

# **PEAS: An Education for Everyone**

## WHITE PAPER



**Patchogue-Medford School District**

# PEAS: An Education for Everyone

## INTRODUCTION

Abraham Lincoln once stated, “The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.” If public schools are the birthplace of future citizens and leaders, the focus on what it means to be a productive citizen must escape the contracted mindset of today’s education reform. Instead, public education needs to be reassessed, with the goal of cultivating optimal conditions for all children to grow to their full potentials.

Beginning with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and continuing through the present day with increased annual testing requirements as well as tremendous business opportunities in education, the philosophy and purpose of public education has drastically changed. Far too much emphasis is placed on test scores in literacy and math. The aftermath is that the concept of *teaching children*, rather than achieving scores, has been lost. While data, accountability, and assessment are important, they are not the primary means to educating our children. But at this time, at both the federal and state levels, we are experiencing a hyper-focus on ranking, sorting and test scores... and not on fully educating *students*.

What is particularly notable is that these changes have not been shown to improve education. To the contrary, independent research and countless education experts all support that we must change course from this model and instead nurture children in all aspects of their lives, if we are to offer a true holistic education. To continue focusing almost exclusively on academics, coupled with testing and limited subject matter, without looking at students’ full needs is to ignore what best serves children, and is, in effect, educational negligence.

Moving forward, a 21st century education must consist not just of academics focused heavily on math and English language arts, but of four components: Physical growth, Emotional growth, Academic growth, and Social growth – PEAS. PEAS allows children to tap into their own potentials and maximize their talents. Each component is equally as important as the others, and each also reinforces the others. And with PEAS, research shows that even with less time spent on traditional academics, academic achievement improves, along with so much more. PEAS gives direction and guidance to the “whole child” approach so often spoken about, but so rarely successfully achieved.

## EACH ASPECT OF PEAS IS CRITICAL

### Physical Growth

Most adults understand that a sedentary work day is far from ideal, and leads to reduced output. Cutting edge corporations like Google design their work campuses to include gymnasiums, swimming pools, volleyball courts, and walking paths. Businesses provide gym memberships to their employees for use during the workday. With more movement comes more focus, less boredom, fewer absences, better attitudes, and more positive outlooks.

The trend in public school, though, has been the opposite. As the emphasis on attaining high scores in math and ELA grows, the reaction has been to increase classroom time, on the assumption that the more time spent on the subjects will correlate with better performance. All too often, that extra classroom time is pulled from recess time, or from physical education time. At the same time, the childhood obesity problem in the United States has continued to grow, being cited as parents' number one health concern last year by the American Heart Association.

[http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/HealthyKids/ChildhoodObesity/Overweight-in-Children\\_UCM\\_304054\\_Article.jsp#.WbmbpLKGOM8](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/HealthyKids/ChildhoodObesity/Overweight-in-Children_UCM_304054_Article.jsp#.WbmbpLKGOM8)

Recess can no longer be thought of as a throw-away. In fact, recess is critical to children's healthy growth, and to their successful performance in school. Children run, play, climb, swing – and smile. They connect with their peers. They are out-of-breath. When they finish their play, they are ready to be in a class again, ready to focus. And they are happy. According to Dr. Peter Gray from Boston College, the importance of play is crucial for children's healthy psychological development and ability to thrive in life, and yet it is woefully underestimated by parents and educators. "In short, play is how children learn to take control of their lives," states Gray.

<http://www.bc.edu/offices/pubaf/news/2013-mar-apr/peter-gray-book.html>) Pasi Sahlberg, who familiarized us with the educational system in Finland trusts that steady recess and physical exercise are crucial for significant learning. (Sahlberg, "FinnishED Leadership," page 18-21).

Research repeatedly supports that increasing physical fitness opportunities for children leads to not just improved physical health but also to increased academic growth. The Center for Disease Control has stated that "[t]here is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores."

