CPRE

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First Things First: A Case Study of Implementation in Three Schools

Executive Summary

This case study describes school staff members' understanding and enactment of First Things First (FTF) in three high schools and provides some insights into why enactment proceeded as it did. FTF is a whole school reform that endeavors to help schools to improve relationships among teachers, students, and parents; to improve instructional practices; and to reallocate resources to support those goals. The reform's goal is to raise the level of student achievement. FTF requires that all high schools establish thematically-oriented Small Learning Communities (SLCs) in which teachers and students in grades 9-12 spend the majority of their instructional time. Teachers share common planning time with their SLC team members and are involved in a process of ongoing professional conversation and instructional improvement. High schools also implement a Family Advocate System (FAS) in which small groups of students meet with an adult mentor (Family Advocate) on a regular basis. The goal of the FAS is to ensure that every student feels connected with an adult in the school and has a place to discuss personal and academic issues of concern. The Family Advocate is also expected to maintain contact with students' parents or guardians. FTF has also developed a system of monitoring and professional development that seeks to improve practices around student engagement, course alignment, and the rigor of high school content and instruction. The efforts to reform and improve high schools are led by FTF staff, a School Improvement Facilitator (SIF), SLC coordinators, as well as school and district staff members.

In all three study schools, we found teachers and administrators to be well-informed about FTF, with their understanding and implementation of the reform growing over time. In all of the schools, SLCs had been created and were being used to improve instructional practices and to build relationships among both teachers and students. The FAS was also in place in all three schools, though teachers reported less consistent use and satisfaction with this component than with the SLCs. This was particularly true in the two schools that were still relatively early in their implementation of FTF. In the study school that had several years of experience with FTF, both the SLCs and the FAS were highly embedded features of the school and were cited by teachers as important components of their ongoing efforts to improve student achievement.

FTF trains school and district staff members to monitor teacher practice, to measure a host of outcomes and implementation benchmarks, and to facilitate discussion about how to improve practices. As with the structural components, staff understanding and use of these tools were most well-supported at the study school that had been implementing FTF for five years. The schools that had been implementing FTF for only two or three years struggled more with their use of the tools intended to review teacher planning and practice. This is not entirely surprising, given that FTF recognizes the difficulty of changing teacher culture and practice and plans for this process to take place over several years.

Staff members generally reported that FTF helped build relationships in their schools (among both staff and students) and believed that these new relationships were helpful in improving student behavior and school climate. They also reported finding peers in their SLCs to be useful professional resources. The reform also altered the responsibilities of school leaders, placing increased responsibility for instructional

improvement with the SIF and SLC coordinators. The new structures created new communication patterns in the school as teachers sought out and found new sources of advice and guidance about their professional practice.

FTF has been responsive to schools to meet their particular needs and to constantly improve the reform program that it offers. We found that teachers' initial work and success with the reform played a significant role in predicting their ongoing commitment to the reform and the predictions they made about its sustainability. In the introduction and ongoing monitoring and support of the reform, the role of school and district leadership was shown to be vitally important. Across the three schools, leaders at these levels assumed very different stances with regard to the reform, and thus impacted the way in which the reform played out at the school level.

I. Introduction

Each year more schools are identified as underperforming due to failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In 2005, 14% of schools in the US were identified as not making AYP. In 2006, 26% of schools had been identified as not making AYP (Education Week, 2006). To raise achievement, new performance expectations require teachers, schools, and districts to move beyond aligning curriculum, reallocating time, and other conventional approaches. In response, school leaders increasingly rely on external school reforms. However, the challenge of making improvements in schools, and in high schools in particular, is well documented (e.g., Siskin, 2003).

To better understand this challenge, researchers at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) have examined the interactions between five reforms and 15 high schools over a two-year period. Reforms in this CPRE research project include: High Schools That Work, First Things First, Ramp-Up to Literacy, the Penn Literacy Network, and SchoolNet. These reforms were selected as representative of the types of external assistance found in high schools during previous CPRE research (see Gross & Goertz, 2005). Based on this research, we sought out reforms working in the areas of whole school reform, literacy instruction, and data use. After a scan of the environment, reforms that appeared to have promising strategies were recruited for participation in this study.

This document grows out of that larger research project and is a case study that examines the progress of one reform in a sample of three schools at different points of implementation.[1] The case study presented here focuses on the work of First Things First (FTF) and draws from interview and survey data collected in three high schools and districts across the country, and from FTF staff during the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years. At our request, FTF staff identified three schools with which they had collaborated for one to five years. Two of the schools were in their first (FTF1) or second (FTF2) year of implementation at the time of our first visit. A third "mature" school (FTF3) had worked with the reform for five years. This sampling strategy allowed us to examine the reform at different points in the implementation process.

This research, including the case study presented here, is not an evaluation of either the schools or the reforms. Readers who are interested in large-scale evaluations of FTF are encouraged to refer to the list of references at the end of this document to find references for evaluations of FTF (see Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center [CSRQ], 2005; Gambone, Klem, Summers, Akey, & Sipe, 2004; Quint, Bloom, Black, Stephens, & Akey, 2005). In contrast to evaluation studies, this case study is part of a research project intended to examine the components of various reforms, the ways in which those components were understood and enacted at the school level, and the reasons for those understandings

[1] Case studies for each of the other four reforms can be found by visiting www.cpre.org.

and enactments. Readers may be interested in placing this case study within a larger research context. However, that is beyond the scope of this case study. Instead, we offer the reader a richly descriptive investigation of reform use at three high schools.

Methods. This case study uses a mixed-method design and is based on data collected at three schools. FTF1 was visited three times (at the beginning and end of the 2004-2005 school year and at the end of the 2005-2006 school year), FTF2 was visited twice[2] (at the beginning and end of the 2004-2005 school year), and FTF3 was visited once (at the end of the 2004-2005 school year). FTF1 and FTF2, the two early implementing schools, provided data about the implementation process—the focus of this case study—and were thus visited multiple times so that we could chart their early steps with the reform. FTF3, the mature school, served as a point of comparison and thus was visited only once. During each visit, a team of two researchers spent two days collecting data in each school. Interviews were conducted with teaching and administrative staff at the school, and staff members with both central and peripheral involvement with the reform were targeted. In addition, we interviewed staff members from the district office in each of the school districts and staff from the reform organization. In total, our findings are based on approximately 107 semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes each.

In addition, at the three schools a survey was conducted with all teaching staff the end of the 2004-2005 school year. The survey provides data about the enactment of components of the reform and communication among staff in each school. At FTF1, the survey was administered a second time, at the end of the 2005-2006 school year. Our findings in this case study are based on 284 surveys from spring 2005 and 115 surveys from spring 2006, with school response rates ranging between 63-89 percent.

Qualitative data were analyzed iteratively using a set of codes derived from existing research literature, as well as our previous and ongoing data collection and analysis.[3] Simultaneously, survey data were analyzed in order to provide schoolwide measures of reform use, teacher familiarity and comfort with the reform, perceptions of school change, and communication patterns among high school faculties. Using both the qualitative and quantitative data, case studies were developed for each school. These findings were then aggregated, with analysis focused on factors explaining patterns and/or variation in implementation. It is these aggregate descriptions and analyses that are presented here.

Study schools. Two of the schools in this study (FTF2[4] and FTF3) are large high schools (1,000-2,000 students) located in large urban school districts characterized by a long history of low student performance. FTF2 was more than 90% African American and approximately 50% of students were receiving free or reduced price lunch. FTF3 was approximately 80% Latino and 10% African American and 90% of students were receiving free and reduced price lunch. FTF3 student body is also composed of approximately 35% English Language Learners. At the time that they partnered with FTF, both FTF2 and FTF3 had a history of missing state and federal performance targets.[5] The other high school in this study (FTF1) is also large (approximately 2,000 students) and is located in the urban fringe of a large city. It is the only high school in its district, has an ethnically diverse student body (60% students of color, 40% white), and approximately 35% of students were receiving free and reduced price lunch. Unlike the other

[2] A third planned visit to FTF2 was cancelled due to natural disaster.
[3] Initial codes for interview data included categories for school context, the use and/or effects of the reform, communication patterns in the school, history and training experiences with the reform, leadership in the school, and the role of people and policies originating outside the school (primarily district and state). These codes were subsequently refined as themes emerged in these broad categories.
[4] The high schools in this study range from early implementers to mature schools. After the provider abbreviation, the number 1 denotes a school that was in its first year of implementation, the number 2 a school that was in its second year of implementation, and the number 3 a school that was implementing for 3-5 years.
[5] It is worth noting that FTF3 did meet federal AYP standards for the 2005-2006 school year, suggesting a change in traditional performance.

two schools, at the time the partnership was forged, FTF1 missed AYP due only to sub-group performance. While all of the schools had made FTF the centerpiece of their school reform efforts, the state and district for FTF2 placed a number of demands on the school which diverted some of their attention and resources toward other requirements. For example, all of these schools were under pressure to demonstrate improvement on the statewide high school math and English exams given in grades ten or eleven in these schools.

Limitations. As stated above, the research presented here is not meant to be an evaluation and is not generalizable to other cases. Such a study would have required very different measures, samples, and methods. Because we used sampling and data collection methods designed to gain a deep understanding of the work of three schools and the experiences of teachers and administrators, the data and findings presented here are based heavily on their perceptions. As a result, references to "change" or work related to the reform are based not on externally designed measures or researcher assessment, but on the perceptions of school staff. In addition, our findings heavily emphasize the experience of those schools that are relatively early in their implementation processes.

Overview. This case study is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, the second section offers a brief overview of the reform being studied as it was designed by its creators. The third section describes the ways in which the reform was interpreted and used at the school level. The fourth section documents individual and organizational outcomes that were attributed by school and district staff to the use of the reform. The fifth section identifies several factors at the reform, school, and district levels that help to explain patterns or variation in reform use across schools. Though these factors are not generalizable, it is our hope that they will provide the reader with insights into factors that were found to affect the interaction between these three high schools and the reform. The final section of this case study briefly discusses several concluding remarks based on our findings.

