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Reading Public Schools and the Reading Coalition Against Substance Abuse Featured in Report from National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Youth Mental Health First Aid Highlighted As a Best Practice

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Reading Public Schools and the Reading Coalition Against Substance Abuse and its work to support the whole student is included as an exemplary approach to supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic development in a report released last month by a prestigious national commission.

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development’s “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope” asserts that our nation is at a turning point, understanding that social, emotional, and cognitive development underpins children’s academic learning. This breakthrough understanding about how people learn is fueling a growing movement to educate children as whole people, with social and emotional as well as academic needs, the report says.

Reading Public Schools was highlighted under Recommendation IV, building adult capacity, where District, school, and youth development leaders should provide opportunities for school faculty and staff, families, after-school and youth development professionals, and future professionals still in university pre-service programs to learn to model and teach social, emotional, and cognitive skills to young people across all learning settings, both during and out of school. In this recommendation, the Reading Public Schools and the Reading Coalition Against Substance Abuse (RCASA) are highlighted in *training adults across the community in Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA)*. *An evidence-based, international program, YMHFA trains adults similarly to medical first aid and CPR to identify the signs and symptoms of a young person in distress and to take the appropriate steps in providing aid until further help comes. A common language and expectations regarding typical child development, as well as ways to manage crisis and non-crisis situations, were spread throughout the community.*

School Committee member Chuck Robinson states, “I would like to thank the Commission for developing this outstanding report. As a parent and long-standing School Committee liaison to RCASA, I recognize the collaborative effort of our town and school officials to provide a safe environment for our students. The Youth Mental Health First Aid Training highlighted in this report as a Reading Public Schools best practice is a very important training for any adult that works with children in our schools

and in our community. I am deeply grateful for Executive Director Erica McNamara's innovative and steady leadership in this effort”

“A Nation at Hope” emphasizes that translating knowledge about how people learn into practice and helping students develop skills like collaboration, empathy, and perseverance requires systemic change. It offers specific actions in research, practice, and policy to fundamentally shift how we teach children, with the understanding that the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct.

The report recommends taking these key steps:

- Set a clear vision that broadens the definition of student success to prioritize the whole child.
- Transform learning settings so they are safe and supportive for all young people.
- Change instruction to teach students social, emotional, and cognitive skills; embed these skills in academics and school-wide practices.
- Build adult expertise in child development.
- Align resources and leverage partners in the community to address the whole child.
- Forge closer connections between research and practice to generate useful, actionable information for educators.

Nearly 100 organizations that have signed on in support of the report’s conclusions and recommendations as part of an ever-widening coalition committed to advancing the work. This groundswell of support that has surged over the course of the Commission’s work, and now supports action across communities following its release, sets the report apart and offers promise for the movement to grow nationwide.

Superintendent of Schools John Doherty emphasizes that, “The recommendations highlighted in this report are critical to creating the safe and supportive school environments that we need for our students. If students are not emotionally ready to learn each and every day, they will not achieve academic success.”

Drawing on input from more than 200 scientists, youth and parent groups, educators and policymakers, the report seeks to accelerate and strengthen efforts in local communities. These recommendations are especially pertinent as states and communities continue to leverage their increased authority on education policy under the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act*. The report includes specific strategies that schools, districts, and communities can pursue related to each recommendation and examples of places that are engaged in these efforts.

The report also outlines evidence that confirms that supporting students’ social, emotional and academic development has a positive impact on their attendance, test scores, success in college and careers, and overall well-being. This approach also improves students’ feelings about school and makes schools safer.

More information is available at NationatHope.org.