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FINAL REPORT TO THE NATION

Foreword
A letter from the co-chairs and commissioners will set the stage for the Commission and its recommendations to follow.

Introduction
The introduction will frame the argument for social, emotional, and academic development in a broad, compelling context to burst the bubble in which the topic has been trapped and engage the broadest possible group of stakeholders. Michael Gerson is working to frame the report in a compelling, accessible way that can also gain media attention. We discussed his concept statement during the September 5 meeting.

Chapter One: How Learning Happens
Enabling All Children to Learn and Develop: We want to make the research and the argument for social, emotional, and academic development as inviting and accessible as possible for nonexperts, including parents, policymakers, and the media. For that reason, we’ve organized the rationale for the recommendations around six big questions that the average person might ask, such as: “What do we know about learning that we didn’t know 25 years ago (and why does it matter)?” and “What does it look like to educate the whole student?” We’re also creating simple markers or graphics in the report that help people quickly skim through and summarize the big points, and we will pull out and highlight quotes from students and educators.

Chapter Two: Recommendations for Action
The recommendations section is a roll-up of the key recommendations across the policy and practice change agendas. It begins with some principles that guided our recommendations: Opportunities for social, emotional, and academic development happen in and outside schools. Local communities have to develop and own this process, with policy and practice in a supporting role. All children benefit from social, emotional, and academic development but equity does not mean treating all children alike. Each of the 6 big recommendations then includes no more than 3 practice recommendations and 3 policy recommendations, followed by two concrete examples (one for practice and one for policy). The goal of this section is to help readers understand the major thrust and focus of the recommendations and to want to read more by going to the separate documents designed for specific audiences: practitioners, policymakers, researchers. The goal is not to regurgitate and repeat the separate documents.

Chapter Three: Accelerating Our Efforts
This lays out the Commission’s change agenda, with a focus on the six big levers for implementing the recommendations—cross-sector coalition building; greater implementation knowledge; local, place-based capacity; a strong talent development pipeline; an aligned policy framework; and a new research paradigm that bridges the gap between research and practice. It also suggests steps individual stakeholders can take.

Conclusion
The conclusion, which Michael is also drafting, will provide the rousing call to action meant to build a national conversation and generate momentum beyond the Commission. It will build off of the initial content framing.
CHAPTER ONE: HOW LEARNING HAPPENS
ENABLING ALL CHILDREN TO LEARN AND DEVELOP

What do students, families, educators, and business leaders all want from our schools?

Across the nation, communities are redesigning schools to support how students learn best. These communities recognize from intuitive experience and backed by a solid body of scientific evidence that learning happens best when social, emotional, and academic growth are connected. By taking a more balanced approach to education that goes beyond test scores to develop the whole child, these local efforts are generating a renewed sense of hope in what is possible. It is this vision of possibilities that is motivating students, parents, educators, and business leaders to demand more and to reject the false choice between academic excellence and broader student outcomes:

• More than 9 in 10 parents think that schools have a role in reinforcing the development of what they typically call “life skills.”
• At least two-thirds of current and recent high school students agree that attending a school focused on social and emotional learning would help improve their relationships with teachers and peers, their learning of academic material, and their preparation for college, careers, and citizenship.
• Nine out of 10 teachers believe social and emotional skills can be taught and that it benefits students. Four in five teachers want more support to address students’ social and emotional development.
• Ninety-seven percent of principals believe a larger focus on social emotional learning will improve students’ academic achievement.
• Eight in 10 employers say social and emotional skills are the most important to success and yet are also the hardest skills to find.

For the past two years, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development has been talking with students, families, educators, youth-development professionals, policymakers, and employers in communities across the country about what they want for future generations of Americans. The Commission also has been talking with researchers about what we now know about how people learn. This report is intended to elevate those conversations and that body of scientific knowledge. It is a report from the nation, to the nation about how best to support learning and development for all our children. And it’s perhaps best summed up by young people themselves:

“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,” wrote members of the National Commission’s Youth Commission in their Youth Call to Action. “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.”

As humans, we are naturally wired for learning. The challenge is ensuring the conditions in schools foster the natural tendency of students to want to understand things, and that those same conditions carry through from the school day to the rest of young people’s waking hours.

The Commission was formed to seize on the momentum in local communities—as well as in policy, practice, and research—in order to build an even larger, more sustained conversation and call to action. Our aim is simple: to align what we’ve heard from educators, families, and students, and what we know from evidence about how children learn, with how schools and classrooms are designed and operate. We know more than we ever have about what it takes to educate all children well; now is the time to put that knowledge into practice for all children everywhere.

What do we know about learning that we didn’t know 25 years ago (and why does it matter)?

...that learning has many dimensions, and they are inextricably linked.

Scientists have told us that we have reached a milestone in what we now understand about how people learn. More than two decades of research across a wide range of disciplines—psychology, social science, brain science—demonstrates that learning depends on deep connections across a variety of skills, attitudes, and values. These generally fall into three broad categories: (1) skills and competencies; (2) attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets; and (3) character and values.
Skills and competencies – shown in the center of the figure above – represent approximately a dozen specific behaviors that decades of research and practice indicate are important. Though they are interrelated, these can be organized into three areas: cognitive, social, and emotional.

- Cognitive skills and competencies underlie the ability to focus and pay attention; manage distractions; set goals, plan, and organize; and persevere and problem solve.

- Social and Interpersonal skills and competencies enable children and youth to read social cues and navigate social situations; negotiate and resolve conflict with others; cooperate and work effectively on a team; communicate clearly; engage in positive and respectful relationships; and demonstrate respect and empathy toward others.

- Emotional skills and competencies help children and youth recognize and manage their emotions, understand the emotions and perspectives of others, and cope with frustration and stress.

Importantly, scientists tell us, this set of skills and competencies develop and are used in dynamic interaction with attitudes and beliefs and values – shown in the second ring in the figure. Attitudes, Beliefs, and Mindsets include children and youth’s attitudes and beliefs about themselves, others, and their own circumstances. Examples include self-concept and identity, a belief that you have what it takes to achieve your goals, motivation, and purpose. These types of attitudes and beliefs powerfully
influence how children and youth interpret and respond to events and interactions throughout their day. **Character and values** represent ways of thinking and habits that support children and youth to work together as friends, family, and community. They encompass understanding, caring about, and acting on core ethical values such as integrity, honesty, compassion, diligence, civic and ethical engagement, and responsibility.

These multiple dimensions of learning are inextricably linked. They develop interdependently and are often processed in the same parts of the brain. Like the roots of a great tree, these dimensions of learning entwine to promote academic accomplishment in any subject. When learning environments recognize these skills as mutually reinforcing and central to learning, children make greater academic progress.

*...that integrating the multiple dimensions of learning benefits all children.*

Evidence confirms that supporting students’ social, emotional, and cognitive development relates positively to all of the traditional measures we care about: attendance, grades, test scores, graduation rates, success in college and careers, more engaged citizenship, and better overall wellbeing.

Today, a range of researched and evidence-based programs and approaches that intentionally develop the whole child are achieving results: increasing students’ grades and test scores, their ability to get along well with others, to persist at hard tasks, and to believe in themselves as effective learners and individuals. Young people who have stronger social, emotional, and cognitive skills are more likely to enter and graduate from college, succeed in their careers, have positive work and family relationships, better mental and physical health, reduced criminal behavior, and to be more engaged citizens.

Success in the future economy also rests on this broad set of integrated skills, as reflected in greater labor market demand and higher wages for people who have these skills over the past 30 years. Employers recognize that it doesn’t matter how much workers know if they can’t work well in teams, communicate clearly, and persevere when confronted with complex problems.

When children and youth possess a full array of social, emotional, and cognitive skills, habits of mind, and character, they are best equipped to prosper in the classroom, perform in the workplace, and succeed in life, as contributing and productive members of society. By integrating—rather than separating—young people’s social, emotional, and cognitive development, we position all students to have more success academically. We also improve their overall wellbeing, something that parents care about deeply.

