



More than a Score:

School Accountability for Whole-Child Success

"I feel that school should prepare students to be ready to take on new challenges and take risks. The school needs to not only teach academic skills. Kids need life skills, coping skills to manage their emotions. Schools should provide a platform for students to learn about themselves and the world around them. Students also need to learn where they fit in this world and how they can be contributors to their world." —Educator respondent¹

Introduction:

There has been growing recognition of the need for student-centered schooling, a paradigm shift aimed at placing students at the forefront of school design. Traditional education frameworks often fail to accommodate the varied needs of students, resulting in disengagement, frustration, and unrealized potential. The call for student-centered schooling is rooted in the belief that education should be tailored to students' individual needs and interests. It prioritizes personalized learning experiences, interactive teaching, and a holistic approach to student development encompassing not just academic growth, but also social-emotional well-being, creativity, and critical thinking.

Methodology:

From November 2023 to February 2024, Teach Plus Fellows conducted focus groups with 120 Illinoisans. Of the participants, 23 were students in grades 5-12, 48 were parents of students ranging from preschool to beyond high school, and 49 were current educators. Participants included 8 respondents from rural Illinois, 28 from Chicago, 34 from central and southern Illinois, and 49 from Chicago suburbs. Focus groups were asked about the role and purpose of school in their lives and their hopes and aspirations for their future. Participants recorded their responses on a questionnaire and then discussed responses together while facilitators recorded the conversations.

Key Finding: While all stakeholder groups agree that academic skills are important, they also believe that schools should address the needs of the whole child at the same time

Stakeholders stressed the importance of building a strong sense of community in classrooms and schools to support the whole child. Parents specifically reinforced this focus, expressing support for learning environments built around students as opposed to content. Students, parents, and educators alike pointed to the power of relationship-building in supporting student growth. Students recognized that strong relationships and school communities led to supportive environments in which they felt safe taking risks in practicing life skills and citizenship. As one student put it, the role of schools is *"to help and educate so kids can feel more at home."*²

Students recognized that academic success is contingent on their emotional well-being. They pointed to support provided beyond the classroom—namely social workers—in helping them achieve that emotional well-being. Educators named the power of wraparound services in collectively working toward student emotional health. Students, parents, and educators agreed that learning should be joyful, and that it takes a team stretching beyond the classroom—spanning the school, district, and broader community—to actively create and sustain that joy.

“Teachers should form real, personal relationships and treat students like humans, rather than numbers or test scores. For my son, teachers that have encouraged him to go above and beyond in clubs, band, and sports, have pushed him out of his comfort zone and into greater possibility. This has also helped him find purpose and more thought about future careers. In turn, he knows he must do well academically to pursue these other goals.”

—Parent respondent³

Recommendation: As ISBE reinvents school accountability and supports, Illinois should incorporate measures tied to whole-child well-being alongside academic achievements.

In his weekly memo on March 19th, 2024, State Superintendent Dr. Tony Sanders highlighted the need to revise how we assess students and schools, stating that, “If we are to provide a statewide system of support that effectively and equitably directs resources to the places of greatest need, we simply must have more accurate measurements of student success and school performance.”⁴ In any truly accurate measure of student success and school performance, students, parents, and educators tell us that the school environment and the well-being of the whole child must be taken into account. We offer for discussion two ways we might achieve this goal.

Option 1: Reimagining the Accountability System

If ISBE is truly redesigning our current accountability structure, it should be designed from the ground up to support the whole child—not just academic success. The Center for Disease Control and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) published the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Model, which emphasizes the connections between health and academic achievement and the importance of evidence-based school policies and practices. This model aligns education with public health and school health standards so that every student is Healthy, Safe, Engaged, Supported, and Challenged. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) referenced the WSCC model in the introduction to the [ESSA Plan](#) approved in July 2022, writing, “We believe caring for ‘the whole child’ is an essential part of promoting academic excellence.”⁵

Working from this belief statement, we recommend that the new accountability system should be designed to include measures of the [components of the WSCC model](#).⁶ A system that not only measures progress in these areas, but also helps schools improve on them, is one where all students can thrive. The 655 school districts in Illinois that participate in the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program are already required to establish a wellness policy meeting the nutrition and physical education/activity components of the WSCC model, so this recommendation builds on existing efforts.⁷ These schools use an assessment tool called the WellSat to meet the assessment requirements of these programs. However, the University of Connecticut also developed an expanded version of the tool, the WellSat WSCC, that includes all components of the WSCC model and would provide a more complete picture of how schools are supporting whole-child wellness.

In order to ensure schools are doing their part to maximize student success in our schools, the new accountability model should be aligned with the WellSat WSCC tool to meet all components that address the health and wellness of the whole child—in addition to their academics.

Option 2: Working Within Our Current Accountability System

Reimagining critical systems like accountability measures is difficult. While we think that reimagining represents the best path to serving the whole student, we also see ways to take smaller steps in that direction without major disruptions to the current system. School districts already participate in the annual 5Essentials for School Success survey of students and teachers, which generates data districts can use to improve schools and student wellness.

Our current school accountability metrics include only the response rate from this survey, and do not push schools to take steps to address critical needs identified by the survey respondents. We believe this existing tool should be used to target supports that will impact student wellness—and ultimately student outcomes, as research has demonstrated that schools that succeed in at least 3 of the 5Essentials produce stronger results for students.

Rather than focusing only on the response rate of the survey, ISBE can use the scores derived from the Supportive Environment, Ambitious Instruction, and Involved Families indicators to target state support for schools struggling to achieve a minimum benchmark score in these essential areas. Utilizing survey results would focus schools on ensuring the process of learning is attentive to the whole child, and not just test scores. Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) and Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs), as school improvement partners for local school districts, are primed to provide targeted wellness support for schools as ISBE moves to reform the state-wide system of support in partnership with the ROEs and ISCs. Using the 5Essentials score as a focus point for improvement—rather than as an accountability measure that could portray schools in a negative light—preserves the value of the tool as an honest reporting of school conditions while ensuring that the results also lead to action.

Conclusion:

As the old saying goes, “what gets measured gets managed,” and school and district priorities are guided by the priorities expressed in our accountability system. As ISBE prepares for the next update to Illinois’ accountability system, we urge the agency to incorporate measures and supports that prioritize the health of the whole child. We offer these starting points for discussion in order to encourage thinking about ways to ensure that all school communities statewide prioritize the overall health and well-being of our students alongside their academic success, and look forward to continuing that conversation with teachers at the table.

References:

- ¹ What do you see as the role of education and schools in helping your students achieve success? What responsibility do schools have for their success, and what do you see as the purpose of education?
- ² What do you see as the role of education and schools in helping you achieve success? What responsibility do schools have for your success, and what do you see as the purpose of education?
- ³ What will your child(ren) need from school and their teachers to help them achieve your/their dreams for the future? What do great schools and teachers look like to you, and what parts of school have been most useful for your child(ren) so far? Why?
- ⁴ Sanders, T. (2024, March 19). ISBE’s weekly message. Illinois State Board of Education.
<https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Weekly-Message-Display-Form-V5.aspx?ItemId=390>
- ⁵ Illinois State Board of Education State Template for the Consolidated State Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act. (2022). Amendment, 2. <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Approved-Illinois-State-Plan-2022.pdf>
- ⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/whole-school-community-child/about/components-of-wscc.html>
- ⁷ Illinois Secretary of State. Illinois School District National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Eligibility Percentage.
<https://www.ilsos.gov/departments/library/libraries/pdfs/il-nslp-eligibility.pdf>.