Executive Summary

We know how to provide world-class education in the United States. In many places, it has been – and is being – done. In fact, most public schools are centers of excitement. Public elementary, middle and high school students across the country are building robots and 3D-generated artificial limbs; creating original works of art; collaborating with local government officials to solve community problems; and integrating technology as they write poems, short stories and business proposals. Their schools are fulfilling what many consider the purpose of education: developing young people’s knowledge, skills and attitudes so they graduate from high school ready for college, career and citizenship.

Where schools are working, it is because educators, parents and local communities have developed programs specific to their goals and challenges, within their communities’ setting. There are elements common to all successful schools, but how these elements are implemented and integrated depends greatly on context.

As we consider how to improve public schools on a large scale, we as an education community – the experts in public schools – have identified those commonalities. This report describes them. But we also want to make clear that the “solution” in improvement isn’t the same for every school. Each has a wide range of existing strengths and a unique set of needs. And each child in each school is different. What is a challenge in one school might not be a concern in another. Therefore, schools combine the elements necessary for success in very different ways.

Common Elements of Successful Schools

Based on a review of seminal documents from our member organizations that reflect their expertise and experience in public schooling, the Learning First Alliance has identified six elements around which successful schools are organized, whether formally or informally. Each of these elements has an impact on several
important aspects of schooling, which LFA members also define, including what success looks like for school leaders, school counseling programs, students integrating technology and more. These elements are:

- Focus on the Total Child
- Commitment to Equity and Access
- Family and Community Engagement
- Distributed Leadership
- Strong, Supported Teaching Force and Staff
- Relationship-Oriented School Climate

**Focus on the Total Child**
Successful schools support all students’ needs in helping them become an effective, empowered learner. They design and carry out instructional programs enabling all students to reach academic and other vital outcomes – instructional programs that go beyond basic reading, math and science and include the arts, physical education, computer science, foreign languages, history and other important subjects constituting a rich educational experience. They provide opportunities for students to explore careers and nurture their talents and interests. These schools also share responsibility for students’ social/emotional and physical development, with successful schools helping students lay a solid foundation in these essential areas.

Focus on the total child considers both factors inside the classroom (such as instruction) and outside of it (such as family engagement and a child’s readiness to learn). This section emphasizes the instructional aspects of this focus. Additional issues will be discussed in later sections.

- **Standards:** Successful schools provide good instruction based on state standards for student learning that define the knowledge and skills essential for college and career readiness. These standards emphasize deep understanding of subject matter, critical thinking and problem solving. They also foster interdisciplinary instruction with purposeful connections across subject areas.

- **Curriculum and pedagogy:** In successful schools, teachers use effective curriculum (*what* they teach) and pedagogy (*how* they teach) to lead students toward the standards they are expected to reach. Such a curriculum is a tool that supports instruction – it does not drive it. Such a pedagogy includes techniques and strategies known to contribute to learning.

- **Assessment:** Successful schools consider the multiple goals of assessment, including accountability, informing instruction and continuous improvement of both educators and students, and use the right tool for the right purpose. They get clear and timely information about student performance. Rather than waiting for a final, summative score, these schools use formative assessments to continuously inform instruction. They also use a range of information about student abilities and do not rely on test scores alone to drive their work.
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- **Individualized learning**: Successful schools recognize that, although all students should be held to the same expectations for learning, each student starts at a different place and has a unique way of learning and distinct interests. They customize learning to individual students, for example, using tiered systems of intervention to address the needs of those at risk of falling behind, engaging in culturally sensitive teaching or adjusting the pace at which material is covered. One major aspect of individualized learning involves special education. In successful schools, individualized education programs (IEPs) and the entire special education program are constantly evaluated and modified to meet each child’s needs.

- **Integrated use of technology**: Successful schools integrate technology into instruction across the curriculum, driven by learning objectives. These schools make this technology accessible to all students, and they ensure students use it appropriately. They are guided by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards for Students, which are designed to empower student voice and ensure learning is a student-driven process.

- **Social/emotional learning**: Successful schools incorporate social/emotional learning (SEL) throughout their buildings. In doing so, they are guided by agreed-upon definitions, standards and competencies, developed by experts, such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). In these schools, this work is considered essential, and every adult – administrators, teachers, coaches, school counselors, parent leaders and other stakeholders – understands and is engaged in it every day.

**Commitment to Equity and Access**

Successful schools ensure all students have access to high-quality services and supports enabling them to set and reach high goals for learning. In these schools, *equity* does not necessarily mean *equality*; they recognize some students need additional resources to have the same opportunity for success as others. They ensure the needs of all student populations are met, including English-language learners, students with disabilities, children of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ students and others. Successful schools recognize such students are assets and diversity is a strength.

These schools demonstrate commitment to equity in many ways:

- **Opportunity to learn**: Successful schools consider the distribution of opportunities and resources in their community, and they work to overcome inequities in them. They address the “opportunity gap” in many ways, based on local needs, for example, by offering quality early childhood education, enriching summer school opportunities, providing trauma-informed instruction and enabling connections to social services and health care.

- **Academic opportunities**: Successful schools ensure all students have access to challenging, high-level coursework and a rich curriculum, offering academic supports to accelerate progress so this access is meaningful. They offer cours-
es in the arts, physical education, computer science and other subjects contributing to a complete education. They also integrate materials that are reflective of the diversity of their school, including in classrooms and school-sponsored activities, to help all students connect to their classes and coursework.

- **Digital equity**: Successful schools make sure all students can benefit from learning opportunities driven by advances in technology. For example, they work to provide students who lack home resources with devices and with opportunities to use broadband in school as well as libraries and other locations.

- **Equity in discipline**: Successful schools treat all students fairly and appropriately. They eliminate disparities in discipline practices, including suspension and expulsion rates, between students of color and students with disabilities and their peers. In general, they use discipline strategies that keep all students in school and learning.

- **Identity equity**: Successful schools are constantly considering how to meet the needs of all students and working to address new challenges as demographics and social norms shift, with a new light shining on something schools have not frequently dealt with: identity equity. Successful schools are, for example, working to provide appropriate accommodations for transgender (including transitioning) youth and to meet the needs and protect the rights of students who wear hijabs, turbans or other articles that serve as a core piece of their identity.

**Family and Community Engagement**

In addition to being filled with knowledgeable, capable and caring educators, successful schools engage families and communities in support of students. This work is backed by a solid body of research showing that involving families and community members in important roles improves student learning and development, as well as strengthens the capacity of teachers and schools.

- **Family engagement**: Family engagement is a critical component of successful schools. These schools believe all parents want the best for their child and work to identify and overcome barriers to family engagement. They build trust and proactively invite families to participate in their child’s education. In addition, they utilize evidence-based family engagement practices known to have an impact on students and schools. They are guided by the National PTA’s National Standards for Family-School Partnerships.

- **Community engagement**: Successful schools are transparent and accountable to their communities. The most successful engage the broader community in many ways, building support for schools and student learning and development that goes beyond basic funding. This engagement takes a variety of forms, with the needs of the local community driving the work schools and their partners do together. It can include:
  - Extending learning beyond school walls, such as through workplace learning opportunities, field trips building on classroom lessons or after-school activities.
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- Partnering to provide services and supports for students and their families, such as health clinics or English language instruction, or connecting families to housing or food assistance.
- Advocating for schools with community organizations such as businesses providing support for schools in bond elections and legislative debates.

Distributed Leadership

The most successful schools define leadership broadly. Leadership is distributed – to principals, teachers, community members and others in the building – and decision-making is a shared endeavor. These schools also display:

- **High standards for school leadership**: In successful schools, principals and other administrators meet the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration and widely embraced by the education community. The standards lay out expectations for school leaders in 10 areas, which work together to improve student learning.

- **Communications leadership**: Effective communications are a key component of successful schools. Their leaders make the investments of time and resources necessary to build solid, trusting internal (among staff) and external (with parents, families and other community members) relationships. They strategically integrate communications into their daily life in ways that support teaching and learning, guided by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) rubrics of practice and suggested measures for successful school communications programs.

- **Teacher leadership**: In successful schools, teacher leaders play a critical role. They take responsibility for instruction, which can include observing colleagues and offering feedback, working with colleagues to conduct research and leading professional learning, among other activities. Teacher leaders also play a key role in forming partnerships with community organizations and families, and they are included with principals and district leadership for discussions and decision-making about important school policies. The National Education Association (NEA), National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and Center for Teaching Quality, as part of their Teacher Leadership Initiative, have developed Teacher Leadership Competencies that help articulate a vision for transformative teacher leadership.

- **School counselor leadership**: In successful schools, school counselors participate as members and leaders of the educational team. These schools understand that comprehensive, data-driven school counseling programs are an integral component of the school’s academic – and overall – mission, and they deliver such programs to all students. “The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs” outlines the key components of high-quality programs.

- **School board leadership**: The most successful schools and school districts have strong local school boards that view their most important responsibility...
as working with their communities to improve student achievement in the public schools. Research shows that the more effective the board, the better a school district’s students perform. The National School Boards Association (NSBA) publication “The Key Work of School Boards” identifies a framework for effective school governance.

- **Leadership development**: At successful schools, the development of educational leaders – whether teachers, principals, school counselors or others – is supported. Such development shares key characteristics identified as common in high-quality school leader preparation and professional learning programs, including structures allowing participants to learn among colleagues and learning opportunities focused on solving specific problems that integrate theory with practice. Most educational organizations offer leadership development programs.

### Strong, Supported Teaching Force and Staff

Successful schools thrive, in large part, because they are staffed with outstanding, caring educators, including teachers, principals, school counselors and others, who are well-educated, well-prepared and well-supported. Educators in these schools benefit from continuous learning and support along the professional continuum. This includes:

- **High standards for teaching**: Successful schools recognize the importance of high standards for teaching and work to ensure their teachers meet them, investing the resources – including time, money and more – that it takes to develop a strong teaching force. These standards include NBPTS’s National Board Standards, NEA’s Principles of Professional Practice, and ISTE’s Standards for Educators.

- **Pre-service education**: Successful schools recognize the importance of educator preparation grounded in clinical practice, opening their doors to teacher candidates for such experiences and for mentoring by teacher leaders. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Clinical Practice Commission has defined essential proclamations and tenets for clinical preparation that is both effective and responsive to local contexts.

- **Continued professional learning**: Successful schools offer comprehensive teacher induction programs to new teachers, tailored to the needs and context of the educator and the school and community they serve. Strong districts also provide such induction programs for principals and other educators. In addition, successful schools offer all teachers and staff high-quality professional learning opportunities, including peer-led experiences where possible. These learning opportunities meet rigorous standards developed by Learning Forward in collaboration with other educational organizations.

- **Evaluation and accountability**: Successful schools regularly evaluate the effectiveness of teachers, principals and other staff using multiple measures. These evaluations serve as one component of a comprehensive professional...
growth and development system, providing educators with clear and actionable feedback on their performance. Evaluation systems are designed at the local level, with input from multiple stakeholders, including those working under them. Both NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have developed frameworks identifying the characteristics of successful teacher evaluation systems, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) together developed such a framework for principal evaluations. There are many similarities between these frameworks, and several of the shared characteristics also apply to evaluations for other educators, such as school counselors, although in successful schools each role is evaluated based on the position’s responsibilities.

Relationship-Oriented School Climate
Successful schools pay close attention to school climate and culture, recognizing that learning thrives in an atmosphere that is safe, welcoming and respectful to all. There are several attributes common to school climate in successful schools, including:

- **Supportive learning community**: Successful schools establish and enforce norms for conduct and behavior that allow all students and staff to feel safe, connect to the school and want to teach and learn. Everyone – the principal, faculty, staff and students – is expected to be respectful of, listen to and look out for one another. While there are high expectations for both learning and behavior for all, individual differences and abilities are recognized, attended to and celebrated.

- **Supporting positive behavior**: Successful schools have comprehensive plans for reinforcing positive behavior and addressing violations of the school’s norms and rules. These schools have orderly and focused classrooms, where teachers, in consultation with students, set clear rules, routines and equitably enforced behavioral expectations. They have mechanisms for early identification and intervention in situations where conflicts might arise. Successful schools aim to keep students in school, working to ensure all students learn from their behavior.

- **Valuing and using data**: Successful schools study data about student outcomes, student needs, instruction, professional learning, school climate, communications, family and community engagement and community context. They use what they learn strategically in setting goals, measuring progress against them and making changes in behaviors when needed. These schools give educators access to professional learning that supports their understanding and use of data and ensure families and other stakeholders have access to and understand what the data means. In this work, they adhere to principles for protecting and guiding the use of students’ personal information, identified by the education community in an effort led by the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) and the Data Quality Campaign.
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- **Culture of collaboration:** Successful schools embrace collaboration. They promote productive, cooperative relationships between teachers, administrators and other staff. They also recognize the importance of teachers working in collaboration and encourage a sense of collective responsibility for students’ academic, social/emotional and career development, where teachers, school counselors, principals and other specialized staff all play important roles. They engage all stakeholders, including students, teachers, families and community members, in decision-making.

