Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: Recommendations for a Policy Agenda

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Introduction

In states and communities across the country, policymakers are working with educators, parents, employers, and community leaders to improve educational outcomes for young people. Their motivations for action are urgent and diverse: achieving equity, meeting increasing and shifting workplace demands, improving the quality of public discourse, and boosting civic engagement. America’s creed of equal opportunity depends on providing each and every child a quality education and comprehensive supports to succeed in school, work, and civic life. Policymakers now have two powerful allies to advance this work – science tells us more than ever about how children learn and develop and mounting evidence
demonstrates that integrating social, emotional, and academic development boosts outcomes for children and youth.

State and local policymakers, therefore, have a unique opportunity to help integrate social, emotional, and academic development, particularly in this time of resurgent state and local authority over education. Each state constitution creates an affirmative state responsibility for public education that has been affirmed by the courts. With this responsibility comes the obligation to think strategically about the state role, as well as which decisions are in the province of local leaders. State leaders have a responsibility to fulfill their constitutional mandates, such as ensuring that a fair, complete, and equal education is provided to students across their state. Many decisions about integrating social, emotional, and academic development, however, ought to happen at the local level (in districts, schools, and their communities), in part to ensure shared ownership and “fit” with local context. Although the recommendations that follow principally target state and local policymakers, they also acknowledge and advance the important roles that the federal government can play in supporting education policy across the country.

Students in every school need an integrated approach to the multiple dimensions of learning and development. The growing science of learning and development tells us that this integrated approach is how young people learn and how our education system can set up all young people for success. But adopting this approach does not mean the work looks the same everywhere. We need to make sure that as this work develops and grows, it does so with an asset-based approach that seeks to unlock the great potential within each young person and affirms the dignity and value of every students’ background and culture.

We need to recognize that each and every student requires and deserves a school culture, classroom instruction, and other opportunities for engagement that treat social, emotional, and academic development as interconnected parts of a whole. At the same time, we must recognize that some students growing up in trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACES) need additional support to realize their potential for greatness. The science of learning and development is rapidly expanding the knowledge base about the inter-connected nature of social, emotional, and academic development, with particularly important implications for buffering young people from the effects of stress and nurturing their healthy development in response to adversity.

It is an exciting time for leadership and innovation in education. New science and research can be translated into more effective practice. There are tremendous opportunities for research and development to push the field even further, and to improve outcomes for young people and society at large. There also is a need for field-building – to connect different disciplines that all have a piece of this puzzle, and to call on educators and leaders in youth-serving organizations across the PreK-12 education ecosystem to embrace an integrated approach to educating the whole child. And there are many opportunities for policymakers at the state, local, and in some cases, federal levels for leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A POLICY AGENDA

As the Council of Distinguished Educators noted, integrating social, emotional, and academic development is relational work that does not respond well to compliance-driven reform efforts. The plan for change needs to reflect and model the very skills and attitudes that we want embodied in schools and classrooms. Policymakers need to fully understand why the change is necessary, how it will benefit students’ well-being and their academic learning, and how it will positively impact the culture and climate
of the school. We note the powerful evidence assembled by the Council of Distinguished Scientists who unanimously concluded: “social and emotional learning drives increases in executive functioning, self-efficacy, persistence, pro-social behavior, grades, scores on standardized tests, high school graduation, entry and completion of college, together with more success in careers, positive work and family relationships.” These are many of the existing measures of progress that policymakers seek to improve. Educators need to be compelled by the vision, appreciate the coherence of the approach, and feel supported in making changes to both instruction and classroom organization. Change efforts need to intentionally build trust and agency among those involved and be responsive to the needs of each locality.

For these reasons, the Commission believes that the role of policy should be to create the enabling conditions for districts and schools to implement locally crafted approaches that support students’ social, emotional, and academic development. In effect, we need both a bottom-up and a top-down approach acting in a supportive and coherent way and relying more on data and continuous improvement to drive change, rather than a one-size-fits all solution.

Through their voice, their priorities, their allocation of time and resources, and the specific laws, policy guidance, and contractual and partner agreements that they create, state and local leaders can help support a more comprehensive and holistic approach to student learning and development. This includes the broad range of leaders who impact the PreK-12 education ecosystem: governors, state legislators, state and local school board members, chief state school officers and district superintendents, mayors, city and county legislators, and those who work in state and local education and other youth-serving agencies.

