Voices for Children
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Putting First Things First in Kansas City, Kansas Schools
From the President

How do we measure school success? As parents, we tend to look no further than our own children. Are they learning? Are they enthusiastic about school? Are they bringing home good grades and advancing along the academic ladder? Will they graduate on time and make it into college?

As a nation, increasingly, we look to standardized test scores and drop-out rates. Across the country and here in Greater Kansas City, it is not uncommon for urban school districts to have the lowest test scores and the highest drop-out rates.

Kansas City, Kansas was no exception.

From the outside looking in, it was no wonder. High levels of poverty, high student mobility, significant numbers of students from non-English speaking families and schools filled with students who were vulnerable to the violence and drugs of the neighborhoods from which they came. Failure seemed inevitable.

However, school district leaders – to their credit – decided that failure was not the only option for the children and families of Kansas City, Kansas (KCK) public schools. With generous and ongoing support from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, KCK’s district leaders decided to try to beat the odds. Within an astonishingly short amount of time, the district’s statewide test scores – the way in which the federal government will assess their progress – have made enormous gains. Preliminary results of the 2003-2004 assessments even show that the district has closed the achievement gap among Hispanic and Caucasian students in fifth grade reading tests. Considering that many of those youngsters come from homes in which English is not the primary language, that’s a remarkable achievement.

In this issue of Voices for Children, we’ll tell the story of the KCK schools’ impressive turnaround. They’ve come a long way, but district leaders are the first to admit that they still have a long way to go. It is our hope that supporters of urban school reform will be inspired to help KCK to cross the finish line. It is also our hope that other school districts will be inspired to learn from KCK’s example: reform may not come quickly or easily, but it is well worth the effort!

Janice S. Ellis, Ph.D
President
Imagine how difficult coaching would be if, every season, every member of your team was different. Or how difficult it would be to run a business if, every year, the entire staff was different. Such is the challenge that teachers in most schools face at the beginning of school, when they are greeted by a brand new group of students. Much learning time is lost at the beginning of school, as teachers get to know and build relationships with their students, learn about their individual learning styles, and about what their individual strengths and weaknesses are.

In Kansas City, Kansas (KCK) Public Schools, teachers do not have this challenge. KCK teachers and staff usually already know their students, their academic strengths and weaknesses, and can immediately get down to the business of learning. That’s because teachers and students in the KCK public schools stay together for several consecutive years in a practice known as “looping.” The same teachers and students are together for two or more years in elementary school, three years in middle school and four years in high school.

“There’s not two weeks of catch up and getting to know each other at the beginning of school,” said Wyandotte High School teacher Tracy Chambers. “That’s a huge, huge bonus.”

Small learning communities in which students and teachers spend several years together, developing relationships, is a key strategy of the KCK schools’ nine-year-old reform initiative called First Things First. These small communities are one of many strategies that have produced significant improvements in state achievement scores, attendance, graduation, and drop-out rates. The KCK reform initiative is being touted nationally as a model for urban school reform.

First Things First is no longer school reform,” said KCK superintendent Dr. Ray Daniels, “This is the way we do business. This is the way we educate kids.”

In 1996, however, when First Things First was launched, the story of the KCK public school system was all too familiar: an urban school district in which about two-thirds of the students scored below the national average on standardized tests, with drop-out rates as high as 40 percent and not much prospect for improvement, according to Dan Wright, Ph.D., the district’s educational research and assessment director.

According to Wright, in 1996:

- About 45 percent of KCK students scored in the bottom 25 percent in reading and math compared with national norms.
- Across all grade levels, about 20 percent of students met the state standard in reading; less than 10 percent met the state standard in math.
- KCK schools consistently were near the bottom in the state’s ranking of school districts.

“Something Had to be Done”

Realizing that something had to be done to change the status quo, district administrators presented the data to the KCK school board.

“It truly was the first time the district took a hard, honest look at how our kids were performing,” explained Superintendent Daniels. “Our board had to make a decision. Either we say that poor and minority kids can’t learn, or the board could say, ‘This isn’t good enough for our kids, community and families and we believe our kids can do better.’”
In many ways, it would be a risky position for the school district to take in such a public forum, admitted Daniels. “It was a harsh report and people were afraid that if you said in public your kids weren’t doing well (the district) would look bad and people would leave the district.”