II. Reform Overview

A. Goals of the Reform

FTF is a whole school reform that seeks to fundamentally alter school operations. FTF is an initiative of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE). In 1989, IRRE was founded as a non-profit organization by Drs. James Connell and Louisa Pierce at the University of Rochester to create "research-based educational strategies that support the healthy development of young people living in low-income communities" (n.d.c.). IRRE forged a partnership with the Kansas City Kansas Public Schools district to implement First Things First in 1996-1997. A 1999 U.S. Department of Education grant funded the reform's expansion to secondary schools in Houston, Texas; Riverview Gardens, Missouri; and Shaw and Greenville, Mississippi. With additional foundation and federal funding, FTF has spread to over 70 schools and continues to refine and strengthen the reform.

The reform has three primary goals. First, FTF seeks *to improve relationships* among individuals affiliated with the school, "teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, and home and school relationships" (Provider Interview, June 2005). Second, FTF seeks *to improve instruction* so that students will be prepared for post-secondary education or high quality employment. Third, FTF seeks *to reallocate resources* in order to support the first two goals.

B. Theory of Change

FTF has a four-step theory of change:

1) Several processes initiate the reform: constituency building; planning and capacity building; use of an assessment tool—Measuring What Matters—to measure student outcomes and progress toward implementation; and system leadership development to build district and school capacity to "plan, implement and strengthen FTF's critical features" (Connell, 2002, p. 18).

2) These processes lead creation of the reform's three key implementation strategies: Small Learning Communities (SLCs), the Family Advocate System (FAS), and instructional improvement.

3) The three strategies above foster seven critical features in the school (Institute for Research and Reform in Education [IRRE], n.d.a). For students, there will be (1) continuity of care; (2) more and personalized instructional time; (3) high, clear, fair academic and content standards; and (4) enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, perform, and be recognized. For adults, there will be (5) empowerment and expectations for all staff to improve instruction; (6) more flexibility in the allocation of resources; and (7) collective responsibility for student outcomes.

4) These seven critical features for students and adults in the school produce desired outcomes for students and the school. Students will graduate and be prepared to attend college or enter into high level employment. At the school level, resources will be reallocated and relationships, instruction, and learning will improve.

FTF depends heavily on support from leaders at all levels of the system. Of particular importance at the school level is the School Improvement Facilitator (SIF). Each school must have a SIF and SLC coordinators. The SIF is the "face of FTF at the school." Specific SIF responsibilities include leading SLC coordinator meetings once a week to discuss agendas, progress, and additional strategies; visiting each SLC on a weekly basis and observing during the FAS period; assigning students to a Family Advocate; providing coaching to teachers in instruction and the FAS component of the reform. District and school leaders are assigned a range of responsibilities. Specifically, the reform calls for system leaders to: (1) set and articulate clear expectations, (2) personify commitment to the reform, (3) provide timely and effective supports, (4) monitor and report progress, and (5) recognize accomplishments and intervene to ensure progress.

Small Learning Communities. According to the design, SLCs are theme-based, multi-grade communities that are supposed to contain no more than 350 students. Over time, SLCs are supposed to assume greater control over resources including staff, time, money, and facilities—within legal and fiduciary constraints of district policies and federal and state regulations. SLC staff share responsibility for the outcomes of students in the SLC. Students select and are assigned to an SLC where they remain for the duration of their time at the school. Students are not grouped by ability in SLCs and resources are expected to travel with the student. In theory, a student in special education can choose any community and a resource teacher will be in that community to support the student. Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) requiring particular supports will continue to have those needs met in an FTF school. FTF encourages the inclusion model where possible and cites data to show academic gains for students with special needs in schools using inclusion strategies. The reform allows each school to determine how to handle English Language Learners (ELLs) with regard to SLC placement. FTF tries to ensure that Advanced Placement (AP) teachers are placed in each SLC to maintain community cohesiveness. Often, schools have to build up to this. FTF has found it can take several years for some schools to establish even one AP teacher in every SLC either by bringing in more AP teachers or getting

teachers certified. In the meantime, students go to another SLC with an AP teacher to "get their needs met" in a particular subject and then return to their SLC for other courses.

The SLCs are designed to foster a professional community for teachers. The FTF design calls for at least three hours per week of common planning time for staff in each SLC with 75% of that time devoted to instructional improvement (Connell & Broom, 2004). "Teaching staff in the SLC meet for common planning time, during which they review their students' academic progress, share new instructional strategies, and develop cross-disciplinary, standards-based projects" (Klem, Levin, Bloom, & Connell, 2003, p. 5).

An SLC coordinator is selected to represent each SLC. FTF allows schools to decide how the leaders of each SLC are selected; most schools use an application process. Once selected, SLC coordinators go through FTF-led training sessions on how to facilitate meetings. SLC coordinators are to communicate regularly with the SIF, relaying to the SIF and other SLC coordinators what is taking place in their SLCs. In turn, the SLC coordinators are supposed to relay information about the reform to their SLC members.

Family Advocate System. The FAS is designed to ensure that "every student is known—and watched over—by someone in the school who cares about that particular young person" (Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2004, p. 7). This system is intended to connect "school and home by having teachers and other qualified staff members act as family advocates for a manageable number of students (e.g., 15-17) and their families" (Klem et al., 2003, p. 5). Students are assigned to a Family Advocate in the first few weeks of school. This advocate may be a faculty or staff member who is assigned full-time to an SLC or is affiliated with an SLC (e.g., art and music teachers, and administrators and counselors). Family Advocate responsibilities include: meeting with an assigned group of students weekly during a family advocate period, maintaining personal contact with each student throughout the year with at least a 5-minute weekly check-in, contacting families at least once a month; holding two family conferences with students and their families, sharing information about students' academic and behavioral progress with SLC colleagues, advocating for their students, and referring students and family members to support services. The school is to set aside a 30-60 minute FAS period on a weekly basis.

Instructional improvement. FTF believes "students need more time and individualized attention in core subjects to meet academic standards" (Klem et al., 2003, p. 5). In addition to structural changes described above, FTF advocates instructional strategies that support the reforms's goals of Engagement, Alignment, and Rigor (EAR). EAR is the overarching framework into which FTF's instructional improvement strategies fit. The instructional guidance and tools that FTF provides are aimed at enhancing one of the three components identified by the acronym EAR.

The instructional guidance component of FTF has gone through the most evolution and development over the last few years. While structural changes were well-defined early on, the instructional components have become increasingly defined, often at the request of clients. This unifying set of principles guides professional development for teachers and school staff and serves as a mnemonic device to help school staff focus on program priorities. It is manifested in the instructional strategies that teachers are taught, the guidance they are given in using the block period, and the types of discussions that are expected to take place during SLC common planning time.

There are three primary mechanisms through which teacher skills are built:

1) The Peer Observation and Dialogue is designed to improve instruction, transform the SLCs into learning communities, and "build habits of reflective practice" (Connell & Broom, 2004, p. 10). Instructional coaches, supervisors, and members of the SLC observe classes with a focus on engagement, alignment, and/or rigor.

2) The Tuning Protocol is: "a structured process through which teachers collaboratively examine, assess, and evaluate a set of student work" (p. 11). This tool is intended to generate professional dialogue and to be an opportunity for teachers to receive feedback on their practice, usually divorced from the particular content of their subject areas. Though the discussions begin with student work, in practice at the sample schools the discussions often encompassed issues of lesson planning and instructional technique.

3) The Alignment and Rigor Through Common Assessments and Evaluations of Student Work is a series of professional development activities designed to improve alignment and rigor. The activities are conducted with course leaders and colleagues in each content area. Products generated from these activities include common course content, course syllabi, student outcomes, assessments, and grading protocols. Instructional coaches and supervisors provide guidance for these activities and attempt to bolster the support that traditional subject area departments provide.

FTF expects SLC coordinators to facilitate SLC staff use of the first two mechanisms during common planning time in their SLCs. District and building instructional supervisors are trained to assess classroom practice using a classroom visit protocol. They are then expected to plan and guide professional development activities around the results of these classroom visits in the second and third years of implementation.

Professional development and technical assistance. Professional development for school staff is provided through a combination of activities provided directly by FTF staff, programs with which FTF has partnered, or, frequently, through a model in which FTF intensively trains the SIF and/or SLC coordinators in the school and requests that they then support and facilitate certain reform components. FTF provides training, technical assistance, follow-up coaching, networking opportunities, and implementation review tools/systems and then expects that professional communities in the schools will use the skills and information provided in training experiences to begin to identify their own areas of need, and, in cooperation with the provider liaison, plan for future steps toward improvement. An FTF leader expressed a desire to have the provider liaisons engage in more direct training, but felt that in some cases the limited time made available by the school or district for FTF professional development posed a challenge.

Technical assistance and support from FTF is most intense for schools during the planning year, and proceeds according to a very tightly structured series of steps designed to move schools into the SLC structure. The provider liaison is the primary contact between FTF and the schools. Provider liaisons work with multiple schools at any given time. Almost all are experienced educators many of whom implemented FTF when they were school and district employees. The liaisons primarily communicate with the SIF and the district point person, and less frequently with the principal. Oversight and intervention continues as schools work with FTF. Liaisons and more senior leaders consistently monitor progress and intervene when needed.

C. Sequencing and Roll Out of the Reform

The FTF design has several fixed requirements, including use of block scheduling, creation of SLCs, and development of the FAS, while allowing for school and district staff input—for example, the number and theme of SLCs, how FAS groups are assigned, and certain instructional approaches. The introduction of these components is described below.

Initial steps. The school reform partnership is initiated when a school or district expresses interest in FTF. FTF calls for the buy-in of key leaders—the superintendent, school board, and building leaders. FTF staff work with the district to secure this essential buy-in during the 3-4 months prior to the planning year. FTF does not require formal sign-off from other key stakeholders such as faculty leaders, parent groups, students, or community leaders because "experience shows us that buy-in does not occur for the vast majority of these stakeholders until the reform is implemented and shows early signs of success that are meaningful to them" (Connell, 2002, p. 2). FTF staff participate in constituency building activities before and during implementation in order to assure that stakeholders understand their roles in the reform effort.

