, using a new tool in one or two classrooms, rather than schoolwide). They reported back to their peers at each session about what they had done and what they learned. Peers then asked questions, provided suggestions and gathered ideas for their own school sites.
- Grounding improvement ideas in the science of learning and development and whole-child design - Participants were repeatedly asked to ground and re-ground in the science principles they had learned at the start of the series and to consider if and how the practices they were implementing were consistent, or not, with these principles and with whole-child design.
- Engaging in shared leadership and ownership - Matched with educator-level whole-child approaches, the series also introduced participants to the concepts and practices of shared leadership and ownership, including how leaders are intentionally building staff capacity and being inclusive of all stakeholders. These practices go beyond what individual educators are doing to consider how leaders are creating systems and structures for whole-child design that scale and sustain over time.
- Using an equity lens - Throughout the improvement process, participants intentionally reviewed their ideas and plans with an equity lens. Rather than making assumptions, they repeatedly gathered perspectives from those closest to the problem (students, families, and other staff). They used an equity lens to revise their problems of practice and improvement ideas, taking into account, for example, their own biases and judgements and historic/systemic conditions. Finally, they worked on embedding equity-related questions into their on-going processes in order to be intentionally focusing on equity in their actions and attitudes.

In the first two sessions, PUESD staff worked together to define, review with an equity lens, revise and finally agree on the following two **problems of practice**.

Attendance Patterns:

Families of our students who exhibit habitual attendance challenges need more and earlier support from our school system in order to develop robust attendance patterns of 95% or higher that will positively impact their academic, behavioral and social-emotional well-being.

Engagement:

The school system needs to improve learning conditions for students, particularly those who are experiencing the least engagement with their schools, by focusing on strong positive relationships, engaging pedagogy, supportive environments, positive and consistent communication with parents and attendance supports.

It's important to note that these aren't "perfect" problem statements. As facilitators, we weighed the value of moving forward, knowing that the group conversations had yielded shared understanding of the dynamics around the problem statements, versus continuing to revise the statements and possibly losing participants' engagement and motivation. This judgment is one of the many areas where the continuous improvement process is flexible to the needs of a group and the style of facilitation.

Each school site chose a different **whole-child core practice** for addressing their problem statements.

- Wilcox Elementary (TK-3rd grades) chose to focus on Family, Caregiver and Community Partnerships in order to improve family engagement as a pathway to stronger attendance. Throughout the year, they gathered input from families about the types of support and activities that would connect them to the school and used this information to revise their plans for family engagement through family nights, back-to-school events, the Parent Teacher Group, and partnership with a local family engagement non-profit.
- Golden Hills Elementary (4-5th grades) chose to focus on Learning Experiences in the Zone of Proximal Development and Student Agency. They developed and tested out a tool to share formative assessment data with students and engage students in tracking and reflecting on their scores. Their goal is to capture student voice and motivation by increasing their sense of ownership and agency for their academic progress.
- Palermo Middle (6-8th grades) chose to focus on Student Relationship Structures, specifically with the goal of improving student to student relationships and therefore increasing students' engagement and sense of belonging in the school community. Staff started by gathering perspectives from students about their experiences with the existing social-emotional learning classes. What they learned prompted them to re-think the structure of their SEL classes and curriculum, and to create on-going mechanisms for incorporating student input into all their work.

In the final session, participants were asked to reflect on the **impact of the series** on their mindsets and actions and on their perceptions of the improvement process. Their responses about what they learned were consistent and powerful:

- About stakeholder input and inclusion, participants committed to:
 - Embrace the power of student and family voices
 - Bring in multiple perspectives from stakeholders across the school community
 - Not assume you know what's happening or what to do

- About the change process, participants committed to:
 - Stop doing things that aren't working
 - Take small, consistent steps toward change, rather than expecting big changes overnight
 - Stay focused on one issue instead of trying to fix everything all at once
 - Gather data/information before making decisions

Participants believed that participation in the WCIN will help the broader school community by building relationships across stakeholder groups, getting more people involved and feeling that their voices matter, and strengthening the sense of community.

