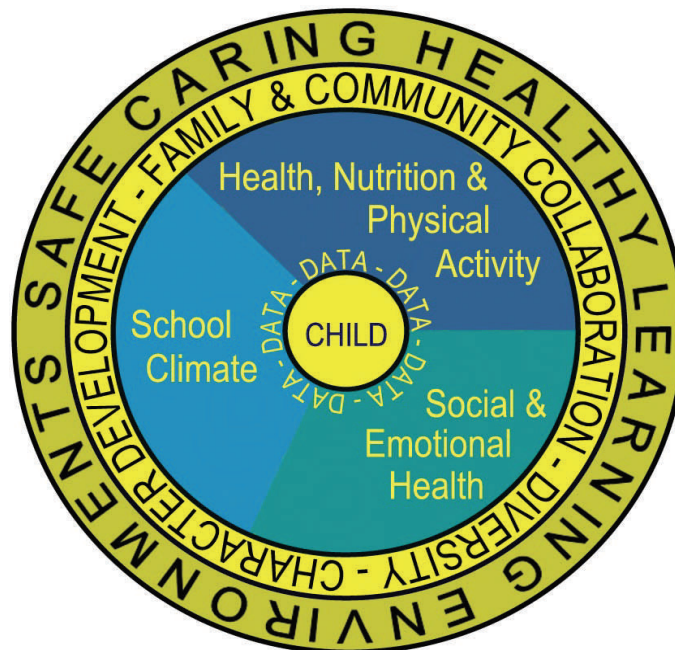


Delaware Department of Education Connections to Learning



A Resource Guide for the Connections to Learning Toolkit

Connection to Learning Resource Guide

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Introduction

Welcome to **Connections to Learning**! You have taken an important step towards improving the quality of education students in your school or district receive. Tackling problem areas or mining for improvement opportunities within your educational environment may seem daunting. Traditional models and methods are often entrenched and comfortable. It can seem too difficult, time consuming, or even scary, to reassess that which is “tried and true.” This toolkit was compiled to facilitate the process of assessment and change.

Connections to Learning is both a philosophy and a mechanism for empowerment, problem solving and action planning. The Connections to Learning team has field tested an array of processes, best practices, and scientific information. This toolkit assembles and shares those things that have been identified as core success factors. The ideas and materials compiled in this toolkit are those that evoke a collective, shared responsibility for impacting children’s success. They build on team infrastructure that is often already established in schools and districts throughout Delaware. They intend to elicit broad, interdisciplinary input, and finally they use data to create, plan, and implement strategies for problem solving and general performance enhancement.

Everyone has a role and responsibility in school improvement. We hope these resources assist you in convening and managing a multidisciplinary and dynamic process! As you gain familiarity, peruse, and use these materials we appreciate your input and feedback. We are here to assist you. Please do not hesitate to contact any Connections to Learning team member if you have questions along the way.

The Toolkit is divided into four sections for easy use and reference:

Section One: “Get Ready...”

This section contains overview materials about the Connections to Learning program and its mission and vision. These background materials should be of assistance in sharing with others about the concept of Connections to Learning and how it applies to your situation, school, or district - and perhaps all three.

Section Two: “Get Set...”

This section contains a variety of planning materials and activities. Whether you will be using an established team or creating a new one, consider some of the activities in this section to provide cohesion and baseline for the team and its problem solving and action planning. Activities range from fun icebreakers to surveys and thought stimulus questionnaires.

Section Three: “Connect!”

This “meat and potatoes” section will facilitate your development of a customized action plan. By working through this stage, your team will be ready to apply planning decisions and priorities. Ultimately, by evaluating lessons learned, the team will be ready to repeat the process. Materials are also included to evaluate other programs and the overall Connections to Learning process.

Section Four: Remain Connected

This section contains additional professional references to support your team’s action planning, communication needs, and information gathering about other organizations and sources of assistance.

Good Luck!
Connections to Learning Team
Delaware Department of Education

Section One: “Get Ready...”

Tips from the Pilot School District

During the 2006-2007 school year, the Department of Education collaborated with a Delaware school district to pilot the Connections to Learning Program. Over the course of that school year, members of the pilot team engendered the principles and concepts of the program and applied them to district programs and initiatives that they determined to be critical to the success of improved instruction for all students within their district. The 2006-2007 Connections to Learning pilot produced valuable lessons shared below.* Please employ these tips as you implement the Connections to Learning Program in your school or district.

