

First Things First:
A Framework for Successful School Reform

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I. Overview

This white paper presents the First Things First framework for successful school reform. It treats improvement in our schools as the first priority and entry point for investments in changing the lives of youth. While its focus is particularly on schools in economically disadvantaged communities, the framework applies to students at all levels of performance and from diverse family, racial, and economic backgrounds. First Things First proposes specific changes, drawn in part from watching and working with public schools, that must be made in the way most public schools now work. These proposed changes are also consistent with developmental and educational research on children and youth, including those living in economically disadvantaged communities, with current research on organizational change, and with emerging results on “what’s working” in our own and others reform efforts.

The paper is divided into the following sections:

- II. Looking Back – a brief review of the past fifteen years of educational reform and what we have learned from it.
- III. Schools: The Focus for Reform – a discussion of why schools should be a primary focus for investments in our youth.
- IV. Critical Features in School Reform – identification of seven critical features of school reform that comprise the necessary and sufficient conditions for schools to produce meaningful improvements in student outcomes. This section also includes a discussion of features that are *not* included in this list and the reasons why.
- V. The Crucial Role of Evaluation in School Reform – an explanation of the “theory of change” evaluation strategy that produces useful information for all stakeholders about whether or not reform efforts have been implemented and are having their intended effects.

VI. Closing Remarks – a summary of how First Things First complements and advances other educational reform and youth development efforts.

The First Things First framework is a tool with many potential users and uses.

- **For students, their parents, and other reform advocates**, it can provide a set of expectations for what schools can and should look like.
- **For teachers and other adults working in schools**, it can help them articulate and then implement new and more productive ways of doing their work.
- **For district, city, state, and federal partners in public education**, it can establish sets of reachable and meaningful targets in the short-, medium-, and long-term on which to base their policies and focus their resources.
- **For the public**, it offers a solution that, if adopted by schools and school systems, will signal that public education is righting itself in ways that will result in students prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

These are the ambitions for the framework. There is also an important caution.

This paper does not offer conclusive, scientific evidence that implementing First Things First's critical features will dramatically improve student academic performance and commitment across elementary, middle, and high schools in communities serving diverse student populations. Such evidence does not exist for any reform framework that we know of. However, preliminary results of external and internal evaluations of our implementation efforts with the framework are promising (1). The case we make in this paper rests on scientific evidence from diverse sources and common sense arguments.

It is our hope that evaluation research on First Things First now underway will strengthen the scientific base for this model's and its components' efficacy.

II. Looking Back

The Goals 2000 program, Congress' Improving America's Schools Act, and most recently, the No Child Left Behind legislation, have spawned many national and state efforts to define standards of student performance for American education. Virtually all states have developed standards defining what their students should know and be able to do, and approximately half of those states have linked performance assessments to their state standards to maximize student achievement (2).

As a result, during the past decade we have witnessed a sharp increase in educational reform efforts at the federal, state, and local levels. Thousands of local school districts – in part responding to state and federal initiatives, and in part on their own – are also setting reform agendas (3).

Some of these local efforts have received support from a variety of school reform organizations:

- New American Schools designs, including "America's Choice, ATLAS communities, Co-NECT Schools, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Modern Red Schoolhouse, and Roots and Wings" (4);
- Theodore Sizer's "Coalition for Essential Schools" (5);
- James Comer's "School Development Program" (6);
- Henry Levin's "Accelerated Schools Project" (7);
- Eric Schaps' "Child Development Project" (8);
- Robert Slavin's "Success for All" (9);
- Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk's "Talent Development High School" (10); and
- Southern Regional Education Board's "High Schools that Work" (11).

At the same time, private funding for urban school reform has increased markedly.

There are three particularly noteworthy examples:

- The Carnegie Corporation's investment in secondary school reform “The Schools for a New Society Initiative” (12);
- The Annenberg Foundation's contribution of significant resources to school reform in disadvantaged communities, beginning in 1994 (13); and
- The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s effort to improve high school and college graduation rates by supporting the creation of small focused high schools and small learning communities that help all students succeed and the development of educational leaders (14).

What have we learned? What observations can we now apply to ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes, particularly in schools and school districts with large gaps between current and desired levels of student performance? Much of what we know is discouraging.

1. Meaningful improvement is scarce to non-existent.

There are many state- and district-level reform efforts currently underway – some for almost 10 years and others just beginning. But none of these have produced profound changes in the everyday lives of students or adults in more than a few schools within any district (15). Most of the longitudinal evaluations linking comprehensive school reform initiatives to important student outcomes have just begun. While these evaluations initially show positive results at the school level for several school reform models, it will be several years before claims of profound change can be made. Those initiatives that have been in place longer and that have more extensive evaluations have shown mixed results, often as a function of the extent to which the initiative has been implemented (16).

Voucher systems – originally intended to provide choice for parents – have in some cases been found to worsen inequalities and block opportunities for meaningful reform (17). Some advocates for students and other observers of school reform are also calling into question the purported benefits of the “high stakes, high standards testing movement” when it does not include an additional focus on developing (a) more effective instructional strategies through professional development and (b) more personalized learning environments (e.g., smaller class sizes, smaller schools) (18).

