



## How Technology Bridges the Gap in Teaching the Whole Child



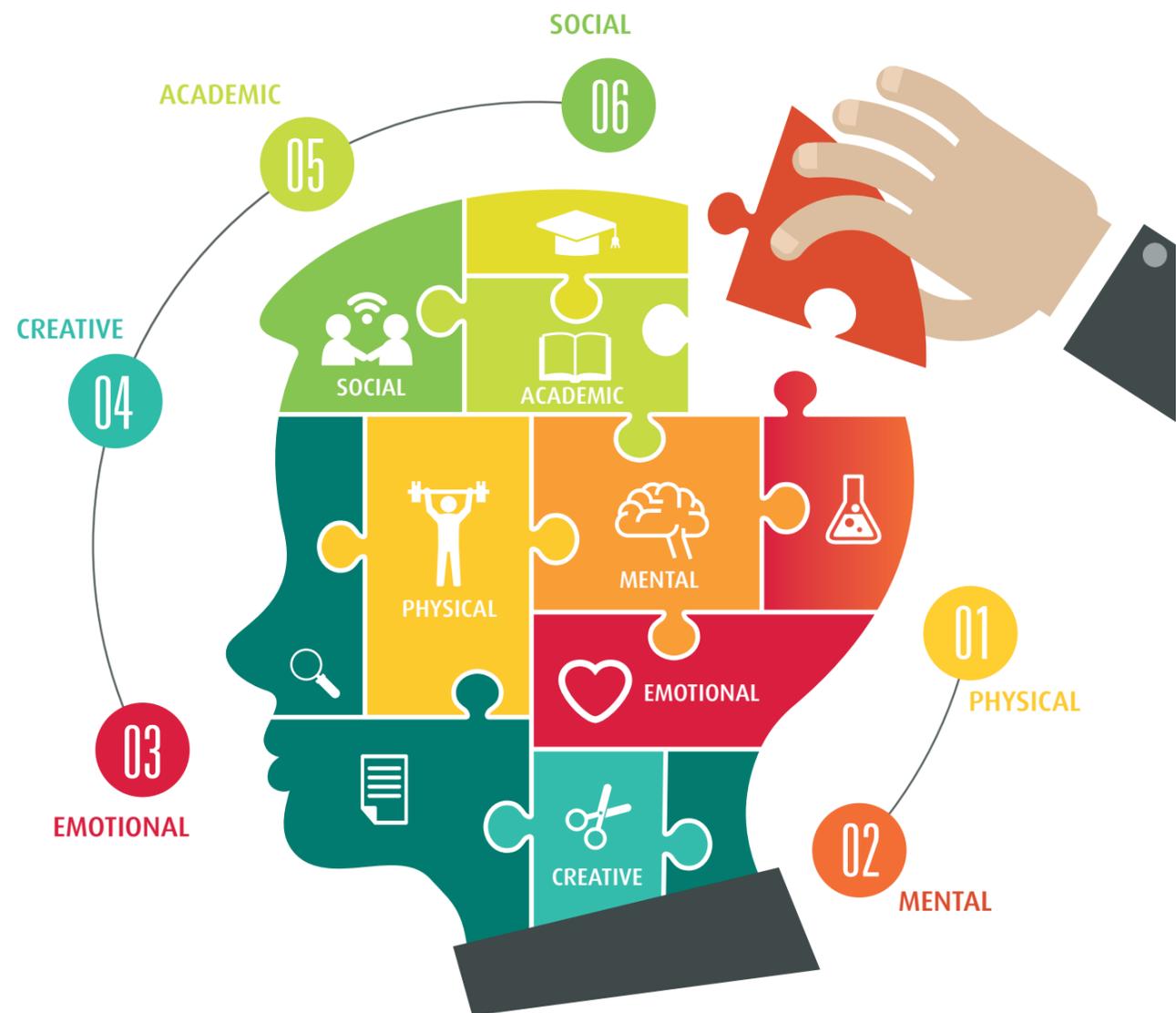
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## Student Engagement & Collaboration:

