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## **Scaling Up First Things First Findings from the First Implementation Year**

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First Things First is a comprehensive reform that calls for transforming the structure, instructional practices, and governance of low-performing schools, with the aim of increasing engagement among both students and teachers and boosting students' academic achievement. The initiative's seven "critical features" — its underlying design principles — are shown in Table ES.1.

Developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), First Things First was introduced in the Kansas City, Kansas, school system beginning in 1998. Promising early results there led the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education to support a five-year research and demonstration project to expand the initiative to an additional 18 schools and to study its implementation and impacts in these new settings; funding now comes from the Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. Along with six additional secondary schools in Kansas City, the new sites include seven middle and high schools in Houston, Texas; the high school and its two feeder middle schools in the Riverview Gardens school district in suburban St. Louis County, Missouri; and the high schools in the Mississippi Delta communities of Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi. (Greenville's two high schools were subsequently consolidated into one, but because the schools maintain separate campuses and administrations and some separate policies, they are considered as two sites in this report.) All these schools serve large numbers of black and/or Hispanic students who are at significant risk of school failure.

The Scaling Up First Things First project, which began in 1999, represents a collaboration of two organizations: IRRE provides support and technical assistance to the participating schools and districts, while MDRC oversees the project and is responsible for conducting the evaluation in all sites outside Kansas City. The schools were phased in over a two-year period, in two groups; Group I includes the Mississippi and Missouri schools and two of the seven Houston schools, while Group II includes the remaining five Houston schools. An earlier report discussed site selection and the planning year for the Group I schools.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Janet C. Quint, *Scaling Up First Things First: Site Selection and the Planning Year* (New York: MDRC, 2002).

## The First Things First Evaluation

### 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.<sup>a</sup>
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 150-350 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.
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SOURCE: IRRE documents.

NOTE: <sup>a</sup>Since the planning year, IRRE expanded the scope of the first critical feature to include increased instructional time.

This report describes the first year of implementation at the Group I sites; a later report will examine implementation and impacts for both groups of schools. This report draws on a combination of quantitative data from staff and student surveys and qualitative findings from classroom observations and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. The report centers on three key elements of First Things First that represent vehicles for putting the critical-features in place: small learning communities, the Family Advocate System, and efforts to improve the quality of classroom instruction.

## **Key Findings**

- By the end of the first year of operations, the reform’s basic structural elements were in place at most sites, although their implementation was far from complete.
- Teachers knew more about and felt better prepared to undertake the initiative after implementation began. Nevertheless, implementing a major reform of this kind proved difficult and stressful, and survey data point to an “implementation dip”: Teachers expressed less commitment to the reform during the implementation year than they had during the planning period.
- Teachers increased their use of cooperative learning strategies during the implementation year, but lessons remained centered on memorization of facts and other low-level cognitive activities.
- At this early stage, when structural changes must be put in place, the commitment and support of the principal and leadership team appear to be more essential to successful implementation than does a high degree of staff support for the intervention.
- Students reported feeling more supported by their teachers during the implementation year than they had a year earlier, but they also reported experiencing a lower degree of academic engagement — perhaps in part because teachers’ attention was diverted from instruction. This suggests that instructional improvement should be the focus of the next phase of the demonstration.

## **Small Learning Communities**

According to the initiative’s theory of change, theme-based small learning communities (SLCs) — groups of up to 350 students, along with their core-subject and other key teachers, who remain together for several years — are critical to breaking down the impersonality that students

often experience in large urban schools. SLCs provide settings in which mutually caring relationships between students and teachers, and among members of each group, develop; teachers can examine their instructional practices and can support each other's efforts to improve; and teachers can exercise greater decision-making authority. And the thematic nature of the SLCs unites teachers and students around shared interests and gives focus to the core curriculum.

Achieving SLC “purity” — scheduling classes so that teachers teach only students within their SLCs and students take all their core courses from SLC teachers — proved harder than expected, and major scheduling issues persisted in many schools through the first half of the implementation year. One key lesson learned is that scheduling needs to be addressed well before the start of the school year.

During their SLC meetings, teachers largely discussed individual students' conduct and academic issues, along with information handed down by administrators, field trips, award ceremonies, and the like. Instructional matters — the use of innovative instructional methods and the development of curricula reflective of the SLC's theme — received far less attention. Leadership had a great deal to do with how effectively the SLCs operated, and while some SLC coordinators had the requisite skills — the ability to delegate, openness to the ideas of others — there was consensus that SLC coordinators needed more training in being effective leaders.

