A Parent's Guide to Supporting the Whole Child in Schools

Whole child-centered learning is the idea that children learn best when all of their needs are met: social-emotional, physical, mental, intellectual, and need for relationship. Whole child-centered learning takes place when schools focus not just on academics and behavior, but on meeting all of a child's needs. These ideas are supported by decades of scientific research and widely understood by parents and experienced educators. This approach leads to better outcomes for young people and is not just nice to have; it is essential for enabling kids to do well in school and to thrive in college, career, and life. However, the vast majority of schools serving Black and Latino students do not use this integrated approach and are not yet serving the needs of the whole child.

This guide is a tool to introduce the latest understanding of what works, what to look for, and where to push to make sure your school and community support all children to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.
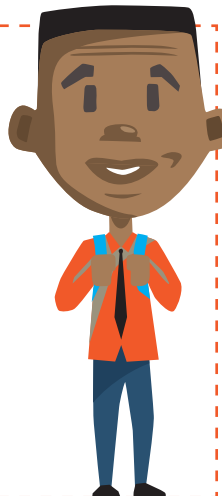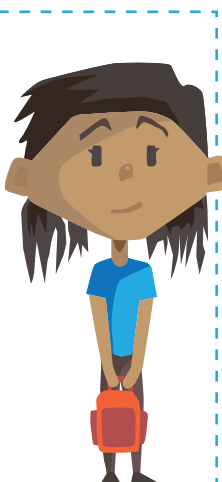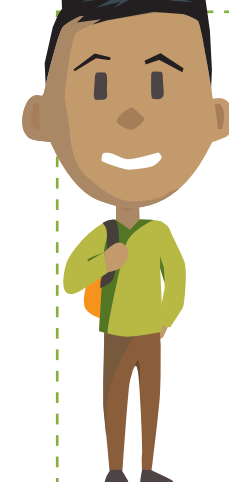
The power of the whole child approach to education

The whole child approach is grounded in the understanding that learning happens best:

- In an environment that is safe and equitable, where students have trusting and caring relationships with adults who truly believe that they can learn and succeed.[1]
- When all of a child's needs are met, including their academic learning, physical and mental health, social emotional well-being, and identity development.
- When academic learning and social emotional learning are integrated. It's not an either/or; social emotional learning is necessary for academic learning and success in life and social emotional skills can be taught and lead to better academic outcomes.[2]

Across the country, there are promising pockets of change as schools and communities move toward a whole child approach. However, the overall pace of change is slow. Kids who have experienced trauma and adversity benefit even more from this approach, and schools need to invest more to meet the broad needs of young people who face extra challenges.[4]

It is time for schools and communities to evolve so that each child can say:

1
My school is safe and welcoming

2
The adults at my school love, understand, and believe in me

3
I am ready to learn because my needs are met

4
I am building important life skills everyday

1 My school is safe and welcoming

The overall climate and culture of a school is the bedrock on which learning takes place. Students need to feel safe at school and schools need to have clear and consistent strategies across the school to identify and address bullying and violence. Schools must stop using systemically racist disciplinary practices and begin using culturally informed, restorative justice models. Students of color and low-income students, who are more likely to experience external stressors outside of school, are less likely than their peers to report feeling high levels of support, safety, and trust in school, and they are more likely to experience punitive disciplinary practices.[5] In contrast, studies have found that teaching kids how to restore broken relationships and heal their community also leads to better student-teacher relationships and better academic outcomes.[6]

What this can look like in school:

- Suspension, expulsion, and taking students out of class are not the primary strategies for discipline and are not disproportionately applied to Black and Latino boys or children with disabilities compared to White peers.
- Behaviors that negatively impact others are used as opportunities to explicitly teach students about repairing relationships, conflict resolution, and responsibility to the community.

Questions parents can ask to learn more:

- Does it feel joyful and safe at this school? Does my child feel safe and happy to be at school?
- How is discipline handled? How many students have had out of school suspensions in the past two years, been expelled, or have dropped out? Are these students disproportionately Black, Latino, low-income, and/or students with special needs?
- Does the school use conflicts and broken rules to teach rather than merely punish? What does this look like in specific, real examples?

2 The adults at my school love, understand, and believe in me

Close, positive relationships with adults at school is one of the most powerful ways to help children grow and learn from an early age.[7] This is especially true for students identified as underserved and can help students gain the support needed to succeed.[8] When students feel valued and know that adults believe they will succeed, they do better academically.[9]

What this can look like in school:

- Students have a close, healthy and trusting relationship with at least one teacher and ideally several adults in the school.
- All of the adults at the school believe that low-income Black and Latino students can learn and achieve at the highest levels.
- Teachers, curriculum, and school culture reflect, understand, and value the identity, culture, and experiences of students.
- Many teachers and administrators look like the students they teach and come from the same communities and backgrounds as students and families.

Questions parents can ask to learn more:

- How many of my child's teachers are people of color / from our community / reflect my family's background?
- Does my child feel loved and liked by at least one adult at school? By whom?
- Do my child's teachers seem to know my child well? Do teachers care about my child's life outside of school?
- Do I know whom to talk to if I want to know about how my child is doing in school overall, not just in a specific class?
- Is the school schedule and calendar set up to allow my child to develop relationships with teachers?
  - > Are there teachers who stay with my child throughout the year or even for more than one year?
  - > (For middle school and older) Is there at least one teacher who spends time with my child every day?
  - > Are there classes that are specifically designed to allow my child to develop relationships with teachers and other students, such as advisory classes, mentorship programs, and peer-to-peer supports?