How using technology to educate the “Whole Child” prepares students for the future

As educators attempt to prepare young people for the challenges and careers of the modern world, they are coming face-to-face with their own challenge: how can they instill in students the sophisticated technological and collaboration skills now required for success? The former model of training students — the Industrial Age model — with its bells, computer labs, and its separation between academic subjects — is no longer fitting the bill. Instead, the latest movement in education is to integrate academic subjects, health and technology to connect children to the larger world, maintaining that schools are the largest influence on a child’s life (outside of the home) and that strong, positive school influence can guide young people toward a bright future. This approach, using technology to take a child’s social, emotional and academic needs into account in the mission to provide an education, is known as the “whole child” initiative. This approach re-examines what education’s goals truly are. “We are discovering that every aspect of a child’s life is addressed in one place only: school,” said Dr. Pat Willis, leading educator, former Deputy Superintendent and Chief of Staff of Duval County Schools, and proponent of the whole child approach. “This means that educators have an unprecedented responsibility to their students.”



## WHOLE CHILD

As a result of this growing awareness, many administrators are in search of technology that can bridge the gap between the disparate parts of a child’s life, and unifying them in the school environment. “Establishing the need to address every aspect of a child’s life from mental, emotional, social, physical and academic, creates a holistic approach that can prevent problems from happening, or keep them from getting worse,” said

Tommy Harris, SRG Technology’s Vice President of Education Sales. “Poor academic performance shows us that something is happening in a child’s life to prevent his or her success. We have to do everything we can to determine what that is and fix it. The only way to do that is to look at a child’s life in its entirety, which is the foundation of the whole child approach,” added Dr. Willis.

## Defining the Whole Child and Why it Matters

The whole child initiative maintains that the purpose of educating a child is to create a highly functioning, creative, healthy human being. One that is connected to his or her community, both locally and globally.<sup>1</sup> Not only is school performance taken into account, but the whole child approach also takes into account the child’s physical and emotional health as factors that affect a child’s development, academic aptitude, and ultimately, success in life. “Studies have shown that physical health and academic success are inextricably intertwined...There is a symbiotic relationship between learning and health.”<sup>2</sup> The whole child approach places a greater emphasis on collaboration between

schools and their surrounding communities, looking at the physical health of those communities as indicators of where, and how, weaknesses should be addressed. “Both public health and education serve the same students, often in the same settings. We must do more to work together and collaborate.”<sup>3</sup> Collaboration about the child’s overall wellbeing and learning style, with teachers encouraged to communicate with each other about best practices, is at the whole child initiative’s center. “Looking at the child from every angle, with the determination to support every aspect of that child’s learning, is necessary to ensure that child’s success at school and in the world,” said Dr. Willis.

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The Whole Child Initiative identifies the kinds of learning that each child should be exposed to every day to reach optimal success in academics and life. They are:



“With the whole child approach, connection with the community, workforce and world becomes the ultimate goal. After all, isn’t that what makes a successful human being?” questioned Dr. Willis.

## The Link Between the Whole Child and Student Engagement

Incorporated into the whole child principle is the notion of student engagement. Student engagement is defined as “Students meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks, which can be accomplished using three main components: collaboration, project orientation, and authentic focus.”<sup>5</sup> Educators have identified that the use of technology is the necessary bridge between these components, and can be the very tool needed to bring students more fully into their education.

“Students are exposed to technology almost 24/7 now. It is how they relate to the world, and how they get most of their information,” said Dr. Willis. “As a result, kids aren’t coming to us with linear thinking anymore. Schools have to stay on top of the way kids are learning now, meeting them where they are, and that’s connected virtually nearly all the time. We have to put that connectivity to work in our approach to teaching them.”

