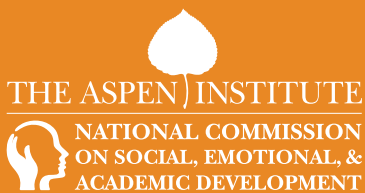


IN SUPPORT OF HOW WE LEARN

A Youth Call to Action

About this Call to Action

This Call to Action from the National Commission's Youth Commission articulates the urgent need for schools and communities to support students' comprehensive development. It is part of a series of briefs that are being developed by various advisory groups to inform the work of the National Commission. The official recommendations of the National Commission itself, which will be released in late 2018, will draw from the students' vision of learning.



Students everywhere know the importance of a good education. School is where we learn about ourselves and find our passions. It's where we are presented with challenges and the opportunities to overcome them. At school, we discover new interests, learn new skills, and build new relationships. We find adults who push us to grow as people, help us to build character, and connect us to resources that can act as bridges to new and greater learning experiences.

School also serves as a transition between home and the adult world where we all need to become productive members of society and contributing citizens of our democracy. Because we spend more waking hours at school than

at home, our peers and teachers play significant roles in our social, emotional, and academic growth.

We, members of The Aspen Institute Youth Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, want to succeed, but we also want to shape how that success is defined. We want and need a foundation of academic skills and knowledge, including the ability to analyze information and to think critically. But to build on our academic strengths, we also recognize that we need interpersonal skills and empathy toward those we encounter.

Learning to work together at school and in our communities will better prepare us to be actively engaged in the world in which we live.

YOUTH

What We Know About How We Learn

We know that we learn best when adults know us, make us feel safe, hold us responsible for our learning, and help us work constructively and productively together. In too many of our schools, key pieces of this equation are missing. This affects our learning and our performance, and we risk not learning key skills that will set us up for success both now and in the future. We know that we learn when our social, emotional, and academic development are connected. For us, this means teaching and seeing us as whole people. We know that we learn best when we have:

Schools that are physically and emotionally safe and have a strong sense of community;

Relationships with adults who deeply care about us and support us as learners;

Learning experiences that reinforce how we learn by simultaneously developing our social, emotional, and academic skills; and

Strong partnerships among schools, families, and communities that work together to support our learning and growth.

This is our vision for how we learn. Our schools will be safe places where each of us are known, respected, and believed in. We will have the strong bonds that we need with our teachers and with each other. Only then will we be better able to master the content that we need to be fully prepared for college, career, and life.

Aspen Institute Youth Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

The Aspen Institute Youth Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development is made up of a diverse group of students with a wide range of educational experiences. We attend public, private, and charter preK-12 schools, as well as public and private universities and military academies, located in urban, rural, and suburban settings. We are involved in art, journalism, music, theatre, science, and sports. But we all share a passion for learning and for making a difference. During the last year we have worked to better understand and advocate for students like us who want their schools to engage their passions and help them meet their potential. We've visited schools that are successfully teaching the whole student, and we have learned from the findings and leaders of the National Commission. We've come to fully appreciate that we need schools with a strong sense of social and emotional safety and well-being as well as challenging academics.

The following statements draw on our diverse experiences as students in schools. We hope to ground the National Commission's recommendations in students' firsthand experiences and real-time insights, and we hope to raise the voices of youth across America. We ask that adults listen to us and help us translate our ideas into action. We call on youth across the country to join us in advocating for a vision for education that supports how we learn best.

This is our Call to Action.



OUR VISION FOR HOW WE LEARN

WE NEED OUR SCHOOLS TO BE SAFE, WITH A STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY

We need to feel like we belong and are emotionally and physically safe in our schools so that we can take the academic risks that lead to success. We want our voices to help shape the school climate and create a culture that fosters community and makes us feel like we belong. In the classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, and other student spaces, we want to feel safe to take intellectual risks, learn, voice our opinions, create, and decompress. Academic risks look different for all of us: from raising a hand to ask a question, to trying a new club, to choosing a challenging course.

Our learning environments can help build our confidence in our ability to make these leaps. Through a climate and culture defined by healthy and trusting relationships among peers and teachers, schools can create the balance between cooperation and healthy competition that helps us develop our full set of skills. When we have teachers, administrators, and school staff members who are present and engaged in our

learning, we can feel confident and safe enough to ask questions and to trust that we will be supported by adults who believe in us.

School policies should ensure that we are safe by creating learning communities that aim to resolve conflicts collaboratively. We want school and district policies to foster community, encouraging us to engage constructively with peers and adults. When issues arise, we want to be sure consequences are distributed fairly and that we are able to learn from our mistakes. We want our schools and teachers to have the flexibility and resources they need to develop community-building practices that work for each unique school. For example, students can learn to take responsibility for resolving conflicts and work together toward resolutions, taking into account both the student and the broader community involved in the dispute. All staff members, including security staff, should know about such practices and be able to work with students to address the social and emotional needs on all sides of a conflict. This serves to create a feeling of safety in the school, led by the students. This also helps ensure issues are addressed more fairly and constructively.

