Whole-Learner
Education:
A Policy Roadmap to Student Success

America FORWARD

America Forward is the Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a pioneering national venture philanthropy organization that invests in a portfolio of breakthrough social entrepreneurs and systems-change initiatives, catalyzes and builds their impact, and transforms how government and philanthropy pursue social change to ensure that all people can thrive.

America Forward unites social innovators with policymakers to advance a public policy agenda that advances equity, fosters innovation, rewards results, catalyzes cross-sector partnerships, and transforms local impact into national change.

We lead the **America Forward Coalition**, a network of over 100 social innovation organizations that champion innovative, effective, and efficient solutions to our country's most pressing social problems. Our Coalition members are achieving measurable outcomes in more than 15,000 communities nationwide, touching the lives of nearly 9 million Americans each year. They are driving progress in early childhood development and learning, K-12 education, postsecondary education, workforce development, Pay for Success and evidence-based policy, poverty alleviation, social innovation, national service, criminal justice reform, and public health.

Since 2007, **America Forward's** community of innovators and advocates has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation policy. Together, our Coalition organizations have successfully advocated for lasting policy change in education, workforce development, and Pay for Success policy; leveraged $1.7 billion for social innovation; and driven millions of federal resources toward programs that are achieving measurable results for those who need them most.

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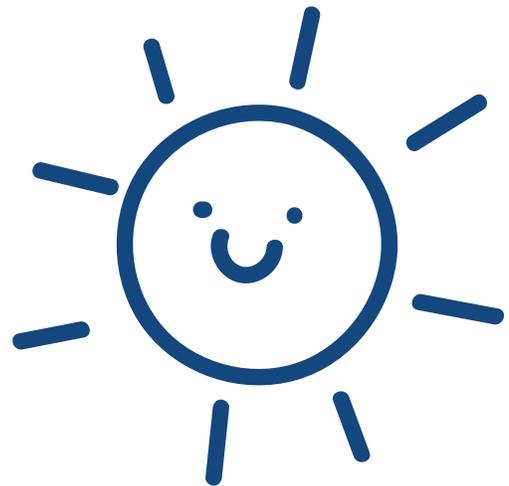
Addressing the Needs of the Whole Learner

Our rapidly changing world is posing unique challenges and placing unprecedented demands on all of us. In this moment, it is more important than ever that all young people have the tools and support they need to grow into confident, caring, and engaged members of society. And yet, our education systems across the country aren't structured in ways that develop and nurture the breadth of skills every young person needs to thrive. This roadmap is about closing the gap between what all students need and what they receive.

The science of learning and development tells us that learners of all ages need a variety of healthy, engaging learning experiences. In order to optimize opportunities for success, learners need experiences that are grounded in strong developmental relationships and safe environments, and support the development of a broad set of physical, social, cognitive, creative, and emotional skills. **But there is a persistent disconnect between the holistic set of skills and experiences that every child needs, and what our current education system prioritizes.**

Existing educational systems that prioritize narrow definitions of student success—tied almost exclusively to academic performance measured by high-stakes testing—do not reflect the prevailing scientific understanding of learning as a holistic, engaging endeavor. Nor do such limited approaches allow for the customized, personalized experiences necessary to reach the diversity of learners in every classroom. As a result, achievement and skills gaps continue to widen; individuals, families, and communities miss out on massive unrealized potential; and our country faces serious challenges to its social health and economic competitiveness.

The challenge—in a country where opportunity and access remain inequitable—is how to ensure that every student has access to experiences that challenge and nourish them as whole learners. Far too often, current approaches lean heavily on one-size-fits-all approaches to instruction ("teaching to the test"), limit engagement with families and caregivers, and fail to focus on the depth and breadth of skills that individual learners need to build self-efficacy and successfully navigate a rapidly changing world. **An essential part of the solution is a fundamental shift in how we perceive the purpose and practice of education, and how we understand what constitutes quality learning.**

In order to create the systemic conditions for optimal learning and development for every young person, we must break out of antiquated, narrow notions of educational success that create a **false choice between students' academic achievement and their physical, social, cognitive, creative, and emotional development**. To succeed, students need opportunities to develop and practice this broad set of skills that foster self-confidence, facilitate engagement with peers, and build the capacity to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. From birth through grade 12 and beyond, educators and policymakers must embrace evidence-based whole-learner approaches that reflect the dynamic, interconnected nature of how children learn and interact with the world, and focus on achieving stronger positive outcomes for every learner.

In this policy roadmap, we leverage the expertise of the America Forward Coalition, along with our partners, experts, and researchers, to define the key characteristics of evidence-based, high-quality whole-learner approaches, and lay out a vision for how to make them a reality for every student. Together, we can create an education system that supports healthy, holistic learning and development for every child; provides every learner with the breadth of skills necessary to thrive; yields stronger academic outcomes; and helps to ensure a better future for our children and our communities.

Defining "Context"

Context includes the environments, experiences, and relationships that comprise human life. The context is comprised of (a) the levels of organization within each person's body (genes, cells, organs, and systems—i.e., the nervous, circulatory, digestive, and respiratory systems–and the chemicals circulating within and across these physiological levels) AND (b) the levels of the person's social, cultural, and physical world within which they are embedded (social relationships, neighborhoods and communities, social institutions, the physical ecology, and culture), all of which change interdependently across time (history). Simply, within a dynamic-systems approach to human development, all levels of context are integrated, relational and bi-directional, and coact with the individual. As such, context drives our biology, including our genetics, with each person's life course shaped by the specific features of these levels as they coact with the individual across time and place.

Cantor, P., Lerner, R. M., Pittman, K., Chase, P. A., & Gomperts, N. (in preparation). Whole-Child Development and Thriving: A Dynamic Systems Approach. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Designing Connected, Engaging Learning Experiences

The concept of the "whole learner" is grounded in the science of brain development and learning, which tells us that, at every stage of development, learning doesn't happen in neatly defined silos.[1]

Much like a "constructive web," all children develop along simultaneous "strands," or pathways, demonstrating responsiveness to different yet connected constructive experiences.[2] This development is predicated on the learning opportunities available, and the context in which the learning happens.

From the moment all children are born, they possess a tremendous, natural capacity for learning. The opportunity to harness that capacity—and grow into productive, engaged members of society—is dependent on creating the conditions for all children to access and fully engage in high-quality learning experiences.[3] With developmentally rich contexts as a foundation, healthy, holistic learning and development requires experiences that allow students to develop **cognitive skills,** both "academic" skills like language and numeracy, and "learning-to-learn" skills like critical thinking and problem-solving; **physical skills** like fine motor control; **social skills** like communication and collaboration; **creative skills** like imagination and symbolic representation; and **emotional skills** like self-regulation and executive function.

