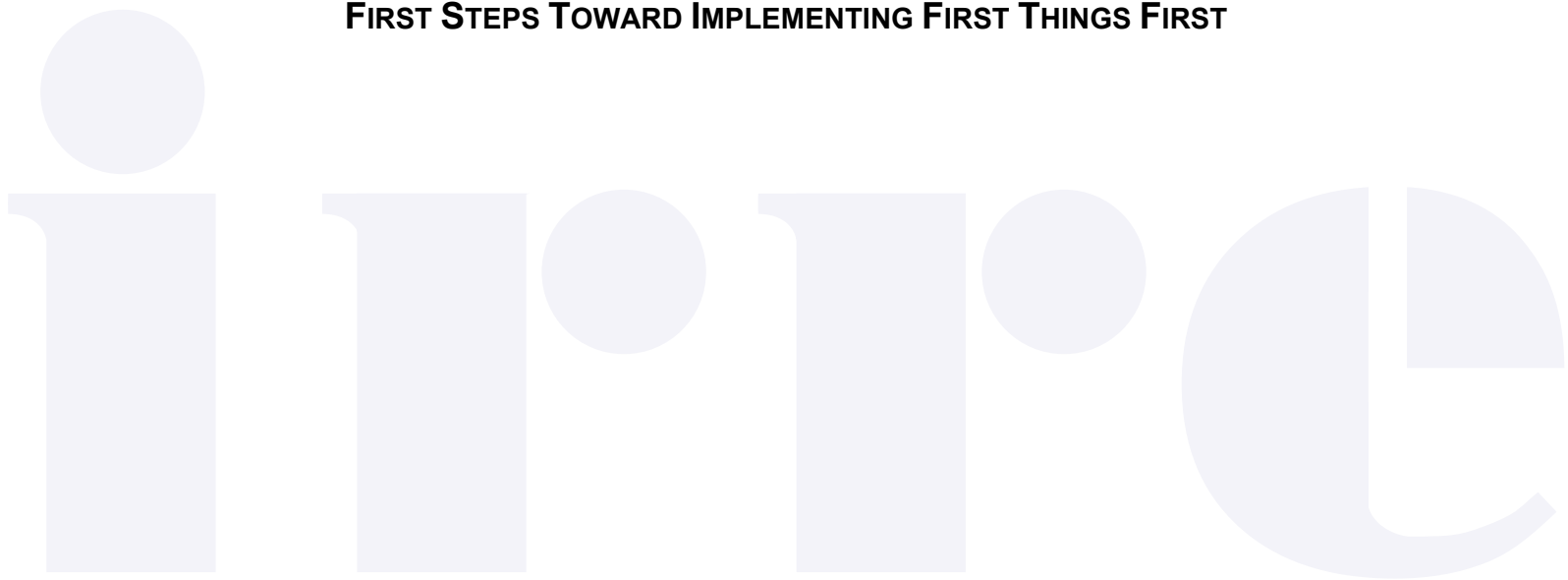


**GETTING OFF THE DIME:
FIRST STEPS TOWARD IMPLEMENTING FIRST THINGS FIRST**



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CHAPTER I: OVERVIEW

Between 1998 and 2002, 25 urban and rural secondary schools in four states implemented First Things First (FTF), a comprehensive school change framework. Their cumulative experience and the ways in which the reform evolved over five generations of sites hold useful lessons for everyone concerned with the complex but urgent business of reforming secondary schools.

In this report, the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), the developer of First Things First, focuses on three questions:

- How do districts and schools decide whether to go with FTF as their approach to reform?
- How have FTF's first steps changed over time?
- What leadership capacities are involved in getting reform started?

Two reports¹ by independent evaluators present qualitative and quantitative data that touch on these issues. We build on and extend these reports with our own observations into a set of suggestions for how districts and schools can start transforming their secondary schools. Table 1 presents the secondary schools involved in FTF and their demographic characteristics, and Table 2 presents the seven critical features that drive the FTF framework.

¹ "First Things First: Creating the Conditions and Capacity for Community-wide Reform in an Urban School District" (Gambone et al., 2002) and "Scaling Up First Things First: Site Selection and the Planning Year" (Quint, 2002).

CHAPTER II: THE DECISION TO GO WITH FIRST THINGS FIRST

Our partner districts learn about FTF in varied ways, primarily through referrals or conferences where district-level leaders hear about IRRE's work. Irrespective of who makes the initial contact, IRRE quickly seeks out superintendents and school leaders as key people in deciding whether FTF is right for their districts and schools. Our experience tells us that sign-off from these two groups of leaders — while not alone sufficient to ensure successful planning and implementation of FTF — is clearly necessary.

Over the past five years, IRRE's view of who else should sign off on this decision has changed, but in very minor ways. In Kansas City, Kansas, the location of our first three generations of sites (planning years: 1997, 1998, 1999), district leaders consulted with community representatives before adopting FTF as their district-wide reform. As FTF expanded to other communities in 2000 and 2001 with support from the U.S. Department of Education, we continued to require school boards, superintendents, union leaders and principals of participating schools to sign a letter of commitment to implement the critical features of the FTF framework.

Unlike some other reforms, however, we do not require formal sign-off from other important stakeholders, including faculty leaders, parent groups, student leaders and community leaders.² Experience has shown us that buy-in does not occur for the vast majority of these stakeholders until the reform is implemented and shows early signs of success that are meaningful to them. We look to district and school leaders to represent their interests, and we make sure these stakeholders are fully informed before the decision to go or not to go with FTF is made. Most

² In our current work, we have dropped the requirement that leaders of teachers unions must sign off on moving ahead with FTF. Our experience thus far is limited to "right-to-work" states where less than half of staff are members of the teachers union or association. We will re-examine this stance as we move into other communities.

recently, we have developed a series of orientation sessions that provide information about the framework and the research behind it. We discuss how each constituency will help shape its implementation, and we respond to overarching concerns or issues that these groups raise. We work with district and building leaders to keep these stakeholders informed and to engage them in dialogue around the FTF framework throughout the “courtship” period.

What helps district and building leaders make informed decisions?

The choice of a reform framework involves a serious and long-term commitment. As described in the earlier reports (Gambone et al., 2002; Quint, 2002), district and building leaders develop the awareness and knowledge to make such a commitment in three ways:

- Descriptive materials (including written, PowerPoint, video and Web-based information);
- Phone conferences, e-mail exchanges and face-to-face contact with IRRE staff when we visit prospective districts and schools; and
- Roundtables, which allow leaders from prospective sites to visit current FTF sites and to place their own districts and schools in national context.

Leaders who eventually sign on with FTF report three critical messages from these contacts that influence their decision:

- A heightened sense of **urgency** as they see national data, presented at the roundtable, that illuminate consequences for their students of sticking with the status quo;
- The sense that it is **possible** to implement FTF and make progress on important outcomes in a district or school like theirs; and
- The **confidence** that IRRE has what one superintendent called “the chops” to help them pull it off.

Personal chemistry also plays a crucial role in their decisions. IRRE staff and building and district leaders interact over short periods of time, typically three or

four months from initial contact to decision point. Face-to-face contact usually totals three to four hours, though phone and e-mail contact may be frequent. Through these interactions, leaders tell us, they are sizing up whether they and their staff can work with IRRE's team: Do we listen well? Will we be credible? Are we diverse enough in background and experience?

Leaders also report that coming to terms with FTF's requirements — the outcome goals, critical features and implementation strategies to which they commit — plays a big role in their decision. They grapple as well with the planning process, which is based on IRRE's years of experience, but which does not always make intuitive sense to potential partners.

On the one hand, district and building leaders hear IRRE saying that the FTF requirements and the planning process will give them the clarity, efficiency and accountability they need for their emerging reform efforts. On the other hand, they worry that the approach is overly prescriptive and "outside in," which could appear disrespectful of local knowledge and values. Some also worry that parts of FTF might run counter to incremental reforms already under way or might appear to be trumping ongoing planning activities. All of these are valid concerns; by surfacing them early, IRRE and system leaders not only gain the trust they need among themselves, but also prepare to respond when other constituencies raise them.