According to its plan, FTF seeks to secure participation at both the district and school levels. At the district level, FTF seeks a point person in each district to serve as the primary conduit for raising issues beyond the principal level. FTF's relationship with the district varies. In general, district staff members are expected to personify the commitment to FTF and provide needed technical and logistical support. The reform has increasingly sought collaboration at the district level. District leaders are expected to support the improvements that are needed as indicated by a host of measures provided by FTF.

Once buy-in from key leaders is secured, a more formal and multi-year partnership is established and several school and district staff members are identified as Study Group Facilitators. These individuals are trained by FTF, and prepare (with FTF) to introduce the reform to the entire school at the beginning of the planning year. FTF and school staff members then begin a year of planning and preparation for a restructured school the following year. Also at this point, the SIF is selected. FTF calls for the creation of two new leadership positions.

Planning year. The major activities that take place during the planning year are development of the SLCs and some instructional changes. During the first month, all staff members (including non-teaching staff) are introduced to the reform in a schoolwide meeting. According to one FTF staff member: "We tell them that changing relationships, improving instruction, and allocating resources are our three goals." They explain the three strategies to achieve these goals—SLCs, FAS, and instructional improvement (although students will not participate in SLCs or FAS groups until after the planning year). Study groups composed of faculty and staff are formed to solicit input from the school and community and to develop SLC themes during the first semester.

By spring, teachers are placed in newly formed SLCs, with every attempt to honor staff preferences. (Students are not placed in SLCs until the following fall.) An SLC coordinator is selected to lead each SLC. In their SLCs, teachers develop a mission statement and begin to plan curriculum and instruction that reflect the SLC theme and structure for the following year. The school then holds a fair and/or engages in other information sharing activities (e.g., letters to parents, presentations at middle school assemblies, home room discussions in the high school) through which SLCs recruit students. Students have the opportunity to choose any community in the building and FTF reports and our data indicate that students usually receive their first or second choice.

During the planning year, school staff are introduced to the student engagement component of the reform's three instructional goals—engagement, alignment, and rigor. Because FTF has found that the issue of engagement resonates so strongly with teachers, FTF introduces this instructional piece early in the planning year to generate teacher buy-in, and help teachers see results early in their use of the reform. Teachers want to "get into real work" and when they do, they "buy-in on a different level," said one FTF leader. Training in engagement also gives teachers a common language and practice to begin to foster discussions in the nascent SLCs.

Summer and implementation year. In the summer between the planning year and implementation year, FTF expects teachers to participate in a one day SLC training session, a one day FAS training session, and a one day orientation to the reform for new teachers (IRRE, n.d.a). If all goes according to plan, at the start of the implementation year, the basic components of FTF are operational. It is planned that the faculty and students have been reorganized into SLCs, and that block scheduling and the FAS are in place. Instructional improvement activities are on-going and occur in the SLCs and during professional development time periods.

D. High Schools

The FTF design represents a departure from several aspects of the traditional high school. First, the traditional academic department structure found in most high schools is supplemented by the creation of SLCs. These smaller, theme-based groupings are intended to strengthen relationships between and among the members—teachers and students—and provide a continuity of care for students so that they do not fall through the cracks.

Additionally, the professional development that FTF provides is frequently cross-disciplinary and allows teachers to learn strategies for student engagement, course alignment, and increasing rigor in a collaborative environment. The Alignment and Rigor Through Common Assessments and Evaluations of Student Work is a series of professional development activities FTF developed that address the work traditionally conducted in academic departments and continues to be done within content areas and by teachers who teach the same courses.

FTF also modifies the traditional seven or eight period school day and calls for longer instructional periods through block scheduling. FTF introduces new instructional strategies for teachers to keep students more active and engaged during these longer periods of time.

FTF recognizes the challenges inherent in high schools. “High schools are much more complicated” than middle or elementary schools, said a provider staff member, “The design doesn’t really look different in high schools than it does in middle school. It’s just more complicated to put in place, because you’ve got all these added factors that have to be taken into consideration.”

III. Enactment

This section is divided into several sub-sections, each discussing a particular component of reform use. We start with a discussion of the awareness that staff had of FTF in their schools and their participation in the reform in the most general sense. We then move on to discuss the implementation of several key components of the FTF design in our three study schools. Following this, we discuss use by the study schools of the professional development and technical assistance offered by FTF, the monitoring that was done to assess the progress of implementation, and the degree to which the schools maintained fidelity to the program or made adaptations according to their context and needs. In sum, this section is meant to provide the reader with a sense of what happened in the study schools. Having familiarized the reader with the design in the previous section, we now discuss the way in which that design was enacted in the study schools.

A. Awareness and Participation

As a whole school reform, FTF targets all professional staff in a school. Virtually all school staff interviewed in the three schools were aware of FTF's presence in the school, and between 72% and 97% of all staff reported in the survey that they were involved in FTF.[6] The lower percentage, interestingly, corresponded to the mature school, and based on interview data appears to reflect the fact that many new teachers did not associate structures like SLCs and FAS with the FTF name. In the mature school, the principal's approach for communicating with his staff about FTF was to talk about critical features of the reform (e.g., SLCs, FAS) rather than to explicitly put it all under the FTF rubric. For example, one new teacher at this school claimed not to be clear about the goals of FTF, but did discuss school goals, which were the same as those of FTF. This represents an effective internalization of the reform's goals.

Based on surveys and interviews, teachers in all three schools were aware of the goals of FTF and generally understood its purpose. Most teachers (and some administrators) across the three schools viewed the primary purpose of FTF as "keeping kids from falling through the cracks" because they are not academically motivated or engaged in their school work. In interviews, teachers by and large viewed changes in course content and teacher pedagogy primarily in the context of getting students more engaged in their studies. According to survey results, as teachers became more familiar with and experienced FTF, they decreasingly felt that they were required to make major changes in classroom practice. At the conclusion of the planning year, 73% of survey respondents at FTF1 felt that they had to make major changes in practice. A year later, only 56% of respondents at FTF1 felt the same way. At the two schools with even slightly more experience with the reform, the percentages of teachers that felt that FTF required them to make major changes in classroom practice were even lower: 53% and 38%. Although teachers initially felt pressure to make great change, this pressure was reduced as experience with the reform grew.

Teachers obtained information about FTF from several sources. Although many teachers received an overview of FTF and received some training directly from the provider in particular components of the reform, like FAS, block scheduling, or instructional improvement strategies, most staff members reported that they received the majority of their guidance about the reform from school-based staff members. FTF staff provide intensive training to a school's SIF and SLC coordinators. These school staff members are then expected to build capacity among other teachers in the school during schoolwide and SLC meetings. Generally, teacher and school staff understanding of FTF grew over the time the reform was in place. The deepest understanding of FTF was found among SLC coordinators and SIFs. One SLC coordinator said:

> *Last year, I didn't have a leadership role in the SLC or FTF, so I think there was kind of a vague notion of what FTF was. Like it was the overall entity that was bringing Kagan [training on student engagement strategies] into the classroom and lots of other initiatives. This year, we have EAR and I've done a lot of work with FTF as a coordinator and a lead teacher. That just gives me a lot of inside information about FTF and the reforms in the school*

SLC coordinators and SIFs viewed FTF in terms of its structural changes as well as its instructional improvement and relationship-building potential. Teachers mostly associated FTF with its primary components: SLCs, FAS, and EAR.

In all three schools, district personnel were aware of the schools' implementation of FTF. The district office was involved in, or mandated, the selection of FTF in two of the schools. Only at FTF1, however, did the district's own awareness of and broader participation in FTF appear to influence the use of

[6] The percentage in FTF1 remained at 86% across the two years, implying that "involvement" (as measured by a teacher survey) during the planning and first implementation years is relatively consistent.

specific reform components at the school level. At this school, the district staff was very much involved with use of particular reform components. In most cases, district actors allowed school leaders and staff to work with FTF directly, rarely involving themselves in discussions of programmatic or instructional issues.

B. Components

All three school schools were implementing the three main components of FTF: SLCs, Family Advocate System, and professional development related to FTF's instructional program. In all three schools, 90-100% of staff reported that they belonged to SLCs and had been assigned students for the FAS. Implementation of the three components, however, varied among components and across schools.

Small Learning Communities. Interview respondents in all three schools reported that there was a range in the quality of the SLCs within the schools in terms of the discussions and planning that was done, although the range and overall level of quality primarily varied by years of implementation (discussed in more detail below). While some SLCs used the trainings and tools provided by FTF to engage in meaningful discussions of lesson planning, use of the block schedule, increasing course rigor, or aligning practices, other SLCs remained a good bit more superficial dealing with administrative procedures, scheduling, or other non-instructional issues. This variation appeared to have to do with the personalities of teachers and leaders in the SLC as well as turnover of school staff, which made it difficult to deepen discussions with each passing year. While provider liaisons and school administrators in the study schools were pleased to see SLCs functioning at even the most basic level, they believed that many of the SLCs could have been functioning at a higher level, and engaging more frequently in instructionally focused discussions.

Despite the variation, most SLCs were meeting regularly (two or three times per week) in all schools and were engaged in discussions relating directly to their students' progress, their own teaching practice, or school logistical issues. It appears that the focus of SLC discussions changed somewhat as schools and teachers became more experienced with the reform. Teachers reported in both interviews and surveys that discussions had moved away from logistical and administrative topics toward more of a focus on students and their learning. In FTF3, the mature school, teachers reported that the meeting time focused primarily on student discipline, student engagement and work, and on improving instruction. They spent less time talking about alignment, themes, and course content. Teachers at FTF2, which was in its first full year of implementation, reported they talked about the full range of topics on a regular basis. At FTF1, SLC meetings during the planning year were reported to have focused on logistics, course content, curriculum alignment, and SLC themes. By the end of the first implementation year, however, SLCs at FTF1 were also discussing a full range of issues, including student discipline and strategies for improving student engagement.

