

ACE INTERVENTION LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

INTERVIEW PROJECT REPORT

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Portland, Oregon*

ACE Intervention Learning Collaborative

The ACE Intervention Learning Collaborative began with informal conversations initiated by Bob Stewart, superintendent of the Gladstone School District, with colleagues in six other Oregon districts. In August 2015, these seven superintendents met to affirm their commitment to participate in a year-long learning collaborative focused on the impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

In addition to the commitment of their leaders, these seven districts were chosen to represent a diverse subset of Oregon school districts, in an effort to develop a broader understanding of how schools and communities experience and address issues related to childhood trauma. The collaborative's membership includes districts of varying sizes, located across western and northern Oregon.

- ❖ Bethel School District (5,671 students, Lane County)
- ❖ Gladstone School District (2,173 students, Clackamas County)
- ❖ North Wasco School District (3,108 students, Wasco County)
- ❖ Phoenix-Talent Schools (2,675 students, Jackson County)
- ❖ Portland Public Schools (48,383 students, Multnomah County)
- ❖ Tillamook School District (2,069 students, Tillamook County)
- ❖ Umatilla School District (1,372 students, Umatilla County)

Each district sent a diverse team of staff members (and in one case, community partners), numbering from seven to 14, always led by the district superintendent.

- ❖ Bethel School District: superintendent, deputy superintendent, special services director, assistant special services director, equity coordinator, elementary school principal, middle school principal, high school principal, district PBIS coordinator, health center director
- ❖ Gladstone School District: superintendent, director of student and family supports, elementary school principal, middle school principal, elementary school counselor, middle school counselor, elementary school teachers (2), middle school teachers (2), director of special education, Gladstone Center for Children and Families principal, kindergarten teacher, Culture of Care coach
- ❖ North Wasco School District: superintendent, middle school principal, elementary school principal, elementary school counselor, middle school counselor, elementary school ESL/ELL teacher, elementary school special education teacher
- ❖ Phoenix-Talent Schools: superintendent, elementary principals (3), middle school principal, director of special programs, TOSAs (teachers on special assignment) (2)
- ❖ Portland Public Schools: superintendent, assistant superintendent for school performance, assistant superintendent for school supports, assistant superintendent for the office of teaching and learning, senior director of the Madison cluster, Creative

Science School principal, elementary school principals (2), director of student services, assistant director for academic progress, director of special education, restorative justice coordinator

- ❖ Tillamook School District: superintendent, grants/foundations director, elementary principals (3), middle school principal, curriculum director/Title I director, English language learners director
- ❖ Umatilla School District: superintendent, high school vice principal, middle school dean of students, elementary school vice principal, elementary school counselor, middle school/high school counselors (2), director of special education, instructional coach, DHS family stability manager, Lifeway school-based services (2)

These diverse district teams took part in seven, five-hour sessions in Oregon City, planned collaboratively by the superintendents with the assistance of Gladstone administrative and support staff and of facilitator Richard Withycombe, of Withycombe Scotten & Associates.

- ❖ The November 2 session featured Dr. Chris Blodgett, director of the CLEAR Trauma Center in the Child and Family Research Unit at Washington State University.
- ❖ The centerpiece of the November 30 session was a presentation by Dr. Vincent Felitti, one of the lead investigators in The ACEs Study, a large, longitudinal study conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control.
- ❖ The group spent a portion of the next session, on January 12, reflecting upon what they had learned; and they began a series of “expertise in the room” presentations, in which member districts shared local efforts related to the implementation of ACE intervention strategies and trauma-informed practices.
- ❖ On February 22, the collaborative viewed *Paper Tigers*, a documentary about Lincoln Alternative High School in Walla Walla, Washington, and had an opportunity to ask questions of the principal at that time, Jim Sporleder. They also learned about CareOregon’s Health Resilience Program.
- ❖ March 29 saw the resumption of the “expertise in the room” presentations, as well as reports from collaborative participants who took part in visitations to Lincoln Alternative High School or to Cherokee Point Elementary School in San Diego.
- ❖ The following session featured presentations by Chris Bouneff, executive director of the Oregon chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Health, and Tony Biglan, senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute and author of *The Nurture Effect: How the Science of Human Behavior Can Improve Our Lives and Our World*.
- ❖ Dr. Jody McVittie, cofounder of Sound Discipline, joined the group on May 23, ending the discovery year with a focus on building resiliency in children and working effectively with students who have been exposed to trauma.