**Moving Toward Success**

Schools are exciting places to be. They teem with life wrapped around the hope and obstacles each child faces. Yet challenges exist within them, as well as controversy of how to “fix” them.

The education community, including teachers, parents, administrators, school counselors, teacher educators, technology educators and others, has a good idea of what needs to be done to improve schools. They also know that one change won’t lead to magic. To make progress, each community must develop an individual response to its context that incorporates the elements presented here.

Although the professionals and parents leading local schools understand the elements identified in this paper are important to all successful schools, we rarely talk about how the six – focus on the total child; commitment to equity and access; family and community engagement; distributed leadership; strong, supported teaching force and staff; and relationship-oriented school climate – should be integrated and uniquely developed in each school. Success demands that the public has a greater understanding of the complexity of schools, as well as what to look for and support to ensure all students graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful.
In 1990, with the introduction of the National Literacy Act, the sponsoring members of Congress cited that during World War II, a high school graduate on the deck of a carrier in the middle of the Pacific Ocean had to use an aircraft manual of 43 pages. By 1993, Navy aircraft flying off an aircraft carrier would have a manual of more than 70,000 pages – and that was 25 years ago. Jobs requiring workers who can simply look at a piston engine and change the spark plugs have been replaced by jobs requiring individuals who know how to read and interpret fluctuating pressure gauges and technical documents, as well as decide which of several complex and expensive tools are needed for a delicate repair operation.

Today, 9.4 percent of public school students speak a language other than English at home, and 50.5 percent are children of color, according to the latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that, nationally, 18 percent of children live in poverty, and approximately 16.5 percent live in food-insecure households according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Compare this with what public school students looked like in the mid-1990s, when NCES data showed that around 33 percent were children of color, and 5 percent were English-language learners.

The world has changed. Schools need to meet the challenges our society faces today. And in many places, they are. Public schools across the nation are providing students with a world-class education, equipping them with knowledge and skills needed for their future success.

Unfortunately, some schools aren’t, and even the best schools don’t always meet the needs of every student. What will it take for us to see successful schools at scale? And what do these schools look like?
When it comes to education, everyone has a different definition of success, including the 12 members of the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of national and international education associations representing the 10 million local leaders charged with the education and well-being of the nation’s more than 50 million public school students each day.

So we gathered their seminal documents – the documents reflecting what each of our member organizations defines as successful practice for schools and education practitioners, both in general and regarding specific issues. We reviewed them, looking for common themes as well as areas where one organization has unique expertise that can benefit the wider education community. And we found them.

These documents reveal consensus on six elements around which successful schools are organized, whether formally or informally. Those elements each encompass several important aspects of schooling, which LFA members also define, including what success looks like for school leaders, school counseling programs, students integrating technology and more.

What this effort also revealed is that there is no one answer as to what successful schools look like. They can look very different from one another, based on student and community needs. Successful schools may be organized around these elements, but how they are implemented and integrated depends greatly on context.

If you are reviewing this document with an eye toward improving a specific school, keep your own circumstances in mind. Consider where your strengths already are, and where you could make improvements. Rather than looking here for specific programs to implement, use the standards and indicators included to help you gauge where your school is in relation to the elements, as well as ideas that can strengthen your work in each arena.

If you are reviewing this document with an eye toward policy change at the local, state or federal level, do the same – remember the importance of context. Consider how new policies in these arenas will interact with current practices and regulations, taking a comprehensive approach to improvement efforts.

Regardless of why you are reviewing this document, remember these elements are not “pick as you please.” A successful school needs all of them to help best prepare students for their future.

The students who are entering school in 2018 will be graduating in 2031 to a world where enhancing crops will mean the difference between millions of people living or dying, and where robots will identify rare minerals on asteroids. Health care will regularly include genetic interventions. Problem-solving will be a shared endeavor with machines that “think,” and those same machines will need
to be repaired by people who know how to regulate electrical output while at the same time twisting a wrench in what may well be a demanding environment of space, the ocean, a deep mine or on a moving craft.

We must prepare all our students for the opportunity to succeed in such a world.

Richard Long, Ed.D.
Executive Director
Learning First Alliance
During the 1990s, the relationship between the education community and the public fundamentally changed. Polls began to report that education and the economy were the two most important issues to Americans. In the ensuing 20 years there have been several massive efforts to change schools, both to improve historically underperforming schools and to transform learning in all schools in ways that effectively use advances in technology and understanding of how people learn. Yet when it comes to change at a large scale, these fixes have always fallen short, especially when driven by government or by large philanthropic organizations. Why?

In 2018, the education community knows how to provide world-class education. In many places, it has been – and is being – done. In fact, most public schools are centers of excitement. Public elementary, middle and high school students across the country are building robots and 3D-generated artificial limbs; creating original works of art; collaborating with local government officials to solve community problems; and integrating technology as they write poems, short stories and business proposals. Their schools are fulfilling what many consider to be the purpose of education: developing young people’s knowledge, skills and attitudes so they graduate from high school ready for college, career and citizenship.

Yet, to hear many debates, one would think that public education is a disaster. One might also believe public schools are stuck in the past, resistant to changes as technology and our country’s needs evolve.

To be sure, there are schools that need to improve, particularly when it comes to meeting the needs of all students. However, even schools needing improvement are making progress; each year, the vast majority of these schools are setting and meeting new goals and pushing students higher and higher.
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We know, however, that the rate of improvement is too slow. But while we want change to come faster, we can’t just wish it so. We must advocate for and implement what we know works, including lessons we can learn from other nations, such as the importance of public support for the education profession, systematized professional learning and more. Instead, many call for market forces to lead the way; for more federal rules to direct change along specific, unproven paths; or for the latest silver bullet to solve all of education’s challenges. It is worth noting these policies haven’t worked in the past – at least not at the scale we need. In fact, they have wasted time and opportunities.

We know that where schools are working it is because educators, parents and local communities have developed programs specific to their opportunities and challenges, within their own context. Nationally, we must set high goals, such that every student graduates ready for success in career, college and life. We must recognize that not all communities have the same resources and that to reach our national goals there must be federal and state funds, in addition to local funds, to ensure all students are in a school with the resources it needs to prepare them for their future. And we must set guidelines to ensure all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability status, home language or any other characteristics, are treated fairly, with access to opportunities that will allow them to thrive. But many issues, including those related to instruction, family engagement and professional learning, among others, are best decided at the local level.

But there is more. There are elements underlying successful schools, although how they are actualized varies greatly community by community. The challenge for us in the education community is to bring forward core ideas on what success requires – to identify what is common in successful schools. For the public, the challenge is to understand that the solution isn’t the same for each school or school district – each has a wide range of existing strengths and weaknesses and a unique set of needs. What is a challenge in some schools isn’t even a concern in another. And each child in each school is different. Therefore, the mix of elements needed for success in each school must be different too.

This report presents six key, and several supporting, elements common to successful schools. Most of these have been explored in other papers. But two things make this work unique. One is consensus. These elements were not named by one individual or one organization. They were identified through review of the published work of the education community, as represented by the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of national and international education associations representing the 10 million local leaders (including teachers, parents, school board members, superintendents, principals, school counselors and others) charged with the education and well-being of the nation’s more than 50 million public school students each day. In other words, these are the elements that those working directly with and on behalf of students every day recognize as necessary for success.
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The other is interaction. We don’t believe that it is the mere presence of each of these elements that makes a school successful. It is the way they all work together in the context of a specific school and community. Much in the same way that the elements of the periodic table bond together in different ways to form different molecules, these elements work together in different ways dependent on individual environments to create successful schools.

This report does not offer a silver bullet list of practices or a set of actions to direct school improvement efforts. Rather, it is a guide for understanding successful schools. Educators can use it to evaluate their school’s current strengths and identify challenges to address. Educator preparation programs can use it to help aspiring educators (be they teachers, school counselors, principals, superintendents or others) understand their work. Parents, other family members and communities can use it to better understand what their children need to succeed and the supports and advocacy their schools would benefit from. And policymakers can use it to help them understand the impact of their legislative, regulatory and funding decisions on outcomes for students.

Common Elements of Successful Schools

Successful schools do not all look alike. Each school reflects its community’s beliefs and character, and each addresses students’ needs in its own way.

However, evidence from successful schools shows these schools share a set of common elements affecting their management, staff, day-to-day operations and student learning. These elements include:

**Focus on the total child:** Successful schools support students’ needs in helping them become effective, empowered learners. They design and carry out instructional programs that go beyond the basic subjects and constitute a rich educational experience. They provide opportunities for students to explore careers and nurture their talents and interests. These schools also share responsibility for students’ social/emotional and physical development, with successful schools helping students lay a solid foundation in these essential areas. Focus on the total child considers both factors inside the classroom (such as instruction) and outside of it (such as a child’s readiness to learn).

**Commitment to equity and access:** Successful schools ensure all students have access to high-quality services and supports enabling them to set and reach high goals for learning. In these schools, equity does not necessarily mean equality; they realize some students need additional resources to have the same opportunity for success as others. Successful schools ensure the needs of all student populations are met, including English-language learners, students with disabilities, children of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ students and others. These schools recognize such students are assets and diversity is a strength.
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**Family and community engagement:** Successful schools engage families and communities in support of students. These schools believe all parents want the best for their children and work to build trust and invite families to participate in their children’s education. They are transparent and accountable to their communities. The most successful engage the broader community in many ways, building support for schools and student learning and development that goes beyond basic funding.

**Distributed leadership:** The most successful schools define leadership broadly. Leadership is distributed – to principals, teachers, community members and others in the building – and decision-making is a shared endeavor.

**Strong, supported teaching force and staff:** Successful schools are staffed with outstanding, caring educators who are well-educated, well-prepared and well-supported. Educators in these schools benefit from continuous learning and support along the professional continuum.

**Relationship-oriented school climate:** Successful schools pay close attention to school climate and culture, recognizing that learning thrives in an atmosphere that is safe, welcoming and respectful to all.

We recognize there is a great deal of overlap between these six elements, and many issues in education touch more than one. For example, issues of student discipline can be related to each of the six elements.

Although the professionals and parents who are leading local schools understand the elements identified in this paper are important to all successful schools, we rarely talk about how to integrate and uniquely develop the six in each school. Success demands that the public has a greater understanding of the complexity of schools, as well as what to look for and support to ensure all students graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful.
Focus on the Total Child

Students are at the heart of successful schools, which address all students’ needs in helping them become effective, empowered learners.

To develop young people’s knowledge, skills and attitudes so they graduate from high school ready for college, career and citizenship, a complete education must include academic content and much more. To be sure, academic knowledge and skills are critically important. And successful schools work hard to design and carry out instructional programs enabling all students to reach those vital outcomes – instructional programs that go beyond basic reading, math and science and include the arts, physical education, computer science, foreign languages, history and the other important subjects that constitute a rich educational experience.

Schools also share responsibility for young people’s social/emotional and physical development. Students cannot become productive, contributing members of the community if they have strong academic skills but lack empathy or an understanding of how to cope with adversity. Likewise, students need to remain healthy, both physically and emotionally, to continue contributing to their community throughout their lives. Successful schools help students lay a solid foundation for the development of these essential attributes.

Focus on the total child considers both factors inside the classroom, such as instruction, and outside of it, such as family engagement and a child’s readiness to learn. This section emphasizes the instructional aspects of this focus. Later sections will cover additional issues.

Standards
In successful schools, instruction is linked to state standards for student learning. Over the past several years, states have been implementing standards for college
and career readiness, such as the Common Core State Standards. Such standards have at times been controversial, but teachers report they are already making an impact on teaching and learning, according to 2017 research from the Center on Education Policy.

The new standards represent an improvement over previous state standards in several major respects. First, they were developed with the explicit intent of defining the knowledge and skills essential for college and career readiness, something not all previous standards had directly addressed. And, as 2011 research by David T. Conley and colleagues found, the standards do indeed reflect what entry-level college students and employees should know and be able to do. The grade-by-grade progression of standards is coherent and intended to lead all students, not just some, to college and career readiness.

Second, the standards represent high and worthwhile goals for students. They emphasize deep understanding of subject matter, critical thinking and problem solving, and they foster interdisciplinary instruction with purposeful connections across subject areas. When implemented effectively, the standards promote deeper learning and are an essential component of successful schools.

Curriculum and Pedagogy
To be sure, standards by themselves do not improve instruction; they simply set the parameters for teaching. In successful schools, teachers use effective curriculum (what they teach) and pedagogy (how they teach) to lead students toward the standards they are expected to reach. Such a curriculum exposes students at all levels to literature, mathematics, history, civics, science, the arts, foreign languages, career and technical education and other important content areas that provide a strong foundation for future success. Such a pedagogy includes techniques and strategies known to contribute to learning, such as contextualization (connecting school to students’ lives) and instructional conversation (teaching through conversation).

