



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FIRST THINGS FIRST:

Creating the Conditions & Capacity for Community-Wide Reform in an Urban School District

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Prepared by Gambone & Associates

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The full report was completed in January 2002
and is available online at the following Web sites:

Kansas City, Kansas Public School District
www.kckps.k12.ks.us

Institute for Research and Reform in Education
www.irre.org

Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
www.emkf.org

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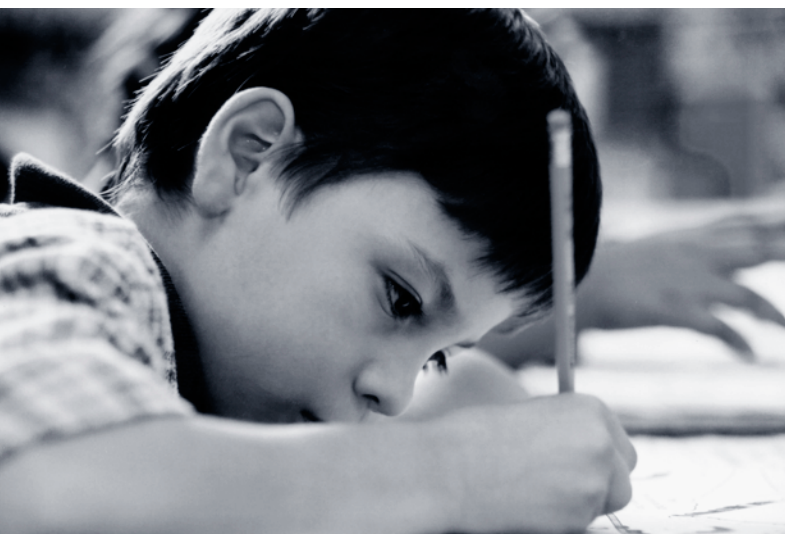
Introduction

First Things First: Creating the Conditions and Capacity for Community-Wide Reform In An Urban School District

Take a look inside the Kansas City, Kansas (KCK) public schools and you will find challenges facing any urban district: insufficient funding, large numbers of at-risk students, declining enrollment and teacher shortages. You will also see teachers working in teams and staying with their students for more than one year, lower ratios of students to teachers in key classes and extra time built into the day for professional development. What separates this district from others is its commitment to a comprehensive school reform effort called First Things First.

To understand First Things First, it's helpful to examine what we know about comprehensive school reform because this research is integral to KCK's story. For example, we know schools work best when everyone shares a common vision of what a high-quality school looks like (Bodilly et al, 1998). This vision shapes instruction, curriculum, professional development, district support and how resources are spent. Comprehensive school reform is most effective when schools use a blueprint. The best blueprints, researchers say, have well-defined academic standards, research-based curriculum and instructional strategies, measurable benchmarks and goals, a strong assessment system and professional development for teachers (New American Schools, 2001). Parent and community engagement are critical as well.

Research also tells us district support is vital (Education Commission of the States, 1999). Central office administration must devote resources, change policies and practices, and make explicit commitments to ensure comprehensive school





reform takes root. Without this leadership, schools are left to fend for themselves with little direction or help.

This executive summary describes some of the findings from *First Things First: Creating the Conditions and Capacity for Community-Wide Reform in an Urban District*. This study, completed in January 2002, is the first comprehensive look at the initiative's early planning and first year of implementation. Like other research, it offers important lessons and guidance on comprehensive school reform.

Readers will learn more about how the early stages of this comprehensive school reform effort weathered leadership changes and staff resistance, issues familiar to urban districts. The report also

shares insights on what is required to build the capacity of teachers, principals and central office staff who are critical to any reform movement. It also highlights some adjustments made to meet the challenges key partners faced along the way.

Why First Things First?

When First Things First was launched in 1996, the District faced an uphill battle. Many of its 21,000 students — 70 percent minority and growing — lived in poverty. Students' performance on standardized achievement tests was well below the national norm. Curriculum-based assessment scores in math, reading, social studies and science were even worse.

F I R S T T H I N G S

1996 The first Roundtable is held to introduce First Things First to District leaders.

The District, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (EMKF) and Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) launch First Things First. District-level planning begins.

The position of School Improvement Facilitator (SIF) is created.

1997 The Wyandotte cluster begins its planning year.

The superintendent retires and an interim steps in.

The school board election results in three new board members not acquainted with First Things First.