Daniels credited the board with having the courage to face “the brutal facts” about student achievement and do what was best for students. The board charged administrators with putting a plan in place that would bring about lasting change.

Fortunately, top KCK administrators had been invited by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation to hear from school reformer Dr. Jim Connell, co-founder of the New Jersey-based Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE). As Connell described his First Things First program to area educators who were in attendance, the program seemed to be what KCK administrators were looking for to improve their declining schools. “Our district was very interested,” said Steve Gering, KCK Executive Director of Instruction.

According to IRRE, First Things First provides a “flexible framework for reform that districts and schools can adapt to their specific needs,” and that helps schools focus on three goals:

- Strengthening relationships among students and staff;
- Improving teaching and learning; and
- Reallocating budget, staff and time to achieve the first two goals.

IRRE materials describe the process this way: “IRRE staff and consultants work with schools to create small learning communities, involve families in supporting student success and develop new ways to engage all students in achieving high standards.”

Over time, according to IRRE, the goal is to prepare all students for a future in post-secondary education and the job market.

District administrators, led by then-superintendent Jim Hensley, presented the First Things First concept

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**FIRST THINGS FIRST TIMELINE**

1996 – School Board urges school reform.

1996 - Administrators attend First Things First presentation.

1996 – Community meetings begin.

1996 – Kauffman Foundation awards initial grant.

1997 - Federal court approves KCK desegregation plan including First Things First.

1998 - First Things First implemented in Wyandotte “cluster” schools.

1998 - Ray Daniels hired as superintendent.

1999 - First Things First implemented in Washington “cluster” schools.

2000 - First Things First implemented in Harmon and Schlagle “clusters.”

2001 - Kauffman Foundation awards $9.6 million grant.

2002 – First key data shows significant improvements.
to the school board and eventually to principals and other influential district leaders. Once they were given the go-ahead by the board, district and IRRE staff put a communications plan into motion that included a series of informational meetings with teachers and other staff, parents and community leaders. At the meetings, participants were presented the data about the district’s performance compared with national data, illustrating the need for school reform. At each discussion, audiences were told about the key components of First Things First. Most district patrons and teachers, according to Gering, eventually became supporters of the approach. Those teachers who were unable to join the reform effort eventually left the school district, he said.

A Bold, Comprehensive Commitment

Once the school board decided to embrace First Things First, it decided the district had to “move boldly forward,” according to Gering. After several months of planning and engagement, during the 1996-97 school year, district leaders decided the reform effort should be district-wide, implemented at all levels of administration and staff, with a minimum five-year commitment. The school board, administrators and staff had experienced smaller efforts that had failed to bring about lasting change, so it was determined that First Things First would be implemented district-wide.

Daniels said that system-wide, long-term commitment was important and has made the difference between success and failure. “The recommendation was to do what hardly any district in the country was doing - enact school reform in every school, at every grade level, for all kids across the whole district,” he said.

“We believed it was really important that this was a kindergarten through 12th grade, system-wide reform,” Gering said. “I am convinced that school districts don’t have the capacity to handle multiple reforms.” Gering notes that because each of the levels - elementary, middle and high schools – needed improvement, it was effective for the entire district to focus on one reform effort.

The district also avoided the temptation to start with those schools in which success would be easiest. Instead, it was decided that the reform effort would start with the schools that needed it most, those with the worst achievement scores and lowest attendance rates. The effort got underway with a significant grant from the Kauffman Foundation.

Both district administrators and IRRE consultants said the school board’s leadership and support have been critical in making the reform work. When the district found itself hiring its third superintendent in three years, the school board determined that a commitment to First Things First would be a job requirement. When Daniels, who started with the district in 1965 as a junior high English teacher, was hired as superintendent in 1998, he made it clear that implementation of First Things First would be a priority.

“The board made a number of courageous decisions,” said Daniels. “They backed us in the very beginning, when we weren’t seeing improvements and didn’t have backing from staff.”

Getting the support of the district’s leadership for First Things First was one thing; implementing a system-wide school reform in a large and troubled urban district was quite another. Furthermore, KCK would be the first school district to implement First Things First on such a large scale over such a long period of time. The KCK school district was blazing a new trail.

How It Came Together

One of the things that sets First Things First apart from other reform initiatives is the emphasis that it places on planning and making sure the conditions for reform are in place. Long before First Things First reached the classrooms in KCK, several strategies were used to ensure system-wide and lasting reform. Gering noted that these strategies were all based in research and “just made sense” to set the stage for systemic success.