Share My Lesson
Ensuring educators have the right tools also supports school and student success. Share My Lesson, run by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is one such tool. It is an online community in which pre-K–12 educators collaborate and learn from one another using materials aligned to high standards, including the Common Core State Standards; Next Generation Science Standards; and individual state standards in English, math, science and social studies. Share My Lesson’s new standards center makes it easy for educators to find lessons aligned to specific standards as well as tag and share their own standards-aligned lessons to support one another.

Visit the site at https://sharemylesson.com/
An effective curriculum has several key features. First, it is aligned to the standards. That is, curriculum topics match those the standards expect students to learn in each grade. Successful schools choose materials appropriate for the standards, and they provide teachers with time to develop or adapt materials for their students.

Second, the curriculum has evidence of effectiveness. Careful evaluations have shown that some materials are better than others in improving student learning, and this research informs decisions about selection and purchasing in successful schools and systems.

Third, successful schools recognize that an effective curriculum is a tool that supports instruction; it does not drive instruction.

In addition to purchased curriculum, successful schools acknowledge that experienced teachers have the expertise needed to develop their own materials and lessons in ways that meet the specific needs of the students they serve. By providing teachers with access to excellent materials and to colleagues to share lessons, these schools ensure quality of curriculum that is appropriate for their own contexts.

Assessment

Assessment is integral to good instruction. Good teachers have always checked students’ understanding and used the information to make adjustments in their teaching and keep parents informed of their children’s progress. Successful schools have always used assessment results to inform decisions about professional development or programming changes.

In recent years, however, there has been extensive debate around testing. Many education stakeholders, including many parents and teachers, question whether students are subject to too many tests, whether the tests take up too much instructional time, whether they provide useful and usable information and if they are being used appropriately or if they provide negative incentives that encourage teaching to the test at the expense of a broad curriculum. Successful schools get the balance right. They consider the multiple goals of assessment, including accountability, informing instruction and continuous improvement of both educators and students, and use the right tool for the right purpose.

What does that look like? First, successful schools use assessment systems that provide clear, timely information about whether all students, including English-language learners and students with disabilities, can demonstrate their knowledge and skills. The assessment systems also show where students might be struggling, which helps students understand what they need to do to improve, teachers understand where they need to adjust their instruction and school leaders understand where they should make professional development investments.
FOCUS ON THE TOTAL CHILD

These schools recognize that a final, summative score is not enough; formative assessments are continuously informing instruction.

Second, successful schools use a range of information about student abilities and do not rely on test scores alone to drive their work at either the student or school level. This information reflects both progress toward and mastery of skills and knowledge students need to be successful. It includes grades, which provide insights about the work students do every day, not just what they can do on test day. These grades are aligned to standards so they inform students, parents and school leaders about how students are progressing on what they are expected to learn. This information can also include performance-based assessments and writing samples or graduation, college matriculation and job placement rates.

By using multiple measures of student and school progress, successful schools avoid some of the negative features of test-based accountability. Teachers are not pressured to teach to the test, since tests are only one measure of student progress. And schools do not spend days and weeks on test preparation. Successful schools focus on teaching content and skills, not how to fill in bubbles on a test answer sheet, and they value and assess the content areas that are not subjected to standardized tests as well as those that are.

Individualized Learning

Successful schools recognize that, while all students should be held to the same expectations for learning and development, each student starts at a different place and has a unique way of learning and distinct interests. To address these differences, successful schools customize learning to individual students. This happens in many ways. It can include culturally sensitive teaching, ensuring that students see their own heritage positively reflected in classroom materials, for example, by reading books by diverse authors or featuring diverse characters. It can include accommodations that take into consideration issues that might prevent students from showing mastery of a particular skill, such as vision or hearing issues or language challenges. It can include adjusting the pace at which material is covered, as well as the path by which students acquire it.

Successful schools also use personalized environments to focus on the total child. For example, some successful schools personalize behavior support plans, to ensure they both reinforce positive behavior and correct inappropriate behavior in ways that address the root causes of the behavior, giving each student the support needed to change such behavior in the future. Others allow for career exploration based on students’ interests, giving them perspective on their future and allowing them to see beyond their schooling toward the life they will be entering after high school.

A key component of personalized learning is student agency and empowerment. Many successful schools provide opportunities for students to direct their own
learning. For example, students choose projects based on their interests, and the teacher guides their work and makes sure it incorporates appropriate content and meets high standards for quality.

In addition, many successful schools provide students with opportunities to pursue their own interests and aspirations outside of the classroom. For example, some of these schools have developed dual-enrollment programs, in which high school students simultaneously take courses at a nearby college; by the time they graduate the students may have accumulated enough college credits to earn an associate’s degree. Some partner with employers to allow students to begin working as interns or apprentices while in high school. Under such programs, students develop an understanding of the world of work, gain valuable experience and learn skills that could enable them to earn a recognized industry certificate. At the same time, such programs help motivate students in the classroom by showing them clearly that their school work has relevance in the workplace. These experiences also help develop students’ noncognitive skills, such as their ability

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**Response to Intervention**

Some successful schools address the needs of each child through a framework called Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS), an approach to early identification of students with learning and behavior needs. One framework specifically addressing behavior is Positive Behavior Supports (PBS).

While, as the RTI Action Network notes, there is no single model of the RTI process, it is generally defined as a three-tier program of supports using research-based interventions. Tier 1 often includes high-quality classroom instruction, screening and group interventions. All students are screened regularly to identify those who are underperforming or at risk of falling behind. Once identified, these students receive supplemental services in their classroom. If they make adequate progress, they return to the regular program; if not, they are provided with targeted Tier 2 interventions. These interventions address individual needs and might include small group work in addition to regular classroom instruction. If students do not make significant progress, they are considered for more intensive Tier 3 interventions, which are very individualized support (such as daily one-on-one instruction or very small group work) in areas targeted for improvement.

It is often only after efforts at each of these tiers that the school recommends evaluation for special education services. In successful schools, at all stages, parents are informed of their child’s progress and how they can support it at home. As a research review by Charles Hughes and Douglas Dexter shows, in many cases this approach has resulted in fewer students being referred for the development of a formal IEP.
to collaborate with peers, persevere to complete a project and learn how to learn, which help develop them into lifelong learners, according to a 2012 National Research Council report on developing transferable skills.

One major aspect of individualized learning involves special education, defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as “specifically designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.” Students receiving such services must have an individualized education program (IEP) that lays out the child’s learning needs, the services the school will provide and how progress will be measured. These needs can be academic, or they can be physical or social/emotional. In successful schools, these plans and the entire special education program are constantly being evaluated and modified to meet each child’s needs.

Integrated Use of Technology
Successful schools are also transforming education to an increasingly student-centered, student-empowered endeavor by taking advantage of technology advances. Just as adults routinely use everything from e-mail to spreadsheets to complex video productions as part of their careers, so students increasingly utilize technological tools to enhance and expand their learning.

Understanding that future careers will depend on the rapid adoption and understanding of technology across many forms, successful schools integrate it into instruction across the curriculum by providing students with opportunities to access and synthesize a vast array of materials and resources, to communicate with peers and experts from around the world and much more. Students create new products, such as videos, websites and hands-on materials made with 3-D printers, and use virtual reality to engage in new situations and activities in realistic settings – opportunities that make much more authentic and engaging learning possible.

Although these technologies offer promise, as The New Media Campaign and Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) have documented, schools face challenges in making them a reality for all students. One is that the availability of technology varies widely. Although nearly all schools are wired to the Internet and most schools have broadband capability, many families, particularly low-income families, lack access to broadband. This is a problem for schools that want to expand learning beyond school boundaries, such as by offering “flipped” classrooms in which students watch video lectures at home and solve problems in class.

In addition, the availability of more sophisticated technological tools, such as 3-D printers and virtual reality, also varies. If these tools strengthen learning and future readiness, then gaps in access to them are unconscionable. Successful school systems provide the resources necessary to make technology accessible to all.
students, including necessary professional development for teachers, parents and leaders to successfully support teaching and learning usage of these tools.

To help them use technology effectively, students benefit from a construct or set of goals to aspire to when thinking about their personal use. They need to be able to use the tools safely and productively. Successful schools ensure learning leads technology usage and that students use technologies appropriately and learn from and with them. In fact, educational technology effectively supports these schools in their implementation of certain learning models, such as personalized learning.

To clarify the expectations for student learning with technology, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has long provided standards to the educational community. The standards for students, updated in 2016 with input from more than 3,000 educators, fall into seven categories:

1. **Empowered learner**: Students leverage technology to take an active role in choosing, achieving and demonstrating competency in their learning goals, informed by the learning sciences.
2. **Digital citizen:** Students recognize the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of living, learning and working in an interconnected digital world, and they act and model in ways that are safe, legal and ethical.

3. **Knowledge constructor:** Students critically curate a variety of resources using digital tools to construct knowledge, produce creative artifacts and make meaningful learning experiences for themselves and others.

4. **Innovative designer:** Students use a variety of technologies within a design process to identify and solve problems by creating new, useful or imaginative solutions.

5. **Computational thinker:** Students develop and employ strategies for understanding and solving problems in ways that leverage the power of technological methods to develop and test solutions.

6. **Creative communicator:** Students communicate clearly and express themselves creatively for a variety of purposes using the platforms, tools, styles, formats and digital media appropriate to their goals.

7. **Global collaborator:** Students use digital tools to broaden their perspectives and enrich their learning by collaborating with others and working effectively in teams locally and globally.

In addition, ISTE also offers guidance for educators and administrators. Successful schools consider these standards as they plan and implement new learning technologies.

**Social/Emotional Learning**

Recognizing students cannot achieve academic success or meet academic standards without the necessary underlying skills, successful schools incorporate social/emotional learning (SEL) throughout their buildings. In doing so, they are guided by agreed-upon definitions, standards and competencies that provide structure to ensure this critical work is not treated as an add-on or addressed only haphazardly as time and resources permit.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions.” This learning takes place in many environments, including the home, community, school and classroom, and must be specifically supported in each. CASEL has identified five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective and behavioral competencies related to SEL:

- **Self-awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one’s own emotions, thoughts and values and how they influence behavior, as well as the ability to accurately assess one’s strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism and a growth mindset.
A Note on Student Privacy

While using technology to improve student learning and development, successful schools take care to ensure that their students’ privacy is protected.

In 2015, CoSN and the Data Quality Campaign (DQC), along with 32 leading national education organizations, released 10 principles for protecting and guiding the use of the personal information of America’s students – the first-ever effort by major national education associations to articulate commonly held principles around the use and safeguarding of student data. These principles are:

1. Student data should be used to further and support student learning and success.

2. Student data are most powerful when used for continuous improvement and personalizing student learning.

3. Student data should be used as a tool for informing, engaging and empowering students, families, teachers and school system leaders.

4. Students, families and educators should have timely access to information collected about the student.

5. Student data should be used to inform and not replace the professional judgment of educators.

6. Students’ personal information should only be shared, under terms or agreement, with service providers for legitimate educational purposes; otherwise the consent to share must be given by a parent, guardian or a student, if that student is over 18. School systems should have policies for overseeing this process, which include support and guidance for teachers.

7. Educational institutions, and their contracted service providers with access to student data, including researchers, should have clear, publicly available rules and guidelines for how they collect, use, safeguard and destroy those data.

8. Educators and their contracted service providers should only have access to the minimum student data required to support student success.

9. Everyone who has access to students’ personal information should be trained and know how to effectively and ethically use, protect and secure it.

10. Any educational institution with the authority to collect and maintain student personal information should:
    - have a system of governance that designates rules, procedures and the individual or group responsible for decision-making regarding data collection, use, access, sharing and security and use of online educational programs;
    - have a policy for notification of any misuse or breach of information and available remedies;
    - maintain a security process that follows widely accepted industry best practices;
    - provide a designated place or contact where students and families can go to learn of their rights and have their questions about student data collection, use and security answered.
- **Social awareness**: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, as well as the ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school and community resources and support.

- **Responsible decision-making**: The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns and social norms, as well as the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

- **Self-management**: The ability to successfully regulate one’s emotions, thoughts and behaviors in different situations, effectively managing stress, controlling impulses and motivating oneself, as well as the ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

- **Relationship skills**: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups, as well as the
ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has developed comprehensive student standards that integrate the CASEL competencies with competencies and standards developed by other groups, including Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), ACT, College Board, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the Partnership for 21st Century Learning. ASCA’s Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K–12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student identify and prioritize the specific attitudes, knowledge and skills students should be able to demonstrate. They include six mindset standards of attitudes and beliefs students should have about themselves in relation to academic work.

