

A Survey of Whole-Child School Reforms

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Overview

Whole-child education models are based on the idea that schools should expand the reach of their services in order to address a wider range of student needs related to health and well-being. This paper reviews several examples of whole-child reforms, including community schools, school-based health centers, wraparound service models, and social-emotional learning curricula. What these models have in common is a focus on the development of the “whole child” rather than just the academic aspects of child development.

Because nearly all children in the United States attend public schools, these locations have long been used to provide health-related services such as immunization clinics, but there is debate about whether schools are the appropriate places to focus on nonacademic outcomes and on the broader societal ills that so negatively impact child well-being.

Guidance for Policymakers

- Policymakers looking to invest in whole-child reforms should take a careful look at the existing research. The US Department of Education’s taxonomy of research quality is helpful, as is the What Works Clearinghouse it operates.
- It may be the case in some districts that a whole-child model seems like the best available intervention. In these settings, care should be taken to determine the needs and goals of the school or district; clearly articulate these for the community; choose a whole-child model focused on the relevant outcomes with research evidence validating its effectiveness; provide adequate resources to support the implementation; and commit to a process of continual evaluation and a willingness to change directions or to abandon the model if it is not effective.
- Policymakers looking to initiate whole-child reforms should also take care to redouble their focus on academic achievement by investing in tools that we know work, such as attracting and training an effective teaching workforce, extending the time children spend in high-quality learning environments, and offering math and reading curricula that demonstrate improvements.

What the Research Tells Us

- The research evidence on the effectiveness of whole-child reform in schools is limited.
- There is some promising evidence in support of whole-child education from a few programs in a few settings but not enough to support any of these models’ ability to improve children’s educational outcomes at scale.
- The lack of conclusive evidence of a clear positive causal effect of whole-child reforms on academic achievement casts doubt on the theory that investments in a wider range of school-based child development programs are what is needed to enhance students’ academic success.
- Though whole-child education models may have other positive impacts, on their own and without attention to academic reforms, they are unlikely to be the panacea for low academic performance that plagues children in the United States.

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