The physical environment of a school should be designed in ways that invite learning. The quality of the physical space matters. We should

see our work and the work of our peers displayed around the room. We want collaborative spaces that invite us to sit, read, talk, and work. There should also be spaces for both whole class and small group discussions. We want to listen to each other, challenge one another in debate, and synthesize our ideas through collaboration, dialogue, and feedback. Discussion and debate are just as important in math as in history; science should be hands-on; creative expression has a place in all subjects. The physical rooms should support these things. We understand this requires resources, but welcoming physical spaces contribute to our learning.

WE NEED OUR TEACHERS TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND US

Teachers who honor our lived experiences and know us as unique individuals make a difference. The best teachers understand how we learn, nurture our development, and see us as more than just names on a roster. They also teach beyond the test. We need time to build and sustain these meaningful relationships with our teachers.

Every student should have an adult in the building whom they know and trust. The best advisory programs are an example of one way to build these types of relationships, which provide us with a forum to discuss academic issues, receive extra help, and connect our school work to future goals. These relationships also offer us an opportunity to discuss with a trusted advisor issues related to home, work, and peers. When teachers and students get to know each other well, classrooms are transformed into safe and supportive places to learn.

Teachers must be prepared and supported to create comprehensive learning experiences for each and every one of us. As students, we

recognize and appreciate the difficulties that confront teachers inside and outside of school. Teachers should be able to lead a balanced life and be given the opportunity to develop their own social and emotional skills. We learn more from teachers who model these skills in our schools and in our classes. Our learning is enhanced when our teachers understand how to:

Craft learning experiences based on how our brains develop and learn;

Build community, trust, and inclusion through conflict-resolution practices that build healthy relationships; and

Recognize and combat biases and stereotypes based on race, ethnicity, religion, income, gender, or sexuality.

For teachers to achieve this, they need the time and support to work alongside in-school counselors, mental health professionals, and/or social workers, administrators, and instructional support staff. This time should be built into their school day and schools should promote collaboration among their entire staff.

WE NEED TO LEARN AND BE EVALUATED AS WHOLE STUDENTS AND WHOLE PEOPLE

We want our education to be rooted in how we learn and develop our academic, social, and emotional skills. We understand the deep connection between our social and emotional selves and how well we do in the classroom. As the science tells us, strengths or weaknesses in one area foster or hinder our growth in another.

When we have opportunities to interact with our peers and make connections to subject material, our academic learning is deeper and more meaningful. When we are in learning environments that embrace our comprehensive development, we learn to solve problems, cooperate with others, cope with frustration, and demonstrate responsibility. These are the skills we will need to be successful later in life.

We need to learn and develop in ways that respect our individual backgrounds, skills, and abilities. Not all students learn the same way. We come to school with a wide range of experiences that affect our learning. School staff should be fully equipped to support us and create environments and practices that are mindful of our individual experiences. We need every adult in the school building to believe we all can learn at the highest level regardless of where we come from or what we look like. Within a class period, teachers should be able to adapt instruction to minimize the divide between students who understand the material and those who need additional supports. The instructional materials must recognize and speak to our diverse backgrounds—they should be inclusive, accessible, and encourage critical discussion about historical and contemporary issues. We also should have multiple ways to show what we know and can do. When teachers create the right conditions, we are motivated to learn and critical thinking happens. Teachers are then able to spend less time covering material that we should have learned previously and more time challenging us to excel.

In every classroom, every day, our learning needs to be directly connected to the real world. Our learning must offer social interaction and leadership development within the context of academic subjects in order to encourage us to appreciate, recognize, and leverage different forms of diversity present in our classrooms. We need learning experiences that develop our skills and allow us to see the connections between in-

school learning, out-of-school activities, and real life. One way to accomplish this is to reinforce the importance of project-based learning throughout preK-12 education. This is essential because both higher education and the workplace emphasize group work. Our teachers should not only act as content advisors, but also as coaches who can help us develop team skills such as punctuality, flexibility, preparedness, and equal participation. Group projects can be challenging for some of us. Therefore, we need time to reflect independently and to celebrate reaching both our personal and group goals.

Grading and evaluation should give us multiple ways to demonstrate our learning and growth. Our grades do not determine our self-worth; they are an indication of where we need to improve in our learning. They should recognize our strengths and give us a launch pad from which to learn and grow. Beyond our performance on classroom assignments, projects, and exams, we should have an opportunity to present a portfolio of work through presentations and interviews and to reflect on important social, emotional, and academic lessons we've learned. Our fellow classmates should encourage us, ask us questions, and provide constructive critiques. The evaluation process should be seen as positive and ongoing, rather than judgmental and final, to allow for our continued growth.

