



High school students hold a mock City Council meeting during the City of Tacoma's Student Government Day.

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Joining forces to support the learning and development of all students.

In 2011, just 55 percent of Tacoma Public School students were graduating from high school. And the district, like many urban systems, was struggling to engage students, reduce classroom disruptions, and put many more students on a pathway to college and careers.

The third-largest district in Washington State, Tacoma Public Schools serves some 29,000 students in grades K-12. Approximately 58 percent qualify for free- or reduced-price meals and 60 percent are non-white or Hispanic.

District leaders, together with the University of Washington-Tacoma, decided that to close achievement gaps, they needed to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of Tacoma's children and youth in partnership with the broader community.

That view is backed by research, which has found that families and other community institutions play an essential role in supporting healthy child development and in allowing student learning to continue across many settings in which children learn.

Making the Case

This publication is the third of several reports that will explore promising practices for supporting social, emotional, and academic development. Find them all at: as.pn/edresources

Both in- and out-of-school settings can intentionally cultivate social, emotional, and academic skills, the Council of Distinguished Scientists of the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development concluded in a [research brief](#) summarizing consensus in the field.

The Tacoma Whole Child Initiative, now in its sixth year, is a decade-long strategic plan designed to support student success in the classroom and beyond. As one measure of its success, the district has experienced a 30 percentage point increase in its graduation rate since 2010.

The hallmark of the initiative is its citywide approach: from the Tacoma Public Schools to the mayor's office and city council, the health and human services agency, the Metro Parks authority, Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, the Boys and Girls Clubs of South Puget Sound, the Tacoma Urban League, the YMCA, Graduate Tacoma, Safe Streets, and a host of other community-based organizations. In addition to providing expanded learning opportunities and embedded partnerships during and after the school day, the initiative is intended to provide wraparound services and supports for students who need them, in partnership with community agencies.

"It's more than just an effort to make kids smarter," says

Superintendent Carla J. Santorno. "It's an effort to make sure that they are very well prepared for life after graduation. We want them to be resilient; we want them to be persistent. And those are all things this partnership is offering our students."

Common Goals & Vision

The Tacoma Whole Child Initiative (TWCI) grew out of an extensive set of conversations with everyone from civic, business, and civil rights leaders to after-school providers and the directors of community-based nonprofits. "We asked them, 'What will success look like, and what evidence will you accept in order to determine if we are successful?'" recalls Deputy

Superintendent Joshua Garcia, a member of the Commission's Council of Distinguished Educators. "That was a really challenging process to go back and forth, to engage people...so that people could see, oh, this is really something that meets our threshold of success."

The result was an initiative built around four overarching goals for Tacoma's youth: academic excellence, partnership, early learning, and safety. Aligned to the four goals are 35 measurable benchmarks, ranging from performance on state tests to the percent of middle and high school students enrolled in extracurricular activities. Together, the goals and benchmarks comprise the district's



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—Gina Anstey, vice president of programs and initiatives, Greater Tacoma Community Foundation

approach to supporting each student’s social, emotional, and academic development.

This clear vision, common language, and transparency about results, combined with strong district and school leadership, have been essential for making communitywide implementation possible. But that wasn’t always the case. Reflecting on where they started, Gina Anstey, Greater Tacoma Community Foundation’s vice president of programs and initiatives, notes, “We all shared a common goal of doing what is best for kids but we didn’t have a common language or shared metrics, and it made it hard for us to move in the same direction.”

Now, in developing partnerships, “We start the conversation with, ‘Which benchmarks are you trying to help us move?’” says Garcia. Those objectives are typically included in memos of understanding and data-sharing agreements and provide an independent criterion for monitoring quality. For example, the city of Tacoma now awards health and human services grants based on how grantees partner with the district to support mental health services and community engagement around specific benchmarks.