Three partners — the District, EMKF and IRRE — agree on a mutually created accountability plan.

The federal court approves the District's Desegregation Exit Plan, of which First Things First is the centerpiece.

In response, the district explored how to address these problems by placing more emphasis on data-driven school improvement and evaluation. Leaders also looked at ways to enhance curriculum and instruction, and participated in the state's new accreditation process. Students began taking new standardized tests and faced more rigorous graduation requirements.

At this critical point, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation introduced District leaders to the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) — the architects of, and technical assistance providers for, First Things First. After reviewing the model, District leaders believed First Things First could be a vehicle to synthesize and expand their efforts to improve student performance. The District, IRRE and the Kauffman Foundation participated in a series of joint planning sessions. Based on these discussions and the District's plan, the Kauffman Foundation agreed to invest in the initiative's development, implementation and evaluation.

What is First Things First?

First Things First is a comprehensive model of school reform that maps the path from building district-wide capacity for reform to achieving better outcomes for students. The model calls for:

- Reducing the student-teacher ratio to no more than 15 to 1 in core math and reading classes at every grade level for more individualized attention;
- Keeping the same group of eight to 10 teachers with the same students for three years in elementary and middle school, and for at least two years in high school, to provide more continuity of relationships and learning;
- Setting clear, high academic and conduct standards that define what students should know and be able to do and how adults and students should behave;
- Providing enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, perform and be recognized;
- Assuring that teams of teachers and administrators take collective responsibility for student performance, with built-in incentives and consequences;
- Giving teams of teachers support to develop instructional strategies and decision-making power over instructional methods they use in their classrooms;
- Granting teachers and principals greater authority over how to deploy resources (people, time, facilities and funds).

FIRST TIMELINE

1998 The Wyandotte cluster of schools begins implementation of First Things First.

The Washington cluster begins its planning year.

A new superintendent, Ray Daniels, is hired.

1999 The Washington cluster of schools begins implementation of First Things First.

The Harmon and Schlagle clusters begin their planning years.

2000 The Harmon and Schlagle clusters begin their implementation years.

2001 The first major study of the reform effort, *First Things First: Creating the Conditions and Capacity for Community-Wide Reform in an Urban District* is released.

These critical features are the blueprint for First Things First. While the District required schools to adopt this blueprint, schools maintained control over how First Things First was implemented in their buildings. For example, schools could determine what teaching methods were used in the classroom, and how to use building resources and participate in building hiring decisions.

Introducing First Things First to Kansas City, Kansas

Spearheading the reform initiative were three key partners — the District, IRRE and the Kauffman Foundation. The early goals of the initiative focused on planning, and building awareness and support

for the initiative. Along with central office staff, union leaders, school board members and others, the partners set out to prepare schools and the community for change. This meant making sure everyone understood, and was committed to, what First Things First intended to accomplish. It also meant creating a belief among teachers, principals, central office staff and others that this was a long-term effort that would result in better outcomes for students.

In 1998, the comprehensive reform initiative was put into place in a cluster of 11 schools — Wyandotte High School and its feeder schools. The second cluster of schools — Washington High School and its feeder schools — adopted First Things First the following year. The decision to phase in

FIRST THINGS FIRST LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Executive Committee

Responsibilities:

Makes strategic decisions about how reform efforts are implemented, monitors progress and addresses barriers. The team meets regularly with researchers to examine trends in implementation and to request information to support its decision-making.

Members:

Fall 1996

- District Associate Superintendent
- President of IRRE
- Senior Program Officer from EMKF

Over time, the committee expanded to include:

- The Superintendent
- The Director of School Improvement
- The two Executive Directors of School Operation

- The Superintendent's management team, representing Professional Development, Research and Assessment, Special Education, Instructional Development and Curriculum and Standards

Research Management Team

Responsibilities:

Designs, manages and disseminates findings about the implementation of First Things First. The team advises the Executive Committee, provides additional support for data collection and analysis conducted by the District, and prepares all official reports documenting progress.

Members:

- President of Gambone & Associates, an independent research company
- Director of Research from EMKF
- Director of Research from the District



schools in clusters gave the District time to reallocate limited personnel and funding so that the reform effort could be properly implemented.