*...that these skills can grow*

People are not born with these skills intact, scientists tell us. Their development is open to change, growth, and intervention over time. We continue to develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills...
and competencies throughout childhood and adolescence, into adulthood, with unique needs during each stage of life. For example, young children need support to identify and manage their emotions and focus their attention. Adolescence is a period of remarkable exploration and opportunity, as young people begin to develop their sense of self and their purpose in the world, along with their decision-making, long-term planning, and critical thinking skills.¹⁶

...that social, emotional, and cognitive skills can be taught

Not only do social, emotional, and cognitive skills unfold and change over time, there’s also strong evidence that they can be taught. A review of more than 200 programs for teaching social, emotional, and cognitive competencies in grades K-12 found students’ skills, behaviors, attitudes, and academic performance improved significantly while their emotional distress and behavior problems decreased. Moreover, these programs were beneficial across student populations, regardless of race or income.¹⁷

What is less common are efforts to integrate such intentional skills development with academic learning in the content areas, so that teachers are teaching “the whole child,” not just subjects. It’s also less frequent for K-12 leaders to fully engage in community-wide efforts to improve child and youth outcomes, including but not limited to academics.

...that learning happens in relationship

How children and youth develop these skills and competencies is fundamentally shaped by their experiences, contexts, and relationships. Our brains develop through constant interaction with the world around us. We learn within social contexts, and emotions are essential for our learning. Positive, supportive relationships and rich, stimulating environments spur the brain to form, prune, and strengthen connections that promote further development and learning. A lack of social and emotional support and stimulation can hamper development and growth. Thus, babies who are deprived of touch can fail to thrive, lose weight, and even die.¹⁸

...that social, emotional, and cognitive development off-sets the effects of stress and trauma

Integrating social, emotional, and cognitive development benefits all children. But researchers have found it’s especially important for children and youth who have experienced trauma or adversity—such as violence, neglect, chronic hunger, homelessness, or the loss of a parent. These external influences can place our bodies and minds in a constant state of stress or high alert that interferes with learning and growth. Teaching skills that build a sense of efficacy and self-control, providing supportive adult relationships, and directly addressing physical, emotional, and mental health needs can buffer children and youth against the negative effects of stress.¹⁹ It also gives young people a set of tools that provide on ramps to learning.
Low-income students and students of color in our society, as well as their families, are more likely to be exposed to many sources of stress. Ensuring access to high-quality, equitable learning environments that respond to each child’s needs, assets, culture, and stage of development can help mitigate some of these stresses and provide a pathway to a more equitable future. In contrast, when schools reinforce discrimination in the larger society, they can exacerbate and even cause new sources of stress and trauma in children’s lives. When students in schools feel stereotyped or marginalized—or have expectations set for them based on culture or background—it impacts their feelings of emotional safety and belonging, their motivation and identities as learners, and their performance.20

One of the main roles schools and youth organizations can play is to prepare students to use their full array of skills to navigate situations that are not “respectful.” Educating the whole child means helping students develop the beliefs, mindsets, attitudes, and values that they can use to make responsible decisions when there are no adults present or when adults are not modeling ethical behavior.

What does it look like to educate the whole student?

In the past two years, the National Commission has visited schools and districts across the country that are translating the research about how people learn into action. These places have discovered it is not as simple as adding another year of mathematics instruction or adopting a new reading program. Rather, they’ve told us, it requires rethinking learning so that academic content and students’ social and emotional development are joined not just occasionally, but throughout the day. That’s a big change from decades of educational practice that assumes focusing on social and emotional skills takes time away from learning academics, particularly for older students.

“I can tell you anecdotally that children who get along, who are comfortable in their classrooms and are comfortable seeking help and advocating for themselves when they need it, I can tell you that those kinds of children tend to do better in school,” said one Superintendent, “and that our programs are designed to help children develop in those ways.”21

The Elements of Success

As the Commission observed and talked with these practitioners, some common elements have emerged that guide their work. These sites have developed a clear picture of what it looks like to educate the whole student and they have supported it by focusing on three essential elements—shown in the first circle in the visual below:

1. **Children and youth are intentionally taught social, emotional, and cognitive skills**—such as how to resolve conflicts and work in a team, recognize and manage emotions, and plan and manage their time. Today, many programs and approaches that intentionally develop such skills are showing promising results.22
2. Students are asked to exercise these skills through learning academic content and in their interaction with peers and adults throughout the day. How we learn depends on experience and use. It’s not enough to teach specific skills if students do not have opportunities to develop and apply them on a regular basis. For example, if “mathematical courage” is explicitly taught and valued, students are emboldened to take positive risks—by raising their hands, asking questions, making mistakes, presenting their thinking, considering others’ perspectives, and receiving suggestions from their peers—all of which enhance their learning of mathematics. Opportunities to connect with and exercise the full complement of social, emotional, and cognitive skills exist not only in academic subjects, like mathematics or reading, but also in enrichment activities, such as sports, music, and the arts, and in how students and adults interact with each other, whether in the hallways or in the cafeteria.

3. The learning environment is physically and emotionally safe and fosters meaningful relationships among and between adults and students. For example, students help develop classroom and school norms that are followed by everyone in the building. And there are structures and practices in place, like morning meetings, teams of teachers that share a cohort of students, mentorship programs, and advisory groups that enable every student to be known well by at least one adult. A respectful learning environment models and reinforces the development of students’ social, emotional, and cognitive skills throughout the school day, not just in a single program or lesson. Respectful learning environments in schools also model and reinforce the norms set and followed by other learning settings with which schools partner.

Putting it all Together

When local sites put these elements of success together into a single framework, the Commission clearly observed a learning experience where children and youth are engaged, have a sense of ownership, and find purpose in their learning. They also have explicit opportunities to contribute to their school and broader community, and to be recognized for those efforts, which is critical to preparation for active citizenship. In these settings, children and youth are more successful in mastering difficult academic content and concepts, because the instructional practices and learning environments reflect what is known about how people actually learn.
As the Commission has seen on its travels around the country, there are schools, whole school models, charter school networks, and districts that exemplify this integrated approach to learning. But there is far more demand for change than help to make the transition. We’re still stuck in a paradigm that views social and emotional development and mastery of academic content as competing priorities. To create learning environments that support the whole student, educators will need a coherent plan that is supported by policy and research and that fosters the comprehensive development of young people.

**How does this relate to parents’ biggest concerns: the safety and wellbeing of their children?**

The Commission has heard parents and the public’s legitimate concerns about the growing incidence of bullying and school shootings. While not a stand-alone solution, helping young people feel like they belong and are emotionally and physically safe in schools can serve as a critical and primary prevention strategy against school violence. In school shooting incidents, 95 percent of attackers were current students at the school and of those, 71 percent said that they felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the shootings.²⁴

When schools work to build strong relationships, offer mental health supports, and teach students social and emotional skills, such as solving problems and resolving conflicts with others, they become safer. A review of more than 206 studies found that the more supportive the school climate, the less bullying and other aggressive and violent behaviors occur in schools.²⁵

As one high school student said about their school, which emphasizes social emotional learning, “I like it because the other school that I went to, they are more violent. That’s stereotypical, but I feel like it’s true. My school doesn’t really have that violence because, I think, of communication. Learning
how to deal with it so that conflict doesn’t occur even if there are arguments. Learning how to deal with that is a good skill.”

When schools embrace the reality that students’ and parents’ concerns for safety go beyond the school grounds, they acknowledge the broader conditions in which children live. And they recognize the need to partner with community, civic, and faith organizations to create safe and welcoming places both in and out of school where children, youth, and families can develop their own skills and sense of belonging.

Isn’t this yet another burden for teachers?

The great teachers we have had in our lives have always paid attention to us as people, not just repositories for information. Teachers tell us that when schools embrace the whole student, it gives them the space to teach in ways they have always wanted to teach. “My job is to build them as people,” says one 6th grade teacher at a public charter school. Providing teachers with tools and strategies to develop students socially, emotionally, and cognitively helps them engage students, reduce behavior problems, and makes teachers’ jobs more satisfying.

Transforming instruction in this way is not easy. It will not happen overnight. This is not about asking content area teachers to teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills on top of academic subject matter, but about shifting instruction to teach and reinforce such skills through learning academic content and by the features of the classroom and school environment.

Teachers are pivotal to creating the rich educational experiences that all children need and deserve. Supporting teachers so that they can support students is essential, especially in schools serving students of color and low-income students, which tend to be under resourced. This requires providing teachers with both the preparation and ongoing learning to change current practices, as well as organizational and policy supports that remove barriers to this more holistic approach to instruction.