To ensure that district activities also support the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative, the system

conducted an analysis that identified 92 separate initiatives, only some of which aligned with the benchmarks. Using that data, efforts are being made to fill gaps, eliminate unaligned programs, and redirect resources toward district priorities. For example, the district did not have any programming targeted toward middle school engagement, which led to an expansion of after-school programs in the middle schools.

“A community, broadly defined, has many resources and assets that can be brought to bear,” says Hugh Price, the former president and CEO of the National Urban League and a Commissioner. “The challenge—which is not always clear, since these are disparate assets—is whether they aggregate into enough resources and activity to cover the needs of the kids who are in the local schools and what kinds of cracks there are.”

The Tacoma initiative initially focused on transforming practices in each of the district’s 54 schools. Beginning in 2012, successive cohorts of schools received training in practices related to equity and inclusion, social and emotional learning, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and trauma-sensitive practices. TWCI building teams and a 23-person district leadership team—comprised of district leaders, a consulting psychologist, and representatives from the University of Washington-Tacoma’s Center for Strong Schools, the City

of Tacoma, and Comprehensive Life Resources, a community-based mental health program—also began learning how to identify students in need of more support and how to connect them to more targeted and intensive interventions.

Within this broader framework, principals have the autonomy to tailor social and emotional learning practices and programs to their schools based on the needs of their community. For example, each school is responsible for reaching out to partners in its neighborhood and deciding what those partnerships look like. Each school must publicly report on the number of expanded learning opportunities created with partner organizations, and on the number of businesses, higher education institutions, and partner organizations supporting the school's goals with donations, resources, and volunteers, as part of the district benchmarks.

“Schools can't do it all,” says T'wina Franklin, the president and CEO of the Tacoma Urban League, which offers mentoring programs for students both during and after the school day. “As a community organization, we too care about the social emotional learning needs of our students. There's an incredible opportunity to relieve

the schools of some of what needs to be done and to step up to make it happen.”

Enriching and Expanding the School Day Through Partnerships

In Tacoma, the potential of partnerships is already evident at some elementary, middle, and high schools across the city. Partnerships in the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative serve to enrich and expand the school day experience through a range of strategies that include shared staff, space, programming, language, goals, data, and practices.

Tacoma's Science and Math Institute, or SAMi, epitomizes how partnerships are enriching

students' learning experiences and supporting their comprehensive development. SAMi opened in Fall 2009 with the mission of using the city's natural resources to offer a creative path to learning. The approximately 500-student high school, a partnership between Tacoma Public Schools and Metro Parks Tacoma, draws students proportionally from each Tacoma neighborhood by lottery. It's located at the Environmental Learning Center on the grounds of Point Defiance Park, a 702-acre park operated by the parks system. The high school provides integrated inquiry-based experiences, combining the arts, science, math, and environmental and marine studies. The school explicitly addresses students' social and emotional development in



Students learn about marine life at the Science and Math Institute (SAMi), a partnership between the school district and Metro Parks Tacoma.

What Makes for a Strong Partnership?

"I think a great partnership begins with organizations and individuals who are able to check logos and egos at the door and really focus on what needs to get done. It's really being able to use a strengths-based approach and ask, who does what well, and then supporting that work of one another." —Carrie Holden, president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of South Puget Sound

We asked some of the Commission's partners—including the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Citizen Schools, City Year, Communities In Schools, the Forum for Youth Investment, Playworks, and the YMCA—as well as the Providence After School Alliance and the Nashville After Zone Alliance, about the characteristics needed for strong school-community partnerships that support students' social, emotional, and academic development. Here's what they said:

