

Ohio Leverages a Whole Child Framework to Create Dynamic Systems of Change

Addressing Students’ Basic Needs to Enable Complex Learning

Poverty impacts a growing number of Ohio children; 51% of the state’s student population faces economic disadvantage—an increase of 37% in 10 years.ⁱ A 2018 report from the Health Policy Institute of Ohio found that the state’s children ranked in the bottom half of states on 65% of national child health metrics, demonstrating the need for comprehensive and statewide strategies to improve child well-being.ⁱⁱ The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic called further attention to the importance of addressing the needs of Ohio’s children on issues such as mental health, school readiness, and access to technology.ⁱⁱⁱ

Given these challenges, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) recognized that it must help meet students’ basic physiological and psychological needs before they can fully engage in complex learning and social activities. To meet those needs, the department adopted a Whole Child Framework in 2020 that moves beyond a narrow focus on academics to consider the needs and dimensions of wellness that support students in achieving healthy and positive outcomes. While daunting, this shift in approach resulted in ODE and the Region 8 Comprehensive Center (R8CC) collaborating to design a framework and a state-level strategic plan to guide comprehensive implementation. The story of ODE’s response to meet the needs of the whole child is a powerful example of how state education agencies can serve and support districts and schools.

To be on a call and see all these different people from different organizations working together, collaborating, using the same language—all behind the Whole Child Framework—has been amazing.

– Ohio Whole Child program administrator

Multiple Strategies Used to Build ODE’s Capacity to Address Students’ Basic Needs

Ohio’s Whole Child Framework places the whole child at the center, where each of five tenets—Healthy, Safe, Challenged, Engaged, and Supported—reflect the ideal conditions leading to healthy and successful outcomes. ODE collaborated with the R8CC to design a comprehensive plan to support districts in systemic adoption of the framework. This plan helped districts coordinate policy, processes, and practices; support cultural responsiveness; deliberately focus on equity; and dedicate time and resources to structured continuous improvement.

In one of the first steps, ODE asked the R8CC to help build the capacity of the Office of Whole Child Supports and the Whole Child Advisory Group to develop a framework to support the initiative. Strategies included:

- needs assessment
- coaching
- network creation
- resource identification and development
- reflective questioning
- collaborative problem-solving
- implementation support



Source: [Ohio's Whole Child Framework website](#)

Through this collaboration, the state built an understanding of the framework and facilitated conversations with key stakeholders about its alignment with state and district policies, practices, and resources. The timeline below details key accomplishments of this collaborative work.

Timeline of Key Accomplishments

2019–2020 →	2020–2021 →	2021–2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create 40-member Whole Child Advisory Group ▪ Develop and secure state board approval of the Whole Child Framework ▪ Hold ongoing Whole Child Advisory Group and subgroup meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop implementation, communication, and dissemination plans as well as processes and tools to support integration of the framework within ODE and to support districts ▪ Create Whole Child Framework Implementation Team and workgroups ▪ Design Whole Child Network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Launch Whole Child Network ▪ Hold/produce monthly Whole Child Network meetings, webinars, communities of practice, podcasts, newsletters ▪ Create cross-agency team and subgroups to support systemic implementation of the framework across the state

Partners and collaborative teams help drive this effort. The Whole Child Advisory Group includes staff from:

- state departments
- state associations
- local nonprofit and advocacy organizations
- state board of education
- institutions of higher education
- school and district administrators
- teachers
- students

Originally charged with developing the Whole Child Framework, this group now focuses on supporting a comprehensive, statewide implementation plan.

An internal Framework Implementation Team includes three workgroups of ODE staff focusing on communication, content development, and school improvement. This team also supports the Whole Child Network, a group of more than 300 school staff and community members that promotes tenets of the framework and provides space for collaboration. ODE supports the network through webinars, resources, podcasts, newsletters, and other professional development resources.