1. Belief in development of whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional and physical well-being
2. Self-confidence in ability to succeed
3. Sense of belonging in the school environment
4. Understanding that postsecondary education and lifelong learning are necessary for long-term career success
5. Belief in using abilities to their fullest to achieve high-quality results and outcomes
6. Positive attitude toward work and learning

These mindset standards are developed and demonstrated through three groups of behavior standards:

- **Learning strategies**: Processes and tactics students employ to enhance learning, such as critical thinking, creativity, organizational and study skills, self-motivation and self-direction, media and technology skills and goal-setting.
- **Self-management skills**: Ability to focus on a goal despite obstacles, to avoid distractions and temptations and to prioritize long-term pursuits over short-term pleasures. These standards include responsibility; self-control and self-discipline; ability to work independently; coping skills; personal safety; and the ability to balance school, home and community.
- **Social skills**: Behaviors that improve social interactions with peers and adults, such as oral and written communications, listening skills, empathy, social responsibility, collaboration and cooperation skills and self-advocacy.

In successful schools, all staff in the building address these competencies. For example, they are evident in classrooms, as teachers encourage students to set high goals and standards and to persevere and work their way through problems. They are also addressed as teachers model and encourage democratic behavior by ask-
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ing students to listen to their peers respectfully and engage their arguments. They are addressed by leadership in policies around discipline, as schools utilize positive behavior supports. In successful schools, every adult – administrators, teachers, coaches, school counselors, parent leaders and other stakeholders – understands and is engaged in promoting social/emotional development every day.
Successful schools maintain high expectations for all students and provide welcoming environments for students from all cultures and parts of the world. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), as of fall 2014, children of color, once called “minorities,” now make up the majority of public school students in the United States. In addition, 9.4 percent of public school students are English-language learners, and 13 percent are students with disabilities. Half qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, according to a 2015 analysis of NCES data by the Southern Education Foundation. As of 2016, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that 18 percent of children live below the poverty line, and according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, approximately 16.5 percent of children live in food-insecure households. In real terms, most of these children don’t know where their next meal is coming from. Even with accounting for overlap, if we add all of these numbers together about one-third of all students come to school with greater needs than others – and that doesn’t include all students who experience trauma, undergo physical or mental health challenges, face instability at home or otherwise encounter issues that have an impact on them at school.

These numbers are important to feel as we humanize the data. And what the data shows is that, unfortunately, equity is an ideal the United States hasn’t reached. Achievement gaps between white, more affluent students and their peers who are low-income or of color are large and persistent, despite gains in recent years. For example, while the U.S. Department of Education reports that the national high school graduation rate reached a record high of 83.2 percent for the class of 2015, the graduation rate for black students was 74.6 percent. For English-language learners, it was 65.1 percent. These gaps make clear the urgency of ensuring all schools are successful for all students.

We must also consider the changing context around equity in our society. Historically, the mainstream education community has mostly considered equity as issues
of race and of socioeconomic status. But as we reflect on the state of schools today, we must ensure the needs of all student populations are met, including English-language learners, students with disabilities, religious minorities, LGBTQ students and others. Successful schools recognize such students are assets and that diversity is strength.

In addition, educational equity in the 21st century means something different than it did in the past. Those who have been working in education policy for decades remember a time when equity was just about access. In the 1960s and '70s, many assumed that making certain opportunities available to all would level the playing field, with any differences in outcomes due to individual decisions and efforts.

The pendulum then swung to a focus on equity on the back-end: achievement gaps. Educators realized simply providing access to the same learning opportunities was not enough to improve outcomes for groups of students. In many places, this led to a focus on remedial education, presenting basic material repeatedly, more slowly and/or in smaller pieces to low-performing students, who were often low-income students or students of color.

**Opportunity to Learn**
Successful schools have moved beyond this, recognizing remedial education will not yield a satisfactory outcome. They keep a focus on achievement and add a focus on inputs: the opportunities available to students. These schools ensure all students
have access to high-quality services and supports enabling them to set and reach high goals for learning and development. In these schools, equity does not necessarily mean equality; successful schools recognize that some students need additional resources to have the same opportunity for success as others. These schools are working to overcome what has been termed the “opportunity gap.”

This work is closely related to focus on the total child, and it means different things in different contexts. For example, driven by the understanding that students’ intellectual ability is affected by the richness of their environment early in life, when they are age zero to five, in some school systems this means ensuring every child arrives to kindergarten ready to learn by offering quality preschool and pre-K experiences. Or, given a growing understanding of the impact trauma has on children, both those who experience it in the neighborhood and in the home, schools might take a deliberate approach to addressing it. In some schools, the opportunity gap might be addressed through cultural sensitivity, working to ensure students are not disadvantaged by cultural practices, such as observing certain religious holidays or customs that fall outside the majority culture. Or it might mean providing access to health services, such as vision and dental care.

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**Opportunity Zone Closes the Gap**

In 2008, as projections showed schools in Vancouver, Washington, would see a significant rise in the number of students in poverty, district leaders decided to tackle the challenge head-on, launching a district and community-based initiative to address learning and socioeconomic issues in poverty-impacted schools. They started by identifying an “Opportunity Zone” with 14 elementary, middle and high schools serving large concentrations of students affected by poverty and mobility. They then redirected approximately $1.5 million in categorical and basic education funds to these schools to help remove barriers to student success. Three goals focused the resources and work: 1) increase family and community engagement, 2) ensure high-quality instruction, and 3) provide flexible learning environments at each of these schools.

One key aspect of this work was that, in several phases, each school in the zone established a family-community-resource center (FCRC), staffed by a coordinator. Each center then developed its own menu of services, based on the needs of the community it served—for example, early childhood education, family literacy programs, food pantries, clothes closets, referrals to mental-health services, after-school activities, housing support and more.

Vancouver did see a rise in the number of its students experiencing poverty. But since implementing the Opportunity Zone, it also has seen dramatic increases in graduation rates, parent engagement and low-income students taking advanced courses, among other outcomes. Today, 18 schools have FCRCs, and a mobile FCRC provides services to schools without site-based centers.
One key way schools address the opportunity gap is through school meal programs, which provide access to nutritious meals for children. Many children arrive at school each day without adequate nourishment, which impairs their ability to focus on schoolwork. Far fewer students participate in school breakfast programs than school lunch programs. According to the Food Research and Action Center, only 56 low-income children participated in school breakfast for every 100 who participated in school lunch in the 2015-16 school year, despite qualifying for both. Successful schools study the barriers to school meal participation and work to overcome them, including by participating in “alternative school breakfast” programs, which move breakfast out of the cafeteria and into classrooms and hallways. AASA, the School Superintendents Association, supports a network of districts to increase school breakfast participation. As the spring 2017 issue of School Leadership & Governance reports, after implementing alternative school breakfast programs, these districts have both increased the number of students eating school breakfast and seen other results, with districts reporting decreases in tardiness, school suspensions and nurses visits, as well as increases in academic achievement.

Whatever their community’s greatest challenges, successful schools are leading the charge in developing programs and opportunities that ensure students come to school prepared to succeed. Yet there is still the need for a greater push to reduce the debilitating effects of poverty.

**Academic Opportunities**

Successful schools ensure all students have access to challenging coursework and a rich curriculum. Schools have steadily increased the availability of high-level courses, particularly in mathematics, but gaps remain in a variety of areas. For example, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights reports that as of 2012, a fifth of all high schools did not offer algebra II, and 11 percent did not even offer algebra I – and these schools disproportionately served low-income students and students of color. As of 2010, NCES found that schools serving disadvantaged students are less likely to offer courses in music or the visual arts, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress 2014 Civics Assessment shows that students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are less likely than their peers to discuss current events, participate in role-playing or debates, go on field trips, have outside speakers or otherwise experience interactive civic education. Successful schools not only offer such courses and opportunities, they ensure that all students have access to them.

Of course, equal access is insufficient if students come to school without adequate preparation for challenging coursework. Successful schools provide students with the academic and social support they need to accelerate their progress and become ready to take advantage of the opportunities the schools provide. That requires school systems to have the resources they need to ensure schools serving large numbers of students from low-income homes can have access to high-level coursework.
Equal access is also insufficient if students feel disconnected from their classes based on their racial, religious or other identities. Successful schools integrate materials reflective of their school’s diversity, including in classrooms and school-sponsored activities (such as multicultural nights), as well as training staff in cultural competency.

Successful schools also recognize their students’ individual assets and needs and dedicate the resources necessary to address the issues students face. One area in which that is particularly important is with English-language learners. Successful schools recognize these students know a second language and can navigate between two cultures, a skill that is important in an increasingly interconnected world. These schools also acknowledge important characteristics about the population they serve, for example, that some students speak a mixture of English and another language with neither language dominant, and direct resources as needed. Successful schools invest the time, money and capacity for skilled educators to develop the programs so these students can learn challenging content and higher-order skills while they are continuing to develop their English-language competencies.

Successful schools also accommodate the needs of students with disabilities and provide them with the support they need—academic, health and emotional. They are as inclusive as possible and make sure all students welcome and support their peers with disabilities. As previously referenced, one strategy some successful schools use to ensure all students have access to the supports they need is response to intervention (RTI), a tiered-level of interventions allowing for differentiation within a general education classroom as well as with specialized instruction as needed.

Although there are new approaches to many challenging problems, they all require the investment of time and money in having highly educated and supported staff working with small groups of students.

**Digital Equity**

Technology has changed schooling in many ways, and successful schools make sure all students can benefit from those changes. Nearly all schools have computers and access to the Internet, but the digital divide still remains in students’ homes. Families with incomes of less than $25,000 are significantly less likely to have access to a high-speed internet connection at home than families with incomes of more than $150,000, according to analysis of U.S. Census data by the Pew Research Center. Although many students and their families have access to a smartphone, such devices are not necessarily adequate for reading and writing assignments or for interaction with some digital learning resources. This discrepancy leads to what has been termed the “homework gap”—the fact that students from low-income homes are less able to use technology for homework or take advantage of learning opportunities outside of the regular classroom. Only 3 percent of
teachers in high-poverty schools said their students had the digital tools necessary to complete homework assignments, compared with 52 percent of teachers in more affluent schools, according to CoSN’s Digital Equity Action Toolkit. Successful schools provide students who lack home resources with devices and with opportunities to use broadband in school, in libraries and in other places.

**Equity in Discipline**
A strong research base shows students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to perform poorly in school and are more likely to drop out, become victims of substance abuse and become delinquent. Currently, these punishments disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities. Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students, and students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be suspended than students without disabilities, according to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

Successful schools address these disparities and reduce suspensions and expulsions overall so all students can remain in school and learn and develop. This can take a number of different forms, including providing training to staff on differences in cultural norms in interactions; reconsidering current policies, such as zero-tolerance policies for certain actions; or emphasizing different discipline strategies, such as restorative justice.
Identity Equity
A new light is shining on a side of equity schools have not frequently dealt with: identity equity. Among other important, emerging issues, successful schools are now striving to provide the appropriate accommodations for transgender and transitioning youth and to meet the needs and protect the rights of students who wear hijabs, turbans or other articles serving as a core piece of their identity.

A commitment to equity requires schools to be flexible and agile to meet students’ changing needs. For instance, one year may find a school building with several students challenged by autism, the next, students learning English who also have a learning disability, or disadvantaged students’ families constantly moving because of economic upheavals.

The fact is that successful public schools offer a comprehensive program for all students, although in some places, these programs are well-supported by their communities and in others they are creating patchwork interventions to make a difference in students’ lives.
Family and Community Engagement

Successful schools recognize educators cannot do the job alone. In addition to being filled with knowledgeable, capable and caring educators, they engage families and communities in support of students. Research shows that involving families and community members in important roles both supports student learning and development and strengthens the capacity of teachers and schools.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is a critical component of successful schools. Research consistently shows that students with engaged families attend school more regularly, earn higher grades, enroll in advanced courses at higher rates and graduate at higher rates. A 2008 study by economists Andrew Houtenville and Karen Smith Conway suggests that schools would have to spend $1,000 more per pupil, which is about a 10 percent increase in spending, to attain the same results as engaging families.

Increasingly, research is looking at what kinds of family engagement have the greatest impact on students and schools. For example, meta-analyses from William Jeynes in 2012 and from Nancy Hill and Diana Tyson in 2009 found that parents’ academic expectations and aspirations for their children’s future are significant predictors of their achievement and attendance. In their 2002 seminal review of more than 50 studies of family engagement, Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp also found:

- Family engagement practices and programs linked to specific student learning were more likely to affect student achievement than general forms of involvement.
- Family engagement approaches founded on building trust and proactively inviting families to participate in their child’s education were more effective in creating lasting changes in engagement that supports student achievement.
What does family engagement look like in successful schools?

National PTA has developed the following standards to guide successful family, school and community engagement efforts:

**Standard 1 – Welcoming All Families into the School Community.** Families are active participants in the life of the school and feel welcomed, valued and connected to each other, to school staff and to what students are learning and doing in class.

**Standard 2 – Communicating Effectively.** Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning.

**Standard 3 – Supporting Student Success.** Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students’ learning and healthy development both at home and at school and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

**Standard 4 – Speaking Up for Every Child.** Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

**Standard 5 – Sharing Power.** Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence and create policies, practices and programs.

**National Standards for Family-School Partnerships**
Standard 6 – Collaborating with Community. Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services and civic participation.

