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Whole Child Policy Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to give state policymakers and education leaders a set of strategies, tools, and resources to advance whole child policy and systems change. A whole child education prioritizes the full scope of a child’s developmental needs—social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and psychological, as well as academic—to ensure that all children are able to reach their full potential. A whole child approach is built on the understanding that students’ education and life outcomes depend on their access to positive relationships inside and outside of school, a safe learning environment, and deeper learning opportunities.

The whole child approach builds on decades of research from the science of learning and development that defines the environments and experiences that children need to thrive. It also draws on the policy agenda set by the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, which brought together leaders from education, policy, research, business, and the military to make recommendations on how to ensure that students’ social, emotional, and cognitive development is centered in schools.

Shifting toward a whole child education has far-reaching implications for our education system, requiring greater collaboration to promote children’s learning, well-being, and healthy development. The Whole Child Policy Toolkit outlines how policymakers can support schools, districts, and communities to make these shifts and to meet the needs of every child efficiently, effectively, and most importantly, equitably. It provides the evidence base for high-quality whole child practices; policy strategies and actions that states can take; examples of state-level policies and initiatives; and a library of resources to help state policymakers advance policy and systems change.

The Whole Child Policy Toolkit was produced by the Learning Policy Institute with input from more than a dozen Whole Child Policy Table partners and several individual organizations and experts. This toolkit is organized into five key elements, shown in the figure and described below.

Setting a Whole Child Vision

A whole child vision is an important first step in articulating both the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students need to be successful and the ways state and local leaders can provide the resources to ensure students are able to succeed. A shared whole child vision, created by a diverse, representative set of stakeholders, is essential for communicating the need for a systemic, collaborative approach across youth-serving agencies to meeting the needs of every child. To set a whole child vision, states can:

- Convene a diverse set of stakeholders to develop a statewide whole child vision
Assess conditions of learning and development for children and youth

Establish coordinating bodies to advance the whole child vision through children and youth cabinets and strategic task forces to identify current state capacity and needs and provide guidance to support service provision

Transforming Learning Environments

For healthy learning and development to take place, students must feel safe and supported. This is more likely to happen when learning environments are structured in ways that foster strong relationships, build trust, and allow children to feel valued. To support young people and their varied needs, learning environments should also be designed to include protective factors such as health, mental health, and social service supports, as well as opportunities to extend learning and build on interests and passions. To transform learning environments, states can:

- **Support relationship-centered learning environments** that are designed to facilitate strong relationships and trust among students, staff, and families/caregivers
- **Foster culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments filled with safety and belonging**, in which all students feel valued and positive relationships can flourish
- **Adopt restorative and educative approaches to school discipline** that replace exclusionary practices with trauma-informed and healing-oriented approaches
- **Adopt integrated support systems** that use an asset-based approach to address social, emotional, academic, and physical and mental health needs; develop partnerships; and provide individualized supports that remove obstacles to learning and meet the holistic needs of students and families/caregivers
- **Provide high-quality expanded learning time** that mitigates opportunity gaps, builds upon students’ strengths, and nurtures positive relationships

Redesigning Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Accountability Systems

The U.S. education system was built on a factory model of education designed during the Industrial Revolution, in which teachers deliver instruction to passive students, content areas are siloed, and learning is primarily defined by multiple-choice test scores. This model stands in stark contrast to the growing knowledge base of how people learn: through authentic learning experiences that actively engage students, help students develop higher-order thinking skills, ask students to apply what they have learned, and treat all students as equally capable of success. To redesign curriculum, instruction, assessment, and accountability systems that meet the needs of today’s students, states can support and develop:

- **Rich learning experiences** that support the development of deeper learning skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills and social-emotional competencies; draw on culturally and linguistically responsive approaches; and include personalized learning structures
- **Authentic systems of assessments** that are culturally and linguistically responsive, provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning and development in a variety of ways, and are designed to measure growth and progress
- **Comprehensive accountability systems designed for continuous improvement** that measure students’ opportunities to learn and support a system designed to improve whole child outcomes
- **Distance and blended learning** models that are equity focused, offer personalized instruction, and take advantage of the different settings in which learning can take place

Building Adult Capacity and Expertise

Research from the science of learning and development points to important transformations in teaching practice needed to ensure that children experience the secure relationships, skillful teaching, and personalized supports that will enable healthy development and successful lives, including for those who have experienced adverse conditions. To build adult capacity and expertise to support the whole child, states can establish and support:

- **Educator preparation systems** that prepare teachers and school leaders with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to support whole child developmental needs and support students’ development of 21st-century skills
• **Proactive teacher recruitment and retention strategies** through high-retention pathways, including high-quality teacher residencies and Grow Your Own programs, service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs, strong hiring practices, and competitive compensation

• **High-quality mentoring and induction programs** that integrate whole child approaches and ensure that novice educators receive the comprehensive supports needed to remain in the profession and succeed

• **Professional development and educator evaluation and improvement systems** that support student and educator development and growth and encourage teacher collaboration and reflection

• **Strategies to improve the social, emotional, and mental health and well-being** of educators and other school staff through the creation of positive learning environments

**Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently**

To provide all students with equitable access to safe and supportive learning environments, states must ensure that resources, including money, time, staff, and staff training, are distributed efficiently and equitably. States should ensure that all students have access to adequate physical facilities, a welcoming and inclusive school environment, high-quality learning opportunities, and well-prepared teachers and school leaders. State leaders also need to reduce fragmentation and improve alignment across programs and funding streams and align school-based and community-based resources to support students’ full range of needs. To align resources efficiently and equitably, states can:

• **Adopt adequate and equitable school funding formulas** that prioritize high-need schools and support all young people in having access to the whole child opportunities they need to succeed

• **Allocate new funding across the developmental continuum** to ensure children and families are supported from birth to age 5

• **Blend and braid federal, state, and local resources** to reduce fragmentation and improve alignment across funding streams and programs

• **Leverage and align federal funds** in ways that support all young people in having access to the whole child opportunities they need to succeed

• **Invest new funding in community schools and integrated student supports** to better serve the holistic needs of children and families

• **Close the digital divide** to ensure every child has access to appropriate technology and connectivity to meet their whole child needs
What Is Whole Child Policy?

More than a century ago, Horace Mann decreed that education is the great equalizer, but our current education system has not yet created the equitable opportunities or outcomes that children and families deserve and that our democracy and society need. The reasons for this failure are both within and beyond our schools and classrooms. Our current system was designed for a different world—one that believed talent and skills are scarce and that relied on beliefs and stereotypes about students’ potential to shape the system so that only some children were deemed worthy of opportunity. These beliefs have been associated with unequal access to educational resources, curriculum, and out-of-school opportunities.

Furthermore, there has been a siloing of systems in the United States that has led to disconnected, piecemeal policymaking and inefficient use of critical funds. K–12 education has been positioned as separate from other systems that serve children and youth, including early childhood education, physical and mental health, child and family services, after-school and out-of-school time, juvenile justice, and higher education. The failure to address the full spectrum of education and child development has contributed to the inequitable outcomes we continue to see today.

To achieve the transformation we need today, education and all youth-serving systems must be willing to embrace what we know about how children learn and then develop. Whole child policy addresses each of the elements of the systems that influence children’s opportunities to learn. It builds on the knowledge established through the science of learning and development, which shows that the range of students’ academic skills and knowledge—and, ultimately, students’ potential—can be significantly influenced through exposure to learning environments that use whole child design. These designs are relationship-centered and filled with safety and belonging; provide rich learning experiences and opportunities to develop essential skills, mindsets, and habits; and ensure access to integrated support systems. Whole child design—of both schools and systems—must guide the next generation of policymaking and practice if educational outcomes are to be substantially improved.

To facilitate this transformation, this toolkit describes evidence-based practices and policies that can become the foundation for a new way of policymaking to improve outcomes for children and youth. Whole child policy principles suggest not a single pathway to systemic change but rather an approach that supports the development of the full set of skills, competencies, and mindsets that all young people need to live and thrive in their diverse communities.

Whole Child Policy Principles

When education policymaking is grounded in whole child principles, it takes the following forms:

- Policy that is grounded in the science of learning and development and supportive of students’ academic, cognitive, social and emotional, and identity development, as well as their mental and physical health and well-being

- Policy that is made collaboratively, across child-, youth-, and family-serving agencies and institutions, informed by stakeholders, and guided by a shared whole child vision

- Policy in which all policymakers and stakeholders in child-, youth-, and family-serving systems hold collective responsibility for how policy affects children and youth; this includes education (early childhood to young adulthood), health and human services, juvenile justice, youth development, child welfare, housing/homelessness, and workforce initiatives
• Policy that **creates the enabling conditions for and removes barriers to** successful implementation of rich, developmentally appropriate educational experiences within schools, districts, and communities

• Funding and resources that are **distributed efficiently and are equitably based on student need**

• From the state level down to the classroom, policy that uses **data for continuous systemic improvement**—to detect gaps in resource allocation, assess areas of strength and areas for growth, and inform plans for continuous improvement

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**Creating Systems Change**

Developing and sustaining whole child education grounded in the science of learning and development requires both a new policy agenda and comprehensive systems change. To give every student the opportunity to thrive, U.S. education systems must be informed by the growing body of research on how children learn and develop. The advancement and sustainability of whole child education will require simultaneous and reinforcing work streams that address how and what policy gets made, how schools and other learning spaces are designed, and how practitioners are prepared and supported.

The **Whole Child Policy Toolkit** aims to tackle one piece of this work by supporting states in adopting a whole child policy approach. Developed by the Learning Policy Institute with our **Whole Child Policy Table** partners, the toolkit translates principles from the science of learning and development into a framework for policymakers to build the state-level conditions for whole child school design to take hold.

The toolkit builds upon two playbooks, **Design Principles for Schools** and **Design Principles for Community-Based Settings**, that provide a framework to guide the transformation of k–12 and community-based learning settings and illustrate how practitioners can implement practices and structures that support whole child learning and development. Co-created by the Learning Policy Institute, Turnaround for Children, and the Forum for Youth Investment, the **Design Principles** playbooks leverage the deep knowledge and expertise of the educational ecosystem, including educators, counselors, curriculum and tool developers, and community-based organizations to translate key findings from the science of learning and development into concrete practices and structures that can guide the transformation of schools, districts, and youth-serving organizations.

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**Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design**

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Implementing a whole child approach requires educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to do so. This will require both an examination of the “what” of practitioner preparation and development—the content that educators and leaders need to learn about children’s development—and the “how”—the strategies that practitioners must develop to produce deep understanding; useful skills; and the capacity to reflect, learn, and continue to improve. One collaborative effort—the Educator Preparation Laboratory (EdPrepLab)—is currently underway to build the capacity of preparation programs to strengthen educator preparation in the United States. This initiative, led by the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street College, brings together a growing network of pioneering preparation programs to support them in documenting, sharing, and strengthening their practices. EdPrepLab also recognizes the importance of working with preparation institutions and state agencies to incorporate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions educators need into the expectations, designs, and accountability standards for educator licensing and accreditation. The Learning Policy Institute, in partnership with EdPrepLab institutions, is developing and refining design principles based on the science of learning and development for educator preparation programs, which will set a vision for the redesign of pre-service and in-service preparation and create a collaborative network of practitioners working on implementing the principles.

**Achieving Systems Change**

To achieve the transformation toward whole child design, education systems—from policy to practice—must be willing to rethink and rebuild those systems around what we know about how children learn and develop. And what we know is this: Students’ academic success—and, ultimately, their potential as human beings—can be significantly influenced by learning environments that use whole child design. These learning environments are safe, inclusive, and relationship-centered, and they provide students with rich learning experiences that help them build the skills, knowledge, and mindsets to thrive in school and life. Whole child learning environments are foundational to supporting the learning and development of all young people. The policy strategies and actions found in this toolkit can help transform education systems and give schools, districts, and communities the tools and resources they need to ensure every child has access to learning environments that meet their learning and developmental needs.
Setting a Whole Child Vision

Why States Need to Set a Whole Child Vision

Improving educational and life outcomes for young people must be guided by a clear, coherent vision that articulates the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students need to be successful and how state and local leaders will provide the resources to ensure students are able to succeed. A shared whole child vision, created by a diverse, representative set of stakeholders, is essential for communicating the need for a systemic, collaborative approach to meeting the needs of every child.

A whole child vision can also deter states from advancing policy affecting children and youth in a piecemeal manner. When various agencies and educational entities work separately, this can lead to inefficiencies, redundancies, and at worst, policies that directly contradict one another. In contrast, a shared vision that has broad stakeholder buy-in provides clear direction for state policymakers in developing and adopting legislation, budgets, guidance, and regulations and in analyzing existing policies and practices for alignment with the vision. A clear, coherent vision sets a precedent for cross-agency coordination, streamlining of services, and the creation of shared learning opportunities to more effectively support children and youth.

A statewide whole child vision, tied to a statewide data system that measures both system inputs (e.g., funding, access to pre-k, high-quality academic curricula and supports, effective teaching, and expanded learning opportunities) and youth outcomes, can also provide a necessary tool for policymakers to assess existing systemic inequities and develop plans to erase them.

To set a whole child vision, states can do the following:

1. **Convene a diverse set of stakeholders** to develop a statewide whole child vision
2. **Assess conditions for learning and development** for children and youth
3. **Establish coordinating bodies to advance the whole child vision** through children and youth cabinets and strategic task forces to identify current state capacity and needs and provide guidance to support service provision

**POLICY STRATEGY 1**

**Convene a Diverse Set of Stakeholders to Develop a Statewide Whole Child Vision**

The core purpose of setting a shared whole child vision is to broaden the definition of both student and system success and establish a foundation for policy and practice in the state. The vision should (1) articulate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions young people need and (2) create a roadmap for distributing resources and support to ensure all young people can reach their full potential. A shared whole child vision communicates to all stakeholders the need for a comprehensive and collaborative approach to serving young people adequately and equitably.

A statewide whole child vision can also signal to districts and schools the importance of focusing on the whole child in their priorities and can empower communities to develop learning experiences and opportunities that will help young people meet science-backed developmental goals. At the local level, many school districts and individual schools may already have a mission statement that articulates a definition for student success and a high-level vision for establishing a learning environment to support students in achieving it. States can learn from these locally crafted statements and engage stakeholders in developing a statewide whole child vision that is grounded in the local context.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can develop and set a whole child vision for the state by:

1. **Convening and engaging stakeholders across the youth-serving ecosystem to develop a shared whole child vision.** State leaders such as governors or chief state school
officers can convene stakeholders across agencies and youth-serving organizations. Convenings can take the form of listening tours, surveys, or meetings to gather input from stakeholders. These stakeholders should include:

- State officials from education, health, housing, juvenile justice, social services, and other agencies working with young people
- Legislators
- State board of education members
- Tribal agencies
- Community leaders
- After-school and youth development professionals
- Child care providers
- Institutions of higher education
- Superintendents, principals, teachers, students, and families and caregivers

States should prioritize including historically marginalized communities to ensure their perspectives are part of the decision-making process.

2. *Developing a whole child vision for learning and development.* The vision or strategic plan should be grounded in the science of learning and development and provide a roadmap to supporting young people from birth to adulthood, including elements of:

- Academic development
- Cognitive development
- Social-emotional development
- Identity development
- Ethical and moral development
- Mental health
- Physical health

States can develop statewide developmental goals and competencies for children as part of the vision that clearly lay out expected student outcomes. Stakeholders might consider the orientations, skills, habits, and mindsets of a successful 24-year-old in their state or what a successful high school graduate should know and be able to do. Convened stakeholders can also consider the creation of a strategic plan for distributing resources, developing partnerships, and evaluating progress toward achieving the vision.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success** (Learning Policy Institute, Report)
  https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/educating-whole-child-report

- **From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope: Recommendations From the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development** (National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, Report)
  http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation/

- **Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC)** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Framework)
  https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc/index.htm

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
POLICY STRATEGY 2

Assess Conditions for Learning and Development for Children and Youth

A statewide whole child vision can provide a roadmap for assessing the learning and developmental conditions of children and youth and can be a tool for ensuring adequate and equitable resource distribution. Once a needs assessment has been conducted, states can create a plan of action to track and evaluate progress toward meeting identified needs and achieving the vision. The plan can establish roles and responsibilities for state agencies and stakeholder organizations; steps for implementing the vision; and timelines and processes for publicly reporting progress.

States can also invest in a statewide data system that compiles data on children’s well-being and opportunities to learn. Many states have statewide longitudinal data systems in place, but these systems largely focus on student performance outputs (e.g., standardized test scores, graduation rates, college enrollment and retention, employment). While these data are important, data systems should also include a more holistic set of indicators, including system inputs and student opportunities, to ensure all children are supported from birth through adulthood.

To accomplish this, states may need to convene permanent or short-term governing bodies, such as a child and youth cabinet or strategic task forces (see Policy Strategy 3: Establish Coordinating Bodies to Advance the Whole Child Vision) and invest in coaching and other supports for state policymakers, educators, and youth-serving professionals on data collection, analysis, and use for continuous improvement.

POLICY ACTIONS

States can inventory existing policies and practices for alignment with the whole child vision by:

1. **Conducting a needs assessment to identify current conditions for children and youth and to determine capacity to provide needed resources and services**. A needs assessment provides a systemic approach to identifying the needs of children and youth across the state and evaluating state and local capacity for meeting those needs. For the needs assessment, states can collect demographic and publicly available data, conduct interviews and focus groups to collect stakeholder input, and use targeted and focused data collection methods, including surveys and other measurement tools.

2. **Creating an action plan to ensure the whole child vision gets realized**. States can task convened stakeholders to create a strategic action plan for meeting the vision, including roles and responsibilities, implementation guidance, timelines, and communication plans for reporting progress. States can also consider establishing indicators of short- and long-term goals that measure progress toward meeting children’s needs and assessing impact on young people’s opportunities and outcomes.

3. **Establishing and investing in a statewide data system that spans cradle to career, including indicators of engagement and opportunities to learn**, such as measures of:
   - School climate and culture, such as discipline and chronic absenteeism data, and access to rich learning experiences and opportunities inside and outside the traditional school day
   - Equitable access to certified and experienced educators and other measures of educator quality
   - Access to technology and virtual learning opportunities
   - Measures of fiscal equity that can reveal any disparities in access by race, gender, English learner and special education status, and other student characteristics (See Redesigning Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Accountability Systems for more on opportunity-to-learn indicators.)

States could develop data collection procedures that provide unified reporting on states’ early childhood education
availability and quality, as well as the compensation and qualifications of the workforce, and integrate multiple early childhood data systems with each other and with k–12 data. Further, states should be transparent and engage youth, families, and communities in developing data systems, collection, analysis, and use to ensure trust in data systems across stakeholders.