While there are important examples of successful schools in economically disadvantaged communities, *very few schools and no school districts have meaningfully improved their students' learning and performance outcomes*. By "meaningful improvement," we mean that a majority of a school's or district's students have moved from outcomes that reliably predict low or poverty levels of income to outcomes that predict middle-class or better levels of income in early adulthood. It is also worth noting that improved test scores gaining national headlines have taken place almost entirely at the elementary school level.

One notable exception, Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) located in East Harlem, New York, graduates within five years more than 90% of its students who enter ninth grade. This is in sharp contrast to the New York City average of 55%. Even more important, more than 90% of CPESS students go on to college right after graduation. In New York City over all, only a small fraction of students do so (19).

2. Success requires profound transformations.

Tinkering with the way schools do their job will not result in meaningful change in student performance and development. A look at schools that are successful reveals an essential truth: the everyday lives of students and teachers in a school such as CPESS are very different from the lives of students and teachers in other public schools serving

similar populations. Profound transformations need to occur in the way schools do their business. This is the only way to eliminate the gap between goals and performance for students in disadvantaged communities (20).

3. Large segments of the public are becoming discouraged and distant.

Many urban educators at the district and school levels are facing an impatient public looking for results (21) – and far less willing to extend resources until those results are demonstrated. Community members are no longer interested in complicated and expensive solutions. Instead, public support seems drawn to more simplistic and cost-saving solutions opposed by most educators. As a result, despite all of the ongoing reform efforts, diverse political constituencies are increasingly attacking (or sometimes ignoring) public education.

These first three observations are discouraging. However, the fourth and final observation is the most important and most hopeful:

4. Meaningful educational reform is possible.

Some schools *are* effecting dramatic changes and improvements in the lives of students and teachers (22). These schools must grow roots quickly to keep from being swept away by the political and economic twisters that touch down all too often, particularly in large urban school districts. The personal successes of students and adults working in these schools nourish these roots and justify and sustain the difficult work of making change.

III. Schools: The Focus for Reform

The title of this paper, "First Things First," intentionally implies that priorities must be set. We contend, along with others who have made similar arguments (23), that schools and school-site change must be the touchstone of educational reform.

In making this claim, we are not dismissing educational reform strategies that emphasize other entry points such as teacher education and community empowerment. Rather, we are claiming that, regardless of the entry point, what happens to students in schools deserves to be and must be the first and primary focus of the change effort.

There are six overriding reasons why schools should be the focus of educational reform.

1. Schools are where the students are.

Given the importance of educational outcomes in shaping lives, it follows that public and private stakeholders will seek their improvement. But we already know from our observations of successful schools and from other youth development efforts (24) that improvement in youth development outcomes overall will come only with dramatic and persistent change in their everyday lives.

Where does sustained opportunity to support youth development exist? In schools – where students spend six-plus hours per day, five days a week, for approximately forty weeks every year.

2. Schools are where the money is.

Seventy-five cents of every public dollar spent on children and families go to public education. In addition, we've seen an extensive redistribution of public education resources in the last few years. Despite politicians' need to fit school reform into a sound bite (e.g., vouchers or class size), a large amount of money has been

allocated to supporting the implementation and evaluation of comprehensive school reform. According to the Education Commission of the States, comprehensive school reform began to gain ground when the U.S. Congress approved \$150 million in November 1997 to support its implementation in school districts across the country. Congress approved an additional \$134 million in fiscal year 1999, enabling more than 2,000 schools to receive grants of at least \$50,000 to implement comprehensive school reform over three years (25). Recently, the U.S. Department of Education has appropriated more than \$125 million for reform of large comprehensive high schools as well.

3. It matters what students do in school.

Research on youth – and specifically on economically disadvantaged youth – demonstrates the importance of educational outcomes as precursors of important life outcomes such as economic self-sufficiency, healthy family and social relationships, and good citizenship (26).

Difficulties in the earlier years of school strongly predict early school departure (27). Further, leaving school at any point before completion correlates highly with unemployment and lower earnings (28). A paper examining employment outcomes for African-American males demonstrated that being held back more than once, or being suspended during middle school, tripled the odds of being unemployed in adulthood (29).

When students are successful in school they are very likely to make it. When students aren't successful in school, they are not. A report on education and the economy indicates that "educational attainment is the single most important determinant of a person's success in the labor market. In the 50 years it has been tracked, the payoff to schooling has never been higher" (30).

4. We know a lot about schools.

We know more about how schools can contribute to improving life chances of children and youth than we do about other entry points.

If youth development initiatives are going to focus on outcomes that we know are important in settings that we know can change these outcomes, the first outcomes should be educational and the first setting should be school.

Certainly there are other entry points to improve youth development and educational outcomes:

- Efforts toward community-building in disadvantaged areas;
- Reforms of social services;
- Improving school readiness; and
- Changes in teacher training.

While all of these entry points have been understudied, none to date has been shown to effect meaningful long-term change in outcomes for large numbers of economically disadvantaged youth unless accompanied by school-level reform.

We do not mean to say that school change alone will *optimize* student outcomes. Indeed, the most successful schools are ones that effectively marshal all available resources and partners, combining them to achieve improved outcomes. It remains true, however, that existing knowledge offers more guidance about what school-site reform can achieve than it does about what other supports can do.