The first two clusters were very different from each other. Wyandotte High School had the lowest high school graduation rate (53%) and average daily attendance (less than 75%) of all four comprehensive high schools in the District. Most of its student population was minority (82%) and poor (75%). Washington High School, where student success rates were also low, had comparatively higher graduation (76%) and attendance rates (90%) and fewer poor (41%) and minority (58%) students. District leaders believed if they showed First Things First could work in schools serving the full range of students in the District, key stakeholders would believe it could work district-wide.

Evaluating the Success of First Things First

Evaluation was built into the process early on. Two major data collection efforts began in fall 1997 to study the decisions of key leaders, how those decisions affected staff and whether the early outcomes were being achieved. The evaluation included measures of the extent to which staff understood the First Things First goals, whether they had a sense of urgency in implementing First Things First to improve students' performance, and how committed they were to implementing those changes. The initial data collection also examined how prepared staff felt they were to implement those changes.

Data were collected by reviewing documents, interviewing central office staff, observing District and school staff involved in the effort and conducting surveys. This Executive Summary and the full report focus on the initiative's early activities and success in producing the early outcomes. Future reports will focus on First Things First's impact on student behavior and achievement.

Creating the Conditions and Building Capacity for Change



The full report, *First Things First: Creating the Conditions and Capacity for Community-Wide Reform in an Urban District*, examines in detail the strategies put in place by the First Things First partners (the District, IRRE and Kauffman Foundation) and how those strategies helped to build capacity and create the conditions for change.

These strategies, and some of the challenges associated with them, are described briefly next. The report also examines whether these strategies resulted in the desired early outcomes.

Strategy One: Holding Partners Accountable

The partners' work began when they crafted a three-way accountability plan. The plan is significant because it defined in detail the partners' roles, responsibilities and deadlines for accomplishing work. The partners knew that failure to meet commitments had consequences — such as potential suspension of funding and loss of community support. Each year the partners updated the plan, adjusting timelines and activities, and adding new tasks and responsibilities.

The plan not only maintained pressure on the partners to stay focused, but also pushed them beyond the typical expectations for their organizations. For example, the District knew it not only was accountable for improving student test scores in the long-term, but also for building the capacity in central office and in schools to set changes in motion in the short-term. The Kauffman Foundation did more than award grants; the Foundation was involved in ongoing planning and reallocation of committed funds to address the reform's serious needs. The Foundation also provided assistance from its own research, training and communications departments.

IRRE was viewed as more than an “outside expert,” supporting the District development of a plan and offering regular advice and support to the superintendent, principals and teachers. It also became a trusted sounding board for local decisions tied to First Things First. For example, when new sources of funding became available to the District,

IRRE urged the District to ask: “Will this (funding) help move First Things First forward, or will it create additional work that doesn’t fit with our shared vision of reform?” Soon District leaders were asking that question of themselves and of their partners.

Several leadership changes occurred between the summer of 1997 and the spring of 1998 that had the potential to derail the initiative. Three new school board members, unfamiliar with First Things First, were elected. The Superintendent retired in the spring of 1997, and the position was held by an interim Superintendent for a year. First Things First could have ground to a halt during this uncertain period, but the reform weathered these changes in part because the accountability plan with its clarity of expectations, institutional commitments and resources, helped the partners maintain their focus on moving the initiative forward.

During this transitional year without a permanent superintendent, First Things First was viewed by many in central office as a project that would be phased out with the arrival of a new leader. The reaction was understandable. Like other urban districts, KCK had seen reform efforts come and go with each new superintendent. Worried that First Things First would founder, the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel Services, Ray Daniels, put his name forward as a candidate for superintendent. In the spring of 1998, the school board hired Daniels after ensuring his support of First Things First.

Strategy Two: Informing Stakeholders

A series of roundtables were held to introduce school staff and the community to First Things First in order to ensure everyone knew what the reform effort was about, why it was significant and what each person’s role was in its implementation.

The roundtables targeted two different audiences. Stakeholder Roundtables involved a group of individuals from each school who would lead school teams through the process of planning for school-site reform. The group included staff, administrators, community members, parents, support staff and School Improvement Facilitators.

Cluster Roundtables, which were held two months after the Stakeholder Roundtables, included the entire staff of all schools in the clusters. Other participants included leaders from central office, the teachers’ union, the school board, the Kauffman Foundation and community groups.

The goals were ambitious, but simple. The three partners wanted participants to walk away with:

- a sense of urgency to change;
- a deeper understanding of First Things First’s critical components;
- a common vision for what needed to change in the schools;
- an appreciation for the complexity of change;
- an understanding of how to plan for school change; and
- an understanding of the skills and practices needed to successfully implement First Things First.