Family Advocate System. Of all of the components of FTF, the FAS appears to have been the most variable in implementation among our three schools. At FTF3, FAS had become part of the fabric of the school and was considered a key part of the reform. In the words of one FTF3 teacher: "Advocate groups are becoming kind of organic. They're becoming like a family." Teachers met weekly with students and reported that meetings focused on what FTF expected (e.g., performance in class, progress toward graduation, and post-high school options). Teachers received general guidance from SIFs, printed materials, and SLC coordinators on the purposes of FAS along with some model activities, but were free to use the time in ways that they thought would be most effective for their group of students.

At FTF2, the school struggled to set aside time for FAS and teachers were not entirely clear on their obligations to the students in their FAS groups. Though school leaders stated that they attempted to schedule FAS meetings weekly, teachers reported that time for FA was frequently pre-empted for SLC

meetings or coverage of classes and that their contact with students was sporadic. High teacher absentee rates made consistent group meetings difficult. Only 16% of survey respondents who had been assigned to an FAS group at FTF2 said that they met with their FAS students as a group at least once a week. This is in comparison to close to 80% of FAS group leaders at the other two schools that reported meeting with their FAS groups as frequently.

Teachers at FTF2 reported that they were also not able to meet informally with their students; only 26% met informally with each student at least weekly. In the other two schools more than 40% of teachers were meeting informally weekly or more with their FAS students. Though this percentage was still lower than what provider and school leaders hope for according to the reform, it was clearly much higher than at FTF2. Teachers at FTF2 were generally disappointed that the FAS had not proven to be more effective. But felt that the biggest impediments to a more successful program were school scheduling and class coverage challenges, issues over which they felt they had little control, believing them to be issues controlled by building and district administration.

At FTF1, time for FAS was allotted in the schedule and 80% of those who had been assigned an FAS group met with their students at least once a week. However, teachers and administrators were unhappy with the materials for FAS activities provided by FTF, and stated that many were inappropriate for the population at that school.[7] Teachers reported that the activities focused too much on getting students acquainted with each other and did not go beyond "broad-brushed" activities. In an effort to make the time feel more productive for staff and students at FTF1, the materials were altered by school staff, and were subsequently abandoned in favor of scripted activities designed by the SIF and school counselors. This all occurred over the course of the first implementation year. Many FTF1 teachers complained that the scripted nature of the FAS activities (both the original ones and those modified by school staff) prevented them from really getting to know their students. The SIF planned next year to move away from scripted activities toward more thematic discussion guides.

Instructional improvement. At all three schools, SLC coordinators had been trained and were facilitating use of the tuning protocols in their SLCs. However, their understanding and use of the strategies and principles was still in the infant stages. Because this component of FTF was relatively new, all three of our schools were at a similar level of experience with the tuning protocols and classroom visits. All three schools began with the use of the tuning protocol. They had received guidance in the use of this instrument from the school SIFs and SLC coordinators and were using it periodically during SLC meetings. Teachers' comfort and experience with the tuning protocol was limited and teachers in all schools reported that these conversations were still difficult but had proven interesting and provided a new opportunity to learn about what their peers were doing. In all schools, the definition of "rigor" continued to be a source of some confusion for teachers. Some teachers still voiced uncertainty about their ability and that of their colleagues to address or assess the level rigor or subject matter alignment for courses in subject areas with which they were not familiar. Support from FTF staff was cited by teachers and leaders at the two less experienced schools as being of great help as they began to wrestle with the difficulties of using the tuning protocol in SLC meetings.

At the most mature school, some teachers had begun to visit peers' classrooms (as FTF recommends) and to use these visits as the basis for discussion in SLC meetings. In the other two schools, teachers were not visiting their peers and were not clear about the purpose of peer visits as they related to FTF's objectives, though they said they would generally welcome peers if they wanted to learn something from them. In all schools, there were observations guided by FTF protocols being conducted by school administrators—principal, SIF, and other administrators. Using different protocols, these visits were, as mentioned above,

[7] FTF has since revised its guides for FAS activities.

used to guide professional development decisions. However, even administrators admitted in interviews that they were not always clear on what EAR looked like, or should look like, in every classroom.

The level of classroom observation that was occurring as part of FTF appeared to increase as a school's experience with the reform grew. As schools grew more comfortable with the structural components, they had more time to engage in instructional improvement. For example, the SIF at FTF2 mentioned that much of her attention during the first year of implementation had been dedicated to "putting out fires." It was only toward the end of that first implementation year that she began to find some time to focus on instructional issues, including conducting some classroom observations and facilitating use of the tuning protocols in SLC meetings.

C. Professional Development and Technical Assistance

School-level reaction to the professional development provided by FTF was mixed. Overall, those who had received more direct training were more positive. Even when FTF trainings were not totally successful in meeting teachers' expectations (as happened at FTF3 in student engagement and at FTF1 around rigor), teachers' often felt that the basic ideas were strong and desired additional training on a topic. The desire for more clarity and training was satisfied through a combination of FTF and school-coordinated trainings. For example, at FTF3, the principal stated that the initial training on strategies for student engagement had "gone over like a lead balloon" but the school had nonetheless gone on to seek out more information and guidance from FTF about strategies for student engagement. According to FTF staff, feedback about these instructional improvement trainings is used to strengthen the activities with subsequent cohorts of FTF schools. This statement is supported by the fact that the engagement training was cited by teachers in the two newer schools as being of immediate use in the classroom.

There was some feeling among school leaders that the pre-determined professional development did not always meet the particular needs of a school or teachers. For example, the abolition of tracking at FTF1 was a challenge that they did not feel was well supported. FTF2 had particular challenges establishing SLCs and would have liked more direct guidance, particularly during the first implementation year. In both of these cases, FTF was changing firmly embedded school practices, requiring additional guidance.

During the planning year, the FTF1 liaison was in contact with the school by phone or in person every two to three weeks, and via email on a regular basis. Following the planning year contact, all three schools had an ongoing relationship with FTF at the time of our visits. Areas of support varied based on the school's experience with the reform.

In theory and practice, receiving help is heavily dependent on the SIF. Teachers were generally clear that the SIF was their primary resource for FTF-related information and guidance.[8] In addition to identifying needs related to FTF, the SIF must mesh support and technical assistance with other initiatives in the school. For example, at one school, the SIF pushed for an instructional coach and in another school the SIF worked with the state's distinguished educator. In contrast, according to teachers, the principals in the schools in early stages of implementation played little role in guiding their instructional improvement efforts (with the exception of the school where the principal served as the SIF). Traditional school leaders (e.g., principal, assistant principals) were essential in creating an environment where the structural and resource modifications required by FTF could be made, but were generally not viewed by teachers as having a strong instructional role.

[8] In one of the three schools, the principal served as the SIF.

There was a stronger focus on instructional change at the more mature school, while the early implementing schools had a broader focus, trying to improve in several areas simultaneously. Provider liaison and SIF support at FTF2 and FTF3 focused on the introduction of the EAR instructional component; at FTF1, as an earlier implementing school, technical assistance from FTF covered a broader range of issues. Additional support is also available from FTF. For example, feeling that the focus on instructional changes was getting lost among the myriad changes underway, FTF1 asked for and received an instructional coach from FTF to work with SLCs, the SIF and reading coach, as well as individual teachers. This support, funded by the district office, was perceived as helpful by the majority of interviewees and worked in partnership with the provider liaison.

FTF staff also continued to work with district staff in order to coordinate their efforts or advocate for FTF schools within a larger system. On occasion, FTF priorities, such as scheduling changes or planning time, were different than traditional district practices. In such cases, FTF worked with the district office to understand the need for such changes and to implement them. In addition, professional development opportunities and priorities had to be coordinated with the district office in some cases. FTF staff helped the district to better understand and integrate the reform into the ongoing work of the district.

District staff also received professional development from FTF in order to learn how to best support their schools. For example, district staff responsible for FTF1 reported receiving reform-specific training on the Measuring What Matters (MWM) component of FTF, district staff at FTF2 were just beginning to learn about the reform, and district staff responsible for FTF3 had attended the yearly FTF conference. Formal training for district staff (in contrast with school staff) was generally limited, as the reform was expected to be supported much more at the school level as opposed to at the district level. However, FTF staff members were in contact with district office administrators as needs arose and believed that this less formal contact played an important role in building district office capacity to support the reform.

D. Monitoring

FTF has also developed a set of tools and processes to monitor implementation and impact of the component known collectively as MWM. This component includes protocols designed to capture information about how FTF is being implemented and systems to document the changes in practices and student outcomes that result from implementation. According to FTF staff, FTF pays particular attention to student outcomes, including: (1) achievement (state test scores and national test scores), (2) attendance (an indicator of student/teacher buy-in), (3) discipline (number of suspensions or time lost to instruction), and (4) post-graduate plans. The use of MWM is phased in over the planning and first years of implementation based on school readiness, commitment to its use, and financial resources available to support the training and technology required. Among the study schools, FTF1 was beginning to use MWM, though teachers reported not being clear on the use of this data. School leaders at FTF1 reported that they felt compelled to use MWM by district staff. FTF3 was also gathering data about the use and impacts of FTF, though teachers did not use the MWM term in interviews.