In considering how to design learning experiences that effectively develop this breadth of skills and set the stage for deeper learning, we can take a lesson from children themselves and the ways in which they naturally learn through self-directed, playful experiences. What does it look like when children are

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[1] Golinkoff, R.M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2016). Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children. APA Press: Washington, D.C.

[2] Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2019). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context, Applied Developmental Science, 23:4, 307-337, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649.

[3] Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development, Applied Developmental Science, 24:1, 6-36, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650.

learning effectively, exercising agency, overcoming challenges, and making new discoveries? They are engaging in experiences that are: **meaningful**—connecting new content or concepts to things they already know and understand; **engaging**—hands-on, minds-on opportunities that are absorbing and limit distraction; **iterative**—providing the chance to experiment, learn, and retry in a self-directed cycle; **socially interactive**—promoting learning through communication and understanding diverse perspectives; and **joyful**—creating a positive emotional response that elicits interest and motivation.[4]

Experiences that model these characteristics can occur in both child-directed and adult-directed environments. When children are engaging in informal, imaginative play with friends, like putting on a dramatic performance complete with costumes and sets (either imagined or made from whatever is at hand), they are developing language skills, creating and understanding

symbolic representation (critical for early literacy), and collaborating with others who inhabit the imagined world with them. An older student tackling an assignment to model a detailed cityscape with clay or a computer program is also involved in a self-directed, creative activity (within a more structured learning framework led by an educator), and is developing a deeper understanding of mathematical concepts (geometry, sorting, and quantifying), practicing spatial reasoning, and engaging in proactive problem solving.

Throughout the continuum of development, from birth through grade 12 and beyond, whole-learner approaches aim to provide every individual learner with meaningful, engaging, iterative, socially interactive, and joyful learning experiences that set the stage for the interconnected development of a breadth of skills.

[4] Zosh, J.M., Hopkins, E.J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Solis, S.L., & Whitebread, D. (2017). Learning through play: A review of the evidence (white paper). The LEGO Foundation, DK.

Learning Through Play at School

Learning through play at school can take many forms, including active learning, experiential learning, guided discovery learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, or Montessori education.

The connective tissue of these experiences is that they are purposeful and scaffolded, and the core characteristics of the experiences effectively set the stage for deeper learning: They are meaningful, actively engaging, socially interactive, and joyful.

Collectively, these experiences empower continual, iterative learning and development across domains—physical, social, cognitive, emotional, and creative.

Parker, R., & Stjerne Thomsen, B. (March 2019) Learning through play at school. LEGO Foundation, DK.

Taking a Holistic Approach to Achieve Key Outcomes
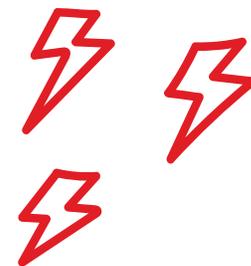
The concept of "whole learner" is predicated on instructional approaches that effectively weave together **direct instruction** (in which adults provide initial framing and explicit instruction), **guided teaching and learning** (in which students have the opportunity to investigate, iterate, and learn through self-directed experiences within a framework constructed by educators, with grounding in specific pedagogy)[5], and **open exploration** (in which learners are encouraged to make their own choices about the content and process of learning).[6]

"The best learning outcomes occur for children when there is a balance between different types of direction, and opportunities for all types are planned and provided for." Integrated approaches—those that combine different levels of teacher and child-directedness—"can positively affect student learning across social, emotional, physical, creative, and cognitive domains, [and] these pedagogies can altogether create learning experiences for children that are meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, socially interactive, and joyful."[8]

[5] Golinkoff, R.M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2016). Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children. APA Press: Washington, D.C.

[6] Marbina, L., Church, A., Tayler, C., & Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning (2011). Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: Evidence paper: practice principle 6: Integrated teaching and learning approaches.

[7] Marbina, L., Church, A., Tayler, C., & Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning (2011). Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: Evidence paper: practice principle 6: Integrated teaching and learning approaches.

[8] Parker, R., & Stjerne Thomsen, B. (March 2019). Learning through play at school. LEGO Foundation, DK.

Learning experiences for children should be meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, socially interactive, and joyful.

Open Exploration

Direct Instruction

Guided Teaching & Learning

"The best learning outcomes occur for children when there is a balance between different types of direction..."
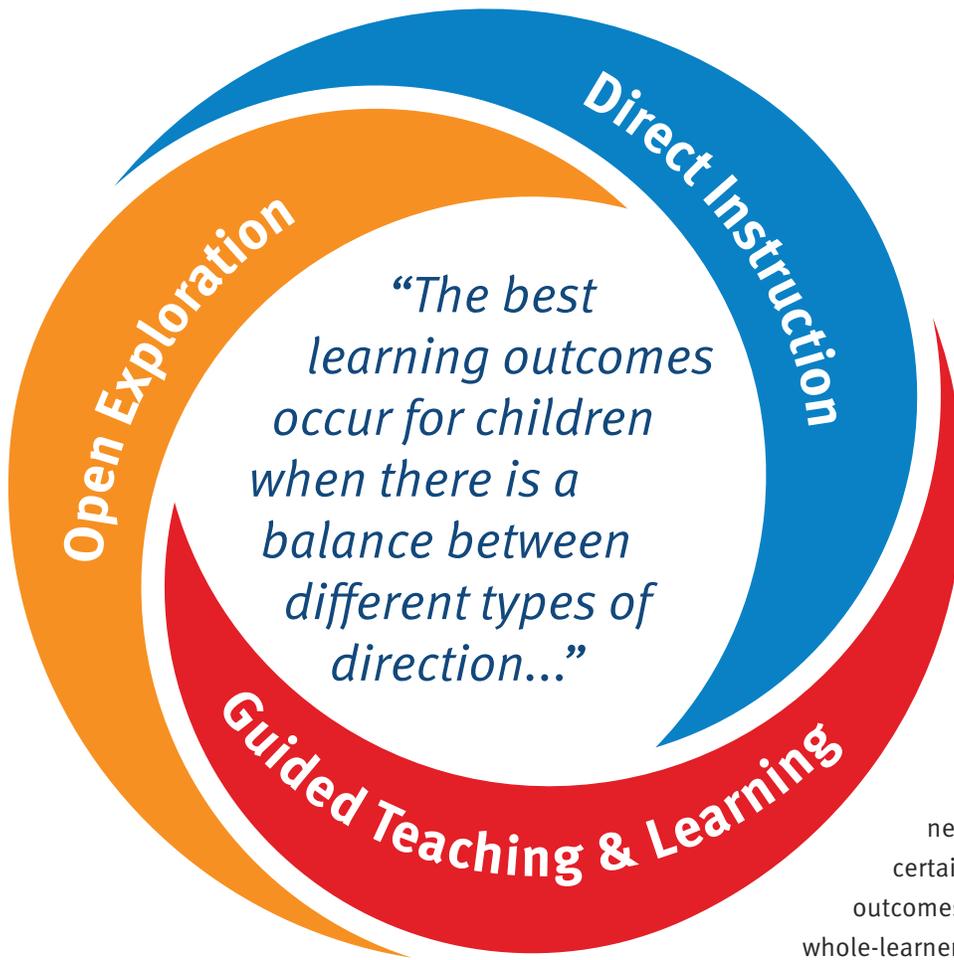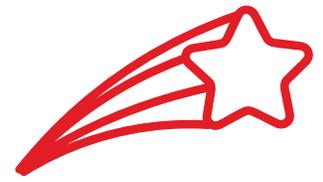
understanding allows children to more successfully connect concepts and skills, apply their knowledge to different situations, and spark new ideas.[9]

