

Scaling Up First Things First: Site Selection and the Planning Year

First Things First seeks to increase student and teacher engagement and boost academic achievement in low-performing schools by transforming the school environment through comprehensive changes in school structure, instruction, and governance. The program model, which is grounded in both research and the best practices of schools serving high-risk youth, was developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) and was initially mounted in the Kansas City, Kansas, school system. Promising early results led the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education to support the initiative's expansion into 19 middle and high schools — six additional schools in Kansas City; eight in Houston, Texas; three in suburban St. Louis County; and two in the Mississippi Delta communities of Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi. All these schools are characterized by large percentages of nonwhite students and students at high risk of academic failure. The new schools are being phased in over two years, in two groups.

MDRC is evaluating the implementation and effects of the intervention at the Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas sites. This report covers the first 22 months of the Scaling Up First Things First project (November 1999-August 2001), a period that included the selection of these sites and the planning year for the first group of schools. The report draws on a combination of quantitative data from staff surveys and qualitative findings from interviews and observations. Its principal findings are these:

- Setting up a whole-school reform initiative in multiple locations required a great deal of the program developers. Site selection, the provision of technical assistance, the preparation of background materials, and general troubleshooting stretched the capacities of IRRE staff and consultants.
- Whether developers should be prescriptive about important matters or give teachers the freedom to make their own choices is a difficult decision. But the worst option may be to try to do both at once. As part of the planning process, IRRE allowed teachers in the first group of schools phasing in First Things First to make their own decisions about school structure. Yet this was a subject about which IRRE held strong convictions, and it voiced these so powerfully that the teachers became resentful, feeling that their only real “choice” was to adopt IRRE's recommendations. Recognizing that it had made a major mistake, IRRE changed its strategy: For the second group of phase-in schools, it will specify the schools' structure in advance; although staff will have choices about other matters, this will not be one of them.
- As expected, survey findings indicate that commitment to First Things First was stronger among teachers who had less experience, teachers who perceived their principal as being responsive to their concerns, and teachers who felt that they had played an important role in decision-making. An unexpected finding was that nonwhite teachers generally felt more positive about the initiative than their white counterparts.