[https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health\\_and\\_academics/pdf/pa-pe\\_paper.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pa-pe_paper.pdf), page 6) The CDC further notes that physical activity "enhance[s] concentration and attention as well as improve[s] classroom behavior." (Id., page 7) Even simply incorporating physical activity breaks during class increases student performance. (Id.)

In addition, recess lets children actively develop the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that are so often discussed in the education world: communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. These skills are best learned and honed not in a classroom exercise, but rather on the playground, by creating an imaginary kingdom out of a shade tree with kids wearing crowns made of autumn leaves. They learn problem solving and collaborating when they figure out how to share a space or decide how to choose who participates in a game. The playground is its own microcosm, where children are the governors and citizens, who learn to play in their world together, with goals of kindness and support. The Patchogue-Medford School District in New York last year increased recess every day from 20 minutes to 40 minutes, along with incorporating a 40-minute lunch for every child. Not only did attendance improve, but teachers and administrators reported significantly fewer disciplinary issues in the classrooms. In some of the elementary schools, the discipline referrals were reduced by over half. And best of all, parents remarked that their children couldn't wait to come to school again.

In sum, with PEAS, we understand that physical growth, via recess, physical education, and participation in afterschool sports, is just as important as academic teaching, and in fact is integral to maximizing academic success and improving student health. When physical activity is relegated to being just a disposable, non-essential filler, our children suffer. It's time to right the wrong of reducing children's physical activity that high-pressure testing has caused. It's unhealthy on too many levels. The United Nations Standards of Human Rights endorses that prisoners have at least an hour of outdoor exercise every day. Why don't we allow the same right to our children in schools? (Sahlberg, page 28)

## **Emotional Growth**

Healthy emotional development is essential for children on myriad levels, from setting the stage for a purposeful life to creating healthy relationships to helping children succeed academically in school. While intuitively we understand that attending to emotional growth is a worthy goal, the rise of high-stakes testing and mandated curricula that over emphasize ELA and math have made it near impossible for schools to be able to fully address this need.

But as schools, we are remiss if we don't ensure that children, especially our youngest, are learning in ways that create emotional health, because, in fact, a strong emotional basis is the groundwork for the academics that will follow. It is this emotional strength that will allow a child to continue to strive even when he or she is frustrated. Emotional well-being gives a child permission to fail on his or her route to success. Children will understand that feelings both positive and negative are part of the human experience and aren't something to be feared or repressed.

So critical is this emotional growth that the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child considers it foundational: "It is essential that young children's feelings get the same level of attention as their thinking."

<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Childrens-Emotional-Development-Is-Built-into-the-Architecture-of-Their-Brains.pdf>, page 1)

This is because proper brain development -- which leads to optimal thinking skills -- depends on the fostering of emotional growth:

"When feelings are not well managed, thinking can be impaired. Recent scientific advances have shown how the interrelated development of emotion and cognition relies on the emergence, maturation, and interconnection of complex neural circuits in multiple areas of the brain, including the prefrontal cortex, limbic cortex, basal forebrain, amygdala, hypothalamus, and brainstem." (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Childrens-Emotional-Development-Is-Built-into-the-Architecture-of-Their-Brains.pdf>, page 2)

Even more, emotional health is critical to developing strong executive functioning skills, like creating, planning, and managing. The neural "circuits that are involved in the regulation of emotion are highly interactive with those that are associated with 'executive functions' .... In terms of basic brain functioning, emotions support executive functions when they are well regulated but interfere with attention and decision-making when they are poorly controlled." (Id.)

High-stakes testing pressure and heavy emphasis on the tested subjects not only interfere with creating a healthy groundwork for emotional development, they also exacerbate the situation by causing excessive stress. Districts across the country have seen unacceptable upticks in childhood mental-health related hospitalizations, use of stress-related medications, and other behaviors linked to too much stress.