Similarly, just because an *exclusive* emphasis on academic achievement represents a barrier to the development and adoption of whole-learner approaches (which recognize development and learning outcomes as necessarily interconnected), it certainly doesn't mean that academic outcomes are in any way deprioritized in whole-learner approaches. Effective whole-learner approaches embody the understanding that academic content and knowledge acquisition are *strengthened and sustained* when all of the skill domains—physical, social, cognitive, creative, and emotional—are addressed in a seamless and interwoven manner, and are taught in classrooms where students feel supported by trusting, positive relationships and a system of integrated supports.[10]

Across the continuum of learning, educators have a vital role to play in designing and scaffolding learning experiences that allow for the exploration and development of self-efficacy, while remaining grounded in concrete learning goals that support the development of a breadth of skills. Effective whole-learner approaches leverage guided instruction, modeling, practice, and a lot of feedback to ensure learners have all the resources, knowledge, and skills required to pursue more complex thinking and tasks over time. Addressing the multiple, interconnected components of development enables students to learn and internalize concepts more deeply. This is critical because, beyond the accumulation of specific knowledge, developing conceptual

Creating meaningful, engaging whole-learner experiences by prioritizing integrated pedagogies—combining direct instruction, guided teaching and learning, and open exploration opportunities—is key to providing learners a firm grasp of academic content, as well as developing the breadth of skills necessary for every young person to become a lifelong learner and an engaged, productive member of society.

[9] Winthrop, R., & McGivney, E. (May 2016). Sills for a Changing World: Advancing Quality Learning for Vibrant Societies. Center for Universal Education at Brookings, U.S.

[10] Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development, Applied Developmental Science, 24:2, 97-140, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791.

"Make 4"

Take, for example, the math problem "2+2." When an educator calls on a particular child and asks for the answer to "2+2," that child may well know the answer is 4. However, the experience of answering the question fails to create a connection to deeper learning and leaves out the other learners in the classroom. Imagine an educator asking all the students, "Show me how many ways you can make 4," and inviting the students to work together using a diverse range of materials. Now, instead of focusing merely on recalling the correct answer, all of the children are meaningfully engaged in an experience that allows for differentiated learning. Children can gain a deeper understanding of the mathematical concepts—including addition and subtraction, and maybe even multiplication or division—at their own "just right" level. As important, they can also develop other skills in addition to mathematical ones: creativity, executive function, collaboration, communication, and many others. This principal holds true as learners get older and the subject matter becomes more complex. Approaches that engage learners and give them agency in demonstrating a chemical reaction, simulating an event from history, or finding multiple routes to solve advanced math problems help students develop a wider range of skills and lead to learning that is more motivating, resonant, and lasting.

> " This disconnected approach 'fails to capture the real nature of learning-to-learn, and particularly the skills required in learning-to-learn that truly allow children to be prepared for 21st century opportunities.' "

Our Current System Creates Barriers to Developing a Breadth of Skills

Education should nurture and expand on a child's natural capacity and curiosity, not limit them.

Experiences that draw on the playful, engaging, self-directed learning that all children pursue intuitively help to develop deep understanding and knowledge, create high engagement and motivation in students, and support the development of the breadth of skills necessary for learners to thrive and broaden their own horizons. This deeper understanding and skills development is essential for the students of today to succeed in a workplace that is evolving in profound ways—from a primacy on collaboration to the rapid acceleration of automation and the integration of artificial intelligence.[11] But, today, our system isn't set up to provide these experiences for every learner or the context that enables them to take root.

Current systems are not designed to allow for the systemic scaling of innovative, holistic approaches that support wide-ranging, connected skills development. Instead, **assessment systems, funding streams, and existing education policies discount the importance of positive context, narrowly define student achievement, and perpetuate outdated conceptions of learning and development as a series of separate, independently developed domains**. This disconnected approach "fails to capture the real nature of learning-to-learn, and particularly the skills required in learning-to-learn that truly allow children to be prepared for 21st century opportunities."[12]

As long as developmental domains remain siloed from one another, as long as policies and practices are unmoored from established research and science, and as long as we fail to provide adequate support for educators and families, **we will fail to achieve positive outcomes for all students**. Continuing current educational practices that don't reflect whole-learner concepts artificially limits the capacity of young people to achieve, and lowers the ceiling on economic and social growth for our communities and our country.

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[11] Bughin, J., et al. (May 2018). Skill Shift: Automation and the Future of the Workforce. McKinsey Global Institute, U.S.

[12] Golinkoff, R.M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2016). Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children. APA Press: Washington, D.C.

How Whole-Learner Approaches Advance Equity
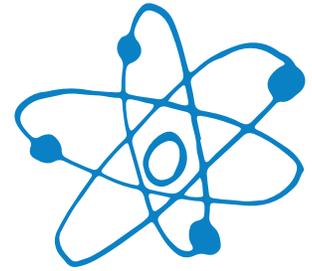
Science now validates what many of us know to be true from our own experiences: **Ability is not static; our brains are continually rewiring and reshaping based on experiences and stimulation throughout life.**[13]

The breadth of skills that create the foundation for success in life exist in a potential state in all children; outcomes are determined by opportunities, environment, experiences, and relationships.[14]

But we also know that safe environments; healthy developmental relationships; and access to engaging, learner-directed experiences are not accessible to all children. Systemic issues like disease, hunger, homelessness, persistent poverty, exposure to violence, institutionalized racism, and the experience of trauma create stress that dramatically impedes a child's ability to learn, and constrains the capacity of parents, caregivers, and educators to provide high-quality educational experiences. In that context, education systems predicated so heavily on one-size-fits-all approaches to instruction

[13] Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2019). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context, Applied Developmental Science, 23:4, 307-337, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649.

[14] Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2020) Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development, Applied Developmental Science, 24:1, 6-36, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650.

and assessments deepen inequity and limit opportunities for growth. Student success depends on access to both the positive environments and relationships that set the table for learning, reflecting the understanding that the plasticity and malleability of children's brains give them the ability to overcome tremendous challenges given positive context, and ensuring universal access to learning experiences that align with the interconnected, dynamic way in which all children learn.