As a result of all this connectivity, today’s learners are highly visual, preferring to process pictures, sounds and video rather than text.<sup>6</sup> Combining both audio and visual learning tools in the classroom has proven to increase student engagement because

it adds variety to the learning environment. “Instead of sitting at a desk being talked at, students are doing projects that resemble the kind of work that is being done in the world: collaborative, visual, and using the internet and different interfaces,” said Harris. The Internet also makes it easier for students to have authentic audiences to share their work. Whether the audience is a peer-group or the worldwide audience of the internet, creating work for an audience with broader scope is a way to get students to care. “By showcasing their work to a larger audience, students are learning a crucial piece of becoming successful later: networking. Networking is a new type of literacy that all students will need to succeed in a global economy.”<sup>7</sup>



## TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMS LEARNING

**75%** Of students ages 5-7 regularly use technology to play educational games



**50%** Of students ages 10-18 go online for homework help at least once per week

Students who study on mobile devices spend **40 MINUTES MORE** per week studying than those who don't

## TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMS TEACHING

**91%** Of administrators say effective use of ed tech is critical to their mission of high student achievement



**74%** Of administrators say digital content in schools increases student engagement

**77%** Of teachers say technology use in the classroom motivates students to learn

**76%** Of teachers say technology allows them to respond to a variety of learning styles

Collaboration through technology is also key in the development of the whole child. Not only does collaboration make it possible for educators to discover individual student's needs and address them, but collaboration is a crucial part of the modern students' learning. "The promise of technology is to best facilitate students to inquire, collaborate and connect. Ethically, cognitively, socially and physically; engaging every aspect of the child," said Harris.

"Student engagement means empowering the student. The use of technology can target skills that create opportunities for kids to experience creativity, self-direction,

connection and usefulness — all key factors in engaging the whole child." Student engagement and interaction has greatly expanded beyond participating in classroom discussions. "Today's students," Dr. Willis added, "are looking at social media not as a separate thing that you do occasionally, but as a ubiquitous part of the way they are living their lives outside of school. For them, it is natural to extend that connectivity into the classroom."

Studies are finding that connections are important to the modern student, in part, because constant interaction is so pervasive in their lives already. <sup>8</sup> According to a poll of

over 10,000 high school students, 9 out of 10 students have access to personal mobile devices." <sup>9</sup> If there was any doubt that almost all kids are carrying a computer in their pocket, backpack or purse," said Dr. Willis, "there is no longer any." Eighty-nine percent of high schools students have access to smart phones, while 50 percent of students in 3rd - fifth grade have access to the same type of devices, and these numbers are only growing. <sup>10</sup> Educators such as Dr. Willis say that they are seeing students leverage mobile devices both to be more efficient in their day-to-day tasks and to transform their learning processes, using technology to become facilitators in the classroom, rather than merely to absorb information. "The right use of technology in the classroom helps students 'own' their learning," said Harris. "The student of today isn't content to sit back anymore. Social media and the internet have made student engagement our biggest priority and, like adults, students

are most engaged when they have a direct say in their experiences. Collaborative, social, visual projects make that a reality, giving students opportunities to shape their education."

Educators are onto this trend. Many school districts, such as Henry County Schools in Georgia, are not merely allowing students to use their mobile devices in school, but are encouraging it as a way to engage students. Recent research shows that 46 percent of teachers are using video in their classroom to assist with instruction, while one-third of students are accessing video online — through their own initiative — to help with their homework. <sup>11</sup> "Video is no longer a vehicle for a teacher to sit back while the students zone out in front of a movie. Video is one of many digital resources that teachers can use in the classroom to engage students -- as long as they know how to use it," said Dr. Willis.