National PTA supports schools to bring these standards to life through its Schools of Excellence program. In this program, the PTA reaches out to multiple families and educators to help diagnose the school’s approach to family engagement and uses PTA guidance and tools to improve it.

Families face many barriers to engaging in their child’s education – from logistical challenges like speaking another language or having to work during school hours to adaptive challenges like feeling their involvement isn’t welcomed by their child’s school or that they are perceived as problems instead of assets in their child’s life. Successful schools work to identify those barriers by surveying parents formally and informally and then work to overcome them, often extending themselves creatively so they are building connections to all of their families. For example, they may visit students and families at their homes or at neighborhood venues like parks, rather than require families to come to the school. They may offer free food or babysitting at, and move the times of, PTA meetings, parent/teacher conferences and other events to accommodate families. They may set up social media accounts on platforms popular in their community or communicate via text or backpack letter as appropriate to their context.

Regardless of a school’s approach to family engagement, at successful schools efforts to build authentic connections to families are centered on a belief that all parents want the best for their children, and when provided the right invitations and opportunities, they can and do play roles that help their child’s, and all children’s, success.

Parent Teacher Home Visits

Parent Teacher Home Visits build trusting relationships between educators and families. Begun by a group of parents with Sacramento Area Congregations Together, this model was collaboratively designed with district staff, teacher union representatives and parent leaders who shared a common interest in ending the cycle of blame and distrust in their school communities. During parent-teacher home visits, teachers, who opt-in to the program and are compensated for their time, go in pairs to meet with families (at an agreed-upon time) to learn about families’ hopes and dreams for their child, their experiences in school and their child’s unique interests and to open a line of communication for the rest of the school year. Evaluations of parent-teacher home visits have found increased parent engagement, teacher cultural competence and student literacy achievement. Parent-teacher home visits are now in 19 states, institutionalized in some places through district/union collaboration and supported in others by a grassroots-regional infrastructure.
Family and Community Engagement

As the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has pointed out, the public school system is one of the largest investments a community makes. Schools are funded mainly at the local level, and local tax dollars largely pay for teacher salaries, textbooks, technology, supplies and the other components of running a school. Successful schools and districts understand this, and they make efforts to be transparent and accountable to their communities to ensure local citizens continue to supply the funds required to run successful schools.

The most successful schools go further. They engage the broader community in many ways, ensuring community support for schools and student learning and development that goes beyond basic funding.

First, community organizations and agencies help extend learning beyond school walls. For example, by forming partnerships with community organizations, successful schools enable students to participate in internships and service-learning opportunities providing them with exposure to careers and helping them see how

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Community Schools

One model for bridging the gap between the school and the community is community schools. Each of the more than 5,000 community schools across the nation looks different based on the unique challenges its students and families face, but they share a belief that schools should be the center of the community, where teachers, families, community members and service providers come together to promote not only student learning but stronger families and healthier communities.

The highlight of the model is a set of partnerships between the school and local community organizations, designed to meet the needs of the community and create better conditions for teaching and learning. These needs include and go beyond student academic needs. They can include physical and mental health needs, perhaps addressed through partnerships to allow onsite health clinics or dentist offices, and activities that improve families’ access to social service programs. They can also include parent education and career counseling, mentoring opportunities, robust after-school programming or any other programming necessary to meet the unique needs of a particular school.

Key to the model is development of a needs assessment to identify priority areas and a strategic plan to address them. Also key is identifying a “community schools coordinator” who oversees all this work, engages partners and manages the integration of activities with the academic program and schedule. Among their results, community schools have been shown to increase attendance, grades, test scores, behavior, enrollment in college preparatory classes and graduation rates.
FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Business Support for Schools

In Kentucky, the state Chamber of Commerce and the Prichard Committee (the most prominent education advocacy group in the state) enlisted about 75 notable business leaders to urge the legislature to maintain high academic standards. As Kentucky Chamber of Commerce CEO David Adkisson explained in an interview with LFA, recognizing the need to close the skills gap, many members of the business community signed on to public efforts promoting the need for and benefit of these standards. In large part because of these efforts, Kentucky faced much less public backlash than did other states in implementing college- and career-ready standards.

schoolwork is applied in the workplace and in the community. Such exposure is a critical ingredient in college and career readiness. Partnering organizations might provide experiences during the school day that build upon lessons students learn in class, including field trips to museums, fire stations, nature centers and other venues. These organizations also provide out-of-school time activities (including sports, the arts, tutoring and other activities) that extend learning beyond the school day. Or they might donate learning materials, including books, computers or broadband internet access, that allow students to continue learning at home.

Second, at most successful schools, community organizations, businesses and agencies partner to provide services and supports for students and their families. These partnerships with community agencies make it easier for students and their families to gain access to needed services, such as health clinics and English-as-a-second-language instruction. They might connect families to housing or food assistance, offer immigration or legal services or address issues of substance abuse or trauma exposure. Business partners might volunteer in the school, offering employees paid time off to read to, tutor or mentor students. Critically, in the most successful schools, the local community’s needs drive the services and supports schools partner to provide.

Third, partnerships with community organizations help in advocating for schools. Businesses in particular have a strong voice in the community and in state legislatures and help provide needed support for schools in bond elections and legislative debates.
Leadership is a key element in successful schools. In fact, a landmark study of the evidence on school leadership conducted by the Wallace Foundation concluded that the quality of school leadership is one of the most important school-based factors in student achievement, second only to the quality of instruction.

The most successful schools define leadership broadly. The leader is not just the person at the top of the organizational chart. Leadership is distributed to teachers, community members and others in the building. This can take many forms, but it starts with the principal or district leader setting the tone for shared leadership. In some schools, it may include the school leader collaborating with the school community to build and maintain a vision, direction and focus for student learning and development. To then carry out that vision, the school leader creates a school council with representation from teachers, parents and students and assigns meaningful roles to each. School leaders work with teachers to form teacher-led teams that have the responsibility of leading instructional improvement and professional learning.

As this example illustrates, the buck may stop with the principal (or superintendent, in the case of successful districts), but that person shares decision-making duties with others.

High Standards for School Leadership
In successful schools, principals and other school leaders meet the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration. The education community has embraced these standards, originally adopted in 1996 and updated in 2015.
The standards are intended to guide leaders in their work, as well as how they are prepared, hired, developed, supervised and evaluated. They also are intended to inform government policies and regulations.

The standards lay out expectations for leaders in 10 areas. These are:

1. **Mission, vision and core values**: Effective educational leaders develop, advocate and enact a shared mission, vision and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.

2. **Ethics and professional norms**: Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
3. **Equity and cultural responsiveness:** Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

4. **Curriculum, instruction and assessment:** Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

5. **Community of care and support for students:** Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.

6. **Professional capacity of school personnel:** Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

7. **Professional community for teachers and staff:** Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

8. **Meaningful engagement of families and community:** Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

9. **Operations and management:** Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

10. **School improvement:** Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, these aspects of leadership work together to improve student learning.

While these standards lay out expectations for what all school leaders should accomplish, in successful schools leaders engage with additional resources to ensure continuous development and that they are meeting their specific challenges. For example, NASSP’s Building Ranks Framework places leadership as the foundation for the two domains of building culture and leading learning, which lead to professional and personal success as adults, all under the umbrella of student success in college, careers, citizenship and life.

Although NASSP’s leading learning domain is applicable to all school leaders, NAESP goes a step further and has developed competencies to create and support connections between the worlds of birth–5 and K–12 and to ensure successful pre-K–3 continuums in their schools.
**Competency 1: Embrace the pre-K–3 early learning continuum.** Leaders of effective pre-K-3 communities know that a strong foundation in early learning sets the stage for future academic and personal achievement.

**Competency 2: Ensure developmentally appropriate teaching.** Quality instruction has particular significance during the pre-K-3 years, when children master foundational skills and concepts, develop attitudes toward school and form ideas about themselves as learners.

**Competency 3: Provide personalized learning environments.** Children in safe, supportive, nurturing and developmentally appropriate learning environments are regarded as learners with individual needs, each with different skills and interests, working at their own pace, practicing and refining as much as they like and moving to mastery of different competencies at different rates.

**Competency 4: Use multiple measures of assessment to guide student learning growth.** Effective principals know that the goal of assessment must be to improve teaching and learning.
Competency 5: Build professional capacity across the learning community. Effective principals build collaborative working environments that support the professional growth of every member of the learning community, with the belief that in order to improve the learning of children, educators themselves must be continually learning.

Competency 6: Make schools a hub of pre-K–3 learning for families and communities. Effective principals work with families, prekindergarten programs and community organizations to build strong pre-K–3 linkages.

Technology Leadership
Nowhere is the rapid change in education more evident than in technology. The ISTE Standards for Administrators guide school and district leaders in supporting digital-age learning and creating technology-rich learning environments to lead the transformation of the educational landscape.

- **Visionary leadership:** Educational administrators inspire and lead development and implementation of a shared vision for comprehensive integration of technology to promote excellence and to support transformation throughout the organization.
- **Digital-age learning culture:** Educational administrators create, promote and sustain a dynamic digital-age learning culture that provides a rigorous, relevant and engaging education for all students.
- **Excellence in professional practice:** Educational administrators promote an environment of professional learning and innovation that empowers educators to enhance student learning through the infusion of contemporary technologies and digital resources.
- **Systemic improvement:** Educational administrators provide digital-age leadership and management to continuously improve the organization through the effective use of information and technology resources.
- **Digital citizenship:** Educational administrators model and facilitate understanding of social, ethical and legal issues and responsibilities related to an evolving digital culture.

Communications Leadership
By creating a culture of communications, successful school leaders build support for their goals and vision, and they effectively engage stakeholders in pursuit of a common cause.

These leaders, whatever their official job title, understand effective communications at all levels is a critical component of school and district success, and they prioritize it. They make the investments of time and resources necessary to build solid, trusting internal relationships with other staff in their building and external relationships with parents, families and other community members. They understand the importance of listening as well as speaking in these efforts, and they
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

take advantage of places where their stakeholders already gather to engage with them, including both tools such as social media and meetings at venues such as the Chamber of Commerce or faith-based institutions.

Rather than view communications as an add-on to their other work, successful school leaders strategically integrate it into their daily life, creating proactive opportunities to support their overall mission and goals. NSPRA has developed rubrics of practice and suggested measures to guide school communications programs. According to them, successful school communications programs have four critical function areas:

- **Comprehensive professional communications programs** that serve as the basis for all communications deployed from a school or district.
- **Internal communications** that recognizes the invaluable role of all district and school personnel as representatives of their organization; includes a proactive program that provides them with the skills, information and resources they need to effectively serve as ambassadors; and includes a communications infrastructure that ensures timely and consistent delivery of information to internal stakeholders.
- **Parent/family communications** that recognizes the relationship between family engagement and student success and includes a proactive program to build collaboration and trust to support student learning.
- **Branding/marketing communications** that helps position the school or district in the community’s mind and supports the organization’s vision.

Although each individual communications program looks different, NSPRA notes that one overarching component should never change: the link between school communication and the support of teaching and learning. The best communications programs are built to do just that – support the direct goals of educational programs.

It may seem difficult to identify the link between communications and instruction. But when assessing all that a strong communications program can do and include, the impact on teaching and learning becomes clear. Just consider what some successful schools and districts have experienced in response to their comprehensive communications programs:

- Increasing volunteers to assist with instruction
- Developing parent resources to help parents help their children
- Creating professional development for teachers and principals to help improve communication with parents and others
- Conducting attendance campaigns for students and staff
- Devising new initiatives to build support for healthy children
- Providing assistance in building active support in school budget deliberations and elections
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

- Increasing partnerships for school programs
- Boosting the impact of local school foundations for more classroom resources

The list goes on. It illustrates that with communications, as with other issues in education, successful school leaders always remember their *raison d’etre* – to improve teaching and learning.

**Teacher Leadership**

In most successful schools, the role of teacher leaders is particularly important. “A Systematic Approach to Elevating Teacher Leadership,” a publication of Learning Forward, cites a key definition of such leadership as a means of improving schools. As the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Commission put it, teacher leadership “is a powerful strategy to promote effective, collaborative teaching practices in schools that lead to increased student achievement, improved decision-making at the school and district level, and create a dynamic teaching profession for the 21st century.”

Teacher leaders in successful schools take responsibility for what they know best: instruction. In addition to teaching their own classes, they also observe their colleagues and offer feedback on their teaching. They keep up with research and disseminate materials with new findings. They work with colleagues to conduct their own research to test new practices and collect and analyze data on the results. And they lead professional learning, providing their colleagues with guidance on new approaches.

In these schools, teacher leaders also form partnerships with community organizations and institutions to expand learning beyond the classroom. They explore opportunities to provide internships and work-based learning experiences for students. They find community resources for learning in libraries, museums and other institutions. And they work with community agencies and organizations to provide health and social services for students and families.

Teacher leaders also reach out to form partnerships with parents. They conduct home visits to get to know the families and engage them in the school, and they meet with families to inform them about the school and policies that might affect them.

