

Letter from the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's Youth Commission

We, the members of the [Aspen Institute National Youth Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development](#), are encouraged and motivated by the voices of our peers captured in *Respected: Perspectives of Youth on High School & Social and Emotional Learning*.

We are not surprised by what our fellow students shared about their high school experiences. Far too often, schools fail to help all of us reach our potential and see us as whole learners. *Respected* reveals that our generation's embrace of social, emotional, and academic learning in schools is undeniable and unambiguous: learning does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, learning happens best when the full, often complicated nature of our lived experiences are recognized, celebrated, and serve as the basis upon which we experience school.

While life outside of school can pose obstacles to learning, reconstructing what happens inside of school can offset learning barriers and instead enhance, accelerate, and broaden our success. The adults who teach and guide us—teachers, administrators, coaches, and counselors—should be organized to foster a warm, nurturing, and physically and emotionally safe environment that acknowledges and helps offset these obstacles. That means that adults in the building need to know and understand us. They need to help cultivate a strong sense of community that empowers each of us to achieve a sense of purpose and belonging. It also means that schools must transition to a leadership model that sees collaboration as a two-way street.

As students, we understand why we go to school: to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for future success. Social and emotional learning works in service of greater academic achievement and mastery, while also helping raise a generation of empathetic, compassionate, and self-aware people. This understanding, which was affirmed during our time with the Youth Commission, drives our desire to help build a student experience that leaves us better prepared to claim our future. By listening to young people, our education system can provide equitable access and opportunity for all and create a generation of leaders prepared to combat the challenges of this century.

To those reading this report, know that behind every data point is the story of a student who was brave enough to give voice to their own experiences and struggles. We want to thank them in joining our call in asking for more support from our schools as we go forth to accomplish our dreams.

The Youth Commission is a diverse group of high school and post-secondary young people with a wide range of educational experiences. We've attended traditional public, charter, and private preK-12 schools as well as public and private universities and military academies. Over the past two years, we've reflected on the successes and challenges of our educational journeys and listened to various voices within the National Commission community and beyond. We learned how to advocate for students like us who want their schools to engage their passions and prepare them to succeed in school, career, and life. Our findings culminated in a [Call to Action](#) for adults and schools to treat us as whole learners.