## Information Technology and the Whole Child

While exposure to technology inside the classroom is a crucial component of meeting the modern child's needs, how that technology is used is just as important. The answer? Differentiated instruction and personalized learning. "Differentiated instruction is imperative to meet the needs of the whole child," said Brent Rhodes, (SRG Technology's Education Sales Associate). "Every child is different, with different needs and learning styles. Using a system that can help organize, target and differentiate the needs of each student means that teachers are better informed as to how each student responds to different modes of learning. Having a system that assesses and organizes students based on their interests and goals gives the teacher added insight as to the child's needs, and that child's needs are then recognized and addressed."

Differentiated instruction has also become the focus of educator professional development. "The days of a teacher standing at the front of the classroom and giving a lecture to the class are over," said Dr. Willis. "Teachers have to be educated in order to meet the different needs of their students. They need professional development to learn how to implement differentiated instruction, and they need

professional development to learn how to use technology to make it possible." An education suite of solutions like BlenderLearn™ deals with the needs of both students and teachers by offering professional development for teachers and targeted assessments for students: both features get everyone on track for success.



Dealing with the child's learning styles is still only part of the whole child picture. As previously stated, the child's health and well-being are crucial indicators as to how the student will perform in school. Having a system in place that keeps each child's health and performance data accessible to administrators and teachers means that when a student is struggling, the right people have access to the information to discover why, and then address the problem using the right resources.

"By keeping tabs on student health and student academic achievements and weaknesses, technology solutions can address the areas where children are falling behind, and celebrate where children are succeeding," said Rhodes. "Using technology as an interface to do so be is directed affected by a student and teacher's tech-savvy – a crucial skill in navigating the workforce and keeping students engaged."

The whole child concept recognizes the crucial part technology can play in giving schools the opportunity to better educate youth. Through the ubiquitous use of technology, students can experience and learn:

- **Healthy habits, and attitudes essential to successfully working online**
- **Safe practices for virtual connecting, communicating, and collaborating**
- **Meaningful learning, involvement in their local and global communities**
- **Individualized, supportive learning that accommodates their needs and interests**
- **High-level learning that challenges and prepares them to realize their full potential**

School districts across the country are discovering that being able to deal with large-scale issues through individualized data makes educating the whole child possible. To ensure that all stakeholders are collaborating; children's needs are being met; children are improving; educators are sharing best practices with each other and parents are involved in the journey of student improvement, a revision to traditional school Learning Management Systems technology is crucial.

## The Whole Tech Approach to the Whole Child

For the whole child concept to truly succeed, schools need a “whole tech” approach. But what does it mean for a school to be “whole tech”? A holistic view of school technology maintains that technology has the power to educate the whole child by promoting:

- **Learning experiences that are incidental and seamless, accessible and universal**
- **Tasks that are purposeful, authentic; the real-world applications of skills and understandings**
- **Work that requires problem solving, product development and the creation of new knowledge**
- **Digital portfolios that showcase student growth and learning over time**
- **Collaboration between student and teacher, and educator to educator to encourage best practices**
- **Communication with parent and teacher in order to ensure the child’s successes are carried into the home space**
- **Accessibility for administration to affect school-wide decision making and chart improvements**<sup>12</sup>

This may seem like a tall order, but it’s just what the Henry County Schools (GA) is doing. Henry County Schools, a school district outside of Atlanta, has seen big changes in the last decade. The district approached these changes by identifying and embracing the needs of students then shifting their strategy to address those needs and promote student success. “We believe that it is a school’s responsibility and obligation to be integrated into the community,” said Aaryn Schmuhl, Henry County School District Assistant Superintendent. “We saw that in order for students to be engaged in their education, to really succeed, we would need to offer choices, and take into account the student’s social and emotional life.”

