

FIRST THINGS FIRST AND NINE COMPONENTS OF COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

1. Effective, research-based methods

- ♦ Seven critical features of FTF¹ are based on research from diverse literatures: adolescent development, urban educational reform, instructional change, literacy and organizational-change literatures.
- ♦ Design is also based on studies of secondary schools with demonstrated success working with students from economically disadvantaged communities.
- ♦ Evidence for successful implementation in secondary schools is drawn from FTF district-wide initiative in Kansas City, KS.

2. Comprehensive design with aligned components

- ♦ Seven critical features address three interrelated purposes: building better and more mutually accountable relationships among all education stakeholders at school-site (school staff, students, parents); improving the quality of teaching and learning for all students across curriculum areas; and creating policies and allocating resources at school and district levels to support these first two purposes.

3. Professional development

- ♦ District leadership, school staff and parent and community stakeholders all engage in FTF roundtables where framework's rationale, implementation and intended outcomes are discussed with developers and exemplary sites and where urgency for local reform highlighted through use of local student performance data.
- ♦ "Equip, empower and expect all adults to improve instruction" is one of the critical features of the FTF framework.
- ♦ FTF professional development focuses on all instructional staff building a repertoire of cross-curriculum instructional strategies that actively engage all students, and learning how to use and develop rigorous standards-based learning activities — first in the areas of literacy and math — that are aligned with high stakes assessments. All of these activities are supported by on-site training, peer coaching and identifying and supporting emerging instructional leaders to sustain the school's focus on instructional improvement, and collaborative, ongoing study of effects of instruction on student performance.

¹ Seven critical features of FTF are: for students, cut student/adult ratios by half during core instructional periods; provide continuity of care across school day and schools years, communicate and implement high clear, and fair academic and behavioral standards, and enrich and diversify opportunities to learn, perform and be recognized; for adults, assure collective responsibility for outcomes for all students; provide instructional autonomy and supports; and assure flexible allocation of resources (people, money, time, space) to meet student needs at the school site.

4. Measurable goals and benchmarks

- ◆ District- and school-level sites are supported to adopt state-level content standards and to set performance standards as high or higher than the state's.
- ◆ Public commitment of all stakeholders to explicit goals, timelines and benchmarks on student outcomes and improvement in educational practices – both grounded in baseline assessments -- is required by the “collective responsibility” critical feature of the model and is an essential element of the FTF district support for model implementation.

5. Support within the school

- ◆ Education roundtables for school-site leadership and selected stakeholders and then for all staff, parent and student representatives are used to build initial support for the FTF model;
- ◆ Full year of planning and capacity-building activities involves staff, parents and students in study and discussion of key decisions around FTF implementation plan and capacity-building in preparation for implementation of FTF framework;
- ◆ Small learning communities formed by March of planning year, which then begin developing plans for engagement of students, families and community.

6. Parental and community involvement

- ◆ Three types of parent involvement are supported under the FTF model:
 - ◆ Parents take part in planning, monitoring and contributing to FTF through membership in stakeholder groups, planning workgroups and participation in education roundtables.
 - ◆ As part of the continuity of care critical feature, a Family Advocate System engages all parents and families in relationship with an individual professional or qualified support staff member for the entire time their student attends the school. The focus of the Family Advocate System is the academic success of each student. Based in the small learning communities, family advocates work with groups of approximately 15 students and families providing a primary contact point with the school, weekly contact with the student, monthly contact with the family, at least twice annual face-to-face meetings with student and family, advocacy for student and family with other staff, and referrals, where needed, for specific services and supports. Family advocates communicate to parents about what is expected of and accomplished by student (e.g., SLCs provide information on student schedules, homework and upcoming tests and other performance assessments) and what all parents can do to support student academic success (e.g., district-wide Just Read literacy initiative);
 - ◆ Community engagement supported through: thematic small learning communities partnering with community educators to provide community-based learning experiences in their thematic areas; district-level communication of FTF initiative's goals and significance by anchor stakeholders; and regular reporting of progress on “collective responsibility” outcomes and practices to media and community groups.

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7. External technical support and assistance

- ◆ IRRE, the developer of the FTF model, has direct experience supporting the implementation of reform in over 55 elementary, middle and high schools in four states.
- ◆ IRRE staff and consultants provide ongoing technical support and assistance to all sites from site recruitment and engagement through post-implementation support.
- ◆ IRRE's technical assistance team includes experienced practitioners in urban and rural reform sites and support organizations.
- ◆ Technical assistance is provided in three major areas: formation and strengthening of small learning communities; improving instruction toward standards-based learning activities that engage all students; and effective use of resources to accomplish these goals (people, time, space, money).
- ◆ District- and school-level change management and research teams work directly with IRRE for at least three years, leaving a strong technical assistance and evaluation infrastructure behind once the model is implemented at the school- or district-level.

8. Evaluation strategies

- ◆ IRRE uses a theory of change approach to tracking implementation of FTF and its impacts on student behavior and performance. Measurement instruments and approaches, proven effective in two major research studies of FTF in five diverse sites, are available for use in new sites.
- ◆ IRRE can provide measures and analysis of the conditions leading to (and impeding) successful implementation of the FTF framework; the breadth and depth of implementation of the critical features of the model; and the effects of model implementation on intermediate and longer term outcomes for students and adults (teachers, parents and other education stakeholders).

9. Coordination of resources

- ◆ At the district level, resources dedicated to support school- and district-level implementation of the FTF framework come from two sources: reallocation of participating school districts' resources (e.g., central office personnel, professional development budgets, Title I and At-risk funds, instructional materials budgets) and government or foundation grants to support external technical assistance, local planning and capacity-building and research activities.
- ◆ Flexible allocation of the district resources (people, space, time and money) by building staff to meet student educational needs is one of the critical features of the FTF framework.