Coherence Lab

An Initiative of
Council of Chief State School Officers
Education First

Coherence Toolkit

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How to Use this Toolkit

Throughout this toolkit, you will find tools associated with each element of the coherence framework. Within each tool, there are resources; Some tools include facilitation guides while others include reading lists. In aggregate, these resources are meant to help you lead your team to build coherence by building focus and coordination, cultivating trusting relationships, changing behaviors at scale and thinking and working in equitable ways. These tools also serve as stand-alone resources to help you and your team focus on a particular area.

Many of these tools can be used in virtual or in-person environments. Feel free to adapt them to suit your needs and context, including making supplementary materials as needed. If you have questions or would like support with designing, please reach out to Education First.

On certain pages, there will be an icon designating what part of the coherence framework the resources or tool will help you learn more about.

To make your own copy of a tool or resource, go to file and select "Make a copy". Then rename your file, save it to your google drive and click "OK". You now have an editable document that you can share with your team. **Please note that you can remix, adapt, and build upon the work linked within this toolkit non-commercially, as long as you credit Education First and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and license your new creations under the identical terms (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike, CC BY-NC-SA).**
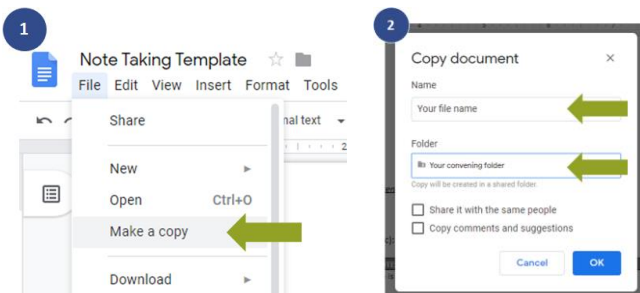
Overview of the Coherence Framework

The four guiding themes for the fellowship curriculum are directly connected to the key drivers of fragmentation. In order to achieve coherence by specifically addressing the drivers of fragmentation, system leaders must **build focus and coordination** within and across agencies, consistently engage educators in **cultivating trusting relationships** to build a shared sense of purpose **change behaviors at scale** throughout all levels of the organization and **think and work in equitable ways** to ensure that equity is the cornerstone of work.

1 **Build focus and coordination:** A coherent system is focused and coordinated on rigorously implementing a few key priorities. Leaders at all levels of the system create and support the conditions and structures that enable a focused, collaborative, integrated approach to improvement within their own agencies and across sectors. They must also call attention to the existing system's assumptions, power structures and institutionalized inequities that are barriers to building shared vision, purpose and collaboration

2 **Cultivate trusting relationships:** Coherence, or the lack of coherence, manifests through our relationships with one another. Leaders understand the importance and power of building trust with individuals, teams and communities. They know that too often, stakeholder engagement efforts are still missing the voices of those who are closest to the policies or initiatives they enact in decision-making, so they work in ways that prioritizes relationship-building. They engage with and learn from educators in school buildings and school systems, community members and other agency team members, including those who disagree, are skeptical or opposed. They seek to understand others' needs, motivations and interests by leading with empathy, confronting issues of power, and convening and collaborating across lines of difference.

3 **Change behaviors at scale:** Coherent systems are adaptive systems. As fundamentally human enterprises, education organizations' power to adapt relies on the ability of people to learn and change. System leaders must understand the principles of social networking and change management to understand how to promote organizational learning and change that will shift mindsets and behaviors and make improvements stick.

4 **Think and work in equitable ways:** Incoherent education systems are a product of design, and can be redesigned. This requires leaders to understand their role as systems designers as well as the enablers or disablers of a system that has often failed to serve the students who are most marginalized. Leaders at all levels of the organization must recognize how ways of thinking and working can create systems of advantage and oppression, and that it's not possible to collaborate effectively, authentically engage or make change stick unless identity, bias, and power dynamics are understood and addressed. We must align our beliefs and values around equity with our mindsets and our actions.

