

WINTER 2026

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

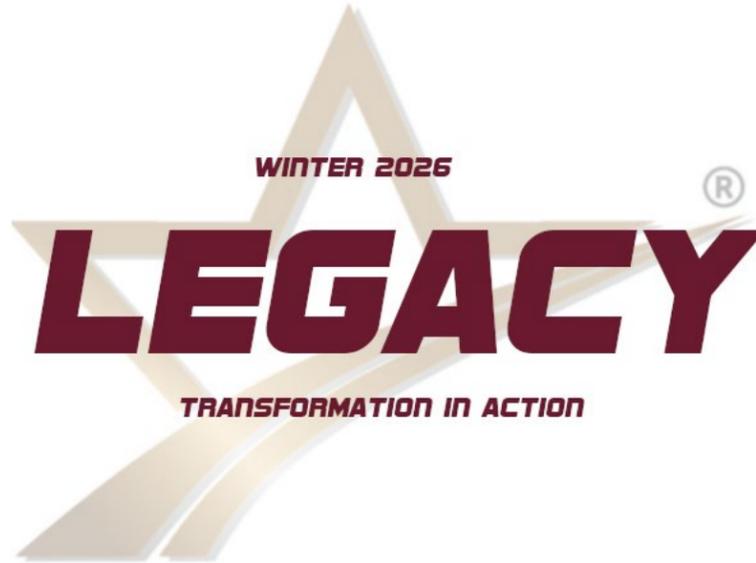
**Educating for the Whole: Whole Child Education as
a Future-Ready Imperative in Maine and Beyond**

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Educating for the Whole: Whole Child Education as a Future-Ready Imperative in Maine and Beyond



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Abstract

This article argues that Whole Child Education (WCE)—the integration of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains—constitutes not merely a support for academic success but a future-ready framework essential for preparing learners in a rapidly changing world. Set within Maine’s distinctive educational contexts, WCE is positioned as both a corrective to inequities in rural and underserved communities and a foundation for cultivating transformative competencies required for 21st-century life. After addressing criticisms that WCE distracts from scholastic rigor, the paper draws on empirical research to demonstrate that holistic supports enhance, rather than dilute, academic outcomes.

The discussion situates WCE within global discourse on the future of education, drawing from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), and the Aspen Institute. A central case study is the creation of the world’s first Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) Whole Child Education at the University of Maine at Augusta, which represents an institutional commitment to preparing educators in holistic, trauma-informed, and community-engaged pedagogy. By integrating neuroscience, social-emotional learning research, and global policy frameworks, this article positions WCE as indispensable not only for academic success but also for equipping learners with the adaptability, resilience, and civic responsibility required for the future.

Introduction

Education systems in the United States and globally are at an inflection point. The convergence of economic instability, rapid technological change, and cultural shifts requires schools to move beyond narrow conceptions of academic preparation. Increasingly, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners acknowledge that the health, safety, and social-emotional development of learners are not optional supplements to instruction but essential conditions for success (ASCD, 2017). This view is at the core of Whole Child Education (WCE), a framework that integrates cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development into an interdependent model of schooling.

Critics often contend that schools should focus solely on academics, leaving issues such as mental health, trauma, or resilience to families or external agencies. Yet neuroscience and educational research consistently demonstrate that learning is biologically impossible when students are stressed, unsafe, or unsupported (Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, & Krone, 2019). WCE responds directly to these findings by emphasizing interconnected supports that prepare learners for both academic engagement and long-term flourishing.

This article advances three central arguments:

1. WCE enhances, rather than detracts from, academic rigor.
2. WCE addresses inequities, particularly in rural and underserved contexts such as those found in Maine.
3. WCE cultivates future-ready competencies—emotional intelligence, adaptability, civic agency—that are essential for thriving in a complex, uncertain world.

To illustrate these claims, I draw from both empirical research and my professional expertise as a faculty member at the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) and former Executive Director of Maine ASCD, where I worked to advance professional learning aligned with WCE. I highlight the creation of UMA’s M.A.T. in Whole Child Education, the world’s first dedicated M.A.T. rooted in the WCE approach, as a case study of innovation in educator preparation.



Literature Review

The Whole Child Framework

The ASCD Whole Child framework outlines five tenets: each learner should be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (ASCD, 2017). These interdependent conditions illustrate that intellectual growth cannot be separated from physical wellness, social connection, and emotional regulation. Schools organized around these principles do not see academics as isolated content delivery but as the outcome of an ecosystem in which learners' needs are addressed comprehensively.

SEL and Academic Outcomes

A robust body of evidence underscores the academic benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL). Durlak *et al.* (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs, finding that students demonstrated improved attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance, with gains equivalent to an 11-percentile-point increase. Similarly, Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) emphasized that SEL is foundational to academic engagement, highlighting that skills such as self-management and relationship-building are not tangential but central to learning.

Emotional Intelligence and Long-Term Success

Daniel Goleman's (2006) work on emotional intelligence (EI) further supports WCE. Goleman argues that EI competencies—including empathy, adaptability, and self-awareness—are often more predictive of career success and leadership effectiveness than IQ alone. These findings align with WCE's insistence that education must prepare learners for complex futures requiring collaboration, resilience, and ethical reasoning.