CHAPTER III: WHAT IS AND ISN'T NEGOTIABLE AND WHY

While schools and districts tailor First Things First to their particular needs and circumstances, they also commit to a set of requirements that IRRE has found essential to success. These requirements, which have evolved over time, include:

- A set of student and school outcomes;
- Commitment to FTF's critical features, which IRRE believes lead to these outcomes; and
- Implementation strategies — changes to school and district structures and processes for improving teaching and learning that get these critical features in place.

The student outcomes to which FTF partners commit are graduation and academic performance at levels required for students to succeed in post-secondary education and high-quality employment. School outcomes include:

- More long-standing, respectful and mutually accountable relationships among students and adults at school and between school and home;
- All students actively engaged in high-quality and rigorous standards-based learning activities in every classroom every day; and
- All resources (people, time, facilities and money) being focused on the above two things.

Through its experiences putting FTF in place, IRRE added three strategies to its requirements: small learning communities (SLCs), the Family Advocate System and an instructional improvement process. For each, accompanying standards now define what constitutes sufficient implementation quality, as shown in Table 3.

Initially, we left the choice of implementation strategies to our partners. Over time, however, we found that requiring a commitment to the three fundamental

strategies resulted in greater clarity for our partners about what their commitment to FTF actually entailed. They could then move more quickly to the decisions that would change not just structures, but teaching and learning in their classrooms. We discuss this evolution in greater detail during the remainder of this chapter.

What comes first in FTF?

In our work with secondary schools, IRRE leads with structural change: breaking up large schools into small learning communities. Why?

Existing structures in large secondary schools do not encourage people to get to know each other. In the communities that have signed on to FTF, differences in race, class, culture and place of residence often divide the students and families served by the schools from the professionals who work in them. Both experience and research tell us that groups with these profound differences tend to isolate themselves and act from negative stereotypes unless they have opportunities to interact around shared concerns and successes frequently, over extended periods over time.

Many reform efforts are now developing small learning communities to address the problems endemic to large schools. These SLCs become the vehicles for students and adults to build relationships that fuel instead of impede high-quality teaching and learning. The goal is that, working together over years in their SLCs, students, families and staff will form more personal, long-standing and mutually accountable relationships around their core work.

Efforts to form SLCs, however, have had uneven results. Implementation issues have pummeled what seems like a good idea. Our own work in First Things First confirms the issues that other efforts have experienced: If it takes too long to get SLCs off the dime, and if the structural changes are only partially or ineffectively implemented, the reform stalls. The resulting delay in instructional improvement

activities then makes it difficult or impossible to achieve improved student outcomes.

We have found that greater clarity up front about what it will take to implement FTF has allowed our district and school partners to avoid some of the implementation problems. They have been able to head off protracted, often unproductive debates about structural mechanics and to introduce instructional improvement activities for staff earlier — by second semester of the FTF planning year. Once we required some basic features of SLCs, our partners could move on to the business of what would actually happen in their classrooms.

Flexibility: How much is too much of a good thing?

Even in the earliest days of First Things First, IRRE strongly recommended small learning communities for high schools with certain characteristics: mixed-grade; organized around themes; implemented “wall-to-wall,” all at once throughout the school; and retaining students all the years they were in the school. These recommendations arose from our study of other reform models and our belief that these implementation standards supported FTF’s critical features more strongly than did alternatives.

However, the actual decision about whether to use SLCs or other strategies to implement FTF’s critical features remained in the hands of the schools.

Decisions about how the school would be structured, staffing and schedules resided somewhere between the school staff and building leadership.

Kansas City, Kansas, became the first community to face these decisions, when district leaders committed to putting First Things First in all 43 of their schools. After a year of planning at the district level, a cluster of KCK schools — one high school and its feeder schools — began implementation each year for the first two

years and two clusters began implementation in the third year.³ These were the first three generations of FTF sites.

As reported by Gambone et al. (2002), the first generation of sites had great flexibility in how they implemented the seven critical features. Learning from that first year, district leaders moved toward greater definition by providing the second and third generations of schools with several “district parameters” for implementation. For example, these district parameters dictated that all schools needed to achieve continuity of care through looping (groups of teachers staying with groups of students for multiple years), not simply assigning the same advisers to students for multiple years, and that lower student-adult ratios during core instruction meant 15:1 in language arts and math for at least five hours per week.

Principals and executive directors (their direct supervisors) and the Director of School Improvement (the “point person” for the overall FTF reform in the district) acted as monitors and advisers to this process, prodding schools to make decisions in a timely fashion. However, neither these district leaders nor IRRE actually controlled the outcomes or the timing of those decisions. The planning year activities designed to support the decision-making process in the first- and second-generation sites are described in Gambone et al. (2002) and summarized in Table 5, and the planning year activities for the third generation in Table 6.

By the third year of implementation, early outcomes were emerging from Wyandotte High School, the only high school in the first generation of sites. Having created small learning communities with many of the characteristics recommended by IRRE, Wyandotte was now showing higher levels of

³ In Kansas City, Kansas, district leaders committed all of the district’s 43 schools in writing to implementing FTF’s critical features: first, in their proposal to the Kauffman Foundation for funds to support the planning process for the first cluster of schools; then quickly in federal and state grant proposals; and, perhaps most important, in their district strategic plan that was submitted as part of their successful appeal to be released from a 20-year desegregation order.

persistence by ninth graders, lower rates of suspensions and higher attendance rates.

These positive results helped convince district leaders and IRRE that small learning communities should become a required strategy for the third generation. However, the district leadership did not choose, and IRRE was not yet confident enough with only one high school's results, to recommend that Wyandotte's four-year, thematic communities become standards for future implementation.

The fourth generation of FTF sites (see Table 1) was not in Kansas City, Kansas, and encompassed only middle and high schools. The high schools ranged from a small rural high school, grades 8-12, in Mississippi to a large, highly diverse comprehensive high school in Houston, Texas. The planning year activities and process for this generation of sites is described in MDRC (2002) and in Table 7. For this generation, IRRE not only required schools to establish SLCs, but restricted choices about what they would look like in several ways.

In a sense, this period represented a transition toward the required implementation standards. Thematic communities were still optional. If selected, however, they would be implemented throughout the school so that all students and teachers could choose a community based on their interest in the themes. By the fifth generation, IRRE required thematic communities.

In the fourth generation, IRRE also provided high schools with only two options around the grade levels to be included in the SLCs: either two-year communities (9th–10th and 11th–12th) or four-year communities. Middle schools had two options as well: mixed-grade communities with 6th–8th grade students (7th–8th in schools with just two grade levels) or same-grade communities with just one grade level, in which teachers moved with the students to the next grade through the students' entire time in the school.

District leaders had the authority to take any of these options off the table before schools became involved in the decision-making process. Some district leaders did, and some didn't. Those leaders who eliminated one or more of the options always moved in the direction of IRRE's recommendations, requiring:

- Four-year communities in the high schools, providing more continuity of care and collective responsibility for students' achievements;
- Thematic communities, offering more choice to students, their families and teachers; and
- Mixed-grade communities for students in middle school.

Emerging lessons from Kansas City, Kansas, buttressed these recommendations. While Wyandotte High School's early outcomes continued to improve, high schools with two-year communities were still struggling to implement the critical features. Older students needing to recover credits were forced to switch small learning communities to do so; and collective responsibility for important outcomes such as graduation and 11th-grade high stakes testing was difficult to ensure with students moving into the upper-level communities with entirely new sets of teachers after two years.

Once building or district leaders in the expansion sites could decide which options to present, they opened the choices to larger debate only after intensive discussion among themselves and with IRRE staff around three issues:

- How much value is there in school staff debating and then deciding the basic structure of the school? Do these discussions raise the level of inquiry and promote buy-in to the ultimate decision by more staff?
- In light of the arguments and knowledge base behind IRRE's recommendations, are the alternatives really defensible?
- Can the resources — time, energy, money — required to support discussions of alternative approaches for forming SLCs be better used to support the work of staff within their SLCs once they are created?

A description of what each site left on and took off the table is available in MDRC (2002) as part of its report on the fourth generation of planning year activities. Finally, the fifth generation of FTF sites (see Table 1) was all in Houston, Texas. Two large high schools and three large middle schools completed their planning year and began implementation in 2002. For these sites, IRRE created more explicit implementation standards for the small learning communities. All fifth-generation schools began their planning year knowing, and with their building and district leaders signing onto, these implementation standards.⁴ The planning year activities for the fifth generation are summarized in Table 8.