Research reveals that teachers’ social and emotional competencies influence the quality of the learning experiences they offer their students. Studies also indicate unconscious teacher bias and stereotypes can have a negative impact on their relationships with students and the quality of instruction afforded to students of color and those from under-resourced settings.

A growing body of research suggests that developing teachers’ social and emotional competencies improves teacher wellbeing, reduces stress and burnout, and can reduce teacher and administrator turnover. Teachers also report greater job satisfaction when their students are more engaged and successful.

In addition to the importance of teachers, evidence points to the critical role that school administrators play in setting the conditions for classroom teaching and learning. Principals are highly influential in setting priorities and goals, providing human and material resources, and establishing
and sustaining programs and practices that support social, emotional, and academic development. A recent study by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found that principals influence school achievement primarily by improving school climate: They empower and coordinate the work of teachers and school staff around shared goals, organize and support shared leadership, and develop systems for supporting teachers.30

Yet too often, teachers and school leaders do not receive preparation and ongoing learning that address the science of human development and help them translate that science into their practice. Teachers, in particular, must understand this work, own it, and help shape it. “We have to start with adults’ social and emotional learning, and then work on kids’ social and emotional learning,” said a 4th grade teacher in Seattle.31

All adults who work with young people must be given opportunities to build their own social and emotional skills so that they can, in turn, model and support these skills for young people.

How can we help schools do this work?

Schools play a central role in healthy development and learning because school is where young people spend so much of their day. Schools can choose to take on this work intentionally and meaningfully, and do it well, or ignore it and do it poorly. But when the Commission asked “how, where, and with whom” learning happens, it became apparent that young people are shaped by all the formal and informal learning spaces in schools and in the community. The American Academy of Pediatrics, for example, recently published guidelines about the importance of recess and unstructured play as essential to contributing to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of children.32

Youth development organizations, libraries, and museums—which provide extracurricular activities, enrichment and development opportunities before and after school and during the summer, and volunteer and internship experiences—are valuable preK-12 partners. If engaged fully and creatively, they can not only extend learning time and expand learning choices for children and youth, but also accelerate progress toward integrating social, emotional, and cognitive development across learning settings.

Research suggests that effective implementation of efforts to support social and emotional learning should be integrated across homes, schools, and communities because students are more likely to benefit when they have consistent, continuous opportunities to build and practice their skills.33
In Providence, Rhode Island, for example, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) has created a middle school strategy called the AfterZone. 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, where they have a meal, and then can participate in a combination of off-site programming at multiple sites and an on-site club focused on social, emotional, and cognitive skill building. 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. A 2011 evaluation found the program shrunk school absences by 25 percent after two years, with the greatest benefit for students who participated in at least 30 days of programming.\textsuperscript{34}

Expanding the definition of where adults \textit{should} expect young people to find formal and informal opportunities that support whole child development invites families, educators, youth advocates, and policymakers to “name and see” the size of the opportunity gaps in their communities. Helping educators and youth development programs effectively partner to support whole child development can increase their collective impact, as the Commission observed in visits to Austin, Texas; Cleveland, Ohio; and Tacoma, Washington.

This partnership work can be difficult and time-consuming. It requires collaborative planning, open communication, effective coordination, and a strong commitment to placing young people’s needs, rather than adult concerns, at the center of such efforts. “Schools can’t do it all,” said 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.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Building stronger partnerships between educators and the many other people who serve children and youth would create a more seamless developmental and learning continuum for all young people across settings.}

\textit{Is this yet another fad that’s going to come and go?}

In community after community, the Commission heard that addressing the comprehensive development of children and youth is not a separate initiative or program—or at least, it shouldn’t be. It’s foundational to learning. It aligns with the basic intuitions that parents and teachers, youth development professionals, and business and community leaders have about what young people need to grow and thrive. It has roots in a deep understanding of how learning happens—rather than in responses to short-term performance anxiety. It changes the entire paradigm for how we educate our young people.
Momentum for a more balanced approach to learning is building across the country, with local communities taking up, shaping, and refining these strategies. Understanding the robust research base about how people learn requires a new lens—and a new conversation—about how we educate the rising generation of Americans. Closing the gap between what we now know and what we do in schools can make schools more effective for all young people.
CHAPTER TWO:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

One of the Commission’s primary conclusions is that the demand for change in local communities far exceeds the supply of help. Translating what we now know about how people learn into practice on behalf of children and youth requires fundamental and systemic change—it’s not a matter of tinkering around the edges. It requires changing how we teach children so that the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning are fused rather than distinct; the settings in which learning occurs, so that they mirror and reinforce the skills, habits of character, and mindsets that we want to develop in our young people; and the relationships on which that learning is fundamentally based.

As we looked around the country, we saw many schools and districts doing part of this work—for example, implementing a curriculum to teach specific social, emotional, and cognitive skills or putting in place advisory groups so that students are known well. But very few have put in place all the essential elements of a comprehensive framework that teaches young people social, emotional, and cognitive skills, habits, and character; provides them with opportunities to learn and apply these skills while learning academic content and throughout the school day; and creates safe and relationship-based learning environments that model and reinforce these skills.

So, the Commission began to ask people: What would it take? What recommendations are needed to build from a set of promising practices to more widespread change? If we now know what it takes to educate all children well, what is our obligation as adults to act on that knowledge? Based on conversations with hundreds of people across the nation over the past two years, including students and their families, the following takeaways have guided the recommendations that follow:

...Opportunities to foster whole child development happen in and outside schools and begin at home.

Families are profoundly important in the social, emotional, and cognitive growth of their children. Nurturing family relationships provide the foundation for all other relationships. It’s in the family that children learn trust, self-esteem, right from wrong, and how to cope with and manage their emotions. Parents and other caregivers overwhelmingly believe it’s important to join forces with schools and youth-serving organizations to support their children’s healthy development and learning. This means involving families through home visits, parent advisory groups, parent-teacher conferences, and other opportunities for families to learn and lead. Such opportunities need to be made equitably available to all families—and diverse cultural and language backgrounds—so that schools can build on families’ strengths and deepen their understanding of children’s home backgrounds to jointly address students’ growth.
Community organizations also can play a crucial role in partnering with schools—providing support during the school day and beyond the schoolhouse doors, from in-school mentoring and classroom and schoolwide services, to out-of-school and summer programming. Often, these partners already have closer and deeper relationships with families, who enroll their children in such programs because of their focus on developing character and life skills. While some of the recommendations that follow speak specifically to educators, many of them address the broader community of educators and youth-development professionals.

... Local communities will need to shape and drive the process of comprehensively supporting students, with the help of policy changes and continuing research.

To do this work well, local leaders—including educators working alongside families, civic leaders, and out-of-school providers—need champions, a galvanizing agenda, flexible resources to support collective planning, and authentic voices that represent the students and families being served. They also need the autonomy and flexibility to determine their approaches based on their students’ unique strengths, needs, and contexts. And they must be able to modify and continue developing their strategies based on ongoing data about what’s working and what’s not.

Rather than offer mandates aimed at compliance, the recommendations that follow view policy and research as providing the conditions to enable good practice in schools and classrooms. This will require state and local policymakers to operate in a more collaborative, coherent fashion. It also will require new, more cooperative approaches between researchers and practitioners to answer high-priority questions in ways that are useful and actionable.

... Acquiring social, emotional, and cognitive skills is important for all students but equity means acknowledging that not all students are the same.

We know that students come to school with different experiences and access to opportunities, so addressing and responding to their individual strengths and needs is a key part of ensuring that all have an opportunity to learn. In the United States, students of color and students from low-income families are systematically provided with fewer resources in and outside of schools. Diminished access to housing, health care, and other basic needs, along with discrimination on the basis of race and family income, are major sources of stress that can interfere with healthy development and learning. These stressors are often compounded when low-income students and students of color
also attend schools with fewer resources, more disruptions, lower expectations, and less engaging learning experiences.

Providing equitable opportunities for developing young people socially, emotionally, and academically requires calibrating to each student’s individual needs, while addressing these systemic disparities in school settings. It’s also important to guard against approaches that reinforce inequities, such as providing heavy doses of behavior management for low-income or minority students and more intellectually rigorous, collaborative projects for affluent, white students.