Fragmented design and education initiatives hinders our ability to deliver the education opportunities and outcomes we seek for all children. The Carnegie Corporation of New York's (CCNY) Education program recognized that the siloed and fragmented approach to grantmaking and implementation hindered the success of education reform. To consider the root causes of and improve the fragmented nature of our education system, CCNY launched the Integration Design Consortium and sought out leading innovators in the field to design new approaches to working in a more integrated, efficient and effective way.

Education First proposed, and CCNY funded, the Coherence Lab Fellowship (CLF) in 2017 to develop and field-test a practical solution to fragmentation rooted in helping education practitioners create a more coherent and equitable education system. The Coherence Lab Fellowship and NYC Coherence Lab, co-led by the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program (Aspen Education), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and Education First, ran from 2017-2021. The existing Coherence Lab builds off the strengths of the Coherence Lab Fellowship and the NYC Coherence Lab.

The **Coherence Lab Fellowship** took place over the course of two-years with teams of state education agency and local education agency team members. The Fellowship provided states the opportunity to build SEA-wide systems, structures and mindsets that enable coherence. Participating states were expected to identify an existing cross-functional strategy or initiative that involves multiple teams in their agency and that was not operating with optimal coherence. In service of both coherence and equity, the Fellowship curriculum included exploration of issues of diversity, identity, bias and power. State teams were expected to actively test new approaches and make changes to policies, processes, procedures and routines in order to create more coherence within and across the SEA (e.g., deprioritizing unaligned initiatives, co-designing with stakeholders, or implementing collaborative meeting structures). The Coherence Lab Fellowship launched two cohorts of states who participated between 2017–2021.

The **NYC Coherence Lab** provided many of the same supports and processes to a large local education agency, and was focused on NYC. The NYC Coherence Lab was a one-time professional development opportunity designed to help the NYC district team develop skills and capacity around the four elements of the Coherence Framework, and make progress on solving a critical problem of practice, including having a plan for continuing to work on their problem of practice at the conclusion of the NYC Coherence Lab. The NYC Coherence Lab took place over 26 weeks in 2021 and included bi-weekly coaching and team leads meetings, monthly 2-3 hour full-team engagements and a curriculum scope and sequence that was adjusted based on the districts team's goals and needs related to coherence.

Which Tools are Right for You?

While a team may benefit from using all of these tools, the coherence assessment can help teams identify the highest leverage tools for their unique context. By the end of the assessment process, teams will have a clear sense of which areas of the coherence framework would most effectively support their team. Teams can use tools from that section.

If teams plan to use most or all of the tools, we recommend the following sequence:

1. Coherence Assessment Tool
2. Empathy Interview Tool
3. Initiative Inventory Tool
4. Power Dynamics Tool
5. Circles of Identity Tool
6. Ideation Tool
7. Prototyping Tool
8. *Other tools on an as needed basis*

Coherence Assessment

The Coherence Assessment Tool helps agencies **assess their team's strengths, growth opportunities** and progress over time in relation to building coherence.

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Establish Few Priorities: Leaders build a shared vision and identify, plan for, model and measure the relentless pursuit of a small number of clearly-defined priorities. They lead by identifying when there are distractors, inefficiencies or too many priorities, and by helping others say no to or reduce work that doesn't align to the core priorities. By prioritizing rigorously, they obsess on doing fewer things better.

Model Collaboration: Leaders at every level create a culture of collaboration: they model collaboration, build the discipline and time for it within their agencies and departments and expect it of their colleagues. They maximize the opportunity for impact by identifying critical interdependencies between the priorities and initiatives and supporting team members to execute. They can differentiate between instances where communication and/or coordination are more powerful than collaboration, while also maintaining an organizational culture rooted in collaboration.

Remove Obstacles: Leaders understand and are able to address structural barriers, tools and processes that allow fragmentation to persist. They actively focus on effective management needed to execute on key priorities, rather than execute solely for compliance. They actively discourage territorialism and competition in support of collaboration and they continually support and hold accountable others to effectively and efficiently use their time in service of the few priorities.