5. Schools can change.

IRRE has observed and studied successful schools and has worked with reform efforts in over a dozen urban school districts, most of which serve disadvantaged and diverse students. We conclude that change in schools can occur.

Those who are skeptical should note that what prevents some schools from changing in important ways are not their current lack of authority, professional capacity, or resources (time, money, or staff size). The problem lies with other shortages:

- They don't believe it can happen;
- Leaders lack political will, both inside and outside the school, to embrace wholesale change;
- Outside advisors have failed to provide clear, compelling, and useful information about what will work and how to get what will work on the ground; and
- There's not enough support and pressure to take the first steps that will yield the first positive results.

Some schools have overcome these shortages. In IRRE's view, all schools can do so.

6. Schools can be important partners in youth development.

Schools will have to change to meaningfully improve student outcomes, but other systems – communities, school districts, and teacher education institutions – will have to change as well if these outcomes are to be optimized.

Schools can lead the way in developing partnerships with parents and local organizations, especially churches, community-based organizations, and locally-based social services. When schools are doing everything they can to support youth development, then youth development organizations can be relieved of their compensatory activities and sustain a more positive focus (31).

In summary, school reform presents the most feasible, defensible, and informed opportunity for public policy to improve the life chances of children and youth in disadvantaged communities. It provides the means to concentrate authority, resources, knowledge, and responsibility in the hands of professionals who deal directly, intensively, and over long periods with children and young people. It can create an effective focus for broader systemic change and public engagement in the change process.

IV. Critical Features in School Reform

How can and must schools change to achieve meaningful improvements in student outcomes? Further, what evidence exists that these changes will result in meaningful improvements for the children and youth who are most at risk – the ones who live in disadvantaged communities?

IRRE has identified seven critical features of school reform (see Table 1, page 17). The first four focus on student/adult relationships and teaching and learning; the remaining three focus on adult responsibilities, supports, and resource allocation. Together, we believe these seven features comprise the necessary and sufficient conditions for schools to produce dramatic improvements in student outcomes.

A. For Students: Greater Continuity of Care; Lower Student/Adult Ratios and Increased Instructional Time (Critical Features 1 & 2)

All major school reform strategies (32) share the hypothesis that *better relationships between adults and students contribute to improved educational outcomes for students*. Extensive research on children and youth in diverse educational settings supports this hypothesis (33).

In economically disadvantaged settings, serious and deep-rooted challenges make it especially difficult to build these relationships. Gaps of class, ethnicity, and places of residence have historically separated professionals in urban schools from the students and families they serve. At the same time, these are the schools where strong ties between adults and students can make the greatest difference.

Table 1: Seven Critical Features of School Reform

For Students:

1. **Provide continuity of care** across the school day, across the school years, and between school and home by forming small learning communities. The same group of no more than ten to twelve professionals within each school level stay with the same group of no more than 150-325 students for extended periods during the school day. This core group of adults also stays with the same group of students and their families throughout elementary school for cycles of at least two years with the same teacher or pair of teachers, for all three years of middle school, and for all four years in high school. As Family Advocates, these adults are also paired with a small number of students and their families (between 12 and 17) to encourage adults in school and at home to work together to ensure each student's academic and personal success.
2. **Increase instructional time** in language arts and math by at least 50 percent **and lower student/adult ratios** by half for as much time as possible during language arts and math, primarily through redistribution and reconfiguration of professional staff.
3. **Set high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards** that define clearly what all students will know and be able to do by the time they leave high school and at points along the way in their school career. Student performance on standards-based tests is linked directly to students' advancement and grading, curriculum aligns with these standards, and students have ongoing opportunities to learn how to take these assessments. Adults and students must agree on conduct standards, which are reinforced by adults modeling positive social behaviors and attitudes and which are sustained by clear benefits to students and adults for meeting them and consequences for violating them.
4. **Provide enriched and diverse opportunities: to learn**, by making learning more active and connected in safe and respectful learning environments; **to perform**, by linking assessment strategies that use multiple modes of learning and performance tied directly to standards; and **to be recognized** by creating individual and collective incentives for student achievement and by providing leadership opportunities in academic and non-academic areas.¹

¹ See *First Things First: Improving Teaching and Learning* for a more detailed discussion of this critical feature.

Table 1: Seven Critical Features of School Reform (con't)

And for Adults:

5. **Equip, empower and expect all staff to improve instruction** by creating a shared vision and expectation of high quality teaching and learning in all classrooms; supporting small learning communities' implementation of research-based instructional strategies to fulfill that vision; and engaging all staff in ongoing study of student work and of current research to improve curricular and instructional approaches.
6. **Allow for flexible allocation of available resources** by teams and schools, based on instructional and interpersonal needs of students. Resources include **people** (students and staff); instructional **facilities** (on- and off-campus); **time** for instructional, planning, and professional development; and **money**.
7. **Assure collective responsibility** by providing collective incentives and consequences, linked to changes in student performance for small learning communities, schools and central office staff.

Research demonstrates that strong relationships between young people and adults are forged when the young person experiences the adult:

- Providing valuable psychological resources (time, respect, caring);
- Setting high, clear, and fair standards; and
- Encouraging expressions of individuality (34).