The same considerations that led us to strengthen the required strategies and standards for small learning communities came into play as we focused on instructional improvement and as we developed the Family Advocate System to extend the critical feature “continuity of care” between home and school. While a separate report on each of these areas is forthcoming, Table 4 presents the time frame in which specific implementation strategies and standards around both became part of the FTF framework. Table 3 presents the current version of the standards. Tables 7 and 8 include the planning year activities that supported instructional improvement and the Family Advocate System in fourth and fifth generation.

What difference did increased clarity make?

We have learned that there is such a thing as being too flexible. Our credibility and our partnerships’ productivity both increased markedly when we became clearer about what schools and districts could expect their transformed schools to look like. Increasingly, school and district partners want to know up front whether the changes they are about to make have a good chance of working (in this case, will these SLCs make a difference in what students and adults can do

⁴ IRRE has worked with early generations of FTF schools and districts to implement strategies and meet standards that were negotiable during their planning year, but have now been integrated into the FTF framework.

and accomplish?). They want to know that the changes are feasible with available resources, and they want to know when the restructuring is going to be in place. As an outside technical assistance provider, we couldn't provide confident answers to these three questions when basic characteristics of the new structures were up for grabs.

Greater clarity about processes, policies and practices helped in three areas:

- We were able to build trusting and productive relationships with our partners more quickly.
- Clearer implementation standards focused planning, which in turn permitted earlier conversations around more engaging and important issues and more timely and effective professional development activities during the planning year.
- Getting clear earlier appears to have had positive effects on initial implementation.

Trusting and productive relationships

IRRE's role in First Things First has always been that of missionary and mechanic. Our partners recognize this duality and, we believe, value both roles. However, the timing and interplay of the two roles is critical. We have learned from five generations of sites that the quicker IRRE can shift the balance from our missionary work, advocating for what schools and districts should be doing, to helping our partners put in place something they believe will be good for students and teachers, the better the partnership works.

In the second, third and fourth generations of FTF sites, IRRE spent the first half of the planning year advocating for particular strategies and standards: "Stay with your students all four years! Form thematic communities!" School sites were debating these strategies and alternatives. As missionaries, we seemed to be engaged in doublespeak: advocating for local decision-making while lobbying for certain approaches. As mechanics, we were saying we can help you design

and implement all of these strategies, but we're really confident only that we can help you do a particular set.

We have found that FTF can still respond to local interests, remaining flexible enough to meld some locally generated reform strategies with the new structures. For example, building leaders have asked, “Within FTF’s implementation standards for high school SLCs — four-year, mixed-grade, thematic communities — can we customize educational experiences for incoming freshmen or exiting seniors?” We have responded by working with them to create staffing plans and schedules that allow for these enrichments without creating separate “stand-alone” structures, such as freshmen SLCs or senior SLCs.⁵ In our view, stand-alone structures — SLCs with less than all grade levels in the building included — weaken the implementation of two critical features of the FTF framework (continuity of care and collective responsibility). They also do not maximize use of available resources, since running separate and isolated structures is not efficient.⁶

Focused planning

The timing and nature of conversations during the planning year have changed significantly as we have become clearer about what is going to be implemented. In the fall of the planning year, staff can now study what is going to happen rather than debate the pros and cons of what might happen. In winter, staff review and choose specific options for how their school is going to implement SLCs (what themes? transitional communities?) rather than debate whether to have SLCs and how long students and staff will stay in them. In the spring, staff come together in their SLCs to develop the SLCs’ identities, recruit students and practice and discuss new instructional strategies rather than anxiously await

⁵ As of yet, only some sites in the earlier generations have taken advantage of these opportunities.

⁶ One of our fifth-generation sites will include a “senior community” for one year to ensure completion of specific program requirements by this graduating class. In the second year of implementation, seniors will remain in their thematic small learning communities.

news about which SLC they're going to be in. Later in the spring, students become part of these activities. During the summer, SLC colleagues receive structured training and supports around new responsibilities, such as becoming family advocates and using common planning time effectively. They are no longer meeting for the first time as a group at the 11th hour before implementation.

Improved initial implementation

Subsequent reports by MDRC on the third-, fourth- and fifth-generation sites and Gambone & Associates on the first two generations of FTF sites will provide more complete evidence on how increased clarity affected implementation. What follows is our initial take on the impact of strengthening the requirements at the outset of the planning year.

Even though the first three generations of FTF schools had significantly more time and more flexibility than the fourth and fifth generations in planning,⁷ initial implementation of the critical features at the high school and middle school levels was highly uneven in those early years, and two of the four high schools initially implemented small learning communities only in ninth and 10th grades. In the fourth- and fifth-generation sites, initial implementation of small learning communities became more ambitious and more consistent. Schools set higher standards, and more schools and SLCs then met them.

Only 20/20 hindsight tells us that clearer expectations and more focused support around those expectations would have improved initial implementation in the

⁷ As reported in Gambone et al. (2002) and Quint (2002), the first three generations had a full year of district planning and, for the second and third generations, one or two additional years before they began their formal planning years at the school level. The fourth and fifth generations had, at most, three months of district planning before their single planning year for a total of 15 months between district commitment to FTF and initial implementation.

earlier FTF sites.⁸ However, educators working with other reform efforts around the country report similar experiences. To our Kansas City, Kansas, colleagues' great credit, uneven and partial implementation did not sit well with them. Their three high schools (other than Wyandotte High School) and most of the middle schools have revised their initial SLC structures. These changes have all been in the direction of the current FTF implementation standards.

⁸ We recognize that selection and timing factors also might differentiate districts and schools in the fourth and fifth generations and that the increased experience, stature and track record of FTF and IRRE made later sites more willing to commit to higher standards up front.

CHAPTER IV: LEADERSHIP DURING THE PLANNING YEAR

District staff and school leaders (administrators and teacher leaders) in our partner communities tell us that getting off the dime toward meaningful reform required three things: urgency on their part to make these changes and make them quickly; clarity on their and our parts about what the planning year would produce, by when and by whom; and leadership — from them and us — in sustaining urgency and clarity through the planning year and into initial implementation. In this chapter of the report, we lay out our concept of “system leadership,” defined as the collective capacity schools and districts need in order to get meaningful reform planned and implemented. We will describe how leadership positions⁹ inside and outside the system map onto the capacities needed in order to determine who does what. Within each area of system leadership, we also provide examples of effective practices we have observed in FTF sites.

How is our definition of leadership changing?

Even with the introduction of a major reform effort, some things stay the same for building and district leaders. They still need good management and supervisory practices to keep schools and districts functioning effectively while reforms are taking place. Leadership responsibilities still include encouraging and maintaining healthy relationships with all stakeholders and keeping the ship afloat. But on top of these practices, what does it take to get districts and schools moving toward implementation of FTF’s critical features?

The leaders who have signed onto FTF to date have taught us a great deal about effective reform leaders. They have been district and building administrators who knew and acknowledged that their districts and schools were struggling. They

⁹ For the most part, these leadership positions should be quite familiar — board member, superintendent, principal, etc. However, some of these positions — school improvement facilitator, small learning community coordinator — emerge when a district and school commit to FTF.

have seen their students, staff and themselves underperforming; they have come into this reform with hope, often barely holding its own against histories of repeated false starts. At the outset, they have not had solid and informed consensus among their teaching staff or even their fellow district or building administrators that FTF was what needed to be done, much less that it would get done. When they took their jobs, no one envisioned this kind of reform. They also have not had the option of replacing the vast majority of the teaching staff, nor did the system have the option of replacing the vast majority of them.

Why are these stark facts important? They force us to think differently about leadership development than we would if, for example, we were starting new schools: charters or small schools within public school districts. For example, new schools select, rather than inherit, administrators, teachers and, at times, students and families. Self-selection alone ensures less diversity and higher initial levels of will (and probably skill) for planning and implementing reform. Developing the leadership capacities to carry out a framework such as FTF in a new or charter school would be easier than in existing and future FTF sites, where the leadership conditions just discussed hold true. We could, for example, look to dozens of examples of successful small schools, watch what their administrative and teacher leaders did and see what attributes made them successful. Then we could try to replicate these practices and attributes as we hired and supported the principals and teacher leaders coming on board in the new schools.