The recommendations that follow seek to accelerate efforts in states and local communities by strengthening six broad categories that impact student outcomes:

1. **Recommendation One: Set a Clear Vision.** Articulate and prioritize a clear vision that develops the whole child and reflects the interconnected social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning.

2. **Recommendation Two: Teach Students Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Skills and Embed Them in All Academic Learning.** Provide children and youth with the opportunity to learn specific skills and competencies and to connect them with learning academic subjects and throughout the day, not just in a stand-alone program or lesson.

3. **Recommendation Three: Create Safe and Supportive Learning Environments and Ensure Continuous Improvement.** Design and improve environments to be physically and emotionally safe and to foster strong bonds among children and adults.

4. **Recommendation Four: Build Adult Capacity to Support How Learning Happens.** Ensure that teachers and other adults receive the professional learning and conditions they need to model and teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills to young people.

5. **Recommendation Five: Create a Cohesive PreK-12 Ecosystem: Align Resources and Leverage Partnerships.** Blend and braid resources and build partnerships between schools, families, and communities to support healthy learning and development in and out of school.

6. **Recommendation Six: Learn as We Go.** Continue to refine the evidence base and support practices that reflect the growing body of knowledge about how learning happens. As we learn more, continue to build adult capacity for continuous improvement.

**Recommendation One: Set a Clear Vision**

A clear vision engages all important stakeholders in a single, sustainable conversation and provides a north star that points them in the same direction across practice, policy, and research, for both in school and out-of-school settings. It provides a strong foundation for developing strategies to ensure equitable access to a wide range of learning opportunities. It helps people understand why it’s worth the hard work of changing their existing practices and why this work should rise above other, competing priorities.
While every community will craft its own unique vision, all visions must prioritize the whole child and reflect the interconnected social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning. A district’s vision should begin in partnership with students, teachers, families, and youth-serving professionals in the local community to provide continuity across learning settings. These visions need to be embraced by state and local policy leaders so that there is a clear and consistent view of student success that drives efforts to support districts and schools. Once a vision is established that resonates broadly, leaders at the state, district, and school levels need to communicate that vision clearly and regularly to help everyone understand that developing the whole child is not a program, a department, or a one-off initiative. It is foundational to all actions, policies, and programs that support students.

How do schools, educators, youth-development professionals, and policymakers roll out their vision?

Start with the student. Local and state leaders, in partnership with their communities, should articulate the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities of a successful high school graduate to encompass the social, emotional, and cognitive competencies, character, and habits of mind demonstrated to contribute to success in school, work, and life. Education leaders at the district and school level can identify developmentally appropriate social, emotional, and cognitive learning objectives, in partnership with youth-development professionals, and align them across school and out-of-school settings to provide a coherent learning progression from PreK through grade 12.

Implement the shared vision. Once a community has a clear and compelling vision, it’s important to draw the thread of the vision through the way work is described, planned, and implemented at every level. At the district and school levels, this can entail aligning strategic action plans, budget priorities, and adult talent management systems with the shared vision. Policymakers can support this work through state standards, guidance, and frameworks that signal to districts and communities the importance of prioritizing the whole child. For example, states can embed social, emotional, and cognitive competencies into existing learning standards; require local communities to articulate learning standards or competencies for developing these skills; and leverage existing guidance from early childhood or youth development agencies to create coherence across the PreK-12 education ecosystem.

Track progress. Once a community has a clear vision for student success, it’s important to develop and use measures across school and out-of-school settings to know whether progress is happening, what’s working, and what needs to be adjusted. School climate and culture surveys—that ask questions of students, teachers, administrators, and families about the quality of the learning environment and their evolving experience of learning over time—are examples of the types of measures communities can use. Policymakers can support these efforts by supplying measurement tools as well as training and support in interpreting and using the data. Researchers can help refine such measures over time in collaboration with practitioners.37
A vision in action

The approximately 83,000-student Austin Independent School District has integrated social and emotional development into academic learning in all of its 130 schools, including creating a department of social and emotional learning. Beginning in the fall of 2014, more than 150 different stakeholders collaborated with the superintendent and the board of trustees to develop the district’s strategic plan. The plan includes an articulation of the district’s vision for educating the whole child, its core beliefs and values, and a five-year implementation strategy. A district scorecard reports on indicators and targets related to each of the core beliefs and is used to measure the extent to which the district is meeting its goals.

Skills related to social and emotional learning are part of the annual scorecard, including the percentage of students who report that they feel safe in their schools, the percentage of students who say they like to come to school, and the number of students with discretionary removals or emergency placements.

During the 2016-17 school year, the district worked to update its vision for social emotional learning based on lessons learned and new research from the field. According to its mission statement, “The purpose of social and emotional learning in AISD is to enable students to develop in safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, academically engaging, and equitable learning environments that cultivate: self-awareness and self-management; social awareness and relationship skills; and planning, evaluating, and decision-making skills.” Austin’s goal is that all students internalize and demonstrate the social and emotional competencies and mindsets they need to thrive in school and in life.

The Kansas State Board of Education has expanded its definition of what it means to be a successful high school graduate to include academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement. The Kansas CAN school redesign project, launched by the state department of education, invited local districts to apply to become one of seven statewide that would redesign at least one elementary school and one secondary school to help prepare students to meet these five outcomes. Each district needed the support of its local school board, teachers, and teachers’ union or other professional association. The 7 districts chosen, out of 24 that applied, will launch their new designs in the 2018-19 school year and will serve as sites for others to study, learn, and visit.
Recommendation Two: Teach Students Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Skills Explicitly and Embed in All Academic Learning

Districts and schools debate whether it’s best to cultivate social, emotional, and cognitive skills through discrete programs—either published nationally or developed locally—or by embedding these skills into the instructional practices and classroom protocols of teachers throughout the school day. The answer is both. There is a wide range of effective, published programs that provide frameworks, activities, and developmental sequences for teaching social, emotional, and cognitive skills. In addition, many districts and schools have independently developed their own programs and resources. But if a single curriculum or program is the extent of a school’s or district’s commitment to this work—if students and teachers see developing these skills as a focus only on Tuesday afternoons, or in morning meetings, or in grades 5 and 8—there is little hope for real impact. Opportunities for formally and informally developing and practicing social, emotional, and cognitive skills, habits, and character can and should happen throughout the day. Teachers need to focus on these concepts and skills in classes, in extra-curricular work, in hallways and the cafeteria, and on the playground. When students and staff feel accountable to be their best selves and help others all day long—whether in science class or on the athletic fields—then social, emotional, and academic development takes root in the hearts and minds of the community.

What does this mean for schools, educators, and youth-development professionals?

Explicitly teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Districts, schools, and youth-serving organizations can create or select and use evidence-based instructional materials, practices, and resources that teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Anyone who has tried to help kindergartners stay patient, focused, and collaborative, or to help adolescents be kind and welcoming to all of their peers, knows that these skills and habits do not come naturally to all children and cannot simply be mandated: they have to be learned through a careful process. While there are families, teachers, community organizations, and faith-based leaders who do a remarkable job of helping children learn these skills and develop positive character habits, we can’t count on every child getting access to natural mentors. To ensure that every child is given guidance, support, and accountability in this area, schools and districts can select an evidence-based national program or develop one locally that will give school staff the framework, language, lessons, and resources to cultivate these skills and habits in students.

Embed into academic instruction. If learning is social, emotional, and cognitive, then teachers should routinely build such connections into academic content to increase student engagement and learning. A primary reason these skills are not prioritized in schools is that we view academic learning as distinct from social and emotional learning—time spent on one detracts from time spent on the other. Given limited time, the focus must be on academics. This assumption is ultimately self-defeating. Academic learning is powerfully enhanced by the cultivation of social and emotional skills and character habits. For example, by creating and upholding classroom
norms and responsibilities, or using discussion protocols that involve all students and require respectful listening and thoughtful contributions, academic learning can be freed from many of the challenges of disengagement and social distraction. Students’ understanding of history, literature, and science are deepened when they can reflect on the ethical and moral choices that people made, think critically about big ideas, and understand how what they are learning might help them achieve a goal they really care about. District and school leadership can effect this change by combining professional development for all staff in embedding the development of these skills through a clear mandate to bring this focus into lessons. Many teachers fear “taking time away from learning” to focus on how students are feeling, behaving, and interacting in their classroom. It is up to leadership to make clear that a core part of teaching academic content and skills is attending to those social, emotional, and cognitive development skills directly, every day, to enhance academic learning.

