

Whole Child Education: *Supporting Students' Learning and Development*

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Background

With the COVID-19 pandemic changing the way students learn and interface with others, it is more important than ever that the U.S. education system meets the academic, social, and emotional needs of students. Even prior to the pandemic, [there has been a stronger push](#) for schools to teach more holistic, comprehensive curricula that account for students' cognitive development and social-emotional learning. Now, two years into the pandemic, school closures have resulted in [significant learning loss, social isolation, and poor mental health](#). A 2021 survey commissioned by The Hunt Institute found that six in ten parents (63 percent) said COVID-19 has been disruptive to their own children's education and their mental health and emotional wellbeing. As the country continues to transition into a new normal, it is critical that schools and educators adopt a "whole child" approach to education, incorporating teaching methods that account for [the ways that children grow and learn](#) in their relationships, identity, emotional understanding, and overall wellbeing.

Whole child education helps students [prepare for the challenges and opportunities](#) of today and the future by addressing students' comprehensive needs through the shared responsibility of students, families, schools, and communities.

[Recent research](#) in neuroscience, developmental and learning sciences, education, sociology, and other fields confirms that a whole child approach to education is desirable for fostering all areas of children's development and learning – including literacy, math, and science, as well as social-emotional and cognitive skills. Furthermore, integrating whole child education in schools has also seen support among voters. The same survey from The Hunt Institute found that nearly nine in ten likely voters (85 percent) think a whole child education is important for schools to provide. A teaching approach that acknowledges the full scope of a child's development lays the foundation for lifelong learning, ensuring that children are well-equipped to be engaged learners.

Whole Child Tenets

Taking developmental and learning science into account, a whole child approach sets the standard for comprehensive, sustainable school improvement and provides for long-term student

success. According to two [comprehensive research reviews](#), the following foundational principals contribute to a child's learning and development:

Brain development is shaped by consistent, supportive relationships; responsive communications; and modeling of productive behaviors. Brain capacity develops most fully when children feel emotionally and physically safe, and when they feel connected, engaged, and challenged.

Learning is social, emotional, and academic. Positive relationships, including trust in the teacher, and positive emotions, such as interest and excitement, open the mind to learning. Negative emotions, such as fear of failure, anxiety, and self-doubt, reduce the capacity of the brain to process information and learn. Children can build skills and awareness to work with emotions in themselves and their relationships.

Adversity produces toxic stress that affects learning and behavior. Students may experience poverty, housing and food insecurity, bullying, abuse, or neglect. Meeting students' needs by

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providing stable relationships, social supports, and services is necessary in making sure they are able to focus on learning rather than their trauma.

In support of these foundational principals, five guiding tenets provide a framework and understanding of what a whole child approach to education means:

- Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.
- Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults.
- Each student is challenged academically and is prepared for postsecondary success, employment, and participation in a global environment.

Schools and educators want to improve the work they do for students, their families, and the community. Whether it is instruction, school climate, leadership, family engagement, or other areas, all educators need the right tools to help them improve how they take action. A whole child approach, which ensures that each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged, sets the standard for comprehensive and sustainable school improvement and provides for long-term student success.



The Current State of Whole Child Education

The broadened focus on the factors that affect student learning has led to an increased interest in whole child education as a solution to the pandemic's impacts on students. Along with a desire for greater academic supports and personalized learning, the public has directed greater attention on the mental and physical health challenges and basic needs insecurity that students have faced. In particular, [worsening mental health](#) trends and growing trauma during the pandemic fueled the conversation around how to mitigate its impacts in the classroom. Coupled with this was the [reduction in access](#) to mental health services and meals that came with school closures, which only exacerbated the struggles that students faced. Some states and districts have turned to whole child education to address these needs, aiming to fill many of the gaps in services seen during the pandemic.

82% of voters believe additional counseling or mental health supports would be helpful to students.
 - The Hunt Institute & Lake Research Partners National Voter Survey

At the same time, teachers and districts have also started to realize the [difficulties of implementing](#) whole child education during the pandemic, especially when the quality of student engagement and instruction are not the same through remote learning compared to in-person instructional settings. Moreover, personalized learning is not always carried out equitably across student groups. Personalized learning and technology often [do not meet English Language Learners \(ELLs\) and students with disabilities](#) at their appropriate education level with consideration for their cultural and physical needs.

In addition, these underserved student groups are also more likely to be assigned to less challenging or lower-level tracks, often because they are perceived to not be able to handle rigor, preventing these students from accessing high-quality educational resources. Students with disabilities are also less likely to have access to the technology necessary for personalized learning instruction or may not know how to use such technology. In order to appropriately and effectively implement personalized learning models in schools, it is critical to address equity issues when planning and executing these approaches.



State and District Policies

A growing number of schools and districts have implemented whole child approaches to teaching in varying degrees and practices. In order to create long-lasting impacts, policymakers should ensure sustainable and consistent measures are used. Select cities and states are at the forefront of this work, sharing a common goal of addressing diverse student needs.