Our policy recommendations seek to accelerate efforts by leaders in states and local communities by focusing on strengthening four broad categories that impact student outcomes:

I. A Clear Vision
Articulating a clear vision of students’ comprehensive development that reflects the interconnection of the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of learning as the basis for a policy framework that aligns key stakeholders;

II. Learning Environments
Creating child- and youth-centered, developmentally appropriate, personalized learning environments that are aligned across the PreK-12 education ecosystem and reflect the interconnection of the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of learning;

III. Adult Capacity
Preparing and supporting educators, school leaders, and youth development professionals both in understanding and modeling the competencies themselves and in teaching them to their students; and

IV. Resources
Aligning and allocating resources—funding, training, time, and community capacity—more efficiently and equitably to create a cohesive PreK-12 education ecosystem that can support students holistically.

This effort should not be viewed as a new initiative. Rather, it is an opportunity to better align the PreK-12 education ecosystem so that each and every student can develop into a lifelong learner, productive
worker, and engaged citizen through supportive, engaging, and challenging experiences both in and out of school. In pursuing this work, state and local leaders should acknowledge the expertise that resides within state education agencies, district offices, and other key state, district, and community partners to help with implementation, staff capacity, reporting, and data collection. And they should consider opportunities to help share existing knowledge and resources across these groups. State and local agencies along with their community partners already have significant work underway that can and should be leveraged and amplified.

At the core of these recommendations is a new vision for how state players and their local partners can operate in a more collaborative, coherent fashion to support each community’s vision for teaching and learning, informed by best practice as articulated by the Council of Distinguished Educators, and grounded in the evidence summarized by the Council of Distinguished Scientists. This vision requires moving from policies focused on compliance to enabling policies that support best practice; from disconnected programs and supports to integrated and aligned strategies that focus on the well-being of the whole child; from using assessments for accountability to using evidence for continuous improvement; from responding to federal directives to prioritizing community needs; and from a definition of success limited to test scores to a more inclusive definition that reflects the mastery of social, emotional, and academic competencies, as well as civic awareness, informed by a broad, collaborative network of partners. In this way, we can ensure each and every child receives the quality education and comprehensive supports needed to succeed in school, in the evolving workplace, and in community and civic life.

I. Across the PreK-12 education ecosystem, state and local leaders should articulate a clear vision for students’ comprehensive development.

Efforts to improve educational outcomes need to be guided by an overarching vision of student success. Many states, and in turn school districts, have a vision or mission statement that captures characteristics of a successful graduate, often aligned with a definition of what students need to be ready for college, career, and participation in community life. The process of setting clear expectations through vision and mission statements and providing the supports to meet them have been critical elements to boosting student success. It is an opportune moment to revisit these statements to better align with our growing understanding of how learning happens. State and local leaders need a clear vision of what each and every student should know and be able to do, grounded in evidence that learning has social, emotional, and academic dimensions. A clear, common message across all key state and local leaders also highlights the interconnected nature of this work and ideally positions it, not as the desire of one or two elected leaders, but as a community-wide priority. Clear, consistent messages across all key state and local leaders also highlight the interconnected nature of this work and serve as an organizing vision for current efforts across a state and district.

**Strategy 1:** For both schools and youth-serving agencies, state and local leaders in partnership with communities should articulate the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities of a successful high school graduate that is inclusive of the social and emotional competencies demonstrated to contribute to academic progress and workforce success as well as prepare students to become productive members of their communities.

- The development of this shared vision of student success should begin with community conversations aimed at building consensus on the purpose of elementary and secondary education, as well as the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities that students need to effectively participate in further education, the workforce, their communities, and our democratic society.
Once articulated, key state and district leaders across the PreK-12 education ecosystem must demonstrate and communicate their commitment to this vision of student success, share the evidence of how such a vision and approach boosts child and youth outcomes, and identify critical elements of the vision that have not been getting adequate attention.