We also know that student learning benefits when students receive more adult support and guidance during instructional periods and from the same adults over longer periods of time (35). Under these conditions, students have greater access to teachers, more individualized attention, and a better understanding of the classroom routine. At the same time, teachers are more likely to use active engagement strategies – hands-on

instructional approaches such as materials students can manipulate themselves, interest centers, and cooperative learning structures – activities that have been linked to improvements in student performance (36).

To achieve these conditions, schools need to provide greater continuity of care by keeping students with a stable group of adults across longer periods during the school day, across multiple years of their school experience, to lower student/adult ratios, and extend instructional time students have to meet higher academic standards (see discussion of standards below).

How much continuity of care is enough? Almost all exemplary schools we have observed have longer instructional periods (one to two hours) with the same teacher or groups of teachers across the school day and keep students with the same adults across multiple school years (37). This is in contrast to the typical, urban middle school in which, based on an eight-period day, students have about 24 teachers and change classes more than 4,000 times over their three years in the school.

The research literature and the exemplary schools we have studied do not offer clear messages about *optimal* ratios. We do know that small decreases in student/adult ratios (for example, from 28:1 to 25:1) have no effect on student learning (38). We also have evidence that dramatic decreases – for example, cutting the ratios to 15:1– do have positive effects (39).

Going beyond the evidence, it stands to reason that students will feel more secure and be more productive when students and adults work together in smaller, flexible groupings that remain focused on their task for as long as they need and that remain relatively consistent over multiple years. Deborah Meier, founder of Central Park East Secondary School, points out that such arrangements are much more consistent with

the nature of people's work lives beyond the school years. She asks: "When will young people ever again work for eight different bosses a day, one at a time, for forty-five minutes apiece on completely isolated sets of tasks?" (40)

Most elementary schools have achieved continuity of care across the school day. Some middle and high schools have managed to accomplish the same thing by using block-scheduling (41).

Less prevalent – and perhaps more important – is continuity across school years. Achieving continuity of care across school years requires that professionals stretch the perceived boundaries of their practice. For example, former sixth-grade teachers who see their students again at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels must attend to instructional and interpersonal needs of students as they undergo the transition to adolescence. Fortunately, teachers whose small learning communities have implemented continuity of care at the elementary, middle, and high school levels report that the social and academic benefits more than offset the challenges. These benefits include:

- The efficiencies that come with knowing most of your students at the start of each school year;
- Increased student self-confidence and social skills;
- Stronger relationships with students and their families;
- Increased knowledge about children's intellectual strengths and weaknesses;
- The opportunity to track student progress across school years; and
- More opportunities to individualize learning for students (42).

Deborah Meier aptly summarizes the benefits of continuity of care: "When you have a student for a year, she is on your mind. When you have a student in your class for two to three years, she is on your conscience (43)."

Similarly, according to Daniel Burke, superintendent of Antioch (IL) School District 34:

- "70% of [the teachers] reported that teaching the same students for three years allowed them to use more positive approaches to classroom management;
- 92% said that they knew more about their students;
- 69% described their students as more willing to participate voluntarily in class;
- 85% reported that their students were better able to see themselves as important members of a group, to feel pride in that group, and to feel pride in the school as a whole;
- 84% reported more positive relationships with parents; and
- 75% reported increased empathy with colleagues (44)."

Continuity of care across school and home occurs when adults from these settings form personal relationships intended to support individual students' academic achievement and commitment. Implementing this aspect of continuity of care has proven most difficult in secondary schools. However, these relationships can and have been formed when adults in small learning communities commit themselves to act as advocates for a group of students and their families from the time the students enter the small learning community until they successfully move on (45). Advocates act as partners with students and their families in setting academic and behavioral targets, monitoring progress on these targets, and formulating appropriate intervention strategies at home and at school to assure students achieve their targets. When teachers take on this advocate role, parent attendance at teacher conferences and student accountability increase dramatically (46).

How can dramatic decreases in student/adult ratios be achieved in elementary, middle, or high schools without significant increases in staff size or reductions in student populations?

First, student/adult ratios on the order we advocate already exist in most schools if one simply divides the number of students by the number of qualified adults working in those schools. For most students, however, these desirable student/adult ratios do not occur during core instructional periods (47). For example, in the urban schools we have studied, the student/adult ratio (total full-time equivalent staff who are qualified to work with students divided by the total student body) ranges from 10 to 14 to 1 – excluding secretarial, janitorial, food service, transportation, and security. In these same schools, this ratio during core instructional periods ranges from 25 to 30 to 1. A review of the staffing and spending patterns of schools across the country has identified similar patterns across districts and over time (48).

With this many adults assigned to a school, achievement of desirable student/adult ratios during some core instructional periods is possible by requiring that a greater number of qualified adults participate in the core instruction of more students. A range of strategies for lowering ratios during core instruction has been implemented in First Things First schools including:

- Reallocating existing staff – teaching and administrative – to support core areas of instruction of highest priority – typically literacy and math;
- Changing staff profile of certification over time as the school focuses its instructional attention on these core areas;
- Importing qualified community educators and teacher trainees;
- Using high quality large group instructional opportunities to free up staff to work with other students in smaller groups; and
- Involving some students in off-campus community-based learning to lower numbers of on campus students at certain times.