4. **Providing information, time, coaching, and other support for educators, other youth-serving professionals, and state agency staff on data collection, analysis, and use.** This may include using needs assessment data to identify and align interventions for both individual student and schoolwide needs. In addition, state agencies may need to coordinate to find time for recurring check-ins to validate data and share best practices.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **50-State Comparison: Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems** (Education Commission of the States, State Scan)  
  https://www.ecs.org/state-longitudinal-data-systems/

- **Data Quality Campaign’s Data Use Resources** (Data Quality Campaign, Webpage)  
  https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resources/

- **Making ESSA’s Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap** (Learning Policy Institute, Report)  
  https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/essa-equity-promise-report

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

**POLICY STRATEGY 3**

**Establish Coordinating Bodies to Advance the Whole Child Vision**

With various agencies and institutions involved in setting policy that affects children and youth and their families and caregivers, it is far too easy for miscommunication, conflicting policies, and inefficient service provision to be the norm. For example, the early childhood education (ECE) “system” is made up of a patchwork of programs in most states, with several federal and state agencies overseeing these programs. (See Figure 1.1.) The complexity at the federal level is passed down to state administrators who often lack the capacity or authority to untangle the web of funding and requirements. This is further complicated by state programs that have their own income eligibility, quality standards, and monitoring. The incoherence of this fragmented system inhibits efforts to address ECE needs, access, and quality at the federal, state, and local levels. (See **Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently** for more information on aligning ECE programs.) This fragmentation also causes disconnects in all youth-serving systems—k–12, out-of-school time, health, and others—that have led to wasteful spending and missed opportunities to meet the needs of children and youth more adequately.
Thus, a foundational piece of effectively carrying forward the shared whole child vision at all levels of leadership is to take a coordinated and collaborative approach to decision-making and service provision. One means by which state leaders can do this is to use their convening power to bring diverse stakeholders together to address necessary changes through permanent bodies, such as a state children and youth cabinet. Children and youth cabinets, often brought together by the governor, bring together heads of government agencies (e.g., education, health and human services, housing, child welfare, transportation, labor, juvenile justice, tribal) with the goal of facilitating a comprehensive approach to serving children and youth, strengthening partnerships, and assessing and improving overall coordination and efficiency across state and local government agencies. (See Figure 1.2.) A Forum for Youth Investment report on the need for big-picture structural changes lays out several attributes of creating a well-structured and staffed children’s cabinet:

- The opportunity to promote and institutionalize a common vision
- The capacity to engage all stakeholders
- The capacity to assume shared accountability
- The authority to align policies and resources; increase public will and demand; engage young people and their families; and improve the quality, quantity, and coordination of service delivery

States can also encourage community-focused local children’s cabinets to improve local leadership coordination and service provision.
POLICY ACTIONS

States can establish coordinating bodies to advance the whole child vision by:

1. Convening leadership across a range of children, youth, and family issues. This may include leaders from health and human services, economic development, education, higher education, transportation, housing, child welfare, juvenile justice and corrections, labor, tribal nations, and other relevant agencies to identify and advance ways to better serve young people holistically. For example, the state can do the following:
   - Create a permanent children and youth cabinet that meets regularly and is
staffed by at least one fully dedicated full-time equivalent employee

- Convene a stakeholder task force to evaluate gaps in cross-sector service provision
- Create standing advisory bodies—including youth councils—to offer ongoing support and problem-solving
- Issue guidance on ways state and local agencies can coordinate and streamline services
- Identify and invest in a state-level governing body, if needed, with the authority and expertise to coordinate children and youth programs, including programs for children from birth through school age
- Establish cross-agency data sharing to better identify and meet child, youth, and family needs equitably
- Develop cross-agency initiatives and budget proposals to support alignment

States should prioritize including youth and family voices in these governmental bodies to ensure their perspectives are part of the decision-making process.

2. **Convening short-term task forces to study and make recommendations on areas of need.** In addition to permanent state structures, the state can also convene diverse stakeholder organizations and agencies to address targeted areas of need and develop and strengthen targeted elements of a high-quality, equitable education system. Stakeholders might include early childhood educators, expanded learning providers, health and mental health providers, higher education institutions, and research institutions. For example, as described in the state examples, Oklahoma created a task force on trauma-informed care, while North Dakota created one on behavioral health.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **2020 State Policy Survey: Child & Youth Policy Coordinating Bodies in the United States** (The Forum for Youth Investment, Report)

- **Building Partnerships in Support of Where, When, & How Learning Happens** (National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, Brief)

- **Setting the Right Conditions for Learning: How State Leaders and Partners Can Work Together to Meet the Comprehensive Needs of Students** (Council of Chief State School Officers, Report)
  [https://ccsso.org/resource-library/setting-right-conditions-learning-how-state-leaders-and-partners-can-work-together](https://ccsso.org/resource-library/setting-right-conditions-learning-how-state-leaders-and-partners-can-work-together)

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
Transforming Learning Environments

Why States Need to Transform Learning Environments

The science of learning and development emphasizes the need for whole child learning environments that foster positive developmental relationships between students, educators, and families and caregivers. However, our current education system often minimizes opportunities to build and maintain meaningful relationships and fails to provide personalized supports that enable students to learn, cope, and become resilient. This depersonalized approach is especially damaging to students who may be experiencing the effects of poverty, trauma, discrimination, and racism. Strong relationships and restorative practices are ways to address experiences that may interfere with learning, undermine connections, and impede opportunities to grow and develop the skills and competencies young people need to succeed in school and life.

For healthy learning and development to take place, students must feel safe and supported across all domains of development — academic, cognitive, social-emotional, ethical, identity, and physical and mental health. This is more likely to happen when learning environments are structured in ways that support the whole child and are responsive to students’ strengths and needs.

To accomplish this, states can do the following:

**POLICY STRATEGY 1**

**Support Relationship-Centered Learning Environments**

Research shows that relationship-centered learning environments must attend to (1) personalizing relationships with students, (2) supporting relationships among staff, and (3) building relationships with families and communities. As policymakers seek to support schools in improving learning environments, they must focus on all three to ensure the greatest impact.

**Personalizing relationships with students**

Relationships are essential to healthy learning and development. Research has found that a stable relationship with at least one caring adult can mediate the effects of even serious adversity. Positive teacher–student and other adult–student relationships contribute to many aspects of learning and development, including better performance and engagement and greater social competence and willingness to take on challenges. All students can benefit from nurturing relationships with teachers and other adults, which can increase student learning and support their development and wellness, especially when these relationships are culturally sensitive and responsive.
The Power of Relationships in Schools

School structures and practices can support the development of nurturing relationships between students and teachers as well as other school staff. Structures and practices that allow for consistency in relationships and routines and that reduce anxiety and support development include:

- **Block scheduling**, which allows more time for learning and smaller pupil loads for teachers
- **Small school size and small learning communities**
- **Looping**, which allows teachers to stay with students for more than one year
- **Longer grade spans** (i.e., k–8 or 6–12) that reduce the number of school-to-school transitions
- **Advisory systems** that ensure each child and family will be well known and supported in secondary schools
- **Preschool transition plans** that help kindergarten teachers support each learner as soon as they enter kindergarten

Research has found that structures and practices such as these, which allow teachers to build deeper and more consistent relationships with a small group of students, can have **significant positive effects** on student outcomes. For example, small schools or small learning communities with **personalized structures**, such as advisory systems or looping with the same teachers over 2 years or more, have been found to improve student achievement, attachment, attitudes toward school, behavior, motivation, and graduation rates.

**Supporting relationships among staff**

A positive and supportive staff culture is the foundation of a school climate that enables positive developmental relationships with students. Student culture follows staff culture. **Research** on teacher effectiveness shows that teachers become **more effective** over time in collegial settings in which they have opportunities to collaborate with and learn from one another. School leaders need to prioritize structures and practices that build a healthy professional learning community for staff—supporting staff to strengthen personal relationships and collaborate effectively—and to continue their own professional and personal growth. It also requires ongoing efforts to be sure everyone on the staff feels respected, heard, and valued. Structures that help cultivate positive relationships among school staff include staff collaboration within and across disciplines, such as grade-level or subject-matter teams; dedicated time for professional learning; and opportunities to participate in shared decision-making with school leaders. (See **Building Adult Capacity and Expertise** for more information on creating and maintaining professional and collaborative relationship-centered learning environments.)
Building relationships with families and caregivers

Fostering positive, trusting relationships between school staff and families and caregivers is another critical component of student success and sustaining change and improvement. Building this kind of trust requires skillful school leaders and staff who actively listen to concerns, avoid arbitrary actions, and nurture authentic parent and family engagement and partnerships to promote student growth.

Schools that succeed in engaging families embrace a philosophy of partnership in which power and responsibility are shared. (See Figure 2.1.) It is important to recognize that when trust has been violated in a community—for instance, as a result of racial injustices or incidents of police violence—it must be rebuilt through a proactive, authentic process that includes extensive listening, relationship-building, and demonstrations that school staff are trustworthy.

Figure 2.1
The Dual Capacity–Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships (Version 2)

![The Dual Capacity–Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships (Version 2)](image)


Schools can cultivate partnerships and relational trust with families and caregivers by using culturally and linguistically responsive approaches to relationship-building with families and caregivers as part of the core approach to education. These strategies may include planning teacher time for virtual or in-person home visits; teacher–parent–student conferences to learn from parents about their children; meetings and school events flexibly scheduled around parents’ availability; and culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach to families, including regular communication through positive phone calls, emails, and text messages.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can support districts and schools in redesigning learning environments in ways that prioritize strong, stable relationships between students, staff, and families and caregivers by:

1. Rethinking policies and providing guidance on removing impediments to and supports for relationship-centered school designs, including staffing structures. States can do the following:
   - Encourage the redesign of schools by rethinking staffing designs and ratios embedded in state and local policies
   - Support districts in adopting and implementing flexible master scheduling, which can allow for the creation of allocated and consistent relationship-centered structures, including block scheduling and advisory periods
   - Provide flexibility for local leaders to adopt new approaches to staffing that favor personalization across boundaries of
grade levels, departments, and other traditional organizing features that can fragment schools

This may also include providing guidance on school designs that minimize student transitions between pre-k, elementary, middle, and high school and between classes in ways that support the development of consistent, stable relationships. Such designs may include longer grade spans that reduce the number of school-to-school transitions, looping, and preschool transition plans.

2. **Providing training, time, support, and funding for consistent communication between school and home.** States can provide—or support districts and schools in providing—guidance and professional development for effectively and flexibly conducting conferences with students, teachers, and families and caregivers. For example, when outreach is scheduled around families’ and caregivers’ availability, they are more likely to become involved in school activities. This may happen through regular check-ins with culturally and linguistically responsive communication via positive phone calls, emails, and text messages. State agencies can also provide translation services and provide templates in various languages for commonly used documents.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- [How the Science of Learning and Development Can Transform Education](https://www.soldalliance.org/what-weve-learned) (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, Brief)

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

**POLICY STRATEGY 2**

**Foster Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments**

In addition to creating consistent, caring learning environments, it takes a set of proactive efforts to ensure that these environments are inclusive and culturally affirming for all students. **Transforming learning environments** so that every child feels safe and welcome requires establishing identity-safe, culturally affirming environments; trauma-informed and healing-oriented supports; and measures of school climate to guide improvement efforts.

**Identity-safe, culturally affirming environments**

Educators can foster inclusion by directly addressing stereotype threats and creating identity-safe, culturally affirming learning environments. Both inside and outside of school, students often receive messages that they are less valued or less capable as a function of their race, ethnicity, family income, language background, immigration status, dis/ability status, gender, sexual orientation, or other status. When those views are reinforced and internalized, they can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Stereotype threat, “a type of social identity threat that occurs when one fears being judged in terms of a group-based stereotype,” has been found to induce the body’s stress response, leading to impaired performance on school tasks and tests that does not reflect students’ actual capacities.
Video 2.2
Stereotype Threat: A Conversation With Claude Steele

[Image]

Video URL: https://youtu.be/failylROnrY

When adults appreciate and understand students’ individual experiences, assets, needs, and backgrounds, they can support students in ways that counteract societal stereotypes that may undermine students’ confidence. Such knowledge of students and respect for their backgrounds and their societal stressors can help teachers design instruction in ways that build their confidence and interrupt the negative effects of discrimination.

Identity-safe learning environments, in which all students feel seen and valued, promote student achievement and attachment to schools. These kinds of learning experiences enable students to feel a strong sense of safety, belonging, and purpose, which in turn increases their ability to learn and engage with instructional content. Research has found that children are better able to learn and take risks when they feel both physically safe, with consistent routines and order, and emotionally and identity safe, knowing that they and their cultures are a valued part of the community. When adults have the cultural competence to respond affirmatively to negative narratives about the capabilities of students, they are better able to create an environment that enables all students to thrive.

Elements of Identity-Safe Classrooms

Identity-safe classrooms promote student achievement and attachments to school. The elements of such classrooms include:

- Teaching that promotes understanding, student voice, student responsibility for and belonging to the classroom community, and cooperation in learning and classroom tasks
- Cultivating diversity as a resource for teaching through regular use of diverse materials, ideas, and teaching activities, along with high expectations for all students
- Classroom relationships based on trusting, encouraging interactions between the teacher and each student and the creation of positive relationships among the students
- Caring, orderly, purposeful classroom environments in which social skills are proactively taught and practiced to help students respect and care for one another in an emotionally and physically safe classroom so each student feels attached to the others


If students are to feel safe and valued, they must be understood and respected by educators as well as other adults in their learning communities. Educators play a critical role in student learning through their perceptions about their students and feedback they
provide. However, evidence suggests that educators often inaccurately characterize student ability and behavior based on race and ethnicity or other characteristics. When educators perceive students as less capable based on their identities, this can affect their ability to perform academically. Educators and other adults must have opportunities to develop the skills and awareness necessary to create and maintain inclusive learning communities in which students are not subjected to social-identity or stereotype threats or misperceptions about their abilities and behaviors. (See Building Adult Capacity and Expertise for more information on creating identity-safe classrooms and culturally responsive pedagogy.)

**Trauma-informed and healing-oriented supports**

More than two thirds of U.S. children under the age of 16 experience at least one traumatic event, including abuse or neglect, hunger, homelessness, witnessing domestic violence, the sudden death of a loved one, or community or school violence. Trauma and adversity can lead to chronic stress, which damages the chemical and physical structures of a child’s developing brain and can lead to problems with attention, concentration, memory, and creativity. Children experiencing trauma are also more likely to be easily distracted, have trouble calming themselves, and become disengaged from school. Exposure to trauma as a child can also lead to negative long-term physical and mental health outcomes.

Becoming a trauma-informed and healing-oriented school involves providing administrators, educators, and other school personnel with the knowledge and preparation to recognize and respond to those impacted by traumatic stress within the school community and to promote wellness for all students. (See Building Adult Capacity and Expertise for more information.)

Although understanding the impact of trauma on learning is critical for practitioners, a focus on trauma alone may be incomplete. For example, understandings of trauma-informed practice can focus attention on the individual experience, obscuring the fact that collective trauma can be held in marginalized communities. Attention to individual trauma can also provide little insight or urgency into addressing root causes of trauma in communities that are disproportionately affected by negative economic, racial, and environmental conditions. Finally, a focus on trauma alone runs the risk of focusing on trauma intervention and treatment rather than fostering the overall well-being of the individual who has experienced adversity and harm.

Trauma- and healing-informed schools implement practices that promote wellness for all students, in addition to targeted supports for students dealing with trauma and other challenges, as part of their school support systems. (See Policy Strategy 4: Establish Integrated Support Systems for more information.)

**Measures of school climate to guide improvement efforts**

A positive school climate supports students’ growth across all domains of development while reducing the stress and anxiety that create biological impediments to learning. Such an environment takes a whole child approach to education, seeking to address the distinctive strengths, needs, and interests of students as they engage in learning. For example, a review of school climate studies found that a positive school climate can reduce the negative effects of poverty on academic achievement. Researchers found that the most important components of school climate that contributed to student achievement were associated with relationships between students and teachers, including aspects such as warmth, acceptance, and teacher support.

To create and maintain environments filled with safety and belonging, it is important to understand how students, educators, and families and caregivers experience the school environment. One way to accomplish this is through school climate surveys, which can signal that school climate is a priority, highlight important school practices that are often overlooked or are experienced differently by some students, and identify areas of growth and progress. The National School Climate Center outlines 14 dimensions that cover all aspects of the school environment, ranging from physical and emotional safety and the physical maintenance of the school building and grounds to relationships, engagement, and a sense of belonging.

**Safe and healthy school buildings**

Research has shown that the condition of a school building significantly impacts students’ physical and mental health and educational achievement. However, many of the nation’s approximately 90,000 public school buildings not only are detrimental to student learning but also are bad for students’ physical and mental health. A 2014 study from the National Center for Education Statistics found that the average age of a public school building was 44 years. This study also found that nearly one quarter of public school buildings were in either poor or fair condition. These building issues disproportionately impact schools in low-wealth communities. A study that looked at school facility funding between 1995 and 2004 found that school districts in high-wealth communities spent 178% more per pupil on facilities than districts in very low-wealth communities.
The marked difference in education spending between high- and low-wealth communities has to do with the source of capital funding. A 2021 study found that the federal government provides only 1% of funding for school facilities and that, on average, states supply 22% of the funding. On average, local school districts are responsible for 77% of the financing of school facilities. However, between fiscal years 2009 and 2019, 11 states (Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin) provided no state funds for public school facilities. Local funding for school facilities comes almost exclusively from property tax levies.

Modern educational facilities and materials are prerequisites to ensure students and teachers can engage in meaningful learning. Facility quality has been linked to the health of students and school-based personnel, student achievement, teacher performance, and educator satisfaction. Specifically, exposures to mold, poor ventilation, uncomfortable temperatures, inadequate lighting, overcrowding, and excessive noise can negatively impact the health of children and adults in schools. In contrast, new, rebuilt, or renovated schools can positively influence student test scores, student attendance, and teacher performance. Educational facilities thus clearly play a major role in creating safe, healthy, and comfortable learning environments for students and school staff.

Students are also at risk of exposure to lead in school drinking water, which research shows can cause serious irreversible health issues for children, even at very low levels. A 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) nationally generalized survey found that just 43% of school districts, serving 55 million students, tested their drinking water, and 37% of these districts found elevated levels of lead. The Environmental Protection Agency provides guidance and resources on testing and eliminating lead in school drinking water; yet no federal law requires schools to test their drinking water for lead, and only 12 states and the District of Columbia require it for their schools.

It is difficult to put an exact number on how much it would cost to bring all our public schools up to good working condition, but multiple estimates suggest the cost is upward of $200 billion. A 2020 GAO study found that 54% of “public school districts need to update or replace multiple building systems or features in their schools.” The U.S. Department of Education estimated in 2014 that the cost of bringing all public school facilities into good condition was approximately $197 billion. Adjusted for inflation, the cost would come to $220 billion in today’s dollars. Another national study estimates that annual spending on public school facilities needs to increase by $46 billion, or about $900 per student, to meet current needs. Without additional federal or state funding, it will not be possible for our public schools, especially those in low-wealth communities, to meet this funding need.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can support districts and schools in creating safe and inclusive environments by:

1. **Promoting the use of evidence-based, data-driven approaches to improve school climate and foster strong relationships, community, and well-being.** Such approaches include adopting school climate surveys to evaluate how students, educators, and families and caregivers experience the school environment and then including that school climate survey data in state accountability plans for improvement purposes. States can also conduct assets and needs assessments to identify appropriate supports (e.g., counselors, social workers, school psychologists, social-emotional programs, trauma-informed practices) for districts and schools as well as the barriers they face in responding to the unique needs of students, educators, and families and caregivers.

