THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
NATIONAL COMMISSION
ON SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, &
ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

DRAFT GUIDING PRINCIPLES
Policy (pg. 1)
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Guiding principles developed by the Policy Subcommittee

The policy opportunities are informed by the following guiding principles:

- **Evidence-based:** Are the policies based upon evidence of effectiveness in boosting outcomes for students?
- **Honor Local Conditions:** Will the policies respect and honor local conditions in schools and communities, and support a sustainable ecosystem that builds upon progress and momentum at the local and state levels, in working to bring effective change to scale?
- **Engage the Perspectives of Local Stakeholders:** Will the policies effectively engage those working directly with young people and the young people themselves in shaping such policies? Does the policy recognize that schools and local communities, who must carry forward the work, are the centers of innovation?
- **Actionable:** Are the policies actionable in the short, mid and long terms?   Can they be sustained over time? Are they adaptable to local context?
- **Equitable:** Do the policies promote equal outcomes to learning and development for *each and every* student, while being mindful of the vulnerabilities and particular needs of students who may require additional supports?
- **Supportive, Not Prescriptive:** Are the policies supportive, and not overly directive, thus creating the conditions for the integration of social, emotional and academic development in practice and not creating unintended consequences; and
- **Measurable:** Are the effects of the policies measurable? Do the policies enable an environment of continuous learning and innovation to improve student outcomes?
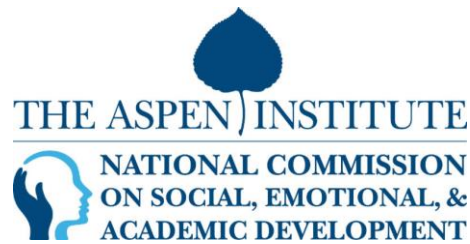
Principles to Guide Research for the Next Generation

1. Research that has impact embodies both rigor and relevance.

Research that is rigorous embodies basic scientific concepts including careful and transparent study design that incorporates guidelines for statistical power and hypothesis testing, the use of valid and reliable measures and tools, analytic methodologies that are closely aligned to research questions, and honest and clear reporting of positive, null, and negative effects and associations. To date, we have achieved a body of evidence that is rigorous. **Research for the next generation of practice in social, emotional, and academic development is both rigorous *and* relevant.** It responds to, and is situated in, the real-world, contemporary problems that arise from the practical work on the ground. Moreover, research that is relevant is *timely* – it happens in a manner that is quickly shared and easily translated for practical application. This means research is conducted in vivo, with and by practitioners. It therefore reflects the questions that practitioners, educators, and policy-makers want and need to be addressed in order to make strategic decisions, improve practice, effectively serve a broad and diverse population, and cultivate and support the profession. Building a relevant science of social, emotional, and academic development will necessitate relying on newer methods and approaches including for example, participatory action research, smart and adaptive designs, in addition to those that are more typically employed.

2. A dynamic, bidirectional relationship between research and practice demands precision.

In a close relationship between research and practice, there is a clear link between research on one particular outcome or competency (the evidence), how we plan to develop that construct in children, youth, and/or adults (the strategy), and how we will measure it to determine if our efforts were successful (the evaluation). The relationship is iterative, forming a research-to-practice cycle that both facilitates evidence-based practice and enables us to learn from our efforts and add to what we know about the field as a whole. Importantly, it is the *words* we use – the specific terms and the meaning, or definitions, we ascribe to them – that maintain those connections. When outcomes, constructs, or competencies have multiple names and definitions as they do in the broader field that encompasses social, emotional, and academic development (described as the jingle-jangle fallacy where one term has multiple meanings, and different terms have the same meaning), it becomes much harder to sort through such an extensive body of research to determine where the links between evidence, strategy, and evaluation really exist. **Research for the next generation of social, emotional, and academic development employs terminology that is transparent, precise, and specific ensuring that stakeholders work with a common and shared understanding of the core constructs and ideas.** In emphasizing precision and transparency, our field will grow a better understanding of which skills and competencies are the same, which are different, and which overlap across disciplines, ultimately allowing us to move beyond fads and quick fix approaches to closer alignment between research and evidence, programs and strategies, and assessment and evaluation. It is important to note that precision does not apply only to constructs and outcomes, but it equally relevant to practices and strategies (e.g., what is actually meant by "project-based learning") and settings (e.g., what is a common and shared definition of "school climate"). Getting precise and transparent means putting our own biases and beliefs systems as researchers with different interests, varied training, and diverse disciplinary traditions on the table.
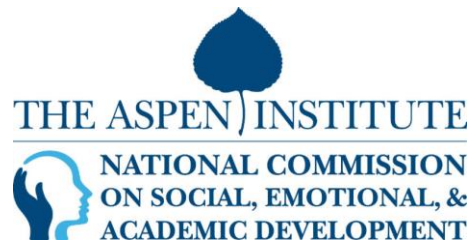
3. Assessment is a tool for **continuous improvement** and **capacity building**, not high-stakes accountability.

There is tremendous interest in identifying and deploying measures and assessments of social, emotional, and cognitive skills so that practitioners and policymakers can easily take the temperature of the children and youth they serve and make decisions about what practices, strategies, and policies to implement. Using data to drive continuous improvement is not new, but unless we (1) have tools that we are confident adequately capture these social, emotional, and cognitive skills and competencies in ways that are sensitive to age, stage, and context, and (2) are organized around a commitment to using assessment to inform continuous improvement, we risk holding educators and systems accountable to things that we aren't actually supporting them to do. **Research for the next generation of social, emotional, and academic development uses assessment and measurement as instruments of formative improvement and capacity building, not accountability.** Data employed with this purpose honors the institution of schools, and the processes of schooling, as the central hub in our society that is focused on *learning,* serving as a nexus of growth and change for children and adults alike.