Physical Health and Cognition

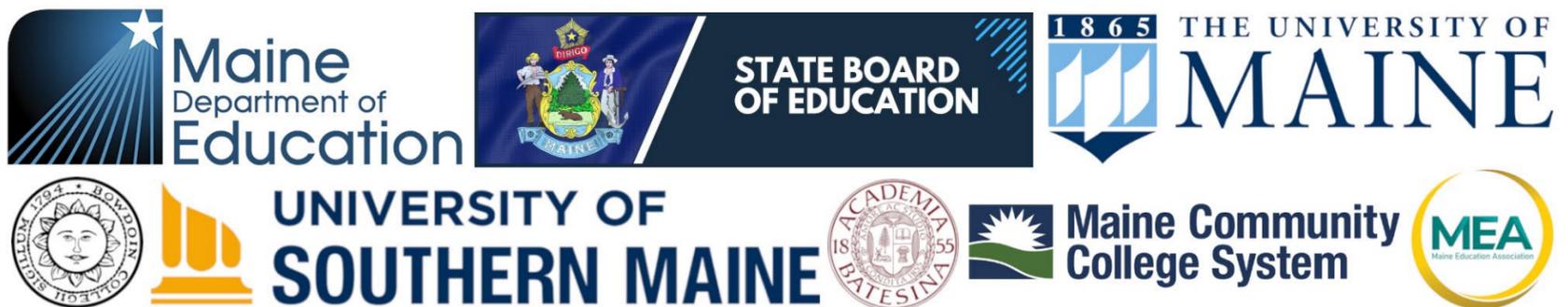
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) demonstrated that physical activity and access to nutrition are correlated with improved concentration, memory, and academic performance. Schools that integrate health education, physical movement, and wellness supports thus directly enhance students' cognitive readiness. For rural states such as Maine, where disparities in access to health resources persist, this integration is especially critical.

The Future of Education and Skills

Globally, organizations such as the OECD and P21 articulate frameworks that align closely with WCE. The OECD's *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project identifies three "transformative competencies": creating new value, reconciling tensions, and taking responsibility (OECD, 2018). The P21 framework emphasizes the "4Cs": critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (P21, 2019). These competencies extend beyond content mastery, requiring schools to nurture dispositions and skills deeply connected to social-emotional and physical development. WCE provides the systemic conditions under which these capacities can be cultivated.

Neuroscience of Learning and Emotion

Research in affective neuroscience demonstrates that cognition and emotion are inseparable. Immordino-Yang *et al.* (2019) argue that the brain systems governing emotion and social interaction are also those that support learning and decision-making. Ignoring social-emotional dimensions of education undermines the very neurological processes that enable learning. This evidence base provides a scientific rationale for embedding WCE within every dimension of schooling.



Context: Maine's Educational Landscape and Professional Authority

Maine offers a distinctive lens through which to consider WCE. The state's educational landscape combines rural isolation with urban centers that have experienced demographic change. Rural districts face persistent challenges related to economic instability, limited access to healthcare, and high rates of trauma exposure—including the ongoing effects of the opioid epidemic. In such contexts, schools often function as community hubs, providing not only academics but also meals, counseling, and health services.

As the former Executive Director of Maine ASCD, I facilitated statewide efforts to embed whole child principles into professional learning. At the University of Maine at Augusta, where I currently serve as a faculty member and Coordinator of Teacher Education, I spearheaded the development of the world's first dedicated M.A.T. in Whole Child Education (University of Maine at Augusta, n.d.). This program, grounded in trauma-sensitive practice, resilience, and educator self-care, prepares teachers to recognize and respond to the interdependence of learners' academic and developmental needs.

By situating this program at UMA, an institution committed to serving rural learners and communities, the initiative aligns directly with Maine's educational and economic realities. It represents a pioneering model that could inform national strategies for preparing educators in holistic, future-ready pedagogy.

Responding to Criticism: WCE as Foundation for Academic Rigor

One persistent critique is that WCE dilutes academic rigor. Yet research consistently demonstrates the opposite: SEL and wellness supports strengthen academic achievement. Durlak et al. (2011) and Zins et al. (2004) show that SEL interventions correlate with higher test scores and improved classroom behavior. Far from a distraction, WCE provides the foundation upon which rigorous academic instruction rests.

Another critique is that WCE shifts responsibility away from families. Yet in Maine’s rural communities, schools often serve as the most consistent institutional presence in children’s lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, Maine schools that provided meals, counseling, and digital access exemplified WCE in action, ensuring continuity of learning despite unprecedented disruption (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020). Rather than replacing families, WCE strengthens school-family partnerships by offering resources and supports that create conditions for shared success.

WCE and Equity

By addressing social-emotional and physical needs alongside academics, WCE also advances educational equity. Students experiencing poverty, trauma, or cultural displacement benefit most directly from wraparound supports. In Maine, schools in communities such as Lewiston and Biddeford—home to growing populations of immigrant and refugee families—have integrated WCE principles to provide culturally responsive, trauma-informed support. This aligns with national trends, such as the Aspen Institute’s Nation at Hope report, which calls for integrating social, emotional, and academic development into every school as a matter of equity and democracy (Aspen Institute, 2018).