This redistribution and reconfiguration of professional staff can be difficult. It alters not only the relationships among professionals, but individual professional identities as well. Implementing this critical feature further requires schools to address issues of certification requirements, teacher contracts, district policies, special education requirements, and relevant state regulations (49).

In addition to the more individualized attention allowed by lower student/adult ratios, many students in urban schools need increased instructional time to meet the increasingly rigorous academic standards they face – particularly in language arts and math (50). With this additional time, students without the prerequisite skills in these areas will be able to "catch up" without having to fail and retake courses. Students who are "on track" use the additional time to move to higher levels of mastery. How much additional instructional time and how often the lower student/adult ratios will occur depend on the resources and priorities of the school and district.

Strong and mutually accountable relationships among adults at home, adults at school, and students are absolutely necessary if students are to overcome the disappointments that will inevitably occur as they strive to meet new challenges. These relationships will provide students with the support they need to analyze these challenges and try again. Such relationships will also provide opportunities for adults to recognize students appropriately and meaningfully when they have succeeded.

The new and stronger relationships also support adults at school and at home as they play new roles and interact in new ways. These relationships help adults face new and more difficult work in creating and sustaining higher standards and better learning

opportunities for their students. Stronger relationships give new meaning to the work educators are doing for students and families they know and care more about.

These first two critical features – continuity of care along with lower student/adult ratios and increased instructional time – help provide the foundation for the next two critical features, which require students to meet the challenges posed by higher standards and the new and more difficult work these standards demand.

B. For Students: High, Clear, and Fair Standards and Enriched Opportunities
(Critical Features 3 & 4)

The "standards movement" is visible at all levels of educational policy. Leading educational theorists (51), practitioners (52), advocates (53), and policy makers (54) are making compelling arguments for the importance of high, clear, and fair academic standards for all students in urban schools.

State standards describe what students should know and be able to do, and most states are in the process of developing or have developed assessments aligned with such standards (55). While states vary greatly in their specificity, these standards typically include what students will know and be able to do when they graduate from high school and at key points in elementary, middle, and high school. Specified levels of performance on assessments reflecting these standards, when fully implemented, determine not only student graduation, but also student advancement (for example, from elementary to middle to high school), course grades, and successful completion of projects or units of study within a course. These are also the standards that states expect will drive curriculum and instruction in every classroom.

Current federal policies embodied in the No Child Left Behind act force states and districts to attend to this issue or face significant consequences. Prior to this external mandate, the pressing need to include standards in our framework was borne out in IRRE's own work. We conducted an intensive study of a representative urban middle school in which approximately 40% of the students received grades from their teachers of 75 or better in all of their core subjects for all four marking periods during the last school year. However, on national reading and math tests, only three percent achieved the 70th percentile or better on both tests. Thus, students were doing far worse on their standardized test scores than on grades given by teachers.

A large gap between students' grades and their performance on standardized tests exists in most of our urban schools. To achieve success, schools must raise expectations and standards and clarify them for all students and their families.

In *First Things First*, we have expanded the critical feature of setting high, clear, and fair academic standards to include conduct standards. Developmental and educational research supports the importance of setting high standards and expectations for students' individual and social conduct. And youth development research and programs emphasize the importance of involving older children and youth in establishing, articulating, and enforcing these standards (56).

The need for standards is compelling. Equally important, however, are more diverse opportunities for students to learn, perform, and be recognized if they are to have any real hope of achieving these standards.

In fact, we believe that raising expectations and standards without enriching and diversifying students' opportunities to learn will do more harm than good. Thus, *First*

Things First, like other reform initiatives (57), links high academic and behavioral standards with the supports and opportunities that students need to meet them:

- More enriched and diverse **opportunities to learn** include more active, integrated, cooperative, and real-world learning. These opportunities have all been shown to yield higher levels of student engagement and deeper levels of student learning in diverse groups of students (58). Student engagement in learning is also linked to less disruptive behavior and lower levels of suspensions (59).
- **Opportunities to perform** include multiple and more authentic modes of assessment that are linked to content standards and that teachers use to guide instruction (60).
- **Opportunities to be recognized** include formal and informal ways for students to be leaders among their peers, to have their work recognized, and to demonstrate their uniqueness as well as their collective contribution to their class, school and their community (61).

These opportunities for students appear in all schools to some degree; but in successful schools, they are key elements in the everyday lives of all students.

C. **For Adults: Equip, Empower, and Expect Staff to Improve Instruction, Flexible Allocation of Resources, and Collective Responsibility** (Critical Features 5, 6, and 7)

In order to implement and sustain the critical features for students, teachers will have to work differently and relate to each other in new ways. Why?

- Creating small learning communities that stay in place over years will result in more long-standing and intensive relationships among teachers, students and their families; and

- Instruction driven by higher standards and assessment of student progress toward these standards will demand new forms of practice in the classroom.

Studies of teachers and their work have revealed that factors promoting their engagement are strikingly similar to the ones that work for students. Specifically, the quality of teachers' relationships with their students and each other and the diversity, flexibility, challenge, and recognition associated with their work foster engagement, willingness to innovate, and productivity (62).

