



Whole Learner Act: Meeting the Needs of Today’s Students

The challenges facing students’ academic achievement and mental health are at critical levels. The impact of the pandemic on learning and emotional well-being continues to affect students and [increase gaps in academic achievement](#). Based on [brain science](#) showing that academic and emotional development are inextricably linked, we believe that – in order to truly address the needs of today’s students – schools must adopt evidence-based, holistic learning models that reflect the student as a “whole learner.”

Whole-learner approaches to education recognize that healthy learning and development requires all students to have educational experiences that support the development of a range of skill domains—physical, social, cognitive, emotional, and creative. By supporting the varied aspects of students’ development,-- within safe, supportive learning environments – whole-learner approaches enable students to grow into flexible, well-rounded individuals who can excel in the workplace and contribute to the economy and their community.

The success of these approaches is evidenced by organizations like [Building Assets, Reducing Risks \(BARR\)](#), which has implemented whole-learner practices in more than 300 schools around the country – urban, suburban and rural. Research involving 115 of these schools showed that in just one year, rural schools saw an average reduction of 29% in failure rate, and urban schools saw an average reduction of 40%.

To support the adoption of whole-learner approaches in schools across the country, America Forward and our Coalition partners are calling on Congress to pass the Whole Learner Act, which would:

- Establish a competitive grant program for partnerships proposing to work together to create transformative, school-wide systems that increase access to whole-learner approaches in schools.
- Direct grantees to use funds to:
 - o Increase mental health and protective supports in schools, including student and staff wellbeing;
 - o Integrating learning through play to build critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills;
 - o Provide training and professional development for teachers on transitioning to this new school-wide system and leveraging whole-learner approaches; and
 - o Encourage active parent and family engagement in the development and implementation of whole-learner approaches at home.
- Require partnerships to specify in their grant application how they will:
 - o Demonstrate the evidence base for implementing effective whole-learner approaches as part of a transformative, school-wide system;



- o Weave together academics, skill development and acquisition, play, and mental health and other supports as part of a cohesive transformative, school-wide system focused on helping students learn and grow;
 - o Engage school and community stakeholders in the design, implementation, and continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of the activities supported by the grant;
 - o Conduct and provide the results of a data-driven needs analysis of the schools and surrounding communities to be served, including surveys of teachers, other school staff, students, parents and families, and non-profit and community service providers; and
 - o Implement activities to meet the identified needs during the grant period and sustain such activities at the conclusion of the grant.
- Establish a definition for “whole-learner approaches” to include evidence-based instructional practices that support physical, social, creative, emotional, and cognitive development; reflect the dynamic, interconnected nature of how young people learn and interact with the world; are trauma-informed and culturally relevant; utilize restorative disciplinary tactics; allow for playful experiences that bring joy to learning; create safe and healthy learning environments that foster positive, trusting relationships; and offer a combination of guided teaching, direct instruction, and open exploration to give young people agency and voice.
 - Give funding priority to high-need school districts and schools where a significant percentage of children come from low-income families or rural elementary or secondary schools.
 - Require an independent evaluation of program effectiveness, submissions of activity reports by grantees, and the dissemination of best practices by the Secretary of Education.

About America Forward

America Forward is the 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 represents a Coalition of more than [100 social innovation organizations](#) that champion innovative solutions to our country’s most pressing issues in education and economic mobility.