

**Written Testimony of Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond
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**Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee
United States House of Representatives
Subcommittee Hearing: Social and Emotional Learning and Whole Child Approaches in
K–12 Education
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Chair DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your invitation to participate in this hearing. My name is Linda Darling-Hammond. I am the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University and the President and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). The Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, we seek to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child.

I am honored to be here today to discuss the federal role in supporting social-emotional learning (SEL) and whole child approaches to education, so all children have access to quality educational opportunities that support their ability to learn most effectively.

Today, I will discuss the need for taking a whole child approach to education; describe the research that demonstrates the importance of interrelated social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as physical and mental health; and share a framework with accompanying recommendations on how the federal government can holistically support all students.

Along with colleagues Dr. Pamela Cantor, Dr. David Osher, and others, I have been part of a project to synthesize what we have learned about human development from neuroscience and the sciences of learning and development. The large body of evidence demonstrates that effective learning depends as much on strong, positive relationships and a trusting, supportive environment that allows the brain to function optimally as it does on the clear presentation of concepts and rich, hands-on learning experiences.

A positive school environment supports students' growth across all the developmental pathways—physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional—while it reduces stress and anxiety that create biological impediments to learning and teaches the skills students need to be successful. 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.¹

Furthermore, academic learning and other accomplishments in the world depend on our ability to integrate social, emotional, and academic skills: to clear our minds, focus our attention, manage our emotions, communicate and collaborate effectively with others, and be resilient in the face of obstacles.² These are skills that can be learned, and doing so does not detract from academic learning; it actually accelerates the pace of academic learning.

What Is Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning, and What Are Its Benefits?

Emotions and social relationships affect learning. Positive relationships, including trust in the teacher, and positive emotions—such as interest and excitement—open up the mind to learning. Negative emotions—such as fear of failure, anxiety, and self-doubt—reduce the capacity of the brain to process information and to learn. Students’ interpersonal skills, including their ability to interact positively with peers and adults, resolve conflicts, and work in teams, all contribute to effective learning and lifelong behaviors. These skills, which build on the development of empathy, awareness of one’s own and others’ feelings, and learned skills for communication and problem-solving, can be taught.³

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies five main areas of social-emotional competence: *self-awareness* involves identifying emotions and accurate self-perceptions; *self-management* includes managing stress and controlling impulses, which includes aspects of executive function; *social awareness* entails perspective-taking, empathy, and appreciation for diversity; *relationship skills* involving communication and cooperation are about establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and resolving conflicts when they arise; and *responsible decision-making* focuses on skills like identifying problems, evaluating, reflecting, and acting with consideration for the well-being of oneself and others.

In addition to these skills, there are a set of closely related cognitive abilities that are important, such as the ability to organize our thoughts and actions so we can follow through on things in an orderly way, and the ability to reflect on what we experience and learn from those experiences (what is known as metacognition), which allows us to become increasingly strategic in our learning and behavior. And there are perspectives such as a growth mindset that allow us to understand that we can improve our work with effort and that we need not give up when we experience setbacks, but we can analyze how to move forward and marshal our efforts in that direction.

These are skills that many employers say are among the most important for success in work, that sports fans know are among the most important for success in athletics, and that research demonstrates are important for success in life. We have found that these skills can be explicitly taught and learned ... and they produce focus, perseverance, resilience, and strategic actions that support success in everything we do.

Parents recognize the importance of these skills: A recent study from the Fordham Institute found that nearly all parents, regardless of political affiliation, want their children to acquire these kinds of skills and believe that schools have a role to play in teaching them.⁴ Parents agreed that they want their children to learn how to set and achieve goals; navigate social situations; empathize with others; stand up for people of different backgrounds; respond ethically; and understand, express, and control their emotions. There is overwhelming agreement among all parents that students’ social and emotional needs must be addressed for them to “reach their full academic potential.” In fact, the study concluded that “when SEL-related programs are described without jargon, support soars on both sides of the aisle.”