These activities were made possible by financial support provided by healthcare provider organizations CareOregon and Moda Health, as well as by the commitments of participant school districts.

Outcomes of the First Year

The findings that follow are drawn from onsite, group interviews conducted by Withycombe Scotten & Associates at each of the seven school districts in August 2016. These conversations involved as many district team members as possible, given the many demands on administrators' time as the opening of school neared.

The quotes aligned with these outcome findings are meant to be illustrative, to expand upon the nature of the finding rather than to profile any individual district or indicate the relative frequency of any particular idea. Comments have been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

1.0 Participants described the collaborative experience as engaging and rewarding, valuable both for their own professional development and for their districts' abilities to respond to student needs. The diversity among participating school districts was a significant factor in achieving a valued and dynamic "learning community."

- ❖ The stars are beginning to align. Things are beginning to deepen. This was really needed this year. I just don't know how we could have coordinated and pulled this off without our participation in the collaborative. (North Wasco)
- ❖ At that time, my study was really surface-level. It was more like "admiring the problem" than finding real solutions. Before this past year, I knew what ACEs stood for, but the collaborative really opened my eyes toward why it's so important and how big a problem it really is. (Umatilla)
- ❖ For us, as a team, the meetings were very valuable. The speakers were excellent. Beyond this, however, the meetings gave us an opportunity to hear what other districts were thinking and doing. (Tillamook)
- ❖ The connections with other district leaders, the emails and phone calls, and learning about the experiences of others were so important. (North Wasco)
- ❖ We're the largest district, but we didn't come into this thinking that. We're all learners — we're all learning. The fact that there was no obligation to produce a particular product by a certain date enabled us to learn and listen carefully to others without feeling anxious — to just be genuine, responsive learners. Our size is something that is not always helpful. (Portland)
- ❖ What made this experience so rich for me and made me prioritize participation in these meetings, which was tough because it was a lot of time, is that you had great speakers. I always walked away knowing something I didn't before. I really valued the people you brought into that room. (Portland)
- ❖ To be in the same room with like-minded people was invigorating. (North Wasco)

- ❖ I measure success in terms of the parking lot conversations after something has ended. It gives you a glimpse of what people are going to do. (Portland)
- ❖ At every meeting, we were just learning so much. It was difficult at times to travel so far, but everyone wanted to go. It was never a waste of time. (Phoenix-Talent)
- ❖ We couldn't wait to get to the ACEs meeting. We wanted to learn more. We wanted to do more. We had great conversations regarding how we were going to change things in our schools and in our community. (Umatilla)
- ❖ What do restorative practices mean? That was something our district leadership was grappling with, particularly for discipline. There was no clear understanding of what it looked like, what it sounded like, why it was so important. The collaborative really helped with that lens. (Bethel)
- ❖ All of the sessions were very valuable. For our entire team, it was just a great learning experience. A lot of information was available that we could bring to our own situation here. (North Wasco)
- ❖ The collaborative meetings weren't just something we did occasionally. It became part of our life last year. It was very powerful to have that experience every month. (Umatilla)
- ❖ The San Diego trip was a real eye-opener for us. We realized we could achieve this type of environment too. It's all about connections. We started to look at how we could build those connections with our students. (North Wasco)
- ❖ Our district's benefit from participation included the visitations, with a recognition of the importance of the sanctuary approach to caring — that everyone's safe throughout the expanded school community. (Gladstone)
- ❖ With every training session, we walked away with a different lens. I would approach students differently, especially those struggling behaviorally. (Bethel)
- ❖ Our participation answered a need we already saw. We were seeking to identify what we could do to best support our students — socially and not just academically. We wanted to provide some hope and engagement for kids and their families. We know it's not just our instructional practices that we must continuously improve. We were experiencing very young children with behavior that we more and more didn't understand. (Phoenix-Talent)

2.0 The ongoing involvement of all seven superintendents served to establish the collaborative's importance and, together with diverse and strategic team memberships, contributed to the ability of all seven districts to immediately apply new knowledge and understandings.