“Every student comes in with different needs, and we have an obligation to meet those needs,” said Karen Perry, Henry County School District’s Special Projects Coordinator. “We saw that personalized learning, working with student strengths and making education relevant to kids was the direction we needed to go in. And we knew technology could enable that work.” In order to reach the “whole child,” technology can be used to collect data that directly pinpoints ways to support individual kids. “The teacher needs to be supported by technology in the process of making ‘co-decisions’ about a given student’s educational path. Technology supports teachers by giving them easy access to crucial student information (instead of having to track down a file locked away in a vault somewhere).” Meanwhile, technology supports the standardization of best practices while increasing communication. Schmuhl explains, “This was what we needed: technology in our schools that could do all of that. We searched for two years to find what we were looking for, and we were thrilled to discover that BlenderLearn’s Learner Profiles fit our needs, thanks to SRG Technology’s willingness to co-develop their existing tool.”

BlenderLearn’s Individual Learner Profiles (ILPs) are a component of BlenderLearn, an innovative educational ecosystem developed by SRG Technology to make personalized learning possible. ILPs work by combining information such as student’s skills, interests, assessment data and learning barriers into a unique profile, accessible through a role-based portal. With ILPs, teachers can personalize teaching and learning by better understanding the child’s whole learning picture. It is whole child learning at its most up-to-date. “Engaging both the parent and student through individualized portals has been a big piece in keeping families engaged in student learning,” said Perry. “Connecting students to the reality that their education is a relevant part of reaching their unique goals has been the centerpiece in making our students feel successful. In order to do this, we need to know who our students truly are. Without taking the whole child into account, all of the exciting shifts in our schools wouldn’t be coming together the way they are.” This is what it means to be whole tech, and Henry County Schools is one of the nation’s first school districts to understand the importance of being whole tech, and is seeing the payoffs.

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## Conclusion

Education technology solutions like BlenderLearn meet the needs of the whole child by connecting students with educators, their families and each other. By using technology to support the whole child, educators have the data they need to drive better outcomes, both in terms of student health and student academic success. “The bottom line is that we cannot get students to progress without addressing their whole needs — we must discover whatever avenue is necessary to make each child succeed. How is that child’s health? Is he or she eating

breakfast? Is there homework support at home? What is his or her learning style? Goals and dreams? Special talents and interests?” asked Dr. Willis. “Knowing that the whole child is crucial to creating a path to success, and is the only way we can make a difference. And educators are so overwhelmed with students, technology can play a huge part in making sure students don’t fall through the cracks. A system like BlenderLearn is making sure everyone is accountable, and students are succeeding,” Dr. Willis concluded.

The whole child requires that every aspect of his or her academic life and health is understood: eating habits, homework, behavior, test scores, extracurricular activities and involvement in the community. "All these pieces function as part of the puzzle that, when put together, influence the success and well-being of a student's performance. Their whole life becomes an integral focus on what will best drive their success in school," said Rhodes. Educators agree that in order to accomplish this, a data system that takes into account all of these factors: keeping track, charting changes and improvements, and recommending next steps to achieve triumphs over weaknesses, is desperately needed.<sup>13</sup> A system to evaluate and recommend what is needed for the child to perform optimally in school, and BlenderLearn is a system that can meet the needs of educators.

Studies show that the better a child does in school, the better the child performs later in life and in the workplace.<sup>14</sup> "High achievement in the classroom has a direct relationship to high achievement in the workforce, and in life outside of school," said Dr. Willis. "By encouraging students to have drive and success early on, you put into place habits of achievement that students will adhere to for the rest of their lives."



## Footnotes:

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## About SRG Technology

Founded in 2007, SRG Technology developed Blender™ — a suite of cutting-edge software solutions designed to drive performance improvements through enhanced data collection and analysis; personalized recommendations; and the creation of individualized action plans. SRG Technology is focused on elevating performance, increasing productivity and ultimately improving end-user outcomes in education with BlenderLearn™, healthcare with TopCare powered by Blender™, geo-positional security with BlenderRM™, and consumer engagement and outreach with BlenderConnect™. SRGT is poised to set the benchmark for innovative, disruptive technology solutions that elevate performance, increase productivity, and make a difference in our daily lives.