Given this popularity and the research supporting SEL, it is unsurprising that every state has comprehensive SEL standards with developmental benchmarks for preschool students.⁵ In addition, at least 18 states have adopted SEL-related k–12 competencies and/or standards.⁶

This range of skills may be taught in part through sharing sessions and brief lessons as part of classroom meetings in elementary or advisory classes in secondary schools. They can also be folded into everything that is done throughout the school if staff members learn how to embed them in daily work and life: processes for how conflicts are resolved on the playground; how students learn to take a deep breath and calm themselves and talk about what has happened when something disturbing has happened; how students learn to revise their essays in English class by reflecting on feedback and developing a growth mindset that supports their improvement; how they learn to collaborate effectively on the investigation they are doing in science class; how they learn to organize their notebooks and study efforts in History class. And they will be more likely to learn these things if they feel confident that they will experience support for their efforts to learn how to manage themselves responsibly.

These efforts pay off for academic achievement as well as student well-being: A recent meta-analysis of 54 classroom management programs found that while all of the approaches had positive effects, the interventions focused on the social-emotional development of students were the most effective.⁷

Another meta-analysis of 213 studies, representing more than 270,000 students from urban, suburban, and rural schools, found that participating students show greater improvements than comparison students in their social and emotional skills; attitudes about themselves, others, and school; social and classroom behavior; school grades and test scores, including an average 11-percentile gain in achievement. They also experienced significant reductions in misbehavior, aggression, stress, and depression.⁸ Following up on this, a later meta-analysis found that these benefits were sustained in the long term, showing how learned attitudes, skills, and behavior can endure and serve as a protective factor over time.⁹ In cost-benefit terms, economists have estimated that participation in SEL programs shows an 11 to 1 return on investment, as schools become safer and students become more successful in school and in life.¹⁰

Additional research also shows that teachers can be effectively prepared for the social and emotional dimensions of teaching and learning.¹¹ Embedding SEL in comprehensive approaches to teacher preparation is important because it enables them to understand students well, develop productive relationships and curriculum in their classrooms, and feel competent and confident so they communicate a sense of efficacy to their students. In addition, teachers and principals who are better prepared feel more efficacious, experience less stress in their jobs, and are more likely to stay in the profession, providing students with the stability they need.¹² Unfortunately, only 22 percent of educators feel they are very prepared to teach social and emotional learning in the classroom.¹³

The Need for a Whole Child Approach to Education

In addition to a psychologically safe environment and opportunities to learn social, emotional, and cognitive skills, the science of learning and development demonstrates that children need

stability in their lives, good nutrition, health care, and supports when they have experienced trauma, which creates a toxic stress reaction that affects brain development, physical health, learning, and behavior. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 46 million children were exposed each year to violence, crime, abuse, homelessness, or food insecurity, as well as a range of other experiences that cause psychological trauma annually.¹⁴ Likewise, more than half of American schoolchildren—about 25 million—live in low-income families and, increasingly, in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and racial isolation. Almost one in four children also experience an adverse childhood experience before they start school. These experiences—which may also include parental unemployment and inadequate health care—create toxic stress that can impact children’s attention, learning, and behavior.¹⁵

Over the last two years, the COVID-19 crisis has increased these adverse conditions, stretching many families to the breaking point, as they struggle to balance the demands of work with caring for their children or dealing with the loss of loved ones. Children of all ages are grappling with the ensuing stress and trauma, which can present itself in school by having difficulty paying attention or acting out, for example—which has led to an increase in school tensions and disciplinary actions.¹⁶