Keep it simple.

Use the Connection to Learning brochure as a guide for the development of the action plan.

Keep the focus on connections.

In each step of the Connections to Learning process, search for the expertise that each person brings to improve student learning.

Keep the line of communications open with DOE.

Their support has been invaluable.

Keep it real.

Looking at a problem through a variety of lenses (state, district and school) leads to practical solutions to difficult problems.

Keep an eye on the data.

Focus on all aspects of student and school performance, such as academics, discipline, suspension rates, health concerns, and school climate surveys.

Keep it small.

By dividing the action plan into specific sections we were able to accomplish more. The communications process is key to keeping all groups connected.

* These lessons learned have been taken from a testimonial letter written by Ms. Sandra J. Smith, Director of Instruction, Indian River School District.

The Importance of the Team

Connections to Learning requires a team approach. Whether using an existing team or forming a new one, assuring inclusion is a key consideration.

The overarching objective of the Connections to Learning program is to build ongoing commitment to a holistic problem solving approach. A holistic approach requires an interdisciplinary team including such individuals as the principal, school nurse, teachers, bus driver, cafeteria workers, parents, coaches, custodians, librarians, etc. The process could take six months, or a year. It is important that team members understand upfront that their respective roles and expertise are essential and valuable. The process needs to be respectful of the many time demands imposed by modern society on team members, but at the same time strive to be thorough and patient enough to see the process through to completion.

Remember, the team is never final. You can, and should, continually add people to the team as necessary. In fact, it is good practice to begin every meeting by looking around the room and asking, “Who’s missing?” If there is a representative not at the table, be sure to invite them to the next meeting.

Meeting Planning

A team has been identified or formed. It’s time to start planning a kick-off meeting. Program description materials may have already been a required component of the team recruitment process. Regardless, team members will benefit by receiving background materials in advance of the first meeting. The first meeting establishes a foundation for the rest of the process and warrants thoughtful planning.

Some administrative things to consider in planning the first meeting:

- Allow ample time for the first meeting. It is an important discussion for achieving team member understanding of the Connections to Learning goals, principles, and ultimate advantage.
- Consider a time, date, and location that will accommodate the majority of your team. School employees, parents, and school officials have many demands on their time.
- There may never be a date and time that is universally agreed upon by all team members. However, it may be a good idea to rotate meetings. By alternating days of the week and meeting times you can help ensure that all members are able to attend some, or even better, most meetings.
- In the event a member is unable to attend a meeting, be sure to send him/her the minutes or some follow-up from the missed meeting to keep him abreast of the team’s activities.

The following materials are contained under the “Get Ready” tab in the toolkit:

- ◇ A Connections to Learning Program Overview Handout
- ◇ The Connections to Learning Mission/Vision Statement

Section Two: “Get Set...”

Convening Team Meetings

Team meetings will need to accomplish a number of things, and do so at a reasonable pace.

The toolkit contains several items for progressive meeting content, icebreakers, teambuilding, and data activities:

The following materials are contained under the “Get Set” tab in the toolkit:

- ◇ The Connections to Learning PowerPoint Presentation
This tool provides a comprehensive orientation to the Connections to Learning program and what it can achieve. The PowerPoint presentation including presentation notes are contained on the enclosed disk. A hard copy is included in the toolkit behind the “Get Set...” tab. The lower left corner of the PowerPoint references the associated page(s) of the Connections to Learning Booklet.
- ◇ The “What’s My Job?” Icebreaker Activity (including instructions)
The objective of this exercise is to get team members acquainted with each other and what they do. As this activity is completed, team members will learn surprising things that they didn’t know or necessarily appreciate about other team members.
- ◇ The “Breaking Into the Circle” Activity (including instructions)
The objective of this activity is to have the team examine and gain understanding of all the sub-domains and embedded concepts of Connections to Learning. During this activity, team members should review all of the elements of the Connections to Learning logo, which are individually presented in Fact Sheet format. The team can refer to the individual Fact Sheet reference sections if further investigation into the domains and concepts are needed.
- ◇ The “Connecting all of the Pieces” Puzzle Activity (including instructions)
The objective of this activity is to work as a team to complete the puzzle. The puzzle itself represents the whole school community. During the course of this activity, the team should come to the conclusion that communication, teamwork, and other resources are needed to make all the pieces fit together. The puzzle is a metaphor for the program’s principles.

