



Westbrook Public Schools

Westbrook, CT

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Westbrook Public Schools Featured in Report from National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Westbrook students continue to lead the national wave of optimism about the potential for young people and their communities to experience positive outcomes socially and emotionally.

WASHINGTON, D.C. –Westbrook Public Schools and its work to support the whole student is included as an exemplary approach to supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic development in a report released today by a prestigious national commission.

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development’s “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope” asserts that our nation is at a turning point, understanding that social, emotional, and cognitive development underpins children’s academic learning. This breakthrough understanding about how people learn is fueling a growing movement to educate children as whole people, with social and emotional as well as academic needs, the report says.

Westbrook has espoused the integration of multidimensional skill development to optimize learning. We believe that social, emotional and cognitive skills can be taught, that learning happens in the cultivation of positive relationships and that social, emotional and cognitive development offsets the effects of stress and trauma; adverse childhood experiences. In that work, we have seen the increase in academic proficiency and less disciplinary exclusions. See the work noted in the Aspen Institute feature entitled Caring Communities: Linking School Culture and Student Development p. 9-10 and in the Practice and in the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Practice Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens, p. 39.

Westbrook thanks the commission for recognizing our school district and the students who are emerging as our strongest resource. In pledging to continue this work, we have made a commitment to work with our students as resources, true partners in setting the climate of our schools and district, so that students can emerge as leaders on the importance of empathy and kindness. From her unprecedented step of asking high school students to collect and analyze school and community climate survey data, the superintendent commented that “our students are transforming their school and the district (Pre-K – 12) and inspiring others across the state to do the same.”

“A Nation at Hope” emphasizes that translating knowledge about how people learn into practice and helping students develop skills like collaboration, empathy, and perseverance requires systemic change. It offers specific actions in research, practice, and policy to fundamentally shift how we teach

children, with the understanding that the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct.

The report recommends taking these key steps:

- Set a clear vision that broadens the definition of student success to prioritize the whole child.
- Transform learning settings so they are safe and supportive for all young people.
- Change instruction to teach students social, emotional, and cognitive skills; embed these skills in academics and school-wide practices.
- Build adult expertise in child development.
- Align resources and leverage partners in the community to address the whole child.
- Forge closer connections between research and practice to generate useful, actionable information for educators.

Nearly 100 organizations that have signed on in support of the report's conclusions and recommendations as part of an ever-widening coalition committed to advancing the work. This groundswell of support that has surged over the course of the Commission's work, and now supports action across communities following its release, sets the report apart and offers promise for the movement to grow nationwide.

As Chet Bialicki, Teen Leadership teacher/mentor, has noted that his, "priority to give Westbrook students increasing opportunities to respond to invitations from organizations such as CEA, the Community Coalition on Children, National School Climate Center, FaceBook and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence to present their leadership in setting a climate conducive to social, emotional and academic development."

Drawing on input from more than 200 scientists, youth and parent groups, educators and policymakers, the report seeks to accelerate and strengthen efforts in local communities. These recommendations are especially pertinent as states and communities continue to leverage their increased authority on education policy under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. The report includes specific strategies that schools, districts, and communities can pursue related to each recommendation and examples of places that are engaged in these efforts.

The report also outlines evidence that confirms that supporting students' social, emotional and academic development has a positive impact on their attendance, test scores, success in college and careers, and overall well-being. This approach also improves students' feelings about school and makes schools safer.

More information is available at NationatHope.org.