In addition, teacher leaders are at the table with the principal and district leadership for discussions about important school policies. They help decide where resources are allocated and what additional resources might be needed.

As part of their Teacher Leadership Initiative, the National Education Association (NEA), National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and Center for Teaching Quality developed the Teacher Leadership Competencies, which “represent an aspirational vision for teacher leadership that can be truly transfor-
mative.” This guidance helps teachers expand their reach, offering overarching competencies as well as addressing three intertwined pathways by which teachers can shape the educational landscape: instructional leadership, policy leadership and association leadership.

**School Counseling Leadership**

In successful schools, school counselors participate as members and leaders of the educational team. These schools understand that comprehensive school counseling programs are an integral component of the school’s academic – and overall – mission. They deliver such programs to all students, much like math, science, English and social studies programs are delivered to all students.
Comprehensive school counseling programs are a collaborative effort between the school counselor, parents and other educators. They value and respond to diversity within the school community, and they ensure equitable access to opportunities and rigorous curriculum for all students. “The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs” outlines the key components of high-quality programs:

- **Foundation**, which includes focusing on student outcomes, teaching student competencies and delivering with professional competencies
- **Management**, which incorporates organizational assessments and tools that are concrete, clearly delineated and reflective of the school’s needs

**The ASCA National Model**

![Diagram of the ASCA National Model]
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

- **Delivery** (where 80 percent or more of time is spent), which is providing services to students, parents, school staff and the community in:
  - Direct student services: in-person interactions between school counselors and students, such as structured lessons delivered in classrooms, individual student planning, counseling in individual or small-group settings or crisis response
  - Indirect student services: services provided on behalf of students as a result of the school counselors’ interactions with others, including referrals for additional assistance, consultation and collaboration with parents, teachers, other educators and community organizations
- **Accountability**, which is analyzing school and counseling program data to determine impact, drive future action and improve future results

In successful schools, these programs are driven by student data to promote and enhance the learning process for all students by helping them improve academic achievement, social/emotional development and college and career readiness.

School Board Leadership

School boards play a key role in successful schools and systems. Local school boards (also known as boards of education, school committees, school directors or trustees) are elected, or occasionally appointed, to be leaders and champions for public education in their states and communities. They are responsible for employing the superintendent; developing and adopting policies, curriculum and the budget; overseeing facilities issues; and adopting collective bargaining agreements. School boards’ most important responsibility is to work with their communities to improve student achievement in their local public schools.

School boards represent the community’s beliefs and values. Research shows that the more effective the board, the better a school district’s students perform. The NSBA has identified a framework for effective school governance, The Key Work of School Boards. This framework focuses on five key areas reflective of best practice:

- **Vision**: Effective school boards establish a clear vision with high expectations for quality teaching and learning that supports strong student outcomes.
- **Accountability**: High academic standards, transparency and accountability undergird a world-class education.
- **Policy**: How a board sustainably exercises power to serve students. Through policy, school boards establish a set of cohesive guidelines to transform vision into reality.
- **Community leadership**: Through public advocacy and community engagement, school boards share their concerns and actions with the public.
- **Board/superintendent relationships**: Both the school board and the superintendent have essential leadership roles that are interconnected but different. To develop a productive partnership, the board and superintendent draw on, and respect, the backgrounds and abilities of everyone involved.
Leadership Development
At successful schools, educational leaders, whether they are teacher leaders, principals, school counseling leaders or others, are supported in their development. The Learning Policy Institute identifies the common elements of high-quality preparation and professional-learning programs for school leaders:

- Strong partnerships between districts and preparation/training programs that involve close collaboration and purposeful and targeted recruitment of principal candidates.
- Structures that support learning in which participants learn in a cohort or network of colleagues.
- Learning opportunities that are problem-based in nature and integrate theory with practice by using internships and on-the-job coaching with an expert principal.
- Curriculum and learning focused on improving instruction to support students’ academic, social and emotional learning and development and school-wide achievement; creating collegial organizations that engage in continual learning and improvement; and using data and collective inquiry to identify problems and address needs in collaboration with staff, parents and community organizations.

Several national educational organizations have developed programs to support leadership development (see sidebar).
Leadership Development Programs

A Wallace-funded initiative, conducted in partnership with AASA, aims to develop a “pipeline” of principals. The six large districts that are part of the program have established standards for leadership, improved preparation programs, changed hiring practices to ensure that leaders were assigned to schools that fit their strengths and provided evaluations based on the standards and support where needed.

The AACTE is also working with the Wallace Foundation to improve school leadership preparation, spotlighting the University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI), which funds seven universities along with state and district partners, to improve university-run principal preparation programs and sharing the lessons learned throughout its membership.

NAESP has created a National Mentor Training and Certification Program to develop a cadre of educators who can mentor and provide ongoing support to principals. Some 30 states have adopted mentoring programs for principals, and this program is designed to ensure that mentors have the skills needed to mentor effectively.

NASSP, meanwhile, has partnered with the consulting group McKinsey & Company to develop an online management course for principals. NASSP also provides on-site support for principals, including the American Express Principal Leadership Development Program, which has provided over $2.5 million in resources to expand effective principal preparation programs at five sites around the nation. One of these projects is “Learning Leaders for Learning Schools,” a partnership between the Arizona chapter of Learning Forward and the Arizona Department of Education that began a three-year leadership training program for 70 current and aspiring principals in 2016.

The AFT’s Teacher Leaders Program brings together a select group of teachers to learn how to take active leadership roles in their schools and communities. The program helps prepare teacher leaders to lead professional development and to advocate for schools and teachers.

NEA, in partnership with the Center for Teaching Quality and NBPTS, has developed the Teacher Leadership Institute to cultivate and train prospective teacher leaders. Each year, fellows participate in a year-long institute that culminates in a self-designed capstone project. The fellows focus on instructional leadership, policy leadership or association leadership.

AACTE offers a Leadership Academy each year to help new deans, department chairs and other academic administrators acquire the skills every successful leader needs. They also bring together their state-level leadership to learn more about policy leadership and their role in it, and they offer the Holmes Program to support students from underrepresented backgrounds entering the education profession in a variety of ways.
Strong, Supported Teaching Force and Staff

Successful schools are successful, in large part, because they are staffed with outstanding, caring educators who are well-educated, well-prepared and well-supported. Such educators go the extra mile to support students, and this is the norm in successful schools. It does not just happen, however. The educators in these schools benefit from continuous learning and support along the professional continuum, with successful schools and systems recognizing the importance of, and engaging in, high-quality pre-service training, effective hiring practices, ongoing high-quality professional learning, collaborative work environments, engagement of educators’ professional judgment, meaningful evaluation tied to professional growth that helps improve practice and opportunities for staff to take on leadership roles, regardless of official title.

Standards for Teaching
As noted above, successful schools are staffed with outstanding educators that possess certain knowledge, skills and dispositions. According to NEA’s Principles of Practice, for teachers these include the ability to:

- Design and facilitate instruction that incorporates the students’ developmental levels, skills and interests with content knowledge.
- Develop collaborative relationships and partner with colleagues, families and communities focused on meaningful and deep learning.
- Provide leadership and advocacy for students, quality education and the education profession.
- Demonstrate in-depth content and professional knowledge.
Participate in ongoing professional learning as an individual and within the professional learning community.

Utilize multiple and varied forms of assessment and student data to inform instruction, assess student learning and drive school improvement efforts.

Establish environments conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Integrate cultural competence and an understanding of the diversity of students and communities into teaching practice to enhance student learning.

Utilize professional practices that recognize public education as vital to strengthening our society and building respect for the worth, dignity and equality of every individual.

Strive to overcome the internal and external barriers that impact student learning.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NPBTS) has also defined what the most successful teachers know and are able to do, developing a set of standards for teachers that is based on five core propositions:

- **Proposition 1:** Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
- **Proposition 2:** Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
- **Proposition 3:** Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
- **Proposition 4:** Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
- **Proposition 5:** Teachers are members of learning communities.

In addition, ISTE offers standards for educators that provide a roadmap to helping students become empowered learners. In their 2017 update, these standards focus on educators’ responsibilities in seven different roles:

1. **Learner:** Educators continually improve their practice by learning from and with others and exploring proven and promising practices that leverage technology to improve student learning.
2. **Leader:** Educators seek out opportunities for leadership to support student empowerment and success and improve teaching and learning.
3. **Citizen:** Educators inspire students to positively contribute to and responsibly participate in the digital world.
4. **Collaborator:** Educators dedicate time to collaborate with both colleagues and students to improve practice, discover and share resources and ideas and solve problems.
5. **Designer:** Educators design authentic, learner-driven activities and environments that recognize and accommodate learner variability.
6. **Facilitator:** Educators facilitate learning with technology to support student achievement of the ISTE Standards for Students.
7. **Analyst:** Educators understand and use data to drive their instruction and support students in achieving their learning goals.
The Architecture of Accomplished Teaching

1st TOTAL CHILD
Your Students - Who are they? Where are they now? What do they need and in what order do they need it? Where should I begin?

2nd EQUITY AND ACCESS
Set high, worthwhile goals appropriate for these students, at this time, in this setting

3rd ENGAGEMENT
Implement instruction designed to attain those goals

4th LEADERSHIP
Evaluate student learning in light of the goals and the instruction

5th STRONG STAFF
Reflect on student learning, the effectiveness of the instructional design, particular concerns, and issues

6th SCHOOL CLIMATE
Set new high and worthwhile goals that are appropriate for these students at this time

The Five Core Propositions

PROPOSITION 1: Teachers are committed to students and their learning
PROPOSITION 2: Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students
PROPOSITION 3: Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning
PROPOSITION 4: Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience
PROPOSITION 5: Teachers are members of learning communities

© NATIONAL BOARD FOR PROFESSIONAL TEACHER STANDARDS

Successful schools acknowledge the importance of standards for teaching, and they work to ensure their teachers meet them. However, they also recognize that such teachers are not born but created. They invest the resources, including time, money and more, that it takes to develop a workforce that meets these standards, from preparation of applicants to the continuous learning of veteran educators.
Pre-service Education
Although there is a continuum of professional learning, successful schools and school systems form partnerships with outstanding teacher preparation programs to ensure they maintain a steady supply of teachers who are well-prepared and ready to teach their students.

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, an organization that accredits institutions that provide teacher and leader preparation, has developed a set of standards for providers that represent a definition of a high-quality program. These standards, updated in 2013, are:

- **Content and pedagogical knowledge**: The provider ensures that candidates develop a deep understanding of the critical concepts and principles of their discipline and, by completion, are able to use discipline-specific practices flexibly to advance the learning of all students toward attainment of college and career readiness standards.

**edTPA**

One way successful schools and systems can determine whether a teacher candidate is ready for the classroom is through edTPA. Developed by researchers from Stanford University, edTPA is a multiple-measure assessment system aligned to state and national standards – including the Common Core State Standards and the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) – that can guide the development of curriculum and practice around the common goal of making sure new teachers are able to teach each student effectively and improve student achievement.

The assessment systematically examines an authentic cycle of teaching aimed at subject-specific student learning goals, using evidence derived from candidates’ practice in their student teaching or internship placement. A cycle of teaching, captured by the three tasks that compose an edTPA portfolio, includes: 1) planning, 2) instruction and 3) assessment of student learning. Authentic and job-related evidence includes lesson plans, instructional materials, student assignments and assessments, feedback on student work and unedited video recordings of instruction. Also assessed through the three tasks are candidates’ abilities to develop their students’ academic language and to justify and analyze their own teaching practices.

The assessment was first used in 2013. According to its 2015 annual administrative report (the most recent data available), more than 27,000 teacher-candidates participated in edTPA in 2014-15, its second year. As of 2017, 759 institutions in 40 states and the District of Columbia are using edTPA in some form.
Clinical partnerships and practice: The provider ensures that effective partnerships and high-quality clinical practice are central to preparation so candidates develop the knowledge, skills and professional dispositions necessary to demonstrate positive impact on all pre-K–12 students’ learning and development.

Candidate quality, recruitment and selectivity: The provider demonstrates the quality of candidates is a continuing and purposeful part of its responsibility from recruitment, at admission, through the progression of courses and clinical experiences and to the decisions that completers are prepared to teach and recommended for certification. The provider demonstrates that development of candidate quality is the goal of educator preparation in all phases of the program.

Program impact: The provider demonstrates the impact of its completers on pre-K–12 student learning and development, classroom instruction and schools and the satisfaction of completers with the relevance and effectiveness of their preparation.

Provider quality assurance and continuous improvement: The provider maintains a quality assurance system comprised of valid data from multiple measures, including evidence of candidates’ and completers’ positive impact on pre-K–12 student learning and development. The provider supports continuous improvement that is sustained and evidence-based and that evaluates the effectiveness of its completers. The provider uses the results of its inquiry and data collection to establish priorities, enhance program elements and capacity and test innovations to improve completers’ impact on pre-K–12 student learning and development.

