

The Essential Supports

As states vie for billions in federal Race to the Top (RttP) funds designed to spur school improvement, a new book by current and former researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago reveals what it will really take to turn around the nation’s neediest elementary schools.

Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago conclusively demonstrates there is no “silver bullet” for school reform—but there is a reliable recipe.

The key ingredients, which the authors call the “essential supports,” are school leadership, parent and community ties, professional capacity of the faculty, student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance. Schools that measured strong in all five supports were at least 10 times more likely than schools with just one or two strengths to achieve substantial gains in reading and math. Moreover, a sustained weakness in just one of these areas undermined virtually all attempts at improving student learning.

What are the Five Essential Supports?

School leadership: This support refers to whether principals are strategic, focused on instruction, and inclusive of others in their leadership work. Elementary schools with strong school leadership were seven times more likely to improve in math and nearly four times more likely to improve in reading than schools weak on this measure.

Parent-community ties: This support refers to whether schools are a welcoming place for parents and whether there are strong connections between the school and local institutions. Elementary schools with strong parental involvement were ten times more likely to improve in math and four times more likely to improve in reading than schools weak on this measure.

Professional capacity: This support refers to the quality of the faculty and staff recruited to the school, their base beliefs and values about change, the quality of ongoing professional development, and the capacity of staff to work together. Elementary schools where teachers were highly committed to the school and inclined to embrace innovation were five times more likely to improve in reading and four times more likely to improve in math than schools weak on this measure.

Student-centered learning climate: This support refers to whether schools have a safe, welcoming, stimulating and nurturing environment focused on learning for all students. Elementary schools with strong safety and order were two times more likely to improve in reading than schools weak on this measure.

Instructional guidance: This support refers to the organization of the curriculum, the nature of the academic demand or challenges it poses, and the tools teachers have to advance learning (such as instructional materials). Elementary schools with strong curriculum alignment were four times more likely to improve in math and reading than schools weak on this measure.

Researchers also found that weakness in one area can amplify the negative effects of another weakness, while strength in one can amplify the positive effects of another. For instance, 33 percent of schools with weak teacher educational backgrounds and 30 percent of schools with weak professional communities stagnated. But 47 percent of schools with weaknesses on both measures stagnated.

To summarize, school organization drives improvement, and individual initiatives are unlikely to work in isolation. This has strong implications for states and districts focused on any number of reforms that have gained increasing political currency—for example, improving teacher quality, turning around low performing schools, or mandating a single curriculum.