** We welcome your team building strategies or activities. Additional tools will be added to this section as they are identified and compiled. Be sure to check behind the tab for newer materials that may have been added subsequent to the production of this resource guide..*

Establishing Priority(s)

The following materials are also contained under the “Get Set” tab in the toolkit:

- ◇ The Readiness Checklist
The Readiness Checklist is to be distributed to each member of the team with instructions to complete the assessment individually. For each statement, the team member must decide if it is a STRENGTH, WEAKNESS, or NON-ISSUE specific to the school/district in discussion. Once everyone has completed this activity, facilitate a discussion allowing people to share their answers. In so doing, it may be helpful for a team leader to collect and collate the anonymous individual assessments in advance of the meeting. Aggregate information from the assessment can be shared with the team and team members can individually offer their input to the discussion.
- ◇ The Embedded Concepts Checklist
As a group, review the Embedded Concepts Checklist. Lead the team by reading the checklist aloud and facilitating a group discussion. The Embedded Concepts Checklist is a tool intended to stimulate discussion about the presence of Connections to Learning’s core values within the school or district. Through either individual or group affirmation of individual items on the checklist, the team can begin to identify inherent strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and possible limitations. This is a formative activity for use early in the Connections to Learning process; however, periodic review of the checklist may prove helpful throughout the process. It should ultimately inform the development of the action plan, and in that respect may be a “checklist” that is re-viewed more than once during the process.

Establishing Priority(s) (continued)

◇ The Essential Questions Activity (including directions):

The Essential Questions Activity centers around the ideas presented on pages 8 – 15 of the Connections to Learning Booklet. (The booklet can be found online at [www. Doe.K12.de.us/programs/DESS/files/C2L%20book.pdf](http://www.Doe.K12.de.us/programs/DESS/files/C2L%20book.pdf)).

A Connections to Learning enduring understanding is a belief that applies to all children in the educational setting. Essential questions are provided pertinent to each of three enduring understandings; a) School Climate, b) Social & Emotional Health, and c) Health, Nutrition & Physical Activity. This survey process identifies priority areas for better promoting each enduring understanding in your school.

There are two methods offered to complete the Essential Questions Activity:

- A) The Activity is found in hard copy in the toolkit. Team members may complete the survey individually on hard copy. Teams may also wish to distribute the hard copy surveys to individuals outside of the team. (If completed individually in hard copy, care will need to be given for how to best aggregate, present, and discuss results for effective meeting management purposes.)
- B) The Department of Education has created an electronic survey of the Essential Questions Activity for your convenience. The link to the survey is <http://survey.doe.k12.de.us/cgi-bin/qwebcorporate.dll?idx=WUNHNT>. Once your school (or other target audience) has completed the survey, please contact Ms. Lisa Marcum at DOE to get your survey data. Ms. Marcum can be reached by telephone at 302-735-4163 or email at lmarcum@doe.k12.de.us. Please allow 10 business days to receive your survey data.

Some things to consider in completing the Essential Questions Activity:

- Maximizing the number of individuals who complete a manual or online survey is encouraged as broad reach will provide the team a greater sense of baseline information about the school/district.
- A team leader needs to take responsibility for collecting and compiling the survey results.
- The team should facilitate a discussion about the survey results. At this meeting, the team can use the Essential Questions posters found in the Connection to Learning Toolkit. The team is charged with the task of determining the current level of implementation of each Essential Question (1 = not implemented, 2 = in process, 3 = fully implemented). This will help the team coordinate the findings of the survey with the opportunities for short or long term success.
- While completing the Essential Questions Activity, the team should refer back to the Embedded Concepts Checklist for periodic guidance.
- Discussion of survey results and completion of the team Essential Questions activity will likely require several team meetings.

Section Three: “Connect!”

Using Data

Once the team has identified and prioritized areas in need of improvement, it is time to practice working with data.

There are two activities, Role Play and Data Activity, and their respective instructions contained in this section, found behind the “Connect!” tab. Each is meant to stress to the team the important role of data. The activities serve as tools to familiarize the team with finding and analyzing data in a purposeful way.