BCOE and Turnaround Areas of Learning

BCOE staff observed and took notes at every session, and then debriefed with Turnaround about what they had noticed and learned from the process. Some of the key areas of learning include:

- *The structure of the series strengthened PUESD's capacity to do continuous improvement as part of their ongoing practice and to address other issues and needs.*

Staff found the process to be sustainable and generalizable, meaning it can be repeated and applied to many efforts they may be taking on. They also found the practice to be practical and relevant, addressing specifically what staff had identified as important and pressing. The process is grounded in collaboration, using stakeholder input and other data to inform ideas for improvement. It includes multiple opportunities to practice thinking and acting in equitable ways as part of the continuous improvement process - for example, taking into account other people's perspectives, reflecting on assumptions and biases, and considering the social, historic and systemic context.

- *The year-long process, rather than one or two meetings, allowed participants to focus and deepen their understanding of issues and possible areas for improvement.*

The existing DA process is often light touch, offering limited opportunities for LEA staff to think deeply about the challenges that are flagged in the Dashboard. Despite best intentions, the ongoing operation of a district or school makes it easy to lose track of longer-term efforts in favor of short-term fixes. By committing to a full year of the WCIN, PUESD staff returned every month to focus on the same challenge within a process that required experimentation and reflection. By the end of the year, participants had not only come up with possible solutions to their problems, they had also built muscles around the process of trial and error, reflection, and change.

- *Action steps between meetings kept participants engaged and accountable.*

Micro-tasks - designed by participants - allowed them to try out their improvement ideas in low-risk situations, learn from their successes as well as their failures, share that learning with peers during meetings, and gather input about their next steps. The collaborative environment encouraged people to talk openly and authentically about what was working or not working.

- *The participation of people beyond the superintendent and the leadership team deepened and broadened the learning.*

In the traditional DA process, COE staff often meet with the superintendent and sometimes with their leadership teams. In this process, the superintendent invited in teachers, principals, and student support staff - people with daily, direct contact with students and families - as part of each school team. This diverse participation meant that problems and improvement ideas reflected the actual experience of people on the ground. It also meant that those people had a voice and commitment to the changes being proposed.

- *Participants were given significant agency over the problems and improvement ideas they implemented.*

The WCIN is designed to help participants apply new information from the science of learning and development and whole-child design to practices in their specific contexts. This approach acknowledges that participants are the experts in their context. The facilitators' role is to partner with participants in exploring and testing out new ideas and information in their context.

- *The process was asset-based, encouraging participants to recognize and build on existing work and strengths.*

As participants generated improvement ideas, they were encouraged to consider other initiatives or efforts that were already in place or taking shape. Palermo MS, for example, was already involved in a focused effort to improve social-emotional learning at their site. Rather than add another project to their plates, they were encouraged to apply their learning around whole-child design to the on-going work around SEL. The WCIN then became additive, rather than "one more thing," providing more time and information to support a challenge already on the school's plate.

- *The consultancy model allowed school sites to learn from each other.*

At every session, school teams shared information about their progress and challenges, and asked targeted questions to gather advice from their peers. These conversations created opportunities for staff at different sites to learn from each other and from the improvement ideas that were being explored. Because each site chose a different area of focus, participants were gaining information and learning about tools beyond their own project.

- *Components of the WCIN could be blended with other approaches that BCOE is implementing.* BCOE, and other COEs, have processes in place for DA and for other improvement efforts that could incorporate elements of the WCIN. BCOE is, for example, using [Appreciative Inquiry](#), an approach that could easily be incorporated within the WCIN structure or could be combined with components of the WCIN series, for example, generating problems of practice, asking equity questions, doing empathy interviews and sharing across school teams.

Despite this rich learning, BCOE and Turnaround acknowledge that there are many outstanding questions. After just one year, we won't know about the longer-term impact of this intervention. Will these practices be sustained at the site and district level? Will they have impacts beyond the District Leadership Team and invited staff? How much more support over how long would it take to shift the mindsets and actions of the whole school community? What ultimately will be the impact on the DA findings? How might this work impact the specific subgroups identified through DA? There are also questions about the degree to which whole-child design will be integrated into the LCAP and the impact of the superintendent's retirement and other staff turnover.