Working with the realities in five generations of FTF sites has required us to rethink the way we develop leadership capacity in our district and school partners. Rather than invest all our resources and relationship-building only in existing leaders, all of whom will leave at some point for all the normal reasons, we work with our partners to invest in a system of constantly emerging leaders. Leaders we have worked with over the past five years recognize the inherent sense in this approach. At this point, we have:

- Shifted from individuals to the system as the unit of analysis and capacity-building for leadership;
- Moved away from trying to replicate the rare brilliant leader as a way to transform typical leaders; and
- Started with a fairly specific blueprint for what schools need to become — and then build the system’s leadership capacity to get them there.

What does system leadership look like?

Applied to First Things First, system leadership is the system-wide capacity to plan, implement and strengthen FTF’s critical features. In our still evolving definition of system leadership, we have parsed this capacity in five areas:

- Set and articulate clear expectations;
- Personify commitment;
- Provide timely and effective supports;
- Monitor and report progress; and
- Recognize accomplishments and intervene to ensure progress.

In Table 9, we look at how existing and emerging leaders’ work maps onto these five areas. Checks in the grid indicate that a position or entity holds primary and central responsibility for an area of leadership. Diamonds indicate that the position or entity provides back-up and support in an area. In the following section, we also describe each area and provide examples of practices in each that we believe contributed to more successful planning and initial implementation of FTF.

Set and articulate clear expectations

The leaders directly accountable for system and building outcomes (see checks in Table 9) need to establish clear expectations by embracing and consistently communicating what these expectations are, why the system has committed to them, and what supports are and will be available to achieve these expectations.

In Kansas City, Kansas, for instance, the leadership's ability to relay its expectations clearly, consistently and specifically undoubtedly kept the reform on track. The district faced a transition in FTF's early years with the election of new board members and a change in superintendent. Fortunately, the existing board and interim superintendent understood the value of preparing the ground to keep FTF moving forward. The interim superintendent briefed candidates for the upcoming board elections about First Things First, explaining what the seven critical features of FTF are, why all schools would be implementing them and what future board members could do to help the district's students go to schools implementing these critical features.

Once elected, the new board had to select a new superintendent quickly. As discussed in an earlier report (Gambone et al., 2002), the board asked all superintendent candidates how they could strengthen and sustain the reform that was under way. At this point, only half the schools in the district were implementing FTF. In IRRE's view and that of the board, a new superintendent who signaled that she intended to "take stock" before moving ahead with the reform or to put her own stamp on the reform would have galvanized passive resistance in the schools and frozen individuals and schools who were tentative supporters in their tracks. The important groundwork of the board and the interim superintendent kept everyone clear about the district's commitment to FTF and what that commitment meant for all players.

As we have discussed in this paper, the implications of the district's commitment for specific implementation strategies and standards were not entirely clear in the early sites. This led to several leadership crises. For example, when IRRE's lead consultant and a central office administrator informed one middle school's planning group that their proposed student advisory system was not a powerful enough strategy for ensuring continuity of care, tremendous resentment and charges of "changing the rules" resulted. The principal — who also claimed to be blindsided by a raised bar of expectations — was forced to choose between

aligning with his faculty leaders or his supervisor. Gambone et al. (2002) document the effects of these shifting expectations on early FTF outcomes.

In subsequent generations of FTF sites outside of Kansas City, Kansas, board presidents and superintendents have made written commitments to more specific implementation strategies and standards for getting FTF's critical features in place.¹⁰ With this clarity from the board and superintendent, other district and building leaders can then transmit these expectations to the participating schools. They also have the political cover of district commitment as they assume line responsibilities, along with their staff, for converting these expectations into new practices.

Personify commitment

Leaders at all levels of the system must convey in their professional behavior, public and private, the urgency of meeting stated expectations and the commitment to do so. Disconnects between stated expectations and leaders' everyday behavior create system-wide lethargy and cynicism, conditions that can quickly erode the reform.

In the planning year of FTF, district and building leaders, emerging reform leaders and the IRRE team have formal opportunities to walk the walk of the reform for staff. These formal opportunities include:

- Initial planning group meetings in the summer or early fall;
- Roundtables later in the fall, at which all staff hear from national experts and practitioners;
- Study group sessions following the roundtables;
- Initial meetings of the SLCs in the spring; and

¹⁰ IRRE has also developed a set of implementation assessments linked directly to the critical features, implementation strategies and standards. We and all of our sites are using these assessments to identify gaps in implementation and to develop action plans for addressing gaps at the district, building and SLC levels.

- Summer training and capacity-building activities immediately prior to implementation.¹¹

These events can showcase the commitment of district leaders, principals and assistant principals; school improvement facilitators (SIFs), who are full-time district staff responsible for coordinating, supporting and monitoring the planning year activities; teachers who facilitate the planning groups; small learning community coordinators; and other teaching staff. Our observations during five generations of FTF sites reveal wide variation in the extent to which leaders seize these opportunities.

For example, IRRE strongly encourages board members to attend and kick off the full-staff roundtable along with the superintendent. In cases where this happened, the events took on added significance. The levels of preparation among these district leaders, their willingness to articulate specific commitments and their effectiveness in conveying urgency and possibility affected the quality of work in the subsequent activities at these events and beyond.

Equally important have been the roles played by principals and their supervisors. IRRE recommends to our partners that every building leader not only show up but stay throughout the event and that each one say a few words about why this reform is needed, why folks are at this event, what expectations are, and what supports leaders will provide.

IRRE also uses these structured activities, particularly the full-staff roundtable, to show our commitment to providing information and inspiration throughout the reform process. IRRE staff, along with students and adults from other FTF sites, share their successes and their challenges in putting FTF in place. We take

¹¹ These planning year activities are described in detail in the two earlier reports by MDRC (2002) and Gambone et al. (2002).

responsibility for modeling both openness to dialogue and a commitment to move ahead with the reform.

As the planning year progresses, structured activities become opportunities for teacher leaders and the school improvement facilitators to demonstrate their skills and continuing commitment. Again, we have observed wide variation in these leaders' will and ability to seize these opportunities. When they do, we see a payoff. For example, planning group facilitators, faculty members who have emerged as potential leaders in the reform process, are the first to have these opportunities. Their job is to personify commitment to the need to change, not to the reform's specifics, which they cannot yet know; to understand what FTF's requirements are and why; and to engage staff as participants in making decisions about implementation. They need to facilitate constructive conversation among their colleagues and to assist them in gaining knowledge about the reform and making informed decisions for their school.

In the planning year, school improvement facilitators and, later in the year, small learning community coordinators, play this role and expand it. They field staff concerns through genuine dialogue without relinquishing their advocacy for the reform's goals, critical features and strategies.

Opportunities to lead also present themselves in less formal but critically important venues. Consider these situations:

- What does a planning group facilitator say in a private conversation with an ambivalent, or even resistant, colleague who wants to know what the facilitator really thinks about FTF?
- What does a principal do when time set aside at a faculty meeting for FTF is getting taken up by “administrivia”?
- Does the executive director of a cluster of schools continue to use “chalk and talk” methods to lead discussions at the first meeting of principals following district-wide training in cooperative learning structures?

- How does a senior staff member in human resources handle a request for previously assured flexibility in trading in an administrative position for a teaching position?

Each of these interactions is an opportunity for these leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the reform:

- The study group facilitator can assure the staff member who wanted the straight story that he believes reform is needed and that this reform isn't going away any time soon.
- The principal's commitment to the full staff becomes clear when she dispenses with her checklist of administrative announcements so that planning group leaders can give updates on FTF.
- The executive director uses a simple cooperative learning structure in leading the principals' meeting and signals that practicing what was learned at yesterday's training applies to her as well.
- The personnel manager — often referred to as “Dr. No!” — sends a message to every principal throughout the system by getting back to the principal the next day with some strategies for trading an administrative position for a teaching position rather than listing all the barriers to that possibility.

When leaders depart from business as usual, the news spreads and so do the interest and engagement in the reform.