For state education leaders, there is an opportunity to leverage the state’s ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) plan to articulate this vision of student success and to align it with specific strategies, including ESSA’s focus on evidence of effectiveness. ESSA is the current reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which embodies the nation’s longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students.

**Strategy 2:** State standards, guidance, or frameworks should signal to districts and communities the importance of a more integrated approach to student learning and development. More specifically, state leaders could:

- Adopt state-level standards or competencies and/or require local communities to articulate learning competencies for social and emotional learning.
- Embed social and emotional competencies into existing academic standards.
- Set benchmarks, expectations, and competencies for students inclusive of the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning.
- Include this more integrated vision in strategic planning documents, mission statements, and other policy guidance. In turn, local school boards, districts, and schools can include such an integrated vision in their similar documents, statements, and guidance.

II. States leaders should enable districts and schools to create and continually improve supportive and affirming learning environments that ensure strong relationships, personalized supports for students, and engaging, relevant learning opportunities.

Evidence affirms the importance of creating safe learning environments that generate a strong sense of community among both students and educators. Such environments have high, consistent, and clear expectations for students behaviorally and academically. A compelling body of research underscores the importance of school climate and culture. A positive learning environment is associated with higher academic achievement; better emotional, mental, and physical health; better behavioral outcomes; and increased teacher retention. Research also demonstrates that the primary role of principals in influencing school achievement is through changes in the school climate and culture.

When students feel known, valued, and supported by both adults and peers, they are able to take risks necessary to learn and grow. Such a culture and climate are inclusive of and responsive to the diversity of interests, aptitudes, perspectives, races, and cultures represented in the classroom. These types of learning environments give students voice, opportunities to be engaged and heard, and agency in their own learning and development. Enabling students to feel respected for their cultural identities and perspectives is an essential element in creating safe, affirming, and inclusive classrooms.

School safety also is enhanced by creating a positive learning environment. Evidence suggests that when schools put in place a positive approach to discipline, focus on building strong relationships, and teach students such social and emotional skills as resolving conflicts and relating well to others, schools become safer. Rather than viewing students as the problem, this approach directs adults to explore the broader
environmental and social context in which students learn.

For all of these reasons, the Council of Distinguished Educators made the development of safe, supportive learning environments one of the core tenets of its recommendations. State and local policies have unique roles to play in framing the elements necessary to design, create, and improve learning environments than can support students’ social, emotional, and academic growth.

Such learning environments need to be developmentally appropriate and acknowledge that, while the principles are the same, there are different strategies to pursue for early childhood, elementary, and secondary schools.

**Strategy 3: State leaders should provide funding, technical assistance, and other resources (e.g. measurement and assessment tools) that help state and local agencies and community-based organizations support district and school leaders to create quality learning environments that foster students’ comprehensive learning and development while reflecting local priorities.**

State and local leaders can both shape and provide the resources for districts to undertake the essential work of defining quality learning environments. Specific strategies might include:

- Providing tools and resources for district and school leaders to facilitate conversations with their community to identify the elements of a quality learning environment.
- Providing measurement and assessment tools (e.g. school climate or culture surveys), as well as training and support in interpreting and using the data.
- Training cadres of educators with expertise in needed areas (e.g. trauma-informed instruction, restorative practices, conflict resolution, and the integration of social, emotional, and academic development) as a means to share knowledge and skills through professional learning communities or other forms of professional development.
- Designing measurement and assessment tools to measure the learning environment across multiple settings, including schools, out-of-school settings, and other community-based organizations.

**Strategy 4: State and local leaders should provide districts with the flexibility to design and operate schools in ways that create engaging learning experiences and opportunities for students to build relationships, based upon individual needs.**

Some of the key policy areas that state and local leaders should consider include:

- Promote the adoption or development of curricula that embed the social and emotional dimensions of learning and are affirming of culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- Enable flexible use of time to ensure that each and every student is connected to a significant adult within the school community through such strategies as advisory programs, mentoring, and class meetings.
- Be flexible about how credit is awarded to ensure that each and every student demonstrates mastery of academic content and essential knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Provide flexibility for districts to manage human resources and other conditions of schooling to reflect local priorities.
- Remove barriers in state funding, regulations, and compliance that inhibit schools and communities from working collaboratively to support students holistically.
**Strategy 5:** State and local leaders should support networks of districts and schools working collaboratively to build quality learning environments.