After the team has completed these activities it is time to look at school specific data. Consider using all available data; State, District, Local, or School specific. Remember to have the team ask, “What’s missing?” Is there any data your team would like that is currently not being gathered or reported? If so, collaborate with your IT department to develop a means to collect this data for future use.

To obtain school specific data reports, follow the links listed on the Data Resources list found under the “Connect!” tab. If you are in need of additional data, contact the your IT department. Some of the data you will need may only be accessible directly by the school.

Creating an Action Plan

You’re in the home stretch! You have formed your team and convened and facilitated several activities. You have launched a school-wide survey and analyzed the findings to narrow and prioritize your school’s list of goals to focus upon. You have practiced using data in order to apply your findings, and you have the tools and resources necessary to achieve your goal(s).

We have provided an Action Plan template under the “Connect!” tab in the toolkit. The template addresses crucial points to help you achieve your goal. An Action Plan provides a mechanism for tracking progress, facilitates sustained and systemic change, justifies grant requests, and is an effective tool for required School Performance Plans.

Keep in mind the following guidelines when starting an Action Plan:

1. Identify the goal and create your school goal statement
2. Identify data needed to help accomplish your goal, set targets and timeframes for review and analysis
~If a grant is needed, data/supported documentation will be needed to backup your request for funding.
3. Identify actions or activities that need to be completed in order to meet your goal
4. Identify required resources and needed programs
5. Evaluate external programs using an objective review process to determine if they will be effective for helping your team reach its goals
~It is important to evaluate the programs and resources you choose to utilize in your school. Look at your data to decide what programs to implement. Use the Program Assessment Checklist, found behind the “Connect!” tab, as an objective evaluation to ensure quality programs that support the Connections to Learning process.

Creating an Action Plan (Continued)

6. Identify person(s), department or organization responsible for the action/activity
7. Identify budget needed to fulfill actions/activity ~ consider all possible expenses
8. Create a realistic timeline
~ Don't cut yourself short, but don't set a deadline so far out that team members and others involved lose momentum.
9. What does success look like? Evaluate your activities and actions every step of the way. What data do you need to gather and monitor to know how you're doing? What works, what doesn't? Keep these things in mind when starting the action plan for your team's next goal.
10. Celebrate your success. Convene the team and/or sub-committees regularly in order to stay updated and on track. Share success stories.

Implementing the Action Plan

One could feasibly argue that this step is the most important step. All the preceding steps were ultimately leading up to this point. The team has identified areas that need improvement, prioritized those areas, worked with data, and created a plan. While the team has worked very hard and accomplished much, it is vital that the team not run out of steam now! A team leader must ensure that the team is following the Action Plan it set. Hold regular team meetings to allow team members to report their progress.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a critical step in the process. An evaluation form is contained within the toolkit. This is for evaluation of the effectiveness of Connections to Learning. The Connections to Learning Evaluation can be completed individually and returned to Ms. Linda Wolfe at the Department of Education. This evaluation provides important feedback to the Department of Education about the utility of Connections to Learning.

The following materials are contained under the "Connect!" tab in the toolkit:

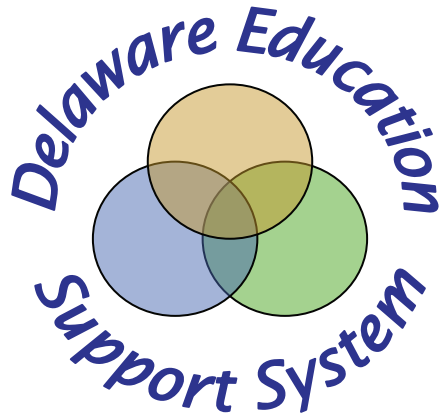
- ◇ *"Where Have All the Students Gone"* Role Play Activity and instructions
- ◇ Data Activity and instructions
- ◇ Data Resources List
- ◇ Action Plan Template
- ◇ Program Assessment Checklist
- ◇ Connections to Learning Evaluation

Section Four: Remain Connected

A variety of materials are contained behind Tab 4: Remain Connected. These professional tools provide evidence-based references on key topics. Additional materials are also found.

The following materials are contained under the “Remain Connected” tab in the toolkit:

- ◇ Book List
- ◇ Partnership Council Resource List
- ◇ Connections to Learning “Toolkit on CD”



Connections to Learning
is a domain of continuous improvement
in the Delaware Department of Education

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