



November 2017 Convening and Site Visits Tacoma Public Schools Summary of Key Takeaways

In November 2017, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development visited Tacoma, Washington to learn more about the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative (TWCI), including understanding how community partnerships are leveraged in school and beyond in support of students' comprehensive development.

The convening and accompanying school visits yielded several insights into the ways in which a clear vision, intentional relationships, and supportive environments play a critical role in students' social, emotional, and academic development.

Through site visits to Jason Lee Middle School and the Science and Math Institute (SAMi) High School, commissioners observed and reflected on a spectrum of potential approaches to implementing social, emotional, and academic development at the school and classroom levels, ranging from explicit instruction of social and emotional skills to the integration of those skills within academic instruction. Commissioners also heard from local and national experts on the role of measurement; the intersections of social, emotional, and academic development with equity; and the ways in which policymakers can support local efforts to prioritize social, emotional, and academic development. Some themes, such as the need for a shared language and the need for schools and communities to work in partnership, further confirmed takeaways from previous Commission meetings; other points, including the role of data for continuous improvement, were new areas of consideration for the Commission's final recommendations. Highlights from the Commission's observations and discussions are elaborated upon below.

1. [A community-wide approach to supporting social, emotional, and academic development requires clear vision, a common language, and strong leadership.](#)

The hallmark of the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative is its communitywide approach; everyone has and knows the role they play in supporting the whole child. A clear vision of the desired outcomes, a common language to describe the work, as well as strong district and school leadership that sets priorities, are essential to making communitywide implementation possible. The combination of these three elements within a well-defined strategic plan contribute to buy-in at all levels, and provide a critical through-line across the system for effective implementation at the classroom, school, and community levels. The strategic plan delineates non-negotiables from the district leaders, including four goals and thirty-five benchmarks. The plan also identifies areas for distributed leadership, decision-making, and flexibility that extends responsibility and ownership to all levels of the system – particularly among school leaders, teachers, and students. For example, commissioners noted the shared articulation of the strategic plan's four goals – academic excellence, partnership, early learning, and safety – among the superintendent, school leaders and teachers at Jason Lee Middle School and the Science and Math Institute (SAMi) High School.

Importantly, these elements translate to the district's community partnerships, whose shared commitment helped align their work with the objectives of the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative. The process of engaging partners from the broader community into the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative reflects a deliberate plan that leverages the city's unique assets and strengths, and takes into consideration issues such as long-term sustainability. For example, the district's contract with the local health and human services agency is contingent on alignment with the Tacoma Whole Child Initiative.

2. Relationships are at the core of supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development, and this holds true at both the individual level and community level.

The central role of human relationships—between adults and students, among adults, and among students—is a theme that continues to grow in resonance with each Commission convening. A defining characteristic of learning environments that effectively support social, emotional, and academic development is the fundamental recognition of each individual's role in cultivating trusting, constructive relationships. Within environments that promote and nurture trusting relationships, teachers are valued as front-line experts and are given opportunities for leadership. Student voice and agency are also supported and celebrated. As one example, multi-grade advisory groups at Science and Math Institute (SAMi) High School intentionally create opportunities for older students to actively develop trust-based relationships with their younger peers and allow all students to participate in building a supportive school culture.

The role of trusting relationships also extends to the community level. Relationships between students and adults in the community, as well as between adults in the district system and larger community, demonstrate the district's intentional investment of time and effort to build trust and engagement. For instance, the district tracks community partnerships by school, as a measure of whether the school is serving the whole child. As a result, the resources available for students' social, emotional, and academic development has grown from school-specific assets to "a constellation of supports" within and beyond a school's walls.

3. Social, emotional, and academic development is about fixing the environment, not the student.

To optimize student learning, adults must focus on creating and fostering conditions that give each student the opportunity to activate, demonstrate, and grow the social, emotional, and academic competencies they bring to the classroom. The convening's assessment panel emphasized that students may have social and emotional assets but in the absence of the right learning conditions, students may not exhibit these skills and competences. The Tacoma Whole Child Initiative continues to track suspensions and behavior data, but also uses student, parent, and staff surveys to assess the learning environment.

Shifting the emphasis from correcting student behavior to understanding the central role of the learning environment helps to avoid viewing students as the problem, and directs adults to explore the broader environmental and social context in which students learn. As an example, the teachers and school leaders of Jason Lee Middle School (JLMS) intentionally expanded their scope to include engagement with families, visiting students' homes throughout the academic year. In addition, JLMS is piloting an innovative "school within a school" program called Thrive, using brain science research to combine fitness, education, and healthy in order to address students' basic physical, social, and emotional needs, ensure the conditions for academic learning, and improve student achievement.

4. Prioritizing a communitywide approach to supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development requires identifying and understanding the data and metrics that inform the conditions of continuous improvement.

The district's focus on continuous improvement and growth, rather than punitive action for correction, relies heavily on data assessing schools' and students' performance. Moving beyond summative test data, the district expanded from solely relying on end-of-year assessments to include thirty-five benchmarks that are linked to the four goals of its strategic plan. These benchmarks measure learning conditions, community partnerships, and opportunities for rigorous learning; the collected data is then analyzed at multiple points throughout the year to inform continuous improvement. To this end, the district has invested in training and professional development for teachers and school leaders to interpret data, make data-informed decisions, and iterate accordingly. To better respect local school context, the district requires each school to identify four continuous improvement goals, but only two of those goals must be aligned with district-wide goals. Thus, trust in and ownership of data extends beyond the district leaders to include school leaders and teachers who become active participants in the evaluation and continuous improvement processes.

5. Social, emotional, and academic development encompasses a range of approaches.

The Tacoma Whole Child Initiative reflects a broad spectrum of potential approaches to implementing social, emotional, and academic development. Importantly, "explicit" and "integrated" approaches can happen simultaneously; the example of Tacoma Whole Child Initiative demonstrates that any approach to students' social, emotional, and academic skills must be done with intentionality. The Commission's site visit to Science and Math Institute (SAMi) High School showcased a two-pronged approach that provides opportunities to explicitly address social and emotional development in weekly mentor group discussions, as well as an experiential learning model that requires social and emotional competencies in students' daily academic work. Jason Lee Middle School has adopted practices, such as "brain breaks" and advisory groups, that seek to develop students' social and emotional competencies, in service of promoting academic learning and healthy development.