4. **Theory of change** is the glue that links research and practice – it is a common blueprint to action in both arenas.

Theory of change (ToC, or theory of action, logic models, etc.) is an explicit, and agreed upon, theory about what, how, and why a program, strategy, or intervention will work. Theory of change is also used as a tool for organizing a system of variables or constructs, depicting a set of hypotheses about how they influence each other. In both cases, the ToC serves as a map to the core assumptions, specific goals, near and distant outcomes, concrete activities, and mechanisms guiding the work. Building directly from the adage, "there's nothing so practical as a good theory,"[1] ToC can be used as a blueprint for bringing stakeholders together, program and research planning, program implementation, assessment, and evaluation. **Research for the next generation of social, emotional, and academic development employs Theory of Change as a tool to align researchers and practitioners in a common, and agreed upon, plan for action.** ToC works to do this by making explicit the assumptions, actions and reactions expected in any program, initiative, and/or research endeavor.

5. Average effects are important, but scaling effective practices requires we know the active ingredients.

Documenting the average effects of complex, multi-faceted programs generates a critical signal about what can work in the field. However, a singular focus on the signal draws attention away from the noise. Noise in this case represents variation in take-up, response, and impact that are essential to tailoring supports, practices, and strategies to individual needs and opportunities. Similarly, average effects of multi-component programs limit our understanding of underlying mechanisms and effective, or active, ingredients (the how and why programs work). Because one approach or type of program is unlikely to work or be meaningful and/or desired in all settings, it is essential that we prioritize a focus on

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[1] Lewin, 1943
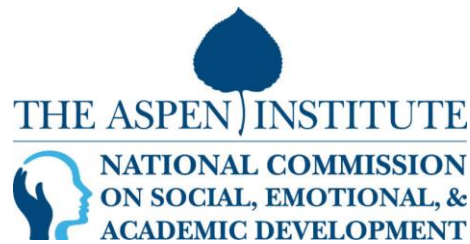
illuminating mechanisms and active ingredients that themselves can be replicated and scaled, but in way that is resonant with different contexts and settings. **Research for the next generation of social, emotional, and academic development seeks to understand mechanisms and active ingredients.**

6. Understanding **variation** is the key to customizing for different developmental needs, experiences, and settings.

Just as average effects obscure critical information about the active ingredients of programs and practices, using averages to represent whole groups – whether they are groups defined by socio-demographic characteristics like race/ethnic background, or specific experiences or contexts – assumes uniformity in human development that ignores the reality and complexity of setting, culture, and experience-based variation. Concretely, capturing or understanding variation pushes us beyond overly simplistic depictions of groups toward a more thoughtful and actionable understanding of what's needed in our classrooms and schools and when and how to tailor strategies to best meet the needs of each and all children, youth, and adults today. **Research for the next generation of social, emotional, and academic development moves beyond averages to represent and act on variation.**

7. **Structures** and **processes** go hand in hand – focusing on one without the other impedes integration and meaningful change.

Structures are the tangible, concrete parts of any plan, strategy, program or intervention. They are the concrete elements that serve as the pillars or core components of practice and typically can be seen in the daily work. Structures might include curricular materials, ongoing assessments, staff and educator training or professional development and support. Processes, on the other hand, are not tangible—not easily seen—but they are what make structures effective. They are the interactions, relationships, and essential practices that result from using a structure well; it is the processes—not the structures—that are tied to change and improvement. Unfortunately, however, the tendency to date has been to build our expectations on structures alone, making the assumption that simply putting a structure in place – e.g., a curriculum or new practice – without careful attention to an explicit and related process (e.g., will this practice improve basic interactions and relationships that are fundamental to social and emotional development?) will result in change. The field is not yet in the habit of focusing on and articulating the processes that go with structures. **Research for the next generation of social, emotional, and academic development addresses both structures *and* processes to support integration and meaningful, lasting change.** In this way the next generation of research foregrounds the changing developmental needs and developmental interactions of children and youth at each and every stage and context.

8. Innovation is finding **something new in something known**.

What does it mean to innovate? Does it necessitate something completely different – a transformation in how we think and act? In our field, we have decades of knowledge grown from basic and applied research. We also have a deep and rich well of practice-based wisdom and experience about the work of schools and schooling. Innovation in our field builds from these roots, and instead of reflecting a new concept, strategy, or practice, is a transformation in *how* research gets done. **Innovation in research for the next generation of social, emotional, and academic development bridges the research-practice divide.** Improving the educational experiences and life chances of each and all children and youth in all learning
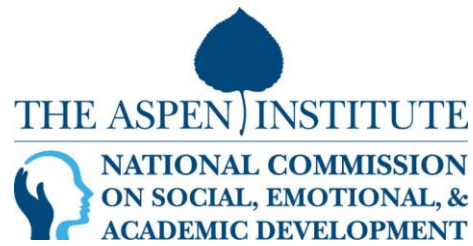
contexts demands a different way of doing the work. It requires a **new practice-based science of social, emotional, and academic development** that is relevant and responsive, organized around practical questions and knowledge of developmental needs and developmental interactions, situated in the real-word, and executed by practitioner-researcher teams.