The strategy to inform educators, community members, parents and others had a positive impact on the first year of implementation. But more had to be done to inform new teachers. Like other districts across the country, the teacher turnover rate in the District was increasing. No strategy was in place to educate new teachers and staff about First Things First. Most schools did not orient new teachers to First Things First’s most critical components or to the school’s specific reform plan.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

A Sample Agenda

- Describe First Things First and explain how it improves student outcomes.
- Build a sense of urgency by using district data.
 - Show attendance levels and test scores students must achieve to have a good chance of graduating from high school.
 - Reveal the actual percentage of students in the district who meet these attendance and performance thresholds.
- Discuss what implementing First Things First means for adults and students.
 - Students from schools talk about a typical day at school and how reform has led to new relationships and learning opportunities.
 - Teachers and administrators talk about a typical day at school, including team planning time, discipline problems, new instructional strategies, challenges encountered and changes about which they are most excited.
- Allow time for reflection, small group discussion and questions.
- Discuss the skills necessary for teamwork, such as active listening.
- Examine existing resources, skill sets and needs.
- Review the timeline for implementation.
- Create a vision and build momentum to begin reform efforts at schools.



Strategy Three: Making First Things First Policy

The school board approved the reform initiative as the centerpiece of the District-wide Improvement Plan in fall of 1996. This sent a strong message to the community that First Things First was here to stay and ensured First Things First was not viewed as simply another add-on reform effort.

The following year, First Things First was integrated into another landmark plan. The District was under a federal court order to craft a Desegregation Exit Plan, and leaders placed First Things First at its center. A federal court judge signed off on the plan the same year, obligating the District to carry out changes called for by the model. This action was significant. Integrating First Things First into District policy helped sustain the initiative through the period of leadership change.

Strategy Four: Reallocating Resources and Restructuring Positions

The District took several steps to support First Things First. These steps involved shifting dollars, securing new funds and re-examining staff positions. For example, the District phased in schools in clusters instead of addressing all schools at once. This ensured that there was enough funding, personnel and technical support available to support the difficult work ahead. But the Washington cluster of schools, the second group to be phased in, grew frustrated with the wait. Eager to begin work, some schools in the Washington cluster started to make decisions without first participating in the scheduled planning process. When the District stepped in to slow down the uninformed planning, some school staff viewed this as a move to limit their autonomy. In response, the partners decided to accelerate the phase in of the remaining clusters.

The District also streamlined its curriculum department when it assigned curriculum specialists to new positions as School Improvement Facilitators (SIFs). The move meant more support for teachers and principals. The partners trained the facilitators in system- and building-wide change, facilitation skills, team-building and effective communications. Five SIFs were selected to work with the Wyandotte cluster, six with the Washington cluster.

Other central office restructuring occurred over the four-year period — designed to spend dollars effectively, demonstrate the growing importance of First Things First and help simplify the chain of command. For example, the Director of School Improvement, a new position created in 1997 to manage the reform initiative, became the Executive Director of School Improvement, a senior-level position that reported directly to the Superintendent. At the time, the move demonstrated the growing importance of the reform.

The position later was eliminated and the associated duties were incorporated into the job responsibilities of the Executive Directors of Instruction, signaling that First Things First was to be integrated into the daily work of the District. Other positions were reworked to support, and put pressure on, principals and School Improvement Facilitators to implement instructional changes. The two Executive Directors of Instruction each were responsible for two clusters. This created a clear chain of command, and SIFs and principals now reported to only one person.

A new Director of Research was hired to strengthen the District's capacity to collect and use data in its work. Two central office positions were reassigned to the research department with a focus on data management and assessment tied to First Things First. Finally, increased emphasis was placed on community engagement with the creation of a new position called Coordinator of Parent and Community Programs.

The restructuring efforts were largely successful, but presented challenges. Some members of the District's senior management staff faced difficulty moving from a supervisory to a supportive role. For example, the people who were once making decisions about school budgets were now supporting decisions made at the school level.

Also, some schools criticized central office's slow response time to requests for computer access to much-needed student data. Problems with the District's computer system delayed schools getting data they needed to inform decisions about reform. In fact, the problems with technology were so widespread that they colored school staff's perceptions of central office's helpfulness, as well as parents' impressions of the responsiveness of individual schools. The problems were later resolved.