The extent to which the use of FTF was being monitored by parties external to the schools varied among our schools. The provider liaison is generally in each school building once or twice a month during the first couple of years of the partnership. During these visits, the provider liaison conducts observations of SLC meetings and classrooms. As one provider liaison noted, FTF staff members also talk to the principal about "what they're seeing and what they think is needed," and "informally interview the SLC coordinators." The level of monitoring in our sample appeared to parallel the level of experience the schools had with FTF. For example, according to school leaders, on-school monitoring by provider staff and frequency of communication with school leaders at FTF1 was most intense, less so at FTF2, and the least evident at FTF3. In part, this can be explained by the fact that FTF1 was new to the reform and was beginning to enact so many components of FTF simultaneously while the other schools were introducing

pieces of the reform and had more experience. This required monitoring of progress on a number of fronts at FTF1 while less "hands-on" supervision was required elsewhere. At FTF2, the staff had become comfortable with the structural aspects and the general outline of the reform though they were still struggling with the instructional piece. This was acknowledged by both the SIF and provider liaison and so this is where much of the monitoring (and support) attention was focused at FTF2. At FTF3, the principal, who had significant experience with FTF by the time of our visit, along with other administrators and the SLC coordinators, took responsibility for monitoring and assisting with FTF implementation and worked collaboratively, as much as the involved parties felt necessary, with FTF staff.

E. Fidelity and Adaptation

One FTF leader described the organization's openness to adaptation at schools in this way:

> *I think for us, with First Things First, there are things that we will compromise on because we feel that they can be worked around and if we support the school it can be done. But there are other things where we absolutely feel are non-negotiable because we don't see how it could be truly effective. And if the school can't agree, we can't support each other. If we can't support the school and the school can't support us in having that common vision then there's a big underlying problem there.*

Some of the reform's "non-negotiables" include: the creation of Small Learning Communities composed of multi-grade, inter-disciplinary groups; the establishment of an FAS; the use of block scheduling; and a concerted effort to improve the engagement, alignment, and rigor of instruction across the school.

In our data, we found modifications to FTF primarily at one of the three schools. These were made in order to accommodate particular school contexts and the needs of diverse student bodies. The FTF design was developed for high schools that are comprised largely of low-performing students in urban environments with a history of widespread sub-par academic performance. Two of the three schools (FTF2 and FTF3) fit this description well and engaged in relatively little intentional modification of the FTF design, making every effort to hew as closely as possible to the guidance and systems that FTF provided. (This was not always possible due to resource constraints or the inability of teachers to change as rapidly as FTF leaders would like.) FTF1 is a slightly different case. As a suburban high school with a wide range of student achievement, the FTF was not always seen by school staff as a perfect fit for the high school. As a result, this school, more than either of the other two, engaged in some modification of the reform. This was done in consultation with FTF in order to most effectively meet the needs of the school and students.

The challenge of meeting the needs of a wide range of achievement levels was particularly evident at FTF1 due to its diverse student body. Modifications were evident at both ends of the student performance spectrum. For high achievers, the school allowed students to move more freely out of their SLCs in order to take high level courses or to use FAS periods for special seminars or electives. For struggling students, the district established an off-school credit recovery program to make up credits for courses not passed in ninth and tenth grades. Although FTF schools have the option to create transitional communities or opportunity centers for struggling and ELL students, FTF1 was the only school of the three study schools to create a particular center for struggling students. Students in the recovery centers were expected to join one of the thematic SLCs when their credit recovery is complete. Additionally, double blocks were created in English and math for ninth and tenth grade students, in an effort to bring struggling students up to grade level faster before testing. Students with special needs were also assigned to particular FAS groups headed by a state certified teacher. By doing this, the school was able to count the FAS period

toward state requirements for additional hours of support. According to the FTF liaison, separating these students is a "very, very different philosophy than [what] we normally do."

Other modifications included FTF1's modification and subsequent abandonment of the FAS materials and the creation of an "SLC-like" experience for teachers who were unable to meet with their SLCs due to course scheduling done at the school level. Two affiliate groups were formed and separate meetings mimicked the functioning of traditional SLCs though teachers did not necessarily share the same group of students.

The equitable distribution of resources within a school is another area in which FTF seeks change within a school. Traditionally, many high schools provide very different experiences for different populations of students (e.g., high achievers, ELLs). But in order to better prepare all students for post-secondary opportunities, FTF seeks to distribute resources more equitably across a school. For example, because FTF recommends against tracking students except in cases of severe disability,[9] meeting the needs of ELL students was a challenge for two schools in this sample. FTF offers a variety of options for schools seeking to deal with challenges such as these, and it is up to schools to implement what works best for them given their context and resources (e.g., staff capacity). FTF1 chose to create a mini-SLC for ninth and tenth grade ELL students with core teachers who are English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, whereas FTF3 created a transitional group for ELL students with the goal of moving students by the end of the school year from this group into a traditional SLC with ESL support. This school also had an ESL teacher in each SLC.

IV. Outcomes

This section discusses a set of changes that were evident at each of the schools as a result of its partnership with FTF. These changes include how school staff felt about the reform, its utility in their schools, and the changes that they reported seeing in the behaviors of both staff and students.

A. Perceived Value of the Reform

Perhaps reflecting their understanding of the goals of FTF, teachers viewed the value of FTF primarily through the lens of relationships with and among students and their families. The SLC and FAS structures were generally viewed as appropriate mechanisms for building these relationships and creating learning conditions that will support students. SLCs had been fully embraced by teachers at all three schools as a valuable component of the reform for both teachers and students. Despite feeling "meetinged to death," as one teacher put it, teachers generally regarded SLCs as a positive development, citing their potential to improve coordination and collaboration among teachers and improve teacher-student relationships. Even in those schools at the early stages of implementation, teachers seemed overall quite happy with the functioning of the SLCs, and mentioned the advantages of being able to discuss and develop strategies for particular students with their colleagues.

The value of the FAS structure was less universally clear to teachers. Though it had been fully embraced at the mature school (FTF3), opinions about it were split at the other two schools. FTF2 had not fully implemented FAS because time in the school schedule was not consistently allotted. Even the teachers who had been meeting with their FAS groups were not entirely sure how their role and that of school counselors were similar or different. They also felt that they could not contact families as frequently as

[9] FTF does not recommend tracking special needs students but promotes having their educational needs met in accordance with their IEPs. This may include having some students in self-contained classrooms with qualified staff, but these classrooms are still expected to be affiliated with an SLC in the school.

FAS recommended and still pay sufficient attention to their instructional responsibilities. Teachers at FTF1 were not sure that the activities they had been given to use during FAS would yield the desired closer relationships. Only 38% of survey respondents at FTF1 felt that FAS was strengthening bonds between teachers and students by the end of the first year of implementation. School leaders planned to modify this FTF component for the following year in order to increase its perceived value among teachers.

Teacher opinions of FTF's instructional component varied across all three schools. Generally, about one half to three quarters of teachers surveyed felt that their involvement in FTF had exposed them to examples of classroom teaching that the reform seeks to foster. At both FTF1 and FTF3, about one half of the teachers reported that FTF provided them with useful ideas and resources for changing their classroom practice or had exposed them to examples of student work that the reform seeks to foster.[10] In contrast, at FTF2, 89% of the teachers surveyed felt that FTF has a detailed plan for improving instruction, and 75% felt that their involvement in FTF had exposed them to examples of classroom teaching that the reform seeks to foster, and provided them with useful ideas and resources for changing their classroom practice. The higher rate of satisfaction can be partially explained by the fact that FTF was working closely with a state-mandated distinguished educator at FTF2, and teachers often correctly associated the strategies that she promoted with FTF.

Teachers were similarly split about whether the changes advocated by FTF would result in improved student achievement. Between 41% and 65% of teachers across the three schools agreed with the statement: "The changes called for by FTF are helping, or will help, my students to reach higher levels of achievement."

In interviews, teachers generally responded positively about the increased focus on instruction. The tuning protocol, seen as the major engine for instruction-oriented discussions, was viewed as a good tool, if not a particularly prescriptive one. Many teachers were initially skeptical about the use of such a tool in an interdisciplinary grouping. However, as comfort with both the SLC and the instrument grew, teachers reported an increased benefit to the instruction-centered discussions.

District leaders were generally quite pleased with the reforms that FTF had introduced into their schools. Their focus was frequently on the structure of the school and school day. Tangible changes such as the development of SLCs and FAS were most often cited by district leaders. However, these changes were not viewed as an end in themselves: district leaders generally saw them as a precondition to changing school atmospheres, professional development, and eventually instructional practice. District staff also appreciated the fact that FTF would not conflict with any ongoing instructional reforms underway at the district level. FTF's own instructional components provided a common vocabulary for discussing instructional practice among teachers, but could be adapted in support of a host of district initiatives. Finally, district leaders were very supportive of FTF's efforts to build more connections between teachers, students, and families, believing that these connections would help boost student engagement in high school.

[10] While the relatively low percentage at FTF1 can be expected due to the limited amount of time the school had worked with the reform, the low percentage at FTF3 can be explained differently. Because of the combination of the high turnover of teaching staff at FTF3 and the fact that FTF had been introduced in the school several years prior to our research, many teachers at the school are experiencing most of their instructional supports from school leaders who had been trained by FTF staff or from additional consultants connected to the school by FTF. Thus they did not always associate the training and strategies with FTF.

B. Changes in Teacher Behavior and Practice

Overall, teachers' work lives changed considerably with the introduction of FTF. The reform impacted the ways in which teachers spent their time, the organization of students and staff, and relationships within schools—among teachers, among students, between teachers and students, and to a lesser extent between teachers and students' families.

SLC meetings had become a regular, even dominant, feature in all three schools. Under the guidance of SLC coordinators and the SIF at each school, teachers were encouraged to discuss a host of school-related issues for the first time in a structured environment. Many teachers found this to be quite beneficial. Teachers reported that SLCs provided opportunities for professional development, and for teacher collaboration and communication about both students and instruction. Some teachers reported that the SLCs led to closer personal relationships among teachers as well.

In addition, the SLC structure served in some cases as a catalyst for a sort of new internal accountability in the school among teachers. Because teachers worked with the same students, they felt more incentive to make sure that their colleagues were enforcing similar practices to their own. As one SIF described: "Well, in some SLCs, I think they've been very effective and saying 'Listen. Every time you let that kid in with a drink in your room, it kills me, because then I have to send them to the disciplinary office, because they're so ticked off that it took 'til fourth block that anybody said anything.'" Other teachers described trying to use incentives and rewards that were similar to those used by their colleagues in order to present a more "unified front" to students.