- Putting **students at the center**; all partners approach the work with a commitment to putting students and their needs first;
- Having **an aligned vision and a common language** for successfully integrating social, emotional, and academic development, with partners engaged in the visioning;
- Collaboratively developing **clear goals and metrics** that align with the vision, including a commitment to share data that can drive continuous improvement;
- Selecting partners who have **evidence of successfully providing social, emotional, and academic supports**;
- Providing **high-level commitment, leadership, and oversight** at both the district and school level, and through an intermediary organization or nonprofit that can coordinate key players and ensure the right services and partners are brought inside the school;
- Creating **formal agreements**, such as common memos of understanding, background checks, and facilities sharing agreements, to efficiently and effectively broker services and ensure agreed upon expectations for the partnership are met;
- Identifying **the strengths of each organization** in order to provide a continuum of supports for students before, during, and after school, from enrichment to intensive case management services, while avoiding overlaps and redundancies across organizations;
- Building **open, two-way communications**, both formally and informally, to build trust, transparency, and effectiveness among schools and community partners;
- Committing to implementing rigorous standards and training to ensure **high-quality programming**;
- Committing to **multi-year partnerships** to ensure the continuity required for sustained student progress; and
- Bringing **additional resources**, such as the ability to leverage diverse public and private sector funds, to the table to subsidize costs to schools and to help engage the community to support broader school and district goals.



Students at SAMi sketch a sloth from the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium as part of their study of rainforest mammals of Central and South America.

weekly mentor group discussions but also integrates social and emotional competencies into students' daily academic work.

Students use the park's old growth forests, saltwater beaches, marine center, zoo, historic fort, and aquarium to take classes as part of their normal schedule, with classrooms and labs built in and around the natural forest and marine facilities. "We want them to be using as many of the community spaces as possible," says Joni Hall, co-director of the institute. "So, the kids have to behave differently. There are no bells alerting them to go from space to space. And they rise to the occasion."

As part of this school-community approach, a zoo employee teaches a course on zoo conservation, and students can volunteer as zoo

guides. The zoo also runs a visiting preschool at the Environmental Learning Center, where SAMi students can work alongside teachers and earn an entry-level para-educator certificate. A project to learn about beekeeping led Fort Nisqually, a living history museum in the park, to offer adult beekeeping classes, using SAMi's bees for its programming and students to help teach. A partnership with the University of Puget Sound has students gathering water samples from the sound for a water quality study.

Through the Next Move Internship Program, SAMi and other high schools also work with some 225 area businesses to provide 250 to 275 juniors and seniors with internships each semester. At SAMi, those have ranged from internships in doctors' offices,

hospitals, veterinary clinics, and fire stations to a new introductory park ranger's course, organized by a SAMi teacher and the park ranger at Pt. Defiance. In addition to students learning responsibility and agency, says Liz Minks, co-director of the institute, "The kids are able to have an experience with all those soft skills that are attached to their interests, and then a lot of kids get hired out of these."

The strategy of using partnerships to offer students real-world learning experiences extends beyond SAMi. Summer Jobs 253, another Tacoma-wide initiative sponsored by the City of Tacoma, the REACH Center, Tacoma Community Health, Workforce Central, and the school district, engages some 75 employers in providing paid summer internships to about 150 Tacoma

sophomores and juniors. Students also can attain credit for work-based projects. “I think there’s a validation stamp for our kids when the community says ‘We’re going to invest in you,’” says John Page, the director of career and technical education for the district.

Coordinating Expanded Learning Opportunities to Support the Whole Child

[Research shows](#) that expanded learning opportunities—from summer school to afterschool—can have a significant impact on school attendance, achievement, and students’ attitudes, behaviors, and feelings of belonging. But such impacts are more likely when program content is intentionally designed to achieve such outcomes and when programs are of high-quality, according to a study from the [RAND Corporation](#). The more students consistently attend expanded learning programs, the greater the

benefits, the RAND researchers found. Further, when communities take a coordinated approach to supporting access to quality afterschool learning experiences, learning and developmental outcomes can improve, concluded [Public/Private Ventures](#), based on an evaluation of Providence’s citywide after-school system.

Such coordination is evident after school at Roosevelt Elementary School in Tacoma. At the 230-student school, some 75 students stream into the cafeteria after school, grab a snack, and take their seats at long tables, organized by brightly colored folders labeled with the different after-school programming available: Ballet Folklorico, Game Center, Hip-Hop, Open Gym, Coding, Bricks for Kidz, Spanish, the Sisterhood (a mentoring program for girls run by the Tacoma Urban League). This is the RAM Center. RAM stands for three of the school’s four core values: Respectful, Always

Responsible, and Make Time to Be Kind. The fourth core value is safety.