By failing to adequately understand and nurture the inherent talent in each learner, we are leaving tremendous potential untapped and leaving children ill-equipped to thrive, especially those students already facing enormous barriers to success. Every child is potentially a future decision-maker and contributor; today's population of students will cure diseases, build new companies, solve previously intractable social problems, design our cities for 21st

century realities, create works of art, and much more, but not if we continue to perpetuate educational approaches that deepen entrenched inequities.

Evidence-based whole-learner approaches grounded in the science of brain development and learning provide the framework for customized instruction and allow for learner agency that leverages the individual assets each child possesses, and address the unique barriers they face. Whole-learner approaches that provide every child with customized, high-quality learning experiences, built on a foundation of safe environments and healthy developmental relationships, are essential to effectively bridging existing gaps in skills, opportunities, and academic achievement. Whole-learner approaches ensure every learner has the ability to envision and realize their potential. And when learners thrive, so do our communities.

Advancing Whole-Learner Approaches Through Policy and Partnerships

The widespread adoption of whole-learner approaches in our education system is both a moral and economic imperative.

It will both enable all children to thrive today and create our productive, engaged citizens of tomorrow. High-quality whole-learner approaches that are focused on outcomes and provide for a diversity of engaging learning experiences are already being implemented in select schools across the country—but those proven best practices are not being scaled at the systems level.

Federal policymakers have a critical role to play in creating the conditions that promote the development and implementation of whole-learner approaches—by lifting up successes, providing incentives, removing barriers, and rewarding results. Embracing holistic learning environments requires not only a shift in our thinking, but also new or updated federal policies—from assessments to accountability to teacher preparation—that reflect a more accurate understanding of learning and development and a commitment to outcomes-focused innovation. Incorporating whole-learner concepts across federal policies, programs, and funding streams is not merely a "nice to have," it is essential to advancing positive outcomes for all students:

promoting healthy learning and development, increasing opportunity and achievement for all of our young people, and preparing them to thrive in an interconnected and dynamic world. Making a robust course correction now will yield rewards for our country for generations to come.

Reframing our education system to elevate and sustain whole-learner approaches that prioritize the development of a breadth of skills cannot, however, be the job of policymakers, educators, and caregivers alone. High-quality community partners, like those in the America Forward Coalition and our network organizations, play an essential role in providing the capacity and expertise to support schools and families as they implement comprehensive, evidence-based whole-learner approaches. From supporting teacher and school leader development and advancing brain science research, to modeling effective whole-learner approaches and building the evidence base for inquiry-based learning, high-quality external partners represent an enormous resource for states, districts, and schools working to implement high-quality whole-learner approaches.

Whole-Learner Approaches in Action

Imagining a system that centers itself on a whole-learner approach to education is not a far-fetched idea. Innovative whole-learner models are being implemented by school leaders and educators in districts and schools—both public and private—across the country. These approaches reflect the importance of meaningful, engaging, inquiry-driven learning experiences to improve outcomes for students, including academic achievement.

At **AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation** in Washington D.C., an America Forward Coalition member, 3- and 4-year-old students engage in the Every Child Ready (ECR) curriculum, an evidence- and standards-based curricular program that balances independent, play-based learning with whole and small group instruction. Through ECR, educators focus on developing cognitive, physical, social, creative, and emotional skills in early learners. The schools complement this whole-learner approach by engaging in deep professional development with their educators and intentional parental engagement.

At **Bank Street School for Children** in New York City, students pursue experiential learning that is tailored to each student's individual path. The school centers its teaching on the social, emotional, and cognitive skills essential for success in school and in life.

At **Cajon Valley Union School District** in San Diego, educators and school leaders are setting the stage for experiential, inquiry-based learning through their World of Work curriculum, which provides all students with hands-on, minds-on experiences to help them identify which of six personality traits fits them best and the careers that could be a good match. Students are genuinely empowered to visualize a future tailored to their individual, unique interests.

The Path Forward

As every parent, caregiver, and educator knows, no two children are the same, so an education system that homogenizes educational approaches, silos different domains of development, and adheres to narrow definitions of academic success and attainment simply doesn't make sense.

Creating and sustaining conditions where every child is able to grow, thrive, and succeed—in keeping with their own strengths and interests—requires an education system that closes the gap between what we know and what we do.

Together, federal policymakers—in partnership with state and local leaders, high-quality partners, educators, and families—can advance evidence-based whole-learner approaches that channel the science of learning and development to make progress toward providing every student with the engaging, meaningful learning experiences that will enable them to realize their full potential and contribute to their communities.

In the policy recommendations that follow, we propose a roadmap for federal policymakers to achieve a bold vision that:

1. **Reimagines and supports the remodeling of our education system.** Preparing every individual learner to thrive in school and beyond requires an education system that takes a holistic view of learning and prioritizes the development of a breadth of skills, built on a foundation of safe environments and healthy developmental relationships. Achieving that vision means redefining the goal of our education system to prioritize positive outcomes for all students. Federal policies, resources, and tools must align to support whole-learner approaches.

2. **Supports transformative educators.** Teachers, school leaders, and school staff play a critical role in students' ability to succeed in school. In order to effectively develop and implement whole-learner approaches, educators and staff need strong, ongoing support to understand and adopt new pedagogies; time to think critically about their own educational practice; and evaluation structures that allow for innovation and differentiated instruction. State and federal policymakers should fully engage and leverage the expertise of teachers, school leaders, and staff in the creation of policies that support the design and adoption of effective, culturally competent whole-learner approaches, and should provide robust support to educators already working to implement these approaches.

3. **Effectively engages families.** Research highlights the critical importance of child-caregiver interactions in fostering optimal learning and development throughout all critical periods of growth.[15] As the primary caregivers of their children, families play a uniquely important role in fostering and supporting healthy, holistic learning and development. Achieving positive outcomes for all children requires that families and caregivers are supported. Federal policy should incentivize and support programs that engage parents and caregivers as partners in the development and support of whole-learner approaches.

4. **Fosters successful systems through effective partnerships.** High-quality partners play an essential role in providing the capacity and expertise to support educators and help implement whole-learner approaches. The federal government should catalyze and incentivize innovative partnerships between states, districts, schools, and nonprofit organizations that prioritize the effective scaling of comprehensive, evidence-based whole-learner approaches.

5. **Leverages science and evidence.** There is so much yet to be uncovered in the ways we can more effectively and accurately measure outcomes for students; support educators, families, and the public in shifting mindsets on holistic development and learning; and inform continuous improvement of whole-learner approaches. The federal government must play a role in rewarding evidence-based approaches and spurring innovation that reveals the best ways to measure and scale the impact of whole-learner approaches.