However, teachers also commented that this new structure had weakened the traditional subject-oriented academic departments and limited communication among teachers in the same content area. Though teachers spoke about this in interviews, survey data indicate that teachers continued to talk with other people in their departments about issues related to course curriculum, materials, and pacing.

The FAS also changed teacher behavior as they were now provided with a scheduled time to meet and talk with students. Though implementation of this piece varied, many teachers credited the FAS with enabling them to develop closer relationships with students, particularly in FTF3 where this component was well-developed and had a dedicated period for these meetings. The FAS had also increased the amount of contact teachers had with parents. Though not always increased to the level desired by FTF and/or school leaders, in almost all cases teachers said that they had given greater attention to contacting students' families.

At the time of our visits, FTF's impact on instructional practice was much less apparent to teachers than were other impacts. This was particularly true in the early implementing schools. At these schools, most teachers did not describe deep changes in instructional practice resulting from their exposure to FTF. Still, several teachers commented that they picked up strategies through EAR training or through the use of tuning protocols in SLC meetings that helped them increase engagement in their classroom. Additionally, FTF was beginning to work through some new avenues to change classroom practice. By combining efforts with an instructional coach at FTF1 and a state-mandated distinguished educator at FTF2, FTF had increased presence at the classroom level and was guiding teacher practice in this way.

Though some teachers believed that the type of instruction required by FTF was not much different from their current practice, others were able to point to some FTF-related influences on their practice. For example, several teachers mentioned using techniques taught in the Kagan training, a set of ideas and practices aimed at increasing student engagement in the classroom. Teachers also mentioned having to change their instructional practices as a result of the shift to 90-minute block scheduling. As one teacher described:

I feel like a first year teacher again. I have that 45-50 minute class down pat and I know what I'm teaching in that . . . and I don't want to just teach a lesson and then give them work to do. So for me it's been a challenge to figure out, you know, how long to do something, then what am I doing next, and how do I keep their interest.

C. Changes in Other Staff Behavior and Practice

According to the FTF design, the school board, superintendent, other high-ranking district leaders, and the principal are expected to set and articulate clear expectations, personify their commitment to FTF, provide needed financial and political support, recognize accomplishments, and intervene to address challenges. In addition, the principal and district leaders are expected to monitor and report progress toward implementation.

Principals are expected to be active proponents of the reform, ensuring that the structural components of SLCs and FAS are put in place and that implementation follows the timeline established by the provider. At the same time, principals are asked to relinquish some control over decision making, conferring more authority onto SLCs once they are established.

The SIF is meant to form a partnership with the principal and operate as part of the school's administrative team. According to the providers, the SIF-principal relationship should be like "a hand in a glove." One should not do something related to the reform without the other one knowing about it and talking about it first.

In practice, the new roles school leaders are expected to play in support of FTF's implementation were sometimes challenging. One principal indicated the dramatic change that he had experienced at the conclusion of the first year of implementing FTF: "I mean, virtually no one in this building did this year what they did the year before." As noted above, SIFs had an enormous amount of responsibility for guiding the progress of FTF. Across the schools in our sample, they served as the primary point of contact for FTF in the school, tracked the progress of each SLC, coordinated training and professional development opportunities, and identified areas of need for the school. In some ways, the SIF became the primary instructional leader in the school (except in the one school where the SIF and principal were one and the same). This resulted in a changed role for the principal in the two early implementing schools. Principals in these schools indicated a feeling of displacement and some reduction in the traditional authority of principals and assistant principals. The changes that FTF introduced caused a new distribution of responsibilities at each school. More discussion of the role of leadership as it is recommended by FTF and was manifested in our study schools can be found in Section V-C.

There was some evidence that the relationship with the district office was beginning to change for FTF schools. Central offices sought to both learn from and monitor the effects of FTF practices. In order to succeed in the schools, FTF sought to collaborate more closely with district efforts that were underway at the schools. In most cases, this led to a closer relationship between the district and the high schools. Even in FTF3, where the district had traditionally played a minimal role in the high school, there was evidence that the district was seeking to learn from and expand some of the FTF practices that the school was using.

D. Changes in Communication Networks and Staff Relationships

The move to the SLC structure and dependence on the SIF and SLC coordinators clearly changed communication networks and staff relationships for many, if not the majority, of teachers. Teachers were

now working with other SLC colleagues multiple times per week in structured meetings. For many teachers this was their first experience working in interdisciplinary teams or even having regular formal professional conversations with colleagues.

Looking across schools at different phases of implementation of the FTF reform, we found that belonging to the same SLC became an increasingly strong influence on professional communication as experience with the reform increased. While there was concern among teachers that the creation of SLCs would effectively dissolve subject area departments, there was not strong evidence supporting this claim. When discussing course content or pacing, membership in the same academic department was even more strongly associated with communication than belonging to the same SLC, indicating that departmentally-based communication continued to be robust around areas of course content planning and pacing.

In interviews, teachers in all schools reported talking more about instruction and individual students under FTF than they had in their past experience. Whereas previously teachers might have gone to a friend in the department for ideas about a lesson, the SLC-based use of the tuning protocol formalized this process and brought in a wider range of perspectives. Though according to the provider liaisons these discussions were not always as deep as one might hope, they felt that the development of relationships among newly grouped teachers was a necessary precursor to deep discussion and change in instructional practice. Only at the end of the first implementation year did SIFs report witnessing conversations that were both instructional in nature and focused on the needs of students rather than adults. This represented a shift in both the form and content of communication.

The heavy emphasis on the SLCs did isolate those teachers and administrators who, for scheduling or other reasons, could not participate in SLC meetings. They felt largely isolated from much of the discussion in the school and were not sure how to access information about the changes that they were seeing. Schools attempted to meet this challenge in various ways—by making “affiliate” groups of teachers with common prep periods, by attaching administrators to various SLCs, or by having the SIF meet with those teachers—but there was little that appeared to effectively substitute for the SLC. Provider leaders recognize that it is not possible to substitute for full SLC membership but recognize that SLC affiliates are sometimes needed to meet scheduling demands.

E. Perceived Effects on Students

Though teachers in all schools had high hopes for FTF, only FTF3 had implemented the reform for a long enough period of time for respondents to consistently report having seen effects on students’ academic performance or behavior. At that school, staff that had been at the school for more than five years felt that changes introduced by FTF had created a climate where students were comfortable and had a sense of belonging. Students had built strong relationships with their teachers and administrative members of their SLCs, students had bonded with each other in their SLCs, parents knew they could call their child’s teacher (and vice versa), and teachers had a better sense of students’ needs.

In addition, some anecdotal evidence shared among teachers seemed to point to improvements in student achievement.[11] For example, one teacher noted that when the state switched to a more demanding test, scores in all of the high schools declined, but those in FTF3 declined less than many others. Another teacher mentioned that fewer students had to retake the high school exit exam in their senior year. Faculty identified additional positive student outcomes including increased retention of students in school, increased graduation rates, better classroom grades, increased numbers of students prepared for and going to college, and an increased number of AP courses to support students who wanted to go to college.

[11] Evaluation data regarding student achievement can be found in CSRQ, 2005; Gambone et al., 2004; and Quint et al., 2005.

Though it was still early in the implementation process at the other two schools, some of the teachers interviewed spoke positively about the effects of FTF on students. Interviewees discussed how the SLCs and FAS had enabled the development of closer relationships among staff, between students and staff, and between staff and parents. Many teachers felt that these changes resulted in effects such as improved student behavior or engagement and slight improvements in academic achievement. One drawback that was mentioned by teachers was the feeling that the block schedule increased difficulties for students who missed school because they were now missing twice as much material in a day.

In general, school staff as well as the provider liaisons most frequently cited the development of closer relationships between teachers and students and more communication among teachers about individual students as leading to a better school environment where students felt both more supported and more accountable for their behaviors. The positive effects on students discussed by teachers and staff reflect the intended goals of the reform and the expected goals of the study schools.

F. Perceived Sustainability

Sustainability of the relationship between FTF and the schools was often dependent on a set of factors that were beyond the control of the schools themselves. A strong sense of ownership of and support for FTF at FTF3, for example, did not necessarily translate into confidence that FTF would be sustained if the principal left because he was a strong proponent of the reform. As the principal noted:

> *And then it depends on the district and who would—when I disappear, who's next and what's their philosophy? And do we hire for a philosophy or an approach that's consistent with where the school is at? Too often in our district we keep sending people in and saying, it's your school, and you get some version of the "fix it" speech, which I took in my first principalship, as do many others, to be massive change of course.*

Teachers and administrators at the other schools expressed a similar concern, having little to do with FTF and more to do with the politics of school reform. Having seen other reforms come and go, they were concerned that FTF might also be subject to the whims of staff turnover and new school and district leadership. District leadership was generally more confident that at least some components of FTF would remain regardless of staff changes and funding difficulties. However, they did acknowledge that new leadership at the district level could seek to take high schools in a new direction that would depart from FTF strategies (and structures). Interview data suggest that actors at both the school and district levels felt that there would be little they could do in order to stop FTF from being abandoned should someone make that decision. Though FTF reports a three-year persistence rate of 80% in schools that initially implement the reform, even the individuals at the study schools who were most enthusiastic about the changes that FTF had brought about in their school did not feel those successes would save the reform in the face of leadership change.

However, barring any major leadership changes at the district level, teachers were optimistic that some of FTF's essential components would persist. Most common was the belief that the SLC structure would remain in place. In the two districts with more than one high school (FTF2 and FTF3), there was some evidence that the SLC concept was being tried in other schools, even in the absence of the full FTF reform. This gave some optimism that at least that component would continue. Even among those teachers whose support for FTF was tepid, SLCs were generally endorsed as a worthwhile structure and opportunity for discussion.