Whenever possible, successful schools and districts hire staff from educator preparation programs that meet these quality standards. Importantly, they recognize the need for teachers whose preparation has been fully grounded in clinical practice (interwoven with academic coursework), as opposed to a model emphasizing academic preparation that is only loosely tied to school-based experiences.

AACTE has formed a Clinical Practice Commission that has defined essential proclamations and tenets for effective clinical preparation. These proclamations and tenets are essential to establishing and advancing clinical educator preparation that is both effective and responsive to the local contexts in which it is being implemented. They are:

- The central proclamation: Clinical preparation is central to high-quality teacher preparation.
- The pedagogy proclamation: As pedagogy is the science of teaching, the intentional integration of pedagogical training into an educator preparation program is the cornerstone of effective clinical practice.
- The skills proclamation: Clinical practice includes, supports and complements the innovative and requisite skills, strategies and tools that improve
teacher preparation by using high-leverage practices as part of a commitment to continuous renewal for all learning sites.

- **The partnership proclamation**: Clinical partnerships are the foundation of effective clinical practice.
- **The infrastructure proclamation**: Sustainable and shared infrastructure is required for successful clinical partnership.
- **The developmental proclamation**: Clinical partnerships are facilitated and supported through an understanding of the continuum of development and growth that typifies successful, mutually beneficial collaborations.
- **The empowerment proclamation**: As emerging professionals, teacher candidates are essential contributors and collaborators within clinical programs and partnerships.
- **The mutual benefit proclamation**: Boundary-spanners, school-based teacher educators and university-based teacher educators play necessary, vital and synergistic roles in clinical educator preparation.
- **The common language proclamation**: Coalescing the language of teacher preparation and teaching around a common lexicon facilitates a shared understanding of and reference to the roles, responsibilities and experiences essential to high-quality clinical educator preparation.
- **The expertise proclamation**: Teaching is a profession requiring specialized knowledge and preparation. Educators are the pedagogical and content experts. It is through the assertion and application of this expertise that they can inform the process and vision for renewing educator preparation.

Successful schools do their part to ensure these types of clinical experiences are available to teacher candidates. These schools open their doors for clinical experiences for candidates, and their teachers serve as mentors, enabling future teachers to learn their practice from experts.

**Continued and Constant Professional Learning**

Learning does not stop when a teacher, principal or other school professional earns a certificate; in fact, it is just the beginning of the next phase of their professional growth. In successful schools and systems, educator preparation programs and schools work together to ensure a productive and seamless transition to the classroom. They offer formal, comprehensive, multiyear teacher induction programs to all new teachers. These programs are tailored to the specific needs and context of the educator and the school and community they serve. They often include assigning new teachers to the supervision of experienced, accomplished mentors who offer support and guidance. They also include regular observation and assessments on new teachers’ classroom performance, providing feedback and professional learning opportunities based on those assessments. Strong systems also provide induction and mentoring programs with similar characteristics for principals and other educators.
It is not only early-career educators that need ongoing learning and support to grow their skills. Successful schools offer all teachers and staff high-quality professional learning opportunities, including peer-led experiences where possible. In these environments teachers are typically members of learning teams that share collective responsibility for the success of their teams’ students. They engage in cycles of learning that involve data analysis (students and their own), goal setting, selection of evidence-based learning strategies, development or refinement of lessons and classroom assessments, application, support, feedback and evaluations. This is in contrast to teachers who only have access to an occasional professional development day or workshop. Learning Forward offers a set of standards for professional learning that were developed in collaboration with other educational organizations. They are in state policy and/or regulations in more than 35 states, and they outline the essential elements of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership and improved student results. They are:

- **Learning communities**: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility and goal alignment.
- **Leadership**: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate and create support systems for professional learning.
- **Resources**: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring and coordinating resources for educator learning.
- **Data**: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator and system data to plan, assess and evaluate professional learning.
- **Learning designs**: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.
- **Implementation**: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change.
- **Outcomes**: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.

Successful schools design their learning systems around these standards.

It is worth noting that one area that requires deliberate professional learning is using technology effectively in instruction. Initial preparation is not enough. The continual development of upgrades and new products means teachers need ongoing support and professional learning to keep up and understand ways to
integrate the tools into instruction. Fortunately, there are many local and global learning communities that help teachers collaborate to improve their practice with technology. Teachers in successful schools are active, and many are leaders, in these endeavors. In addition, some successful schools use technology coaches, guided by the ISTE Standards for Coaches, to help support their peers in becoming digital-age educators.

It is worth noting that, overall, professional learning in successful schools also serves another important purpose: to develop a leadership pipeline. By providing effective teachers with leadership opportunities, such as serving as mentors to new teachers, successful schools expand their influence beyond their own classroom, should they choose to remain in it, and also help prepare them to become assistant principals or principals, if they so choose. In that way, schools ensure a steady supply of well-prepared and well-supported school leaders.

**Evaluation and Accountability**

Successful schools and systems regularly assess the effectiveness of teachers, principals and other school staff both formally and informally, providing meaningful feedback to help improve practice and contribute to the continual learning of education professionals.

Many professional organizations have developed evaluation tools for their specific fields. For example, NEA and AFT have developed frameworks of the characteristics of successful teacher evaluation systems. NASSP and NAESP have together developed a framework for evaluating principals’ performance. ASCA has developed a framework for school counselor evaluation. There are many similarities and characteristics among these frameworks that apply to evaluations for other educators. In successful schools, each role is evaluated based on the responsibilities of the position, with the recognition that no position should be evaluated using the criteria or standards of another position. For example, a teacher evaluation instrument should not be used to evaluate school counselors or librarians.

These frameworks all recognize that the main purpose of evaluation is to build capacity – to identify strengths and areas of need so educators can improve both their practice and student learning. It serves as one component of a comprehensive educator professional growth, support and development system.

In successful schools and systems, the standards of practice on which evaluations are based are clear and transparent so teachers and school leaders can assess their own progress and work toward improvement. The standards for assessing practice are likewise clear and transparent.

In these schools and systems, evaluation systems have two distinct components. First, they offer ongoing, consistent, formative assessments of performance for the sole purpose of fostering professional growth and improved practice. They provide
educators with clear and actionable feedback on their performance against widely accepted standards of practice and how well they are contributing to student learning and development, as well as fulfilling additional responsibilities depending on their role. This data and feedback contributes to the work of learning teams as well as guides individuals’ professional learning and career trajectories. Second, these evaluation systems also offer periodic summative assessments that are used for quality assurance, ensuring the community that its educators are equipped to effectively educate children.

These systems consider multiple measures of performance data, which can include student scores on valid assessments, other student work (such as oral and written presentations), observations, portfolio reviews and appraisal of lesson plans (or equivalent documents for roles where that is not appropriate). They also use information provided through peer reviews, professional learning communities and other forms of feedback and support.

In successful schools and systems, those performing evaluations have the support they need to do so effectively. This includes access to effective professional devel-

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**Peer Assistance and Review**

In peer assistance and review (PAR) systems, experienced teachers mentor, support and evaluate the practice of their peers.

First developed in Toledo, Ohio, in the early 1980s, there are currently many different versions of PAR programs. Normally, they are collaborative labor-management programs that shift what is typically an administrator responsibility – teacher evaluation – to teacher leaders (often called “consulting teachers”). Consulting teachers are usually selected after a rigorous application process and released from classroom duties either full- or part-time to support new teachers (or experienced teachers who need additional assistance).

Responsibilities vary based on program but can include outlining professional growth plans, observing teachers and providing feedback, providing direct support in targeted areas (such as student assessment or family communications), writing formal evaluations and making employment recommendations.

Evidence cited by both AFT and NEA suggests PAR programs help develop a culture of collaboration and instructional improvement, including the collegial support networks known to increase teacher retention (and, by extension, student achievement). It also suggests that consulting teachers tend to provide more comprehensive and nuanced feedback in their observations and assessments than administrators do, which means that teachers receive more detailed information to help them improve their practice.
opment to help them make the evaluation process meaningful to both those they are evaluating and, ultimately, the students they serve. This professional development ensures that evaluators are able to effectively observe instruction or other responsibilities, provide appropriate feedback and identify professional learning resources that meet each educator’s needs. In these environments, the evaluators’ professional judgment is respected, and they play a major role in determining how the results of an evaluation are used.

Successful evaluation systems are designed collaboratively at the local level, with input from multiple stakeholders, including those who will be evaluated using the system. They take into consideration the context in which a school sits, including the resources available to it and to those working within it, and accommodate necessary differentiation based on that context. There is no one-size-fits-all solution that can come from the national level.
Learning thrives in an atmosphere that is safe, welcoming and respectful to all, where students, staff, families and community members feel connected to both the school and each other. There are several attributes common to school climate in successful schools, outlined in a 2001 Learning First Alliance report and updated below to reflect advances in the field.

**Supportive Learning Community**
Successful schools maintain a physical plant that promotes safety and community. They also establish and enforce norms for conduct and behavior that allow all students and staff to belong to the community, feel safe and want to teach and learn.

To operate in this way, successful schools set a tone that all can follow. Everyone – the principal, the faculty, the staff and students – is expected to be respectful of one another, to listen to one another and to look out for one another. This tone is evident in the lunchroom, the hallways and the classrooms.

Teachers follow these norms by recognizing and attending to each student’s individual abilities and learning styles. They take care to ensure students are connected to what they are learning, seeing their cultural identity reflected in a positive manner in classroom lessons and materials. They set high expectations for both learning and behavior for all students. Although teachers expect all students to learn what they need to know and be able to do, they know individual students learn in different ways, based on what they already know and how they approach academic content. They provide instructional support acknowledging those differences. In addition, in schools with such a culture, all staff form supportive
RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED SCHOOL CLIMATE

relationships with students, and students have frequent opportunities for participation, collaboration, service and self-direction, strengthening their connection and commitment to the school community.

A supportive school climate is also one in which everyone, adults and students alike, respects differences in race and ethnicity, culture, gender identity, socio-economic status, disability status and other factors. To make that a reality, school leaders advocate and model a set of core values essential in a democratic, civil and global society, including in its conflict revolution and disciplinary processes.

Supporting Positive Behavior
Successful schools have comprehensive plans for reinforcing positive behavior as well as addressing those who engage in behavior violating the school’s norms and rules. These schools have orderly and focused classrooms, where teachers, in consultation with students, set clear rules, routines and behavioral expectations; where positive behavior is recognized, celebrated and rewarded; and where students have a clear understanding of consequences for violating rules.

At these schools, rules are enforced equitably. They have mechanisms for early identification and intervention in situations where conflicts might arise. Successful schools aim to keep students in school and learning as they consider disciplinary action, taking care to use suspension, expulsion and alternative placement sparsely. Instead, they often implement restorative practices. These practices, as detailed by the Schott Foundation’s Opportunity to Learn Campaign, Advancement Project, AFT and NEA, aim to build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing. They recognize every individual’s role as a positive, contributing member of the learning community and promote the responsibility of everyone in the building in sustaining a positive school environment. These practices view conflict and misbehavior as op-

Restorative Justice
One example of restorative practice is restorative justice. Inspired by indigenous justice systems, this evidence-based practice focuses on relationships. Unlike punishments that focus only on the rule broken, responding to original harm with additional harm, restorative justice aims to get at root causes of behavior and prevent recurrences. It brings together the person who has been harmed with the person responsible in a safe and respectful space to right a wrong committed and repair injured relationships. They have the opportunity to discuss both how one was harmed and the other will work to resolve the situation. This practice has been implemented in schools and districts around the world and has effectively reduced suspensions, expulsions and disciplinary referrals.
opportunities for students to take responsibility for their actions and learn about the consequences of their actions, develop empathy and experience making amends. Under these practices, individuals who may have committed harm learn to take full responsibility for their behavior by addressing the individual(s) affected by the behavior. Schools aim for all students, whether they received or experienced harm or were a bystander, to learn from their behavior, empowering change and growth in all members of the community. Types of restorative practices include restorative justice, community conferencing, peer mediation, community service, peer juries, circle process, social/emotional learning and more.

**Valuing and Using Data**

Successful schools also have a data-informed climate, with both student-level and school-level data factoring into decision-making every day. They continually examine their own practices and make changes publicly when warranted. They study data about student outcomes, student needs, instruction, professional learning, school climate, communications, family and community engagement and community context. They use what they learn to first set goals and then evaluate progress against them. Rather than viewing data collection and reporting as a compliance issue, these schools use it strategically as part of a continuous improvement process, working collectively to develop plans to improve operations when needed. They publish their data widely and communicate to a broad range of stakeholders about the current status of their school and what they are doing to improve it.

Successful schools and systems make sure all educators have access to professional learning opportunities supporting their understanding and use of data. They also make sure families and other stakeholders have access both to data itself and to training to help them understand what the data means for both individual children and the school, and they use the data in their family engagement efforts, providing actionable tools based on the data to help families support their child’s learning and the school as a whole.