State leaders have a powerful role to play in convening school district leaders, many of whom have been working to integrate social, emotional, and academic learning and development in their schools. Various districts around the country are beginning to collaborate to share lessons with each other about their efforts. This knowledge and expertise should be captured and leveraged by states.

In addition to sharing research-supported best practices and highlighting promising practices, state and local leaders can connect districts and schools using similar strategies, tools, or resources to learn from each other through learning communities.

The historic opportunity and availability of resources under ESSA enables state leaders to identify, redesign, and support low-performing schools where 50 percent of off-track students are still found. State leaders should use their convening power to network similarly situated low-performing schools with other schools within the state to share proof points and learnings for how schools comprehensively integrated social, emotional, and academic development and made other changes in climate and culture that produced better outcomes for students.

**Strategy 6:** State and local leaders should promote community partners who serve student needs in ways that connect to the school and operate within and outside school environments.

The Council of Distinguished Scientists found that families and other community institutions, such as health and human services agencies and out-of-school-time organizations, play an essential role in building and supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic skills. As state and local leaders reorganize to recognize the interconnectedness and shared vision of the PreK-12 education ecosystem, they must allow for other agencies and community-based organizations to be partners both in and out of school.

For example, state and local leaders should develop and fund multi-tiered systems of support inclusive of resources across the community to promote inclusion and meet all students’ needs by empowering students with the skills to address learning challenges.

**Strategy 7:** State and local leaders should support systems that use data and information to continuously improve learning environments for all students.

- State and local leaders should encourage the collection and use of a broad range of data and information related to quality learning environments, including school climate or culture data, teacher and student surveys, and other assessment and measurement tools. State leaders should consider how to develop existing assessment and measurement tools to include more robust characteristics of quality learning environments. While there is good data and information available on learning environments, there is still an opportunity to continue augmenting and refining the currently available tools. Additionally, there is an opportunity to better align these tools across the PreK-12 education ecosystem.
- Learning environment measures should be included when state agencies and district offices engage
in continuous improvement processes.

- State agencies should publicly report disaggregated data on student outcomes resulting from various assessments of the learning environment, with the goal of better understanding evidence-based, effective practices. State and local leaders should report disaggregated data aligned with best practices for protecting student privacy while ensuring transparency and promoting continuous improvement.

III. State and local leaders should promote the development of adult capacity to support students’ social, emotional, and academic development.

As the Council of Distinguished Scientists and the Council of Distinguished Educators note, to be effective, social, emotional, and academic learning must begin with adults. Students are more likely to benefit when educators are supported in attaining the skills, attitudes, and understandings needed to integrate social, emotional, and academic learning for students, and to model these competencies in the daily life of the school and classroom.

However, today’s educators typically receive little pre-service or in-service training on how to promote specific social or emotional skills, deal with peer conflict, or support social and emotional development overall. The understanding that learning is social and emotional, as well as academic, should be applied to adult learning as well as to children’s learning. To ensure young people gain the broad set of skills to be successful, the training and development of the adults (educators, school leaders, youth development professionals) who create learning environments and experiences are critical.

State policy governs the educator development pipeline (from initial preparation, induction, and licensure through ongoing professional development); this policy can prioritize educators’ own knowledge base in learning science and child development strategies in order to build learning environments that support each student’s development. Districts can similarly prioritize these skills and competencies in their recruitment, hiring, promotion, and compensation policies and in the ongoing professional learning of educators.

We do not underestimate the magnitude of this task, which will require a significant shift in how educators, administrators, and other youth-serving professionals are educated, trained, and developed over time and in the priority, leadership, and resources necessary from states and other institutions.

**Strategy 8:** State leaders should redesign the licensure requirements for school leaders and educators, as well as the approval requirements for educator preparation programs, to reflect the knowledge base and competencies required to integrate social, emotional, and academic development.

