

Prioritizing Student Wellness through the Whole Child Approach

By Will Gordillo

Introduction

A whole child and wellness-focused approach can lead to improved academic achievement, better behavior, social skills, increased student engagement, and higher levels of student satisfaction. Research studies on human development indicate that the impact of trauma can be mitigated when students learn in a positive school environment that fosters long-term secure relationships that support academic, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Teach for America reports that studies have found that social-emotional learning and the Whole Child Approach result in higher academic achievement, graduation rates, and attendance. At the same time, suspension and disciplinary incidents go down.ⁱ Research also indicates that social and emotional learning helps children develop an awareness of their emotions and better manage them, set and achieve personal and academic goals, use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to maintain positive relationships, and demonstrate decision-making and responsible behaviors for success in school and life.ⁱⁱ

The Whole Child Approach is often associated with improved social and emotional skills, including better self-regulation, self-esteem, and empathy. Just as the whole-child approach ensures stronger social, emotional, and cognitive skills empowering children to live “full lives,” we often see that children who do not have these skills or support can experience negative outcomes in school and life, including criminal activity and substance abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ

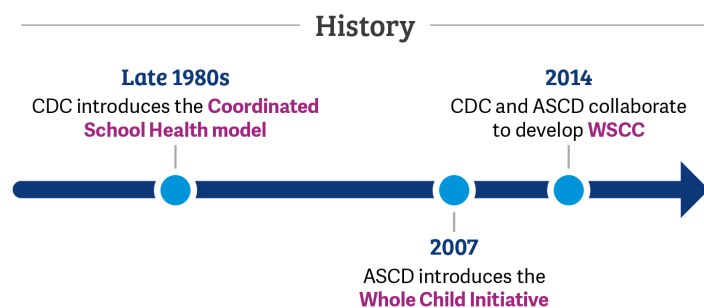
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs has greatly influenced the Whole Child Approach in education. According to the hierarchy, individuals must have their fundamental physiological and safety needs met before they can focus on fulfilling higher-order needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization. In education, the Whole Child Approach aims to cater to the comprehensive needs of students, including their social, emotional, cognitive,

physical, and academic requirements. This approach serves as a useful framework for incorporating such practices in schools, with a focus on student success. Recognizing that children come from diverse backgrounds and have unique needs, the approach seeks to provide them with adequate resources and support to flourish. Maslow’s Hierarchy is frequently employed as a foundation for creating a supportive and nurturing environment that caters to students’ basic needs, enabling them to achieve their full potential and attain self-actualization.

Historical Context, Literature, and Research on the Whole Child Approach



The Coordinated School Health model was first introduced by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the 1980s, while in 2007, the Association of Curriculum Development (ASCD) launched the Whole Child Approach in K-12 Education initiative. The CDC and ASCD collaborated in 2014 to

introduce the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model, which highlights the link between health and learning. The WSCC model focuses on keeping students healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. It places a strong emphasis on student success, valued by schools, teachers, health professionals, families, and communities. This initiative aims to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment by addressing basic needs and implementing wrap-around support in key areas. It highlights the importance of promoting student well-being and academic success through a coordinated effort by all areas involved:

- **Health:** This includes areas such as behavior, mental health, physical health, and nutrition
- **Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS):** This framework supports the whole child through the application of three tiers of both academic and behavioral supports a multi-tiered system of support, including tiers 1, 2, and 3
- **Academic Growth:** This encompasses various aspects of education, such as school climate and safety, learning gains, trauma-informed care, resiliency, and social-emotional learning

The Whole Child Approach in K-12 schools can positively impact student outcomes. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data confirms the consequential impact that events of these last few years has had on student achievement and student outcomes. The paradigm began to shift with the 2007 onset of the great recession and the profound impact of the resulting funding cliff which resulted in significant cuts in spending from which school districts are still recovering. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on school closures, resulting in significant learning loss coupled with increasing mental health and school safety concerns which shifted education funding priorities to recovery efforts with a lens on student achievement and student outcomes.

