FROM A NATION AT RISK TO A NATION AT HOPE

Recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, & ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After two decades of education debates that produced deep passions and deeper divisions, we have a chance for a fresh start. A growing movement dedicated to the social, emotional, and academic well-being of children is reshaping learning and changing lives across America. On the strength of its remarkable consensus, a nation at risk is finally a nation at hope.

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development began with the simple intention of listening—really listening—to young people, parents, teachers, school and district leaders, community leaders, and other experts. This document, in many ways, is a report from the nation. What we heard is profoundly hopeful. There is a remarkable confluence of experience and science on one point: Children learn best when we treat them as human beings, with social and emotional as well as academic needs.

More specifically, children require a broad array of skills, attitudes, character traits, and values to succeed in school, careers, and life. They require skills such as paying attention, setting goals, collaboration, and planning for the future. They require attitudes such as internal motivation, perseverance, and a sense of purpose. They require values such as responsibility, honesty, and integrity. They require the abilities to think critically, consider diverse views, and problem solve. And these social, emotional, and academic capacities are increasingly demanded in the American workplace, which puts a premium on the ability to work in diverse teams, grapple with difficult problems, and adjust to rapid change.

The promotion of social, emotional, and academic learning is not a shifting educational fad; it is the substance of education itself. It is not a distraction from the "real work" of math and English instruction; it is how instruction can succeed. It brings together a traditionally conservative emphasis on local control and on the character of all students, and a historically progressive emphasis on the creative and challenging art of teaching and the social and emotional needs of all students, especially those who have experienced the greatest challenges.

Educating the whole learner cannot be reduced to a simple set of policies or proposals. It is, instead, a mindset that should inform the entire educational enterprise. This is the message from the nation on learning. We want to add our voice to these voices. And through this report, we want this hopeful consensus to be understood and spread as widely as possible.

HOW LEARNING HAPPENS

More than two decades of research across a range of disciplines—psychology, social science, brain science—demonstrates that the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning are deeply linked. These skills grow and change over time, based on children's environment and experiences, and can be taught.

Educating the whole student requires rethinking teaching and learning so that academics and students' social, emotional, and cognitive development are joined not just occasionally, but throughout the day. Students are intentionally taught these skills and asked to exercise them as they learn academic content and interact with peers and adults. Learning environments that support the whole student are

physically and emotionally safe and are based on warm, supportive relationships—including those between children and teachers that are fundamental to learning.

Evidence confirms that supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development benefits all children and relates positively to the traditional measures we care about: attendance, grades, test scores, graduation rates, college and career success, engaged citizenship, and overall well-being. Although these skills are important for all students, equity means acknowledging that not all students are the same. Providing equitable opportunities for developing young people's social, emotional, and academic growth requires calibrating to each student's and school's individual strengths and needs—ensuring that those with greater needs have access to greater resources.

When *all* children and youth possess a full array of these skills, attitudes, and values, they are better equipped to prosper in the classroom, perform in the workplace, and thrive in life, as contributing and productive members of society. By integrating—rather than separating—young people's social, emotional, and academic development, we position each and every student for success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are aimed at the array of practitioners, individuals, and organizations who support young people. We view policy and research as playing essential, enabling roles to support effective practice in classrooms, schools, and communities.

ONE: **SET A CLEAR VISION THAT BROADENS THE DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS TO PRIORITIZE THE WHOLE CHILD**

Create a clear vision for young people's social, emotional, and academic development.

- Broaden existing definitions of a successful high school graduate to include the social, emotional, and cognitive skills and competencies demonstrated to contribute to success in school, work, and life.
- Align strategic action plans, budgetary resources, and adult workforce development in support of the vision.
- Develop and use measures to track progress across school and out-of-school settings, with a focus on continuous improvement rather than on rewards and sanctions.

Policymakers can support this work through state standards, guidance, and frameworks that signal to districts and communities the importance of prioritizing the whole child. Policymakers also can support these efforts by supplying measurement tools as well as training and assistance in interpreting and using data.

TWO: **TRANSFORM LEARNING SETTINGS SO THEY ARE SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE FOR ALL YOUNG PEOPLE**

Build settings that are physically and emotionally safe and foster strong bonds among children and adults.

- Build structures that support relationships—such as advisory groups, class meetings, team teaching, and multi-grade looping—so that every student is known well by at least one adult.
- Create schoolwide cultures that encourage student voice and agency through practices such as student-led parent-teacher conferences, choice in assignments, and participation in collaborative decision-making structures.
- Affirm the cultural backgrounds of the diverse students that schools serve, so all young people and adults feel a sense of belonging and respect for who they are.
- End punitive and counterproductive disciplinary strategies, such as zero-tolerance policies, that push students out of schools and classrooms.
- Bring the assets of community organizations—including art, music, sports, and health and mental health services—into the life of the school.

Policymakers can support this work by providing equitable access to high-quality learning environments for each student through funding and technical assistance. They can also enable the flexible use of existing resources—including the allocation of staff, time, and facilities—to support the whole child and to encourage the integration of community partners into the school environment. They should hold schools, districts, and youth-serving organizations account-

able for improvements in the quality of the learning environment as part of accountability systems, but with a focus on continuous improvement.

THREE: **CHANGE INSTRUCTION TO TEACH SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND COGNITIVE SKILLS; EMBED THESE SKILLS IN ACADEMICS AND IN SCHOOLWIDE PRACTICES**

Intentionally teach specific skills and competencies and infuse them in academic content and in all aspects of the school setting (recess, lunchroom, hallways, extracurricular activities), not just in stand-alone programs or lessons.

