

Implementing a Whole Child Approach: A Thought Leader Conversation with Jonathan Raymond

Questions and Responses from Jonathan Raymond

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Mary Gloner: What are your thoughts about children/students who are in high capacity communities and while not living in poverty, are feeling the environmental and relationship pressures that may not lead them to community violence, but to high rates of suicide and mental health (2nd leading cause of death among youth in the nation regardless of socioeconomic status)?

I wrote a blog a few years back on this very topic entitled “Learning vs. Winning” in response to a suicide at my daughter’s high school. (<https://medium.com/keeping-children-first/learning-vs-winning-what-is-school-really-teaching-our-kids-ab3c7f1fee82>) How unfortunate that we adults are creating and perpetuating cultures and climates at school, at home, and in our communities that are putting young people under such intense pressure. What can we be doing differently? Again, Whole Child approaches place students at the center, allow them to be seen and heard, and have a voice and choice in their learning. This means asking them what they are interested in learning and what the best approaches are to ensuring they are and do. Approaches such as project-based learning with performance assessments and portfolio defenses can be one place to start. Holding our school leaders accountable for creating school and classroom cultures and climates that are welcoming, engaging, and inclusive matter big time. Offering arts, sports, and summer learning opportunities give children opportunities to discover their interests and passions. Engaging and partnering with parents to support these whole child approaches ensures children have the critical support and encouragement outside of school. And demanding our post secondary institutions and supporting organizations like the College Board stop reinforcing high stakes tests that reduce our children to numbers, percentages, and list ranks, rather than recognize them as the beautiful and unique human beings they are with limitless potential.

Cory Sullivan: How do you intentionally create partnerships if you feel that organizations are "closed off" even though you may be open to these partnerships

Partnerships come from trusting relationships which take time to develop. I always approached them from a place of humility and an understanding of the distorted power imbalance that often exists but is never stated. While I might think I’ve got the idea(s), partnerships have to grow from a place of mutual understanding, collaboration, and ownership of a shared vision for the work. This goes both ways and I’d prefer to walk away from a “potential partnership” if I didn’t feel like a valued equal or if the “partner” was trying to force their own theory, research, or approach on us. Fortunately, we encountered little of this during my time in Sacramento with the major exception being philanthropy. You will be surprised at how willing organizations are to partner if you approach them with respect and a willingness to listen and get to know who they are, what they are about, and who they serve.

Shamia Sandles: Working for a large educational agency, what can be done to address systemic disadvantages (i.e. racism, xenophobia, homophobia, access to technology, etc)? How can we build educational environments where youth feel heard and valued and build self-efficacy?

If we are committed to addressing issues of equity (racism, etc) in our schools, classrooms, and communities there is no better approach than whole child/ whole community. Embracing the Whole Child requires empathy and not just listening and talking but acting. Equity isn’t about equal treatment, it’s about equal consideration and starts with a simple yet complex question such as what and how do we give every child what he or she needs in order to thrive? Implicit behind such questions is a willingness to build relationships and getting to know our students and their families. Approaches such as those used by the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project

seek to strengthen relationships among parents, teachers, and students. When children feel respected, seen, and heard they open themselves to the learning process and become more willing to take risks. For some students this is as bold as being able to ask a question in class. For others it's learning a new sport or musical instrument or running for student government. We never know what is possible until we create the right conditions for our students. And often times the resources and expertise for doing so resides in our communities, which is why creating and building partnerships is so essential. No school district in America has or will ever have enough resources to do this important work of education and developing children in isolation.

Leslie Santizo: What were the benefits for these summer programs? Did they get breakfast, lunch? What helped you get them in?

The benefits for children from summer programs are numerous. First, is the research-based issues of summer learning loss (learn more at this link: <http://www.summermatters.net/why-summer/>). Engaging summer programs not only stem and mitigate these issues, but actually can accelerate the learning process.

Second, the vast majority of children in our school systems don't have access to the kinds of summer learning opportunities that my children do, such as visiting relatives in other parts of the country, going on family vacations that combine learning and fun such as taking advantage of our national parks system, or spending weeks in vibrant summer camps. Instead, they are often left to care for siblings at home in less than stimulating environments, or worse, on the streets of cities and towns which aren't often safe, supportive, or nurturing environments.