Therefore, to promote academic recovery and support students’ overall well-being, evidence-based solutions that incorporate a holistic approach to learning are necessary. This includes strategies that address students’ social, emotional, and academic development, alongside interventions focused on content and skills. Research demonstrates that an approach which addresses health and wellness, as well as social and emotional learning bolsters academic achievement.^{iv}

Despite many of the highlighted positive outcomes, implementation of the Whole Child Approach can be challenging. Many studies such as the report published by the Economic Policy Institute indicate that schools often struggle with lack of resources, including insufficient funding and personnel, to implement effective programs that help support an equitable Whole Child Approach. Additionally, some schools may have difficulty aligning the Whole Child Approach with their existing curriculum and accountability systems.^v

In summary, the body of research suggests that the adoption of the Whole Child Approach in K-12 schools, through such means as the implementation of comprehensive school-based behavioral health systems, promotes safety, academic success, and increased attendance. It also helps reduce special education referrals, school disciplinary actions, emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and the prevalence and severity of mental illness and teacher well-being.

Equitable Practices

Equitable practices refer to fairness and justice in the distribution of resources and opportunities. In the context of education, equity means ensuring that all students have access to the same high-quality educational resources and opportunities, regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or any other characteristic. Equity is achieved when all students receive the resources that they need to graduate prepared for success after high school.^{vi}

The Whole Child Approach and equitable practices are closely related, as both aim to support the well-being and success of all students. Further, this approach equips teachers and leaders with knowledge and skills to implement best practices in instructional delivery, and to conduct assessments that drive instruction and differentiation. Student needs are met with relevant and rigorous learning experiences. Holistically, educators gain fundamentals in classroom management, school culture, and community-building to create environments where students are respected, valued, and taught to recognize and honor their contribution to their own learning, as well as the learning of others.

Best Practices for Implementing a Whole Child Approach Framework In K-12 Schools

When implementing a Whole Child Approach in K-12 schools, the focus is placed on ensuring that each student is supported and nurtured in all aspects of development, including their academic, social-emotional, physical well-being, as well as their resiliency. This may include many of the following components aligned with the goals delineated in an intentionally designed wellness policy:

- Personalized Learning
- Social-Emotional and Resiliency
- Health and Wellness
- Family and Community Engagement
- Enrichment Activities

The Whole Child Approach framework acknowledges the complexity of each student and the need for support in all aspects of their development. Lisa Flook, Ph.D., a senior researcher at the Learning Policy Institute, outlined four ways schools can go beyond teaching academics to support students in their relationships, identity, emotional skills, and overall wellness.^{vii}

The ASCD Whole Child Network published a final report summarizing the strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement of schools implementing the Whole Child Approach. According to the report, schools that implemented ASCD's approach saw improvements in attendance, reductions in suspensions and disciplinary actions. The approach placed a greater value on school partnerships by local communities and families. In addition, staff and students perceived greater respect for their voices.^{viii}

With student success in mind, one essential foundational element is to develop a comprehensive plan for designing and implementing integrated services for students and families. One best practice example is the alignment of the school district's wellness policy, goals, procedures, and initiatives to the 10 WSCC components. The following is an example of a school district that embraces this best practice in their student wellness approach.

School District of Palm Beach County’s Whole School, Whole Community, and Whole Child Policies, Procedures, and Implementation Strategies

The School District of Palm Beach County first adopted a wellness promotion policy in 2006 and improved on the policy in subsequent adoptions during the school years of 2009, 2012, and 2015.

The latest revisions resulted in Wellness Policy 2.035 which is comprehensively aligned with the 10 WSCC Components and their Goals:

- The previous wellness promotion policy, goals, and objectives have been consolidated into a streamlined policy
- The policy is aligned with the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Where feasible or required by law, language has been changed from “should” to “must,” such as with recess requirements
- Multiple departments have contributed items to increase the wellness culture throughout the district leadership at both the district and school levels
- A Wellness Promotion Task Force (WPTF) has been assembled
- An Internal District Wellness Promotion Collaboration Team (WPCT) has been deployed
- A Healthy School Team (HST) has been established to ensure schools comply with Smart Snacks legislation and support this policy



Over the years, the school district has incorporated technological solutions to enhance its efforts in various components and goals outlined in the comprehensive wellness policies and procedures. These solutions support the work delineated in policies for providing services to improve student learning and wellness. The School District of Palm Beach County has partnered with outside entities that support the delivery of specific components and goals for student success. The district partnered

with the Public Consulting Group (PCG) to implement their EDPlan case management platform to ensure the documentation of plans and delivery of service for individual Education Plans (IEP), Gifted plans, 504 plans, Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) and Suicide Risk Assessment (SRA).