Strategy Five: Securing Union Support

After the school board approved First Things First as the centerpiece of the District's improvement plan in 1996, District administrators met several months later with local leaders from the National Education Association (NEA). The union expressed concerns about the top-down nature of the initiative and made no promises about supporting it.

Without the union's support, the District knew it would have a tough time securing commitments from teachers to implement change at the school level. In 1997, new District leadership actively looked for ways to partner with the union. The District held a roundtable for union representatives at the schools. Still, teachers were cautious and worried about losing contractual rights.

The District persisted and invited a local NEA liaison to speak at the Wyandotte Cluster Roundtable. The local NEA chapter also tapped a national trainer to build the skills teachers would need to plan collaboratively, a major component of First Things First. And, at the request of the local

NEA representative, senior central office staff attended an NEA conference in Seattle to learn more about the union's experience working with other districts implementing comprehensive reform.

Through these efforts the union and the district created a partnership.

Strategy Six: Strengthening Professional Development and Technical Assistance

To ensure First Things First was integrated into planning, instruction and curriculum, teachers and principals received professional development and technical assistance including:

- opportunities to share ideas, troubleshoot problems, plan collaboratively and learn new strategies at roundtable discussions;
- work group team meetings;
- biweekly voluntary group discussions with stakeholders;
- on-site coaching;
- weekly early-release planning and professional development meetings;
- training on new instructional models;
- a leadership academy and annual retreats for principals; and
- travel to professional conferences.

The school board backed the efforts, even approving a policy that closed schools two hours early every Wednesday so teachers could use the time to learn more about how to improve instruction. And funding from the Kauffman Foundation paid for substitutes so teachers and principals could attend roundtable discussions.

Because too many schools were struggling with how to improve instruction, the District also placed

heavy emphasis on literacy. Recognizing that reading is the cornerstone of all learning, the focus on literacy gave the schools greater clarity, a major challenge for the first cluster of schools. The focus on literacy further shaped First Things First throughout the 1998–99 school year.

Still, challenges remained. The District worked proactively to garner support from the public, the school board and the union for increased professional development during the school day, evenings and weekends. More resources were needed to train teachers in teaching methods designed to boost literacy. And as the District’s focus on literacy intensified, so did controversy in central office over the best literacy approach.

Furthermore, some school staff members were sensitive to critiques by consultants of their schools’ implementation plans. Also, the District realized it needed to strengthen the capacity of principals to lead change at the building level. A Leadership Institute for principals created by the Kauffman Foundation was restructured to better meet the leaders’ needs.

Did These Early Efforts Pay Off?

While further study is necessary to judge the initiative’s long-term success, the early results are positive. Before examining the results, it’s helpful to learn more about how evaluation supports the reform initiative.

The First Things First model is based on a “theory of change.” This approach to planning, implementing and evaluating complex initiatives such as First Things First specifies each step and the sequences required to achieve certain outcomes. Progress toward the outcomes, and the actual outcomes themselves, are identified and monitored over the course of reform.

The “theory of change” behind First Things First holds that having stakeholders reflect on, and agree to, the strategies required for system-wide reform is

critical to success. The theory also states that because the connections between implementation activities and outcomes for each phase of First Things First are laid out in advance, evaluators can test both whether the theory of change is correct (Do these steps lead to these outcomes?) and whether the initiative is on course (Are these steps being put in place?).



The “theory of change” asserts that the following early outcomes are necessary to sustain improvements system-wide, and the designers of First Things First reasoned that ignoring these critical elements could jeopardize the reform effort:

- **awareness** and **knowledge** of the reform among district and school staff;
- a sense of **urgency** to change;
- **commitment** to the initiative by stakeholders;
- a sense of **readiness** to do the work; and
- a belief that the reform is **possible**.

Early results after the end of the first year of implementation showed:

- A majority of staff believed that structural changes, such as lower student-adult ratios or

teachers staying with the same students for multiple years, would **improve student outcomes**. For some critical features, such as teacher-student ratios, standards and instructional autonomy, nearly all staff believed these changes were urgent even before the reform began.



- District activities appear to have been effective in achieving widespread **awareness and knowledge** of First Things First. More than two-thirds of the staff in both clusters reported high levels of awareness and understanding of the initiative.
- Both **personal commitment** and perceptions of colleagues' commitment to changes in academic and conduct standards were high.
- There was a key difference between the two clusters in staffs' commitment to the structural features. The Wyandotte cluster saw significant increases in the percentage of staff who were personally committed to structural reforms. The Washington cluster did not see similar gains, possibly because the partners altered their strategies in working with the second cluster and because of differences in the local school contexts.