2. **Providing educators with training and professional development opportunities on how to create safe and inclusive learning environments for all students.** Learning opportunities for educators may focus on:
   - Cultivating communities of belonging in schools and classrooms
   - Delivering culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy
   - Implementing identity-safe school and classroom guidance
   - Using climate survey data to improve teaching and learning, including how to analyze data by race, gender, disability, native language, and other status to identify opportunities to understand trends and respond to how different student groups may be differently experiencing elements of school climate

3. **Dedicating funding, developing and enforcing standards, and reducing disparities between high-wealth and low-wealth communities to build, renovate, and maintain educational facilities and classrooms that are conducive to learning.** States’ standards should ensure that every student learns in physically and environmentally safe classrooms and in healthy and sanitary conditions. For example, lighting, temperature, acoustics, air quality, space, and environmental factors may be
considered. States may need to update heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems; repair leaky roofs; fix broken windows; reduce excessive noise; remove mold or other allergens; build additional instructional spaces; and employ trained staff to ensure regular building inspections and maintenance. States can also set strict water quality standards for schools, require the ongoing testing of school drinking water, and invest in water filters and other measures to eliminate contaminants in school drinking water. States may also maintain the quality of educational infrastructure through codes, policies, and regulations that specify the roles and responsibilities of states, districts, and schools.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- **Gauging School Climate** (National Association of State Boards of Education, Journal)
  https://www.nasbe.org/gauging-school-climate/

- **Measuring School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning and Development: A Navigation Guide for States and Districts** (EducationCounsel; Council of Chief State School Officers, Guide)

- **School and Classroom Climate Measures: Considerations for Use by State and Local Education Leaders** (RAND Corporation, Report)
  https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4259.html

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

POLICY STRATEGY 3

**Adopt Restorative Approaches to Discipline**

Many states and school districts have adopted zero-tolerance policies, an approach that allows a student to be temporarily or permanently removed from school for a number of discipline issues, from serious, violent behavior to minor dress code infractions. Zero-tolerance policies have led to high rates of suspension and expulsion, which have disproportionately excluded students of color and students with disabilities from schools. Evidence shows that this is due largely not to worse behavior by these student groups but to harsher treatments for minor offenses, such as tardiness, talking in class, and other nonviolent behavior.

Disproportionalities in suspension and expulsion rates between students of color and their white peers appear as early as preschool and continue throughout k–12. These punitive, exclusionary punishments are particularly inflicted on Black youth, who often receive harsher punishments for minor offenses and are more than twice as likely as white students to receive a referral to law enforcement or be subject to a school-related arrest. Research shows that exclusionary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, are ineffective at improving outcomes for students and improving school climate and promote disengaged behaviors, such as truancy, chronic absenteeism, and antisocial behavior, which exacerbate a widening achievement gap.

Students with disabilities are also more likely to face harsh disciplinary practices. According to the 2017–18 Civil Rights Data Collection, 80% of students who were subjected to physical restraint were students with disabilities. Additionally, 77% of students who were subjected to seclusion were students with disabilities. These practices are often overused or misused and can lead to physical injuries and psychological trauma for students and teachers and, therefore, should be replaced with less harmful, inclusionary practices.
Unfortunately, resource inequities have led to many students being more likely to attend a school with police officers but no school counselors or mental health professionals. This is despite research that indicates that a punitive environment undermines learning by increasing anxiety and stress, which drains energy available to address classroom tasks; by limiting students’ abilities to meaningfully engage with peers and adults; and by degrading the sense of community in a school.

To mitigate these effects, exclusionary practices should be replaced with evidence-based restorative approaches that recognize students’ behaviors as a demonstration of developmental need or trauma and that provide tools for educators and students to proactively cope with behavioral issues. (See Figure 2.2.) Restorative approaches are “processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing.” Restorative practices are implemented in classrooms through universal interventions, such as daily class meetings, community building circles, and conflict resolution strategies, which are also part of many social and emotional learning programs.

A restorative approach deals with conflict by identifying or naming the wrongdoing, repairing the harm, and restoring relationships. As a result, this approach is built on strong relationships and relational trust, with systems for students to reflect on mistakes, repair damage to the community, and get counseling when needed. Creating an environment in which students learn to be responsible and are given the opportunity for agency and contribution can transform social, emotional, and academic behaviors and outcomes.

Figure 2.2
What Are Restorative Practices?

Such approaches include culturally responsive social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, which help students build competencies and skills to proactively handle conflict and frustration, and educative and restorative practices, which support the creation of responsive learning environments. These restorative approaches are centered on strong relationships and focus on skills such as self-reflection, communication, community-building, and making amends. It is important to note, however, that SEL programming must be culturally affirming, not another form of policing black and brown students. This often happens when SEL is used as a mechanism for schools to regulate student behavior to conform to cultural and gender norms and values instead of encouraging students to exercise agency and interrogate systems of oppression.

POLICY ACTIONS
States can adopt and invest in inclusive, restorative, and educative approaches to school discipline practice and policy by:

1. **Replacing zero-tolerance policies and the use of suspensions and expulsions for low-level offenses with evidence-based restorative approaches that make schools safer for all students.** Exclusionary policies, including in- and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and restraint and seclusion practices, may start in early childhood and continue through secondary school. States can reduce the use of these exclusionary policies and practices by, for example, limiting or banning zero-tolerance policies, particularly for young children; requiring schools to consider multiple factors before suspending or expelling a student, including age, discipline history, disability status, seriousness of the violation, and whether other interventions or restorative practices should be used; and including suspension and expulsion rates as an indicator in school accountability and improvement systems. States can also provide guidance and funding for implementing evidence-based approaches that support young people in learning key skills and developing responsibility for themselves and their communities (e.g., SEL programs, restorative practices). States can also provide guidance and support to schools and districts to eliminate discriminatory dress code policies, “willful defiance,” and other minor infractions that discriminate against marginalized student groups.

2. **Investing in critical mental and behavioral health services.** States can invest funding into mental health services, social-emotional supports, staff preparation and training in restorative justice practices, and needed social services (e.g., counselors, social workers, school psychologists, mentors) and can provide guidance to schools and districts to do the same.

3. **Providing training on restorative practices for all school staff and others dealing with youth to reduce disciplinary disparities.** In addition to school staff, training should be provided to school resource officers (SROs), after-school and out-of-school program staff, and others working directly with young people. Such trainings may include approaches that help staff work with students by focusing on their strengths and individual capacities and connecting them with positive opportunities in the community. For schools and districts employing SROs, states can also establish standards for the appropriate use of SROs as well as criteria for hiring, training, and continuously evaluating their performance and role.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **Advancing School Discipline Reform** (National Association of State Boards of Education, Report)
  https://www.nasbe.org/advancing-school-discipline-reform/

- **A Restorative Approach for Equitable Education** (Learning Policy Institute, Brief)
  https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/wce-restorative-approach-equitable-education-brief

- **School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies From the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System** (Council of State Governments Justice Center, Report)
  https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/school-discipline/

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

**POLICY STRATEGY 4**

**Establish Integrated Support Systems**
Schools must also be prepared to address the unique strengths as well as the needs of young people that may create barriers to learning and development by connecting students and their families and caregivers to services that promote holistic development. These barriers may be the result of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as physical or mental illness, abuse, neglect, food or housing insecurity, exposure to violence, divorce, loss of a parent, or other difficulties. Each year, nearly half of all U.S. children experience at least one ACE. Black and Latino/a children are disproportionately exposed to traumatic stressors. Without protective factors in place, ACEs can negatively affect children’s ability to concentrate, think creatively, and remain engaged. Ultimately, ACEs can have long-term impacts on children’s health and educational outcomes. Despite the significant numbers of students dealing with toxic and often chronic stress, schools across the nation remain dramatically understaffed with counselors and other support staff. To address these issues, schools must be supported in taking a systemwide and personalized approach to identify and address each student’s well-being and determine what additional supports are needed for the student and family.

Several models have emerged to provide integrated student services, which link children and families and caregivers to a range of academic, health, and social services at the school site. Research has highlighted that integrated systems of support (ISS) can improve student achievement across several indicators, such as academic achievement and attendance. For example, a comprehensive review of ISS models found that these models offer a promising approach to support student achievement and highlighted common components of these approaches. These include needs assessments, coordination of supports, integration of supports within schools, community partnerships, and data tracking.

### Meeting Students’ Mental Health Needs

Research shows that good mental health is key to the success of children and adolescents in school and life. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness but also the promotion of overall wellness; social, emotional, and behavioral health; and the ability to cope with life’s challenges. Left unaddressed, mental health problems can lead to costly negative outcomes, including academic and behavioral issues, disengaging and dropping out, and delinquency.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2013 that roughly 1 in 5 children and adolescents experience a mental health problem during their school years, and the prevalence of these conditions in young people was increasing. Examples include stress, anxiety, bullying, family problems, depression, and alcohol and substance abuse. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues and the need for providing children and youth necessary social and emotional supports. Unfortunately, many young people, particularly students from low-income families and students of color, do not have access to the help they need, and schools and communities often have insufficient means to provide mental health services.

In spring 2021, the Education Commission of the States released a line of resources to help policymakers understand the state of mental health policy for children and adolescents and to provide the resources schools and communities needed to support positive student mental health. These resources are as follows:

- An outline of the student mental health services ecosystem
- The Glossary of Student Mental Wellness Concepts
- The policy brief State Approaches to Addressing Student Mental Health
- The policy brief State Funding for Student Mental Health

Examples of integrated support systems include comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and community school initiatives. Early warning indicator systems can also be adopted to help schools identify students who are falling off track academically and may need additional supports.
Comprehensive multi-tiered systems of support

In recent years, schools have tried to create integrated support systems by building multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS typically include tiers of support that promote learning and development in ways that prevent difficulties and that provide supplemental supports and intensive intervention when needed. These tiered models begin with universal designs for learning and personalized teaching and provide more intensive academic and nonacademic supports to ensure that all students can receive the right kind of assistance without stigma or delays. It is important that interventions, not students, are tiered; that supports are implemented with fidelity; and that providers take an asset-based approach to building upon student strengths instead of focusing just on deficits. The key is to take a whole child approach in which students are treated in connected, rather than fragmented, ways and in which care is personalized to the needs of individuals.

Community school initiatives

The integration of education and health, mental health, and social welfare supports can also be accomplished through a community school approach. Community school initiatives are driven by partnerships between community organizations, nonprofits, and local government agencies to provide resources for youth and adults. Community schools have four key pillars—(1) integrated student supports, (2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, (3) active family and community engagement, and (4) collaborative leadership and practices—to support this integration of services. (See Figure 2.3.) These schools often draw from a wide range of community and cultural resources, including partnerships with families, to strengthen trust and build resilience as children have more support systems and as people work collaboratively to help address the stresses of poverty and the associated adversities children may face.
While community schools vary in their approaches and structures, evidence shows that they can improve outcomes for students, including attendance, academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and reduced racial and economic achievement gaps. A recent RAND study of New York City’s large-scale community schools initiative shows that community schools can work at scale. Promising results include a drop in chronic absenteeism, with the biggest effects on the most vulnerable students, and a decline in disciplinary incidents. Students were more likely to progress from grade to grade on time, accumulate more course credits, and graduate from high school at higher rates. (See Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently for more information on investing in integrated student supports and community schools.)

Strong school–community partnerships can play a critical role in efforts to support the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children and youth. Engaging community partners allows schools to forge a common vision for student success across settings and reinforces the understanding that learning and development happens outside of the traditional school day. School–community partnerships can also be instrumental in establishing two-way communication and trust between schools and community organizations and in ensuring young people are surrounded by consistent, caring relationships.
Research shows that key indicators, including chronic absenteeism, course performance, and credit attainment, can help predict students at risk for dropping out as early as middle school. School-to-school transitions (e.g., between pre-k and kindergarten, elementary and middle school, or middle and high school) and the change in routines, environments, and relationships have been identified as key points of disengagement for students. Early warning indicator data systems, particularly when used at these transition points, can help educators monitor students who are falling off track. Most importantly, students identified through early warning indicator systems can be connected to comprehensive school interventions, including tutoring and academic integrated student supports, mentoring programs, and social and emotional learning supports.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can invest in integrated systems of support to better serve the holistic needs of students and families and caregivers by:

1. **Identifying existing assets (including out-of-school resources and factors) and barriers to learning and the appropriate supports needed to enable positive youth outcomes.** Successful implementation of integrated student supports (ISS) starts with an inclusive and collaborative process for engaging students and families in identifying needs and assets and then using this information to develop appropriate partnerships. To facilitate this process, states can develop districtwide and schoolwide assets and needs assessments and support districts and schools in using them. To be most impactful, the assets and needs assessment should examine existing partnerships and the resources available to address potential service gaps (e.g., counselors, social workers, school psychologists, social-emotional curricula, trauma-informed practices). States can provide districts with guidance, technical assistance, resources, and tools to help them ensure that the ISS selected are tailored to meet the needs of students, families, and communities. Districts can provide schools with an analysis of school-level data and training on how to use that data to support continuous improvement in providing these important services to students and families.

2. **Adopting and supporting evidence-based integrated student support frameworks.** This may include establishing or adopting statewide research-based ISS protocols or frameworks and developing and coordinating policies that connect multiple initiatives, such as multi-tiered systems of support models, to guide implementation in schools and districts and support improved practice at scale. States can also adopt legislation and provide funding for ISS models.

3. **Investing in and supporting evidence-based community school initiatives.** This may include adopting legislation and providing funding for community school models and issuing a state board resolution in support of community schools to encourage district uptake of a community school strategy and help direct funding to support implementation. Community school funding can include support for coordinators—dedicated, full-time staff members in each school or district who understand the community. Coordinators can help manage partnerships, engage students and families, and support collaborative governance structures.

   For more information on investing in evidence-based community school initiatives, see Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently: Policy Strategy 5.

4. **Supporting coordination at multiple levels—from the district to the school building.** States can establish a coordinating infrastructure within communities (from community schools to provider networks to children’s cabinets). This would support collaboration at scale by creating aligned systems and structures for provider and school connection. States can also leverage similar or complementary efforts on data sharing, training, goal setting, and communications to improve connections across systems. (See Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently for more information on investments in community schools.)

5. **Supporting schools and districts in developing and using early warning indicator systems to provide targeted student supports.** These early warning systems should use easily accessible data—attendance, behavior, class performance—to identify and provide integrated supports to students who struggle with school-to-school transitions (e.g., between elementary and
middle school and between middle and high school) or who are falling off track academically.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- **Building Systems of Integrated Student Support: A Policy Brief for Local and State Leaders** (America’s Promise Alliance; Center for Thriving Children, Brief)
  https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/bc1/schools/lsoe/sites/coss/pdfs-for-ctc/ISSreport_2022.pdf

- **Community Schools Playbook** (Partnership for the Future of Learning, Playbook)
  https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/

- **Integrating Social and Emotional Learning Within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports to Advance Equity: SEL MTSS Toolkit for State and District Leaders** (Council of Chief State School Officers; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; American Institutes for Research, Toolkit)
  https://753a0706.flowpaper.com/CCSSOSELMTSSToolkit/#page=1

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

POLICY STRATEGY 5

**Provide High-Quality Expanded Learning Time**

High-quality expanded learning time (ELT) should be readily available and easily accessible to help address students’ academic and nonacademic needs. Large disparities exist in the amount of exposure to learning opportunities between students from low-income families and students from affluent families, including before and after school and during school breaks. For example, research has found that students from middle- and upper-income families typically spend 6,000 more hours in educational activities than students from low-income families by the time they reach the 6th grade. Another study found that the cumulative summer learning gap over multiple years accounts for more than half of the 9th-grade achievement difference between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers. This difference in 9th-grade achievement contributes to the likelihood of high school students entering college-track programs and meeting college-going requirements. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities and prompted many states, districts, and schools to provide high-quality ELT.
Expanded learning time opportunities can include high-quality tutoring; after-school and summer learning programs; and early learning programs.

**High-quality tutoring**

Rather than engaging in tracking, which differentiates students’ access to quality curricula and has been found to depress the achievement of low-tracked groups, providing access to high-quality tutoring opportunities is an effective means for schools to provide supplemental supports. There is well-established literature on the positive effects of tutoring, which can produce large academic gains. Effective tutoring is accomplished by a focused group of trained individuals working consistently with individuals or small groups of students. In particular, research supports high-dosage tutoring, in which tutors work consistently at least 3 days per week for full class sessions (during or after school) with students one-on-one or in very small groups, often accomplishing large gains in relatively short periods of time.

These tutors may be specially trained teachers who work in programs with a set of well-defined methods and who work with students one-on-one or in small groups. Reading Recovery, one example of this type of program, has been found to have strong positive effects on reading gains for struggling readers, including English learners and students with special education needs. The tutors may also be recent college graduates, including AmeriCorps volunteers, who receive training to work with students, as in the Boston MATCH Education program. In daily 50-minute sessions added to their regular math classes, two students working with a tutor gained an additional 1 to 2 years of math proficiency by focusing on the specific areas they need to master while also preparing for their standard classes. Tutors in programs such as these have the advantage of well-developed curriculum with frequent formative assessments to gauge and guide where support is needed.

**After-school and summer learning programs**

After-school and summer programs are another way to enable access to important supplemental supports during out-of-school time. After-school programs are a common way ELT is incorporated into a school’s system of supports. These opportunities can accelerate learning and reduce opportunity gaps between what students from low-income families and their peers from middle- and upper-income families experience during out-of-school hours. Yet additional time will not in and of itself promote positive student outcomes. Quality out-of-school programs that produce positive effects on outcomes offer targeted instruction focused on particular academic and/or social-emotional skills; create a warm, positive climate; enable consistent and frequent participation; and employ a stable group of trained, dedicated instructors. When out-of-school time programs reinforce a school’s curriculum,
pedagogy, and core values, they are more effective in supporting student outcomes, growth, and engagement. ELT includes summer learning programs, which have been found to be most effective when they offer nonacademic enrichment along with academic supports, use a trained group of stable staff, are experienced by students for multiple summers, and provide purposeful curriculum.

**Video 2.4**

**Learning Opportunities in Out-of-School Time**

Video URL: [https://youtu.be/tEwFnfuMwy0](https://youtu.be/tEwFnfuMwy0)

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**Early learning programs**

High-quality preschool is another form of ELT that yields substantial gains, especially when students have access to full-day programs. For example, research shows that increased daily learning time can yield bigger benefits for preschool-age children as well. Yet many children do not have access to early learning programs due to inadequate public funding and because many run only 5–4 hours each day, making them inaccessible to working families. While some part-day programs have shown strong results, most of the highly effective programs, especially for children from low-income families, provide full-day preschool. An evaluation of the long-term impact of the Chicago Child–Parent Centers, for example, showed that children attending the program for a full day scored better on measures of social-emotional development, math and reading skills, and physical health than similar children attending the same program for only part of a day. A national evaluation of Head Start also suggests that children who enrolled in the full-day program performed better in reading and math.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can provide high-quality ELT to close opportunity and enrichment gaps by:

1. **Funding and supporting high-quality expanded learning programs**. This may include investments to expand before- and after-school programs that provide enriched learning, work-based and civic engagement opportunities, summer learning programs, and tutoring (e.g., Reading Recovery, National Center on Intensive Intervention, What Works Clearinghouse). This may include establishing appropriately funded partnerships with community organizations, public agencies, and the business sector. These partnerships can provide support—with mentoring, enrichment, whole child wellness, and academic progress via additional staffing and program augmentation that nurtures positive relationships—and expand access to community-based and career and technical learning experiences.
2. **Expanding the reach, duration, and quality of early learning programs**. States can do the following:

- Define and use state quality standards that incorporate evaluations of adult–child interactions, adult–child ratios, and facility requirements
- Develop quality rating and improvement systems to support continuous improvement, reinforce quality standards, and provide a basis for program accountability
- Link funding to ratings to promote quality
- Invest in strengthening teacher quality by providing accessible, specialized training, coaching, and incentives (See Building Adult Capacity and Expertise for more information on training, recruiting, and retaining educators.)
- Coordinate administration of early learning programs through a state children’s cabinet and by instituting cross-agency data-sharing agreements (See Setting a Whole Child Vision for more information on coordinating and streamlining services.)
- Strategically blend and braid multiple funding sources to increase access and quality (See Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently for more information on investing in high-quality child care and preschool programs.)

3. **Establishing statewide standards for the quality of expanded learning programs**. States can work with expanded learning experts, such as statewide after-school networks, to set standards to be used to review, control the quality of, and improve expanded learning programs. States can also support districts and communities in applying the key research-based principles of effective ELT, including providing active and engaged learning experiences, engaging families, ensuring a well-prepared and diverse staff and investing in professional development, setting explicit goals and aligning programming with those goals, and promoting students’ health and wellness.

