

**A Call to Action for Inspiring and Motivating Our Children and Teachers  
to Learn and Grow in Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Arenas**

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December of 2015 represents a landmark in federal policy: for the first time, schools across our nation are being asked to prioritize educating the whole child. The new law challenges states and districts to bring together the fields of education and child development to enable teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders to deploy the new science of social, emotional, and academic learning in a way that develops both head and heart. Congress and the President led this landmark shift, and it is one we the undersigned join in collectively applauding.

This shift is timely. Today, scientists and scholars know more than ever about child development and about both the hopeful possibilities of an inspired childhood and the heartbreaking pain of a childhood marked by frustration and despair. In recent decades, educators and scholars have worked to translate these insights into innovative tools and strategies for educators with the hope of making schools and children as healthy and successful as they can possibly be. We now have a new evidence based field of education that promises practical and scalable tools that can improve outcomes significantly. This is enormously promising.

Based on our collective work over many decades, we join in affirming the hope of these new disciplines. Integrated social, emotional, and academic education affects many areas including social and emotional skill development, character and ethical education, deeper learning, emotional intelligence, executive functions, grit, empathy, health promotion, project-based learning, positive education, positive behavior supports, positive youth development, growth mindsets, civic education, and school climate reform. The undersigned represent many of these brands and philosophies, but we join now in a shared commitment to key principles that we believe should guide the implementation of ESSA and benefit all.

At the outset, we are convinced that we have to shift both our paradigm of learning, as well as our practices for promoting the development of children. Learning is not a passive act of a machine getting new parts, but rather a dynamic relationship between adults and children. We need to shift from thinking about schools as places of information distribution to places of human inspiration. We need to focus on relationships, bonding, stress, and purpose. These are big but exciting changes.

We also know that thinking differently will result in acting differently. We have to improve what and how we teach in classrooms, how we set our climate and expectations for one another, how we evaluate the process and product we call “education,” and how we integrate families and communities into the relationships of learning, making them collectively places of both safety and challenge.

The good news is that we have well tested curricula and systems change strategies that have proven outcomes across a range of topics ready to help make the change. We know how to promote a broad range of skills, mindsets, capabilities and values, including student self-regulation and executive function; agency and academic tenacity; empathy and compassion; violence and drug prevention, motivation and persistence; inspiration and service learning; citizenship and character; academic mindsets, positive values and safer, more supportive, engaging and healthy climates for learning. Perhaps most importantly, research now backs up what common sense should have taught us long ago: that children who develop these skills and grow up in environments that are filled with strong relationships, children who learn in environments that are safe, challenging, empowering and inspiring will more powerfully engage in the act of learning itself. In addition to being more engaged, they feel better about themselves, live healthier, work more productively, and act more responsibly in their lives.

For all these reasons, this is a great moment of possibility for American children and American schools. Our most urgent challenge now is to ensure that teachers, administrators, and policy makers have the best tools at their disposal to educate children in these “social, emotional, and cognitive” domains. They must also have guidance for creating school cultures and climates that support trusting relationships and learning. Together, these educational and environmental tools must be implemented and evaluated with attention to evidence-based best practices that build critical skills for success and thereby unleash the potential of all children.

In that hope, we ask the Department of Education to provide guidance to State Education Agencies (SEAs), as well as local school districts to assist them in the effective implementation of ESSA. To implement the new law successfully, guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education are needed to provide a reference point for SEAs, and local school districts to support the effective implementation of evidenced-based programs, as well as to identify the most cost-effective and results-driven efforts. To assist in this effort, we offer the recommendations found below that we believe will help SEAs use newly flexible resources found in Titles I, II and IV in the most effective manner.

- I. First, both Title II and Title IV, Part A funds should be used for professional development and systematic, comprehensive, coordinated, evidence-based approaches. To that end:
  - a. Schools should be strongly encouraged to help districts develop a shared vision for their integrated social, emotional and cognitive readiness and education as part of their state activities funding; leadership must come from the most senior levels including Mayors, Superintendents, and School Boards.
  - b. Local schools and districts should include that shared vision as part of their local educational agency applications such as those described in Title IV, Section 4106.
  - c. That vision should lead to an assessment of strengths and gaps in current practices and a multi-year plan for change and change management by the local educational agency such as those in their Sec. 4106(a)(2) needs assessments.