Remember, within each tool listed below, there are resources that support teams in using the tool, including facilitation guides, articles, PowerPoints, etc.

Collaboration Continuum

The Collaboration Continuum Tool enables teams to identify which team priorities or projects are best served **by communication, coordination or collaboration** and consider ways to align priorities with appropriate resources and timing.

Initiative Inventory

The Initiative Inventory Tool supports teams to identify existing barriers to building focus and coordination and **narrow priorities**.

Coherence, or the lack of coherence, manifests through our relationships with one another. Leaders understand the importance and power of building trust with individuals, teams and communities. They know that too often, stakeholder engagement efforts are still missing the voices of those who are closest to the policies or initiatives they enact in decision-making, so they work in ways that prioritizes relationship-building. They engage with and learn from educators in school buildings and school systems, community members and other agency team members, including those who disagree, are skeptical or opposed. They seek to understand others' needs, motivations and interests by leading with empathy, confronting issues of power, and convening and collaborating across lines of difference.

Engage Authentically: Leaders create opportunities and channels to receive rich, authentic and ongoing input from internal employees and external stakeholders, and it is easy to see how that input leads to changes by leadership. They understand that there are multiple ways to engage stakeholders and are transparent about the role and decision making responsibility of stakeholders in each engagement. They foster an environment in which stakeholders feel they can share their and others' perspectives without fear of retribution and understand how their participation advances the agency's mission, and have evidence that shows how their contributions were necessary for the success of the agency.

Recognize and Address Power Dynamics: Leaders are aware of the ways power structures and dynamics—real or perceived—influence individual and team beliefs, perspectives and actions. They acknowledge power is always at play and address inappropriate power differentials, particularly when seeking to listen closely, authentically engage and/or partner with stakeholders. They cede their own power (ie. delegating final decision-making power to those most proximate to the problem, using their influence to elevate opinions of those with less power, etc.) in an effort to support a more equitable and appropriate power distribution.

Support Inclusion: Leaders seek out and intentionally engage diverse groups throughout the development and implementation of policies and initiatives. They are acutely aware of the intersectional identities of those who are leading and making decisions and prioritize those who are closest to implementation, often students, teachers and community members, for leadership and decision-making roles. They honor the experiences of stakeholders and understand successful implementation starts with a deep understanding of the people with closest proximity to the issue or problem they hope to address. They understand that a community is not based on a single story, and that no one individual or organization can represent the full perspectives of an entire group. Leaders create an environment that values and celebrates all members of their community.

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Project Launch Tools

The Project Launch Tool supports teams in **fostering strong relationships from the inception of a project** by getting to know one another's working styles and discussing personal goals to engender equity.

Power Dynamics Reflection

The Power Dynamics Reflection Tool enables teams to **make visible the power dynamics at play within their teams** and explore how identities influence power dynamics.

Coherent systems are adaptive systems. As fundamentally human enterprises, education organizations' power to adapt relies on the ability of people to learn and change. System leaders must understand the principles of social networking and change management to understand how to promote organizational learning and change that will shift mindsets and behaviors and make improvements stick.

Tap Networks: Leaders build a culture and environment of learning and growth within their systems. They understand the value of peer-to-peer learning through direct and indirect networks and utilize the expertise of team members across and within agencies to lead on behavior changes. They strategically identify experts and change agents who may not hold positional authority but do hold strong social relationships to lead knowledge sharing and implementation.

Appeal to Emotion: Leaders understand that behavior is interconnected with mindsets and feelings. They acknowledge the limits of carrot and stick incentives to spur action and understand that motivating large-scale change requires connecting with individual people's emotions and sense of purpose. They intentionally connect these mindsets and beliefs to concrete behaviors. They use storytelling to build investment in change efforts.

Define Key Behaviors: Leaders set clear and specific expectations about critical moves that guide each team member's daily efforts. They know the value of supporting individual and team capacity-building and they invest in developing a focused set of knowledge, skills and mindsets of their leaders. They know that setting expectations and growing a culture of reciprocal responsibility focused on the right things is necessary for changes in structures and behaviors to occur and be sustained.