Future-Readiness: From Integrated Competencies to Civic Agency

The case for WCE becomes most compelling when viewed through the lens of future-readiness. The OECD’s Education 2030 framework argues that students need competencies to create new value, reconcile tensions, and take responsibility (OECD, 2018). These competencies require not just knowledge, but dispositions shaped through social-emotional and physical development. Similarly, the P21 framework highlights critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity as essential for 21st-century work and citizenship (P21, 2019).

Whole Child Education provides the structural and cultural conditions for these competencies to flourish. For instance, trauma-sensitive practices help learners regulate emotions and persist through challenge, directly supporting adaptability. Classroom collaboration grounded in SEL builds communication and teamwork. Health and wellness initiatives support stamina, attention, and resilience. Civic engagement programs integrated into WCE foster responsibility and ethical reasoning, preparing learners not only for work but also for democratic participation.

In Maine’s rural schools, these competencies are particularly salient. Small, community-centered schools are well-positioned to cultivate civic agency and collaborative problem-solving. When educators are trained in WCE, they can leverage these contexts to prepare students not only for local contribution but also for global citizenship.

Case Study: UMA’s M.A.T. in Whole Child Education

Against this backdrop—where future-ready competencies are cultivated through the lived conditions of health, safety, engagement, support, and challenge—educator

preparation becomes a strategic lever for systemic change. If schools are to advance civic agency and global citizenship in ways that are authentic to local context, teachers must be prepared to lead learning environments that are academically rigorous and developmentally responsive at the same time. UMA’s M.A.T. in Whole Child Education represents a clear, institutional answer to that need.

The University of Maine at Augusta’s M.A.T. in Whole Child Education embodies Whole Child Education as a future-ready framework by preparing teachers as both instructional experts and architects of supportive learning ecosystems. The program foregrounds trauma-informed pedagogy, educator resilience, and community engagement as core professional capacities—not peripheral supports—because these competencies directly shape whether rigorous learning can occur. In doing so, it signals a paradigm shift in teacher preparation: teachers are prepared not only to teach content, but also to design the conditions under which learners can think critically, collaborate across difference, persist through challenge, and act with responsibility.

Central to this approach is the program’s emphasis on transforming the teacher as a prerequisite for transforming teaching. Coursework such as Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms, Educator Self-Care and Resilience, and The Whole Child equips candidates to understand how stress, safety, and relationship influence attention, memory, decision-making, and engagement—and to translate that knowledge into concrete classroom practice. Candidates develop the relational authority, reflective habits, and co-regulation strategies that allow them to hold high expectations while sustaining a culture of dignity, belonging, and academic challenge. This is a model of professional formation that prepares teachers to be steady, skilled adults in the lives of learners.

This teacher transformation is consequential because it extends outward. Educators prepared through a whole-child lens are positioned to change classroom trajectories—reducing barriers to engagement, increasing persistence, and supporting learners in building the social, emotional, and cognitive capacities demanded by complex futures. Over time, those shifts compound: teachers who can integrate rigorous instruction with trauma-sensitive practice and developmental supports are more likely to produce learning environments that improve both academic outcomes and long-term wellbeing, particularly for students most affected by inequity.

The program also makes visible an essential premise for Maine and beyond: in many communities, schools function as hubs of stability and connection. Preparing teachers for whole-child practice is therefore inseparable from preparing them for whole community impact. Teachers trained to partner with families, collaborate with local agencies, and design culturally responsive learning experiences help strengthen the relationships and networks that sustain communities—especially in rural and underserved contexts where schools are often the most consistent public institution in children’s lives.

In sum, UMA’s M.A.T. in Whole Child Education illustrates how Whole Child Education can be operationalized at the level of educator preparation to produce ripple effects that move from teacher capacity, to learner flourishing, to community resilience. This case study underscores the central claim advanced in this paper: Whole Child Education is not an alternative to academic rigor, but the foundation that enables rigorous, equitable, and future-ready learning at scale.

Analysis and Discussion

Whole Child Education is not ancillary to the academic mission of schools; it is its indispensable foundation. By addressing the interdependence of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, WCE creates conditions for rigorous academic learning, equitable access, and future-ready competency development. The evidence base—ranging from SEL meta-analyses to neuroscience research—demonstrates unequivocally that ignoring whole child needs undermines learning itself.

For Maine, the stakes are especially high. Rural inequities, economic instability, and cultural transitions demand schools that function as holistic community hubs. WCE provides a framework that not only supports individual learners but also strengthens families and

communities. The M.A.T. in Whole Child Education at the University of Maine at Augusta, the first program of its kind worldwide, exemplifies how higher education can lead innovation in educator preparation by embedding WCE at the core of teaching and learning.

As global education systems wrestle with the demands of the 21st century, WCE should be seen as more than a reform agenda. It is a future-ready imperative—a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to cultivating learners who can think critically, collaborate across difference, reconcile tensions, and take responsibility for building sustainable futures. In short, educating for the whole child is educating for the whole world.

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