- Explicitly teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills by using evidence-based instructional materials, practices, programs, and resources.
- Embed those skills in academic instruction and schoolwide practices. During lessons, educators prioritize with students the skills, attitudes, and values of effective learners and use this focus to boost academic performance and personal character.
- Use a broader range of assessments and other demonstrations of learning that capture the full gamut of young people's knowledge and skills.

FOUR: **BUILD ADULT EXPERTISE IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

Ensure educators develop understanding and expertise in child development and in the science of learning. This will require major changes in educator preparation and in ongoing professional support for the social and emotional learning of teachers and all other adults who work with young people.

- Redesign educator preparation so that all graduates have expertise in child and adolescent development and the science of learning.
- Create collaborative decision-making structures that engage all adults in the school in owning young people's healthy development and learning.
- Prioritize social, emotional, and cognitive skills and competencies in recruitment, hiring, and orientation. Follow through with ongoing professional learning and support for adults to foster the whole learner.

Policymakers can restructure the rules and regulations that govern the adult workforce to hire, retain, pay, and promote people with the skills and knowledge to develop students socially, emotionally, and academically. They can provide incentives for innovations in educator preparation and change the rules and regulations regarding educator licensure and the approval of educator preparation programs. They can ensure that induction programs for new teachers support social, emotional, and academic learning.

FIVE: **ALIGN RESOURCES AND LEVERAGE PARTNERS IN THE COMMUNITY TO ADDRESS THE WHOLE CHILD**

Build partnerships among schools, families, and community organizations to support healthy learning and development in and out of school; blend and braid resources to achieve this goal.

- Engage families and young people in discussions about the resources they need when designing and implementing approaches to support students' comprehensive development. Involve them in opportunities to learn and lead, such as through home visits and student and parent advisory groups.
- Fund dedicated positions in schools and districts to intentionally engage partners through collaborative planning and open communications.
- Provide access to quality summer school and afterschool programming for each young person.
- Use data to identify and address gaps in students' access to the full range of learning opportunities in and out of school.

Policymakers can ensure resources are invested wisely and distributed equitably. The equitable distribution of resources should account for qualified educators, reasonable class sizes and ratios of counselors and other support staff to students, and adequate health and mental health services. Policy leaders should evaluate the adequacy of resources in each community in relation to student needs as a basis for making investments. They can allow states, districts, and schools to blend and braid school and other child-serving resources on behalf of children.

SIX: **FORGE CLOSER CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Bridge the divide between scholarly research and what's actionable in schools and classrooms. Build new structures—and new support—for researchers and educators to work collaboratively and bi-directionally around pressing local problems that have broader implications.

- Create new research-practice partnerships to generate useful, actionable information for the field. Build multi-disciplinary teams that include people at various levels of the system and with diverse perspectives and use iterative inquiry cycles and collaborative data analysis to learn together and test proposed changes.
- Use data and evidence to build and strengthen partnerships among research institutions, community organizations, and schools. This includes robust data-sharing agreements between schools and other youth-serving agencies to collaboratively address strengths and challenges.
- Build new tools for the strategic dissemination and communication of knowledge and effective strategies to a wide audience. This includes moving beyond producing articles for academic journals to also crafting field-facing summaries that provide guidance for educators and call out specific applications in practice.

Historically, the federal government has been instrumental in advancing research through funding and priority setting; it must continue to do so both within and across federal agencies. To continue to encourage innovation and understanding of the integrated nature of social, emotional, and cognitive development, the federal government should encourage more cross-sector research investments, particularly those that incentivize vertical, collaborative, multidisciplinary teams of researchers and practitioners. In addition, the federal government must continue to support the translation of research to inform state-level policy and district-level practice.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Decades of scientific evidence point to the most important missing ingredient in classrooms and schools today: making sure that all children have the social, emotional, and academic skills they need to learn and thrive.

This idea is rooted in the best educational and neurological research. But it has taken shape in local schools and communities. Students, families, educators, and leaders are galvanizing around a growing recognition that we must support the whole learner; and they are making it happen in ways that fit their unique circumstances. Their efforts have revealed the emerging outline of a way forward and have fueled, informed, and shaped the Commission's task of bringing together all that we know and all that's been done into a unified framework for action. It is time to gather this momentum into a movement with the potential to improve the lives and performance of students across the country.

"In dreams begin responsibilities," wrote William Butler Yeats. All of us dream of creating environments where the minds and spirits of children can thrive. Now it is our responsibility to make it happen. That is the high calling of education and the urgent task of our time.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development was created to engage and energize communities in re-envisioning learning to support the whole child. The Commission's members are leaders from education, research, policy, business, and the military. The full Commission team includes Councils of Distinguished Scientists and Educators, a Youth Commission, a Parent Advisory Panel, and Partners and Funders Collaboratives.

This culminating report ***from*** the nation, ***to*** the nation, draws on input we received over the past two years from conversations, meetings, and site visits across the country, as well as from the members of all these groups. It reflects the more detailed recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers contained in three separate, related reports: *A Practice Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens*, *A Policy Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens*, and *A Research Agenda for the Next Generation*. A full citation and reference list are available in these related reports and the final report. To get more involved, view all four reports and related resources on our website at **www.NationAtHope.org**.