State leaders should redesign preparation and credentialing to ensure that educators can acquire:

- A deep understanding of all areas of child and adolescent development— physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and ethical— and the ability to apply this knowledge to classroom design, management, and content instruction.
- Pedagogical strategies that align with the science of learning and development, including how to design motivating tasks that demand higher-order thinking skills, provide careful scaffolding so that they are accessible for all students, use formative feedback, and explicitly teach students how to understand and reflect on their own learning.
• Skills to integrate social and emotional instruction with academic content, including developing social skills, self-control, organizational skills such as setting goals, managing time well, and the ability to focus on a task, and the opportunity to learn from mistakes and to realize that hard work pays off.
• An understanding of the effects of adverse childhood experiences on children’s behaviors and learning and how to mediate these effects to support building relationships and learning.

**Strategy 9:** State leaders should honor existing micro-credentials and other forms of demonstrated expertise (e.g. National Board Certification) or develop new ways to acknowledge educators’ demonstrated competencies and expertise in the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of learning.

State leaders are uniquely positioned both to acknowledge current forms of recognition and to incent the development of state-specific credentials that can apply both within and across the PreK-12 education ecosystem. Because the bulk of the educator workforce is already in the system, it’s important to find incentives and recognition programs to encourage them to develop the knowledge and skills to integrate social, emotional, and academic development that may not have been offered during their prior preparation. Additionally, state and local leaders should align professional development, evaluation, advancement, and compensation policies to enable, recognize, and reward educators who earn micro-credentials or other recognitions of demonstrated expertise in developing students’ social, emotional, and academic competencies.

**Strategy 10:** State and local leaders should restructure recruitment, hiring, performance management, and career advancement practices, including educator leadership positions, to prioritize demonstrated competency in integrating students’ social, emotional, and academic development among both teachers and school leaders.

In order to reinforce the integration of social, emotional, and academic development, the human capital and performance management system(s) should reflect our new understanding of how students learn and develop. By aligning the disparate pieces of this system, state and local leaders can help ensure an adult workforce that has the requisite knowledge and skills. Recruitment and selection, onboarding and induction, performance management, compensation and tenure decisions, as well as ongoing support and professional advancement should all work together to reinforce the expectations we have of educators.

To ensure professional development is aligned with the local context, either the school or district should serve as the center of support for professional growth and development for individuals and groups of educators within a professional learning community. This might include building cadres of teachers with expertise in needed areas – such as trauma-informed instruction, restorative practices, conflict resolution, and the integration of social-emotional skills into academic instruction – and creating ways for them to share their knowledge and skills with other educators through professional learning communities and other forms of professional development.

**Strategy 11:** State leaders should incent educator preparation programs to work collaboratively on building comprehensive preparation experiences focused on understanding and modeling the integrated nature of social, emotional, and academic development.

States leaders can network educator preparation programs and build stronger pipelines between
institutions of higher education, K-12 districts, and other youth-serving agencies and partners. This includes redesigning clinical experiences to focus on applying the principles of human and child development in diverse settings. Strategies include:

- Providing well-trained mentors during clinical experiences who have been selected for their ability to integrate the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of learning.
- Having a portion of clinical experiences occur in youth development settings, which focus on practices and environments to help children manage their behavior, relationships, attention, and motivation in order to gain a sense of their own agency.
- Creating structured, collaborative relationships with teaching schools, including having their educators serve as clinical faculty, similar to teaching hospitals in the medical field.
- When possible, having educator preparation programs provide continued support to their graduates after they enter the profession.

IV. Federal, state, and local government leaders should ensure the efficient, aligned, and equitable allocation of resources to support the success of the whole student.

States and local leaders must ensure that all students have equitable access to learning environments that are safe, inclusive, and welcoming, including adequate physical facilities, high-quality learning opportunities, well-prepared teachers, engaging extracurricular activities, and a supportive school climate and culture.

Supporting social, emotional, and academic development is a wise use of public resources because there can be long-term social and economic benefits to society when schools implement and embed evidence-based programs that promote social and emotional learning as well as cognitive development.

It is becoming clearer that this integrated set of competencies is essential for success in the increasingly complex, global, and rapidly changing world in which our students will function as adults. Thus, the impact of development in these areas reaches far beyond individual or school success and has significant benefits for the well-being of our economy and society. As the Council of Distinguished Scientists found, low-cost social emotional and related interventions can deliver a substantial return on investment. For example, a benefit-cost analysis of prominent social emotional interventions revealed a positive return on investment averaging a yield of $11 in long-term benefits over a range of outcomes for every $1 invested.