Byron Williams, the program coordinator and an employee of the YMCA, coordinates the RAM program on site and sits on the school’s TWCI team. His role is to bring in community partners to deliver engaging learning experiences that support the development of the whole child. One of Williams’ main goals is to establish consistent and coherent expectations for students across their day, both in and after school.

To do so, he integrates many of the signature social emotional learning practices and expectations that students encounter during the school day. Hanging from a key chain around his neck are four colored, laminated cards: green, blue, yellow, and red. Each describes a “zone” of feeling from happy to sad or angry that helps students describe and label their

“We know a lot of families get their information from classroom teachers. We had to make sure our classroom teachers were solid enough in their beliefs and background about the Whole Child Initiative before we talked to families.”

*—Joshua Garcia, deputy superintendent,
Tacoma Public Schools*

The Power of Partnerships

Schools, youth development programs, city agencies, and other community-based nonprofits are joining forces to support students' academic, social, and emotional skills. Read below for three examples of this partnership work in action.

1

IN PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) has created a middle school strategy called the **AfterZone**. This strategy was developed as a result of market research with families and youth who identified a dearth of organized activities for middle schoolers across the city. Each year, PASA coordinates between 50 and 70 community-based organizations that provide after-school programming to at least 1,200 middle school students. The students' afternoon begins and ends at a neighborhood middle school. They have dinner, and then participate in a combination of off-site programming at multiple sites clustered in the neighborhood, and an on-site Club AfterZone, focused on social emotional and skill building activities.

All participating organizations are held to a single set of quality standards and receive training and support to help students acquire a set of essential skills. "We identified problem solving, teamwork, effective communication, perseverance, and engagement in learning as the five things that we want to hold ourselves accountable to measuring and assessing

at the program level," says Hillary Salmons, executive director of PASA.

PASA offers coordination in a variety of ways, including recruitment, training, background checks, contracts, transportation, communications, and facilities sharing. It also measures youth outcomes using annual staff and teacher surveys from the National Institute for Out-of-School Time, and conducts observations at least every other year. A 2011 evaluation by Public/Private Ventures found the program shrunk school absences among its participants by 25 percent after two years, with the greatest benefit for students who participated in at least 30 days of programming.

"I do think that there are capacity limitations for districts, principals, and schools," says Salmons. "They have so much pressure and so little time to do planning, to make practice changes, that to actually manage a ton of organizations that come knocking on their doors is difficult. To have a structure where there's an interface, there's a system, is really convenient."

2

IN NEW YORK CITY, 20 executive directors of education and youth development organizations met over dinner in 2011 to discuss their common successes and challenges. One participant captured everyone's attention by expressing concern about the almost-exclusive focus on academics to the neglect of the whole child. She worried that young people's social and emotional learning was the responsibility of everyone in the room, but they had insufficient information to know whether they were doing a good job. So, in 2013, they formed the **Student Success Network** to ensure every student has the social and emotional intelligence to succeed in life. The skills they focus on include a growth mindset, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging, as well

as self-advocacy, problem solving, academic behaviors, teamwork and communication.

Today, more than 50 organizations—which reach more than 150,000 students in middle and high school, including out-of-school youth—work together to gather data on students' social and emotional development and to identify, innovate, and share practices that drive student outcomes. Members range from social entrepreneurial organizations, such as I-Mentor and Citizen Schools, to longstanding community-based organizations, such as the YMCA and Good Shepard Services, to those that serve special needs students, such as Ramapo for Children. They offer young people

everything from mentoring, to sports, to theatre, to STEM education, to SAT preparation.