4. **Facilitating necessary communication and collaboration between in-school and out-of-school partners**. This may include removing barriers to sharing facilities between schools and community-based organizations to mitigate the out-of-school time opportunity gaps; finding opportunities for appropriate data sharing; supporting joint training and professional development; and including and sharing information on the availability of programs with a broad range of stakeholders to ensure teachers, families, caregivers, and others dealing with youth know the range of enrichment and well-rounded educational opportunities available for students.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **2021 Summer Learning and Enrichment: State Guidance for District and School Leaders** (Council of Chief State School Officers; National Governors Association, Guide)
  https://learning.ccsso.org/2021-summer-learning-enrichment-state-guidance-for-district-and-school-leaders

- **Community Learning Hubs** (Afterschool Alliance, Guide)
  http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/covid/community-learning-hubs.cfm

- **Time in Pursuit of Education Equity: Promoting Learning Time Reforms That Cross Ideological Divides to Benefit Students Most in Need** (AASA, Article)

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
Redesigning Curriculum, Instruction, Assessments, and Accountability Systems

Why a Redesign of Curriculum, Instruction, Assessments, and Accountability Is Needed

The U.S. education system remains substantially reliant on the factory model of education designed during the Industrial Revolution, in which teachers deliver instruction to passive students, content areas are siloed, and learning can be primarily defined by summative test scores. This model stands in stark contrast to the growing knowledge base of how people learn: through authentic learning experiences that actively engage students, develop higher-order thinking skills, ask students to apply what they have learned, and treat all students as equally capable of success. Research also shows that people learn by connecting new information to what they already know and understand and by being able to draw on their cultural experiences and community contexts. It also shows that people need opportunities to receive real-time feedback and to reflect on their learning in meaningful ways. These findings suggest that curriculum, instruction, and assessments should build upon children’s prior knowledge and be culturally and linguistically responsive; support conceptual understanding, engagement, and motivation; and develop students’ metacognitive skills, agency, and capacity for strategic thinking.

Supporting schools in creating these types of learning experiences will require a reshaping of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and accountability systems. As discussed in Transforming Learning Environments, it will also require building relationship-centered, identity-safe schools; establishing restorative and educative approaches to discipline; and providing integrated student supports and expanded learning time. To reshape these systems, states can do the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY STRATEGY 1</th>
<th>Promote Rich Learning Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Promote rich learning experiences that provide challenging curriculum in all content areas and support the development of deeper learning skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and social-emotional competencies; and draw on culturally and linguistically responsive approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Support authentic systems of assessment that are culturally and linguistically responsive, provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning and development in a variety of ways, and are designed to measure growth and progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Adopt a comprehensive accountability system designed for continuous improvement that includes indicators of students’ opportunities to learn, the quality of teaching and learning experiences, students’ contexts and school climates, and how well they are prepared for postsecondary success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Strengthen distance and blended learning models that are equity focused, offer personalized instruction, and take advantage of the different settings in which learning can take place</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

POLICY STRATEGY 1

Promote Rich Learning Experiences

Rich learning experiences foster student motivation through complex content knowledge development and tasks that hold value to the student and a focus on setting and achieving learning goals. They provide students with opportunities to deeply understand disciplinary content through both direct instruction and opportunities to engage in discipline-specific models of inquiry (e.g., scientific investigation, mathematical modeling, literary analysis, historical inquiry, or artistic performance). They also develop students’ beliefs in their abilities to succeed through appropriately challenging activities and well-designed and implemented progressions of lessons to guide students in tasks that go beyond their existing knowledge bases or skill sets. Rich learning experiences also provide opportunities to develop students’ metacognitive skills—the ability to reflect on learning processes and understanding—and enable students to start and persist at tasks, recognize learning patterns, evaluate their own learning strategies, evaluate what works, and invest adequate effort to succeed and to transfer knowledge and skills to increasingly complex problems. A substantial body of research has found that students who employ metacognitive strategies, including self-regulated learning and goal setting, are better able to engage in cognitive processes, remember information, and maximize learning.
Ensuring students have access to these learning experiences supports the development of:

- Productive mindsets that enable perseverance and resilience, especially a growth mindset
- Executive functioning that supports planning, organizing, problem-solving, and self-management
- Interpersonal and communication skills that support collaboration and enable students to describe their academic work and learning and their growth in character
- Reflective mindsets and skills that enable students to evaluate personal strengths, challenges, and progress toward goals
- Compassionate and civic mindsets that encourage students to treat others with kindness, celebrate different identities, and contribute positively to their communities

As Table 3.1 suggests, teaching in the ways that children learn will, in many ways, require reimagining the purpose of and approach to schooling. Schools that are designed to unleash the potential within every child have replaced the standardized assembly line with greater personalization, grounded in the knowledge that each child’s identity, cultural background, developmental path, interests, and learning needs create a unique path for that child. Students engage in collaborative inquiry-based learning by pursuing questions and problems that matter to them and to their communities. Rather than memorizing facts and regurgitating them on a test, students synthesize existing knowledge, apply it to open-ended questions and complex problems, and create something of value for an authentic audience beyond school.
### Table 3.1
Transforming Schools to Advance Rich Learning Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transforming from a school with ...</th>
<th>Toward a school with ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transmission teaching of disconnected facts</td>
<td>Inquiry into meaningful problems that connect areas of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A focus on memorization and recall of facts and formulas</td>
<td>A focus on deep understanding of concepts and applications of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An exclusive emphasis on standardized materials, pacing, and modes of learning</td>
<td>Strategies that allow multiple pathways for learning and demonstrating knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A view that students are motivated—or not</td>
<td>An understanding that students are motivated by engaging tasks that are well supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A focus only on individual work; consulting with others is considered &quot;cheating&quot;</td>
<td>A focus on collaborative as well as individual work; consulting with others is a major resource for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricula and instruction rooted only in a canonical view of the dominant culture</td>
<td>Curricula and instruction that are culturally responsive, building substantially on students’ experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking systems based on the view that ability is fixed and requires differential curriculum</td>
<td>Heterogeneous grouping, based on the understanding that ability is developed in rich learning environments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children. (2021). *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action.*

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Rich learning experiences provide all students exposure to instruction in complex academic content in all discipline areas, as well as opportunities to engage in (1) inquiry-based learning, (2) culturally responsive pedagogy, (3) social and emotional learning, and (4) inclusive heterogeneous grouping.

### Inquiry-based learning

Inquiry-based learning—which involves questioning, considering possibilities and alternatives, and applying knowledge—requires students to take an active role in constructing their own knowledge as they work to solve a problem or probe a question. Inquiry-based instruction incorporates students’ exploration of a problem with direct instruction that supports their efforts to find answers to questions that illuminate core concepts in a domain. The inquiry process includes opportunities for students to explain and discuss their thinking so that educators can determine what additional instruction or resources are needed to guide a constructive learning process.

Project-based learning is one form of inquiry learning that develops students’ knowledge and skills while they investigate meaningful problems or answer a complex question. Projects often center on real-world issues; incorporate interdisciplinary and standards-based tasks related to scientific or historical inquiry, close reading and extensive writing, and quantitative modeling and reasoning; and often require students to present their work publicly. Studies on project-based learning find that students exposed to this kind of curriculum do as well as or better than their peers on traditional standardized test measures and significantly better on measures of higher-order thinking skills that transfer to new situations. Students participating in project-based learning also exhibit stronger motivation, improved problem-solving ability, and more positive attitudes toward learning.

The development of these skills can also be accomplished through civic engagement opportunities (e.g., volunteering, national
service, service-learning projects), internships, career shadowing and mentoring, career and technical education experiences, and independent studies.

Video 3.2
A Project-Based Approach to Teaching Elementary Science

Video URL: https://youtu.be/wSDOQ7_AAdk

Culturally responsive pedagogy

Schools that offer rich learning experiences incorporate instructional strategies that build on students’ experiences and affirm students’ cultural and linguistic histories as they connect new learning to prior knowledge. A person’s culture ranges from concrete elements members of a community share, such as food, holidays, dress, music, and language, to less observable, collectively held beliefs and norms. Culturally responsive pedagogy is critical because “the brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events.” Bringing students’ cultural contexts into schools and classrooms supports an approach to education that recognizes the value and potential all students bring to the classroom. Culturally responsive curricula and teaching build on and validate students’ diverse experiences to support learning, engagement, and identity development. Culturally responsive learning environments celebrate the unique identities of all students while building on their diverse experiences to support rich and inclusive learning. (See Transforming Learning Environments for additional information on identity-safe and relationship-centered environments.)

As culturally responsive, sustaining, and affirming pedagogical approaches center and celebrate diversity, they further belonging and inclusion and positively affect educational outcomes, including engagement in learning and academic achievement. Furthermore, students from all backgrounds benefit from inclusive learning environments that honor and celebrate diversity. These settings not only can help all young people learn about and embrace the diverse backgrounds and cultures that make up the fabric of U.S. democracy but can also cultivate their awareness and orientations toward issues of fairness and inclusion.

Ensuring that young people have rich learning experiences also requires culturally responsive content and materials that:

- Reflect and respect the legitimacy of different cultures
- Empower students to value and learn from other cultures, in addition to their own
- Incorporate information from many cultures into the heart of the curriculum, instead of only on the margins
- Relate new information to students’ life experiences

For students to become engaged and effective learners, educators must simultaneously develop content-specific knowledge and cognitive, social, and emotional skills. These skills include executive functions, a growth mindset, social awareness, resilience and perseverance, metacognition, curiosity, and self-direction. (See Building Adult Capacity and Expertise for additional information)
Social and emotional learning

To ensure students have the opportunity to learn and practice cognitive, social, and emotional skills, schools need to be supported in dedicating consistent time—either within a given curriculum or in the school day—to the development of those skills. Studies show that students who engage in social and emotional learning programs demonstrate improvements in their social-emotional skills; attitudes about themselves, others, and school; social and classroom behavior; and outcome measures like test scores and school grades. A meta-analysis of over 200 studies found that students in social-emotional learning programs experienced reductions in misbehavior, aggression, stress, and depression and significant increases in achievement. A second meta-analysis found that these benefits were sustained in the long term, showing how learned attitudes, skills, and behaviors can endure and serve as a protective factor over time. Social-emotional learning programming has also been found to have an 11-to-1 return on investment.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework has been used by many states to develop social-emotional learning standards. (See Figure 3.1.)

Figure 3.1
CASEL’s Social and Emotional Learning Framework

It is important to avoid equity pitfalls in adopting and implementing social-emotional learning standards and curricula. Educators must be provided with guidance and resources that emphasize student agency and the assets they possess and can develop, rather
than identifying students’ deficits. In addition, it is important that leaders and educators understand and appreciate the similarities and differences in cultural expressions of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. For example, in some cultures, it is considered inappropriate for a child to look an adult in the eye, whereas in others, it is considered a sign of respect. Without an understanding of various cultural norms, practitioners may mistakenly assume some students do not display or embrace certain skills, habits, or mindsets.

Further, it is also important to recognize that stand-alone social-emotional learning curricula, while useful, are insufficient to develop the needed skills, habits, and mindsets when such practices are not actively modeled by adults, incorporated throughout the school day—during classes, lunchtime, recess, and extracurriculars, as well as in disciplinary policies and practices—and integrated into these routines in ways that are culturally affirming and relevant. (See Figure 3.2.) Integration of these skills in ways that develop long-term habits can help eliminate the view that some students need to be “repaired” and ensure that equity is at the center of these practices.
Exclusionary practices, such as tracking mechanisms that exclude students from curricula and coursework focused on higher-order skills, communicate differential worth to students and undermine achievement. Decades of research show that tracking can harm students by reducing achievement for those limited to low-level curricula.

To the greatest extent possible, learning environments should promote inclusive approaches within heterogenous classrooms,
strategically creating small groups for targeted instructional support when needed, and differentiating instruction to meet student needs.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

*States can promote and support the development of rich learning experiences by:*

1. *Investing in the development and adoption of the high-quality curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, assessments, and professional development* that support higher-order thinking and inquiry-based learning in all content areas; culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum and instruction; and integrated SEL. States can further support schools and districts by establishing an online hub that provides access to resources for high-quality curriculum, instruction, and assessments (see [Policy Strategy 2: Support Authentic Systems of Assessment](#)) in the academic disciplines that support deeper learning.

2. *Developing school and district capacity to pilot learning experiences that promote the development of productive habits and mindsets* (e.g., executive function, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, collaboration, conflict resolution, a growth mindset, agency over learning). For example, states can invest in and support high school learning experiences that include opportunities for applied learning and personalized pathways (e.g., internships, career shadowing, career technical education courses, independent studies, community service projects). States can also consider developing competency-based curricula and course sequencing, personalized learning plans, and mastery-based learning progressions. (See [Building Adult Capacity and Expertise](#) for more information on preparing educators to support personalized learning.)

3. *Eliminating policies and practices that promote early tracking (pre-k–8) and replacing them with practices that ensure all students have access to rich learning experiences.* This can include:

   - Providing guidance and support to help schools adopt more inclusive approaches, such as creating temporary small groups for targeted instructional support, engaging in high-intensity tutoring, and adapting lessons to accommodate students at different levels
   - Supporting schools implementing *differentiated instruction* through the provision or recommendation of high-quality curricular tools and professional development for teachers
   - Examining data on student access to advanced courses and high-quality career and technical education pathways and addressing any issues that are surfaced by the data

4. *Establishing competencies for social, emotional, and cognitive learning* that clarify both the social-emotional skills students should develop and the practices that best support development of those skills. States have used statements of competencies and standards as well as professional development funding to inform teacher practice, provide guidance to school and district administrators, and empower parents and families to support social-emotional learning at home.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

  
POLICY STRATEGY 2

Support Authentic Systems of Assessment

Authentic systems of assessment, focused on student growth and progress, help educators understand how to leverage instruction to support learning and help students develop a deeper understanding of concepts. When students feel supported to grow and reflect on their efforts, instead of being compared to others, they are more likely to believe they can improve their performance with time and effort. Assessments that focus on growth can increase students’ motivation and engagement. In contrast, researchers have found that comparison-oriented assessments lead students to have a decreased interest in school, to disengage from learning environments, and to experience a lowered sense of self-confidence and efficacy.

Schools and teachers need both the time and tools to assess whole child needs and establish clear goals for the types of assessments they use. (See Building Adult Capacity and Expertise for more information on supports for educators to implement authentic assessments.) While states have largely focused on end-of-year, summative assessments to gauge school and student performance, educators need support in developing diagnostic and formative assessment processes, embedded in the instructional context, to identify student understanding and provide feedback in real time, adapt curriculum and instruction, and allow students to demonstrate learning through authentic, mastery-based tasks.

What Are Formative and Diagnostic Assessments?

Experts identify three primary goals of assessments:

1. **Assessment of learning**: Assessments that are used to monitor student progress at the end of instruction (e.g., summative assessments)
2. **Assessment for learning**: Assessments that are used to directly surface current student understanding and provide feedback for next steps in learning (e.g., diagnostic and formative assessment processes)
3. **Assessment as learning**: Assessments used for either summative or formative purposes that take a performance-based approach, asking students to show what they know and can do by actually doing certain tasks (e.g., writing an essay or designing an experiment), thus engaging students in the learning process while surfacing student understanding

**Formative assessment**, or assessment for learning, is carried out as part of the instructional process for the purpose of adapting instruction to improve learning. Formative assessment is contrasted with summative assessment, which measures the outcomes of learning that has already occurred.

**Diagnostic assessment** is a particular type of formative assessment intended to help teachers identify students’ specific knowledge, skills, and understanding in order to build on each student’s strengths and specific needs. Because of their domain specificity and design, diagnostic tools can guide curriculum planning in more specific ways than most summative assessments.
Combined with insights from diagnostic assessments that help teachers identify students’ current thinking and chart next steps, formative assessment processes allow students and teachers to monitor and adjust learning together, in real time, as they progress along an identified path.

Formative assessment processes provide feedback both to the teacher and the learner; the feedback is then used to adjust ongoing teaching and learning strategies to improve students’ attainment of curricular learning targets or goals on a day-to-day and minute-to-minute basis. Formative assessment processes are fundamentally grounded in relationships, providing participatory ways for students and teachers to attend to the full set of student experiences. These processes are linked to instruction and designed to support growth, as suggested in Table 3.2.

### Table 3.2
**Formative Assessment Processes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructionally relevant assessment that supports growth looks less like …</th>
<th>Instructionally relevant assessment that supports growth looks more like …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standardized, multiple-choice tests or banks of items</td>
<td>Contextualized opportunities for students to make their thinking about their answers visible to inform next steps in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tests that happen entirely separately from learning experiences</td>
<td>Embedded checks on student understanding that happen as part of learning sequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments that assume a single right answer and a dominant way of knowing as the goal</td>
<td>Assessment processes that illuminate facets of student thinking and understanding that build complex cognition in multiple ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on assigning grades and scores</td>
<td>Emphasis on descriptive feedback to guide improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments that occur after learning has occurred and focus on locating deficits for remediation</td>
<td>Processes that treat current student understanding as a resource for extending learning and making connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments that focus on content as the primary goal for learning</td>
<td>Assessments that integrate content and disciplinary practices so that students develop and consider evidence as part of acquiring knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes that focus on mastery of discrete learning goals</td>
<td>Processes that take into account learning progressions and curricular models of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes that focus on educators and policymakers as the consumers of assessment data</td>
<td>Processes that include students’ participation in their learning through self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the instrument</td>
<td>Focus on the process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Educators also need access to high-quality diagnostic and formative assessment tools that pinpoint student thinking relative to learning progressions and provide actionable guidance over time for how to move students along. It is essential that the assessments used give students the opportunity to make their thinking—and not just right or wrong answers—visible and that they include careful interpretation guidance that helps teachers and students understand which next steps in learning will move student thinking forward. State and local leaders should consider assessments that include performance tasks—which teachers can build upon and modify to suit their needs—as well as reports on individual student progress relative to multiyear learning progressions rather than reports with a focus on percentile scores and rankings. States can work with schools and districts to
develop three key types of assessments: (1) early childhood assessments, (2) performance assessments, and (3) locally constructed assessments.

**Early childhood assessments**

Across the nation, assessments are increasingly being used to measure children’s competencies from preschool to 3rd grade. High-quality early childhood assessments, when well designed and well implemented, can support developmentally appropriate early learning experiences by providing valuable information to guide instruction and support whole child development.

While some states use common early childhood assessments during preschool, many states begin assessing children’s skills and knowledge with a kindergarten entry assessment (KEA). When a KEA fits into an early childhood assessment system, starting in preschool and continuing into the early elementary grades, it can help provide educators and policymakers with an understanding of how children are progressing over time so that they can guide instruction and make investments to support learning. However, the inappropriate use of KEAs or other early childhood assessments for placement or enrollment decisions can have unintended consequences by perpetuating inequities, especially if they inaccurately measure the abilities of groups of children (e.g., children who are dual language learners, children with special needs, and children from diverse cultural backgrounds).

Research suggests that effective assessments of children in early learning classrooms have specific features. Assessments should be authentic and appropriate for the assessed age groups and populations, including children with diverse cultures, languages, or special needs. Assessments should also cover the five key aspects of development—social-emotional development, cognitive development, language and literacy development, mathematical and scientific reasoning, and physical development—to inform instructional strategies and program planning. High-quality assessments provide valuable information for both educators and policymakers to support the diverse range of students’ strengths and needs and address inequitable opportunities early on. For policy, aggregate data at the community and state levels can reveal inequities in access to quality early childhood resources and can inform investments that promote equity in early childhood and the early grades. Such data are especially informative if they are part of a comprehensive data system that spans early childhood and early elementary grades.