Contractual issues also impacted the potential sustainability of FTF's work with the schools. At the close of data collection, one school was in the second year of a five-year contract with FTF. Parties on all sides felt confident that the relationship would continue to be productive over that period, if not longer. A second school was also in the middle of a multi-year contract with FTF, but due to extreme fiscal hardship was having difficulty paying for the services they had received. FTF was hopeful that they could continue working with the school and district, but acknowledged that this would be difficult if funds could not be found to support the work. The most mature school had concluded a multi-year contract with FTF but under the leadership of a supportive principal had chosen to maintain an ongoing relationship. Such continuing relationships are encouraged by FTF.

Teachers and leaders alike also recognized the role of accountability pressures in determining the fate of FTF, or any reform. In order to justify the investment in terms of time, effort, and money, the schools would be under significant pressure to demonstrate improved student achievement on state tests. Teachers at all three schools generally shared the conviction that the status quo at their schools had not been working for a large portion of the student population and all of the schools we visited were under pressure to improve scores on the state assessments. Many believed that improvement on these exams would be the only factor in deciding the future of FTF.

Many teachers and administrators did feel they were seeing positive results from FTF (described in Sections IV-E and IV-F) and this contributed to their desire to keep the reform moving forward at the school. When asked whether she thought the reform would remain at her school, one SIF replied: "I do think so. Even if it's not called FTF. I don't think we'll always call it FTF." At FTF3, this is just what we saw. Teachers no longer referred to many of their practices as components of FTF, but had maintained them over time.

V. Explanatory Variables

Implementation of FTF followed a generally similar trajectory across the three schools. Structural modifications were the focus of most staff attention, particularly in the planning and early implementation years. Teachers were assigned to SLCs and met on a regular basis, indicating that the SLC structure had become embedded in the schools. The degree to which these structures were stimulating the types of rich conversations that FTF envisions varied within schools according to teachers, school leaders, and provider liaisons. The FAS also got considerable attention, though teachers expressed less certainly about what they were supposed to do with that time and had concerns about the frequency with which they were meeting their students. Among the FTF components, the instructional improvement strategies were discussed the least by teachers and school leaders, though it was an area of increasing attention in all of the study schools, as is intended by FTF. The variables identified below help to explain this overall story as well as the variation that was identified among the three study schools. Clearly, there is a great deal of interaction and interplay among these variables. For example, the FTF design creates certain leadership structures which in turn influence the training that staff members receive or the communication networks that grow among staff members. Though the variables are discussed discretely, every effort was made to identify interactions between and among these influential factors.

A. Design Factors

The FTF design is continuously evolving. The ongoing refinement of certain components, in combination with differences in school and district contexts and needs, resulted in different implementation experiences at the three schools. For example, FTF1 was implementing many components simultaneously (some of which were brand new) while FTF3 added some components later. This is because not all of the components had been as developed at the start of FTF3's work with the reform.

Change in the FTF design over time also helps to explain why the changes that were most often cited by school staff had less to do with instruction and more to do with the structural changes that had been made. The instructional components of FTF—tuning protocols, MWM, EAR and its attendant professional development—are newer and thus have not had the same opportunity to take root in schools. They are also introduced to schools somewhat later, explaining lower levels of implementation in those schools still at the earlier stages of work with FTF. And, some components that had been created were being further refined.

As FTF matures as a reform, it is increasingly specific in its design. Based on its experiences in an ever broader group of high schools, FTF is endeavoring to provide greater direction around a number of components. The prescribed FAS activities are a good example. When FTF introduced a newer and highly specified set of FAS activities at FTF1, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the particular activities that were recommended. This input was taken by FTF and used to develop guides better suited to the school.

The schools or districts in this study largely contracted with FTF because they believed that it had strategies to break up large high schools and forge better relationships among and between teachers and students. School staff expressed the most comfort with components of the design that aimed at these targets.

Regardless of the evolution of non-structural changes required by FTF, the structural changes mandated by FTF are the most clearly prescribed part of the reform. Partially as a result of this level of prescription, teachers and administrators most frequently cited these components as the most major changes introduced to the school by FTF (e.g., SLCs are formed with regularity and uniformity during the first year). Structural components are introduced to teachers first and are also the vehicle for subsequent pieces of the reform and are thus a necessary first step.

B. Training Strategies

Related to the issue of reform design is the way in which teachers and other staff are trained in the philosophies and strategies of FTF. The reform relies heavily on school and district leaders to facilitate the use of particular tools or techniques. This means that in many cases the SIF and SLC coordinators (or sometimes just the SIF) will receive training or guidance in certain practices and will be expected to use that knowledge and skill to encourage teachers to try new strategies and think in new ways about their roles and improving teacher practice. In some cases, this method slowed the use of some reform components. SIFs and/or SLC coordinators, feeling burdened with administrative tasks (particularly during the planning and first implementation years), devoted less time than they would have liked to training colleagues in FTF components. Alternatively, those designated as trainers did not always fully understand the strategies that they were charged with disseminating and supporting. For example, the structures needed to use the tuning protocols were in place at many schools, but the teachers felt the training initially provided was insufficient for them to use the tools to have productive discussions. Fortunately, monitoring usually identified these insufficiencies and attempts were made to remedy them though additional guidance.

Because the SLC structure is the mechanism primarily used to demonstrate and reinforce best practices, SLC coordinators are expected to guide this process. SLC coordinators in the two early implementing schools reported having had a day or two of training by FTF staff, though they had much more from their SIFs. More training by FTF staff was expected as schools' experience with the reform progressed. However, the level of SIF capability varied among schools, leaving some SLC coordinators further behind in their understanding and use of the FTF strategies. It is true that FTF provided responsive liaisons for schools, but this system delays response time even in the best of cases. For example, when a

SIF did not have a ready response s/he had to get in touch with the liaison, get a response, and then pass it back to the teacher. This process took time, particularly in newly implementing schools, as the SIF was in the process of developing expertise and confidence in the reform. In addition, because the system depended somewhat on the willingness of school leaders to closely monitor implementation, variability among SLCs persisted. Though FTF has a system for measuring and reporting implementation benchmarks, it was somewhat dependent on school leaders to be pro-active in this area.

When needs were identified at the school or SLC level, additional training was provided. However, this is a relatively reactive approach. Several school staff members stated that they believed that FTF should have been able to anticipate certain additional training or assistance needs at the school level (e.g., around the concept of rigor or integrating various tracks). FTF believes that they provide sufficient training and that the provider liaison can meet the individual needs of schools as they arise. The ability of provider liaisons to meet school needs is dependent on successful communication between the SIF and liaison, and the ability of both to identify school needs. Additionally, in a few cases at the early implementing schools, staff reported that the level of funding available from the school or district affected training opportunities to some extent. Because trainings are added on an as-needed basis, there was not always sufficient funding for staff to attend conferences that both they and FTF believed would be helpful or to bring in an outside trainer to fill a newly identified gap.

C. Leadership

The level of involvement and commitment displayed by key leaders in a school was a very important factor in developing teacher buy-in and potential sustainability for FTF at the three study schools. This is true even where the decision to introduce FTF was made by, or in partnership with, the district. FTF expects school (and increasingly district) leaders to "set and articulate clear expectations, personify commitment, provide timely and effective supports, monitory and report progress and recognize accomplishments and intervene to ensure progress" (Connell, 2002, p. 18). FTF has articulated particular ways in which actors at all levels of the system (e.g., board of education, district and school staff) can enact these leadership requirements and provides training for stakeholders in these leadership activities.[12]

In the study schools, the progress of FTF appeared to depend most heavily on the SIF (in cooperation with a supportive principal). The SIF was expected to coordinate logistics related to the reform, guide the SLC agendas, establish a system for monitoring activities in classrooms and the FAS, oversee and occasionally provide professional development for school staff, maintain contact with the provider liaison, and attend to a host of other issues related to the reform and its continued progress in the school. As a result, the capability and commitment of the SIF played a dominant role in determining the progress of FTF in the three study schools.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, the creation of the SIF position had implications for the role of the principal and other school leaders, such as the assistant principal. While much of the responsibility for the reform lay with the SIF, much of the authority and formal accountability remained with the principals. In the study schools, this disconnect caused some tension in roles according to both SIFs and principals.

The ways in which school leaders negotiated this new and complex dynamic helps to explain some of the variation in reform use in the three schools. In one case, the principal took on the job of SIF, thus combining the roles and eliminating potential conflict. As a committed and capable leader, he was able to see that components of the reform were supported. In addition, as both SIF and principal, he has been in

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[12] These leadership roles and activities are defined in a document entitled "System Leadership Matrix: Continuous Improvement in Teaching and Learning," drafted by FTF in 2004. There are also leadership matrices for supporting the FAS and SLC structures.

the school for the entire time FTF has been in use, able to support its implementation in the school. This is not necessarily recommended as a preferred practice by FTF, but in this case did appear to consolidate both authority and responsibility in one person.

In another case, the SIF at FTF2 did her best to support pieces of the reform but the principal was largely disengaged from the details of the reform effort. The principal was focused on administrative and disciplinary concerns, as opposed to FTF. Thus, school leadership did not appear to be speaking with one voice about school priorities. This undermined even the most basic components of the reform, such as scheduling, when the principal would schedule things to meet his needs while they might directly conflict with the needs of FTF. At FTF1, the original SIF was replaced with one that was more compatible with the principal's vision. However, even after selecting a new SIF, the principal was concerned about his own role and authority in the school.

Related to the new leadership structure, the ability of school leadership to devolve responsibility to non-administrators and to support them in those roles was essential in allowing the FTF structures to function as planned. FTF depends on the leadership of SLC coordinators, in addition to the SIF, for its success. SLC coordinators had varying levels of capacity to guide difficult decisions and this was generally reflected in the functioning of their SLCs which, as discussed previously, varied considerably within many schools. This was a reflection of both the individual SLC coordinator, but also of the SIF and principal and their ability to support the coordinators in their new and more responsible roles.