In schools where students encounter punitive discipline tactics rather than supports for handling adversity, their stress is magnified. In addition to meeting basic needs for food and health care, schools can buffer the effects of stress by facilitating supportive adult-child relationships that extend over time; building a sense of self-efficacy and control by teaching and reinforcing social and emotional skills that help children handle adversity, such as the ability to calm emotions and manage responses.¹⁷ Furthermore, when adults have the cultural competence to appreciate and understand children’s experiences, needs, and communication, they can offset stereotypes, promote the development of positive attitudes and behaviors, and build confidence to support learning in all students.¹⁸ These conditions, coupled with mental health supports, nutrition supports, and restorative practices, are critical for supporting children, youth, and adults as they cope with the challenges, uncertainty, and stress presented by the pandemic, the economic crisis, and the ongoing effects of poverty and discrimination.¹⁹

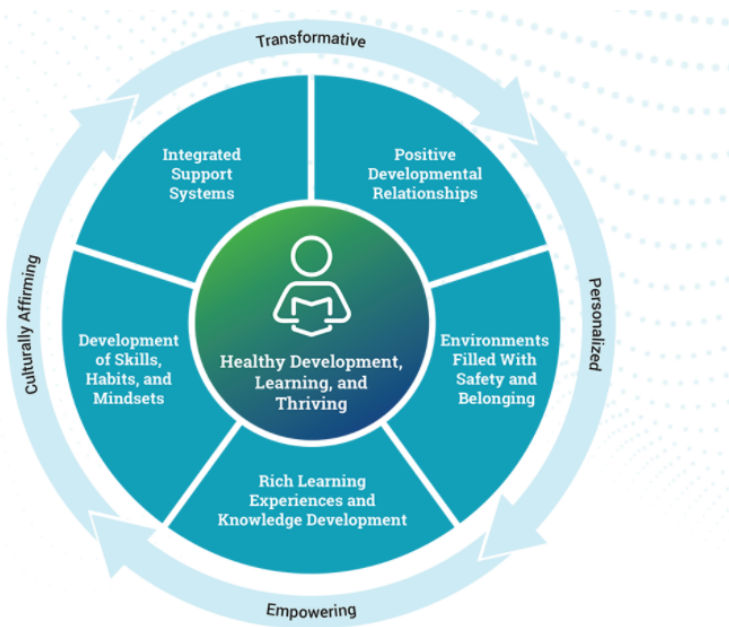
The good news is that when children have strong relationships within a positive and supportive environment that includes needed supports, they can overcome adversity and achieve stability and success. The task for educators and policymakers is to develop these environments with clarity and purpose.

Whole Child Development Framework

To help education stakeholders and practitioners translate the science of learning and development into policy and practice, LPI, Turnaround for Children, and their partners in the SoLD (Science of Learning and Development) Alliance created a framework for whole child education that supports student achievement, attainment, and behavior and can guide the efforts of schools and districts as they design for success.²⁰ (See Figure 1.)

The foundation begins with developing *positive developmental relationships* and *environments filled with safety and belonging* that promote strong attachments and relational trust. For

example, structures for effective caring include teachers staying with students for more than one year, school advisories and block scheduling in secondary schools, teaching teams that share students, and time set aside for home visits and other communications that strengthen connections between home and school. To promote such environments, policymakers can support the redesign of schools so that they support stronger relationships; foster professional development for educators to develop culturally-responsive, caring classrooms; and incorporate measures of school climate (such as student surveys), social-emotional supports, and school exclusions in accountability and reporting systems so that these and other opportunity-to-learn indicators are a focus of schools' attention, and data are regularly available to guide continuous improvement.²¹



Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design

Productive instructional strategies connect to student experience, support conceptual understanding and develop metacognitive abilities through well-designed, collaborative inquiry-based learning combined with direct instruction and the use of formative performance assessments that offer opportunities for feedback and revision. To foster productive instructional strategies policymakers can support subsidies for strong preparation programs and investments in in-service development that help educators continually build on and refine their pedagogy; underwrite teacher collaboration time to problem-solve around the needs of individual children and engage in professional learning communities; and learn from other schools through networks, site visits, and documentation of successes.²²

Explicit development of social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets that enable self-regulation, interpersonal skills, perseverance, and resilience through adoption of social and

emotional curriculum programs, integration of skills into content instruction, and use of educative and restorative behavioral supports. To support the development of these skills, policymakers can fund access to SEL programs and replace zero-tolerance policies regarding school discipline with policies focused on explicit teaching of social-emotional strategies and restorative discipline practices that support young people in learning key skills and developing responsibility for themselves and their community such as self-regulation, empathy, collaboration, and conflict resolution.