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[15] Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). 8 Things to Remember about Child Development. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Policy Recommendations

As new discoveries in brain science and educational research increasingly demonstrate the interconnection between physical, social, cognitive, academic, creative, and emotional skills, it's imperative that we align what we know with what we do, by making healthy development and thriving a central goal of our education system.

A more comprehensive view of education—focused on healthy development and thriving as vital outcomes for all children—can and should inspire and inform policy, funding, and programmatic decisions at the federal, state, and local levels, moving school systems toward approaches that engage all developmental dimensions, and leading to more positive outcomes for a greater number of students.

A critical obstacle to the development and adoption of whole-learner approaches is a vision of education predicated on narrow definitions of learner success focused solely on academic achievement as measured by one-size-fits-all, high-stakes testing, and not on the breadth of essential skills that all children need to succeed in school and in life. Critical policy changes can help states and districts overcome these obstacles and set a course for more comprehensive and effective ways to approach growth and learning.

Reimagine and Support the Remodeling of Our Education System
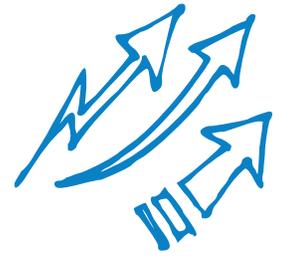
Prioritizing the adoption of evidence-based whole-learner approaches across funding streams that support both early education and K-12 education will not only spur innovation and the adoption of best practices, but also result in greater continuity for learners from early education through K-12.

Incentivize implementation of whole-learner approaches.

Federal education funding represents a powerful lever to promote the adoption of evidence-based whole-learner approaches, but existing funding streams are complex and the resulting incentives are often unclear or contradictory, leading to a misalignment of resources and desired outcomes. Creating a continuum of whole-learner experiences requires greater alignment between early childhood and K-12 systems, including the broader adoption of learner-directed, experiential opportunities that are too often limited to early education settings and phased out as children get older.

HERE'S HOW

Prioritize the implementation and sustainability of evidence-based whole-learner approaches across existing early education and K-12 funding streams.

- Expand technical assistance, research, and dissemination of best practices through funding increases for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Comprehensive Centers, and Regional Education Labs (RELs) targeted at effective implementation of evidence-based whole-learner approaches;

- Incentivize collaboration with high-quality partners and intermediary organizations to help educators think critically about how to design educational spaces and curricula, and use existing resources most effectively to advance whole-learner approaches;

- Shift priorities in major federal education and early education programs to support and incentivize evidence-based whole-learner approaches, including in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I, Title II, Title III, Title IV-A, Title IV-B, and Head Start; and

- Create flexibility in existing federal funding streams for programs to implement outcomes-focused innovations.

Reframe the use of assessments.

In today's education system, assessments are one of the most significant drivers of pedagogy and curriculum. High-quality assessments are critical for understanding and evaluating student achievement and progress; however, assessments that exclusively measure rote information acquisition, retention, and repetition of content knowledge create barriers to—and may undermine—the meaningful and engaging educational experiences that we know are critical to healthy development and learning.

The robust implementation of high-quality whole-learner approaches requires a broader set of assessment tools that measure both the context in which students learn (i.e., environment and measures of student experience) and the breadth of skills students need to grow and thrive, while maintaining rigor and supporting strong accountability systems.

HERE'S HOW

Implement innovative assessments to measure academic achievement, school performance, and more holistic student outcomes that reflect a fuller, more accurate picture of educational success.

- Fund research and development of valid and reliable whole-learner assessments that will return a more comprehensive and complete picture of student success and incentivize the adoption of whole-learner approaches; and

- Shift ESEA Title I accountability structures to include whole-learner assessments.

Effectively leverage technology.

Educational technology is a powerful tool for advancing whole-learner approaches by creating customized learning and exploration opportunities for students; providing actionable, individual insights to educators, families, and school partners; supporting data-driven decision-making; and providing critical educational resources in times of national crisis. When done right—by anchoring digital learning experiences in real-life challenges, with effective scaffolding by teachers and family members, and guardrails against inappropriate online content—technology has the potential to support broad skills development and personalize learning, and to enhance children's developmental well-being.

HERE'S HOW

Intentionally utilize digital assets and technology to support learners, educators, families, and school community partners, and to advance data-driven decision-making.

- Specific federal funding should be designated to support the integration of durable, equitable, and accessible technology into classroom settings—including physical technological tools and software—and to provide the technical assistance and expertise required to seamlessly and successfully merge these tools into curricula across diverse school ecosystems. Professional development and on-site coaching for educators is essential and must be at the center of technology integration.

Prioritize evidence-based approaches to ensure safe and supportive learning environments.

Healthy learning and development can only take place when students feel safe, secure, and supported. A welcoming school climate, strong relationships with peers and trusted adults, and freedom from fear of violence is as important to learning as well-trained educators and a curriculum grounded in science. In fact, safe and welcoming school environments and healthy developmental relationships are the foundation upon which effective and enduring learning takes place.

HERE'S HOW

Expand the adoption of evidence-based practices to improve school climate, ensure students feel the safety and security necessary for learning to occur, and address the school-based factors that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline.

- Embed priorities for the creation of safe and healthy school climates and strong developmental relationships across funding streams; connect schools, districts, and states with high-quality partners working on innovative strategies to improve school safety; and incorporate effective, evidence-based measures of school safety and climate into accountability frameworks.

Prioritizing Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

America Forward Coalition member **KIPP**, the Knowledge is Power Program, is a national network of free, open-enrollment college-preparatory public schools that prepare students in underserved communities for success in college and in life. School environment is a key lever in KIPP's approach to establishing high-quality educational experiences for its students. **KIPP** strives to provide a safe and nurturing culture; as part of this effort, its teachers utilize a range of strategies (including restorative justice, trust circles, and peer mediators) to help foster a positive school culture.

Attract, Support, and Retain Transformative Educators

Reframing our education system to embrace whole-learner approaches requires embedding the foundational elements of whole-learner approaches into teacher and leader preparation, and pre-service programs. Effective teacher training extends beyond direct instruction on the design and implementation of whole-learner approaches and incorporates experiences for future educators that parallel the engaging, differentiated nature of whole-child approaches. When future educators have experienced whole-learner approaches firsthand—learning creatively, with hands-on opportunities and engaging material—they will be more prepared to lead whole-learner approaches effectively in their own classrooms.

Deeply embed whole-learner approaches into teacher and leader professional development, and pre-service programs so that educators learn through whole-learner approaches themselves.

Through an array of teaching strategies, including hands-on, minds-on learning experiences, professional development and pre-service programs should prepare educators with the skills and competencies necessary to nurture and direct the breadth of skills development necessary for students to thrive, and to support individual students with customized instruction aimed at achieving positive outcomes.

