

## Scaling Up First Things First: Site Selection and the Planning Year

First Things First is a comprehensive intervention to transform low-performing public schools. The program model, which is based on research and on the best practices of schools that have successfully served high-risk students, encompasses major changes in school structure, instruction, and accountability and governance — all aimed at creating engaging environments for students and teachers alike and at improving students' academic achievement. The critical features of First Things First are described in Table ES.1.

Developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), headed by James P. Connell, First Things First was introduced in the Kansas City, Kansas, school system beginning in 1998. Promising early results led the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education to support the initiative's expansion in secondary schools in additional urban and rural settings.

The new schools are being phased in over a two-year period, in two groups. Schools in the first group include a high school and its two feeder middle schools in the Riverview Gardens School District in St. Louis County, Missouri; two high schools in Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi, located in the Mississippi Delta; and a high school and middle school in Houston, Texas.<sup>1</sup> These schools underwent a year of planning during the 2000-2001 school year and have now embarked on their first year of program implementation. Three additional high schools and three middle schools in Houston make up the second group of schools, where the 2001-2002 school year is a planning year and implementation will begin in the 2002-2003 school year.

Scaling Up First Things First, a five-year research and demonstration project, represents a collaboration of two organizations: IRRE provides support and technical assistance to the participating schools and districts, while the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) oversees the project and is responsible for conducting evaluation activities in all sites outside Kansas City. This report covers the first 22 months of the expansion effort (November 1999-August 2001), a period that included site selection and the planning year for the first group of sites. The report draws on a combination of quantitative data from staff surveys and qualitative findings from interviews and observations.

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<sup>1</sup>During the 2001-2002 academic year, the two high schools in Greenville, Mississippi, merged to form a single high school with two campuses, now known as Greenville-Weston High School. Until this year, however, they were two separate schools — Greenville High School and T. L. Weston High School — and are treated as such in this report.

## Scaling Up First Things First

### Table ES.1

#### The Seven Critical Features of First Things First

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##### Structural Changes

1. Lower student-adult ratios to 15:1 during language arts and math classes for at least 10 hours per week.
2. Provide continuity of care across the school day, across the school years, and between school and home by forming small learning communities. The same core group of eight to ten professionals stays with the same group of 150-250 students for extended periods during the school day for all three years of middle school and for at least two-year periods in high school. The Family Advocate System is also aimed at ensuring continuity of care between staff of the small learning communities and students' families.

##### Instructional Changes

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. Performance on standards-based tests is linked directly to students' advancement and grading, drives curriculum and instruction in all courses, and is discussed regularly with students and their families. Adults and students agree on conduct standards, which are reinforced by adults modeling positive 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 tie performance directly to standards; and to be recognized, by creating individual and collective incentives for student achievement and by providing leadership opportunities in academic and nonacademic areas.
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 to improve curricular and instructional approaches.

##### Accountability and Governance Changes

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; time for instructional planning and professional development; and discretionary funds.
7. Assure collective responsibility by providing collective incentives and consequences for small learning communities, schools, and central office staff that are linked to change in student performance.

The principal findings are these:

- Site selection, the provision of technical assistance, the preparation of background materials, and general troubleshooting stretched the capacities of IRRE staff and consultants.
- In retrospect, IRRE felt it had made a mistake by allowing faculties to make decisions about school structure — a matter about which IRRE held strong convictions; it made its own recommendations so forcefully that school staff felt dictated to anyway. This error will not be repeated at the second group of expansion sites, where school structure will not be open for staff discussion.
- Survey findings indicate that commitment to First Things First was stronger among teachers who had less experience, teachers who were nonwhite, teachers who perceived their principal as being responsive to their concerns, and teachers who felt that they had played an important role in decision-making.

## Site Selection

Selecting appropriate sites for the scaling-up effort was a labor-intensive affair for IRRE, an organization with a small core staff. This was not due to a dearth of interest — the hope and promise of improved student scores on high-stakes tests attracted many school districts. But the selection process entailed multiple efforts at contact, lengthy phone conversations to explore mutual interest, full-day site visits to promising locations, and an informational conference for prospective candidates. Site selection criteria involved both objective indicators of need and the developers' subjective judgments of local administrators' will and capacity to undertake major reforms.

The initial agreement with OERI stipulated that the demonstration include a medium-size school district with a number of high schools and middle schools. Predictably, finding such a district proved much more difficult than finding individual schools and smaller districts willing to implement the intervention, and ultimately OERI agreed to substitute six additional schools in Houston for the district site.

IRRE did not require, or even recommend, that school staff members vote on adopting the initiative; its staff argued that support from district and school leadership was sufficient and that staff buy-in would develop over time. Only one school actually conducted a formal vote.

## Site Characteristics

While varying considerably in scale, ethnic mix, per pupil expenditures, and other characteristics, all schools served primarily nonwhite students; between 24 percent and 65 percent of these students, depending on school and grade, were estimated by IRRE to be at high risk of school dropout. At the three high schools in Mississippi and one middle school in Riverview Gardens, Missouri, the majority of staff members were African-American; elsewhere, they were predominantly white. Almost half the teachers across all sites had been in the classroom for more than 20 years — a notable finding, in that previous studies have associated greater teacher tenure with increased resistance to reform. Just over half the teachers had never been involved in any school reform efforts; those who did report involvement tended to view these efforts moderately favorably. A “culture of continuous staff improvement” was not well developed at the schools, and the majority of teachers perceived parents as being uninvolved with their children's learning.