Like the critical features for students, the three critical features for adults are grounded in our own and others' observations of successful schools and ongoing reform efforts (63). Above all, the purpose of these features is to permit adults to implement the critical features for students. They are under the direct control of educators in the schools and school districts and do not require an extensive and permanent influx of additional financial resources.

As for students, the critical features for adults are inextricably intertwined: Adults working with smaller groups of students over multiple school years will have to change the way they teach. Within these small learning communities, adults must be able to allocate resources in response to their own and their students' learning needs, and they must take collective responsibility (with students and their families) to ensure that all students in their communities are successful. They will need support from their colleagues in the school, central office staff, district leadership, and outside experts.

Equipping, empowering and expecting all staff to improve instruction means giving staff what they need in their small learning communities to implement a shared vision for teaching and learning that all students are actively engaged in high quality

standards-based instruction within a safe and respectful learning environment. For staff to achieve this shared vision, we have identified the following as critical:

- National training and ongoing support to help all teachers build a repertoire of instructional strategies that actively engage students in learning;
- Private access for teachers to technology-based curriculum and instructional resources with professional development activities to strengthen content knowledge (where needed) and ensure effective use of the resources; and
- Coaching and modeling of effective dialogue around student work among small learning community staff and among disciplinary teams (within and across SLCs, buildings, and levels).

Flexible allocation of resources means giving staff access to the resources necessary to implement the shared vision within and across their content areas. Small learning community staff should have control of:

- Funds available for instructional programs, materials, and professional development activities;
- Physical space;
- Staffing assignments and hiring decisions within small learning communities; and
- Instructional schedules for students (64).

Decision-making strategies used by staff members to allocate these resources will reflect diverse preferences and capacities for carrying out this set of responsibilities (65).

Collective responsibility means adults in small learning communities see themselves as responsible for their students' progress. Student progress must be clearly and collectively defined – what student outcomes are most important? How good is good

enough on these outcomes? And what percentage of students will achieve these outcomes by when? Adults then expect each other to do whatever it takes in partnership with students and their families to support the success of the students in their small learning community and thus their school. Part of collective responsibility is a commitment to open discourse and dialogue among adults at school and at home, focused on meeting students' needs while recognizing and building each others' capacities to meet them (66). To help build this sense of collective responsibility, incentives, and consequences for small learning communities, schools and central office staff should be created based on student performance.

IRRE's experience shows that the implementation of these critical features creates a **set of trade-offs** for teachers and others adults in schools:

- Equipping, empowering, and expecting staff to improve instruction requires educators to forego the comfort of familiar curricula and instructional strategies – but it also engages them in discovering and creating curricula and better ways of teaching with other team members and professionals from other schools.
- Flexible allocation of resources requires that adults work together and find additional time to make resource decisions – but it also offers them a way to create a better balance between bureaucratic requirements for how money, time and people are allocated with their students' and their own needs.
- Collective responsibility means that they can and must monitor each others' work for the first time – but it also means that they can expect team members to support their work in ways never before possible.

D. **Summary of the Critical Features**

The ultimate goal of these seven critical features in school-site reform is enhanced student performance and commitment. To achieve this, these features must have

enough force to dislodge the behavioral regularities and bureaucratic structures that many reform theorists argue are responsible for limiting creativity in schools and causing innovation to wither over time (67).

The critical features do not constitute a program, a process, or a list of guiding principles. They are **an integrated set of changes** in the ways adults and students interact and do their work. We know from our research, our observations, and the cumulative experience of school reform efforts that, if these changes are implemented, public schools will produce:

- Better relationships among adults and students;
- Higher levels of engagement and productivity by teachers and students; and, ultimately,
- Students who are better able to benefit from and contribute to society.

IRRE is not alone in promoting these critical features. As Table 2 (see page 30) reveals, they are well represented in other educational reform perspectives. Some public schools have found that implementing these features results in meaningful improvement in student outcomes with minimal additional resources. However, few schools have implemented **all** of the features, and those that have consider themselves works-in-progress. Nevertheless, these changes are feasible – and they work. But they require change that is often difficult, and always takes time.

E. What Comes Second in First Things First?

The first task we set for ourselves was to identify the conditions that are necessary and sufficient for public schools to produce meaningful improvement in student behavior and learning outcomes within a *relatively brief period of time*. We further limited the task by

insisting that implementation of these changes be under the control of educators within the schools and require only marginal and temporary increases in financial resources.

TABLE 2:
SELECTED EDUCATIONAL REFORM PERSPECTIVES
VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF
SEVEN CRITICAL FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL-SITE REFORM

CRITICAL FEATURES	STUDENTS							FOR ADULTS		
	Lower Student/Adult Ratio	Continuity Of Care	Higher, Clear And Fair Standards		Enriched And Diverse Opportunities To Learn, Perform And Be Recognized			Equip, Empower, And Expect All Staff To Improve Instruction	Flexible Allocation Of Resources	Collective Responsibility
REFORMS			Academic	Behavioral	Active, Integrated, Applied Learning	Multiple And Authentic Assessment	Student Leadership, Recognition, Consequences			
Accelerated Schools Project (Levin)	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
America's Choice	●	●	●		●	●	○	○		
ATLAS		○	●		●	●	●	○		○
Basic School (Boyer)	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	○		○
Career Academies (Philadelphia)	○	●	○	○	●	●		○	○	○
Child Development Project (Schaps)		●	●	●	●	●	●	○		
Children Achieving (Hornbeck)		○	●	○	○	●	●	●	●	●
Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer)	○	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●	●
Community for Learning	●		●		●	●	○	○	○	○

