

New Book Praises First Things First's District-wide Approach

First Things First is one of three initiatives demonstrating that district-wide school reform is both possible and needed, according to a new book by Norman Fruchter. A nationally recognized expert in educational policy and reform, Fruchter uses FTF and his other examples to make the case that effective district-wide reform can result in widespread and sustained improvements in student learning. Fruchter's case review shows that:

- Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, with support from IRRE, phased in FTF without waiting for complete stakeholder buy-in. District leadership and IRRE “subsequently put in place structured processes to build that buy-in,” but did not allow its absence to stop the reform process from launching and gaining initial traction.
- District leaders and IRRE became more prescriptive in the implementation standards and strategies as early data supported certain ways of organizing school structure and promoting improved instruction.
- The reform achieved key implementation standards. As IRRE hypothesized at the outset of its partnership with the Kansas City, Kansas School District, “the use of small-group strategies increased significantly in elementary and secondary schools, and student experience of high academic standards increased four-fold.” In addition, “collective responsibility seems to have been enhanced in secondary schools. Flexible allocation of resources was accomplished system-wide. [Small Learning Communities] enjoyed clear decision-making authority over

space and supplies and participated in school-wide decisions about budgets and hiring.”

- Consistent with the FTF theory of change, independent evaluation studies summarized by Fruchter found increased supports and opportunities for students and adults linked to “attendance, and reading and math scores on state testing, improv[ing] significantly in elementary and secondary schools and ... FTF ... help[ing] to close both race- and class-based achievement gaps in Kansas City, Kansas.”

Reference: Norman Fruchter (2007). *Urban Schools Public Will: Making Education Work for All Our Children*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.