- ❖ We wanted someone from each level of district leadership — as many as we could take. The superintendent reached out to each of us, and we extended our membership to the secondary-school level. High school representation was very important. (Bethel)
- ❖ Our elementary school had established the membership of its Professional Learning Community, and those people were embedded in our ACEs collaborative team, along with representatives of our middle school. (Gladstone)
- ❖ Any one individual trying to undertake this change is going to be met with significant resistance. That is the value of introducing this at the district level. It's not just my school; it's every school doing this in a similar way. That's what I'm banking on to facilitate systemic change. (Phoenix-Talent)
- ❖ Our team was influenced by a very powerful commitment on the part of our superintendent. She attended pretty much every meeting, along with the assistant superintendent staff. (Portland)
- ❖ Our team's construction was really quite easy. We had the ability to bring most of our district's leadership team — the high school joined us at the end — and we brought together all of the right people. The evolution from elementary to K-12 was an important and natural extension of our experience. (Tillamook)
- ❖ I was impressed by the diversity of our group and its representation of our district. (Portland)
- ❖ Our team's construction was pretty obvious. We took everyone in a leadership position who could help our kids and said, "Let's go." And we did. That was our team. (Umatilla)
- ❖ Our superintendent's hope was to bring this to other areas of the district, and we'd love to honor that. We know this is tender work. There's something really precious about this work because the care and communication is much stronger than in any other area of my district work and with other community partners. (Portland)
- ❖ It was never a group that we said, "Be here at 6:00 a.m., we're going to this meeting, and you have to do it." Never. We had more people asking to go than we ever expected to take. (Tillamook)

3.0 Each participating school district identified significant organizational changes, activities, and plans resulting from the collaborative experience. Two common themes were the way it helped them to align existing programs and services and to craft strategic approaches based on local needs and resources.

- ❖ The ACEs work does move across all our systems. The timing of this opportunity was perfect. The collaborative experience added a missing link, a missing background piece. (Bethel)
- ❖ We'll do anything if it will really help a kid. However, some kids just need more. We looked to ACEs to see if we could figure out how to deliver that "more" in a systemic and impactful way. (Umatilla)
- ❖ At the start of the year, we had never had a conversation about ACEs. Not once. As the collaborative meetings began, and we heard about things others were doing to address trauma, we would say, "We're doing that! We're doing that too!" It was a recognition that some of what our district already does to help kids corresponds to ACEs. This process led us to understand we had a lot of good pieces in place already. (Tillamook)
- ❖ This last year, we did trauma-informed training with all district TOSAs, and we're integrating our trauma-informed lens into all of our school-climate work. We held a one-day ACEs conference for eight schools, which covered a large part of northeast Portland and involved more than 100 teachers. The idea came from the principals, who want to do this work in their schools. Teachers entered with very different levels of knowledge, but they all stayed engaged the entire time. Their responses were very touching. I was deeply moved and inspired by our teachers. (Portland)
- ❖ Because of our experience with the collaborative, rather than just jumping on board with a single model, we're doing pretty much an organic model, taking differing approaches to best match with differing needs. (Phoenix-Talent)
- ❖ People here are really accepting of each other. As a result, we have been able to undertake an implementation path that may have been difficult in another community. We did things designed to start a conversation in our community. We've received no pushback from our board, staff, or community. (Umatilla)
- ❖ We took nine staff members to Seattle for an intensive, two-day training. All of our staff wanted to go, but we couldn't afford that. (North Wasco)
- ❖ We focused on staff taking care of themselves, which was a key to acceptance of the training. (North Wasco)
- ❖ Our decision to focus on ACEs for our staff is like a breath of fresh air. People come into education because of the relationships they hope to form with kids. "This is why I teach." There's no resistance to this focus. It's natural fit for why teachers got into education. (Tillamook)