The leadership at the school and SLC level is particularly important because, to some extent, school leaders played a role in prioritizing which components of FTF they wanted to focus on during their common planning time with their colleagues. Part of the variability in the use of FTF across the three schools can be explained by conscious choices made by leaders in the school. For example, at FTF2, the SIF decided to devote her attention to instructional issues rather than building the FAS. Through a negotiation process, the SIF can set the agenda with the FTF liaison and principal (where applicable) much like SLC coordinators can set their SLC agendas in collaboration with the SIF. FTF encouraged and supported these leaders to make their decisions based on the areas of the reform that needed most attention in order to achieve initial levels of implementation expected. This data-based decision-making process was not always followed and FTF liaisons attempted to redirect these leaders' decisions in some cases. For this reason, we saw variability both within and across the study schools and SLCs in the areas that received more or less attention.

D. District Role

Among the study schools, we have a continuum of district involvement from largely uninvolved (FTF3), to somewhat involved though bringing some additional challenges (FTF2), to a district that was quite committed to supporting the reform (FTF1). The district role had implications for reform use at each school as well as for school-level leadership. At FTF3, the near total absence of the district meant that the principal took sole responsibility for moving the reform forward. At FTF2, the district wanted to see certain components of the reform in place (SLCs and FAS, in particular) and so these received most of the attention. However, the general chaos in the district also meant that the school received a host of other messages from the district office, thus providing further obstacles to its focus on FTF. In this case, the SIF struggled to balance competing demands and the chaotic system in which she found herself, while trying to push forward with certain components of FTF. At FTF1, the district was an involved and aware partner, generally supporting the implementation of FTF at the school. In fact, the district was so actively involved that school-level leaders were still in the process of negotiating their own roles in relationship to each other and the district office.

In all three cases the district had been involved in the selection and funding of FTF at the school level, but their involvement following that decision varied considerably. For example, though they had the option, FTF3's district chose not to engage with the reform in any meaningful way in terms of participating in trainings or learning deeply about the reform. Because the principal at FTF3 is such a strong supporter of FTF and this district gave schools a great deal of autonomy over resources and instruction, the reform continued without district involvement. Had he not been such a proponent, the district would have had no ability to support the reform. At FTF2, the district would have likely only stepped in to make sure that the structural changes were maintained at the school if the SIF were not leading the reform. At the time of our last visit, the district office had just hired a coordinator to oversee the efforts at all of the FTF schools in the district, a sign that they were preparing to increase their involvement. Only at FTF1 was the district sufficiently involved to support FTF through a potential transition at the high school level. It should be noted that the level of district involvement in FTF generally parallels district involvement in other initiatives in these districts. Across the three schools, district involvement in FTF did not appear to be different than district office involvement in other areas of school improvement.

From this limited sample, it appears that where the district is largely absent (FTF3), responsibility for all of the reform components fall to school-level staff. Where the district office is an active participant (FTF1), there is regular negotiation between staff at various levels about how and why reform components should be used. At FTF2, the district, unsatisfied with progress at the school level, was preparing to increase involvement. Based on the experience at FTF1, this increased district involvement may have the effect of further advancing the reform.

E. Perceived Need

Staff at all three schools had a sense that their schools were underperforming. This was spurred by states' performance-based accountability systems which identified all of these schools as missing performance targets at the time of our visits. Though the severity of the situation in the schools varied, the message sent by the external accountability system influenced teachers' willingness to try the new approaches espoused by FTF.

Though staff across our schools recognized that poor student performance was a problem for some or all of their students, they diagnosed the problem differently at the outset. FTF was seen as a slightly better fit by staff members that saw student engagement as their primary problem. This is because the first changes that FTF made in all schools—both the structural modifications and the professional development about student engagement strategies—were targeted in large part at improving student engagement.

Those teachers and staff members who felt that more instructional and/or curricular guidance was needed were initially somewhat unhappy that this did not appear to be happening. As FTF's instructional components were introduced over time, and as staff understanding of what the reform could provide became clearer, this concern was lessened somewhat. However, staff at all schools, even those that believed that their instruction was not an issue, began to focus more on instruction as their work with FTF progressed. This was partially due to the evolution of FTF's instructional components as well as the schools' evolving understanding (with guidance from FTF) of what was needed to produce gains in student achievement.

FTF designed the roll out of the reform with this feedback loop in mind. Because the reform mandates change without widespread buy-in among teachers as a necessary precursor, it believes that teachers will be persuaded about the efficacy of the reform based on the results that they see. In fact, in the three schools it appeared beneficial to the progress of the reform if teachers felt they could see results. For example, most teachers reported that they felt that the SLCs were filling a function in their professional lives; they could see the benefit of sharing ideas about the students they have in common. Some teachers

also thought that the engagement strategies that they had learned were beneficial. These positive impressions of the reform's impact spurred interest in and diffusion of the new practices. Those teachers who struggled to see any positive change were less engaged in learning more about the reform, setting them further behind in their use of the reform. For some teachers, skepticism about the reform remained, though it seemed to decrease with their increased involvement in the reform.

Related to this was the sense of internal accountability that the SLC fostered. In many SLCs, teachers talked about a heightened sense of accountability to their colleagues. Because there is a high likelihood that teachers within an SLC will have the same students as each other over several years, teachers felt an increased responsibility to see that these students succeed. Also, because teachers shared the same students, they were able to have discussions about individual students and felt more pressure and more supported by colleagues to develop strategies that will yield greater success with individual students. This internal pressure in SLCs, when it existed, also served to encourage teachers to learn more about the strategies FTF was recommending in the hopes that they would serve students well and would give teachers a common approach to instruction.

VI. Summary

The case study detailed above is one part of a larger study of high school improvement. It is meant to provide the reader with an account of the reform's design, understanding, enactment, and perceived effects of one external school reform and its manifestation in three high schools. As stated at the beginning of this report, this work is not an evaluation of either the high schools or FTF. As a result, this final section of the report does not report generalizable or evaluative findings. Instead, it summarizes issues that offer some possible explanations about why FTF was implemented as it was in our three study schools. This section aims to suggest some directions for future research based heavily on the perceptions of teachers and school staff.

Structure mattered. Based on this case, it appears that structural changes, when contrasted with instructional changes, were relatively easy to mandate. Our data indicate that within one year all schools were able to restructure their teaching staff into SLCs. Features that support these structural changes, such as common planning time, sharing students over several years, thematic orientation, and efforts to build internal accountability, contributed to the impact of the SLC. The SLC structure had a clear influence on who talked to whom in the school, with that influence growing over time. Teachers increasingly talked to colleagues within their SLC when seeking advice across a range of professional issues. In addition, people who were given positions of authority within the reform were increasingly seen as resources for their colleagues. The new communication networks that were created as a result of structural changes led to increased interdisciplinary conversation and new connections between staff members.

Instruction was resistant to change. While structure clearly influenced communication patterns, it is not clear that this communication necessarily impacted instructional practices. FTF seeks to improve teacher practice and recognizes that achieving this goal schoolwide can take several years. Because the bulk of the evidence in this case study comes from schools in the early stages of implementation, we have more evidence of the early struggles for improvement than the resulting improvements evident in schools like FTF3. FTF is not a reform with prescriptive lesson plans or intensive in-class coaching and thus does not expect immediate change in all teachers' instruction. Our data show that it was exceedingly difficult to affect instruction. As previous research has shown, altering the core of teaching is a monumental challenge (Elmore, 1996). FTF, with its early focus on structure, managed to affect classroom practice in only limited ways in the first year or two of implementation. Instructional improvements were more evident at the mature school. This was partially due to the fact that clear objectives for instructional

improvement were relatively new to FTF, with the EAR instructional goals and protocol initially developed in the last few years.

Leadership was central. In our study schools, leaders with formal authority attracted a great percentage of requests from teachers for advice about FTF. That meant that these leaders, particularly SIFs and SLC coordinators, needed to be well trained about the parts of the reform they were being expected to implement or support at any given point in time. The staff members in these positions in the two early implementing schools did not always feel confident in their abilities to answer teachers' questions or to push them in productive ways to improve their practice in some areas of the reform.

In the study schools, the knowledge of reform leaders varied over time and within and across schools. Because FTF depends heavily on school-based leadership to maintain and move the reform forward, building the capacity of school-based leaders prior to rolling out the reform to teachers is a prime concern. Related to the issue of assuring leadership capacity around the reform is the need to define the responsibilities of various leaders in the school as they relate to the reform. Leadership and structural changes required by FTF had real implications for leadership in traditionally structured schools. The tension between individuals who held authority prior to the introduction of reform and those who were granted authority with the advent of reform caused some tension among leaders for whom this was a new arrangement. For example, principals and assistant principals needed to feel comfortable with the increase in authority and prestige of the person who was named as the SIF. Similarly, some department chairs acknowledged feeling displaced or less clear about their roles and responsibilities since the introduction of SLC coordinators. Issues of power and authority caused tension in some schools (at least in the early stages of reform) and on occasion caused teachers to receive "mixed messages" about the primacy of the reform.

Resources impacted implementation. Resources, particularly appropriate staff and time, posed an obstacle to implementation for some schools in our study. The SLC structure, upon which many of FTF's components hinge, is based on the premise that all students and teachers will work within their respective SLCs and will have time to collaboratively plan. Though all schools had largely implemented the SLC structure, teachers and many leaders believed that they should have had totally "pure" SLCs, meaning they would have little or no contact with students outside of their SLCs. All of our schools found this ideal to be impossible to achieve. Though FTF's implementation standards now state that 90% of students should stay in their SLCs for 75% of the time for core subjects and thematic classes, most teachers and school leaders believed that the reform promised an even higher standard. Students took, and teachers taught, courses outside of their SLCs and teachers were not always available to participate in common planning time. Teachers in all schools mentioned the "impurity" of the SLCs as a problem. Lack of SLC purity undermined teacher confidence in the reform, in the conversations that were being held during SLC meetings (because not all teachers were able to participate), and in the ability of the school to implement the reform. Though schools were working to improve SLC purity, what they perceived as full implementation remained frustratingly elusive. Though the lack of purity depended heavily on available resources, the willingness of school and district leaders to make necessary reallocation decisions also played a role in achieving the desired standards.

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