Many strategies can support the implementation of the Whole Child Approach in K-12 schools, including:

- Creating positive classroom and school environments
- Developing positive relationships with students
- Encouraging positive student behaviors
- Promoting social-emotional learning to increase resiliency
- Implementing educational and restorative methods for disciplinary measures
- Providing a safe and inclusive learning environment
- Incorporating physical activity and health into the curriculum
- Encouraging student voice and choice
- Offering support to enhance student motivation and learning
- Implementing a MTSS to address student needs
- Fostering a growth mindset
- Implementing trauma-informed practices
- Providing access to mental health resources
- Promoting cultural competence and diversity
- Collaborating with families and community partners

Educator Engagement

There have been assorted studies surveying the perspectives of educators on the Whole Child Approach in education, including their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences while implementing this approach in their classrooms. These studies have provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing the Whole Child Approach in education.^{ix} Educators' perception of whole child education varies and can depend on several factors such as personal beliefs, educational background, and teaching experience. However, in general, educators who support whole child education believe in promoting the holistic development of students and view education to support the cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative growth of the child. They prioritize the creation of a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters student well-being, personal growth, and academic achievement.

Family Community Engagement

Building resiliency in students is an important aspect of the Whole Child Approach. Family and community engagement can play a key role in achieving this. By involving families and communities in the education process, educators can provide students with a supportive network that fosters their well-being and development. Effective engagement strategies, such as regular communication and collaboration, engaging families in decision-making, and providing resources and opportunities for involvement in school activities and events, can contribute to building resiliency in students. These strategies can lead to improved outcomes for academic achievement, social-emotional development, and health and wellness.

Identifying Funding and Purchasing Pathways

Several research studies have explored the impact of funding on the implementation and sustainability of the Whole Child Approach in education, and its influence on student outcomes.^x Methods cited in the literature that school districts employ to fund a Whole Child Approach include:

- Public funding (e.g., local, state, and federal sources including property taxes and grants)
- Private funding (e.g., foundations, corporations, and individual donations)
- Public-private partnerships (e.g., businesses and community-based organizations)
- Budget reallocation (e.g., redistributing allowable resources from other areas of the budget)
- Innovative financing (e.g., explore alternative financing options such as social impact bonds, etc.)

Note that the funding sources will vary depending on the district's available resources, needs and priorities, and state and federal regulations.

Resources

Resources that can support a Whole Child Approach in education:

- **Social-emotional learning programs:** Develop students' resilience by teaching students skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and the ability to recover from adversity, trauma, and stress
- **Mental health support:** This can include school counselors, psychologists, and social workers who can provide counseling and support to students with mental health concerns
- **Physical education and health programs:** These programs aim to promote physical fitness, healthy habits, and overall well-being
- **Cultural and linguistic resources:** These resources can include bilingual education programs, multicultural curriculum materials, and cultural competency training for teachers
- **Community partnerships:** Collaborations with community organizations can provide students with additional resources and support, such as mentoring, enrichment activities,

counseling, and health services

- **Positive school climate:** A positive school climate that promotes respect, safety, and a sense of belonging can support the emotional well-being and academic success of students
- **Technology:** Online resources and tools to support all areas of learning, such as English, and foreign language learning, coding, math, and reading

These resources should be tailored to the unique needs and characteristics of the students and community they serve and should be accessible to all students regardless of their socioeconomic status or other characteristics.

