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A 'Whole Child' Approach Will Be More Important Than Ever This Fall

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With summer here and life as we remember emerges, the open doors and public gatherings herald a return to normal. When it comes to schools reopening in the fall, however, normal should not be the goal or even the expectation. Returning to in-person classrooms will be different for students because their experiences during the pandemic and their needs upon returning will vary greatly. Some students may have thrived academically in a remote setting, while others struggled in Zoom classes or may have dealt with difficulties at home like the COVID-related death of a family member, parental unemployment, and even limited access to food.

All students, without a doubt, have experienced an unprecedented level of disruption to their lives and routines. If we return to school with an exclusive focus on academic recovery without a strong foundation of social and emotional support, we risk further damage to their mental health and make a return to “normal” ever more elusive.

That’s why it’s been heartening to see so many educators across the country in almost unified agreement to prioritize social-emotional learning instead of doubling down on math, English and standardized tests. The truth is kids won’t get back up to speed unless they feel relaxed, safe and connected to their friends and teachers as they return to the classroom. If they like being in school, are able to regulate their behavior and deal with stress, they will perform better academically. This is the very essence of a “**whole child**” **education**—an approach that will be more important than ever this fall.

At Boston Renaissance Charter Public School (K-6), educating the whole child has been our *raison d’être* since we opened our doors in 1995. Over the past two decades, we’ve found that when students’ individual needs—socially, emotionally and academically—are accommodated, they not only become better learners, but also learners who *love* to learn. When we develop meaningful relationships with students and personalize their learning, we see each student getting the absolute most out of their educational experiences. It’s never a one-size-fits-all approach and there are a lot of variables, but in general, we found that when students feel more positively, they simply do better.

Educating the whole child requires constant innovation, finding new ways to adapt, tailor, individualize and create learning experiences not just for each class but for each child. This approach makes us more attuned to the learning styles of each child. While our curriculum

features all of the proven SEL practices like **restorative justice circles**, daily arts instruction, and mental health counseling, we further deepened our practice last year with the creation of two new schedule blocks. “W.I.N.” and “FLEX blocks” are both dedicated to providing students with targeted interventions, support and enrichment. The W.I.N. serves the Lower School, while FLEX serves the Upper School.

W.I.N. stands for “What I Need” and it’s exactly that. In the interventions, we meet students where they are and deal with whatever an individual student needs. While the blocks serve higher-need special education students or English language learners, they also provide advanced learning opportunities for students who are already exceeding expectations in their grade. The specialized blocks will be even more invaluable when they come back to in-person classes and could serve as a model for schools everywhere looking to educate the whole child and enhance their ability to effectively serve a diverse group of learners.

Staffing is absolutely crucial. Schools should prioritize hiring mental health professionals and other specialists, and organize professional development for all teachers and other school staff to recognize trauma in students. It’s also important for teachers to maintain a two-way dialogue and help students practice coping mechanisms in a setting that is safe, supportive and consistent. Finally, teachers must take time to view each student’s life through a separate lens, as they are so much more than who they present as in class.

The start of the new school year will be a time for all of us—students, teachers, and families—to revive a sense of hope and purpose. Going forward, we cannot afford to meet just one or two components of a whole-child education. We must be all in.