To combat excess stress and foster emotional well-being, schools also need to offer outlets and life-long methods of coping, such as yoga and mindfulness training. These activities help children develop healthy relationships with peers and teachers, and be able to self-regulate emotionally, mentally, and behaviorally (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/aliceqwalton/2016/10/18/the-many-benefits-of-meditation-for-children/#37789808dbe3>) And integrating mindfulness and yoga into curriculum creates a number of other benefits, including improved academic performance: "[a] growing body of research has already shown that yoga can improve focus, memory, self-esteem, academic performance, and classroom behavior, and can even reduce anxiety and stress in children.

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/more-than-just-a-game-yoga-for-school-age-children-201601299055>)

Over the past two years, the Patchogue-Medford School District in New York has incorporated mindfulness and yoga in grades K-12 and offered an elective for students at their high school. Administrators, teachers and students have reported decreases of student related anxiety and increased focus.

By prioritizing the importance of emotional growth, and reducing the emphasis on testing, we help our children grow into more secure, well balanced adults, who can thrive in a diverse global society, able to navigate the multitude of opportunities and challenges that they encounter. And we also help improve their academic careers. For students' overall health, both emotionally and cognitively, it is imperative that we focus on emotional growth.

## **Academic Growth**

The mandates of the Common Core Learning Standards (and now the newly adopted Next Generation Learning Standards in New York), enforced by high-stakes tests, have led to dramatic changes in our classrooms, to the harm of our children. With a school's very existence riding on the outcome of grades 3-8 standardized tests, and with teachers' jobs dependent on these scores, schools have been forced to narrow their curriculums to focus far too heavily on just these two subjects, neglecting science, social studies, art, music, and so much more. In addition, the Common Core's early childhood requirements, such as reading emergent texts in kindergarten, have been criticized from the start as beyond the developmental ability of a significant portion of young children, meaning that teachers are forced to spend even more time on math and ELA with kindergarteners to learn these advanced skills.

It is time now to recalibrate and move forward with research-based methods of teaching that we know will improve our children's academic lives and will not continue with the harm caused by the mandates of the current system. We must abandon one-size-fits-all lesson plans and stop drilling to create high scores on year-end standardized tests. Instead, children should be involved in play (especially younger learners), project-based learning, cooperation, collaboration, and open-ended inquiry.

In addition, leaving a testing-based curriculum for an interdisciplinary approach to learning, with thematic units of study and differentiated instruction to meet all types of learners, prepares students to become life-long, enthusiastic learners. Interdisciplinary instruction promotes critical thinking and offers students opportunities to make deep connections across the content areas. With this comes increased student engagement in the learning process, with the outcome being greater learning.

(<https://www.deefinkandassociates.com/GuidetoCourseDesignAug05.pdf>) (L. Dee Fink, "Creating Significant Learning Experiences," page 42)

Leaving the mandates of the current system also allows students to engage in "divergent thinking," meaning "generat[ing] multiple approaches to solving a problem." (<http://artof4elements.com/entry/35/divergent-thinking>) For example, "a test addressing divergent thinking may ask "what are the uses for a flower pot? An average person would have 10 to 15 answers to this question. A genius of

divergent thinking would come up with a hundred possible answers, and they do this by changing the concepts of already existing thinking – can the flower pot be 10 meters wide, or can it be made of rubber, and so forth.” (Id. emphasis omitted). In contrast, Common Core and its tests promote convergent thinking, where children find the one right answer to a question, like in high-stakes testing, where a child “follows a particular set of logical steps to arrive at one solution.” (Id.)

In this way, by investing in our teachers to help engage our children in ways that allow their full academic growth, we facilitate divergent thinking and allow our kids to work creatively and collaboratively through problems that are meaningful to them, and not based on a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Our children will be able to connect seemingly separate disciplines, in ways that more accurately reflect our world, and their academic successes, and their personal engagement, will soar.

One example is curriculum used by the New York State Performance Standards Consortium a coalition of twenty-eight small high schools across the state of New York. (<http://performanceassessment.org/consequences/collegeperformancestudy.pdf>) These schools utilize inquiry based methods of learning, discussions in the classroom setting, project-based assignments, and student choice and they eschew high stakes testing and one size fits all curriculum. A number of these schools have received national honors, including Blue Ribbon Schools Awards of Excellence and the New American High School Awards.