**Performance assessments**

Performance assessments are often a key element of inquiry-based tasks. Such assessments require demonstrations of knowledge and skills as they are used in the real world. Students are typically asked to apply their knowledge and skills in creating a paper, project, product, presentation, and/or demonstration. These may be assembled and communicated through student portfolios or the systematic collection of student work samples, records of observation, scored papers or products, and other artifacts collected over time to evaluate growth and achievement.

Performance assessments encourage higher-order thinking, evaluation, synthesis, and deductive and inductive reasoning while requiring students to demonstrate understanding. Furthermore, performance assessments can provide multiple entry points for diverse learners, including English learners and students with special needs, to access content and display learning. The assessments themselves are learning tools that also build students’ co-cognitive skills, such as planning, organizing, and other aspects of executive functioning; resilience and perseverance in the face of challenges; and a growth mindset, which develops from the ongoing process of fine-tuning and improving the product. A growing number of schools and districts organize high school work around a portfolio of performance tasks that are assembled and exhibited to demonstrate the competencies they expect graduates to have developed.

There are several ways states can support authentic performance-based assessments within state assessment systems. For example, one way to include these components is through curriculum-embedded performance assessments, which are implemented in the classroom during the school year and may extend over days or weeks. This approach offers several benefits, including the following:

- More completely assessing college and career-ready standards, including independent and collaborative student-initiated research and inquiry; the ability to take and use feedback productively; and oral, written, and multimedia communication
- Evaluating higher-order skills, such as the analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application of knowledge to complex problems
- Better reflecting how learning is applied in real-world settings and thus strengthening validity
- Creating greater curriculum equity for students by using assessments to create strong units and instructional practices across classrooms, rather than having only some students experience instruction for deeper learning
Increasing teachers’ understanding of the standards and of high-quality teaching and assessment by involving them in developing, reviewing, and scoring tasks

**Locally constructed assessments**

Student learning is deeply connected to local contexts—the scope and sequence of courses a district is pursuing, the curriculum teachers are using, and the in- and out-of-classroom experiences students are having. Therefore, compared with a single statewide assessment, locally relevant assessments can more accurately identify what students are learning and can better inform local decisions made on teaching and learning. Locally constructed assessments can also be more culturally and linguistically responsive than one-size-fits-all assessments, allowing educators to adapt as needed to meet students’ needs and support their ongoing learning.

As part of a system of authentic assessments, schools also need tools to understand how students, teachers, staff, and families and caregivers experience the school environment. Research shows that students learn more effectively in environments in which they feel safe and supported, that well-supported teachers lead to better student outcomes, and that building relational trust with families and caregivers is essential to supporting long-term school improvement. One important tool that many states and districts are using is climate surveys to gauge various dimensions of the learning environment, including safety and belonging, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and engagement, and then using that survey data to make improvements. (See Transforming Learning Environments for more information on how this can be accomplished.)

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can support the design and implementation of authentic formative assessments that support growth and reflection by:

1. **Adopting high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood assessments that shine a light on children’s needs and abilities from preschool through early elementary grades.** Assessments should consider key domains of child development (e.g., social-emotional development, cognitive development, language and literacy development, mathematical and scientific reasoning, and physical development) to plan instruction tailored to students’ needs, track progress over time, and make appropriate demands of young children. States should support educators and administrators in understanding the purpose of the assessment, how to effectively administer state tools, and how to use the data to inform instruction and work with families and caregivers. States can also use assessment data to identify opportunity gaps and strategically fund initiatives that strengthen early learning systems.

2. **Supporting and centering authentic performance-based assessments within statewide initiatives.** States’ assessment efforts should include performance-based tasks that evaluate higher-order thinking and deeper learning—aligned with state standards—to measure and incentivize high-quality and equitable teaching and learning practices in k–12. One way states can encourage this is to allow districts to use performance-based assessments to demonstrate readiness to graduate. States can support districts in using performance-based assessments by developing resources that might include:
   - Extended-response performance tasks that are part of on-demand assessments (e.g., in statewide summative assessments)
   - Libraries of performance assessments that are developed and vetted by the state or its educators and are made available statewide across grade levels and content areas (and may have some administration requirement, such as being part of a statewide interim assessment system)
   - A set of classroom-embedded assessment tasks that are intentionally aligned with tasks on statewide assessments
   - Model curriculum units and frameworks with embedded assessment tasks and formative processes

States should also consider providing supports for effective use of any state-developed or recommended resources, including multilingual translations, valid and informative rubrics and score reports, documents showing connections to standards and competencies, suggestions for instructional moves based on student performance, and guidance for adapting
materials to be more supportive of specific diverse learner communities (e.g., attending to local context, cultural and linguistic diversity, special needs, and student interest and identity).

3. **Supporting schools and districts in adopting, developing, and using high-quality local assessments designed to equitably measure student growth and progress.** Balanced, coherent, and **authentic systems of assessment** require that local assessment efforts—those that are adopted, developed, and used at the district, school, and classroom levels—are performance-based; are aligned with both standards and learning progressions; and provide the range of information educators, students, families, and leaders need to support student learning. States can support these efforts by:

- Sharing tools and resources to support quality assessment selection, development, and use for different purposes (e.g., common rubrics, quality criteria)
- Publishing exemplar assessments and vetted recommendations for technical assistance providers and assessment instruments
- Providing professional learning opportunities for school and district leaders as well as educators (e.g., workshops for development and use, professional learning for student work analysis, training for scoring performance-based assessments)
- Enabling innovative local efforts through waivers for innovation zones, funding for local assessment initiatives, and pathways for local assessment efforts to lead to meaningful credentials for students
- Sharing guidance for high-quality local assessment data practices and policies (e.g., equitable grading, advancement and access to advanced courses, etc.)
- Providing support for validating locally developed assessments

It is important that states provide both guidance and guardrails that intentionally ensure that local assessments maintain a high bar for quality while attending to the wide range of data needs of educators and students, including diagnostic information, just-in-time formative feedback, progress and growth information, and performance and achievement data for individual students as well as disaggregated student groups.

4. **Supporting and incentivizing educator professional learning and capacity-building related to effective assessment use to support student learning, growth, and achievement.** This can include:

- Leading professional learning workshops, communities of practice, and educator leadership development initiatives and institutes focused on not only assessment development and implementation but also meaningful data practices within classrooms, schools, and districts
- Partnering with key professional learning and technical assistance providers
- Connecting educator professional learning to ongoing state initiatives (e.g., assessment or curriculum development efforts, training on the use of model resources and curricula, and other content-specific initiatives)

States should consider including a substantial professional learning component in applications for federal and foundation assessment support.

5. **Supporting schools and districts in using multiple data measures to evaluate school context, student achievement, and opportunities to learn.** As part of a system of authentic assessments, states can include multiple measures that they factor into student success in their school accountability and continuous improvement plans that can include:

- Collecting school climate data (e.g., student, staff, and family surveys; student attendance and engagement data; discipline data; student perceptions of their SEL competencies)
- Leveraging extended performance-based tasks (e.g., project-, community-, and work-based learning assessments) to measure deeper learning and character competencies, such as collaboration, communication, perseverance, etc.
- Surveying for opportunity-to-learn (OTL) considerations (See Policy Strategy 3: Adopt a Comprehensive Accountability System for Continuous Improvement for more on OTL measures.)
• Providing guidance and professional development on the use of universal screening tools for social, emotional, and behavioral health issues to monitor students throughout the school year and connect them to needed supports.

These data, like all other data, should be disaggregated by student groups to identify and address any disparities and analyze how different groups of students may be experiencing school.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

• **Developing and Measuring Higher Order Skills: Models for State Performance Assessment Systems**  (Learning Policy Institute; Council of Chief State School Officers, Report)

• **Formative Assessment and Next-Generation Assessment Systems: Are We Losing an Opportunity?**  (Council of Chief State School Officers, Report)
  https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED543063

• **High-Quality Early Childhood Assessment: Learning From States’ Use of Kindergarten Entry Assessments**  (Learning Policy Institute, Report)
  https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/high-quality-kindergarten-entry-assessments-report

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

POLICY STRATEGY 3

**Adopt a Comprehensive Accountability System for Continuous Improvement**

Effective accountability and improvement systems set expectations for performance and provide adequate support in three key, related domains: (1) a focus on meaningful learning enabled by (2) professionally skilled and committed educators and supported by (3) adequate and appropriate resources. (See Figure 3.3.) Such systems move away from a single-score model of evaluation to a more comprehensive approach using multiple measures, such as a dashboard model. Like a dashboard on a car, which provides indicators of speed, distance traveled, fuel, tire pressure, and other information that allows the driver to diagnose how things are working, a school dashboard can provide a wide range of useful state and local indicators and include mechanisms for state monitoring of what schools and districts are doing and to what effect. These approaches allow the means for identifying and intervening when support is needed and provide useful information to the public to assess the quality of schools.
Comprehensive accountability systems are built on the assumption that student outcome data are insufficient for informing improvement and that accountability systems should instead focus on both the performance of the system and the conditions and/or opportunities underlying that performance. A 2019 National Academy of Sciences report, *Monitoring Educational Equity*, calls for a system of educational equity relying on two sets of indicators that measure (1) disparities in attainment outcomes and engagement in schooling and (2) equitable access to resources and opportunities.

For example, *Monitoring Educational Equity* suggests 16 indicators in 7 key domains:

1. Kindergarten readiness (e.g., disparities in reading and literacy, numeracy and math skills, and self-regulation and attention skills)
2. K–12 learning and engagement (e.g., disparities in attendance and absenteeism, accumulating credits, GPA, and achievement and growth on assessments)
3. Educational attainment (e.g., disparities in on-time graduation, enrollment in college, entry into the workforce, or military enlistment)
4. Extent of racial, ethnic, and economic segregation (e.g., concentration of poverty in schools and racial segregation within and across schools)
5. Equitable access to high-quality early learning programs (e.g., disparities in the availability of and participation in licensed pre-k programs)
6. Equitable access to high-quality curricula and instruction (e.g., disparities in teacher experience, certification, and diversity; availability and enrollment in advanced coursework and gifted and talented programs; availability and enrollment in arts, sciences, social sciences, and technology courses; and access to and participation in formalized systems of tutoring and other academic support services)
7. Equitable access to supportive school and classroom environments (e.g., disparities in students’ perceptions of safety, academic support, teacher–student trust; out-of-school suspensions and expulsions; and supports for emotional, behavioral, mental, and physical health)

Further, effective accountability and improvement systems should be built on three principles: (1) shared accountability, (2) adaptive improvement, and (3) informational significance. Shared accountability requires that all stakeholders willingly take on collective responsibility for the accountability system and work together for the continuous improvement and success of all students. Adaptive improvement acknowledges that school capacities differ greatly and that effective accountability and
improvement systems require flexibility that is responsive to school and community conditions. Finally, accountability systems should provide information that is significant to inform and enable school improvement. They should provide a mix of state direction and support, including identifying where additional resources might be needed, and provide oversight. They should provide this alongside the local autonomy needed to align state and local goals and priorities, strengthen governance, and provide schools and districts the flexibility they need to serve their communities effectively. At best, they allow communities and a broader group of stakeholders to help determine how funds should be spent. (See Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently for more information on leveraging multiple funding streams.)

To be most effective, accountability systems that support improvement also require comprehensive and diagnostic data and supports for educators for using the data in decisions. These two tools help educators and leaders at all levels understand and use data to inform practice, select the appropriate strategy or intervention, and evaluate whether progress is being made.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can adopt a comprehensive accountability system that measures students’ opportunities to learn and supports a system of continuous improvement toward whole child opportunities and outcomes by:

1. **Adopting a broad set of indicators in their statewide accountability and improvement systems that reflect student opportunities for learning and encourage shared responsibility for student outcomes.** These indicators can be used for different purposes—reporting out publicly, addressing disparities, identifying schools for support and intervention, and informing the selection of supports and interventions. States can adopt indicators of educational attainment and engagement to include:
   - Kindergarten readiness
   - Attendance and absenteeism rates
   - State assessment achievement and growth data
   - English language proficiency gains
   - On-time and extended-year graduation rates (e.g., 5–7 years)
   - College and career readiness based on courses and programs completed
   - Civic readiness based on evidence of civic engagement
   - Postsecondary enrollment rates or rates of entry into the workforce or military

Accountability systems may also include indicators of equitable access to resources and opportunities, such as:

- Access to high-quality early learning programs
- Access to high-quality courses, instruction, and curriculum, including advanced courses
- Suspension and expulsion rates
- Access to a safe and supportive school climate
- Access to well-prepared educators
- Access to resources (e.g., devices, curricular and instructional materials, internet)
- Fiscal equity
- The extent of racial, ethnic, and economic segregation
- Access to expanded learning opportunities

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states are required to report information included in their statewide accountability systems by student status, including by race and ethnicity, economic disadvantage, and language and special education status, to illustrate where there are inequities that should be addressed. In so doing, information from these indicators can be leveraged by states and districts to guide school improvement efforts. States can also encourage cross-tabulation across student groups (e.g., by race and gender) and disaggregation of college- and career-readiness measures by student group and pathway. States currently have to disaggregate assessment and graduation-rate data for students
experiencing homelessness and foster care for reporting purposes. States should consider disaggregating for these groups across all indicators given the unique needs and growth of this population, especially as a result of the pandemic and economic downturn.

2. **Ensuring that districts, schools, educators, families, and students have ongoing access to student opportunity and outcome data to improve learning environments in a user-friendly format.** States may consider using dashboards for many of their indicators to allow for a more comprehensive view of district and school progress and performance across multiple indicators (e.g., academic achievement, English language proficiency gains, graduation rates, chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, school climate surveys, student access to a broad course of study, parent and family engagement, access to qualified teachers). By providing access to a broad array of data points, states can also set up a process for informed local decision-making for continuous improvement. This process should include regular examination of data indicators by district and school staff and local stakeholders to identify and reward areas of growth and to tie in planning and budgeting decisions to provide support (e.g., funding, state and county assistance, increased staffing capacity, additional resources) on indicators in need of improvement. This would allow for the strategic and timely use of data by educators and support staff and allow them to monitor the effectiveness of selected strategies and interventions.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm** (Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, Report)
  https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1050070

- **Evolving Coherent Systems of Accountability for Next Generation Learning: A Decision Framework** (Council of Chief State School Officers, Framework)
  https://ccsso.org/resource-library/evolving-coherent-systems-accountability-next-generation-learning-decision

- **Making ESSA’s Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap** (Learning Policy Institute, Report)
  https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/essa-equity-promise-report

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

**POLICY STRATEGY 4**

**Strengthen Distance and Blended Learning Models**

In many ways, COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequities in our education system, including access to high-speed internet and technology. (See Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently for more information about closing the digital divide.) As policymakers decide how to effectively support learning now and in the future, it is critical to implement high-quality distance and blended learning models that support authentic learning with equity in mind. The current environment has also increased calls for a change in how learning is structured, particularly for redefining attendance from time spent in class to time students are engaged in learning.
Distance and blended learning models offer a combination of face-to-face and online instruction, with the goal of providing an integrated and authentic learning experience. Research on distance and blended learning has found that well-designed online or blended instruction can be as or more effective than in-classroom learning alone. This research also emphasizes that the way in which blended learning is designed and facilitated matters for effectiveness. For example, in-person and online instruction should be combined in strategic ways that allow students to control how they engage with online learning. High-quality blended and virtual learning models include experiences that provide frequent, direct, and meaningful interactions that focus on solving problems and developing ideas. They also use interactive materials and offer opportunities for feedback, revision, and instruction in self-management strategies. Ultimately, in- and out-of-school learning needs to be connected and seamless, with tasks chosen to take advantage of the different settings in which learning will take place during and after the pandemic.

To promote the effective use of technology, educators must have the training and support to be able to implement high-quality distance and blended learning models. During and after our current emergency, educators will continue to be the most important factor in student learning—wherever that learning may occur. Research shows that investments in professional development, when well designed and effectively implemented, lead to improvements in teacher practice and student outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on state and local resources, highlights the need to support states and districts in building long-term capacity to meet unforeseen challenges to student learning. (See Building Adult Capacity and Expertise for more on preparing educators to support distance and blended learning.)

**POLICY ACTIONS**

**States can strengthen distance and blended learning models by:**

1. **Supporting districts and schools with standards, guidance, models, training, and materials designed to increase student engagement in distance and blended learning.** For example, states can support students’ and teachers’ use of technology and digital tools by developing digital learning standards that articulate how technology can empower learners and support high-quality distance and blended learning models.

   For more information on how state and federal funds can be leveraged to close the digital divide, see Policy Strategy 6: Close the Digital Divide in Investing Resources Equitably and Efficiently.

2. **Supporting states, districts, and schools in collecting data to guide decisions to ensure all students have access to devices and the**
internet. This may include surveying the extent to which students and educators have access to high-speed internet and devices. Based on the needs from these surveys, states, districts, and schools should leverage federal resources to support increased access. Access to the internet and devices could also be used as an indicator in statewide accountability systems to ensure continued focus on identifying and closing gaps.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- **Remote Learning in Early Childhood**  (National Association of State Boards of Education, Brief)
  https://www.nasbe.org/remote-learning-in-early-childhood/

- **Restart and Recovery: Considerations for Teaching and Learning**  (Council of Chief State School Officers, Guide)
  https://ccsso.org/blog/ccsso-releases-restart-recovery-considerations-teaching-learning

- **Strengthen Distance and Blended Learning**  (Learning Policy Institute, Report)
  https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org/strengthen-distance-and-blended-learning

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
Building Adult Capacity and Expertise

Why Building Adult Capacity and Expertise Is Needed

The needed transformations in learning environments and experiences for students necessitates similar shifts in the ways educators are prepared and supported across the career pipeline. The science of learning and development has made clear that young people need educators who are well versed in the knowledge of how to support their academic, cognitive, social, and emotional development and the skills to create safe, affirming, and engaging learning environments. Educators cannot do this alone. They need a social commitment to building a system that supports their continuous learning and development. They also need comprehensive efforts to redesign schools to enable them to enact their knowledge and skills in a collaborative space where they and their students can thrive.

To build adult capacity to support the whole child, states can do the following:

1. **Design educator preparation systems** that prepare teachers and school leaders with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to support whole child developmental needs and students’ development of 21st-century skills.

2. **Adopt proactive teacher recruitment and retention strategies** through high-retention pathways, including high-quality teacher residencies and rigorous Grow Your Own programs, service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs, strong hiring practices, and competitive compensation.

3. **Support high-quality mentoring and induction programs** that integrate whole child approaches and ensure that novice educators receive the comprehensive supports needed to remain in the profession and succeed.

4. **Promote high-quality professional development linked to growth-oriented educator evaluation and improvement systems** that support student and educator development and encourage teacher collaboration and reflection.

5. **Support educator and staff well-being** by adopting policies and practices that decrease stress and burnout and create positive working environments.

**POLICY STRATEGY 1**

**Design Educator Preparation Systems for Whole Child Learning and Development**

High-quality, comprehensive preparation of both school leaders and teachers is key to ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to support students’ whole child developmental needs. Evidence suggests that teachers who are better prepared feel more efficacious, experience less stress at work, and are more likely to stay in the profession. In contrast, teachers who lack comprehensive preparation are significantly more likely to exit the profession in their early years compared with those who are fully prepared. Similarly, high-quality principal preparation programs that prepare school leaders for the realities of supporting students and teachers and establishing a positive school climate can help disrupt the costly turnover of both principals and teachers.