**Embrace holistic supports and assessments that prioritize the whole child.** Families, students, and staff are acutely aware of what really matters in a school by how time is allocated and the systems for rewards and accountability. In many schools, that focus is narrowly constrained to high-stakes test scores in two subjects. In contrast, when a student graduates from school and enters her adult life, she will be judged not by test scores but by the quality of her work and the quality of her character—social, emotional, and cognitive skills and habits. Districts and schools can shift toward real-world needs by focusing on the big picture of the children they serve—their backgrounds, strengths, and needs. There are individual students who remarkably overcome significant physical, cognitive, or emotional challenges or trauma arising from poverty, unstable homes, or language barriers, despite all odds. They are the exceptions. If we wish to give all children the best chance for success, we need to combine a focus on developing social, emotional, and cognitive skills for all students with equitable support for all, making strategies such as nutrition and health support, counseling, accessible settings, culturally responsive teaching, and community collaboration central to schools. In many high-performing schools across the country, students already are required to present evidence of their strengths, challenges, and growth across academic subjects, extra-curricular skills, and social, emotional, and cognitive development through structures like student-led family conferences and public presentations of their learning. This signals to both educators, students, and families that development of this full complement of skills and habits is a highly valued priority and enables young people to fully demonstrate what they know and can do.
What does teaching social, emotional, and cognitive skills look like?

At King Middle School in Portland, ME, science teacher David Mann designed an expedition that engaged his 7th grade students as citizen scientists.38 “Expeditions,” long-term, collaborative projects that produce learning of real value to students and their communities, are a central feature of schools affiliated with the EL Education network, which work to develop students’ character and academics. Working with the city arborist, the students identified individual tree species and their needs throughout the city; contributed to a database of trees in their community using professional software; and then wrote proposals for planting trees in neighborhoods that lacked them. The students presented their proposals to a community audience that included the city arborist, other city officials, and citizens, along with their peers. This real, meaningful field work enabled students to take on professional roles and to draw on multiple social, emotional, and cognitive skills—including working in teams, communicating clearly, understanding the perspectives of others, and applying science and mathematics knowledge and skills in the real world. The EL Education network includes 152 schools in 30 states, serving some 50,000 students.

Van Ness Elementary School, which serves students in grades PreK-2 in Washington, D.C., encourages students to become persistent, creative problem solvers by dedicating time and space for them to practice. The “maker space” is a physical space in every classroom where students can experience what it looks like to solve problems creatively by using hands-on tools and materials. In the maker space, students work on challenges and projects related to what they are studying as well as on fun, one-day challenges, like, “How can you use the popsicle stick, paper clip, and rubber band to make a catapult that shoots the ball the farthest?” By engaging students in interesting projects, children learn to manage their time and emotions, organize their approaches, reflect on what they’re learning, and cope with frustration and try again.

“When you give kids autonomy and choice and really hands-on materials, you have them applying the learning in a way that helps them to gain deep understanding,” said Cynthia Robinson-Rivers, the head of school. “We send the message in everything we do that struggle and making mistakes are ways that you can learn. The maker space is a physical space and an approach to problem solving that really lends itself to that notion of practice being important. As you work hard on it, and change it, and improve it, it gets better.”
Recommendation Three: Create Safe and Supportive Learning Environments and Ensure Continuous Improvement

Safe learning environments that foster meaningful relationships among children and adults are one of the most essential elements for helping students develop socially, emotionally, and academically. Without the right learning environments to reinforce and model the skills and habits of character we expect of children and youth this type of integrated learning simply will not happen. Research shows that the context and relationships in which children develop fundamentally effects their learning and growth. When schools create a positive culture and climate for learning both behavioral and academic outcomes improve.

Yet the overall quality of learning environments in schools varies widely. Students of color and low-income students, who are more likely to experience external stressors outside of school, also are less likely than their peers to report high levels of support, safety, and trust in school, and they are more likely to experience punitive disciplinary practices. For this reason, efforts to improve school climate that seek to address inequitable practices and outcomes often show the largest positive effect for low-income students and students of color.

Some schools are focused on improving discipline practices or managing behavior as a discrete initiative, separate from efforts to improve the overall culture and environment for learning. When schools embrace educating the whole student, rather than a singular focus on discipline, young people learn the skills, values, and character that help them take responsibility for their actions and treat others with respect and compassion, which leads to safer, better organized, and more purposeful learning environments for everyone.

What does this mean for schools, educators, and youth-development professionals?

- **Focus on relationships.** Districts, schools, classrooms, and youth-service organizations can use structures and practices that foster positive, long-term relationships among students and between students and adults. Examples include class meetings, advisory groups in which a teacher serves as an advocate for a small group of students over multiple years, team teaching of cohorts of students, and mentoring. Such structures enable each child to be known well and prevent any student from falling through the cracks.

- **Affirm the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the diverse students that schools serve.** Schools and youth development programs foster inclusive learning communities in which all young people and adults feel a sense belonging and respect for their culture and background. School districts and organizations can publicly acknowledge the value that differences in culture, race, ethnicity, and background play in promoting learning and development. They can provide relevant instructional materials and professional development for teachers and youth development professionals that incorporate strategies for culturally responsive teaching. And they can help
teachers and youth development workers recognize and address their own biases, including their unexamined expectations for children and youth based on ethnicity, social class, and skin color.

Go beyond discipline and behavior management to support learning. Given the pressure to address issues of school safety and violence, it’s tempting to just adopt a new discipline strategy or to place more metal detectors in schools. But research shows that a more long-term prevention strategy is to create safe and welcoming learning environments, which can reduce bullying, violence, and aggressive behaviors. Research also suggests that restorative, or nonpunitive, approaches to handling a wide range of conflicts in schools can lead to reductions in suspension rates and violence and improvements in the overall school climate for all young people. District and school leaders, educators, and youth-development professionals can respond to misbehavior in ways that are developmentally appropriate, preserve the dignity of the child, and enable them to heal relationships with adults and peers. They also can use practices such as class meetings, students’ contributions to school and classroom norms, and peer mediation to give students ownership over their school and classroom climate.

How can policymakers support this work?

Focus resources on supporting healthy learning environments. State and local leaders can provide school climate surveys and other tools to measure the quality of the learning environment and couple it with resources to help build people’s capacity to use such data. They can make improving the learning environment a priority within school improvement plans and school quality reviews. They can help align measures of the learning environment across the Pre-K-12 education ecosystem, including early childhood and youth-development programs and schools. Most critically, they can publicly report the quality of the learning environment in such settings, with the goal of better understanding effective practices and continuing to improve. State and local leaders should report such data in ways that align with legal practices and protect student privacy. Individual student-level data should never be named publicly.

Allow schools and youth-development organizations the flexibility needed to create supportive learning environments. Current rules and regulations—ranging from reporting requirements, to the use of time, buildings, and dollars, to adult-to-child ratios—can constrain or discourage schools and districts from flexibly designing learning settings and partnering with youth-development programs. To move the needle, policymakers can enable the more flexible use of time and resources and communicate that flexibility widely. State leaders also can convene schools, districts, or communities to share best practices about creating positive learning environments and to problem solve and learn from each other.

Measure the quality of learning environments and hold institutions accountable for continually improving the quality of those environments. School climate and the quality of out-of-school learning environments are something that staff can directly influence, and measurement tools tend to be more advanced than those that measure individual students’ social, emotional, and cognitive competencies. States and districts might consider using student, parent, and teacher or
staff surveys to evaluate learning environment conditions and supports. They also can evaluate the outcomes of these conditions by tracking suspension rates, participation rates, and chronic absenteeism. If used for statewide or district reporting, climate surveys should be well validated and meet criteria for comparative use, and they should be developmentally appropriate. (It’s more reliable to survey high school students than those in PreK-3, for example.) States and districts have a number of options for how to use measures of the learning environment, from providing bonus points in a school or district accountability system, as in Nevada, to permitting local communities to select a school climate survey as an additional performance indicator, to be used primarily for school improvement, as in California. Measures of individual students’ acquisition or demonstration of social, emotional, and cognitive competencies and skills should only be used for formative purposes. Until we have tools that we are confident adequately capture these skills, competencies, and attributes in ways that are sensitive to age, developmental stage, and context, and are firmly committed to using the measures for continuous improvement, we risk holding educators and systems accountable for things we aren’t actually supporting them to do.