“All of our members believe learning takes place in environments that simultaneously foster social emotional development and academic achievement,” says Chief Network Facilitator Sue Lehmann, who hosted the initial dinner conversation at her apartment. “They also believe learning takes place in and out of school,” she adds. “Kids need experiences, and they need to connect to many different people and explore their interests.” Members give students the same self-report survey at the beginning and end of their programs and receive data visualizations of students’ social and emotional learning growth by site, grade level, and various demographic characteristics to target areas for improvement and test small changes. They use

a cycle of continuous improvement to innovate and identify what works. While members differ in program offerings, size, and years of experience, all embrace a core set of principles: They have social and emotional learning as a foundational element of their mission and programming; they put students at the center (no decisions in the network are made without youth input); they create equitable, inclusive environments by using data to identify disparities and improve experiences that put all young people on the path to success; and they use data for improvement, not evaluation. “Our members are constantly improving the quality of their data,” says Lehmann. “Guided by our partners at NYU’s Research Alliance for New York City Schools, our members are beginning to identify which practices can drive student outcomes.”

3

IN THE GREATER AUSTIN AREA, Communities

In Schools of Central Texas believes that children cannot learn to their potential when they are in crisis or face significant nonacademic needs. Communities In Schools provides support by bringing resources and relationships to school campuses. It serves about 54,000 students a year, including more than 6,000 students who receive intensive case management, and close to 5,000 parents. CIS builds a support system within schools, so students can focus on achievement. About 155 professional staff (with master’s degrees in social work or counseling) and AmeriCorps members work on school campuses in the Austin Independent School District and five surrounding school districts to provide direct support to students and to coordinate a network of volunteers, social services, businesses, and community resources.

Site coordinators and partners deliver supports to students and their families, from schoolwide services to targeted programs to intensive, wraparound supports. In Central Texas, that includes a partnership with the local housing authority to provide case management for students living in public housing as well as after-school programming on site; a leadership development program for adolescent males; and an early childhood-adult education center that enables parents to earn their GED or ESL certificate, along with a parenting curriculum, while their infants and toddlers receive care.

The 82,000-student Austin ISD has integrated social and emotional learning in all of its 129 schools, including creating a department of social and emotional learning at the district level. “Communities In Schools is using the same language, the same ideas, but we provide a lot of individual counseling supports and guidance,” says Eric Metcalf, the chief of program strategy for CIS of Central Texas, “so it just dovetails very nicely.” That includes providing students with small-group work on the development of social skills, self-regulation, and how to navigate conflict appropriately. CIS also has developed trauma-informed training and tools for teachers in Austin and the surrounding districts.

The work is getting results: Approximately 99 percent of students intensively served by CIS-Central Texas stay in school, and some 85 percent improve their grades, attendance, or behavior. “When push comes to shove, what schools care about is: Are kids coming to school? Are they passing their classes? Are they graduating? So, thinking about our work as ultimately impacting those goals has been very helpful,” says Metcalf. “The flip side is also true—getting school administrators and district folks to understand that you can’t divorce what happens outside the classroom from what happens inside the classroom and really being an advocate for that.”



Students use the computer in the Boys & Girls Clubs of South Puget Sound's Summer Boost program, a community partnership with Tacoma Public Schools.

emotions. He also begins the afternoon by highlighting two students who have illustrated RAM expectations during school, based on information from their teachers.

He then quietly signs two check-in cards from students who've been struggling with behavior. The brief forms, from their second grade teacher, let him know how each student's day went so that he can be prepared and ask follow-up questions. Williams extended the check-in/check-out practice, part of each school's intervention strategies, to the after-school program to create a consistent set of expectations for students and improve communications among the adults that serve them.

Principal Steffanie Broyles says the impact of the program has been evident. "The students who attend RAM center are gaining

enrichment academically, socially, and emotionally," she says. "These partnerships are valuable because a school cannot do the work of shaping children's lives alone. Byron's work at Roosevelt has brought in community members who get to see our students thriving."