State	Policy
Michigan	<p>The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) developed a repository of open education resources for educators and students through their #GoOpen initiative, which provides full courses, course materials, videos, assessments, software, and other tools to better meet student needs.</p> <p>MDE has also been involved in a nine-state network to integrate equity-focused social emotional learning into their Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model in partnership with CCSSO and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).</p>
New York	<p>The Children’s Aid Society in New York City has been championing whole child approaches to education since 2011 and utilizes “wrap around” services to support children inside and outside of the classroom by providing enrichment programs and broadening access to mental health resources in communities, among other services.</p>
North Carolina	<p>North Carolina identified whole child education as an approach to address barriers to quality education and began investing in additional school personnel, such as nurses and social workers, to help meet the nonacademic needs of students.</p> <p>Like many other districts, Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools highlights personalized learning as a key action item in its 2024 strategic plan.</p>
Vermont	<p>Vermont is one of the only states that mandates personalized learning, particularly through the use of Personalized Learning Plans. Act 77 mandates the creation of Personalized Learning Plans for grades 7 through 12.</p>
Washington, California	<p>Summit Public Schools is a public charter school network based in Washington and California that supports personalized learning and allows students to track their learning progress through the Summit Learning Platform. The free online tool allows students to set their own individual goals, create roadmaps to achieve them, learn content at their own pace, and dive into real-world projects.</p>

Policy Considerations

The demands of the 21st century require a new approach to education to fully prepare students for college, career, and citizenship. As students continue to adapt to in-person learning, instilling whole child education standards in schools will be necessary for reducing the damage done by the pandemic and helping students move forward.

Leverage Federal Funding to Support Whole Child Education Initiatives

Federal recovery funds are largely flexible and can be used in a [variety of ways](#) to implement whole child education initiatives. At least 20 percent of LEA funds and 5 percent of state funds are earmarked for implementing “evidence-based learning recovery interventions that respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on student subgroups.” Accordingly, [CARES Act funding](#) can be used to support whole child education through:

- Whole child learning practices intended to address learning loss
- Initiatives that implement summer learning opportunities and narrow the digital divide, both steps that support personalized learning
- [Teacher training](#) programs to educate teachers about whole child practices
- Partnerships with [community-based organizations](#) to ensure that students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities,

English learners, students experiencing homelessness or in foster care, undocumented students, and students who identify as LGBTQ+ have the supports they need to succeed in school

Integrate Whole Child Approaches into Existing Systems

Evidence from [the sciences of learning and development](#), coupled with insights from educational research, provides a framework for supporting children’s health and welfare across the wide range of contexts they experience. Like the tenants of whole child education, [research indicates](#) that schools and childcare services should be organized around several factors, including:

- Strong, developmentally supportive relationships that foster attachment and emotional connections; physical, emotional, and identity safety; and a sense of belonging and purpose
- Coherent and well-integrated approaches to supports, including home and school connections that enable healthy development, respond to student needs, and address learning barriers



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Parents of school aged children strongly favor investing in personalized learning that is focused on each student's individual needs, including their social and emotional learning needs.

- The Hunt Institute & Lake Research Partners National Voter Survey

- Well-scaffolded instruction that intentionally supports the development of social, emotional, and academic skills, habits, and mindsets. This includes a multi-tiered system of academic, health, and social supports that provide personalized resources within and beyond the classroom to address and prevent developmental detours, including conditions of trauma and adversity
- Culturally competent responses to the assets and needs that each individual child presents that support motivation, competence, and self-directed learning

Achieving these goals at scale requires a holistic, evidence-driven strategy for youth development that accounts for the multiple elements impacting student learning and wellbeing. As states continue to amend their [ESSER plans](#), there may be additional opportunities to focus their attention on policies that support schools and districts. Four key policy strategies have the potential to leverage change and create the momentum needed to redesign school experiences for students:

- Assessing school climate to develop positive learning environments that enable students to be well-supported in all aspects of their development
- Providing educative and restorative approaches to discipline that keep students in school by integrating social, emotional, and academic learning supports
- Creating multi-tiered systems of support, including physical and mental health services and extended learning time focused on students' needs
- Strengthening educator preparation and development to enact these programs and practices grounded in the principles of learning and development

Adopt Personalized Learning Models to Meet Students Where They Are

Transformation of our current school model requires a paradigm shift in how educators and policymakers think of school. At the federal level, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has created new opportunities for personalized learning in three areas:

- Increased focus on growth and improvement rather than just grade-level proficiency
- Use of multiple measures and less reliance solely on annual assessments
- New opportunities to build capacity for next-generation educators

State and local leaders can also begin to promote personalized learning to address learner variability in several ways. For example, [competency-based education](#), a core strategy for personalized learning that focuses on demonstration of knowledge and skills through learning exercises and activities, is a promising model for schools as long as expectations are held high for each student. States can encourage personalizing learning for each student by:

- Promoting competency-based academic progressions in which students move onto the next topic once they demonstrate mastery or competence of the previous topic
- Adopting broader academic aims for students that could include social-emotional learning, critical thinking goals, and other "soft" skills
- Supporting personalized learning plans that give students greater control over their learning environment and learning spaces
- Investing in innovative practices and resources, including greater access to digital learning materials

Districts and schools can support personalized learning plans by:

- Providing equitable access to technology for students and families
- Developing purpose-driven professional learning for teachers
- Organizing the adoption of personalized learning in phases
- Leveraging existing community networks of supports and services during the implementation process
- Communicating with parents and the community about students' progress, and explaining why supporting personalized learning to address learner variability is critical for student success

Efforts to personalize learning must be evidence-driven and accommodate the whole child, including the academic, social, and emotional needs of each learner. It must hold high expectations for every student and address learner variability, recognizing that each child learns in unique ways and brings distinct strengths and backgrounds to the classroom. When done correctly, personalized learning welcomes students as partners in their education and turns schools into places where all are inspired to learn and have the best chances for success.



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