Strong certification and teacher preparation systems rely on the essential elements outlined in Figure 4.1. State systems function to guide high-quality practice, while strong certification and preparation systems support broad access to high-quality preparation and professional development. Taken together, these two areas of focus function as “two hands clapping”—working in ways that are necessarily interconnected. When both hands join together, the essential elements are in place for states to recruit a sufficiently large and diverse pool of aspiring teachers while also providing teacher candidates and new teachers the learning experiences that support their growth and development, plus assessments that allow them to demonstrate their ability to support learning for all students.
To ensure a stronger educator pipeline, states need to ensure high-quality, evidence-based preparation systems for (1) k–12 teachers, (2) school leaders, and (3) early childhood educators.

**Preparation systems for k–12 teachers**

To support the kinds of shifts needed to foster whole child learning and development, policymakers need to ensure teacher preparation programs develop teacher candidates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that support children and engage them and their families in culturally competent and equitable ways. The *science of learning and development* also demonstrates that teacher candidates need opportunities to develop important skills, including adaptive expertise to develop appropriate instruction for diverse learners; metacognition; inquiry skills; culturally sensitive listening and questioning skills; observation and analytic skills; curriculum design and instructional skills, such as the ability to scaffold lessons; and reflective and diagnostic skills. Teachers also need to be prepared with the beliefs, dispositions, and attitudes to support students’ learning and development. These include cultivating empathy and building trusting relationships, managing stress, developing cultural competence and affirming beliefs in all students’ abilities to succeed, and developing a sense of self-efficacy. (See Figure 4.2.)
Developing Culturally Responsive Educators

Culturally responsive educators recognize the importance of infusing students’ experiences in all aspects of learning. Doing so enables educators to be responsive to learners—both by validating and reflecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences young people bring and by building upon their unique knowledge and schema to propel learning and critical thinking. To learn more about developing culturally responsive educators, please see Educator Learning to Enact the Science of Learning and Development.

Preparation systems for school leaders

Stable principal leadership is key to attracting and retaining competent teachers, setting the direction of the school, and implementing and maintaining initiatives that foster learning and development. However, a recent national survey of principals found that many encountered obstacles to accessing high-quality principal preparation.

School leaders must be prepared with the same knowledge and skills as teachers in order to guide and support their work. They must also be able to integrate knowledge about how children learn and develop in order to inform school design and create a safe, collaborative, and productive learning environment for students, teachers, families, and caregivers. Research points to four key building blocks of effective school leadership programs:

1. Organizational partnerships that support learning through program partnerships with school districts and recruitment of strong candidates from the communities they serve
2. Programs structured to support learning through small cohorts and professional learning communities
3. Meaningful and authentic learning opportunities, including problem-based learning opportunities and field-based internships and expert coaching
4. Learning opportunities focused on what matters, including a focus on improving schoolwide instruction, attention to creating a collegial work environment, and use of data for improvement

Preparation programs for teachers and school leaders should be informed by well-defined standards that reflect the competencies, aptitudes, and skills needed to support whole child learning and development. Teacher and leader preparation programs should also include effective practices that are integrated with strong clinical experiences and performance-based assessments that assess how well educators meet these standards. Research has found that strong, research-aligned standards for teaching and school leadership are a key feature of high-achieving education systems, program quality, and student learning.

Preparation and credentials for early childhood educators

Teaching young children is complex, yet the bar to become an early childhood educator is often low. Early educator credentials also vary greatly by setting within states, from a high school degree in child care settings to a bachelor’s degree and teaching credential in preschool programs serving children of a similar age and need. While there is no one approach to early educator preparation, programs should equip early childhood educators with a deep understanding of child development and the complexities of educating young children. For example, features of promising models that prepare educators for credentials or degrees include:

- Local educator pipelines and pathways
- Relationship-building to promote persistence and success
- Opportunities for extensive clinical practice in feedback-rich environments
- Multifaceted supports that promote college persistence and success
- Well-supported and diverse staff of instructors, advisors, and coaches
- Community partnerships and funding to strengthen preparation

Video 4.1
What Does High-Quality Teaching Look Like?

Video URL: [https://highqualityearlylearning.org/pre-k-videos/](https://highqualityearlylearning.org/pre-k-videos/
Video courtesy of The High Quality Early Learning Project)
POLICY ACTIONS

States can design systems to prepare educators who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to support students’ whole child learning and development by:

1. *Developing strong educator licensure and certification systems.* To build a strong educator licensure and certification system, states should establish standards that define high-quality practice to reflect what we know about how people learn and ensure that teacher and leader preparation programs incorporate needed knowledge and skills (e.g., knowledge of how to support the development of diverse learners in ways that incorporate the science of learning and development).

States can also develop or adopt standards-aligned performance-based assessments that assess what educators can do in practice. Teacher performance assessments typically require candidates to document their plans and teaching for a unit of instruction, film and analyze their teaching, and collect and evaluate evidence of student learning. States can also establish accreditation and program approval processes that look at what programs provide and what candidates learn in order to support continuous improvement and ensure programs are regularly preparing candidates to meet the standards. To support strong implementation, states can convene educator preparation programs to learn and share best practices and develop common understanding and alignment around what these practices look like and how to best support their development in teachers and leaders.

2. *Adopting early childhood teacher credentials that focus on the specific needs of young children.* Early educator credential requirements should adequately reflect the complexity of educating young children and ensure that preparation programs for early childhood educators equip educators with a deep understanding of child development and the complexities of educating young children. Credentials should also be aligned so that children with similar needs receive a teacher with a similar level of expertise.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- [Educator Preparation Laboratory website](https://edpreplab.org/)
- [Supporting Principals’ Learning: Key Features of Effective Programs](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/supporting-principals-learning-key-features-effective-programs-report)
- [To Reach the Students, Teach the Teachers: A National Scan of Teacher Preparation and Social & Emotional Learning](https://casel.org/teacher-preparation/)

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

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POLICY STRATEGY 2

*Adopt Proactive Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategies*
A large body of research suggests that **certified and experienced teachers** matter for student achievement and teaching quality. For example, a review of 30 studies **found** that teaching experience is positively associated with student achievement gains and that as teachers gain experience, students learn more and do better on other measures, such as school attendance. This research has also found that more experienced teachers not only increase student learning for the students they teach but have positive impacts across the school community as well.

Yet despite existing research, **data** suggest that compared with prior decades, the teaching workforce has become less experienced. This is especially problematic given that **inexperienced teachers** (i.e., having less than 3 years of experience) tend to be concentrated in schools serving historically underserved students, particularly **students of color**. A recent **report** found that students enrolled in schools with a high proportion of students of color have less access to certified and experienced teachers compared with students in schools with a low proportion of students of color.

Several **promising strategies** have emerged to help recruit and retain **well-prepared and diverse educators**, including:

- High-quality teacher residencies, Grow Your Own programs, and service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs, which are effective in addressing teacher shortages and encouraging historically underserved students to enter and remain in the profession
- Hiring practices that promote educator quality and diversity
- Competitive compensation for pre-k–12 educators
- Principal preparation and development

### The Teaching Profession Playbook

The Partnership for the Future of Learning, in collaboration with 26 organizations and several individual experts, created the **Building a Strong and Diverse Teaching Profession** playbook, offering a comprehensive set of strategies that work together to recruit, prepare, develop, and retain high-quality teachers and bring greater racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity to the profession. The playbook includes examples of legislation; a curated list of publications, by topic, for further reading; a guide to talking about teacher shortages and strengthening the profession; and examples of research-based policies.

### Teacher residencies

Residencies offer a path to teacher certification through partnerships that ensure high-quality pedagogical training and clinical practice in yearlong programs and are typically targeted to postbaccalaureate candidates. Residents receive funding for tuition and living expenses while they apprentice with a master teacher in a high-need classroom for an entire school year and take related courses that earn them a credential and often a master’s degree. They repay this investment by committing to teach in a hard-to-staff position in the sponsoring district for at least 3 to 4 years after their residencies. **Research suggests** that residencies have the potential to increase the diversity of the workforce, improve retention of new teachers, aid in staffing of high-need districts and subject areas, and promote student learning gains. Eight **key characteristics** have been identified as important for high-quality residency programs:

1. Strong district–university partnerships
2. Coursework about teaching and learning tightly integrated with clinical practice
3. Full-year residency teaching alongside an expert mentor teacher
4. High-ability, diverse candidates recruited to meet specific district hiring needs, typically in fields where there are shortages
5. Financial support for residents in exchange for a 3- to 5-year teaching commitment
6. Cohorts of residents placed in “teaching schools” that model good practices with diverse learners and are designed to help novices learn to teach
7. Expert mentor teachers who co-teach with residents
8. Ongoing mentoring and support for graduates

**Grow Your Own programs**

Grow Your Own (GYO) programs are another way to address teacher shortages and recruit teachers of color into the workforce. These programs recruit local high school students, paraprofessionals, after-school program staff, or other local candidates from the community to enter a career in education and help them along their pathways into the profession. These models frequently underwrite the costs of teacher training and provide supports for candidates to succeed. As highlighted above, both residencies and GYO programs typically provide financial support to teacher candidates as a recruitment and retention tool. This is extremely important given that the cost of preparation is a common barrier to enter and remain in the teaching profession.

**Service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs**

More than two thirds of individuals entering the education field borrow money to pay for their education, with the average debt ranging from $20,000 for those with a bachelor’s degree to $50,000 for those with a master’s. For college graduates of color, the debt weighs more heavily. Twelve years after graduating, Black graduates owe $45,000 more than white graduates, and though Latino/a college students tend to borrow similar amounts as white students, they are twice as likely to default on their student loans. With beginning teachers making 20% less than individuals with college degrees in other fields, the debt-to-income ratio is a major barrier for both recruiting well-prepared teachers and diversifying the teacher pipeline.

A 2016 national survey found that 1 in 4 public school teachers who left teaching and said they would consider returning identified loan forgiveness as extremely or very important in their decisions to return. Research points to teacher service scholarship and loan forgiveness programs as an effective strategy to recruit and retain high-quality educators. These programs help candidates pay for teacher preparation in exchange for a commitment to teach for several years, typically 3 to 5 years, and are often targeted to high-need fields and/or communities.

**Hiring practices that promote educator quality and diversity**

Hiring practices can also influence teachers’ decisions to enter, stay, or leave the profession. A review of the research on hiring practices found that hiring teachers late in the year negatively affects teacher recruitment, retention, and student achievement. The report also found that schools face barriers to using critical information. One such barrier is the limited time available to school staff for conducting observations of teacher practice, which in turn limits their ability to adequately assess the fit between a teacher candidate and the hiring school that could ensure better placement of candidates.

**Competitive compensation for pre-k–12 educators**

Another barrier to recruiting and retaining a diverse, high-quality educator workforce is low and inequitable compensation. Despite extensive research that highlights that compensation affects retention and recruitment, educators’ compensation continues to lag behind comparable professions. For example, a study found that in 30 states, mid-career teachers who head families of four or more are eligible for government subsidies, and many teachers work second jobs to supplement their salaries.

Similarly, early childhood education (ECE) programs struggle to recruit and retain qualified educators due to low wages and challenging working conditions. Child care and preschool educators, who are disproportionately women of color, earn one third to one half of the wages of k–12 educators, and over half rely on public assistance to make ends meet. (See Figure 4.3.) Federal and state ECE program regulations increasingly require educators to have higher levels of education, but compensation has lagged. This puts a high level of stress on educators, which is passed on to the children they teach and exacerbates turnover, affecting instructional quality. In addition, early childhood educators who work to increase their qualifications struggle to pay for college and have difficulty completing relevant coursework due to structural barriers.
School leaders play a significant role in increasing teacher retention and supporting student achievement. Research has found that school leadership is second only to teaching among in-school factors that affect student learning, and a highly effective principal generates an additional 3-month increase in student math and reading learning. (See Figure 4.4.) Educators also frequently cite principal support as an influential factor in their decisions to remain in the school or profession. High-quality principal preparation programs can provide school leaders with adequate training to foster educator quality, lead and support instruction, create strong learning environments, and organize schools to support whole child development. Research has identified key features of effective programs, including organizational partnerships between preparation programs and districts, such as residencies and programs structured to support learning, and meaningful and authentic learning opportunities focused on what matters, such as networks of practice.

**Figure 4.4**
Why Do Effective Principals Matter?

POLICY ACTIONS
States can adopt proactive strategies to address teacher shortages and recruit and retain diverse, well-prepared educators by:

1. **Supporting high-retention pathways, such as high-quality teacher and leader residencies, that target shortage areas, particularly in high-need schools and communities.** Research points to common features of a high-quality residency. Teacher residencies offer an accelerated path to teacher certification through district and university partnerships that ensure high-quality pedagogical training and clinical practice in yearlong programs. Residents receive funding for tuition and living expenses, plus a stipend or a salary, while they apprentice with a master teacher in a high-need classroom for an entire school year and take related courses that earn them a credential and often a master’s degree. They repay this investment by committing to teach in a hard-to-staff position in the sponsoring district for at least 3 to 4 years after their residency year while they receive additional mentoring.

2. **Investing in and increasing access to service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs that support teacher candidates—particularly those from economically underserved families—in entering and remaining in the teaching profession.** These programs typically subsidize the cost of teacher preparation in exchange for a commitment to teach for several years, typically in high-need content areas and specialties and/or in high-need schools (e.g., rural schools, schools serving high percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). To attract well-prepared teachers to the profession, service scholarship and loan forgiveness programs should do the following:
   - Cover all or a large percentage of tuition
   - Target high-need fields and/or schools
   - Recruit and select candidates who are academically strong, are committed to teaching, and are well prepared, with attention paid to recruiting candidates from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds
   - Commit recipients to teach for a minimum number of years (e.g., 4 years), with reasonable financial consequences if recipients do not fulfill the commitment (but not so punitive that they avoid the scholarship entirely)
   - Be bureaucratically manageable for participating teachers, districts, and higher education institutions

3. **Creating or expanding high-quality Grow Your Own (GYO) programs to help recruit and prepare community members to teach in local school districts.** Beyond allocating funding to help seed these programs, states can ensure access to high-retention GYO programs by requiring that programs do the following:
   - Design structured pathways for candidates to advance toward required teaching credentials and certification at various stages of their careers
   - Provide paid work-based experience under the guidance of a trained mentor teacher that aligns with educator preparation coursework
   - Incorporate coursework and learning experiences that build knowledge of curriculum development and assessment; learning and child development; students’ social, emotional, and academic development; culturally responsive practices; and collaboration with families and colleagues
   - Recruit linguistically and culturally diverse candidates who are both reflective of and responsive to the needs of the local community
   - Provide wraparound supports for candidates through the recruitment, preparation, and induction years (e.g., cohort structure, scholarships, licensure test preparation, assistance navigating college admissions process)
   - Support strong collaboration and coordination across school districts, educator preparation providers, and community organizations

In addition, states could increase the number of high school pathway programs for teaching, such as teacher cadet and/or dual enrollment opportunities for future teachers.

4. **Implementing proactive preparation and hiring practices that promote educator quality and diversity.** For example, states can foster district partnerships with local teacher preparation programs—including at minority-serving institutions, historically
Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal colleges and universities, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander–serving institutions. Such partnerships can leverage service scholarships or other financial incentives to help make the programs more attractive and accessible. Preparation programs can work with local school districts to coordinate student teaching placements, and state policies can support districts in shifting hiring timelines to earlier in the school year to provide school leaders access to high-quality candidates, including educators of diverse backgrounds.

5. **Promoting educator quality and diversity by reducing barriers in licensure or certification systems**. States can examine barriers in current licensure and certification systems, including assessment requirements, that can constrict the teacher pipeline or disproportionately impact potential teachers of color and that are often poor predictors of later teaching effectiveness. For example, states can allow candidates multiple pathways to demonstrate subject matter and basic skills competence, such as through college courses and majors, rather than solely through traditional standardized exams. States can also consider high-quality teacher performance assessments, which measure what candidates do in the classroom, require candidates to demonstrate their abilities to support learning, and have been found to predict teaching effectiveness.

6. **Providing competitive compensation across the state by continuing to increase teacher salaries** to be more comparable to those of other college-educated professionals and closing within-state teacher salary gaps across districts. More competitive compensation can be a critical strategy to recruit and retain effective educators at all levels, although different approaches may be necessary depending on the state, regional, and district contexts. For example, states could work to close wage gaps between districts by providing competitive compensation through a variety of strategies, including examining their current school funding formulas and providing stipends and other forms of compensation targeted to teachers in high-need subjects and schools (e.g., loan forgiveness, which effectively acts as a compensation boost; stipends for National Board Certification; or bonuses).

7. **Raising early educator compensation and adopting other effective strategies to recruit and retain early childhood educators**. K–12 teachers earn two to three times as much as early educators. To address this large wage gap, states can offer competitive compensation to early childhood educators, on par with that of K–12 teachers. States may also provide financial and academic support, such as supporting early educators to pay for degree and credential attainment or adding a stipend for National Board Certification. States can improve retention of early educators by improving their working conditions, such as by ensuring access to paid planning time and in-service professional development on par with what K–12 educators receive.

8. **Supporting high-quality principal preparation and development**. States can invest in high-quality principal preparation and professional development programs that train school leaders in creating productive, professional, and collaborative school working environments. For example, districts can offer service scholarships for aspiring principals to participate in high-quality preparation programs; provide staff support to free up principals’ time to participate in professional development activities; offer trainings at times and locations that are more convenient; and work professional learning into district feedback, evaluation, and mentoring systems. Districts can leverage federal funds under ESSA Title II, Part A to help principals access timely and relevant preparation and development opportunities.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **Building a Diverse Teacher Workforce** (Education Commission of the States, Brief)
  https://www.ecs.org/building-a-diverse-teacher-workforce/

- **Strategies in Pursuit of Pre-K Teacher Compensation Parity: Lessons From Seven States and Cities** (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment; National Institute for Early Education Research, Report)
  https://cscce.berkeley.edu/strategies-in-pursuit-of-pre-k-teacher-compensation-parity/

- **Taking the Long View: State Efforts to Solve Teacher Shortages by Strengthening the Profession** (Learning Policy Institute, Report)
  https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/long-view-report

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
POLICY STRATEGY 3

Support High-Quality Mentoring and Induction Programs

High-quality mentoring and induction programs for novice teachers are another effective strategy to improve educator retention, support professional growth, and increase student outcomes. Research has identified key elements of high-quality induction programs that are associated with lower levels of turnover among novice teachers. For example, effective induction programs include mentoring, coaching, and feedback from experienced teachers in the same subject area or grade level; opportunities to observe expert teachers; orientation sessions, retreats, and seminars; and having regularly scheduled collaboration time with other teachers. Research has also found that educators who receive these types of induction supports are more than twice as likely to remain in the profession compared with educators who lack these supports. Induction programs have also been linked to improved instructional effectiveness and positive impacts on student achievement in the years following the program.

While many novice educators have access to some type of mentoring or induction programs, survey data suggest that many do not receive the comprehensive supports that research has found to be effective. The quality of such programs also varies widely, and the programs are less likely to be available for educators in low-income schools. During the Great Recession, the number of states supporting mentoring and induction programs decreased, and fewer teachers received mentoring in 2012 than in 2008. A 2019 state policy scan found that 31 states require induction and/or mentoring support for new teachers, and roughly half of those states require those programs to last 2 or more years. Given the benefits of mentoring and induction programs, state efforts should be directed at increasing access to these programs and ensuring their alignment with the evidence-based elements of effective programs. States can also increase the number of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) serving as mentors. National Board Certification allows applicants to demonstrate teaching expertise through a rigorous, standards-based performance assessment requiring submission of a teaching portfolio, videos of teaching, reflections on teaching, lesson plans, and evidence of student learning. Research has found that students taught by novice teachers mentored by NBCTs had a higher level of achievement than the students of novice teachers mentored by non-NBCTs.