Provide timely and effective supports

The system's leaders need to provide three types of supports: financial and political, technical and logistical, and ongoing:

- Financial and political supports include reallocation of people, time, facilities and materials — all of which can cost money — toward the effective planning and initial implementation of FTF. This means moving these resources away from other things the district or school is doing. Those in the position to make

these calls will need the political support of other leaders in the system to do so.

- Technical supports refer to formal and specialized training of staff around elements of the FTF framework and acquiring and creating materials to support this training. Logistical supports ensure that these important activities in support of the reform happen and are not hampered by scheduling conflicts, transportation snafus and shortages of facilities or support staff.
- Ongoing supports refer to on-the-ground, day-to-day coaching and dialogue around key elements of the reform: creating SLCs and the Family Advocate System and working with all staff to take on instructional improvement.

Financial and political supports

As reported in Gambone et al. (2002), the associate superintendent in Kansas City, Kansas, with the support of the superintendent and board, reassigned approximately 20 positions in the central office's curriculum department to the new position of "school improvement facilitators," or SIFs, in the district planning year, before the first generation of FTF sites began. In the words of the associate superintendent, the job of the SIFs was to work directly with the schools and "to wake up every day ready to do whatever it takes to get the critical features of FTF implemented in their schools." The leadership's early and large reallocation of internal resources put the system's money where its mouth was by providing a critical set of supports to the planning and implementation of the reform. It also put considerable pressure on school administrators to think about how they could similarly reallocate resources — staff, time, money and space — at the building level to support the reform effort.

Another example from a later FTF site shows the often vital marriage between financial and political support. A high school principal seeking to focus staff resources on the teaching of language arts and math — a critical feature of the FTF framework — needed to dismantle several vocationally focused programs in the school that were prized creations of a longtime board member. Without the

support of the area superintendent who was his direct supervisor, and ultimately the superintendent, the principal could not have made these changes, and this critical feature of the reform would have been less deeply implemented.

Technical and logistical supports

Throughout five generations of FTF sites, IRRE and its partners have become more effective and efficient in structuring and supporting planning year activities. As described earlier in the report, clearer expectations for implementation meant we could do a smaller number of things much better. We've also learned a lot about what critical technical supports are not available in districts. Part of the system leadership is identifying these gaps and moving quickly to bring in supports from the outside to close them.¹²

A case in point is scheduling. Scheduling secondary schools, and especially high schools, has become a highly routinized and specialized practice. Typically, one or two individuals in each building carry out and control scheduling with cooperation from district technology and information systems staff. The scheduling process has also become deeply dependent on software packages provided by a small number of vendors. Each package has its own quirks, but all create schedules driven by bells, transportation schedules and lunch periods more easily than they do anything else. In contrast, FTF's approach to small learning communities requires that:

- Each community have opportunities to create a unique schedule;
- Students stay in their community for the bulk of the day;
- All teachers in the SLC teach their own SLC's students as much as possible;
- Teachers in a given SLC have their planning time scheduled to occur simultaneously; and

¹² A subsequent report will focus on IRRE's role in supporting both the planning year and early implementation years of the reform. It will describe the training and capacity-building activities in FTF sites, along with the supports provided around the structural reorganization of the schools, including scheduling, staffing and decision-making around themes.

- Students not be tracked within their SLC.

This area of system leadership — providing technical supports around scheduling — resides primarily with IRRE during the planning year. IRRE's three consultants who work on scheduling have collectively scheduled over 100 comprehensive high schools and middle schools and have worked with IRRE to develop scheduling approaches that achieve the FTF critical features. They work with each district's technology and information systems staff to flex (or fool) the existing software into accepting the distinctive schedules required to ensure effective implementation of the critical features within FTF's small learning communities.

IRRE not only has the technical expertise, but will make sure scheduling issues don't preclude meeting the implementation standards agreed to by the schools and district. Our goal is to transfer this leadership capacity to the systems themselves as soon as possible. Some systems take up this role more quickly than others. But we have yet to find, even in the largest system we work with, individuals or teams with the essential technical skills and flexibility in applying such skills from the outset.

Unlike the technical aspects, logistical supports for this work reside with the district office and building administration. The IRRE schedulers must have timely and regular access to the district and building staff involved in scheduling students and teachers, in order to learn the system well enough to flex (or fool) it. Again, district and building leaders need to make this access a clear expectation.

Ongoing supports

During the planning year, ongoing supports focus on giving individual teachers timely, responsive and credible information about what FTF is and isn't, what the planning process involves, and what their role is in the planning process. Later in

the planning year, ongoing supports focus on forming SLCs and building their capacity to begin their work together in the coming fall.

As can be seen in Table 9, the positions most centrally responsible for these ongoing supports are school improvement facilitators, planning group facilitators and SLC coordinators. IRRE site coordinators and other national staff support the SIFs in building their content knowledge about FTF and their skills in delivering this content — with particular emphasis on working with resistant and reluctant colleagues. Planning group facilitators receive some of this training as well; but their primary focus, again supported by IRRE, is on planning and facilitating two structured activities: the fall roundtable and the study group sessions in the late fall and early winter of the planning year. After small learning communities choose their coordinators in the spring, the SLC coordinators receive intensive training and support from SIFs and IRRE to ensure they get off on the right foot in leading discussions among new SLC colleagues as they prepare for the following year's implementation.

All of the ongoing supports required during FTF planning have become clearer and, in some ways, less difficult, as implementation standards have become definite and more ambitious. SIFs and, to a lesser extent, planning group facilitators, can focus on helping colleagues:

- Learn about FTF's approach to small learning communities, the Family Advocate System and instructional improvement;
- Discuss a few key decisions about implementation in their schools; and
- Move on quickly, with support of SLC coordinators, to discussions about what their small learning communities are going to look like in the coming fall.

Over the planning year, leadership for First Things First thus becomes less centralized and less focused on a few traditional leaders alone. This dispersion of leadership capacity is critical to successful implementation at the school and

district levels. It is also the process by which new leaders emerge, making the whole system less dependent for the long haul on any individual.

Monitor and report progress

Leadership for First Things First also means ensuring the system's capacity to provide the data to monitor progress and using that data to make adjustments. During the planning year, IRRE works with district and school leaders to develop three sets of indicators to track and monitor progress:

Planning year milestones: What is to be accomplished by when?

IRRE convenes SIFs, principals and the point person for the reform to go over the activities for the coming year, along with time frames, needed resources and decision points. The focus of these conversations is to make sure that building and district staff in leadership positions understand the what, why and when of the planning year process and can work with IRRE to figure out how to make these activities happen. Planning group facilitators are then brought into the discussion before the fall roundtable, when the entire staff learns about the activities, timelines and resource requirements. Thus, leaders at all levels of the system and within IRRE have a very clear picture of what needs to happen by the time the planning groups meet for the first time. At the school and district levels, the timelines and persons responsible for achieving those timelines are clear.

Student performance thresholds, targets and timelines: What are the district's five-year targets for key student performance outcomes?

To make decisions about key goals for student performance, district leaders in consultation with other stakeholders:

- Set thresholds for individual student performance — how good is good enough? — on several key indicators, linked by national research to important long-term outcomes for students. At minimum, these will include attendance, days lost due to suspension, students returning to school from year to year

(persistence), graduation rates and performance on high stakes assessments of literacy/language arts and math;

- Establish baseline levels of the percentages of students currently achieving these thresholds and set targets for the percentages of students who will achieve these thresholds;
- Create timelines for when the district will achieve these long-range targets, typically five years following implementation of the reform; and
- Create the mechanism for providing baseline data and five-year targets to participating schools and SLCs by late fall of the first year of FTF implementation.

FTF schools and ultimately SLCs then use the measures of current status and five-year targets to set their own annual targets for getting to the district's goals.

Over the past five years, IRRE and its district and school partners have struggled to get all four of these tasks accomplished during the planning year. With the focus on supporting school-level planning, we have never completed these steps until at least halfway through the first year of implementation. We are committed over the next year to developing a more structured and effective process for getting this work done in the planning year.¹³

Implementation standards: How good is good enough?