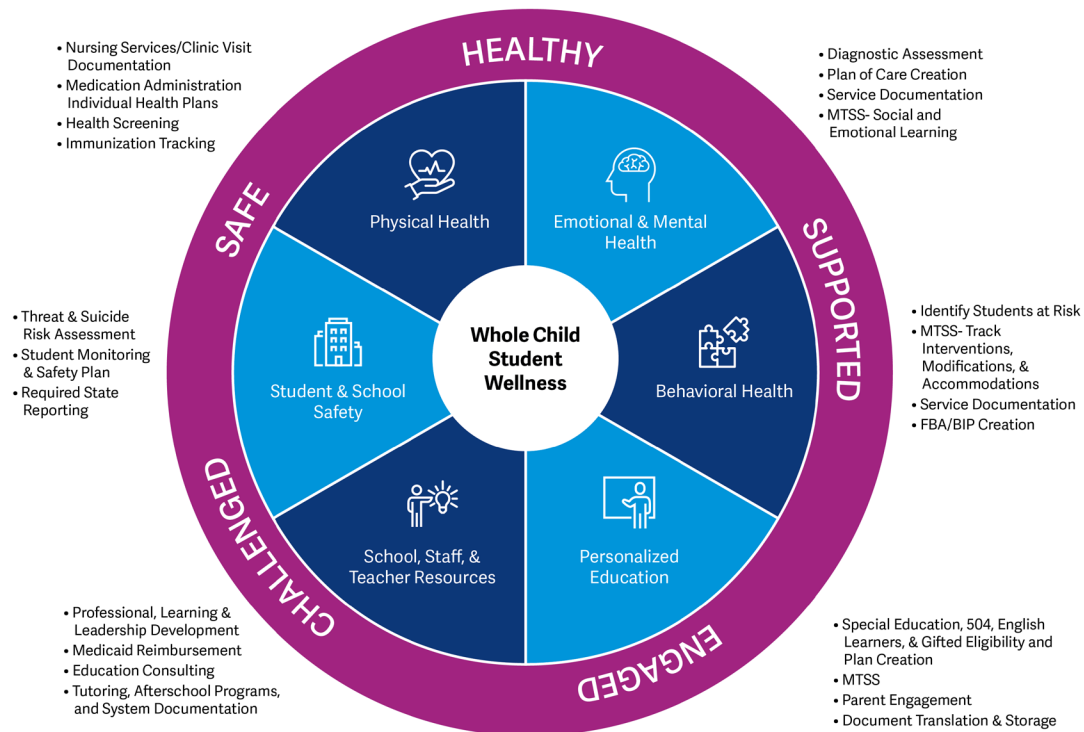
Technology Integration

Incorporating technology can play a significant role in implementing a Whole Child Approach in education. By leveraging technology, educators can foster resiliency and support social-emotional learning, mental health, physical education, cultural and linguistic competence, personalized learning, access to information, and automated feedback. The following are some ways in which technology can be utilized to achieve these goals:

1. **Resiliency and social-emotional learning:** Technology-based programs can teach students skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and resiliency
2. **Mental health support:** BTAM and SRA technologies can help identify and intervene with students in need of mental health support. Teletherapy and online counseling can provide students with access to mental health support both at school and from home
3. **Physical education and health:** Virtual and augmented reality, telehealth, and electronic health records can enhance physical education and health programs and make them more engaging for students
4. **Cultural and linguistic resources:** Technology-based resources such as English language learner plans, language-learning apps, and online cultural exchange programs can support the development of cultural and linguistic competence
5. **Positive school climate:** Communication, collaboration, and documentation tools can be used to create a positive and safe school climate and promote a sense of belonging and well-being among students
6. **Personalized learning:** With technology, students can access resources tailored to their individual learning needs and styles, which can help them make the most of their education. Specialized targeted solutions such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), 504 plans, behavior intervention plans, academic intervention plans, and MTSS intervention plans can also be implemented
7. **Access to a world of information:** Technology provides students access to individualized resources and a wide range of information, which can help them develop new knowledge and skills
8. **Automated feedback:** Some technologies can track progress over time and provide automated feedback on students' work or progress, which can help them improve their learning. It is important to use technology in a way that supports and enhances the overall educational experience and provides appropriate professional development for educators and digital literacy for students.

How PCG Can Help the Whole Child

PCG’s education consulting approach focuses on addressing student success across a variety of areas, including physical health, emotional and mental health, behavioral health, personalized education, and school safety. PCG brings a depth of proven experience in working with K-12 schools to integrate and adopt solutions that guide processes, organize supports, focus attention, and document progress to keep youth **healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged**. This is essential for building a Whole Child Student Wellness framework that prioritizes student success.