# 3 I am ready to learn because my needs are met

Kids need their basic needs met to be ready to learn, including having stable housing, nutritious food, sleep, physical activity, health care, and mental health support.

What can this look like in school:

- Teachers and school leaders understand and care about the challenges their students face.
- Schools play a role by connecting students and families to community resources and services.
- Teachers and school leaders partner with families in advocating for more resources from state and local agencies.

Questions parents can ask to learn more:

- Do the school leaders and/or teachers seem to understand the challenges facing kids and families in our community?
- If my child or other children are struggling in school, do teachers first ask about what might be going on in their life outside of school?
- Does the school connect families and students to the resources they need, such as afterschool care, extracurricular activities, access to healthy food, medical care, and mental health services?
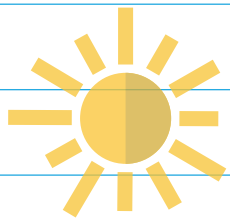
4 I am building important life skills every day

Research shows that young people who have stronger social, emotional, and cognitive skills are more likely to succeed in school and have better life outcomes.[10] They are more likely to graduate from college, succeed in their careers, have healthier relationships, and be healthier mentally and physically.[11] Educators agree with this as well: in a 2016 survey of over 800 school principals, 97% believe that a larger focus on social emotional learning will also improve students' academic achievements.[12]

What this can look like in school:

- The school deliberately incorporates social emotional learning (SEL) throughout the curriculum and school day, not just in separate SEL lessons. For example:
  - > Students work through a multi-step project to learn how to set goals, prioritize tasks, and meet deadlines
  - > Teachers use a challenging lesson to also teach students how to recognize feelings and manage feelings like uncertainty and frustration in the moment.
  - > Students work in a team on a project to learn and collaborate. Learn how to resolve conflicts, recognize each other's contributions, and build relationships.
  - > Schools have advisory classes where teachers can mentor small groups of students so they have a safe space to build peer relationships and process emotions together.
- Students are self-aware and know their own strengths, learning needs, development needs, and what they need to be successful, both in school and later in life.
- Students, teachers and parents share a common understanding about how students need to develop and how each student learns. Parents and teachers frequently communicate about how the student is doing at school.
- Teachers positively encourage and challenge students to reach ambitious goals, work through failure, and develop self-confidence.

Questions parents can ask to learn more:

- Can my child's teacher or teachers paint a clear picture for me of all the skills that they will learn to be successful at the next level, not just academic skills but also social and emotional skills?
- Can my child's teachers explain how social emotional learning takes place throughout the day and in different subjects?
- Do my child and I know my child's social and emotional learning goals and how they connect with their academic goals?
- Do teachers and school leaders engage in their own social emotional learning as well?
- What specific investments is the school district (or charter network) making to ensure that social emotional learning is a part of my child's school?

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2 In a study of 300,000 students, those who participated in a social and emotional learning program showed an 11% improvement in academic outcomes as well. Learning Heroes, Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning: Meeting Parents Where They Are, May 2017

3 Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Whole Child Approach to Education

4 A Nation At Hope, Chapter 1: How Learning Happens

5 A Nation at Hope, Chapter 2: Recommendations for Action

6 Fronius, T., Persson, H., Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2016). Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. San Francisco, CA: WestEd; Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A., & Gerewitz, J. (2016). The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher-student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26(4), 325–353.

7 Learning Policy Institute, Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success, September 7, 2008

8 Friedlaender, D., Burns, D., Lewis-Charp, H., Cook-Harvey, C. M., Zheng, X., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). *Student-centered schools: Closing the opportunity gap.* Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education; Lee, V. E., Bryk, A. S., & Smith, J. B. (1993). The organization of effective secondary schools. *Review of Research in Education, 19*, 171–267.

9 Aronson, J. (2002). "Stereotype Threat: Contending and Coping With Unnerving Expectations" in Aronson, J. (Ed.). *Improving Academic Achievement: Impact of Psychological Factors on Education* (pp. 279–301). New York, NY: Academic Press.

10 Jones, D. J., Greenberg, M. T., & Crowley, D. M. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*(11), 2283–2290; Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development, 88*(4), 1156–1171.

11 Aspen Institute, From a Nation at Risk to a Nation At Hope

12 CASEL, A National Principal Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Prepare Children and Transform Schools

The Whole Child Approach to Learning[3]

Whole child centered learning takes place when schools ensure:

Equity

Teachers and school leaders believe that Black and Latino kids will succeed.

Teachers and school leaders are from similar backgrounds as students and families.

Schools and districts invest deeply in redesigning the school to support the whole child.

Mental Health

Kids have resources and skills to support their mental health, build healthy relationships, and cope with stress.

Academic Development

Students access grade-level content in literacy, math, science, social studies, art, and other subjects.

Safe Learning Environment, Strong Community

Kids feel safe in school and have trusting adult and peer relationships.

There is consistent communication and coordination between home, school, and community to support each child.

Discipline is based on repairing relationships, not on punishment.

Physical Health

Students have access to good nutrition, fitness, sleep, healthcare and health insurance (vision, dental, hearing, medical), and extra support as needed.

Social and Emotional Development

Kids build skills that allow them to recognize and manage emotions, understand the emotions and perspectives of others, cope with difficulty and stress, navigate social situations, resolve conflicts, work with a team, and self-advocate.

Identity Development

Students have a sense of purpose, cultural belonging, and learn about values. Their experiences and identities are celebrated and validated.

Cognitive Development

Students develop skills related to memory, organization, processing, focusing, goal-setting, problem solving, and critical thinking.

[3] Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Whole Child Approach to Education