One of the structural changes contained in the initiative’s program model — block scheduling of classes — was in place in most of the schools. The majority of teachers also felt that high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards — another critical feature of First Things First — were already in place in their schools.

## **Planning-Year Experiences**

The purposes of the planning year are to build knowledge of and support for First Things First among faculty members and to initiate the structural, instructional, and governance and accountability changes that are at the heart of the initiative. IRRE devoted considerable time and resources to launching First Things First: Its core staff and consultants organized and led schoolwide meetings to introduce all staff members to the intervention, conducted monthly site monitoring visits, provided ongoing technical assistance in a number of areas, and prepared a detailed planning guide. All these activities — in conjunction with the continuing search for a district site and ongoing technical assistance to the Kansas City, Kansas, school district — stretched IRRE’s capacity considerably. Nonetheless, site staff members generally agreed that IRRE involvement was a critical factor in making change happen.

The planning year at the first group of program sites illustrates a tension that developers of education reform models often face between being prescriptive and giving school staff members choices about key elements of the reform. IRRE had strongly held views — based on its earlier experiences in Kansas City — about the specific way in which schools should be restructured. But it was initially reluctant to insist that all schools follow its recommendations and instead allowed teachers to make their own decisions about school structure. It asserted its own views so strongly, however, that school staff felt dictated to anyway, and the experience left many teachers feeling manipulated and disillusioned. Support for the intervention did not begin to jell until many months later, when staff members began to plan concrete tasks together.

IRRE has learned from its mistake, which will not be repeated. Staff at the second set of Houston schools joining the demonstration will have a say in other matters, but school structure will not be up for discussion.

The districts strongly supported the effort, making planning for First Things First the centerpiece of their staff development activities and providing financial and staff resources to aid the new intervention. One of the most important forms of support was the appointment of a School Improvement Facilitator (SIF) at each school who was charged with guiding and overseeing the reform process. The SIF’s role was a difficult one, requiring strong leadership skills, organizational ability, and the capacity both to empathize with and to separate from the concerns of faculty members.

## **Early Staff Responses to First Things First**

The theory of change underlying First Things First posits that, for the initiative to be implemented successfully, teachers must be knowledgeable about the reform, must believe that it is both vitally necessary and feasible, must feel committed to it, and must feel ready to implement it. The staff survey measured staff responses on all these “early outcome” measures between five and a half and six months after First Things First was introduced in their schools. Findings across all schools are reported below; it is important to note, however, that staff responses at the various schools differed significantly.

Somewhat over half (56 percent) the respondents at the eight schools reported having some knowledge of all the critical features of the intervention, but few said that they knew a lot about them. Although the vast majority of respondents believed that students in their schools would benefit from all these features' being implemented, only about one-third believed that this would be essential to improving students' achievement. The largest group of respondents (57 percent) had what might be characterized as a cautiously optimistic approach to the possibility of change, reporting that they were somewhat confident that the intervention could be implemented in their schools.

Almost half the respondents said that they were very committed to First Things First, and most of the rest said that they were somewhat committed to it. At all schools, staff members rated their principal as being much more committed to the initiative than they themselves were. At this relatively early stage, however, few respondents said that they were well prepared to implement all of First Things First, and a third said that they were not at all prepared to do so.

It is of interest that the responses of staff at the scaling-up sites generally fell within the same range as their counterparts in the Kansas City, Kansas, schools during those schools' planning years. There was one exception: Kansas City teachers reported more knowledge of the initiative — in part, perhaps, because the district's central office had a full year to plan First Things First before planning began at the school campuses. This meant that the Kansas City SIFs, who were hired during the district's planning year, were much more familiar with the initiative than the newly appointed SIFs at the expansion sites. Furthermore, because First Things First was phased in over time in Kansas City, teachers there who began implementation later were able to learn about the initiative from the experiences of teachers who had started earlier.

The evaluation sought to identify factors associated with different staff responses to the early outcome measures. Multiple regression analysis was used to assess the importance of each factor while holding the other factors constant.

The study confirms that leadership matters: Staff members' beliefs that their principal was responsive to their viewpoint and was concerned for their well-being were significantly and positively related to their answers on all the early outcome measures. Consistent with the literature suggesting that more experienced teachers are more resistant to reform, the more experienced teachers at the expansion sites were more skeptical that First Things First would improve students' performance and were less committed to the initiative than their colleagues who were newer to teaching. Unsurprisingly, staff members who had had previous experience with school reform efforts and who believed that these efforts had had positive effects tended to be more positively disposed toward First Things First as well.

It is noteworthy that nonwhite staff members were more confident than white staffers that First Things First could be implemented and would improve student performance. It seems plausible that nonwhite staff may have bought more fully than their white counterparts into First Things First's central message that "all students can learn."

Finally, those who believed that staff at their schools (as opposed to the district or school leadership) had had a voice in making important decisions about how First Things First would be implemented were more receptive to the initiative than those who did not see the teachers as similarly empowered.