State and local leaders must take responsibility through leveraging policy and resources to ensure each and every student has access to quality learning environments across districts and schools. Resources broadly include funding, training, time, and community assets that must be aligned to support the ability to continually innovate.

**Strategy 12: Federal, state, and local leaders should distribute resources equitably and adequately to ensure each and every young person has what they need to be successful.**

- Federal, state, and local leaders must consider resources broadly to include: a diverse and stable cadre of well-qualified educators, reasonable class sizes and ratios of counselors/other support staff to students, and health and mental health services.
- Additionally, government leaders at all levels must evaluate the adequacy of resources in each community in relation to student needs as a basis for investments.
As federal, state, and local leaders consider investments in school safety, they should explicitly support the teaching of social and emotional skills and provide comprehensive student support services.

**Strategy 13:** State and district leaders should evaluate how to reduce fragmentation and improve alignment across programs and funding in order to advance an integrated approach to social, emotional, and academic development.

Alignment of strategies, funding, and other resources in support of a state’s or district’s vision for social, emotional, and academic development is essential for authentic integration and to make this work doable at the district and school levels. Forging coherence and drawing connections to existing and important bodies of work is a critical next step that state leaders can take in the short term.

- States can start by auditing current priorities and articulating ways in which an integrated approach to social, emotional, and academic development can be embedded in that work, rather than seen as its own, separate area of work.
- Such an approach includes the opportunity to align performance measures, accountability, and public reporting for schools, youth-serving agencies, and community partners with the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for a successful high school graduate that includes social and emotional competencies.

**Strategy 14:** State leaders must create and clearly communicate a mechanism that allows districts and localities to combine and align (or blend and braid) school-based and community-based resources to more effectively meet students’ needs.

States also can be a resource in helping local leaders align funding to integrate social, emotional, and academic development. For example, many communities are unaware of their ability to use federal funds to support services and supports from community-based partners. Clear guidance on allowable uses for federal funds, as well as state categorical funds, can encourage innovative and effective uses of these funds at the school level. Virtually every major program and title of federal financial assistance can be purposed to integrate social, emotional, and academic development. While there is even more flexibility in ESSA than in prior statutes, this flexibility is unlikely to be fully recognized or acted upon without strong and clear state leadership. Additionally, funding and resources should be considered broadly across the preK-12 education ecosystem to include all resources and capacities available to support the state’s efforts.

State leadership should include clear, proactive communications and messaging to districts and schools around the allowable uses of funds and the ability to blend and braid resources within schools and communities to boost outcomes for students.

**Strategy 15:** Federal government leaders should remove barriers and provide incentives within federal programs that would allow districts and localities to serve youth more holistically.

Federal policy, both legislation and regulations, can create the enabling conditions for state- and district-level innovation. This includes providing more flexibility for states and districts to combine federal dollars or waive regulatory requirements in exchange for better outcomes for students. It also includes the
federal government’s ongoing, historical commitment to provide funding for research and the translation of research into practice.

- Federal government leaders should support administrative flexibility in the use of funding and the removal of barriers in exchange for greater student outcomes, similar to work in other sectors of government, such as Performance Pilot Partnerships (P3).
- Additionally, federal government leaders should leverage federal research investments to inform state-level policy and district-level practice via research-to-practice translations across the Departments of Education; Labor, Health, and Human Services; the National Science Foundation; the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development; and other federal agencies.

Conclusion

Policy plays a supportive role in moving these efforts from the periphery to the mainstream of American education by framing expectations, providing resources, and creating the conditions that enable districts and their communities to align around a common vision grounded in how learning happens.

The policy recommendations above create the enabling conditions in states that allow district and school leaders to innovate and implement strategies to support students’ social, emotional, and academic development. Our focus is on how to encourage state leaders to build the capacity of district and school leaders to implement evidence-based strategies that are aligned with each community’s context. Additionally, these recommendations acknowledge the opportunity to leverage the implementation of federal policy and its related funding. While this is not an exhaustive list or a sequential to-do list, these identified opportunities represent the consensus of the many voices that have engaged with the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.