As the ODE team collaborates with stakeholders to define the vision for this whole child work, the R8CC provides valuable supports to put that vision into practice. The work began with a desire to create a movement centered on the holistic needs of children that would shift the traditional ways schools operate. To shift the educational paradigm, the state also collaborates with the R8CC on messaging and implementation support.

Policy and Practice Impacts Lay the Groundwork for Addressing Students’ Basic Needs

In supporting the Whole Child Framework, the R8CC and ODE have worked together to achieve significant short-term and intermediate outcomes from this work.

- **The whole child movement.** As one ODE staff member noted, the department wanted to “start a movement” when it began its whole child work. As a partner in this process, the R8CC began by enhancing the skills and knowledge of ODE staff on issues such as strategy development, collaboration with various stakeholders, and design of best practices in facilitating meetings. Part of that process also included gathering feedback from people with various perspectives and roles, using the feedback for meaningful change, and creating valuable feedback loops to exchange information.



- **Educational shift.** Before development of the Whole Child Framework, ODE convened a group of stakeholders centered on student wellness to determine the need for a whole child approach to education. ODE received feedback from many districts and organizations that centered on holistic child well-being, creating an “educational shift” across the state. After creation of the framework, many educators expressed appreciation that they now had “permission” to focus on the whole child. As a result, the framework served as a catalyst for districts as they shifted their perspective and approach to ensuring success for all children by focusing on multiple dimensions of wellness.
- **Collaboration, unification, and diversity.** The Whole Child Framework contains multiple dimensions of child wellness traditionally situated across different fields, agencies, and service types. As a result, many services operate in silos with organizations not accustomed to working in cross-disciplinary ways. Integrating these dimensions of wellness into educational practices required a new way of collaborating. The R8CC team worked strategically with ODE to create ways for stakeholders to engage in equitable and meaningful ways. As a result, spaces now exist for those with diverse lived experiences and identities to come together and design a framework for systemic implementation. People can rally around the whole child work using a common language, framework, and set of goals.

[The most significant impact is] building cross-sector partnership across various agencies and internally—not just at the state education agency—but building capacity at local levels.

– Ohio Whole Child program administrator

- **Enhanced communication and resources and the freedom to elevate “what is important.”** With creation of the Whole Child Network, ODE now provides [online Whole Child Resources](#) that all districts can access and use, and districts can join the network to access more services such as additional evidence-based resources, coaching, and other networking opportunities. Significantly, the state’s strategic plan also provided an opportunity for districts to spotlight work already underway. For example, one superintendent noted that the district utilized a whole child approach 8 years ago but now the state and district efforts are more aligned.

[The state is] is finally speaking our language and elevating what is important to us.

– Ohio district superintendent

Moving Forward

The R8CC is continuing its capacity-building services with ODE and the Whole Child Advisory Group. Future efforts will focus on continued development of implementation tools and resources and continued alignment of existing and new initiatives with the Whole Child Framework. The R8CC also will support cross-department team members in developing the High Quality Instruction Framework, a statewide plan, and a guidance document to help districts implement high-quality instruction.

ⁱ ODE: [Ohio Strategic Plan For Education: 2019–2024](#)

ⁱⁱ [Health Policy Institute of Ohio: Assessment of Child Health and Health Care in Ohio](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Ohio’s State Plan for the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#)

About Us

The Region 8 Comprehensive Center (R8CC) is one of 19 Regional CCs in the Comprehensive Center (CC) Network that provides high-quality, intensive capacity-building technical assistance to clients from state, regional, and local educational agencies and schools in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. R8CC staff serve clients by helping to identify, implement, and sustain effective evidence-based programs, practices, and interventions that support improved educator and student outcomes. Through these capacity-building services, R8CC staff help agency staff improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, and improve the quality of instruction. Because the R8CC is a federally funded CC, all our work with education agencies is conducted free of any charge for services or related travel.

For more information visit our website at www.region8cc.org.

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