WE NEED OUR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO BE EMBRACED AS PARTNERS IN OUR LEARNING

Our schools should provide inviting and inclusive opportunities to engage and build relationships with our families. We want our families and communities to embrace and endorse a focus on social, emotional, and

academic learning at school. Families should feel that schools are a part of their lives and communities. They should be partners in assessing individual students' needs on an ongoing basis. There should be forums where school leaders can hear about our families' successes and struggles and there should be opportunities to collaborate with our families to solve problems. This learning goes both ways; schools must gain a deeper understanding of the many factors influencing each student's social, emotional, and academic growth. School staff should get to know families, and each and every family should be seen as a valuable member of the school community.

School and district leadership must forge strong partnerships with our communities.

Just as schools must engage our families, they must involve our communities in social, emotional, and academic development. For instance, community members can offer tutoring or adult mentoring where we can practice

these skills. Local businesses can donate their services to support students. Community organizations can offer internships, mentoring, job training, youth-to-senior dialogue, and service opportunities to students who are eager to learn more about and engage with the real world. There should be well-organized collaborations and continuous outreach.

Most of us participate in an after-school activity, such as sport leagues, dance classes, youth groups, and service-learning opportunities. Many of us credit out-of-school experiences for building our social and emotional skills, such as collaboration, leadership, and time management. There should be an intentional relationship between these opportunities and our learning at school. Everything we do in a day contributes to our social, emotional, and academic growth. For you to help us to grow as whole people, you must consider our whole day.

IMAGINE IF...

Every school makes sure all students have at least one adult they could go to and trust with their challenges.

Conflict and discipline are addressed in a way that helps us find our way back in, rather than pushing us further out.

What we learn in school is what we need later in the workplace.

We are able to transition from grade level to grade level, school year to school year, and school level to school level without fear of what lies on the other side.

All students could attend school without fear for their physical safety.

Success in school is defined not just by our grades, but also by our ability to think for ourselves, work with others, and contribute to our communities.



A CALL TO ACTION

To our fellow students: Now is the time to stand up and join together; to advocate for one another by calling for a vision of education that supports us as whole learners. Talk to your teachers, administrators, families, and community leaders and urge them to join us in calling for the full integration of social and emotional learning with academic instruction in schools and classrooms across America. We need the support of all adults in our lives to reach our full potential.

To our teachers: As the adults on the front lines of our learning and development, you know that we need a full array of skills in order to be successful in your classrooms and in life. Please take the initiative and join us in calling for all teachers to teach us as whole learners.

To our administrators and school leaders: Please listen to our voices. Please support our call for teachers and schools to shape our social and emotional development as essential to improving our academic skills and achieving greater equity in our schools and classrooms.

To our families and communities: We call on you to join us — to help us advocate for the change that we need across our communities. We need you, we need these skills, and we need change.

The Aspen Institute Youth Commission for the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development includes the following members.

Jessica Brown
Holton-Arms School

Maggie Chen
Clarksburg High School

Michael Degaga
George Washington University

Grace Dolan-Sandrino
Duke Ellington School of the Arts

Howard Gardner
Alumnus
Bell Multicultural High School

Isabel Geisler
Northeastern University
Graduate School

Eric Guerci
Princeton University

Chris Harried
Johns Hopkins University School
of Education

Alysa Herrera Taylor
Howard University Graduate School

Daria Kerschenbaum
Fordham University

Gardy Lebon
United States Naval Academy

Andrew Lee
Alumnus
Eastern Senior High School

Minh Nguyen
University of Maryland, College Park

Da' yana Segears
University of Rochester

Jahari Shelton
Sidwell Friends School

Milagros de Souza
Duke University

Ashley Strange
Trinity Washington University

Jamar White
McDaniel College

WE INVITE FELLOW YOUTH TO JOIN US

Here's how:

1. Join us in this national youth Call to Action by adding your signature at [as.pn/CallToAction](https://aspeninstitute.org/call-to-action). There is strength in numbers. We can show the world how much we value an approach to learning that prepares us for our futures.
2. Share this Call to Action with your friends and ask them to sign on too.
3. Stay tuned for the Commission's final recommendations, which will be released in late 2018 to help schools and communities fully integrate social and emotional development with academic instruction.



ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE YOUTH COMMISSION FOR THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT:

The Aspen Institute Youth Commission is comprised of young leaders who are supporting the National Commission in re-envisioning what constitutes success in America's schools. Their efforts are part of the National Commission's charge to learn from varying perspectives as it calls for the full integration of social and emotional learning with academic instruction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The National Commission would like to thank the members of the Aspen Institute Youth Commission for developing this Youth Call to Action and is especially grateful to Grace Dolan-Sandrino and Eric Guerci for serving as the lead authors of the document.