Holding Partners Accountable —The district, IRRE and the Kauffman Foundation had defined roles and responsibilities in the First Things First initiative. The Kauffman Foundation invested grant dollars and provided assistance with planning, research, training and communications. IRRE provided planning, guidelines and consulting services for the superintendent, board, principals and teachers. Also, as the district’s consultant, IRRE asked the hard questions to keep all efforts focused on the outcomes. The school district’s job was to create a climate for reform, implement the reforms, and monitor the progress.
Informing Stakeholders — Community roundtable discussions to share both the need for school reform and the First Things First plan were an important first step in the district’s strategic communications effort in the KCK community. Meetings were held not only with teachers and other school staff, but with parents, community groups, civic leaders and other stakeholders.

Making First Things First the District’s Policy — Even the most promising school reform efforts can be dropped at a moment’s notice when there are changes in superintendents or school board. To protect First Things First from fickle political winds, the KCK school district did the next best thing to carving it in stone: it made First Things First a part of its plan for release from court-ordered desegregation. Like many urban school districts, the KCK district had been under court-ordered desegregation. The district was seeking to end a 20-year desegregation case. To meet the requirements of the federal court, the district had to submit a plan showing how it would meet its educational goals for all the district’s students once released from court supervision. School district leaders specified the district would do so through the implementation of First Things First. This move also ensured that the reform initiative would become a matter of policy and not easily subject to change by future district leaders.

Reallocating Resources and Restructuring Positions — The district initially elected to phase in First Things First incrementally, one group, or “cluster,” of schools at a time. This method allowed the district to shift personnel, technical support and funding as needed. However, district planners soon learned that schools were eager to implement the reforms and the plan was adjusted so that more schools could implement the reforms sooner.

Securing Union Support — District administrators knew that local National Education Association (NEA) support would be critical to ensuring that teachers would implement changes in their classrooms. School reform efforts in other urban areas have shown that success depends on the strong support of three school district players: the superintendent, the school board and the teachers’ union. As administrators worked to engage NEA building representatives in the reform, teachers were cautious about implementing changes brought in from outside and about possibly losing contractual rights. “Fortunately, leadership from NEA and the district had the foresight to see the opportunities to learn about each other’s concerns, collaborate and create a partnership,” said Gering. The district invited a local NEA representative to address one of the roundtable discussions. District administrators attended an NEA conference to learn more about the union’s experience with other districts’ comprehensive reform efforts, and the local NEA secured a national trainer to help teachers with new teaching skills.

Strengthening Professional Development and Technical Assistance — One of the most important features of First Things First was a commitment to staff professional development above and beyond what most school districts require. The KCK schools even took the extraordinary step of dismissing school two hours early every Wednesday to allow time for teacher training. As far as district officials are aware, no other school district has tried this approach.

“We can’t emphasize enough what a big risk that was,” said Gering. “Some in the community thought crime rates and teenage pregnancy would increase when young people had extra time,” he said. Although it was a risky and controversial move, it was a leap of faith the community took together. In order to accommodate working families, the district’s afterschool programs were made available to students earlier than usual. Local fire stations and nearby faith communities opened their doors to students on Wednesday afternoons to provide tutoring and safe havens after school.

Seven Critical Features

Once inside the schools, the First Things First philosophy is as simple as its name implies. According to IRRE’s Connell, the seven critical features provide a framework for how a district will develop and support relationships. Once relationships are strengthened, reformers can focus on improving teaching and curriculum, and then manage the resources needed to support those efforts.

Beyond that simple concept, the initiative is built upon seven critical features that guide the planning and implementation for students and their families, teachers and administrators. “Those are the conditions that if you see those in place in schools, you should expect to see kids improve their behavior and achievement,” said Connell. “This is the stuff you really want to have happen in your school.”
In fact, Connell said when he talks with school districts about implementing First Things First, he can usually tell if districts are good candidates for this particular type of reform. If district leaders aren’t interested in developing relationships and want to rush into instruction and curriculum, he said, “We suggest they go work with someone else.”

IRRE’s Seven Critical Features focus as much on processes and relationships as on particular instructional techniques.

For students:

- Provide continuity of care across the school day, across multiple years and between school and home through small learning communities.