Leaders at all levels of the system and IRRE are now identifying and monitoring implementation standards, beginning in the planning year. These indicators have evolved along with the commitments discussed in the first section of this report. Currently, we have a checklist that includes standards for effective small learning communities. All FTF sites are using this checklist to review their current functioning, and fifth-generation sites are using it as they assess initial

¹³ The new "No Child Left Behind" legislation puts additional pressure on districts and schools to engage in this process of setting and monitoring performance targets according to the percentages of students hitting specific thresholds.

implementation in fall of 2002 (see Appendix A for a copy of the current high school checklist). From now on, IRRE and our partners will also use this rubric to guide planning. IRRE is currently developing other instruments to give us structured, quantitative and qualitative information on performance against every aspect of FTF's implementation standards.

Recognize accomplishments and intervene to ensure progress

How district policies and leaders recognize accomplishments and address shortcomings of individuals and groups tells everyone in the system what matters most.

Our experience has shown that leaders at all levels of the system need to recognize — formally and informally — staff accomplishments early and often in the planning year. These accomplishments include active engagement in the planning and capacity-building process, hitting decision-making deadlines and holding the line on implementation standards. Conversely, when leaders at any and all levels observe low levels of staff engagement, missed deadlines or attempts to dilute implementation commitments, they need to intervene respectfully but forcefully. They need to quickly signal their commitment to the reform, their willingness to support staff in achieving its expectations and their intention to see it succeed.

Leaders have three powerful levers that enhance their ability to recognize planning year accomplishments and intervene when folks fall short.

- School and district leaders have committed publicly to supporting informed, participatory and timely decisions at the building level. Leaders who do their part to deliver on this pledge can credibly ask that:
 - Planning groups meet and engage in constructive dialogue around key elements of the reform so that decisions can be informed;

- Staff respond to surveys about their backgrounds and preferences for staffing purposes and weigh in at key decision points so that decisions are participatory; and
- Timelines be followed so decisions can be timely.
- The threat of a chaotic school opening in the coming fall powerfully motivates everyone to complete planning and capacity-building work. Hard knocks have taught us that what appears to be flexibility during the planning year — adjusting time frames for activities and decision-making — almost always produces dire consequences in the fall that can seriously threaten the reform.
- No teacher wants to be unprepared. For most teachers, showing up and engaging in training is internally motivated, as well as externally expected and supported.

IRRE and other national and local partners provide training and support for leaders on how to recognize accomplishments and intervene when challenges occur, in order to move the planning year process ahead humanely and effectively.

CHAPTER V: FINAL THOUGHTS

In this report, we have drawn on our observations and work with over a hundred district administrators in our five FTF sites, dozens of principals and well over 200 teachers in positions of leadership for the reform. We close with two messages that we ourselves intend to heed in our ongoing work and that might be useful to the field as well.

First, clear and supportable expectations make it possible for people to see what they need to do, work to do it, and be supported more effectively by us in their efforts.

Research on motivation undergirding First Things First suggests human beings engage fully and productively in activities when three basic needs are met: competence, autonomy and relatedness. If these needs are unmet, people will, at best, comply with what they are asked to do or, in most cases, resist or withdraw from the activity.

Ambiguity in the early years of First Things First meant we sometimes frustrated people's sense of competence. "We don't know what we're about to do," they could feel, "and we're not sure we can do it." In contrast, clear and supportable expectations allowed us to move forward quickly to engage people in planning year activities and early implementation. When educators, students and families know what to do and expect and know what supports they will receive, they feel a sense of competence. When the planning process moves quickly to reorganize schools into small learning communities, adults and students gain not only a sense of competence, but also one of autonomy. This meets a second basic need. Students and teachers can say, "I choose to be in this community. It reflects my interests. I have an important role in defining, and am responsible, along with everyone else in the community, for its success." Adults and students can also begin to develop relationships around their shared work. The Family

Advocate System then strengthens the connections — helping to meet the third basic need for relatedness — among adults at home, adults at school and students.

The other overarching lesson for IRRE has been the importance of focusing on system leadership and defining what that means carefully. The development of system leadership means that reform can not only get off the dime, but survive and even thrive following the departure of existing leaders. We have found it essential to build capacity through work with multiple individuals at all levels of the system. At IRRE, we are using the areas of system leadership in Table 9 as a frame for tackling development of existing and emerging leaders in partner districts and schools.

Indeed, we see the analysis and development of a system's leadership capacity as one of the greatest challenges in our continuing work with school reform. We look forward to sharing the results of our efforts in the months ahead.

Table 1: School Demographics During The Planning Year

	Total Number of Students Enrolled	Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch (%)	Minority Students (%)	Students with Limited Ability To Speak English (%)	Total Number of Teachers
Generation 1					
Wyandotte High School	1273	73	82	NA ¹⁴	69
Central Middle School	699	92	75	NA	49
Northwest Middle School	443	89	99	NA	29
Generation 2					
Washington High School	1152	51	65	NA	68
Arrowhead Middle School	497	48	56	NA	29
Eisenhower Middle School	752	59	72	NA	41
Generation 3					
Harmon High School	1190	65	67	NA	75.5
Argentine Middle School	555	77	71	NA	37
Rosedale Middle School	500	80	69	NA	28.5
Schlagle High School	1067	58	81	NA	63
Coronado Middle School	431	73	77	NA	25
West Middle School	429	77	76	NA	26
Generation 4					
Lee High School	2079	82	92	74	120
Sharpstown Middle School	1054	88	92	33	88
Riverview Gardens High School	1717	48	90	0	113
Central Middle School	829	61	87	0	62
East Middle School	349	84	100	0	30
Greenville High School	1036	95	100	0	58
Shaw High School	314	94	99	0	27
Generation 5					
Sam Houston High School	2808	59	95	22	154
Sharpstown High School	1722	60	87	22	100
Fondren Middle School	1229	88	94	34	68
Fonville Middle School	1079	90	94	17	73
Welch Middle School	1414	56	94	26	80

¹⁴ Five percent of the Kansas City Kansas, Public Schools was identified as ESL in the 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 academic years.

Table 2: The Seven Critical Features Of First Things First

FOR STUDENTS

Provide continuity of care by forming small learning communities that keep the same group of professionals, students and families together for extended periods during the day and across multiple school years.

Increase instructional time and lower student-adult ratios during language arts and math, primarily through redistribution of the professional staff.

Set high, clear and fair standards for academics and conduct, clearly defining what all students will know and be able to do by the time they leave high school and assessing their progress at key points along the way.

Provide enriched and diverse opportunities for students to learn, perform and be recognized.

FOR ADULTS

Equip, empower and expect staff to implement effective instructional practices by giving teachers the authority and expertise to make effective instructional decisions, by creating opportunities for continuous staff learning, and by specifying clear expectations about teachers, learning, practicing and discussing effective instructional practices.

Give small learning communities and schools the flexibility to redirect resources (time, money, people and space) quickly to meet emerging needs.

Ensure collective responsibility by providing collective incentives and consequences for small learning communities, schools and district staff, based on improvements in student performance.

Table 3: Required Implementation Strategies And Standards — Generation 5

Strategies	Standards
<p>Small Learning Communities</p>	<p>Size: 350 or fewer students in high schools and middle schools.</p>
	<p>Thematic communities available for regular, special education and ESL students.¹⁵</p>
	<p>SLC staff have at least three hours per week of common planning time.</p>
	<p>Themes for SLCs are: Developed based on staff, student ,and community interest; Infused into core academic courses; Linked to postsecondary education and careers (in high school); and Made the focus of elective(s) that are available to all students in an SLC.</p>
	<p>No tracking.</p>
	<p>In thematic SLCs: Duration of students' stay is four years in high school, three years in middle school. Students are grouped heterogeneously. Students stay for core subjects and thematic elective(s).</p>
	<p>Each SLC has: At least one full-time teacher in each core area — two each in language arts and math; At least one-FTE elective teacher; Staff who can provide services to special education and ESL students.</p>
	<p>SLC staff can flexibly allocate resources to meet students' needs and policy requirements.</p>
<p>Family Advocate System</p>	<p>All students and families have advocates assigned.</p>
	<p>All SLC staff and affiliates serve as advocates.</p>
	<p>Students and families have the same advocate all years (except in Transitional SLC).</p>
	<p>Some of SLC common planning time is used regularly for family advocate discussions and supports.</p>
	<p>Student academic and behavior profiles are available and updated regularly.</p>
	<p>Family advocates have; Monthly effective contact with family. At least one effective conference with student and family per semester. Weekly individual contact with every student.</p>
	<p>Family-advocate period is in SLC schedule and used effectively.</p>

¹⁵ Transitional communities for basic and intermediate ESL students (English Language Institute/Newcomers Communities) and for incoming, re-entering and existing freshmen more than one year behind (Opportunity Center) are options for all FTF high schools and middle schools. Students may stay in these transitional communities for up to one year.