Finally, a whole child approach enables healthy development, meeting students' needs, and addressing barriers to learning through an integrated *system of supports* that includes expanded learning opportunities, health and mental health services, and social services, made available through multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). To develop and implement systems of support policymakers can work to increase the number of well-trained school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other mental health professionals qualified to provide school-based mental health services, implement full-service community schools, and align student-based services across departments and agencies.

States and Districts Leading the Way to Support the Whole Child

Fortunately, many states and districts are investing in whole child approaches to education. These approaches include increasing opportunities to build and maintain meaningful relationships and providing personalized supports that enable students to learn, cope, and become resilient. For example, almost a third of districts list spending federal COVID-relief funds on social-emotional learning curriculum, materials, or training,²³ and states including California, Maryland, New York, and Vermont have launched or expanded community school initiatives.

Creating Integrated Systems of Supports Through Community School Initiatives

The integration of education and health, mental health, and social welfare supports can be accomplished through a community school approach.²⁴ 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—integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices—to support this integration of services.²⁵ 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 people work collaboratively to help address the stresses of poverty and associated adversities they may face. An extensive review of research illustrates that well-implemented community schools support improved attendance, achievement, and attainment.²⁶

Due to the effectiveness and community-responsive nature of community schools, many states and districts are making major investments to expand this whole child approach to education.²⁷ For example, in July 2021, California passed a historic \$3 billion investment in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP).²⁸ This investment will significantly strengthen and expand community schools across the state, with a focus on schools and communities with demonstrated need. The grant funding is intended to provide sufficient

resources for every high-poverty school—schools with at least 80% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—in California to become a community school within the next 5 years, located within networks of community schools supported by local education agencies.²⁹ The statute prioritizes funding for applicants that have significant proportions of high-need students and will support such schools in integrating health, mental health, social service, and expanded learning supports, alongside investments in parent engagement, social-emotional learning, and restorative practices that create a caring and supportive environment for students.³⁰

Building Adult Capacity Through Productive Instructional Supports: Washington State

Supporting the whole child requires knowledgeable, skilled, dedicated educators; there is no other way to get the kind of teaching we need. This is why many states, including Washington, are making a concerted, multiyear effort to solve teacher shortages, improve teacher retention, and strengthen the overall educator workforce.³¹ For example, as a part of its comprehensive strategy, Washington updated its standards for educator preparation programs to align with the state’s k–12 SEL standards and require that teacher and principal preparation programs ensure candidates understand and recognize signs of emotional or behavioral distress in students and be able to refer students for relevant support.³² Programs like Washington’s enable teacher candidates to develop the knowledge and skills they need.

Federal Strategies to Address the Needs of the Whole Child

Congress has allocated funding to support many aspects of the whole child framework. For example, in its three most recent annual spending bills (FY20, FY21, and FY22) Congressional appropriations shaped a SEL and whole child initiative that: funds research into new SEL approaches; prioritizes the integration of SEL into their educator preparation and professional development through an existing program; provides funding for schools to increase access to specialized instructional support staff; and expands funding for federal community school grants. The initiative has invested more than \$600 million over three years in these endeavors through the following four federal programs: (1) Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program; (2) Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program; (3) School Safety National Activities program; and (4) Full-Service Community Schools program.

In addition to these four programs, several other federal investments can be blended and braided within the education department and across agencies to ensure that all students learn in whole child education systems. For example, education funding for k–12, higher education, career and technical education, and students with disabilities can all support aspects of the whole child framework described above. In addition, schools often leverage programs such as Medicaid and the free or reduced-price lunch program across agencies and departments—including Education, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, and Housing and Urban Development—to ensure students show up to school ready to learn.

