



# Educator Brief

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IMMIGRATION  
INITIATIVE

## A Whole Child Approach: The Key to Immigrant Origin Student Thriving

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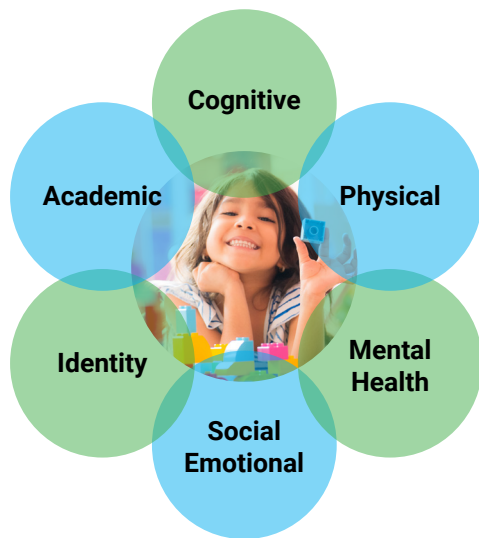
A whole child approach is **child centered**<sup>1</sup> and recognizes **ALL** domains of child development. These include:

- **Academic** (i.e., attainment of core K-12 literacy, math, science, and social science skills and knowledge)
- **Cognitive** (i.e., related to attention, perception, and memory)
- **Physical** (i.e., fitness, nutrition, sleep, etc.)
- **Mental** (i.e., a state of wellbeing to cope with the stresses of life and attain potential)
- **Social-Emotional** (i.e. skills and mindsets related to self-regulation, stress management, social interactions, and resilience), and
- **Identity** (including personal, cultural, racial and ethnic identities) domains.



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A whole child approach recognizes that each of these domains of development are **inter-related** and that each need be addressed for children to thrive.<sup>2</sup>

Further, guiding principles for an equitable whole child approach specifies that **transformative settings** require several elements for children to flourish.<sup>3</sup>

- ☐ It begins with a focus on developing **positive relationships** between educators and students, between students, and between educators and caretakers. This is essential to establish safe class and school setting where all students from every cultural ethnic and racial background feel like they **belong**.
- ☐ Learning experiences necessarily should be **rich, meaningful, engaging, inquiry** and problem solving based; students should see themselves reflected in the curriculum while learning perspectives across cultures and history.
- ☐ Students must also be offered **scaffolded cognitive supports** to master tasks through multiple modalities.
- ☐ As neuroscience now makes it clear, cognitive development does not stand alone—as such schools should incorporate both **structures and practices that support students in social-emotional learning** of habits, skills, mindsets around self-

awareness, -regulation, and -calming; task planning and implementation, perspective and empathy taking; and positive interpersonal relations and conflict resolution.

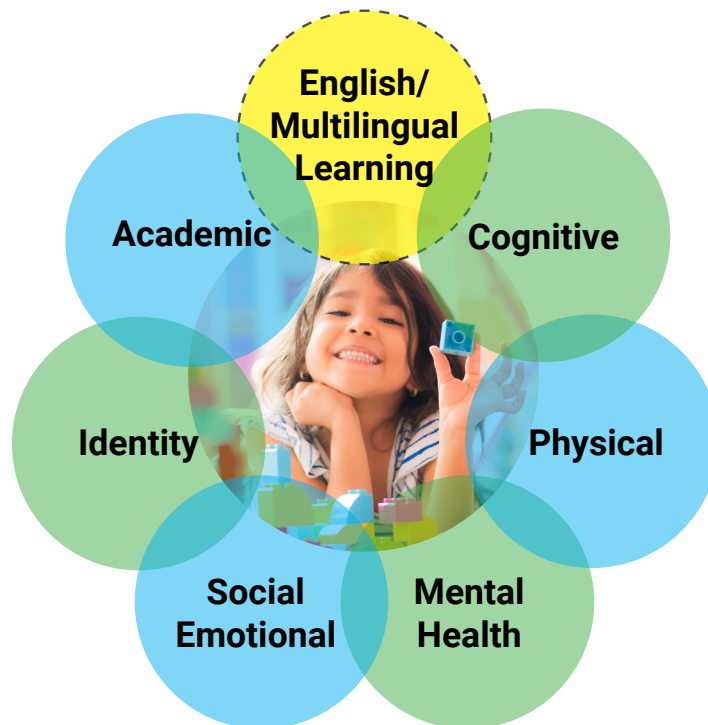
Supports are optimally provided in a **tiered manner**.

