



Whole Child Policy Recommendations



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One of the great lessons of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is that its singular focus on student performance in reading and math overlooks important aspects of teaching and learning and actually deprives students of essential elements of a comprehensive education. Indeed, this desire for more expansive criteria to measure student achievement is at the core of virtually every proposal to improve NCLB.

A world-class, 21st century education goes well beyond reading and math. Test scores, while important, tell only part of a student's story. Scores offer little insight into or understanding of achievement in important subjects like science and the arts, of the child's connection to the school community, of preparation for civic engagement, or of the social and emotional health of the school and its students. For a more complete picture of children's needs and students' success, states must modernize their entire approach by

- Establishing statewide commissions to ensure policies and practices that support the whole child.
- Aligning and coordinating services, resources, and data across state agencies that serve children.
- Publishing annual state report cards that measure the health, safety, and education of children and families.

Although the federal government wields significant power, schools are traditionally governed at the local level and funded primarily by state and local dollars, which are supplemented by federal funds. States have a unique and critical role; they are at the vanguard of innovation to offer not a system of schools, but a system of learning. It is up to state education leaders to promote comprehensive education policies that support the whole child in general, and the following recommendations in particular. Like every successful education initiative, all that is needed are leaders with a vision of what is possible, the commitment to improve, and the courage to try.

Establish a commission in each state to ensure policies and practices that support the whole child.

The demands of the 21st century require a new way of coordinating all of the policies and programs that support children—a whole child approach to learning, teaching, health, safety, and community engagement. It is time to consider what works best for kids and to put their interests first.

As a start, we urge each state to create a “blue ribbon commission” to review the spectrum of state policies and delivery of services to children and to credibly suggest the necessary changes required to ensure all children succeed.

A child's education does not occur exclusively in school, nor does it take place in a vacuum. Children don't learn as well if they are hungry or feel unsafe. Nor can they thrive if they are sick, destitute, or neglected.

A variety of state agencies have some level of responsibility for the well-being of young people, but they do not operate with a coordinated view of all the needs of individual children and young adults. ASCD believes that we will never realize all of the gains we seek in learning and student achievement without a concerted focus on the whole child. States and communities need to align their resources and services to work in concert to ensure children are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.

Much like the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Kentucky, or Maryland's Thornton Commission on Education Finance, Equity, and Excellence, these blue ribbon commissions will be independent, nonpartisan panels focused exclusively on what is in the best interest of children in the state. They will publish their findings and policy recommendations for consideration by the public and local leaders.

Align and coordinate services, resources, and data across state agencies that serve children.

The hallmarks of our current Internet era—the information age—are communication and interconnectedness. We, and especially youth, live in an increasingly connected world, where information is transmitted and shared constantly. And yet, to a large extent, the government agencies and offices serving families and children have not kept pace with the opportunities presented by these technologies. Onerous bureaucratic restrictions and compartmentalized responsibilities can prevent states from effectively carrying out their mission.

A truly 21st century education for students requires that state and local governments dismantle the obstacles to real collaboration between and among school systems and the social, health, and safety services that support children.

We recommend that states ensure they coordinate and provide services in a way that supports the whole child. And we believe a critical first step is to make sure that state data systems give both a comprehensive view of how children are being served throughout the state and an individual view of young people, without forcing policymakers and the public to go from agency to agency to find out.

Government agencies must work in concert to best serve the interests of children. Coordinating data among state agencies is challenging because of incompatibility among data systems, bureaucratic turf battles, and the need to protect confidential information. But such coordination is essential if states are to succeed at making sure all children are healthy, safe, supported, academically engaged, and challenged.





Departmental cooperation also ensures that support for children is delivered seamlessly. A vibrant partnership of health, safety, educational, and other services will align efforts and priorities—at the state and individual levels—to support the successful development of the whole child.

Publish an annual state report card that measures the health, safety, and education of children and families.



In the past decade, schools have begun to publish information for parents and taxpayers about how their schools are doing, most of it based on how students perform on standardized state tests. The information is useful, but insufficient.



The measure of student success is much more than a passing grade, just as determining whether schools and communities are succeeding at meeting the needs of children goes well beyond a test score.

The adage that “what gets tested, gets taught” has resulted, for many schools, in a focus on instructional strategies designed to raise standardized test scores, rather than promote genuine learning. Reading and math scores are easy to obtain; measures of civic engagement or artistic accomplishment and appreciation require a different kind of assessment. This information is not as easily accessible, and it is often not available at all.

To measure progress on educating the whole child, states need to annually assess the health, safety, and education of children and families. An annual Whole Child State Report Card would be an important tool—a comprehensive look at the circumstances (e.g., hunger, poverty, crime, literacy, health) of children in the state—for the public and policymakers about factors that influence student success.

A small investment to publish a clear, easy-to-digest report available to the public can produce a better-informed citizenry and, therefore, an improved policy environment. Policymakers would be able to easily identify the progress and areas in need of improvement to ensure that all of our children receive the education and support needed for a productive future.

For more information, send an e-mail to policy@ascd.org or visit www.ascd.org/wholechildpolicies.



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