Provide professional development that prepares educators to develop students' breadth of skills.

- Refocus Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA) on the full complement of training and professional development opportunities needed to prepare teachers to implement and lead whole-learner approaches, including the development of strong teacher-student relationships; and

- Require grantees under Title II of HEA to align training for early educators with K-12 educators so that all children experience a continuum of whole-learner approaches, rather than facing disruption that can hamper positive impacts on learning and development.

Provide support for new educators on the adoption of whole-learner approaches.

A continuum of high-quality whole-learner experiences is not only essential for students. For new educators, the opportunity to experience and model whole-learner approaches should carry through from pre-service student teaching and clinical experiences to their time in the classroom. Educators need high-quality professional development opportunities grounded in the science of learning, equity, and high-quality content that both educate about and replicate whole-learner approaches, and they need the dedicated time to participate in professional development opportunities, reflect, and iterate with their peers.

Giving New Teachers the Tools to Succeed

America Forward Coalition member **New Teacher Center (NTC)**, a national nonprofit that works in school systems across the country to develop and implement induction programs aligned with district learning goals, understands the lasting, positive impact that high-quality in-service experiences can have on educators and their students. **NTC** induction programs include one-on-one mentoring and professional development, all taking place within school environments that support new teachers. It also develops and provides innovative programs, services, resources, and tools that address national issues related to new teachers and teacher development, including providing coaching on social and emotional and trauma-informed practices to meet the needs of all students.
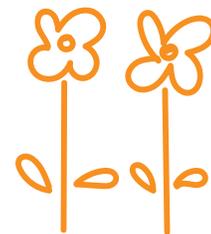
Incentivize strong, evidence-based in-service experiences for new educators that are aligned with and prioritize a focus on whole-learner approaches.

- For new teachers: Provide ample, dedicated, and ongoing funding support for one-on-one mentorship and coaching for at least the first two years on the job. This will help new educators practice and reflect on the personalized nature of leading whole-learner approaches in an integrated, technology-rich context. Veteran teachers steeped in whole-learner approaches—as well as high-quality nonprofit partners—represent a powerful resource to provide capacity and expertise for ongoing coaching/mentorship frameworks that support the expansion of whole-learner approaches; and

- Expand Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to support the adoption of evidence-based best practices in both professional development and mentorship that advance the development of whole-learner approaches in an integrated, technology-rich context.

Support all staff in the development and implementation of whole-learner approaches.

Principals, assistant principals, and lead teachers are not the only people in school settings for whom experience and deep understanding of whole-learner approaches is critical. Every adult in a school building focused on educating children—including assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, curriculum specialists, technology resource teachers, other staff, and volunteers—bears some responsibility for the success of every child. When we invest in a comprehensive whole-learner approach, every adult should have a strong understanding of the underlying concepts to help support every student's path to success. In addition, decisions made at the district level have a profound impact on the ability of individual schools and educators to implement whole-learner approaches. Therefore, superintendents must be included in training about whole-learner approaches, and funding structures must reflect an understanding of the dynamic and customized nature of whole-learner instruction.

HERE'S HOW

Prioritize staffing structures—from district-level leaders to individual support staff—that create consistency and continuity in the implementation of whole-learner approaches, and engage all school leaders, teachers, and staff in targeted professional development.

- Encourage efforts under Title I and Title II of ESEA to support school leaders, educators, and staff—at the district and school levels—in the implementation of whole-learner approaches. In addition to providing relevant resources and best practices, this means providing ample time for peer-to-peer and team-based learning that allows educators to experience and develop a common language around the elements of whole-child approaches.
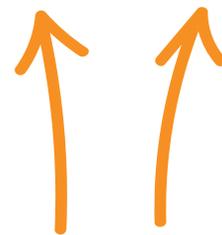
Create aligned incentives.

In much the same way that assessments and measures of student success must be expanded to take a more holistic view of learning and development, assessments of teacher understanding and performance must also be more holistic.

Teacher evaluation frameworks that take a narrow view of student success and teacher effectiveness place additional pressure on educators to focus on the acquisition and repetition of content, rather than pursuing innovative, differentiated, learner-directed experiences.

HERE'S HOW

Incorporate whole-learner outcomes into teacher and school leader assessment frameworks.

- Require that ESEA Title I plans for teacher and school leader assessments incorporate whole-learner approaches and outcomes.

Effectively Engage Families

Learning and development don't begin when children enroll in early education or kindergarten, and they don't stop when children leave the classroom at the end of every day. Families need relevant, clear information about the science of development and whole-learner approaches so that they can help inform and develop locally contextualized, relevant approaches, and be well-informed partners at all stages of development—beginning at birth.

Embed whole-learner approaches in prenatal care and home visiting programs.

The skills children acquire between birth and age 3 become the foundation for future learning,[16] and families are often the primary drivers of formative developmental experiences during these years.

HERE'S HOW

Incentivize holistic development in home visiting.

- Incorporate holistic child development and whole-learner approaches, specifically play-based approaches, into prenatal and home visiting programs. Modeling these approaches and providing hands-on experiences for families can provide valuable insights into the link between play and learning, increase their awareness of the dynamic potential they hold as key partners in their child's development, and provide helpful tools to foster active engagement with young children.

Recognize parents and caregivers as full educational partners.

Throughout a child's developmental journey, parents and caregivers represent powerful partners in the reinforcement and expansion of whole-learner concepts. Parents and caregivers are the experts on their children and are uniquely equipped to provide engaging, learner-directed experiences at home. States, districts, and schools should engage parents and caregivers as full educational partners to expand the reach of rich instructional experiences and amplify opportunities for joyful, engaging, and meaningful experiences that generate positive learning outcomes.

[16] Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). 8 Things to Remember about Child Development. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Investment in staffing dedicated to ongoing, culturally competent family engagement—over the full course of a child's educational journey—can provide enormously valuable information to guide the development and implementation of the most effective family engagement strategies, tailored to particular communities. The more parents are intentionally and effectively engaged, the more able they are to create positive feedback loops for child-centered information, to support educators, and to advance positive learning outcomes for their children.

HERE'S HOW

Implement school policies that recognize parents and caregivers as full educational partners, including sharing information on evidence-based practices to support in-school learning at home; providing data in easily accessible, digestible, and culturally relevant formats; and engaging parents in school-based decision-making.

- Increase the ESEA Title I parent engagement set-aside to expand district capacity to support schools in engaging and supporting parents, particularly in school-based decision-making; sharing best practices; and modeling high-quality whole-learner approaches with their children.

Co-locate parent, child, and educator activities and supports.