The consortium schools not only effectively prepare their students (primarily African-American, Latino and economically disadvantaged) for college level work, they exceed state and national comparisons. “These schools deserve to be protected, studied, and emulated, so that success can become the rule, not the exception, for all students.” (<http://performanceassessment.org/consequences/collegeperformancestudy.pdf>)

## **Social Growth**

As pressure has mounted on achieving high test scores, focusing on a child’s social growth has been shunted aside. But study after study shows that social learning is critical, in more ways than intuition suggests. It isn’t surprising that integrating social (and emotional) learning within a curriculum leads to improvements in positive self-image, positive connections with school, reductions in discipline issues, and reductions in substance abuse. (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12864/full>) It makes sense that a child’s overall behavior and wellness would improve when he or she can navigate social issues, from sharing, to teamwork, to collaboration, to work division, to conflict resolution, to managing within a group.

An added bonus to this healthy sense of being, though, is that academic achievement also improves -- significantly. A recent study involving almost 100,000 students concluded that children who had the benefit of curriculums with social and emotional learning opportunities placed well over ten percentage points academically above their non-trained peers. (<http://www.casel.org/2017-meta-analysis/>) Atlanta Public Schools Chief Dr. Meria Carstarphen recently said, "I'm convinced that if every student in the U.S. had a high-quality SEL [social and emotional learning] program, the United States would be at the top of the education rankings."

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/the-social-emotional-learning-effect/521220/>)

Another study of several hundred thousand students concluded that students exposed to this training also "showed improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school." (<http://www.casel.org/impact/>)

But today's mandates and heavy pressure on ELA and math test scores have made fostering emotional growth an afterthought, if that. 21<sup>st</sup> century skills of collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and communication aren't learned with testing and drilling math and ELA. They are learned, truly learned, when done in the context of social learning, of emotional learning; and it is long overdue that this learning be prioritized. As one educator noted, if our children had sufficient social and emotional learning opportunities, "[w]e'd live in a better world with far less hate and far better social and emotional health."

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/the-social-emotional-learning-effect/521220/>)

## **CONCLUSION/CALL TO ACTION**

Our current system, based on flawed standards and enforced by high-stakes tests, has led to a situation that is no longer healthy or productive for our children. We must create a new philosophy of what it means to be truly educated and how we plan to achieve that. There is a loud call from education leaders, families, students, and community members to end the current system and strive for a way to educate children so that they become engaged, life-long learners.

The next few years will set the stage for the next forty years in public education. To get to the root of the problem, we first must identify it. Simply put, the problem lies not with our children; it lies with our political leaders who influence and set policy and mandates for school districts. These leaders make decisions that reduce our children to numbers and scores, and by doing so, they are failing our children.

By truly focusing on the whole child – by converging the physical, emotional, academic, and social components of PEAS – we are finally acting in the best

interest of all children, supporting their physical and emotional health, and at the same time, setting the stage, as research strongly supports, to maximize academic achievement. Education systems must emphasize and engage in the consistent development of human potential but leaders and policy makers must take caution to not measure *everything* that takes place within the school house, most notably the physical, emotional and social capacities of a child's journey. Famed Sociologist William Bruce Cameron understood, "It would be nice if all of the data which sociologists require could be enumerated because then we could run them through machines and draw charts as economists do. However, not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

Unfortunately, the *new normal* is to teach less and test more. And because of the high stakes attached to these tests, schools are forced to focus on academic outcomes at the expense of a child's social and emotional growth. Under the current model, teachers rank and sort children based on a proficiency model instead of how much growth each individual child may show. Our emphasis on well-being is a much needed new narrative that will inevitably swing the educational pendulum back toward a balanced state of the true purpose of education: **PEAS**.

## **Acknowledgements**

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