This use of data transcends a focus on academics. Leaders in successful schools monitor school climate continuously and hold themselves accountable for it. That means conducting regular surveys of students, teachers and parents and publishing the results, along with data on disciplinary actions, staff morale, the availability of needed instructional resources and other factors affecting school climate. By sharing this data with parents and the community, schools enable their partners to play their roles in supporting students more effectively.

As noted earlier, as they engage in efforts to use data most effectively, successful schools and districts take care to protect student privacy. The most successful in this endeavor can earn the Trusted Learning Environment (TLE) Seal. This program, an initiative of the Consortium for School Networking, in partnership with AASA, the School Superintendents Association; the Association of School
Business Officials International; and ASCD, was developed in collaboration with a diverse group of 28 school system leaders from across the country. It requires schools to have implemented student data privacy protections that meet a set of high standards around five core practice areas:

1. **Leadership practice**: Manage and collaborate with stakeholders regarding the use and governance of student data to inform instruction.
2. **Classroom practice**: Implement educational procedures and processes to ensure transparency while advancing curricular goals.
3. **Data security practice**: Perform regular audits of data privacy and security practices and publicly detail these measures.
4. **Business practice**: Establish acquisition vetting processes and contracts that, at minimum, address applicable compliance laws while supporting innovation.
5. **Professional development practice**: Require school staff to conduct privacy and security training and offer the instruction to all stakeholders.

Understanding the critical role technology plays in 21st-century classrooms and schools, and the importance of data in providing a more personalized education for all students, the TLE Seal signals that schools have demonstrated adherence to a set of publicly available standards focused on the protection of student data privacy – something that all successful schools do, regardless of whether they have the official designation.

**Culture of College and Career Readiness**

Successful schools recognize student success in pre-K–12 schools is not an end but a step in the lifelong learning process that should continue across the lifespan. By understanding the need for postsecondary education and ways their formal education helps them prepare for successful careers, students can set goals for their life after high school graduation, making school more relevant and purposeful.

The NASSP Building Ranks Framework identifies college and career readiness as two of the four components of student success and culture as one of the two necessary domains of successful schools.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) has established three components of a schoolwide college and career culture.

1. **Rigor**. A culture of rigor ensures strategies are implemented effectively to help all students access rigorous high school and college preparatory courses, become college-ready and succeed in rigorous courses.
2. **Community activities and college awareness**. A culture of community activities and college awareness ensures there are active links among schools, community stakeholders, local colleges and universities that facilitate field trips, college/career fairs, academic enrichment programs and in-
ternships and increase students’ awareness about colleges and career opportunities.

3. **College-going environment.** A college-going environment is a school climate in which college attendance and enrollment is a clear and prominent expectation, and faculty and staff actively guide students to meet college-readiness requirements for postsecondary success.

According to the Pathways to College Network, an alliance of national partners working collaboratively to improve college access and success for all students, but particularly for underserved students, college-focused schools do the following:

- Expect that all students, including underserved students, are capable of being prepared to enroll and succeed in college
- Provide a range of high-quality, college-preparatory tools for students and families
- Embrace social, cultural and varied learning styles when developing the environment and activities at the school
- Involve leaders at all levels in establishing policies, programs and practices
- Maintain sufficient financial and human resources to support a college-going culture
- Assess policy, programs and practices regularly to determine their effectiveness

**Culture of Collaboration**

Another key aspect of successful schools’ climate is collaboration. They recognize that there is no one stakeholder who can prepare all students for later success; they know that it is a team effort.

As mentioned earlier, these schools continuously engage with families and communities. They embrace models of shared leadership and productive, cooperative relationships between teachers and administration. They also recognize the importance of teachers working in collaboration, rather than isolation, and provide the time and other resources necessary for them to do so. They know that teachers alone are not responsible for students’ academic, career and social/emotional development; school counselors and other specialized staff, along with support staff, all work to help meet every student’s needs. Therefore, they recognize it is important for every faculty and staff member to understand other positions within a school building and their contributions to student success. In addition, successful schools recognize the need to collaborate with other schools and the community to ensure smooth transitions in terms of both process as a whole and for students moving from one level to another, such as students entering kindergarten or transitioning from elementary to middle school.

As implied throughout this document, successful schools engage all stakeholders in decision-making. They bring staff, families, communities and students together
Setting the Stage for College and Career Readiness: Who does it take to help each and every student succeed?

**LEADERS ESTABLISH CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS**
District leaders – including school board members, superintendents, communications professionals and other officials – set the pace for academic achievement and inform and engage all stakeholders in the schools.
Principals and other school leaders create safe and welcoming school environments that support teachers and students.

**TEACHERS INSPIRE LEARNING AND BUILD KNOWLEDGE**
Classroom teachers support and challenge students every day, building knowledge of fundamental and advanced concepts and skills while encouraging curiosity and a love of learning.
Teacher educators in preparation programs and school districts equip current and future teachers with best practices to help students learn.

**COMMUNITIES ADVOCATE FOR EVERY STUDENT**
Parents, families and guardians support and advocate for their children every step of the way.
Community members support students in and out of school and shape a system where every student can succeed.

**SPECIALIZED EDUCATORS PROVIDE NEEDED SUPPORTS**
School counselors and other specialized educators help students develop the behaviors, attitudes and skills needed to succeed, empowering them to thrive academically, socially and emotionally.
Technology specialists in districts and schools ensure students can access knowledge and tools.

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to develop a shared vision for their schools, as well as to identify the assets they already have and what additional supports they need to improve. They continuously work together in an affirmative manner on the evaluation and revision of their plans and activities, viewing the relationship as collaborative rather than adversarial. Input from all stakeholders is viewed as meaningful, and all are welcomed into the discussion.

These schools value student input, ensuring young people have a voice in key decisions affecting them through formal channels, such as surveys, regular presentations from student groups to school or district leadership and/or student representation on school boards or hiring committees, and informal channels, such as casual conversations in the hallways. Teachers have important roles in decisions on professional learning, curriculum development, assessment and other areas. In addition, parents and community members play important roles in helping school and school system leaders develop policies. When such policies reflect community members’ views, community members are much more likely to support the schools and help them succeed.
Schools are exciting places to be. They teem with life wrapped around the hope and challenges that each child faces. In some, 3D printers are producing replacement parts for their heating system; in others, students are building robots that support their communities. Still others have bands producing beautiful music or world-class chess teams. Also in each school are children who don’t know where they will get their next meal or if they are learning English fast enough to move to the next grade. There are teachers needing more time to integrate new technologies into the curriculum or adjust instruction to meet the continually changing needs of each child.

As mentioned earlier, some who seek to dismember support for public schools cite international studies reporting the United States is making little progress in improving our schools. Yet rarely cited is what successful nations do to create a system of great schools. As the OECD has noted, these nations view education as critical to their success and commit to it. They combine quality with equity, including by investing in early childhood education and prioritizing links with parents and communities. They promote the idea that teaching and school administration are worthy activities and support those careers. They also invest in professional learning for teachers and school leaders. In other words, they address many of the elements we have proposed here – ideas that are often missing from discussions about education change in the United States.

Of course, there are other areas where the United States has served as an international inspiration. One of the outcomes of the World Conference for Education for All, as noted by John Comings, the president of the U.S. Coalition for Educa-
tion for All, was the recognition that the U.S. education system has a unique set of strengths. One of them is the local control of education, and another is the national will to teach all students, including those with disabilities. Yet, these weren’t the only achievements for which the United States was lauded. The leaders of the Education for All movement also recognized that the U.S. continues to produce some of the most talented, creative students in the world.

Still, our goal is for this to occur at a large scale, to ensure each student has the opportunity to leave school prepared for success in the modern world. This paper opened with acknowledgment of the challenges existing in our schools, as well as the controversy of how to “fix” them. The school community of teachers, administrators, school counselors, parents, teacher educators, technology specialists and others have a shared understanding of what elements schools need to be successful. They know one change won’t lead to magic. Progress is made differently in each community as it considers their needs as related to each of the six elements identified here.

This acknowledgement requires us to speak differently about education and education change. For example, in a 2017 piece in *The Washington Post*, Jay Mathews reviewed recent research finding that teacher evaluation can be stymied by a lack of follow through by administrators. In reading it, one might think schools are constant, that each school has the same number of administrators responsible for evaluating the same number of teachers, who are distributed among the same number of content areas in which administrators have equal expertise. They could believe that all administrators have equal time and support to undertake the important work of conducting these evaluations. The piece, unflatteringly, states that research shows “principals still trying to make nearly all teachers happy," and the reader is left with the feeling that we need “tougher” administrators.

When viewed through the lens we present here, it is clear that this interpretation misses the point. Perhaps some schools need a different relationship between administrators and other professionals. Perhaps the building leader with 40 percent novice teachers evaluates differently than administrators with 80 percent novice teachers or those with 5 percent. Perhaps some buildings are using professional coaches to help individual teachers develop effective techniques to reach individual students in their classroom. Or perhaps some administrators need additional supports on how to conduct effective evaluations. There is no one solution for addressing this issue, which in some schools might not even be an issue. Any idea proposed without taking into consideration the individual contexts of schools will have at best minimal impact when it comes to large-scale change.

Why this example? Because it illustrates that every element of schooling is complex. Schools are rarely, if ever, in an either-or situation.
What Next?

What do we think you should do with this report? To be clear, we cite six big and many supporting elements that are all part of successful schools. Most have been explored in other papers, so in a sense, this report isn’t offering anything new. However, as mentioned in the opening, two things make this piece unique.

One is consensus. This document does not reflect the expertise of one individual or one organization. Rather, it reflects the collective wisdom of all the various public school stakeholders. Together, they agree these are the elements needed for a school to perform at a high level.

The second is that it isn’t the individual elements; it is interactions. A school with good teachers and poor leadership won’t be successful. Nor will a school with strong leadership and poor teachers. And sometimes a school with strong leadership and good teachers will not succeed if they are missing another critical element, such as family and community engagement, or if they are focusing solely on academics rather than the total child. The interaction between these six elements is critical. It is the bonds between these elements that allow a successful school to form.

As mentioned earlier, we have identified several audiences for this document, including educators, educator preparation programs, families and communities and policymakers.

- **Educators** can use it in evaluating the current strengths of their school and in identifying challenges to be addressed.

- **Educator preparation programs** can use it to help aspiring educators understand how they should approach their work.

- **Parents, other family members and communities** can use it to get a better understanding of what schools need for their children to succeed and to gauge the supports and advocacy their schools require.

- **Policymakers** can refer to it in their efforts to improve outcomes for students at a large scale, as they consider legislation, regulatory and funding decisions they hope will help improve education.

We hope you will reach the conclusion we have: That there is a wide and deep agreement about what is needed to be successful. Now, we must work together to ensure each school has what it needs to get there. As different audiences consider how to incorporate these ideas into their own work, one big takeaway is that our national conversation on education needs to shift.
There should be no disagreement about **why** this shift is necessary. For America to continue to be a global leader and for the global community to thrive, America’s educational system must continually evolve to meet the needs of American society and individual citizens. Many studies have shown college graduates earn more than high school graduates, and high school graduates earn more than those without a diploma. But the need is much broader than individuals. An educated citizenry is crucial not only for the survival of American society but for America’s continued growth and advancement. Without an educated workforce, America’s economic engine may stall. Without an educated citizenry, the very walls of democracy may crumble.

To improve education at scale, we need to focus on where it most often occurs – the public schools where 90 percent of all school-aged children are enrolled. And we need to provide local school leaders with the flexibility and supports to use their professional expertise to do so.

We need to talk directly about **who** students are and the needs they have. As demographic figures cited earlier demonstrate, more than one-third of the students either speak a language other than English, don’t know where their next meal is coming from and/or are learning with a disability. Additionally, there are a wide range of challenges students in all schools may be managing, including abuse or neglect, alcohol or other drug dependency, family matters such as divorce, mental health issues like depression or anxiety, and social/emotional challenges, among other issues and traumas all families face.

The overall point is that individual students and their unique situations are an important part of every school, and all students need access to an education that provides them the tools necessary for future success – the **what** schools should provide. Now the best options for life after high school – college, career and the military – require knowledge and skills, not a piece of paper saying they attended. The fact that the computer on a person’s wrist today is more powerful than the computer guiding the lunar lander in 1969 is testament not only to the science of the times but to the rate of change to which today’s students will be adapting throughout their careers. It also means that those students who can’t keep up will be blocked from this future.

The **how** of this conversation was detailed throughout this report with the six interacting elements of successful schools. But this conversation must also include resources, including, but not limited to, financial. Having one school counselor for 482 students (the average ratio for U.S. schools, according to NCES) simply doesn’t work. Plus, teachers and administrators need far beyond the four years of an undergraduate education; they need constant and ongoing access to new information, ideas and techniques. These, and many of the other aspects of schooling mentioned here, require funding.
This leaves **when**. The nation has decided to close the achievement gap and ensure every student has access to a world-class education by talking about everything but what we know is needed to make every school a success. Let’s talk about that now.
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