Acknowledgments

We would like to extend special recognition to the following collaborators for their valuable contributions and insights in the development of this document aimed at providing continued thought leadership in this area of practice.

About the Author

Mr. Will Gordillo has worked for PCG since 2015, providing subject matter expertise, thought leadership, and consulting services in a variety of education practice initiatives that support the implementation of special education and behavioral threat assessment policies, and practices across projects nationwide. He has been serving as a member of the team that provides project advisory to support the implementation of integrated solutions helping schools assess threats to others, threats to self, sexual misconduct, and fire-setting incidents in K-12 schools. Before joining PCG, he oversaw the day-to-day operations in two large urban school districts of special education, psychological services, behavioral and crisis management, and student support services including 504 and Gifted education for Miami Dade County Schools and the School District of Palm Beach County, Florida. Will’s extensive K-12 and PCG project work experiences bring value towards supporting the integration of case management solutions that will help schools seamlessly address threat management effectively with behavioral, and mental health, school safety, and whole child well-being in mind.

Contributors

Ms. Jillian Haring joined PCG in 2021 with over twenty years of public education service experience. Ms. Haring is passionate about creating safe, supportive, and engaging environments for students and those that work with them. She spent her time in one of the largest public-school systems in the country working in the capacity of a district administrator, behavior specialist, and special education educator. As a lifelong educator, Ms. Haring is committed to promoting the well-being and success of every student through a Whole Child Approach.

Dr. Allison Atkins is an experienced educator and leader with a diverse background in curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and online education. She holds an EdD in Leadership and Innovation, an MAE in Curriculum and Instruction, and a BAE in Elementary Education, all from Arizona State University. Allison is also a certified teacher in Arizona with endorsements in English, Gifted Education, and Structured English Immersion (SEI). Allison's expertise lies in curriculum development, instructional design, professional learning, and online education. She is known for her strong leadership skills, innovative thinking, and commitment to supporting student success. Allison's career spans various roles in education, including her current position as a Senior Consultant at PCG, where she supports the transition of GoalView to EDPlan in the state of Utah and growing PCG and EDPlan as the premier education solutions provider in the state. In addition, Allison has a strong background in K-12 education, having served as a director of curriculum and instruction where she led system accreditation efforts, developed, and managed curriculum frameworks, and supported school-wide alignment initiatives. She has also worked as a mentor teacher providing support and guidance to beginning teachers and coordinating a 21st Century Community Learning Center. She has also served as a Lecturer at Arizona State University, where she designed and facilitated courses on academic success and critical thinking for first-year college students, and as an Adjunct Instructor/Subject Matter Expert at Grand Canyon University and Ottawa University, where she taught online courses and designed curriculum for literacy coaching and language arts methods.

Ms. Jennifer Jones began her career in education as a classroom teacher. She has 20 years of experience as a leader of diverse teams in school administration, comprehensive professional development, project management, assessment services, distance education technologies, and student-to-adult learning. Within multiple leadership positions, she has been consistently proficient at combining high-leverage practices with individual growth plans to best support peers and clients. As a Senior Consultant at PCG, Jennifer supports school districts that are working towards building educators' capacity through scalable professional learning solutions. She leads the implementation of PCG's Pepper Online Professional Learning program, with a concerted effort on equity-based solutions to address achievement disparities. Jennifer has a notable passion for promoting equity, and she remains laser-focused on illuminating the needs of underserved school communities while pursuing equitable solutions that have a sustainable impact on all stakeholders. Jennifer is a proud alumna of Spelman College, an HBCU in Atlanta, GA, where she obtained her undergraduate degree in sociology. She also has a master's degree in education from Oglethorpe University, certification in Teacher Effectiveness from Agnes Scott College, and certification in Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace from ESSEC Business School.

Ms. Marina Keeton Fielder. Prior to coming to PCG as the Product Lead for EDPlan Health, Marina spent the most recent 10 years of her 18-year nursing practice in school health for a medium sized district outside of Houston, Texas. During her tenure as a school nurse, she spent time caring for students at both an elementary and intermediate school prior to serving as a district administrator over the Health Services Department. Marina holds a CPN Certification as a Pediatric Nurse and Master of Science in Nursing focused on Executive Nurse Leadership.