While parents and caregivers can be powerful partners in the expansion and amplification of whole-learner concepts, many families—especially low-income families—already find time and resources stretched to the breaking point. Information, education, and engagement opportunities have diminished utility and impact when families are unable to afford food, housing, child care, or medical care. Without basic family necessities, disparate outcomes for children widen and cycles of poverty become more entrenched.

HERE'S HOW

Explore innovative solutions in order to increase parent accessibility and engagement.

- Expand funding for community schools, community centers, and aftercare facilities to support the co-location of critical services like child care and medical care with opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn about and experience whole-learner approaches and to explore how they can lift up the concepts at home. This should include creating financial incentives for developers to consider co-locating services at the front end of building design, and rewarding those who sustain service providers as occupants within their buildings. Co-location of essential services will meaningfully decrease the burden on families and allow more parents and caregivers to be actively involved in their children's education, without sacrificing their other critical responsibilities; and

- Expand the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program to include a priority to evaluate and disseminate best practices for on-site co-location of services to enhance parent engagement and activate parents as partners in learning.

Foster Successful Systems through Effective Partnerships

High-quality community partners are a critical part of the solution for schools, districts, and states that want to maximize impact. Partners bring critical capacity and expertise that schools, districts, and states may lack, including the ability to ensure delivery of high-quality whole-learner approaches and experiences.

Scale catalytic partnerships for learner success.

Innovative partnerships between states, districts, schools, and nonprofit organizations can provide comprehensive support to advance the breadth of skills development necessary for learners to grow and thrive.

HERE'S HOW

Incentivize the utilization of high-quality external partners.

- Incentivize partnerships in every ESEA program including Title I, Title II, Title III, Title IC-A, and Title IV-B, in order to help systems support whole-learner experiences for educators, staff, students, and families; and

- Support the development of strong, effective partnerships by creating a transparent marketplace of external partners; supplying capacity-building grants to organizations with strong evidence of success (allowing them to expand their reach with state, school, and district partners); providing model data-sharing agreements; and offering incentives for coherent school design and aligned services that facilitate effective partnerships.

Identify available resources and supports to lower adult-student ratios.

Schools can support holistic, personalized student development "by creating structures that enable teachers to know their students well and develop strong relationships."[17] In classrooms where a single teacher is responsible for 30-35 students, personalized, relational instruction becomes impossible. Increased capacity is essential for the effective implementation of whole-learner approaches.

[17] Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development, Applied Developmental Science, 24:2, 97-140, DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791.

Advancing Whole-Learner Approaches Through National Service

America Forward Coalition member **City Year** places AmeriCorps members in classrooms across the country to facilitate an intentional focus on social and emotional learning, and the development of foundational skills that enable students to learn, self-regulate, and achieve at high levels.

One **City Year** AmeriCorps member in Boston described using the Clover Model—an approach developed by Dr. Gil G. Noam, founder of The PEAR Institute, that focuses on active engagement, assertiveness, belonging, and reflection—to build engagement and community among a diverse set of students.

"We've been creating a community so that everyone feels safe to share. Kids want to talk and want everyone to listen to them. The idea of our group is that everyone's voice is heard, and we explore what the students are passionate about. ... Clover has given me a more holistic view of my students and their growth, and it's helped me to reflect on my service as a corps member."

The additional human capital and holistic approach to development supports the lead teacher's efforts to ensure that students are confident and focused, and feel supported. And the strong relationships developed between the corps member and the students she works with enable her to also "provide critical academic interventions that help students persevere, stay on track, and tackle challenging material."

Leverage national service corps members and partner with higher education institutions to provide additional capacity and expertise for implementation of whole-learner approaches.

- Expand capacity through incentivizing innovative partnerships with national service corps programs (like AmeriCorps and Senior Corps), as well as institutions of higher education, teacher preparation programs, and adult volunteer programs with demonstrated knowledge of whole-learner approaches. This added capacity will allow for more differentiated instruction and individual attention for every student in K-12, leading to more responsive instruction and better learning and development outcomes within whole-learner frameworks. In addition, authorizing an Early Childhood Legacy Corps can provide financial incentives for older adults to serve in early childhood programs, expanding the talent pool, supporting early childhood programs, and creating a pathway to the professional and paraprofessional early childhood workforce.

Fund, support, and empower the adoption and expansion of whole-learner curricula.

Schools and nonprofit partners across the country are leading the effort to implement innovative approaches that reflect the whole learner, elevating scaffolded, engaging, playful experiences driven by a definition of success that includes the development of physical, social, cognitive, creative, and emotional skills. Many schools, however, face barriers (in funding, capacity, and curricular requirements) to adopting these proven approaches, and lack external support. More robust, ongoing technical assistance can help address and remove those barriers; accelerate the adoption of best practices;and bring them to scale at the local, regional, and national levels.

HERE'S HOW

Engage intermediaries to support and expand state and district implementation of academic standards, assessments, and accountability systems that reflect a whole-learner, developmentally aligned curriculum.

- Fund a Whole-Learner Implementation grant to fund intermediaries closest to the work to provide critical technical assistance to educators and support for ongoing implementation of whole-learner approaches inside schools and classrooms.

Leverage Science and Evidence
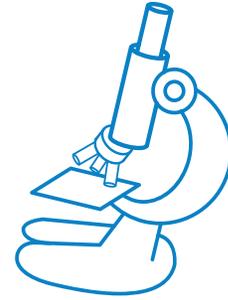
Supporting the continuous improvement of whole-learner approaches that lead to positive outcomes for all students requires a focus on measurement and the consistent use of data to inform the adoption of the most effective, holistic strategies.

Support a pipeline of researchers to develop next-generation measurement tools.

Measurement drives pedagogy and practice—not only from an accountability and evaluation standpoint, but also by providing critical insights and enabling continuous improvement. Effective implementation of whole-learner approaches requires the availability—and adoption—of accurate assessments and measurement tools that reflect a holistic view of learning and development. While a limited number of validated tools already exist, the continued evolution of brain science and whole-learner concepts necessitates the continued refinement of assessments and tools. Developing these next-generation tools requires additional investment in a diverse pipeline of educational researchers and psychometricians who will drive the creation and interpretation of a robust evidence base, resulting from effective measurement tools.

HERE'S HOW

Create a pipeline of educational researchers and psychometricians who will support the development of next-generation assessments and other tools to accurately measure progress on key outcomes resulting from whole-learner approaches.

- Create a new Institute for Education Sciences Fellowship program available to aspiring researchers and psychometricians who will commit to the study of effective, evidence-based whole-learner assessments and measurement tools that will incentivize the adoption of innovative whole-learner approaches at scale.

Reward what works.