LEGEND: ● = Perspective includes critical features as key element
 ○ = Perspective includes but does not highlight critical features
 empty box = Perspective does not include critical features

TABLE 2
Continued

CRITICAL FEATURES	STUDENTS							FOR ADULTS		
	Lower Student/Adult Ratio	Continuity Of Care	Higher, Clear And Fair Standards		Enriched And Diverse Opportunities To Learn, Perform And Be Recognized			Equip, Empower, And Expect All Staff To Improve Instruction	Flexible Allocation Of Resources	Collective Responsibility
REFORMS			Academic	Behavioral	Active, Integrated, Applied Learning	Multiple And Authentic Assessment	Student Leadership, Recognition, Consequences			
Co-NECT	○	○	●		●	●		○		●
Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound		●	○		●	●	○	○		○
High Schools That Work			●		●	●		○		
Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative (Carnegie)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	○
Modern Red Schoolhouse		○	●		●	●		○	●	○
Paideia	●	○	●		●			○		○
School Development Project (Comer)			●	○	●	●		○	○	○
Successful School Restructuring (Newmann)	○	●	●		●	●		○	●	○
Talent Development High School	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	○		○
Urban Learning Centers	●	●	●		●	●		○	○	○

LEGEND: ● = Perspective includes critical features as key element
 ○ = Perspective includes but does not highlight critical features
 empty box = Perspective does not include critical features

Given these priorities, First Things First chose not to include at least two widely cited components of whole school reform in its seven critical features: (1) involving parents and other community members in governing schools and (2) providing extended services for students and families. Why de-emphasize two elements that some consider key to successful school-site reform?

Involving Parents and Other Community Members In Governing Schools

IRRE recognizes that involving parents and other community members in governing schools can be a catalyst for changes such as those included in this framework. These community members can also support reform by participating in community advocacy organizations and supporting the election of reform-oriented school board members.

First Things First supports all of these strategies; however, research suggests that the most important steps parents can take in disadvantaged communities is getting personally involved in their own children's education (68). Therefore, First Things First advocates that schools and small learning communities start by implementing the family advocate system and involving community members as educators in both the school and community settings.

Links Between Schools and Health and Human Services

Efforts to integrate education and health and human services with those provided in schools have produced only small improvements in educational outcomes and very little change in school practices in the absence of meaningful changes in the schools themselves (69). Instead, First Things First advocates that schools concentrate on building good relationships between adults in the schools and their students' families focused around students' work in school. These relationships will lead to greater understanding about what students need to succeed in school (70). Schools can then

work with health and human service providers to develop the needed supports for students' success.

V. The Crucial Role of Evaluation in School Reform

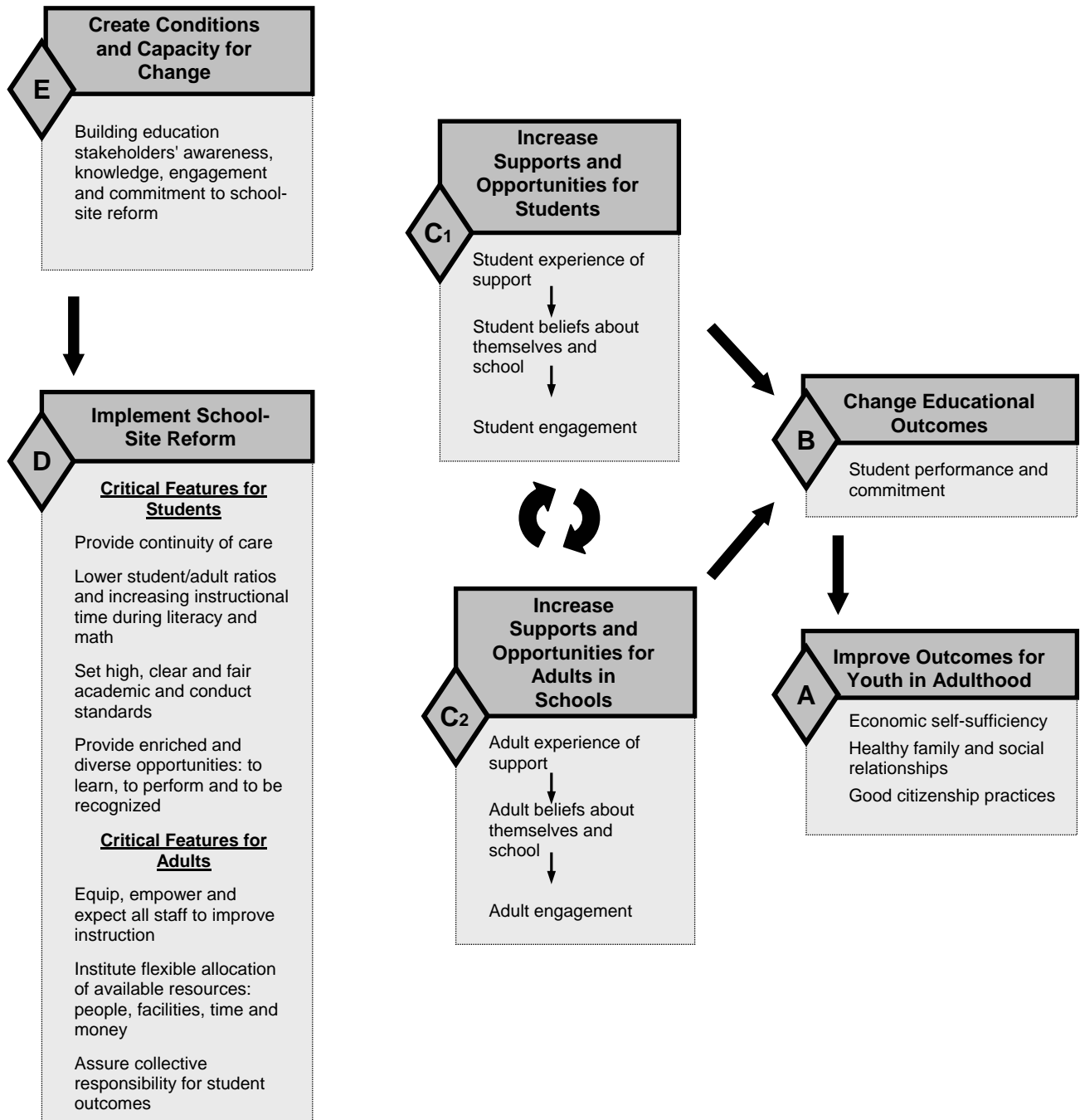
Until very recently, evaluation research has played a surprisingly minor role in shaping the substantial investments in education reform (71).

