Astrologically, the entire northern sky circulates around Polaris, or as it is more commonly known, the North Star. The North Star always faces due north, so it is often a directional focal point for explorers.

On March 9th, 2017, Monroe, New Jersey, was the focal point for all in attendance who explored and extended their learning at the Educating the Whole Child conference.

Sean T. Slade, ASCD Senior Director for Global Outreach, set the directional tone for all attendees during his keynote by asking the audience to look at the ASCD Ecosystem and apply it to their own district. He stated that while children are the educational North Star of the ASCD Ecosystem/framework, the schools that children attend must function as “islands of hope for both them and their families.” He shared a quote from James Comer, stating, “Within every interaction at a school, we are either building a community or destroying it.”

Mr. Slade explained how the five tenets of the ASCD Whole Child philosophy (healthy, safe, supported, engaged, and challenged) form the basic tenets to build the community that meets the needs of all children, thereby keeping them in the center, and challenged the audience to look within their systems built for student success to find the students who continue to struggle, and explore ways to meet their needs. “We know the students who are already achieving. We need to worry about students we don’t have connections with -- the students at the margins,” he stated. “There’s a reason why healthy is the first tenet, and located at the base of the pyramid. The best programs will struggle if we don’t start at the bottom.”
The basic tenets are embedded within the framework through five Communities of Excellence. These Communities (Teaching and Learning, Transformational Leadership, Global Engagement, Poverty and Equity, and Redefining Student Success) provide the framework for educators to create and deliver effective instruction. “When students are in flow, as Daniel Pink discusses, they will learn.” “We’ve created the conditions for that to occur. How are we backwards designing to create productive, healthy, safe, secure human beings?”

Both the tenets and framework described by Mr. Slade were the basis for the breakout sessions offered throughout the day. He urged participants and presenters to learn from one another during these sessions, so individual islands of hope within different New Jersey school districts could collaborate in their shared mission and vision of supporting the whole child. “Where is our moral compass? What do we focus on? What do we ignore?”

Galvanized by Mr. Slade’s impassioned remarks, fifteen presenters from diverse communities, locations, student populations, and demographics shared the educational strategies they are using across grade bands and subjects to build learning communities that address and develop key tenets and Communities of Excellence. Topics ranged from creating a before/aftercare program to engaging academic strategies in math and science to embedding productive struggle into student learning.

Attendees and presenters alike were heard discussing strategies, swapping ideas, and sharing personal and professional takeaways after sessions, lunch, and as they walked to their cars post-conference. While the entire northern sky circulates around the North Star astrophysically, during one conference day in March children were the epicenter of educator focus. The Educating the Whole Child conference supported, validated, and promoted continued collaboration and best practices among all New Jersey educator stakeholders in attendance. Regardless of the direction attendees and presenters took on their way home, their educational compass pointed the same way – North!

We saw examples at the conference of an important truth: we know how to turn around troubled, under-resourced schools by using Whole Child strategies in a framework of dedicated, sustained, and distributed leadership. Define student success in stages. Define the task as one of ethical and moral responsibility, and educational equity. Build a leadership team, and allow this team to learn and grow together. Create and communicate a compelling school identity. Engage and empower youth in meaningful roles in school. Network with others on a similar mission. Connect social-emotional-learning to existing mandates.

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About the author

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