In order to effectively identify and scale high-quality whole-learner approaches, federal funds should be used to expand a competitive grant program that provides tiered funding based on evidence, and includes priorities for critical elements of whole-learner approaches, including supporting educators, engaging families, and facilitating high-impact partnerships.
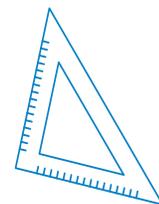
Expand tiered-evidence competitive grant programs to support the development, implementation, and scaling of evidence-based whole-learner approaches.

- Increase funding for the Education Innovation and Research program, and dedicate the increase to support the rigorous study of promising whole-learner innovations. The entities—schools, nonprofits, or other educational organizations—with the strongest whole-learner frameworks, based on clear, measurable outcomes, will receive more funding for their practices, which can then be scaled locally, regionally, and nationally.
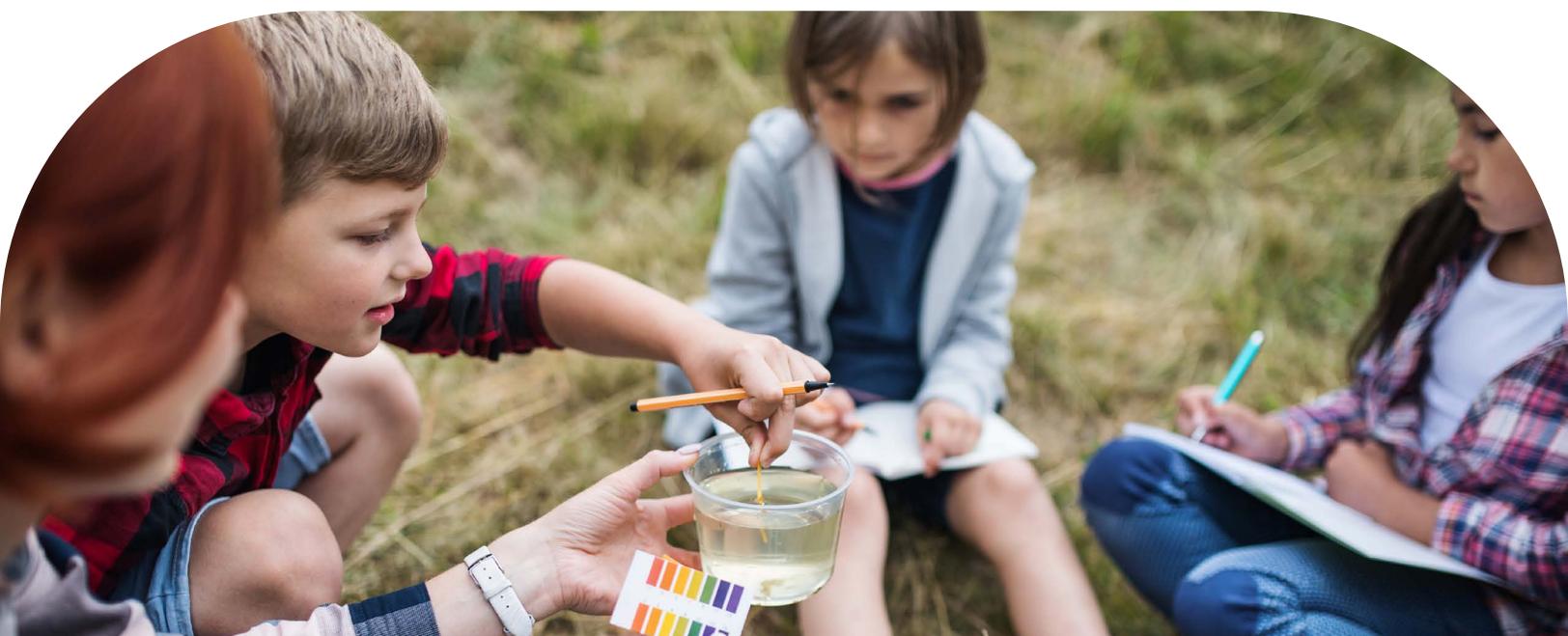
Leveraging Partnerships to Scale Impact

America Forward Coalition member **Transcend** is a national nonprofit dedicated to accelerating innovation in the core design of "school," with the vision that one day, all young people will learn in ways that enable them to thrive in and transform the world. As part of its work, **Transcend** partners with a limited number of schools and other entities to build and spread innovative learning models that offer communities a diverse range of outstanding, relevant options to adapt to their unique contexts. One such example of this partnership is **Transcend's** work with Van Ness Elementary, a pre-K to grade 4 public school in Washington, D.C. Since 2016, **Transcend** has partnered with Van Ness to develop a whole-child school model where student well-being is central. This partnership led to the launch of a Whole Child Collaborative (WCC) in 2019, in which **Transcend**, with the support of D.C. Public Schools, selected five elementary schools to join Van Ness to create models around student well-being, meeting the holistic needs of each student. While the WCC is in its early stages, surveys and observation data show early buy-in and strong implementation of the model, and Transcend expects to continue to learn and improve the model through this WCC approach.

Measure the impact of whole-learner approaches.

Research on whole-learner approaches and the positive developmental impact of engaging, meaningful experiences has advanced tremendously in recent years, but additional research is necessary to better understand the full effect of robust whole-learner approaches.

Brain science tells us that children from different backgrounds exposed to similar contexts will achieve comparably, indicating that the opportunities and experiences children are exposed to—and how they are supported—are the primary drivers of achievement. Put simply, all brains can thrive when conditions are conducive for growth and learning.

HERE'S HOW

Fund greater investigation to help measure the impact of whole-learner approaches on children's development and life chances, in order to better understand the experience gap and its short- and long-term effects.

- Fund research at the Institute of Education Sciences on the impact of the experience gap and the impact of whole-learner interventions to improve our understanding of how to identify specific approaches and best practices that will meaningfully shift existing gaps in learning and development.

Conclusion

Putting the healthy development and thriving of all children at the center of our education system is essential for leveling the playing field, and critical for students' academic and career success, their sense of purpose and fulfillment, and their productive engagement in society. We know that the innate potential of children is boundless, but it is shaped by context—by opportunities, experiences, environments, and relationships. Effective whole-learner approaches create multiple pathways to learner success. These pathways—all of which lead to tangible, positive outcomes for students and the complex world they will inherit—are grounded in research, evidence, and science. These customized, learner-centered pathways are what all children deserve.

Parents, caregivers, policymakers, advocates, and academics all have a critical role to play in bringing whole-learner approaches to learning into our homes, schools, and communities. Together, we can leverage science and evidence; amplify the best practices modeled by bold educators, and effectively engage families, educators; and community partners to fundamentally remodel our education system. Together, we can build a system that provides every child with meaningful, engaging learning experiences—supported by safe environments and healthy developmental relationships—to foster the development of a breadth of skills, and provide the foundation for every child to succeed. That's the opportunity that lies before us—the chance to create an education system that truly reflects and supports every learner.

Let's get to work.

America FORWARD