POLICY ACTIONS

States can support high-quality mentoring and induction programs by:

1. Increasing access to comprehensive teacher mentoring and induction programs for all new teachers. Comprehensive mentoring and induction programs are an important part of ensuring that novice pre-k–12 teachers receive the types of supports that keep them in the profession and that build their capacities to meet the needs of all students. States may consider increasing funding to provide more comprehensive teacher mentorship and induction programs for teachers in their first and second years of teaching and more intensive supports for those serving under emergency certification. Because novice teachers tend to be disproportionately concentrated in districts serving high proportions of students from low-income families, states should consider distributing funding for mentoring and induction programs based on the number of novice teachers teaching in a district. Such funding may be coupled with training to support mentors’ work with new teachers. States should also continue to study the effectiveness of their mentoring programs and refine their designs as needed.

2. Developing new or supporting existing mentoring and induction models that highlight and integrate whole child approaches and mentor–teacher training and coaching. For example, states can build the capacity of educator and mentor cadres with expertise in whole child approaches to improve the quality of the learning environment (e.g., trauma-informed instruction, restorative practices, integration of social and emotional learning, project-based learning, and culturally responsive teaching). States can also increase investments in
National Board Certified Teachers, who can serve as skilled mentors for novice teachers as well as residents and student teachers, and who can bring their expertise to other critical teacher leader roles.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- **High Quality Mentoring and Instructional Coaching Practices** (New Teacher Center, Guide)

- **Mentoring & Induction Toolkit 2.0: Supporting Teachers in High-Need Contexts** (American Institutes for Research, Toolkit)
  https://gtlcenter.org/technical-assistance/toolkits/mi-toolkit

- **State Mentoring Policies Key to Supporting Novice Teachers** (National Association of State Boards of Education, Brief)
  https://www.nasbe.org/state-mentoring-policies-key-to-supporting-novice-teachers/

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

POLICY STRATEGY 4

**Promote High-Quality Professional Development Linked to Growth-Oriented Evaluation Systems**

As with children’s learning and development, educators also require a supportive context and collaborative culture in order to improve and grow their whole child teaching practice. Creating this environment requires a focus on individual practitioner development as well as a commitment to a broader systems-level approach to supporting educators at the school and district levels. Professional learning systems should therefore be guided by helping educators continue to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create the learning environments and rich learning experiences students need to thrive, as well as by a vision for collective school and system redesign that allows teachers and leaders to implement these changes.

To create a system in which educators feel supported to learn and grow throughout their careers, states need to (1) support districts in providing high-quality professional development (PD) and (2) develop growth-oriented educator evaluation and improvement systems.

**High-quality professional development**

Research suggests that well-designed and implemented PD can strengthen k–12 teachers' instructional practices and improve student outcomes. A 2017 review of 35 studies that demonstrated a positive link between teacher PD, instructional practices, and student outcomes identified seven characteristics of effective PD:

1. Focuses on the curriculum content that teachers teach and strengthens teaching strategies associated with specific curriculum content

2. Engages teachers in deeply embedded, contextualized opportunities that provide hands-on opportunities for teachers to design and try out new strategies

3. Supports teacher collaboration that is sustained over a period of time and offers valuable opportunities for educators to learn from each other, discuss best practices on how to support student needs, and grapple with issues related to instructional practices and materials

4. Provides teachers with clear models of effective practices, including lesson and unit plans, sample student work, observations of peer teachers, and video or written cases of accomplished teaching
5. Provides coaching and expert support that guides learning in the context of teachers’ individual practice and needs
6. Provides built-in time for teachers to receive feedback on their practice and to engage in opportunities for self-reflection
7. Provides adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect on new strategies by engaging teachers over weeks, months, or even academic years, rather than in short one-off workshops

Like K–12 teachers, most early educators lack access to coaching and high-quality PD, both of which have been found to improve instructional quality. Coaching—direct observation paired with individualized feedback from a mentor—has been linked to improved teacher–student interactions, less teacher burnout, and increased teacher retention. Coaching is currently an allowable use of funds in the Child Care and Development Block Grant and is a particularly high-leverage strategy for quality improvement.

The need for teachers to receive more personalized, relevant, and easily accessible PD has led more states to develop or adopt micro-credentials for teachers and administrators. Micro-credentials—self-directed, job-embedded, competency-based, and research-based professional learning opportunities that “verify a discrete skill that educators demonstrate by submitting evidence of application in practice”—hold promise for providing learning opportunities in addition to traditional PD, but the approach is still new, and little research has been done to measure its effectiveness. Early survey data of teachers using micro-credentials found that teachers liked the approach and felt they were able to use what they learned in their teaching practice. However, as states consider expanding the use of micro-credentials as part of their broader professional learning and advancement system, they should consider their intended purpose and ensure alignment with high-quality standards for professional learning. Additionally, micro-credentials, like all high-quality PD, work best when paired with collaboration, opportunities to learn and practice new skills, and time to reflect on what has been learned.

Growth-oriented educator evaluation and improvement systems

To create an evaluation system that develops well-prepared, effective educators, professional teaching standards must be linked to student learning standards, curriculum, and assessment to ensure a seamless relationship between what teachers do in the classroom and how they are assessed. A systemic approach to educator evaluation should move away from reliance on single standardized test scores and value-added measures that have been found to be unreliable and biased. Instead, the approach should be based on a collection of multifaceted evidence of teachers’ contributions to student learning and the broader school culture. Evidence of student learning can include teacher observations, portfolios of student work, student performance on curriculum-aligned tests (federal, state, district, school, or educator created), and measures of student progress toward set learning goals.

Well-rounded evaluations may also consider measures of a teacher’s ability to meet the needs of the whole child, including creating authentic and meaningful instruction and assessments; using student data to improve instruction; establishing a safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive classroom environment; engaging with families and caregivers; and contributing to a professional culture through consistent reflection and collaboration with other teachers. Examples of measures to evaluate these objectives may include peer observations, self-assessments, student and family surveys, and evidence of professional and leadership responsibilities within the school.

An evaluation system focused on growth and improvement should consider measures of student learning and contributions to school culture and provide opportunities for continuous goal setting, formal professional development, and job-embedded learning opportunities. It should also create structures that support high-quality evaluations, including time and training for evaluators, the support of master or mentor teachers to provide expertise and coaching, and high-quality learning opportunities to support teacher growth.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can promote high-quality professional development and growth-oriented evaluation systems by:

1. *Creating and supporting effective PD experiences that help educators meet whole child needs* through state departments of education, regional collaboratives, networks of school districts, and other providers. For example, states can provide, or work with districts to provide, PD for all educators on supporting students’ social, emotional, academic, and cognitive growth and development; developing and using authentic assessments; creating identity-safe classrooms and culturally responsive curricula and instruction; building strong family–school relationships, including through providing ongoing, flexible, and linguistically responsive communication and engagement opportunities;
implementing evidence-based personalized learning structures and experiences; and using educative and restorative practices that are trauma informed and healing focused. These trainings can be coordinated with other youth-serving community partners to support consistency of practice and leverage resources and expertise across settings.

In addition, states can support the development of high-quality micro-credentials as part of a larger professional learning system. Early research shows that states can do this by establishing quality standards to ensure micro-credentials hold consistent value to educators regardless of where they teach. To ensure that micro-credentials positively impact educator learning and professional growth, states can establish a well-designed system for developing, implementing, and evaluating micro-credentials; provide support and resources to educators while they work on a micro-credential (e.g., individualized coaching, timely feedback, opportunities to collaboratively learn with peers); and ensure educator access to micro-credential data to understand their impact on teaching practice and student learning.

2. Supporting schools and districts in adjusting and reconfiguring school schedules to allow for new staffing structures, such as team teaching, and providing increased opportunities for teachers to participate in ongoing teacher collaboration. For example, states can encourage schools and districts to provide sufficient and common planning time to discuss and develop strategies to meet the whole child needs of their students and ensure that both early childhood and k–12 educators are provided ongoing high-quality PD to develop and improve their teaching skills and practices. States can also support, through guidance and incentives, the formation of professional learning communities, interdisciplinary teaching teams, or co-teaching partnerships to foster peer-to-peer relationships and information sharing between staff.

3. Investing in and supporting access to coaching and other job-embedded supports for all early childhood education providers. For example, states can leverage federal funds from the Child Care Development Block Grant to support high-quality coaching in all ECE classrooms. Funding could go to programs that meet research-based program design standards, including coaching frequency and coaching qualifications.

4. Developing and adopting teacher and administrator evaluation systems that recognize the full range of student development and learning and are based on multiple forms of evidence of student learning. Evaluations should be based on authentic measures of teacher and administrator performance and growth, which can include formal and informal observations and feedback conducted by trained observers using evidence-based protocols, peer-to-peer observations, student and family surveys, evidence of teacher collaboration, and mentorship and leadership experiences. This information can be used to develop PD plans that allow teachers and administrators to set goals and measure progress toward meeting them and that provide administrators insight into schoolwide PD and peer mentoring opportunities.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- Empowered Educators: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality Around the World (National Center on Education and the Economy, Brief)
  https://ncee.org/empowered-educators/

- Principles for Teacher Support and Evaluation Systems (Council of Chief State School Officers, Guide)
  https://ccsso.org/resource-library/principles-teacher-support-and-evaluation-systems-0

  https://gtlcenter.org/products-resources/teaching-whole-child-instructional-practices-support-social-emotional-learning

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
POLICY STRATEGY 5

Support Educator and Staff Well-Being

To create and maintain learning environments that enable all youth and adults to thrive, it is necessary to support the social, emotional, and mental health and well-being of educators and school staff. A national survey found that 46% of educators report high daily stress during the school year, tied with nurses for the highest rate among all occupational groups. Educators who have greater stress and show more depressive symptoms create classrooms that are less conducive to learning, which in turn affects students’ academic performance. When teachers are highly stressed, students show lower levels of social adjustment and academic performance, whereas when teachers are more engaged, students show higher levels of engagement and achievement. Teacher stress has only been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2020–21 school year, teachers were more likely to report a high level of job-related stress and symptoms of depression than the general adult population, and more teachers are now reporting they are likely to leave the profession than before the pandemic.

Given that stress impacts educator performance and student outcomes, it is important to provide supports for educators to manage their stress and well-being. Research has found that educator well-being can be enhanced by:

- A supportive administration, particularly in creating a collegial, supportive school environment, which can reduce teacher stress and increase teacher engagement
- Mentoring and induction programs, which can improve satisfaction and retention as well as student academic achievement (See Policy Strategy 3: Support High-Quality Mentoring and Induction Programs for more information.)
- Workplace wellness programs, which can result in reduced health risk, health care costs, and staff absenteeism
- SEL programs, which can improve behavior and promote social-emotional skills among students, helping to reduce teacher stress and creating more positive engagement with students
- Mindfulness and stress management programs, which can help educators develop coping and awareness skills to reduce anxiety and depression, and improve health

POLICY ACTIONS

States can support educator and staff social, emotional, and mental health and well-being by:

1. Gathering data from educators on school environments and working conditions as well as their general health and wellness. The state may gather data by conducting staff surveys, through instruments such as the TELL survey (used by multiple states, including Kentucky, Ohio, and Oregon), and tracking educator chronic absenteeism. Such data can help support decisions about allocating resources to improve working conditions. In addition, the surveys can also give educators and staff an opportunity to express their perceptions of the school environment and identify supports to help improve working conditions, manage stress, and promote wellness.

2. Adopting policies and providing guidance for districts and schools on creating healthy school environments and implementing a comprehensive wellness approach to support educators and staff in adopting healthy lifestyles and managing stress. Policies and guidance may include:
   - Workplace wellness programs that improve teacher health, attendance, and engagement
   - Social-emotional supports that help teachers improve engagement with students, families and caregivers, and their colleagues
   - Teacher stress management programs that improve teacher performance and complement health approaches, such as
mindfulness meditation

- School redesign that creates the conditions for the transmission and sharing of knowledge among teachers
- Comprehensive educator wellness initiatives integrated into existing programs across the career continuum, including preservice, mentoring and induction, professional learning, and leadership training and development

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- **A Comprehensive Guide to Adult SEL** *(Panorama, Guide)*
  https://www.panoramaed.com/blog/comprehensive-guide-adult-sel

- **Supporting Educators Through Employee Wellness Initiatives** *(National Association of State Boards of Education, Brief)*
  https://www.nasbe.org/supporting-educators-through-employee-wellness-initiatives/

- **Teacher Stress and Health** *(Pennsylvania State University, Brief)*

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
Investing Resources Efficiently and Equitably

Why Resources Need to Be Invested Equitably and Efficiently

Funding for k–12 education comes from several sources, including federal (7.8%), state (46.9%), and local sources (45.3%). When used well, these resources can close opportunity and achievement gaps. Nevertheless, many state school finance systems have been deemed inadequate. The Great Recession led to a significant loss of state and local tax revenue that supports public schools, but even after the economy rebounded, all but four states failed to restore funding to pre-recession levels. Inadequate school funding disproportionately affects students of color and those living in poverty. As a result, students who are most affected by structural inequities—including housing and food insecurity, lack of health care, and inadequate community services—may also face the double impact of being enrolled in under-resourced schools.

Early childhood education, k–12 education, and other youth-serving systems are also burdened by funding and resource streams that operate in an incoherent and often conflicting manner. Funding to support young people comes from a broad array of federal and state agencies and programs with little to no coordination to ensure funds are spent to have the greatest positive impact on children and youth. This siloed approach to funding and spending without a clearly articulated vision has led to inefficiencies and fragmentation that stands in the way of meeting young people’s full learning and developmental needs. States should pursue strategies to create adequate and equitable funding formulas and use resources in a coherent and efficient manner.

To accomplish this, states can do the following:

1. **Adopt adequate and equitable school funding formulas** that prioritize high-need schools and support all young people in having access to the whole child opportunities they need to succeed.

2. **Allocate adequate funding across the developmental continuum** to ensure children and families are supported from birth to age 5.

3. **Blend and braid federal, state, and local resources** to reduce fragmentation and improve alignment across funding streams and programs.

4. **Leverage and align federal funds** in ways that support all young people in having access to the whole child opportunities they need to succeed.

5. **Invest in community schools and integrated student supports** to better serve the holistic needs of children and families.

6. **Close the digital divide** to ensure every child has access to appropriate technology and connectivity to meet their whole child needs.

**POLICY STRATEGY 1**

**Adopt Adequate and Equitable School Funding Formulas**

Public schools in the United States are among the most inequitably funded of any in the industrialized world. This is exacerbated by unequal local property tax bases and by states not investing enough funding to address these disparities. Despite evidence that money matters for student success in school and life, many state school funding systems do not provide adequate and equitable school funding, particularly for low-income schools. (See Figure 5.1.) Several states have moved in the direction of aligning school funding formulas with the resources needed for students to meet the state’s goals for education, or adequacy-based funding.
Given the great inequities in the United States, including the highest rates of child poverty in the industrialized world, schools should be providing more intensive services for children in high-poverty areas than in more affluent areas. However, the opposite is true. In many states, districts serving affluent students receive as much or more money than those serving children in poverty.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an analysis of funding equity across the United States found that school districts serving predominantly students of color receive $1,800, or 13%, less per student of combined local and state funding than those serving predominantly white students. Furthermore, poverty in the U.S. does not impact all children equally. Children of color are 2.5 times more likely to be poor than their white peers, and Black children are more likely than white children to live in states where Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds are the lowest.

Students who live in poverty, are homeless or in foster care, are English learners, or are identified for special education have additional needs and often require additional educational resources to achieve the standards and goals set by the state. This should be recognized in school funding formulas with greater per-pupil spending weights. Districts with concentrations of such pupils carry more responsibility to provide student support services and intensive teaching and learning opportunities, which need to be recognized in school funding systems as well.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

States can adopt an adequate and equitable school funding formula by:

1. **Prioritizing the needs of historically underserved children and adolescents.** For example. For example, states can calculate district funding beginning from a uniform base level of dollars per student and then adjusting or weighting for specific student needs (e.g., poverty, limited English proficiency, foster care, homelessness, or special education). States can also allow for local flexibility on budgeting decisions tied to identified areas of need and as determined by priority areas for continuous improvement (e.g., academic achievement, English language proficiency gains, graduation rates, chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, school climate, student access to a broad course of study, family and caregiver engagement, and access to qualified teachers). (See also Redesigning Curriculum, Instruction, Assessments, and Accountability Systems.)

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.
POLICY STRATEGY 2

Allocate Adequate Funding Across the Developmental Continuum

Evidence suggests that experiences from birth to age 5 are critical to development and that high-quality early learning opportunities lead to significant and sustained benefits for children. Investments in early childhood education programs have been found to have substantial gains in educational attainment and future earnings. A review of 21 public preschool programs found that students who attend high-quality preschool programs can experience lifelong benefits, are better prepared for school, and show greater learning gains in comparison to children who do not attend preschool. For example, a study of one of these programs, New Jersey’s Abbott Preschool Program, found that students who received 2 years of preschool showed sustained and significant achievement in 4th- and 5th-grade math, literacy, and science—far exceeding students who did not attend preschool.

Yet many children do not have access to these opportunities due to inadequate public funding. When preschool is available, many programs run for only a few hours a day, despite research that suggests that part-day programs are less effective than full-day programs at boosting child outcomes and are inaccessible for many working families.

State support for early care and education can address opportunity gaps that exist from an early age and can have lasting positive effects on students and their families and caregivers. Yet funding inequities are especially stark when it comes to access to high-quality early learning opportunities. One report found that early childhood programs received only about 37% of the public funding needed to provide high-quality care and education. Due to the lack of public funding, families and caregivers must cover the cost of care and education, which is often too expensive for many. As a result, few infants and toddlers have access to early education and care, and just 53% of 3- to 5-year-olds attended preschool in 2017. According to a report from the Education Trust, out of the 26 states analyzed, only 1% of Latino/a children and 4% of Black children were enrolled in high-quality preschool programs.
Where Does Your Child Care Dollar Go?

CostOfChildCare.Org is a project of the Center for American Progress that explores the costs of providing quality child care. Visit the interactive.

POLICY ACTIONS

States can allocate new funding across the developmental continuum to ensure children and families are supported from birth to age 5 by:

1. Investing in and supporting programs that allow families and caregivers and children to access high-quality early learning experiences. States can address achievement gaps early, before they widen, through investments in children from birth through kindergarten entry. For example, states can do the following:
   - Invest in prenatal health care and paid family leave
   - Support parents in accessing full-day child care
   - Invest in universal access to high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in a way that supports socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and linguistic diversity
   - Provide funds that are commensurate with the cost of running a high-quality program and a high-quality preschool
   - Invest in adequate compensation for the early learning workforce

States can make child care and preschool affordable using a sliding fee scale based on the ability of families and caregivers to pay for care, with full subsidies for the lowest-income families. Another key change that states can make to promote equity is adding preschool to school funding formulas. States that have done this have some of the highest enrollment in preschool or Head Start in the country. Even during recessions, state policymakers have added preschool through strategies such as
the 10-year phase-in period used in West Virginia.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- **Early Care and Education State Budget Actions FY 2020** (National Conference of State Legislatures, Report)  

- **How States Fund Pre-K: A Primer for Policymakers** (Education Commission of the States, Brief)  
  https://www.ecs.org/how-states-fund-pre-k-a-primer-for-policymakers/

- **The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons From the States** (Learning Policy Institute, Report)  

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

POLICY STRATEGY 3

**Blend and Braid Federal, State, and Local Resources**

Funds and other resources are often misaligned, fragmented, and inefficiently spent without guidance and clear structures to coordinate the numerous funding streams coming from federal, state, and local sources for children and youth, educators, and schools. Guidance and coordination can break down silos and promote data sharing and interagency cooperation, which can help ensure a more efficient and streamlined approach to distributing funds and resources across systems, accounting for their use, and meeting the varied needs of students and families. It can also help support evidence-based student support systems, such as community school models, that provide a comprehensive range of services to students and rely on state and federal funding across multiple agencies and programs.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides flexibility for states and districts to use federal funding and resources in a comprehensive way, but states will need to take the lead in blending and braiding resources and modeling for localities how to do the same.