What does a healthy learning environment look like?

In 2005-06, Damonte Ranch High School in Washoe County, NV, was graduating just over half its students and only about 40 percent of its freshmen were earning enough credits to move on to sophomore year. “We needed to do something to help increase our graduation rate and have a positive impact on our culture, overall,” said Principal Darvel Bell.

So, the school created seminar classes for students in grades 9-11 that meet for 45 minutes at the end of each day to review homework and grades, directly teach social emotional skills, and build rapport with teachers. The skills students build through the curriculum—such as self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills—are reinforced by the school’s culture, which focuses on respect for others, a readiness to take on challenges, and sharing responsibility for oneself and others.

Damonte Ranch’s focus on knowing each student well extends to the school’s use of data. Every week, the central office tracks credit accrual and grades for each student to support strategies for those not on track to graduate. Seminar teachers send regular communications about progress home for parents to sign and return. The school also uses the results of an annual school climate survey of parents, students, and staff to plan for the coming year. For example, in 2014, results showed a disconnect between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of how engaged students were in their learning. As a result, the school trained the entire staff (custodians, grounds keepers, office staff, as well as teachers) on how to embed social and emotional learning throughout the school day. Last year, the school’s graduation rate was 93 percent.
The **Illinois** legislature has mandated that all districts administer an annual school climate and culture survey to help schools and school systems identify strengths and weaknesses and better target resources and improvement efforts. To ensure districts have access to at least one tool, the Illinois State Board of Education partners with the University of Chicago to administer the **Illinois 5Essentials Survey**, developed by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools. The survey provides districts with detailed data in five critical areas:

- **Effective leaders**: The principal works with teachers to implement a clear and strategic vision for school success.
- **Collaborative teachers**: Teachers collaborate to promote professional growth.
- **Involved families**: The entire school staff builds strong relationships with families and communities to support learning.
- **Supportive environment**: The school is safe and orderly. Teachers have high expectations for students and support students to realize their goals. Classmates also support one another.
- **Ambitious instruction**: Classes are academically demanding and engage students by emphasizing the application of knowledge.

### Recommendation Four: Build Adult Capacity to Support How Learning Happens

When adults have social and emotional skills themselves and know how to use them, they become models for young people and their own wellbeing improves.\(^{46}\) If our goal is for children and youth to learn to be reflective and self-aware, to show empathy and appreciate the perspective of others, to develop character and a sense of responsibility, and to demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior, educators—both in- and out-of-school—need to exemplify what those behaviors look like within the learning community.\(^{47}\) They also need to understand how to foster these skills and dispositions in young people.

Children and youth are more likely to benefit from social, emotional, and cognitive learning when staff receive training and ongoing support to implement programs and strategies well so they can embed them in everyday routines.\(^{48}\) While teachers are central to this work, each and every adult who interacts with children and youth plays a role in supporting and reinforcing young people’s growth and development. Broadening young people’s access to caring, socially and emotionally competent adults across the day and year means making a communitywide commitment to ensure that all adults who interact with young people across the many settings where learning happens take
responsible for, having training in, and are recognized for supporting the integrated nature of learning.

*What does it take to build adult capacity for schools, educators, and youth development professionals?*

- **Include all adults.** Create norms for considerate, collaborative, and productive staff and youth interactions. Leaders and all staff members hold each other accountable for exemplifying these norms. Districts, schools, and youth-serving organizations also ensure that all staff members in all positions, from all backgrounds and orientations, feel welcome, included, and respected as contributing colleagues. And they provide opportunities for authentic relationship building and collaboration among adults as part of building a positive learning community. Such collaboration and alignment can occur both within a school or organization and across the various entities that support children.

- **Emphasize social, emotional, and cognitive skills and competencies in recruitment, hiring, orientation, and professional learning.** Recruitment, hiring, orientation, and professional development policies prioritize attracting and retaining staff members with the knowledge and skills to integrate the multiple dimensions of learning. Opportunities are made available for all staff members for ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that also prioritizes these skills. For example, leaders can be hired who have a proven track record of integrating social, emotional, and cognitive development. Teachers might complete a demonstration lesson or respond to scenarios, such as how they would address an altercation between students. All new hires would be introduced to schoolwide norms and practices for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment.

- **Follow through with ongoing support.** Once adults have built knowledge and systems to support children and youth’s comprehensive development, ongoing support is needed to track implementation progress, make refinements, and ensure those doing the work have what they need to deliver on the vision. This requires change management to support real changes in practice and beliefs and an ongoing attention to improving the learning environment.

*How can policymakers help build adult capacity to support the whole student?*

- **Redesign licensing requirements.** Licensing requirements for school leaders and educators, as well as the approval requirements for educator preparation programs, must ensure future educators have the knowledge base and competencies required to integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development. To exit preparation programs and receive an initial license, candidates should pass performance assessments that demonstrate their ability to understand and develop the full array of these competencies in students. States also can create or expand the use of micro-credentials to recognize specific knowledge and skills demonstrated by those already in the profession.
Restructure adult talent management systems. Recruitment, hiring, performance management, and career advancement practices for teachers, specialized support professionals, and school leaders should prioritize demonstrated competency in developing the whole student.

Incent innovation among educator preparation programs. Policymakers can provide resources and opportunities for programs to collaborate around the development of educator expertise in human development and learning. This includes redesigning clinical experiences to focus on applying the principles of how people learn in diverse settings, including youth-development programs, and providing well-trained mentors during these experiences. When possible, have educator preparation programs continue to support their graduates after they enter the profession.

What does it look like to build adult capacity for this work?

As 45 administrators with the Andover, Massachusetts, Public Schools enter the room to begin a summer retreat, they are welcomed by three elementary school principals who co-lead a series of greeting-and-sharing activities before introducing the day’s agenda. Each day of the retreat, various administrators model similar strategies for supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic learning and decision making, which teachers are implementing in elementary classrooms across the district. The school system has made supporting students’ comprehensive development a priority and backed it up with extensive professional learning for its staff. For example, the district hosts week-long sessions to help teachers implement social-emotional learning effectively in classrooms. Three of the system’s five elementary principals, as well as several curriculum coordinators, have taken advanced courses in social-emotional learning and provide ongoing leadership for their colleagues. The district also sends teams to a year-long certification program in School Climate and Social-Emotional Learning at William James Colleges. These efforts support consistent implementation of social-emotional learning programs across the district’s elementary, middle, and high schools. These range from community-building activities in the elementary schools, to mentoring and community service programs in the middle schools, to a regular advisory period in the high school, in which each adult advisor guides a group of 20 students throughout their four years. A survey of district students in grades 3-8 found 82 percent of elementary students and 84 percent of middle school students experienced a strong sense of safety at school. In addition, 84 percent of elementary students and 73 percent of middle school students indicated that they “completely belong” or “belong quite a bit” at this school.

EdTPA is a subject-specific performance assessment that measures prospective teachers’ readiness to teach, including how their understanding of students’ social, emotional, and cognitive development guides their design of lessons, selection of materials and activities, and supports for students. The capstone assessment, given at the end of an educator preparation program, measures a prospective candidate’s effectiveness by reviewing actual teaching materials, including: short video clips of instruction, lesson plans, student work samples, and
the prospective teacher’s analysis of student learning. More than 750 educator preparation programs in 40 states and the District of Columbia currently use the assessment and at least 18 states have or are considering requiring such a performance assessment for teacher licensure or certification.

**Recommendation Five: Create a Cohesive PreK-12 Ecosystem: Align Resources and Leverage Partnerships**

Learning does not begin with the first bell of the school day, nor does it cease when the final bell rings. Students’ development and learning are constantly shaped by their experiences both in and out of school. Moreover, some students need additional non-school supports—ranging from food assistance to mental health services—to fully access learning. For these reasons, supporting students’ comprehensive development requires leveraging partnerships beyond the schoolhouse—including families, community organizations, employers, colleges and universities, and other public agencies. Ensuring that all students have equitable access to safe and supportive learning environments also requires that policymakers at all levels ensure that resources are used equitably and efficiently and can be flexible enough to support the needs of individual children and youth.