Challenges and Implications for DA and the State System of Support

While implementing this series, Turnaround and BCOE staff considered the opportunity to embed whole-child design and the improvement process into existing DA processes. Several significant challenges were identified:

- Change requires intentional, sustained and focused work over time, but the current DA structure expects rapid improvement with little support in an already stressed system. Intensive, ongoing improvement work is unusual between COEs and districts when requirements and capacity are minimal. COEs need more time with their LEA partners to facilitate longer improvement processes, and they need messaging and tools to inspire greater engagement from their LEA partners. Recognizing this reality, the expectation for the DA process has already been expanded from one to two years, but more time is needed.
- Within the System of Support, it is unclear whether the primary charge of COEs is to build capacity for improvement or address the Dashboard findings. COEs struggle to communicate with their LEA partners about what they are doing and why, including working for transformational practice when the incentive system rewards more transactional change in percentages on the Dashboard. LEAs are seen as successful when they are no longer "eligible" for DA even when root causes and systemic problems haven't been addressed. This incentive system makes it hard to convince parents, board members and school leaders that investing in a more in-depth process is valuable.
- There are also logistical challenges with the Dashboard timeline. With data being released in the winter, COEs begin working with districts around their Dashboard findings in the spring, right before districts close for the summer. There is little time to initiate or build momentum around meaningful change processes. Acknowledging this challenge, the state is working to release

Dashboard data earlier in the school year, with hopes of ultimately having it available each year in September.

- While the language of “whole-child education” is widely used around the state, including by the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education, it is largely invisible in the State System of Support or the DA Process. COEs, LEAs and state agencies have limited shared understanding about what “whole-child education” specifically means, how it translates to educator practice, and how it could help districts address their Dashboard findings. Excellent guiding materials exist through the Science of Learning and Development Alliance (SoLD Alliance), the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), and the Center for Whole-Child Education/Turnaround for Children, among other organizations. Deepening and sharing understanding and expertise within the State System of Support, including within county offices of education, is an essential first step to integrating whole-child supports into the DA process. This work should include familiarizing COE staff with the available resources so they can curate and incorporate them in their work with LEAs through all the initiatives. Willingness to absorb and translate content for their regions is a skillset that COE staff have demonstrated through multiple initiatives.

Recommendations for COEs

Despite the challenges listed above, COEs wanting to incorporate improvement processes grounded in whole-child design should consider the following recommendations:

- Ensure committed LEA leadership and the participation of a team representing a cross-section of the district.
- Allocate sufficient time for learning across the school year with a minimum of 2 hours in six to eight sessions.
- Build shared understanding of the science of learning and development and whole-child design within the COE and familiarize staff with the research, resources and tools available through the SoLD Alliance, LPI, the Center for Whole-Child Education/Turnaround for Children and other organizations.
- Embed whole-child practices into improvement cycles so that participants experience how their mindset and practice changes are improving learning environments and impacting students in real time.
- Make the focus on the improvement process an explicitly stated, core desired outcome of DA efforts so that LEA leaders build the capacity to address challenges moving forward.
- Collaborate with non-profit organizations (e.g., the Center for Whole-Child Education/Turnaround for Children) throughout design and implementation in order to build mutual capacity, support shared understanding and engage in real time responsiveness as the process unfolds.
- Integrate new data - like new Dashboard data - thoughtfully into the process as it becomes available.

- Consider and plan to provide ongoing follow-up support or coaching beyond the terms of the DA engagement and the partner’s involvement.

Conclusion

In the midst of a highly stressful period in California education, PUESD staff engaged whole-heartedly in the improvement process. They dove into the content, pulled out meaning relevant to their context, tried out new strategies, shared their challenges along with their successes, engaged each other with questions, suggestions and appreciations, and reflected together on their learning as well as their progress. This process was not a “quick fix.” PUESD ended the year with plans and momentum to create school communities that authentically inspire student attendance, engagement and learning. And of course, they have more work to do.

The experience of PUESD, BCOE and Turnaround is only one example of a change process. It does, however, offer a case study for how the improvement process could be implemented to strengthen staff capacity for whole-child practices and future improvement work. In the coming year, the California State System of Support will be challenged by the growing number of LEAs in Differentiated Assistance. Rather than being overwhelmed, it may be time to fully embrace the state’s commitment to “educating the Whole Child” by rethinking the expectations, outcomes and process for improvement that we are all engaged in together.