Building on these foundations, the Congress can:

- 1. Continue efforts to support states and districts implementing SEL and whole child approaches to education by expanding funding.*

Congress has an opportunity to build on evidence-based state and district investments by expanding funding for the SEL and whole child initiative described above. Congress could, for example, expand funding for the School Safety and National Activities program to increase access to SEL resources and school-based mental health professionals.

Additionally, Congress can help transform our public schools to ensure they help all students achieve their full potential by continuing to target competitive grant programs in this initiative toward evidence-based SEL and whole child approaches. For example, future funding could help redesign schools as restorative spaces—environments where young people are known, nurtured, and healed—and are responsive to students’ immediate and long-term needs, implement relationship-centered schools, and scale effective state and local programs.

2. *Catalyze the establishment and expansion of community school initiatives through sustained increases in additional funding sources that support students and families.*

Congress can work with the Administration and federal agencies to support the implementation of full-service community schools. In addition to increasing funding for the SEL and whole child initiative, which includes the Full-Service Community Schools program, Congress can support districts in implementing community schools through matching grant opportunities.

- ***Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Title I, Part A*** funds can support supplemental instruction, increased parent engagement, counseling, health care, dental care, and expanded and enriched learning opportunities;
- ***ESSA Title IV, Part A*** funds can support mental health service partnerships, programs that promote community engagement, and trauma-informed school-based practices;
- ***21st Century Community Learning Centers*** can support out-of-school-time programming; and
- ***School Nutrition Programs*** through the United States Department of Agriculture can fund meals and snacks during and outside of school.

3. *Increase investments in comprehensive preparation and ongoing professional development for educators so they can support safe, inclusive, and positive learning environments.*

To support teacher and leader preparation to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for creating safe, inclusive, and positive learning environments, the federal government should increase funding for programs that support comprehensive preparation and research-based professional development that equip educators to teach the whole child. For example, the federal government can use funds to support recruitment, retention, and high-quality preparation programs for teachers and leaders through the following programs:

- ***ESSA Title II*** funds comprehensive educator preparation and professional development that helps educators continually build on and refine student-centered practices that support SEL, including through the SEED grant program;
- ***IDEA, Part D*** funds programs and supports for students with disabilities and for the training of teachers who can better support these students;

- *HEA Title II* funds can support high-quality teacher preparation programs through the Teacher Quality Partnership program;
- *HEA Title III and V* funds can support teacher preparation programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs); and
- *Career and Technical Education* funds can support CTE teacher development.

While federal investments in educator recruitment, retention, and professional development have increased in recent years, they could grow further to better address educator shortages and equip more educators with the skills necessary to support the learning and development of all children.

4. Promote alignment and inter-agency coordination of 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 programs. In 2003, the White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth laid out the fragmentation of federal resources showing little coordination, alignment, or management to ensure the more than \$225 billion in annual funding was being spent efficiently and equitably.³³ A follow-up scan of these 339 programs spread across 10 departments 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.³⁴

The federal government can take several important steps to ensure that communities are able to access available funds from federal programs and agencies and use these funds efficiently and effectively.³⁵ For example, the Administration can work with agencies to provide clear guidance on available federal resources and expertise to help state and local leaders align funding and manage essential partnerships to deploy resources.

Conclusion

The emerging science of learning and development makes it clear that a whole child approach to education, which begins with a positive school climate that affirms and supports all students, is essential to support academic achievement as well as healthy development. Research and the wisdom of practice offer significant insights for policymakers and educators about how to develop such environments. The challenge ahead is to assemble the whole village—schools, health care organizations, youth- and family-serving agencies, state and local governments, philanthropists, and families—to work together to ensure that every young person receives the benefit of what is known about how to support his or her healthy path to a productive future.³⁶

Thank you for your focus on this issue and for the opportunity to discuss and share ideas for a path forward. I am happy to answer any questions that members of the subcommittee may have.

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