POLICY ACTIONS

States can blend and braid federal, state, and local resources to reduce fragmentation and improve alignment across programs and funding streams and can support districts in doing the same by:

1. **Convening state leadership across a range of children’s issues, youth issues, and family issues to coordinate state and federal funding streams that meet the needs of children and families.** This may include health and human services, economic development, education, higher education, juvenile justice and corrections, labor, and other relevant agencies that are intended to meet the holistic needs of students and families. As mentioned in Setting a Whole Child Vision: Policy Strategy 3, this can include creating a permanent children’s cabinet that meets regularly, convening a stakeholder task force to evaluate gaps in cross-sector service provision, and issuing guidance on ways state agencies can coordinate and streamline services.

2. **Conducting an assessment of the available federal, state, and local resources across agencies and programs to provide a whole child support system from early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.** This may involve identifying current and new opportunities to blend and braid resources across federal and state programs (see Policy Strategy 4: Leverage and Align Federal Funds); providing support to local agencies; and clearly and proactively outlining for local agencies the available funding and the allowable uses of those funds within schools and across communities, including how whole child efforts can
be integrated into existing priorities.

3. **Leveraging funding to allow all preschoolers to learn in integrated settings, regardless of family income.** Means testing for programs causes children to be sorted and segregated into classrooms by family or caregiver income. For example, Head Start and state preschool programs often operate in parallel and serve children in poverty separately from their peers from higher-income families in state or private preschool programs. Preschoolers with special needs in state-run preschool programs are also siloed into special education classes because preschool programs are often disconnected from school districts and lack staff with specialized training. (See [Setting a Whole Child Vision](#) for more information on coordinating, strengthening, and streamlining services.)

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

**RESOURCES**

- **Coverage of Services to Promote Children’s Mental Health: Analysis of State and Insurer Non-Compliance With Current Federal Law** (California Children’s Trust; Mental Health America; Well Being Trust, Report)

- **Innovative Financing to Expand Services So Children Can Thrive** (Children’s Funding Project; Education Redesign Lab, Brief)
  https://edredesign.org/links/innovative-financing-expand-services-so-children-can-thrive

- **States Partnering With Educational Service Agencies to Increase Capacity, Coherence, and Equity** (Council of Chief State School Officers, Guide)
  https://ccsso.org/resource-library/states-partnering-educational-service-agencies-increase-capacity-coherence-and

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

**POLICY STRATEGY 4**

**Leverage and Align Federal Funds**

There is a wide range of federal programs available that can be used to support the learning and development of children and youth, but they are spread across numerous agencies and departments. In 2003, the [White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth](#) laid out the fragmentation of federal resources in stark terms: 339 federal programs spread across 10 departments and agencies spending more than $225 billion each year to support underserved youth and their families, but with little coordination, alignment, or management to ensure the funds were being spent efficiently and equitably. The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development conducted a representative scan of these programs and found a broad array of opportunities to meet whole child needs, including supports for low-performing schools and underserved students, health and wellness, bullying prevention, national service opportunities for mentors and tutors in schools, and prevention and treatment of substance abuse (see the Appendix of the [Commission’s Policy Agenda](#) for more information).
In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government made historic new levels of investment available to state and local governments and local educational agencies (LEAs). The 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provided $1.9 trillion in federal stimulus funding to help state and local governments—as well as individual taxpayers and businesses—address the impact of COVID-19. This act provided just over $170.3 billion to education, including more than $125.4 billion for k–12 public education, which made ARPA the federal government’s largest single investment in our schools. This investment added to the $13.5 billion in recovery funds for public education from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and $54.3 billion from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA).

States can take several important steps to ensure that communities are able to access existing funds from federal programs and agencies—including new federal recovery funds—and use these funds efficiently and effectively. For example, states can provide clear guidance on available federal resources and expertise to help local leaders align funding and manage essential partnerships to deploy resources. State leaders can also advocate for increasing flexibility in the use of funding tied to demonstrated improvement in outcomes of children and youth and more efficient compliance and reporting systems.

**POLICY ACTIONS**

**States can leverage and align federal funds in ways that support all young people in having access to the whole child opportunities they need to succeed by:**

1. **Utilizing and aligning federal funding through ESSA and related legislation to make strategic investments** that build local capacity and support settings designed for healthy development, especially in the most marginalized communities. For example, federal funding streams include:
   - **ESSA Title I funds**, which target low-income schools and can be used to address resource inequities (access to devices, wraparound services, and educational staff)
   - **ESSA Title II funds**, which can provide professional development for educators to build their capacities to meet the social-emotional and academic needs of students (see Building Adult Capacity and Expertise)
   - **ESSA Title III funds**, which can provide support for English learners and immigrant students to attain English language proficiency. These funds also support participation in language instruction programs by the parents, families, and communities of English learners
   - **ESSA Title IV funds**, which can be used toward a wide range of programs that support students and provide opportunities for academic enrichment, such as Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, School Safety National Activities, the Full-Service Community Schools program (see Policy Strategy 5: Invest in Community Schools and Integrated Student Supports), and the Education Innovation and Research program. ESSA Title IV funds may also be used to support LEAs that are implementing plans to reduce exclusionary discipline or expand access to school-based counseling and mental health programs
   - **McKinney-Vento funds**, which support students experiencing homelessness (SEH). These funds can be reinforced with increased state funding for SEH programs to help ensure that students receive the necessary resources for a quality educational experience. State policymakers can also guide and support districts in coordinating McKinney-Vento funds with other federal, state, and local funding streams to help them provide quality SEH programs

2. **Utilizing and aligning federal funding streams** from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies to support the well-being of children and adolescents. States can support LEAs in providing for young people’s health and wellness through, for example:
   - The expanded use of Medicaid, which can support initiatives related to health
and mental health

- The adoption of the “community eligibility provision” of the National School Lunch Program administered by the Department of Agriculture, which allows the nation’s highest-poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students

- The distribution of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Healthy Schools grants, which fund educational programming and staff development related to healthier nutrition and physical health

- Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) grants to receive support from national service members (e.g., AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps Seniors, AmeriCorps VISTA) to address identified school and community needs

- Investments from the Federal Communications Commission E-rate program to help close the digital divide by helping schools purchase devices and internet access (See Policy Strategy 6: Close the Digital Divide for more information.)

3. **Utilizing and aligning federal k–12 funding streams to make strategic investments** that support a high-quality educator workforce in high-need schools. Federal k–12 funding streams that can be used to develop and support teaching capacity include:

- **ESSA Title II funds**, which can provide professional development that helps educators continually build on and refine student-centered practices that support social and emotional learning

- **Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants**, which can fund training opportunities and pathways into teaching for teachers and leaders in child development and learning

- **Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds**, which fund programs and support teachers in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, including Part D funds, which can also be used for personnel preparation and development

4. **Utilizing and aligning federal higher education funding streams to make strategic investments that support a high-quality educator workforce in high-need schools.** To support the development of high-quality educator preparation programs, states can support institutions of higher education in accessing:

- **Higher Education Act (HEA) Title II-A Teacher Quality Partnership Grants**, which can support high-quality teacher residency and school leader preparation programs

- **HEA Title III and V funds**, which can support teacher preparation programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Tribal Colleges and Universities; Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian–Serving Institutions; Predominantly Black Institutions; Native American–Serving, Nontribal Institutions; Asian American and Pacific Islander–Serving Institutions; and Hispanic-Serving Institutions

States can also work with institutions of higher education and the state higher education and/or student aid agencies to help ensure that they are accessing and making prospective educators aware of the following service-related federal financial aid in Title IV of the Higher Education Act:

- **Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant Program**, which provides scholarships of up to $4,000 per year (for up to 4 years) to undergraduate and graduate students who are preparing for a career in teaching and who commit to teaching a high-need subject in a high-poverty elementary or secondary school for 4 years

- **The Teacher Loan Forgiveness (TLF) Program**, which allows teachers with certain federal loans who teach in schools of concentrated poverty for 5 consecutive years to earn $5,000 in loan cancellation. This amount can increase to $17,500 for k–12 teachers in high-poverty schools teaching special education or secondary teachers in high-poverty schools teaching math or science

- **The Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program**, which provides loan forgiveness for a borrower’s outstanding loan balance after 10 years of full-time employment in a public service profession, such as teaching in a public school. States should help institutions of higher education work with students interested in loan forgiveness programs to determine whether TLF or PSLF is best suited for their context, including loan balance and planned service area

5. **Utilizing and aligning federal career and technical education (CTE) funding streams to make strategic investments** that support high-quality teacher workforces in high-need schools. Funding through the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act can be used to strengthen k–12 and postsecondary CTE programs for students, support teaching as a high school career pathway, address CTE teacher shortages, and provide for CTE educator development. CTE funding can also be used for
curricular and pedagogical support, peer mentoring, and increases in the number of licensed and credentialed CTE personnel. For example, states can do the following:

- Provide financial incentives and additional supports for individuals with industry or educational backgrounds to become certified as CTE teachers, particularly in STEM-related fields
- Incentivize CTE teachers to earn industry- or sector-specific certifications and credentials, such as in the STEM fields or other in-demand industry sectors or occupations
- Improve and diversify the pipeline into the CTE profession by underwriting preparation for individuals from both industry and academic backgrounds, particularly in subject-area shortage fields, for CTE positions (See Building Adult Capacity and Expertise for more information about investing in the educator workforce.)

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- A Guide to Expanding Medicaid-Funded School Health Services (Healthy Schools Campaign, Guide)
  https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/resources/single/a-guide-to-expanding-medicaid-funded-school-health-services/
- Investing in Our Future: Ensuring Student Access to SEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, Video)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlUyXyzx46Y

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.

POLICY STRATEGY 5
Invest in Community Schools and Integrated Student Supports

As described in Transforming Learning Environments, integrated student support systems—through multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), community schools, and/or coordination of service teams (COST)—link children and families and caregivers to a range of academic, health, and social services at the school site. As laid out in Policy Strategy 4: Leverage and Align Federal Funds, there are numerous federal opportunities to support a whole child approach to learning and development. Many of these resources can specifically be used to bolster community schools and integrated student support services.

Community schools can also be supported with federal recovery act funds, as they are an allowable use under Titles I, II, and IV of ESSA. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) specifically identifies “full-service community schools” as an allowable use of funds to support student mental health. Additionally, the 20% of local educational agency (LEA) funds set aside for learning recovery under ARPA, as well as state set-aside funds, can be used to support community schools, including by providing expanded and enriched learning time.

States play a critical role in communicating about, targeting, and coordinating federal funding streams. States can also develop their own grant programs and budget supports, technical assistance, and regulations to facilitate community school and integrated student support implementation.

POLICY ACTIONS

States can invest new or additional funding in community schools and integrated student supports to better serve the holistic needs of children and families by:
1. Developing and supporting community schools through state funding, guidance, and technical assistance. For example, states can establish grant programs or a formula-based approach to develop and support collaborative partnerships for local planning and implementation of community schools. To guide implementation, states can create guidance documents, toolkits, or FAQs describing funding sources, resources, examples, and best practices. In addition, states should provide technical assistance to connect districts with communities of practice and provide professional development. State boards of education can also issue policy resolutions to signal support for LEAs to take up a community school strategy, create common definitions, and help direct resources to support implementation.

2. Adopting and supporting evidence-based integrated student support service initiatives. This may include increasing investments in:
   - Access to lunch, breakfast, after-school, and summer meal programs
   - In-school support personnel (e.g., counselors, tutors, social workers, school psychologists, mentors) and in supporting partnerships with community mental health providers
   - Health and wellness screenings and services
   - Developing and coordinating policies that connect multiple initiatives, such as MTSS models, to meet the needs of all young people

   This may also involve enlisting regional agencies to help coordinate local services (e.g., family engagement, health care, housing support, nutrition services, job support, transportation assistance), including through MTSS and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) implementation as well as district community school initiatives, and providing professional development, coaching, and technical assistance. (See Transforming Learning Environments, Policy Strategy 4: Establish Integrated Support Systems for more information about integrated student supports.)

3. Blending and braiding federal funding through ESSA as well as federal recovery funds with local initiatives and programs to support new or existing community school initiatives. State and local funding sources to support community school initiatives may include grant programs and formula funding as well as private and philanthropic sources. Federal funding sources may include Title I, Part A funding for school improvement in schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support and intervention and can be used to support community schools, which qualify as an evidence-based intervention under ESSA. Titles II and IV funding can be used to support whole child programs through educator professional development and the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program. Title IV funds designated for community learning centers and full-service community schools can also be used to support community schools. Community schools can also be supported with federal recovery funds.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES

- **Community Schools Playbook** (Partnership for the Future of Learning, Playbook)
  https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/

- **Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement** (Learning Policy Institute; National Education Policy Center, Brief)
  https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-equitable-improvement-brief

- **Financing Community Schools: A Framework for Growth and Sustainability** (Partnership for the Future of Learning, Brief)
  https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/finance

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
POLICY STRATEGY 6

Close the Digital Divide

Technology and high-speed internet access are critical resources for students to succeed in school and life, yet many students lack access to reliable connectivity and appropriate technology to meet their whole child needs. According to one recent report based on data from the 2018 census, approximately 30% of the 50 million k–12 students in the United States lacked high-speed internet or devices needed for digital learning, with nearly two thirds of those students lacking both. This report also found that at least 300,000 teachers lacked adequate connectivity to teach from home. Furthermore, evidence shows that these disparities disproportionately impact students of color, students from low-income families, and students in rural communities. (See Figure 5.2.)

Figure 5.2
Percentage of Students Without High-Speed Internet by Race and Ethnicity

Extended periods of school closures and remote and hybrid learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic brought greater attention to the digital divide and the urgent need to close it. A survey from spring 2020 found that 13% of parents from low-income homes reported lacking devices or internet connections and were nearly 10 times more likely than those from more affluent homes to say their children were doing little or no remote learning. Students from low-income families were also 3 times more likely to report not having consistent access to a device and 5 times more likely to attend a school without distance learning materials or activities.

Closing the digital divide is critical to addressing educational equity and providing opportunities to enhance deeper and more authentic learning. (See Redesigning Curriculum, Instruction, Assessments, and Accountability Systems for more information on deeper learning skills and instruction.) In addition to being essential for learning, connectivity also provides families with access to telehealth, employment, and other needed benefits. One report estimated that closing the digital divide will require at least $6 billion for infrastructure and devices at the federal level, half being recurring costs each year. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) makes a one-time down payment toward closing this divide by providing $7.2 billion in funding through the newly created Emergency Connectivity Fund, which can be used to provide devices and connectivity to students, educators, and patrons of public libraries, but ongoing funding through the federal E-Rate program will be needed to ensure long-term digital connectivity for all students.

POLICY ACTIONS

States can close the digital divide to ensure every child has access to appropriate technology and connectivity, and its
effective use, to meet their whole child needs by:

1. Creating plans to ensure every child has access to computing devices and internet. States may need to survey districts to gain a better understanding of where students experience barriers to accessing devices or high-speed internet. States and districts should create task forces or working groups to inform actionable plans so all students can access high-speed internet connections with up-to-date devices. These plans should be designed in partnership with the community, state agencies, and businesses to provide technology that is equally accessible for historically underserved children, including students with disabilities and English learners. In addition, such plans may include guidance and technical assistance to facilitate implementation.

2. Leveraging federal and state programs that can supplement district budgets to ensure equitable access to computing devices and internet connectivity. For example, states may supplement funding from the federal E-rate program to expand broadband access or utilize funding from COVID-19 relief packages to purchase laptops. To ensure all students have high-speed internet access and access to up-to-date devices, states should prioritize schools in underserved areas farthest from reliable internet access, including those in low-income rural communities.

3. Facilitating partnerships between districts and nonprofit or for-profit businesses to alleviate the costs of expanding broadband to unserved and underserved students in the districts. For example, states can advocate for the private sector (network providers and device manufacturers) to offer discounted and consistent pricing across all districts to ensure equitable access to districts regardless of purchasing power. States can also build partnerships and leverage more funding for targeted internet expansion in schools by connecting these efforts to other policy priorities—economic development, transportation, health care, and agriculture.

4. Investing in professional development for educators to ensure the effective use of technology. States should ensure that educators have access to high-quality professional development on effectively using and integrating technology into classroom instruction in ways that are guided by teacher and student needs and that include peer-to-peer collaboration. Such professional development may include micro-credentials, self-guided modules, or online certificates. Professional development should also be provided to support staff, such as guidance for counselors, social workers, and nurses, to help them effectively deliver services remotely.

Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional policy examples.

RESOURCES


- **Close the Digital Divide** (Learning Policy Institute, Report) https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org/close-digital-divide


Visit the online toolkit at wholechildpolicy.org for additional resources.
Related Initiatives

Developing and sustaining whole child education grounded in the science of learning and development (SoLD) requires both a new policy agenda and comprehensive systems change. The Whole Child Policy Toolkit aims to tackle the first piece of this work by supporting states in adopting a whole child policy approach. Other initiatives are also underway to transform the education and other youth-serving systems to better reflect what the field knows about how children learn and develop.

The SoLD Alliance aims to make the science of learning and development a deeply understood, widely held, and actionable driver of equity and excellence in education systems—to ensure that all young people, no matter who or where they are, benefit from effective, high-quality, continuously improving learning environments that are designed to unleash and realize everyone’s potential for success in school and in life.

Design Principles for Schools and Design Principles for Community-Based Settings provide frameworks to guide the transformation of k–12 and community-based learning settings and illustrate how practitioners can implement practices and structures that support whole child learning and development.

Educator Preparation Laboratory (EdPrepLab) aims to strengthen educator preparation in the United States by developing and sharing expertise within a network of pioneering teacher and leader preparation programs and with the wider field, building a thriving community of practice, and fostering well-informed collaboration between preparation programs, school districts, and state and federal policymakers.
About the Whole Child Policy Table

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD) generated a platform and momentum for a holistic approach to education practice, policy, and research. The SEAD Commission brought stakeholders together around a common whole child vision for education. At the same time, the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance was established to synthesize the evidence base on how children learn and develop and to lay out a road map for transformational systemic change in education. These initiatives have brought stakeholders together around a common whole child vision for education, but after the sunset of the SEAD Commission, there was a need for coordination to carry forward this vision into practice and policy and to build continued coherence and alignment across the education ecosystem.

To meet this need, the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) established the Whole Child Policy Table (WCPT) to align and coordinate the efforts of state-facing membership organizations, researchers, and policy groups to advance a policy agenda based on supporting the full scope of children’s developmental needs. The WCPT partners work together to create the enabling conditions for state- and district-level innovation around the ways students learn, teachers are prepared and supported, and schools are designed and resourced.

In 2019, LPI convened four major state policy membership organizations—the Council of Chief State School Officers, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Conference of State Legislatures, and National Governors Association—which agreed to join together to support this work with their members, through their communications vehicles and conferences and other educative and policy advancement activities. LPI also brought together key partners in this work, including the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL); the Science of Learning and Development Alliance; the Education Commission of the States; the Forum for Youth Investment; Afterschool Alliance; the National Urban League; America’s Promise Alliance; CIVIC; and others.

The Whole Child Policy Table unifies and coordinates the work of a broad set of policy partners who aim to support policymakers interested in whole child development work in schools. The WCPT works to collectively educate and share equity-focused whole child policy options for states that want to accelerate their existing work, create the conditions necessary to enable equity-focused systems change grounded in the science of learning and development, and provide the resources that policymakers may need to implement whole child policy approaches.

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The toolkit can be found online at: wholechildpolicy.org

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.