Ms. Mollye Kiss, a Senior Consultant with PCG, is the national lead for EDPlan MTSS solutions. Ms. Kiss works with school districts and state education agencies on student success projects, providing implementation and leadership support for large-scale MTSS initiatives throughout the country. Ms. Kiss has successfully led statewide MTSS projects in North Carolina, Connecticut, and Oklahoma, as well as numerous district wide MTSS implementations. Informed by more than 27 years of K-12 public education experience, Mollye has a thorough understanding of the complexities inherent in providing effective and appropriate supports and services, while adhering to the full range of federal, state, and local requirements. Her dedication to student and teacher success is evident in her drive to design structures and processes for successful outcomes for all students, including implementation and sustainability in all learning environments. Mollye's extensive experience includes ten years in educational leadership and administrative roles. Prior to joining PCG, Mollye was the director of special education and student services for a Florida school district. Responsibilities included: staffing, budget, curriculum, materials, facilities, child find, due process hearings, and compliance with all state and federal requirements related to special education.

About Public Consulting Group

Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) is a leading public sector solutions implementation and operations improvement firm that partners with health, education, and human services agencies to improve lives. Founded in 1986, PCG employs approximately 2,000 professionals throughout the U.S.—all committed to delivering solutions that change lives for the better. PCG offers education consulting services and technology solutions that help schools, school districts, and state education agencies/ministries of education to promote student success, improve programs and processes, and optimize financial resources.

To learn more about PCG's threat assessment platform or any of the other solutions referenced in this white paper for schools, contact us.

 (800) 210-6113  info@pcgus.com  www.publicconsultinggroup.com/bta

References

- i Teach for America Stories, Reid Hickman, August 30, 2019, Beyond Education and Academics <https://www.teachforamerica.org/stories/education-beyond-academics>
 - ii The Whole Child Approach, What Does the Research Say, Richard Costanza, Teaching Strategies, March 15, 2019 <https://teachingstrategies.com/blog/the-whole-child-approach-what-does-the-research-say/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CSocial%20and%20emotional%20learning%20helps%20children%20develop%20awareness,responsible%20behaviors%20for%20success%20in%20school%20and%20life.>
 - iii Making Whole Child Education the Norm <https://www.epi.org/publication/making-whole-child-education-the-norm/>
 - iv CASEL Press Release August 20,2022 <https://casel.org/naep-data-illuminates-need-to-strengthen-social-and-emotional-learning-for-academic-recovery/>
 - v Public Education In In the U. S. needs an Overhaul Report by Silvia Allegretto, Emma Garcia and Elaine Weiss, July 12, 2022, Economic Policy Institute <https://www.epi.org/publication/public-education-funding-in-the-us-needs-an-overhaul/>
 - vi Educational Equity, What Does it Mean and How Do We Know We Have Achieved it, January 2016, Center for Public Education <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-educational-equity-research-brief-january-2016.pdf>
 - vii Four Ways Schools Can Support the Whole Child, Lisa Flook, PH. D., Greater Good Magazine, April 23. 2019 https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_ways_schools_can_support_the_whole_child
 - viii Whole Child Network of Schools Final Report 2016 <https://files.ascd.org/staticfiles/ascd/pdf/siteASCD/wholechild/ASCD-WCN-Final-Report-2016.pdf>
 - ix Educators Don't Agree on What Whole Child Education Means. Here's Why It Matters. By Rachel Burstein, July 16, 2019 <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-07-16-educators-don-t-agree-on-what-whole-child-education-means-here-s-why-it-matters>
 - x "The impact of funding on Implementing the Whole Child Approach in Schools." Gonzalez, M. 2021) *Journal of Educational Administration*, 55(3), 350-364
- "Adequacy of funding for implementing the Whole Child Approach in Schools, Johnson, D. (2018), *Educational Research and Review*, 13(7), 327-333
- "Examining the Relationship between Funding and the Whole Child Approach in Education." Wilson, J (2019), *Journal of Educational Research*, 112(5), 435-444.
- "The Role and Funding in Sustaining the Whole Child Approach in Schools." Smith, J. (2020). *Journal of Education and Practice*, 11(9), 80-87