There appear to be two reasons for this. First, all too often, immediate and unrealistic results accompany these evaluations; in these instances, savvy reformers have understandably resisted calls for research on their work. Second, even when reformers have been open to evaluation, the specifics of what the reform effort is going to look like and what outcomes should be expected are often absent.

A key element in *First Things First* is an evaluation strategy designed to produce clear, compelling, and useful information for all stakeholders. We and others have referred to this evaluation strategy as a "theory of change" approach. Its basic premise is that evaluation should begin with a set of expectations about how reform is going to be initiated (early outcomes); whether it is implemented and has initial effects on students' and teachers' experiences (intermediate outcomes); and whether it is producing change in "high stakes" assessments of academic performance and student behavior (long-term outcomes). This set of expectations is called a theory of change.

Figure 1 (page 35) presents the theory of change that guides evaluations in *First Things First*. A set of steps lead from the initiation of school reform (early outcomes) through the implementation of the critical features, developing supports and opportunities for students and adults in school (intermediate outcomes), to "high stakes" educational outcomes and ultimately on longer-term youth development outcomes (both long-term outcomes).

Figure 1: First Things First School Reform Theory of Change



In our view, if investors and participants in school-site reform want to know whether, how, and how well their efforts are working, they must clarify the early, intermediate, and long-term outcomes they expect before implementing the activities that are designed to produce them.

One of the clear advantages of such a theory of change approach is that findings enable and support mid-course corrections. Research and action become a continuous loop. Data collected on early outcomes (from staff surveys and interviews) allow educators to assess their progress and identify their continuing challenges in building the commitment and capacity to implement First Things First. Based on these results, they can adjust activities and redirect resources. Similarly, observational and survey assessments of whether the critical features are being implemented and whether they are affecting students and teachers' experiences allow educators to adjust supports for those schools that are struggling and to highlight early successes in schools making rapid progress. At the same time, the initiative continuously tracks longer-term outcomes such as student attendance and academic performance so that, once the critical features of reform take hold, change in the trajectories of these outcomes can be detected.

The process of reviewing results from the evaluation should be a public one, since public awareness of results throughout the reform keeps families and other adults in the community expecting and supporting students' and schools' success.

VI. Closing Remarks

After nearly fifteen years of intensive efforts at education reform, very little meaningful change has occurred in the everyday lives of public school students, particularly students whose life chances are seriously threatened by business as usual in their schools.

The First Things First framework argues that we should not give up on schools. If we do, other policy, funding, and programmatic options will not bridge the widening gap between what students in disadvantaged communities now get during their school-age years and what they need to get to survive and thrive as adults.

In this white paper, we have asserted that schools:

- Must and can transform relationships among adults and young people;
- Change the quality of teaching and learning; and,
- Redirect existing resources to do these things.

We have also discussed why and how evaluation is critical to the implementation of comprehensive school reform such as First Things First.

First Things First builds on previous and ongoing reform efforts, using their successes and disappointments to refine critical features and to create effective and useful evaluation strategies. We have also developed ways to build the readiness and commitment of schools and school districts to First Things First. Once the commitment is there, we then provide a set of strategies and tools for getting the framework implemented.

It is clear to us that meaningful improvement in the life chances of youth will only happen when district and community leaders promote, support – and indeed, require –

the changes contained in this framework to occur. Our challenge – and that of the communities we work with – is to muster the political will and then organize the supports necessary to put "first things first."

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