**Table 3: Required Implementation Strategies And Standards —
Generation 5**

Strategies	Standards
Instructional Improvement Process	Students experience: Block schedules for at least 80 minutes in core subject areas at least every other day. Additional instructional time in language arts and math (up to double instructional blocks). Lower student/adult ratios in language arts and math.
	Faculty have regularly scheduled time during common planning time for: Working on Instructional improvement; Creating and updating plans to achieve SLC student performance targets; and Reviewing student performance targets.
	All staff receive training and receive ongoing supports around instructional strategies to actively engage students; all staff implement new strategies.
	Existing curriculum resources are aligned and enriched around standards and high-stakes assessments.

Table 4: The Evolution Of FTF Requirements: 1997–Present

Planning Years of FTF Schools	Are FTF Critical Features Required?	Are Implementation Strategies and Standards Required?					
		SLCs		Family Advocate System		Instructional Improvement	
		Strategy	Standard	Strategy	Standard	Strategy	Standard
Generation 1 (1997–98)	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Generation 2 (1998–99)	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Generation 3 (1999–00)	YES ¹⁶	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Generation 4 (2000–01)	YES ¹⁷	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO
Generation 5 (2001–02)	YES ¹⁸	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

¹⁶ The critical feature “provide instructional autonomy and supports” became “equip, empower and expect all staff to improve instruction.”

¹⁷ The critical feature “provide instructional autonomy and supports” became “equip, empower and expect all staff to improve instruction.”

¹⁸ The critical feature “provide continuity of care across the school day and school years” grew to include “...and between home and school.”

Table 5: Planning Year Activities In Generations 1 and 2 (1997–98 and 1998-99)

Planning Activity	Time Frame
Preplanning Year	
School Improvement Facilitators (SIFs) were selected and trained.	Fall
Principals received the FTF White Paper outlining the critical features and presenting the rationale for FTF and were asked to share the White Paper with their staff.	Spring
IRRE worked with principals to create a process for selecting stakeholders — i.e., leaders in the school who would serve as facilitators of the planning process.	Spring
SIFs began working with stakeholder groups.	Spring
District held a Stakeholders Roundtable to build enthusiasm through evidence from other schools about the model's effectiveness and to launch stakeholders into their roles as planning facilitators.	August
Planning Year	
Roundtable was held for NEA representatives from each school involved in the planning process.	October
Stakeholder teams planned for and held the Cluster Roundtable. The rationale for FTF and testimony of its effectiveness were presented to all building staff.	October
Stakeholder-led planning sessions were held to begin activities for the coming planning year.	October
A brief planning guide was distributed with guidelines for schools about developing work groups and processes for decision-making (Generation 2 only).	October
Stakeholder committees met regularly. School staff joined committees: Small Learning Communities, Staffing, Budget, Facilities, Administrative Support and Time Use, Professional Development, and Community Engagement. With the SIF and the stakeholders, each committee researched the issue related to the given topic and made recommendations to the whole staff. Research generally involved reading selected articles related to the topic (e.g., literature on looping). Materials were provided by the SIF and occasionally by committee members.	October–May
Monthly after-school information exchange sessions provided staff throughout the district with information and training related to planning for FTF.	October–May
Stakeholder teams visited schools in other parts of the country who were implementing the seven critical features (Generation 2 schools also visited Generation 1 schools).	October–May
Staffing Committee surveyed staff to identify levels of staff experience and determine how to redistribute staff into teaching teams.	October–May
A second planning guide clarified the meaning of, and acceptable criteria for, the structural critical features (Generation 2 only).	January
IRRE analyzed faculty and student profiles to determine options for number and size of SLCs and developed a base schedule for the first implementation year that increased instructional time in core subjects, lowered student/adult ratios, and created common planning time for SLC faculty. Schools reviewed the options and approved a base model.	February–May
Faculty voted on key points about how the critical features were to be implemented.	April–May
Buildings drafted their school improvement plans and submitted them to the central office.	April–May
Schools had a week of in-service and planning time to prepare themselves for the launch of FTF in their buildings.	Summer
Principals attended a two-day leadership institute.	Summer
Year 1 Implementation	
Initial implementation of First Things First.	Fall

Table 6: Planning Year Activities In Generation 3 (1999–2000)

Planning Activity	Time Frame
Preplanning Year	
School Improvement Facilitators (SIFs) were selected and trained.	Fall
Principals received the FTF White Paper outlining the critical features and presenting the rationale for FTF and were asked to share the White Paper with their staff.	Spring
IRRE worked with principals to create a process for selecting stakeholders — i.e., leaders in the school who would serve as facilitators of the planning process.	Fall/winter
SIFs began working with stakeholder groups.	Winter
District held a Stakeholders Roundtable to build enthusiasm through evidence from other schools about the effectiveness of the model and to launch stakeholders into their roles as planning facilitators.	August
Planning Year	
Stakeholder teams planned for and held the Cluster Roundtable. The rationale for FTF and testimony of its effectiveness were presented to all school staff.	October
Stakeholder-led planning sessions were held to begin activities for the coming planning year.	October
A revised version of the planning guide was distributed to SIFs with guidelines for schools about developing work groups and making decisions.	August
Stakeholder committees met regularly. School staff joined committees: Small Learning Communities, Staffing, Budget, Facilities, Administrative Support and Time Use, Professional Development, and Community Engagement. With the SIF and the stakeholders, each committee researched the issue related to the given topic and made recommendations to the whole staff. Research generally involved reading selected articles related to the topic (e.g., literature on looping). Materials were provided by the SIF and occasionally by committee members.	October–May
Two after-school information exchange sessions provided staff throughout the district with information and training related to planning for FTF.	October–May
Stakeholder teams visited Generation 1 schools and schools in other parts of the country that were implementing the seven critical features.	October–May
Staffing Committee surveyed staff to identify levels of staff experience and determine how to redistribute staff into teaching teams.	October–May
IRRE analyzed faculty and student profiles to determine options for number and size of SLCs and developed a base schedule for the first implementation year that increased instructional time in core subjects, lowered student/adult ratios and created common planning time for SLC faculty. Schools reviewed the options and approved a base model.	February–May
Faculty voted on key points about how the critical features were to be implemented.	April–May
Schools drafted their school improvement plans and submitted them to the central office.	April–May
Schools had a week of in-service and planning time to prepare themselves for the launch of FTF in their buildings.	Summer
Principals attended a two-day Leadership Institute.	Summer
Year 1 Implementation	
Initial implementation of First Things First.	Fall

Table 7: Planning Year Activities In Generation 4 (2000–2001)

Planning Activity	Time Frame
Preplanning Year	
School planning group members identified.	May–June
SIFs selected.	May–July
SIFs and principals trained.	August
Working sessions with School planning groups held.	August
Planning Year	
Fall Roundtable: Introduced First Things First; Created Work Groups: Staffing, Teaching and Learning, Community, Finance, and Facilities; Identified tasks for work groups to accomplish.	September–November
Staffing survey was conducted: Staff expressed preferences for SLC themes and indicated work experience, preferences for SLC colleagues, etc. (Survey distributed at Roundtable and collected and sent by SIFs to IRRE within one week.)	November–December
Student survey was conducted: Students expressed preferences among themes.	November–December
IRRE analyzed faculty and student responses to surveys and recommended SLC themes.	November–December
Work groups read and discussed FTF vision statements that described FTF from a teacher's and a student's point of view.	October–December
Second faculty survey identified preferences for selected SLC themes.	November–December
Work groups learned about FTF's approach to structure, teaching and learning. Worked on structural decisions such as two- versus four-year SLCs; mixed-grade versus single-grade SLCs (middle school); looping versus multiyear cohort; and thematic or not. Teaching and Learning Group studied "read-alouds."	November–December
Faculty reviewed and approved themes.	December
IRRE analyzed faculty and student profiles to determine options for number and size of SLCs and developed a base schedule for the first implementation year that increased instructional time in core subjects, lowered student/adult ratios, and created common planning time for SLC faculty. Schools reviewed the options and approved a base model.	December–March
SLC faculty participated in initial instructional improvement activities.	January–April
School leaders and staff approved staffing plan prepared by IRRE.	April
Faculty began to meet in SLCs and select (interim) SLC coordinators.	April
Representatives from SLCs developed plan for Family Advocate System and presented to the faculty.	April