The kind of coordination that exists at the RAM Center is expanding. With a grant from The Wallace Foundation's national Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning initiative, Tacoma Public Schools, in partnership with Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, is embarking on a four-year journey to explore how children benefit when adults in schools and afterschool programs work together to align and improve experiences and create a climate to foster social and emotional learning. Greater Tacoma

Community Foundation is serving as the incubator and providing the infrastructure that will provide coordinated expanded learning opportunities that, like the RAM Center, aim to integrate signature social and emotional learning practices and expectations across settings.

Promising Results

So far, the results of the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative have been encouraging across a rich array of data, based on an evaluation by the Center for Strong Schools at the University of Washington-Tacoma, which has been a critical partner in developing the district's implementation plan. These range from significant decreases in chronic absenteeism and tardiness; to increases in high school graduation rates, verified college acceptances, and the number

of students earning industrial certificates; to teachers' and staff's beliefs about their students. For example:

- As noted earlier, graduation rates have increased from 55 percent in 2010-11 to 86.1 percent in 2016-17, with improvements across every ethnic and racial group. More than seven in 10 Hispanic students and nearly nine in 10 Black students now graduate from high school.
- The number of middle and high school students who have one or more connections to a sport or club increased almost threefold between 2013-14 and 2015-16. Studies show that students involved in extracurricular clubs and

teams feel more engaged, are less likely to drop out, and do better academically.

- Equally important, teachers' and staff members' beliefs about behavior have changed significantly. More than nine in 10 teachers who've participated in TWCI agree strongly that "all students are entitled to positive interaction with me." Nine in 10 also agree or strongly agree that "I can prevent most behavior problems through proactive practices."

Embracing Families and Neighborhoods

Although the district is getting good results, leaders acknowledge the work is far from over.

The school system has been careful to phase in implementation, according to Garcia, so that any services offered are sustainable and supported with sufficient district infrastructure. Following its initial focus on school and community engagement, for example, the district is now starting to better engage families, as part of a purposefully staged strategic plan.

"We know a lot of families get their information from classroom teachers," explains Garcia. "We had to make sure our classroom teachers were solid enough in their beliefs and background about the Whole Child Initiative before we talked to families."

While all schools have some level of family engagement, the district is now considering a more systemic approach, including family & community liaisons, and increased community partnerships to support families. "We want there to be enough meaning around this for people to say, 'Oh, you're serious'," says Garcia. "It's not going away."

Indeed, if there is any message Tacoma hopes to send its students, it's that the entire community is there for them. "Everything is rooted in that 'we' mentality," says Elvin Bucu, director of operations for the Boys & Girls Clubs of South Puget Sound. "At least within Tacoma it is a community-level effort to wrap any and all services around every kid."



Students pose for a photo during Summer Boost, which combats summer learning loss for the most at-risk students at no cost to their families.

About the Series

The final report in this series will explore:

Promoting a positive school climate and culture. Educators and students agree that a positive school climate and culture fosters student engagement and improves student learning. And research has confirmed that schools where students feel safe, engaged, and connected to their teachers have narrower achievement gaps between low-income children and their wealthier peers. We will explore efforts to improve school climate by developing students' social, emotional, and academic skills.

Previous reports, available at as.pn/edresources, explored:

- Curricula that integrate social, emotional, and academic content
- Teachers' social and emotional skills as a foundation for student success

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development is engaging and energizing communities to re-envision what constitutes success in our schools. Scientific evidence demonstrates that social, emotional, and academic development are interconnected in the learning process. The Commission is drawing from research and promising practices to explore how to make all these dimensions of learning part of the fabric of every school. Building upon existing work in schools, communities, and states across the country, the Commission is working to identify specific action steps in research, practice, and policy that will help shape and sustain a new era of education that reflects what we know about how learning happens.

The Commission's 25 members are leaders from education, research, policy, business, and the military, and the full Commission team includes a Council of Distinguished Scientists, a Council of Distinguished Educators, a Youth Commission, a Parent Advisory Panel, a Partners Collaborative, and a Funders Collaborative.

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