- ❖ In 2016-2017, our focus is going to be on ACEs and how to implement trauma-informed care. Every in-service is going to focus on that. We've never done anything like this before. (Tillamook)
- ❖ Our entire year coming up is built on training for this topic, staff-wide. We're working to create a trauma-informed community. One Monday each month, we are introducing a modularized training program. We've identified what we believe the modules are. Our whole staff will receive the same message that Monday. We will all team up to help each other on those Mondays. (Phoenix-Talent)
- ❖ There's a new vocabulary. People know what trauma-informed practices are. We're creating a shift. We're seeing a bigger picture. This is not a trendy buzzword. (Bethel)
- ❖ Our participation has fundamentally altered our approach to our discipline system. We realized we were causing trauma. What we want to see is a system that actually reduces the effects of trauma, for all our kids, at all levels. (Phoenix-Talent)
- ❖ We've moved to more in-school suspensions, as opposed to students just being gone. We still have some exclusionary practices we are working to remove. PBIS has some practices that are exclusionary. It's just due to a lack of knowledge. We're working to align all our practices. (Bethel)
- ❖ We are currently working to more effectively engage our family members in a way to calm, settle, and nurture their children. That would be a great benefit. (Gladstone)
- ❖ This is where we are today. We just want to make life more normal. ACEs lead to ACEs, lead to ACEs. We're not saying it's someone's fault. We're just trying to get a child and family to a better place. (Umatilla)
- ❖ We're working hard on customer relationships. Coming into a school can be difficult for people who have had bad prior school experiences. Our workshop and training for front-office secretarial staff is an effort to improve customer service. (North Wasco)
- ❖ This year, we're working on a school improvement plan that adds a third component: the social and emotional development of our students, moving beyond academic improvement and instructional growth. Focusing on social and emotional development will take us time. It's a difficult, but critical, commitment, a significant initiative. Our objectives are: a common vocabulary, a shared understanding that all behavior comes from a need to feel connected and accepted, and the implementation of community class meetings in which students are able to function, create an agenda, and learn to solve problems on their own. (North Wasco)
- ❖ We want to dig deeper and deeper into our implementation strategies and work to preserve what we've got going. The collaborative then becomes a vehicle to share with others and to gain knowledge from their efforts. (Gladstone)

- ❖ Based on what we're doing in our district, we're being approached to share and to help others. We're being identified as a showcase district, with people coming down to see what we're doing. (Phoenix-Talent)
- ❖ This will impact how our children's services department builds its organization. A lot of our department is being organized with the idea that resilient schools, resilient teachers, resilient students, and resilient families are the collective work of the whole organization. (Portland)
- ❖ I want to say by the end of the 2016-2017 school year that we have become a trauma-informed school district. (Phoenix-Talent)
- ❖ Our belief here is that we can change the culture of this community, not just the culture of our schools and kids. Some families in our community are living in a recurring nightmare of a lifestyle. We're going have to figure out a way to break those physical, mental, and emotional patterns of abuse. We're the one thing that even the lowest-functioning families in our community connect with — they get their kids to school. (Tillamook)
- ❖ I think we're primed for Phase II in another year. Perhaps one element of this would be employee wellbeing, helping people to better manage themselves in a more in-tune and subtle way. (Gladstone)

Thoughts about the Collaborative's Second Year

Representatives of all seven district teams said they could see potential benefits in another year of participation, if it were offered and if it were feasible for their district; and they suggested alternative ways of structuring a follow-up year.

- ❖ Additional expert presentations and visitations that focus on K-12 implementation of trauma-informed practices.
- ❖ Convening representatives of the seven districts for conversations that focus on sharing implementation efforts, particularly lessons learned. Areas of interest appear to include effective data collection and use, professional development strategies, working with diverse families and communities, avoiding stigma, developing family support, building community partnerships, and developing new resources.

Interview participants also talked about the possibility of adding a second cohort of school districts next year.

- ❖ One alternative would be to encourage current districts to expand team memberships to widen their internal bases of understanding and commitment.
- ❖ Another would be to identify additional school districts for an experience like the one these seven districts experienced in 2015-2016, perhaps allowing each current member to recruit a neighboring district in order to begin to develop regional capacity and establish mutual support relationships.