



December Focus: Improving Outcomes for Learners Nationwide

As the year 2019 draws to an end, we at WestEd are reflecting on our mission to improve education and other outcomes for all learners and how that mission takes us around the nation to collaborate across many domains.

This month, we are showcasing a selection of stories that show promising practices in action in a myriad of ways. In sum, our work at WestEd highlights pressing challenges educators and other communities tackle — often with the kind of grit and determination that makes a difference for all learners.

Here are examples of what educators are doing in states across the nation.

New York: The Power of Teacher Leaders

Jonas Bronck Academy in the Bronx is a small public middle school that is excelling in the realm of teacher-led professional learning. When Richard Dirksen first became a teacher leader at the Academy, he depended on collaborative instincts and a trailblazing, supportive administration. “But teacher leadership *really* took off and became formalized under the [Teacher Practice Networks \(TPN\)](#) initiative,” says Dirksen.

[The Center for the Future of Teaching & Learning at WestEd](#), with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, launched the TPN initiative, a vast national network of teacher leaders like Dirksen — expert teachers who mentor and coach their peers. By providing high-quality standards-aligned resources and ongoing professional learning led by teacher leaders, the initiative works to help teachers effectively navigate new ways of teaching as they implement college- and career-readiness standards.

[*Learn more about how teachers are learning from teachers at Jonas Bronck Academy.*](#)

Nebraska: Reaching Disconnected Youth Through Collaboration

At 18, Jesse was one of countless “unconnected” older youth. He had moved out of foster care with no plans for the future — and a deep distrust of authority. “The way I grew up,” he says, “I had nothing. I had nobody I could depend on.” That changed when Jesse was introduced to

Nebraska’s Connected Youth Initiative (CYI), where he met coaches from multiple local agencies to help him learn life skills.

Leaders from the CYI and a WestEd-led evaluation team are generating early lessons about the challenges and opportunities of helping youth just like Jesse — those ages 14 through 24, coming from foster care, juvenile detention, or homelessness, without family or other local ties — specifically in rural, low-income settings.

Encouraged by his CYI coaches, Jesse went on to community college and is now a full-time mechanic. “Going a complete ‘180’ and having people who care and want me to succeed was tremendous,” Jesse says, “and then being able to fall back on them if I needed help.” His biggest lesson? “Don’t be afraid to accept help.”

[Read more about Nebraska’s Connected Youth Initiative.](#)

California: Using Data to Build a Culture of Attendance

More than eight million students nationwide are chronically absent. The causes of missing school are many and varied, but the consequences tend to be negative, according to research summarized by WestEd’s [Regional Educational Laboratory \(REL\) West](#). For example, chronic absence can lead to lower math and reading achievement by 3rd grade and to lower rates of high school graduation later.

But there are solutions to this pervasive issue, says REL West’s [BethAnn Berliner](#). Berliner, with her REL West colleagues, have partnered with districts to help educators expand and deepen their use of data to reduce absenteeism.

The work has taken Berliner to three districts in California’s largely Latino rural Central Valley — Tulare City School District, Kerman Unified School District, and Parlier Unified School District.

“All three districts have invested in building strong cultures of attendance,” says Berliner. “They let everyone in their communities know that daily attendance matters, that kids belong in school, and that they will do whatever it takes to help support student success, which starts with being present.”

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