- ☐ **Tier 1—Universal Supports** are provided across all classrooms to all students prioritizing relationships, a climate of cultural safety and belonging, and enriched learning environment, incorporating social emotional skills.
- ☐ **Tier 2—Integrated Supplemental Supports** are provided extra supports as needed including tutoring, after-school, counseling, and social work supports.
- ☐ **Tier 3—Intensive Personalized Supports** should be provided on a timely basis for students identified with greater needs including special education services, health and mental health services, family supports and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

## How Does a Whole Child Approach Apply to Immigrant Origin Students?

In the world of education, for immigrant origin (IO) students, identification, data, practice, and funding, have largely been focused on the domain of **language learning**.<sup>5</sup> While English language acquisition is clearly linked to both cognitive and academic development, this narrow focus on English language development *neglects all the other critical domains of whole child development*. This constricted focus fails to recognize that language acquisition is deeply intertwined with many other domains of learning.

Further, the language learning designation, neither accurately nor comprehensively captures the lived experiences that immigrant origin students bring with them to school. *Not all immigrant origin children are English Learners*—some IO students enter schools with English skills (e.g.,



## Intersecting Domains of Development

immigrants from the Philippines, Jamaica, Hong Kong, and Sierra Leone). Most importantly, language learning does not fully capture the complexity of their experiences; immigration involves **managing losses of relationships and family separations, negotiating acculturation, hybrid identities, and forging pathways to belonging** among many other complex facets. Further, many (though of course not all) have undergone a variety of traumas—as such a **trauma-informed lens of practice** attending to social emotional and mental health domains are essential for both learning and thriving. Thus, a whole school approach is essential.

## Visualizing the Whole Immigrant Child Approach

### What does this look like in practice?

Long standing research and practice has established many **productive instructional practices** essential for IO students to reach their potential.<sup>6</sup> Productive instructional practices include:

- ☐ For students to learn optimally, students should be allowed to utilize their own home language(s) as well as English as they engage in learning—a practice known as translanguaging;
- ☐ Students should be grouped together in purposeful ways—either heterogeneously or homogeneously—depending upon the task. Intentional grouping can provide students with peer support and help ensure students are working within their zone of proximal development.
- ☐ Principles of universal design learning provide flexible options and differentiated instruction to ensure greater access to learning across a range of learners;
- ☐ Students with limited or interrupted formal instruction (SLIFE) need extra support to make up for gaps in classroom experience. Support can include additional instruction and an



intentional focus on literacy, providing differentiation and scaffolding for language and content learning.

- ☐ Checking for understanding and the attainment of learning goals should occur throughout the year. It should be incorporated in holistic ways across all domains of development using a variety of strategies including portfolios;

Further, structural practices that should be implemented at the school level include:

- ☐ Opportunities for learning should be extended across both the school day and the school year, for students to catch up both for interrupted learning and family and work responsibilities;
- ☐ Educators must be provided with ample professional development and coaching to be equipped to provide necessary support to their students;
- ☐ Community partnerships have the potential to extend the reach of schools in dramatic ways. They are often trusted by caretakers and can





provide services that schools simply are unable to;

- ☐ Advisory periods are integral to establishing a community of relationships in which students and educators can connect in essential ways.

Concurrently, a whole child approach must **attend to wellbeing and social-emotional development** for students to reach their potential.

- ☐ As such, practice must begin by attending to **spaces of belonging** beginning with freedom from bullying with the goal that all students are ensured identity safety and feel like full and welcome members of the community.<sup>7</sup>
- ☐ This requires attending closely to the **fostering of relationships** across all school constituencies including educator/student relations, student-peer relations, and educator/caretaker relations.
- ☐ A whole student approach also takes a **resilience and asset-based** perspective as well as **trauma-informed approach** while explicitly providing instruction around transformative social-emotional<sup>8</sup> skill supports.

- ☐ It also requires **centering culturally responsive learning communities** where students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and where they see their caretakers are welcomed and respected.

By taking a comprehensive, whole student approach, many more IO students will meet their potential—a win for them and their new land.

## Model of Practice

- ☐ The International Schools Network <https://www.internationalsnetwork.org/>

## To Learn More

1 Noddings, N. (2005). What does it mean to educate the whole child?. *Educational Leadership*, 63(1), 8-13.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success*. Learning Policy Institute.

2 <https://chan Zuckerberg.com/education/whole-child-approach-to-education/>

3 Darling-Hammond, L., Cantor, P., Hernández, L. E., Theokas, C., Schachner, A., Tijerina, E., & Plasencia, S. (2021). *Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development into Action*. Learning Policy Institute

4 Darling-Hammond, et al (2021).

5 Blagg, K., & Lukes, M. (2022). *Leveraging Nuanced Data to Inform Research and Policy for Immigrant Students and Families*. An Essay for the Learning Curve. Urban Institute.

6 Bajaj, M., Walsh, D., Bartlett, L., & Martinez, G. (2023). *Humanizing Education for Immigrant and Refugee Youth*. NYU Press.

7 *Identity Safe Classrooms*

8 Jagers, R., Rivas-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). *Toward transformative social and emotional learning: Using an equity lens*. CASEL.

## About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