- d. To the extent practicable, when describing how funds will be used for activities related to supporting well-rounded education and safe and healthy students under Title IV Sections 4107 or 4108, these comprehensive plans should prioritize and include:
- i. pre K-12 developmentally appropriate, evidence-based classroom social and emotional learning curricula that include both skills instruction and infused cognitive, social, emotional, and academic teaching and learning suited to the unique needs of the students and community in which the school operates. Optimally, these will be woven and embedded into pedagogical practice. Children and families who have experienced high degrees of trauma and adversity will also need strategies directed at them as do other children who will have the greatest difficulties with attention, motivation, and learning. Information on evidence-based programs exists in several well curated guides including: The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices ([NREPP](#)), [Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development](#), the What Works Clearing House, [Youth.gov](#), and [CASEL's Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs](#);
  - ii. careful attention to school culture and climate including discipline practices, mental health services, diversity and inclusion norms, relational trust, physical and emotional safety, connectedness, leadership development, policies, and student and family voice;
  - iii. active and meaningful engagement of family and community leaders to ensure collaboration from family and youth serving organizations in the support of the school's efforts to promote each child's whole development; and
  - iv. professional development strategies that help educators understand, implement, integrate, and evaluate social, emotional and cognitive development efforts in core competencies, including self-regulation, executive functions, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, growth mindset, and positive decision making.
- e. These plans will require that central offices have leaders who ensure that cognitive, social, emotional and academic policies and practices have ongoing professional development, rigorous review of new, evidence-based curricula and programs, alignment of prevention mandates into a common developmental framework, and commitment to communicating the importance of sustained commitment to high-quality implementation.
- II. Second, SEAs should, as part of their new accountability systems, create clear standards and supports for evidence-based social, emotional, and academic programming that enables students to be college and career ready.
- a. SEAs should establish state-of-the-art social, emotional, and cognitive readiness (academic learning) standards, practice guidelines, and professional learning

strategies that guide districts and schools in the selection of and measurement of their local approaches.

- b. SEAs should establish research-based school climate standards that complement and extend instructionally based standards.
  - c. SEAs should also direct funding to schools and school districts that show commitment to high quality evidence-based standards of implementation above.
- III. Third, assessment is critical as well as difficult! It is critical for researchers and educators to join forces to establish practical measures of students' intrapersonal and interpersonal competence that are scientifically sound, feasible to administer, and inform planning and practice to enhance students' learning and development. Reliable and valid assessment tools of students' social and emotional competence as well as school climate are available and can be used, but only if used wisely.
- a. Measures that ask students to evaluate their own progress in developing specific skills like self-regulation, executive functions, growth mindset and social awareness are often helpful for teachers as they try to assess progress for individual students. These measures can be combined with behavior ratings and performance tasks that help educators to understand next steps that promote school-wide, instructional and/or relational improvement efforts that can be monitored to support continuous learning. *More research, however, is needed to explore how and if these measure can be used for accountability.* Currently, they can be used formatively to *monitor student learning* and provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning. Under these conditions, educators, often view them as extremely helpful.
  - b. New measures like the US Department of Education's school climate survey (or other highly respected climate surveys) can be used to monitor the conditions for learning and important factors that contribute to learning such as a student's sense of being safe, known, and valued. While these instruments still rely on self-report, they should nonetheless be used to track progress in improving the overall conditions for learning. Climate measures that focus on trust, physical and emotional safety, strong relationships between and among adults and students, and cultural competence are particularly important.
  - c. Data currently being collected by schools can and should be part of the overall assessment of the effectiveness of social, emotional, cognitive as well as school climate interventions. In particular, attendance rates, discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions, and graduation rates are all useful measures of the success of any school.
  - d. We recommend that school leaders include students, as well as families, in the process of understanding social and emotional and school climate measurement findings. We believe that students can become "action researchers" themselves and help interpret data and identify personalized and school-wide responses and interventions that are likely to be successful.

In summary, we believe, as Linda Darling-Hammond wrote, that “the survival of the human race depends at least as much on the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence as it does on the development of technical knowledge and skills.” Happily, this is not an either/or. We can and should integrate academic and the social, emotional and cognitive dimensions of healthy human development and learning and retain high standards for all of our children in both. Employers want both, communities need both, families need both, and children only learn when they get both. It is time for an integrated vision for how our schools cultivate both.

The urgency cannot be overstated. Today, too many children are living in what can accurately be described as an epidemic of stress, anxiety, depression, and addiction. Their hunger to learn, to belong, to contribute and to matter must be met by adults and educators who listen, guide, empower, and inspire. We know so much about how to unlock the dreams of our children and the time is right to equip our schools to try. Nothing less will suffice to meet the great challenges in our nation and in our world.

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