**What does it look like to work together for schools, educators, and youth development professionals?**

- **Meaningfully engage families and young people.** When designing and implementing approaches that support students’ comprehensive development, educators should listen to student and family voices and involve them in opportunities to learn and lead, such as through home visits, student-led parent-teacher conferences, and student and parent advisory groups.

- **Be intentional about engaging partnerships.** Partnerships don’t just happen. It requires an intentional outreach and engagement strategy that ensures the right partners are coming together to accomplish shared goals for the young people with whom they work at every level—classroom, schools, districts, youth development organizations, community partners, and businesses. This requires collaborative planning, open communication, intentional coordination, and putting young people at the center of such efforts in order to ensure a consistent and unified approach for developing children and youth. This means at the district and school level, resources are allocated to support a dedicated, full time, culturally competent person who understands the community and the school district and who can manage and promote partnerships with youth development organizations. To promote efficiency and alignment, this dedicated person should liaise with existing provider networks where possible.
Embrace access to quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities for each young person. Embracing a vision that each young person deserves access to quality afterschool and summer learning opportunities requires schools and districts to play a role in providing and identifying sufficient resources to achieve that vision in partnership with youth development organizations, municipal leadership, provider networks, and youth development intermediaries.

Take a leadership role to ensure that families, students, schools, and community partners have more transparent data about whether and how students are accessing the full range of learning opportunities available to them across a day and year. By expanding the scope of the data collected on where and when students learn, schools could assume an important leadership role in helping communities fill the gaps so that each young person has access to quality learning and developmental supports in and out of school.

How can policymakers support this work?

Distribute resources equitable and adequately. Resource distribution should take into account qualified educators, reasonable class sizes, ratios of counselors and other support staff to students, and 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. Balanced and equitable PreK-12 learning ecosystems require balanced and equitable funding.

Allow districts to blend and braid resources. By pooling or combining school- and community-based resources across programs and funding streams, districts can reduce fragmentation, improve alignment with their goals, and meet local needs and better serve individual students.

Encourage innovation. This can be done by removing barriers and providing incentives within federal and state programs to allow districts and communities to serve youth more holistically. This includes more flexibility to waive regulatory requirements, such as class sizes and length of the school day or year, in exchange for better outcomes for students.

What does it look like to create strong, resourceful partnerships?

In 2011, just 55 percent of Tacoma Public School students were graduating from high school. And the 29,000-student 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. So, 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. 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, the health and human services agency, the Metro Parks authority, the Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, and a range of youth development 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. For example, the district’s contract with the local health and human services agency is contingent on alignment with the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative. To track progress, the initiative’s four big goals—academic excellence, partnership, early learning, and safety—are measured using 35 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 approach to supporting whole child development.

The STRIVE Partnership brings together leaders from the education, business, philanthropic, nonprofit, civic, and grassroots communities in Cincinnati to build their collective impact on behalf of every child, from cradle to career. The Partnership tracks outcome data related to six critical milestones: kindergarten readiness; early grade reading; middle-grade math; college/career readiness; college/career persistence; and career/life pursuit.

Each milestone is tracked through the analysis of a primary indicator and two complementary indicators. Every initiative that the Partnership manages or supports is meant to improve at least one of these indicators in collaboration with a community partner. To support continuous improvement, the Partnership issues an annual report of its data and findings, to serve as a catalyst for community discussions about the state of education. Based on a general review of this data, STRIVE can then dig deeper to better understand how to build on successes and address challenges. Over the past 10 years, measurable improvements have been made in all six indicators along the cradle-to-career continuum.

**Recommendation Six: Learn as We Go**

Decades of research and practice have provided a foundational body of knowledge for how to support children and youth’s social, emotional, and cognitive development and learning. But as schools, districts, and communities move to translate this research into practice within their own context, it’s important to learn as we go. The changes we need to take hold and spread are unlikely to do so
without an intentional, sustained focus on continually learning. This will require building trust so that the entire school and community engages in the process and can learn together.

As the Commission looked around the country, the most effective schools, systems, and communities that we visited were all constantly looking at data and evidence, asking hard questions about what was working and what could be improved, and committed to getting better over time. To support this work will require new types of partnerships between researchers and practitioners in order to produce more useful, actionable, and impactful information for the field. It also will require a commitment from schools and youth development organizations to use data and evidence to maintain strategic partnerships and learn from each other.

**Create a new research-practice paradigm to provide useful, actionable information for the field.**

Using research to inform practice faces two critical challenges: Researchers build knowledge but it often fails to inform changes in school practice and design or the quality of youth programming. Teachers, school leaders, out-of-school providers, and district administrators search for guidance, but cannot easily find the information they need in a form that actually helps. For that reason, the Commission’s biggest research recommendation is to change the current paradigm for how research gets done in order to produce more useful, actionable, and impactful information for practitioners. This includes changing who conducts research, which questions get prioritized, and how knowledge is shared. Central to this shift is the development of meaningful research-practice partnerships in which researchers, school and program leaders, teachers and staff, policymakers, and youth themselves engage in collaborative inquiry and learning. In recommending a new research paradigm, we do not propose to replace existing research approaches, but rather to build upon current research practices. What we argue for here is a move toward more practice-focused, community-based, interdisciplinary research and training that adequately addresses the most pressing issues of practice related to supporting children and youth.

In particular, this will require: multi-disciplinary teams that include people at various levels of the system and with diverse perspectives, including students and families themselves; a focus on critical and immediate problems of practice that are mutually agreed to be important locally and to have larger implications for the field; the use of iterative inquiry cycles to learn together and test out proposed changes, with on-the-ground tests of implementation in schools, classrooms, and youth-serving programs; and collaborative data analysis. The findings from this research should be more intentionally crafted to be relevant and accessible to educators and policymakers, such as through field-facing summaries and video. Achieving this paradigm shift will require the support of funders, including the federal government; research universities, working in collaboration with school districts and community programs; and the broader research and education ecosystems.

**Use data and evidence to develop and maintain strategic partnerships.** One feature of a strong collaboration between schools and youth development organizations is the ability to partner to share data that can be used to both track and strengthen student performance and to better understand how the partnership can support improved learning environments that develop the
whole child. There are many ways that schools, districts, and their youth development partners can use data to develop and maintain partnerships that support student growth. These include: collecting and sharing evidence of how participation in quality youth development programs benefits young people and schools; identifying outcomes that all partners can contribute to and conducting regular check-ins and assessments to chart progress; disaggregating data to identify any disparities in which youth get access to what learning opportunities; undertaking a periodic “community resource scan” to understand assets and gaps and to identify organizations that support whole child development for young people and their families; ensuring robust data sharing agreements between schools and their community partners to appropriately share student level data in ways that align with legal practices and protect student privacy.

**What does it look like to learn as we go?**

The **Student Agency Improvement Community**, supported by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, brought together a network of academic scholars, schools, and teachers to help build students’ academic mindsets—such as feelings of belonging and agency—by engaging in rapid improvement cycles based on evidence and data. The Summit Public Schools, for example, worked with nine schools in California to address the performance gap between English learners and non-English learners. An initial data analysis revealed significant, negative differences between English learners and non-English learners on survey items regarding students’ feelings of academic belonging and whether they believed they could improve through effort, often known as a “growth mindset.” Through its work with SAIC, the Summit team developed 10 instructional strategies designed to promote language learning and student agency, which teachers used during mentor-mentee check-ins with English learners and more broadly for all students through many of the schools’ structures. Between spring 2016 and spring 2017, the performance gap between English and non-English learners at Summit decreased by 50 percent. The network also saw significant improvements in English learners’ growth mindset and sense of academic belonging. 49

The **city and county of Denver** offer a good example of how data are shared and used across school and youth development settings. Denver Public Schools (DPS) has an agreement with the Denver Afterschool Alliance (DAA), a network of more than 300 afterschool and youth development organizations, to share school data with afterschool programs to better design and improve programs that support district students. Three factors were deemed critical to successful data sharing: the willingness of the school district’s legal counsel to collaborate in finding ways to share data while maintaining individual student privacy; champions in both the school and youth development sectors who advocated for data sharing; and leadership at the district level who believed youth development was integral to achieving a whole child vision. As a result, afterschool providers have access to data on school attendance, suspensions, and standardized test results for students who attend their programs, benchmarked against the entire district, which they can use for program improvements.
CHAPTER THREE: ACCELERATING OUR EFFORTS

We have reached an extraordinary moment in time. Decades of research provides a compelling evidence base for how children learn—with major implications for how we design schools and other learning settings. Students, families, educators, youth-development professionals, and business leaders are all calling for a more balanced approach to education that echoes this research. With the devolution of federal education policy, states and local communities have both the opportunity and the responsibility to put these calls into action.