Quality summer programs offer children learning opportunities often defined by the child's learning interests, they offer peer support, and are staffed by adults knowledgeable about how children learn and develop in positive mentoring relationships. And because they are offered in the out-of-school time space, they are freed from the strict curriculum structures and frameworks that often dominate the school day. Freed from these constraints, they enable the conditions most ripe for creativity to take hold. And that is the key. Given the space, voice, choice, and tools, students' creativity explodes. We just need to step back and be prepared to encourage and support the learning process. The magic is creating this creative space. That's the hook! And yes, we served students breakfast, snacks, and lunch. Hungry students can't engage and learn.

Ann Newman: Did you provide transportation?

When we could, yes, though I often joked when I was superintendent in California (2009-2014) that those yellow things we know as school buses were mostly gone. While this wasn't exactly true, our ability to transport children was severely limited, even with community support. So we got creative. We built partnerships with city transportation to get travel vouchers, and we made sure we had quality choices and options in all neighborhoods, which again relied on developing partnerships with our community. Examples include local Boys and girls Clubs, 1000 Black Men, Sacramento State College, the City of Sacramento for Summer Jobs, and the list goes on and on. Again, there are so many resources in our communities we just have to be willing to ask for help and approach our partnerships with humility, listening, and trust.

Victoria Hom: I greatly appreciate hearing how partnerships are so important. Can you say more about how philanthropic partners have made the most difference? Outside of funding, how else have philanthropic partners been most helpful?

Some of the greatest advantages and tools philanthropy has to use are its ability to provide general operating dollars (referred to as "unrestricted" funds), not being constrained by time (i.e. needing to see results in a year or two), fund evaluations and leading research, use the power to convene partners (bringing groups and organizations together to work and learn), provide seed dollars to spark and launch promising ideas, and but for their support, enable important organizations such as intermediary organizations, to exist and do critical work. Sadly, not all foundations take advantage of the above, at least not on a consistent basis.

Leslie Santizo: How did you get the teachers to buy into this concept and let go of the control and lesson plans, allowing children to create? Did they play partnership roles or just supervision?

This may sound simplistic, but we approached them and asked them to help us co-create. You can imagine we got lots of reactions and not always what we thought. In fact, it was often our most experienced teachers, those trained and teaching prior to the No Child Left Behind era that showed the most enthusiasm and willingness to return to a time when they could “really teach.”

Anthony Johnson: Why don't more educators utilize these strategies?

Like a lot of folks in education there is a reluctance, almost a fear to be bold and embrace change and the unknown. In some ways this is human nature (read the book “Who Stole My Cheese?”). It's not just kids we are sucking the creative energy out of! I speak about this in “Wildflowers” that most people won't believe anything, particularly in education, until they see it. While in truth I know it's just the opposite - that we won't see anything until we believe it. That's why stories are so important. They serve to spread ideas, build relationships, and inspire and create hope by sharing and showing what's been done and is possible.

Kittra Hewitt: How do you change the mindset of educators and administrators on developing the whole child?

We began by appealing to their sensibilities and human side. Asking them what kind of education would they want for their own children or a child they knew? We asked them to think of what their hopes and dreams would be for their children or a child they knew. And we brought them together and got them sharing and talking. And we reminded them that the Whole Child approach wasn't new – that it was built by progressive educators like John Dewey, and advanced by educators and child developers like Maria Montessori and Rudolph Steiner, whose approaches are now backed by brain science and research on the science of learning by experts like Mary Helen Immordino-Yang.

Perhaps most importantly, we told them it's not about where you are or where you start, just that you pick something and commit to it. Healthy foods, accessible play grounds, more art and music classes, etc.

Jenn Beideman: How did you define a whole child approach during your first year? Was there a common definition that was shared among partners?

No there wasn't a common definition and obsessing on this can be a distraction. I like to think of Whole Child education as an approach that emphasizes the head, hands, and heart. Ensuring children get the critical skills and tools to inquire, analyze, create, collaborate, communicate, and own their own learning. That they see the relevancy of what they are learning and can apply their knowledge to problems in their communities. And that they can empathize and appreciate differences without judgement. If you can create this shared vision with your community, you just need to be open when opportunities present themselves. I share examples of this in “Wildflowers.”