Table 7: Planning Year Activities In Generation 4 (2000–2001)

Planning Activity	Time Frame
Planning Year	
Schools presented information about SLC themes to current students and conducted recruitment at feeder schools. Students selected a thematic SLC to join.	April–May
Schools developed SLC themes and planned SLC course offerings.	April–May
Schools determined space allocation for each SLC.	April–May
Schools developed schedules for Implementation Year 1 for each SLC.	April–July
SLC coordinator selected for Implementation Year 1.	May
SLCs established discipline plans, practices, and procedures.	May
SLCs developed schedules for teachers and students.	Summer
Summer planning and capacity-building session held. Content included three to four days of professional development: Family Advocate System training; team building, “Opening the Doors”; thematic development.	Summer
Year 1 Implementation	
Initial implementation of First Things First	Fall

Table 8: Planning Year Activities In Generation 5 (2001–2002)

Planning Activity	Time Frame
Preplanning Year	
School planning group members identified.	May-June
SIFs selected.	May-July
SIFs and principals received training.	August
Working sessions with school planning groups held.	September
Planning Year	
Fall Roundtable: Introduced First Things First; Created Work Groups: Staffing, Teaching and Learning, Community, Finance, and Facilities; Identified tasks for work groups to accomplish.	October
Staffing survey conducted: Staff expressed preferences for SLC themes and indicated work experience, preferences for SLC colleagues, etc. (survey distributed at Roundtable and collected and sent by SIFs to IRRE within one week).	October
Student survey conducted: Students expressed preferences among themes.	October
IRRE analyzed faculty and student responses to surveys and recommended SLC themes.	October-November
Study groups read and discussed FTF vision statements that describe FTF from a teacher's and student's point of view.	October-December
Second survey gathered faculty preferences for selected SLC themes.	November-December
Study groups learned about FTF's approach to teaching and learning.	December
Faculty reviewed and approved themes.	December
IRRE analyzed faculty and student profiles to determine options for number and size of SLCs and developed a base schedule for the first implementation year that increased instructional time in core subjects, lowered student/adult ratios, and created common planning time for SLC faculty. Schools reviewed the options and approved a base model.	December
Building leaders and staff approved staffing plan prepared by IRRE.	January
SLC faculty participated in initial instructional improvement activities.	January-May
Faculty began to meet in SLCs and select (interim) SLC coordinators.	February
Schools presented information about SLC themes to current students and conducted recruitment at feeder schools. Students selected a thematic SLC.	February-April
Schools developed SLC themes and planned SLC course offerings.	April
Representatives from SLCs developed plans for their Family Advocate System and presented it to the faculty.	April
Schools determined space allocation for each SLC.	April-May
Schools developed schedules for first implementation year for each SLC.	April-May
SLC Coordinator selected for Implementation Year 1.	May
SLCs established discipline plans, practices and procedures.	May
SLCs developed schedules for teachers and students.	Summer
Summer planning and capacity-building session included three to four days of professional development: Family Advocate System training; team building, "Opening the Doors"; thematic development.	Summer
Year 1 Implementation	
Initial Implementation of First Things First	Fall

Table 9: System Leadership Grid: Planning Year Of Reform

	Set and Articulate Clear Expectations	Personify Commitment	Provide Timely and Effective Supports			Monitor and Report Progress	Recognize Accomplishments and Intervene To Address Challenges
			Financial and Political	Technical and Logistical	Ongoing		
Existing Leaders							
Board	✓	✓	✓	◇	◇	◇	✓
Superintendent	✓	✓	✓	◇	◇	◇	✓
Executive Directors ¹⁹	✓	✓	✓	◇	◇	✓	✓
Central Office							
Curriculum and Instruction	◇	✓		✓	◇		
Standards and Accountability	◇	✓		✓	◇		
Professional Development	◇	✓		✓	◇		
Principal	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓

Key:

- ✓ Indicates that this leadership area is a core responsibility of the leadership position.
- ◇ Indicates that in this leadership area, the position provides back up for the primary leadership position.

¹⁹ These positions are named differently in different districts (e.g., area superintendents). They supervise principals and SIFs and have a direct reporting relationship to a superintendent or cabinet-level designee.

Table 9: System Leadership Grid: Planning Year Of Reform

	Set and Articulate Clear Expectations	Personify Commitment	Provide Timely and Effective Supports			Monitor and Report Progress	Recognize Accomplishments and Intervene To Address Challenges
			Financial and Political	Technical and Logistical	Ongoing		
Emerging Leaders							
SIF	◇	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	◇
SLC Coordinator		✓	✓	✓	✓	◇	◇
Planning-Group Facilitators		✓	✓	✓	✓	◇	◇
SLC Staff		✓					
Reform Support Organization	◇	✓	✓	✓	✓	◇	◇

Key:

- ✓ Indicates that this leadership area is a core responsibility of the leadership position.
- ◇ Indicates that in this leadership area, the position provides back-up for the primary leadership position.

Appendix A

FTF Implementation Standards Checklist for SLCs: High School

CHECK if standard is in place
BLANK if standard is not yet in place

Name of SLC

QUESTION MARK if insufficient information available to rate standard

Size, Duration and Student Composition		Staffing	Themes	Common Planning Time	Family Advocate System	Flexible Allocation of Resources	Collective Responsibility
___ Size: 350 or less <u>Thematic</u> ___ Four years (9–12) ___ Heterogeneous grouping of students ___ Special Ed students included ___ ESL students included ___ Students stay in SLC for core subjects and thematic elective(s)		___ Based on staff interest, certification and equity ___ At least one full-time teacher in each core area ___ At least one FTE elective teacher ___ Staff who can provide services to special ed and ESL students SLC affiliates include: ___ Administrators ___ Counselors ___ Planning-lane teachers	___ Developed based on staff and student interest ___ Themes infused into core academic courses ___ Themes linked to postsecondary education and careers ___ Thematic elective available in SLC to all students ___ No tracking	___ Minimum three hours/week Regularly scheduled time used effectively for: ___ Instructional improvement [Year 1 Implementation 1/3–1/2 of total time; Year 2 and ongoing 1/2–2/3 of total time] ___ Family advocate discussions and supports ___ SLC business ___ Review of SLC student performance targets	___ All students and families have advocate assigned ___ All SLC staff and affiliates serve as advocates ___ Same advocate all four years (except Transitional SLC, where new advocate assigned when student joins Thematic SLC) ___ Student academic and behavior profile available and updated regularly ___ Monthly and effective contact with family ___ At least biannual effective face-to-face conferences ___ At least weekly one-on-one effective contact with student ___ Family advocate "period" in schedule and used effectively	SLC staff can flexibly allocate resources to meet student needs: ___ Time ___ People ___ Space ___ Money ___ Block schedules of at least 80 minutes at least every other day for core subject areas Additional instructional time: ___ Language arts ___ Math Lower student/adult ratios: ___ Language arts ___ Math	___ Key indicators of student progress available at individual and SLC levels ___ Five-year and annual targets set at SLC levels ___ SLC regularly reviews and responds to progress toward annual targets ___ Disciplinary policies articulated and enacted SLC staff expect and support each other to: ___ Carry out SLC action plans to meet performance targets ___ Implement Family Advocate System ___ Carry out SLC discipline and other policies ___ Implement Kagan active engagement strategies ___ Develop and use standards-based instruction
<u>Transitional (ESL and Opportunity Center)</u> ___ One year only, then transition to thematic ___ Credit recovery ___ Basic and intermediate level ESL students ___ 95% of students stay in SLC for core subjects							