Teachers' attitudes toward the SLCs were moderately positive, although not extremely so. When SLCs worked well, however, staff felt a new sense of belonging, and students, too, enjoyed the personalized atmosphere, although — because of the general lack of thematic instruction — being in an SLC did not make for a very different educational experience than in the past.

## **The Family Advocate System**

The Family Advocate System is a key strategy for achieving the initiative's goals of creating continuity of care between the home and the school and engaging families in the education of their children. Program guidelines call for staff members to be paired with 12 to 17 students in their SLCs, for whom they serve as advocates. During a regularly scheduled Family Advocate Period, advocates meet in a group with the students to whom they are assigned; the advocates are also responsible for conducting weekly “check-in” meetings with each student and for meeting with both the students and their parents or guardians at least twice a year.

Both students and staff generally responded favorably to the Family Advocate System. The majority of students said that they felt comfortable talking to their family advocate, and the system may serve an especially important function for a substantial group of students — 43 percent — who reported not having another adult in the school besides the family advocate whom

they could contact when needed. The large majority of teachers reported that the Family Advocate System was a mechanism for recognizing students' accomplishments, providing advice, and helping students to resolve problems with other adults and to do better on their schoolwork.

Implementing the system was not without its problems, however. At some schools, administrators — faced with so many changes to be made — gave lower priority to family advocacy. Teachers found it hard to make effective use of the Family Advocate Period. They also were frustrated by the difficulties involved in reaching out to students' parents and by what they sometimes perceived as lack of parental receptivity to their efforts.

## **Instructional Improvement**

The First Things First model calls for both structural and instructional changes in the classroom. One of the structural changes — block scheduling — was already in place in all but one school before the initiative was introduced. Schools lacked the personnel and other resources to implement simultaneously and for all students the other two structural changes: reduced student-adult ratios and increased instructional time in language arts and math classes. Instead, different schools made different choices about which strategy to pursue, and for which students.

IRRE was also concerned with improving the quality of instruction and, toward this end, provided the schools with technical assistance and training in the use of cooperative learning strategies to increase student participation in learning. Use of these strategies did, in fact, rise sharply between the planning year and the implementation year, although only a relatively small proportion of teachers used the strategies regularly. Students generally enjoyed the cooperative learning activities and felt that they benefited from them. During this first implementation year, however, efforts at interdisciplinary instruction and at instruction related to SLC themes were sporadic and infrequent. Moreover, even when lessons employed cooperative learning techniques, they were rarely intellectually challenging.

## **Early and Intermediate Outcomes of the Initiative**

Early outcomes of this research include survey measures of teachers' attitudes toward each of the seven critical features of First Things First and toward the initiative as a whole. The theory of change underlying the initiative holds that high levels of positive responses are essential if implementation is to be thorough and effective.

A similar pattern characterizes teachers' responses to all the survey measures. During the implementation year, teachers were far more likely than they had been during the planning year to say that they knew "a lot" about a particular critical feature (or all the critical features collectively). They were also more likely to say that they were "well prepared" to implement the

critical feature(s). At the same time, some of the optimism that had marked teachers' attitudes during the planning year appeared to have dissipated: During the implementation year, lower proportions of teachers reported feeling "positive" or "enthusiastic" about the critical features, and they also viewed their colleagues as being less supportive than during the planning year. These findings provide empirical support for the existence of an "implementation dip," which has been posited in the school reform literature, but without corroborating evidence.

Intermediate outcomes of the initiative include measures of support and engagement for both teachers and students. Between the planning year and the implementation year, there was no statistically significant difference in the extent to which teachers felt supported by administrators and the central office, nor were there differences in the proportions of teachers registering especially high or low levels of support. There was a significant decrease in teachers' scores registering behavioral and emotional engagement (the degree to which they enjoyed their work), but there was also an increase in their sense of collective engagement (the degree to which they perceived their colleagues as working hard).

Students, in contrast, registered higher levels of support from teachers during the implementation year than they had during the planning year, perhaps because the SLC structure left students feeling better known and more cared about than in the past. They also, however, registered lower levels of engagement in their schoolwork, perhaps because teachers' attention was diverted from instruction.

In summary, the first implementation year was marked by much effort and hard work, and also by the numerous disruptions that accompany the implementation of any major change. At the year's end, the basic structural elements of First Things First — the SLCs and the Family Advocate System — were in place at most schools. And with greater organizational stability, the schools were in a position to devote increased attention to instructional improvement. The final report will examine their success in achieving better educational outcomes for students.