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Adding Zeros

The Adding Zeros Tool enables teams to **refine their solution and identify methods to scale it.**

Social Network Mapping

The Social Network Mapping Tool supports teams to **identify those with positional and relational power** to help scale an idea.

Incoherent education systems are a product of design, and can be redesigned. This requires leaders to understand their role as systems designers as well as the enablers or disablers of a system that has often failed to serve the students who are most marginalized. Leaders at all levels of the organization must recognize how ways of thinking and working can create systems of advantage and oppression, and that it's not possible to collaborate effectively, authentically engage or make change stick unless identity, bias, and power dynamics are understood and addressed. We must align our beliefs and values around equity with our mindsets and our actions.

This element in the assessment is split into two sub-sections, each with their own sub-elements: "Equitable Ways of Thinking" and "Equitable Ways of Working."

Reflect on Individual Identity: Leaders acknowledge that each person brings multiple, intersectional identities to our work. They examine their identities and consistently reflect on the ways it influences their approach, engagement of others and decision making. They understand that their and others' identities are both fonts of expertise that should be leveraged and can lead to biases, and blindspots that can limit their clarity and perspectives.

Acknowledge and Address Bias: Leaders are consciously aware of their implicit biases, regularly reflect on when they notice their own bias in action and create systems and structures to illuminate where bias might be at play. They understand that bias affects our relationships with others and therefore, our relationships to problems and solutions. They seek to move from awareness of implicit biases to actively countering them.

Design at the Margins: Leaders take responsibility for designing a constellation of solutions that ultimately work for all stakeholders, acknowledging that they must start by tackling problems for those who are most proximate to the problem and most in need of a new solution. They know that there is no such thing as an "average" experience and push others when they use the concept of average to design. They understand that if we can create solutions for those most at the margins, we will best learn how to solve problems for everyone.

Frame the Problem: Problems can be used to organize and mobilize efforts around critical issues that directly impact the experience of the most vulnerable students. Leaders believe that problem definition is a critical step in any initiative and can either be used as a tool for equity, or it can perpetuate inequity. They understand that the way we choose to define (or not) a problem directly impacts our ability to solve it. They push themselves and others to make sure problems are defined through the lens of equity. This requires that the problem is described in the context of the specific situation facing those who are being designed with, acknowledging the history of the community, the history of the problem and the history of previously tried solutions. It also requires that the problem is articulated from multiple vantage points: it should be articulated from the points of view of those who are most proximate to the problem as well as the points of view of those who hold the power in the systems that create and perpetuate it - two articulations that are often quite different but equally necessary to fully understand and address the issue.

Explore the Solution: Leaders understand that the best solutions are those developed by people who most deeply experience the problem and seek to let their expertise drive the solution finding process. Leaders also know that finding the best solution requires generating new solutions, reimagining old ones, and getting rid of things that aren't working. Leaders reduce risk and increase a solution's chances of success by testing these ideas, learning about their efficacy, and fine-tuning them to meet peoples' needs.

Learn Forward: Leaders adapt and transform their priorities and strategies through continuous learning and iteration, so problems and solutions evolve with the context. They understand that complex problems will not be fully solved, but will change shape as work is done. Leaders focus on

learning as a measure of success of an initiative, and develop systems, tools and a culture that allows for risk and failure in order to capture learning to accelerate impact.

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Circles of Identity

The Circles of Identity Tool helps teams explore how their **identities influence decisions and behaviors**.

Empathy Interviews

The Empathy Interview Tool helps teams **include the voices and experiences** of those closest to the problem at hand.

Ideation Exercises

The Ideation Tool is a process that enables teams to **generate fresh ideas to solve a problem**, especially ones that might not have emerged prior.

Problems with Problems

The Problem Definition Tool supports teams in **narrowing and naming their problem**.

Prototype Tracker

The Prototyping Tool enables teams to **plan, iterate and test prototypes** in bite sized chunks.