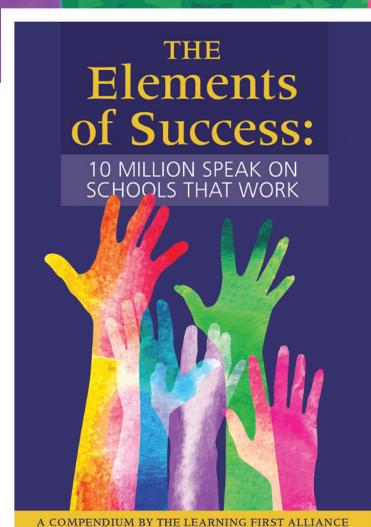


Executive Summary



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.

- **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.

- 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.

- **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.

Learning First Alliance Members

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education; AASA, The School Superintendents Association; American Federation of Teachers; American School Counselor Association; Consortium for School Networking; Learning Forward; National Association of Elementary School Principals; National Association of Secondary School Principals; National Education Association; National PTA; National School Boards Association; National School Public Relations Association