Although there are evidence-based models on which states and communities can build, each locality will have to tailor its approach to fit local needs, grounded in local ownership. At present, the demand for change far outpaces the support available to achieve change at scale.

Based on the Commission’s deliberations over the past two years, six essential levers (illustrated in the graphic below) have been identified as essential for driving forward the recommendations in this report:

**Theory of Change for the Commission’s Recommendations**

*Sustained adoption and successful implementation of the Commission’s recommendations depends on the presence of...*

- Cross-sector coalition building
- Exemplars and implementation knowledge
- Local, place-based capacity
- Strong talent development pipeline
- Aligned policy and catalytic resources
- New research paradigm bridging research and practice

These levers are not stand-alone elements; they operate together in a supportive and overlapping fashion:
Continued, cross-sector coalition building. To prioritize a whole child agenda across an increasing number of players requires bringing in new voices—such as the civil rights, health and human services, civic, and faith-based communities—in addition to the voices of families and students themselves. The existing coalition also must continue to deepen and align its work around the report’s recommendations.

 Greater implementation knowledge. As more schools, districts, and communities pursue the comprehensive development of young people, we will need a better understanding of the different entry points to this work and the various pathways to success, given the diversity of contexts across the nation. This includes efforts to incent or identify exemplary district, school, and out-of-school learning models, clear measures to track progress, and deeper knowledge of how different communities make improvements from where they started.

 Greater local, place-based capacity. The focus on communities reflects the Commission’s belief, as well as what we heard from the field: local ownership is a key driver of change. This requires more help closer to home for local communities committed to supporting children socially, emotionally, and academically. While many educators in classrooms and schools are engaged in the work, schools and districts often lack sufficient knowledge and supports to intentionally and effectively integrate all of the dimensions of learning into academic content and throughout the day. Creating networks of communities and organizations engaged in this work—to support and deepen the knowledge base, facilitate the sharing of information, and spur the development of tools and resources—is a crucial next step.

 A strong talent development pipeline. Throughout the Commission’s work, we were struck by the importance of creating a strong talent development pipeline grounded in what we now know about how people learn and with the skills to apply that knowledge in school and out-of-school settings. It starts with the preparation of adults who aspire to work across the preK-12 ecosystem, both in schools and in other youth serving organizations. It continues by providing them with opportunities for ongoing, job-embedded professional learning. And it relies on strong, committed leaders—who are themselves well-trained and well-supported—who can infuse an emphasis on social, emotional, and academic development across the many learning settings in which young people find themselves.

 An aligned policy framework. This report views policy as a powerful, enabling tool that can support and accelerate efforts at the local level or provide unintended, but significant roadblocks. At present, federal and state agencies are not organized to build capabilities within schools and districts. There is a major opportunity for a group of policy-oriented organizations that embrace the Commission’s recommendations to work together to align their advocacy strategies to promote the Commission’s policy recommendations.

 A new research paradigm. To successfully translate what we now know about how children learn into widespread practice will require a new approach that bridges the gap between research and practice by shifting how research gets done to produce more useful, actionable, and impactful information for practitioners. For example, the varied vocabulary and multiple frameworks for describing and communicating about social emotional, and cognitive development—136 at last count—reflect both the tremendous interest in the field but also
add to confusion and fragmentation. Moving toward a shared understanding and common language, by articulating similarities across existing frameworks and promoting a shared understanding of the evidence base, would help educators and the broader public fully grasp this new vision for student learning. In addition, new opportunities and structures that enable researchers and educators to come together to create and spread knowledge would accelerate efforts to comprehensively develop students and ensure that those efforts are evidence-based, rigorous, and continue to improve over time.

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU: OUR OBLIGATION TO OUR CHILDREN**

The tremendous energy and important new connections formed during the Commission’s work over the past two years indicate what is possible to develop students socially, emotionally, and academically. Amiden all the political divisions in the country, here is an opportunity and a personal obligation for each of us to focus on what we should focus on: our children and their education.

*For Students and Families:* Your voices matter. Check to see whether efforts to support children and youth’s comprehensive development now exist in your own communities so that you can understand and contribute to what is happening. If not, advocate to get started. There are some tools that can help.

*For Teachers:* You deserve the support and the tools to teach the way that you know students learn best. Find ways to ensure that the learning environment in your classroom reflects what we know about how all children learn. Commit to developing your own knowledge about how to integrate the multiple dimensions of learning into your teaching. Emphasize to parents and other caregivers how all these dimensions of their students’ experiences are a critical part of their success. Ask your principal what he or she is doing to support such efforts schoolwide.

*For Principals:* You are the primary driver of school culture and climate. You determine school priorities, you allocate staff and resources, you’re responsible for initiating and sustaining partnerships with community organizations. If you do not make development of the whole child a priority, it will not happen. You can lead by example and through your decisions. If a conversation about integrating social, emotional, and cognitive development has not yet started in your school, now is the time.

*For Superintendents and School Board Members:* Through your vision, your mission statements, your strategic plans, your community-wide engagement, and your budget priorities, you signal whether developing the whole child matters. You can use the recommendations in this report to examine your own practices. But there are also numerous resources available from national organizations to assess where your district is on the path to supporting the whole child and how you can take the next step.

*For Youth Development Professionals:* Commit your organization to meeting standards for the quality of young people’s learning environments and to developing the social and emotional knowledge and skills of all adults within your organization. Engage in intentional partnerships with schools in your local community to expand the formal and informal learning opportunities for young people.
**For Researchers:** Advancing young people’s comprehensive development will require continuing to build the knowledge base about how people learn and develop and how best to translate that knowledge into evidence-based practices. This includes developing research-based measures to track implementation progress, identifying different entry points for getting started and different implementation progressions across diverse communities, and developing valid and reliable measures of individual’s acquisition and demonstration of specific competencies.

**For Curriculum and Model Developers:** High-quality tools are needed that enable implementation. Further development of curricula and tools that integrate the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning are needed for youth in all contexts, particularly at the high school level. Platforms and methods for educators to navigate and identify high-quality resources, and to distribute content and tools at scale, would help accelerate implementation.

**For Municipal and State Policymakers:** Achieving better outcomes for all youth requires broad, cross-sector prioritization of the whole child. Through your leadership, you can help incent and recognize exemplary efforts to educate the whole child; support the funding and dissemination of high-quality tools and resources that enable implementation and measures to track progress; and support networks of schools and districts to engage in joint problem solving and sharing of best practices. You also can use the recommendations in this report to align resources behind a vision for how children learn and to give local communities the flexibility and autonomy they need to blend and braid resources on behalf of young people.

**For Funders:** Your commitment to support children and youth’s comprehensive development in schools and out-of-school settings has been and will continue to be crucial. By collaborating and coordinating your efforts, you can ensure broad coverage, reduce duplication, avoid operating at cross-purposes, and cover gaps. A vibrant funder coalition that supports this work locally and nationally will continue to provide the catalytic dollars that make change possible.


8 Ibid.


15 Cantor et al.


19 Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.


23 Jones & Kahn.


26 DePaoli et al., Respected, 2018.

27 Colvin, 2017.
While there is a lot of interest and energy right now in developing measures of whether students are acquiring social and emotional skills, to help track whether change efforts are working and to inform research, these efforts are too premature to be used as part of state or local accountability systems. As we learned from implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and of state teacher evaluation systems, there can be unintended consequences for students and educators when policymakers rush too quickly to use measures for high stakes purposes rather than for continuous improvement and capacity building.

https://eleducation.org/resources/fieldwork-and-experts-the-branching-out-expedition-at-king-middle-school

Osher et al.

Thapa et al.; Berkowitz et al.

Jones et al., December 2018.


Citation TK

Jones and Kahn.


https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-work/previous-improvement-work/saic/