- More than two-thirds of staff members in the two clusters believed the Superintendent and school board were highly committed to the initiative. However, this proportion declined for the Wyandotte High School staff after the first year of implementation, which may be related to the inability of the principal to secure certain staffing and structural changes approved in the first year of implementation.
- Perceptions were mixed about central office staff commitment to the reforms. Some saw these stakeholders as very committed to the reforms, others were less convinced.
- Although staff increasingly viewed union leaders as very committed to the reform effort, the percentages remained at under two-thirds by the end of year one of implementation.
- There were gains among staff who felt **ready** to implement reforms. Yet, the staff's sense of **possibility** about implementing the reforms in their schools showed large declines in the planning year. During the first year of implementation, the Wyandotte cluster saw some gains, but no change was evident in the Washington cluster. In neither cluster did the proportion of elementary or secondary staff reporting high confidence that reform would occur in their school reach the two-thirds threshold.

This last finding deserves an added note. Feeling ready to change is primarily a reflection of an individual's own knowledge of, and commitment to, reform. However, reflecting on a sense of what is possible requires staff to factor in the likely behavior of others. Since there was more variation in how staff perceived others' commitment to the reforms, this may have affected their confidence that the changes would actually be achieved in their schools. Future evaluation will continue to track this issue.

Conclusion

The evaluation of First Things First indicates early, significant success. This success is credited to the adoption of a comprehensive school reform model, strategies to introduce stakeholders to the model, and three key partners who shared accountability and District supports, such as shifting resources and restructuring personnel. Also fundamental to the initiative's early success was a firmly established commitment to evaluate the effort and assess and refine strategies along the way. Still, some key questions remain.

Key Questions and Lessons Learned

At the outset, the First Things First model was clear about what structural changes needed to be put in place, but there was more latitude regarding instructional approaches. This latitude resulted in uncertainty among school staff about how to proceed with instructional improvements. Changes in leadership and lack of specificity from central office added to this uncertainty. Early evaluation showed instructional change foundering, so the District provided schools with more instructional direction by identifying a literacy program and strengthening professional development.

Lesson one:

A change model considered to be more prescriptive than many is not only capable of achieving the necessary level of commitment by a system's leadership, but it also may have been a key factor in the ability of the system to "stay the course" as important contextual factors changed. Other system reform initiatives (within and outside education) should note — when considering the appropriate blend of reform model definition and local autonomy — the value of model specificity from the outset.

Lesson two:

Phasing in schools to a reform effort rather than engaging them all at once appears to have consequences for achieving the model's early outcomes. While districts often face these choices



while undergoing major school improvement efforts, all involved should be aware of the impact these decisions may have on the schools later implementing reform.

Lesson three:

Overall, the strategies used by the partners appear to have been an effective way to achieve early outcomes specified in the First Things First theory of change. The link between the strategies employed by the partners and the early outcomes appears to be holding up. Building staff became convinced of the need for the reforms, knowledgeable about what they entail, mainly committed to making those changes, and convinced that District leadership also was committed to the reform. Staff in the first cluster of schools came to believe that their colleagues were committed to making reform work. The second cluster, however, did not achieve equally high levels of commitment as the first cluster by the end of their first year of implementation. These gaps may be related to the decision to phase in the clusters, as well as to differences in the cultures of the two clusters of schools and some of the strategies used by the partners.

The Future of First Things First

In 2000, First Things First was implemented in all of the District's 43 schools. The reform effort received a significant financial boost when the Kauffman Foundation awarded \$9.6 million to the school improvement effort in spring 2001 — the second-largest grant ever awarded by the Foundation. While KCK is the first district to implement First Things First on a District-wide basis, the U.S. Department of Education chose First Things First as one of seven comprehensive reform models to undergo further development and testing in order to identify effective models for improving adolescents' school performance. Consequently, five additional First Things First initiatives have begun in other parts of the country. These efforts are occurring only at the middle and high school levels.

The ongoing evaluation in KCK will continue to track how the three partners' strategies affect the progress of reform in schools. As the initiative moves into the next phase, the research will examine how the early outcomes affect the quality of implementation of the critical features in school buildings, and examine the link between the reforms and student performance. The final phase of the research will be available in the spring 2003 evaluation report.



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