- Set high, clear and fair standards for academics and conduct.

- Lower the student-to-adult ratios to 15-to-1 or fewer, and increase instructional time in language arts and math.

- Provide enriched and diverse opportunities for students to learn, perform and be recognized.

For staff:

- Equip, empower and expect all teaching staff to implement standards-based instruction that actively engages all students in learning.

- Give small learning communities and schools the flexibility to redirect resources.
Assure collective responsibility for student outcomes.

The Smaller, the Better

According to KCK’s Steve Gering, First Things First stresses that effective teaching and learning begins with small learning communities, the engines that drive the rest of the reform effort. The small learning communities allow close, long-term relationships to develop between the young people and the staff. The reasoning, supported by research, is that students are more likely to be in school each day when they know their teachers care about them and expect them to be there. Also, students are aware that their teachers know their parents and will keep in close contact with their parents about their progress and their whereabouts.

“As we started creating and implementing small learning communities, we learned not just any small learning community is effective,” said Gering. “We got clearer about what it means in KCK to have continuity of care and to hold people accountable and modified the communities based on the data and not on the political winds.” For instance, Gering said educators learned that students should stay in the same learning communities from middle through high school. At first, some KCK high schools had placed freshmen in a so-called “ninth grade academy” learning communities, then transitioned them to different learning communities at the start of tenth grade. That practice turned out to be less successful than schools that keep freshmen in the same small communities throughout their high school careers.

“In urban schools, the age and transition from ninth grade to tenth grade is a dangerous time (for dropping out),” Gering said. Robbing students of relationships they’ve created can make a difference whether they stay in school or not. “We saw more kids staying in school through ninth and tenth grades in the schools that had four year, 9th –12th grade communities, and as far as graduation.

The small learning communities have other benefits, especially for low-income, urban kids who are sometimes disaffected. Connell used Wyandotte High School, one of the initial First Things First sites, as an example. “This place is different than it used to be,” Connell said. “Even before the test scores changed.

Teachers now refer to the students as ‘our kids’ rather than ‘those kids.’”

Wyandotte High School teacher Tracy Chambers knows, first hand, that attendance rates go up when relationships among teachers and students are strengthened. “You have to let them know someone cares about them and is looking for them the next day. You tell them you’re going to accept and care about them no matter what they’ve done and that you still want to see them tomorrow. There are kids that we make real strides to develop those relationships with. Especially in the inner city, there’s so much baggage that if you can’t get past that, you can’t get the learning part done.”

Chamber tells of one student who could have gotten lost in the system but didn’t, a girl who was a special education student who had been given a schedule of classes where she was just floating. The girl likely would not have finished high school, but somehow she came into Chambers’ visual arts and technology community and now has been accepted into a community college and wants to be a police officer. “They call her mini-me. I’ve worked really hard with her family. Her mom could call me at any time. The relationship is there, especially with the mom.” Chambers also noted examples of students who had been homebound because of accidents or illness and the school-home relationship kept the student in touch and on track instead of falling through the cracks.

Home-School Connection

First Things First also recognizes that students need support at home to be successful in school. So, the KCK school district created the Family Advocate System to create a home-school connection. Each professional and support staff person is assigned to 12 to 17 students and their families. The staff/family relationships last the entire time the students attend the school. This means that the key adults in each student’s life have ongoing contact with one another, communicating about the student’s academic and personal needs. The district has implemented the Family Advocate System in 35 small learning communities so far. It has proved so beneficial to students that the district now has plans to expand it district-wide in the Fall of 2004.

Family advocates:

Meet and orient new students to the small learning communities.
There are more than 150 small learning communities in KCK elementary, middle and high schools.

There are usually no more than 325 students in each learning community, small enough that all students and their families are known by all learning community staff.

Learning communities (students and teacher) stay together for all three years of middle school and all four years of high school. Keeping learning communities together from start to finish promotes stronger relationships and collective responsibility among students and adults, at school and at home. The learning communities can still vary the ways younger and older students are educated and create supportive opportunities between the lower and upper divisions.

Each learning community has a theme, such as construction and home science, visual arts and technology, health sciences, leadership and public service, communications, business academy, or science and technology.

Students and staff, including special education and English-as-a-second-language students, choose their thematic communities. Learning communities are not assigned according to academic performance, but within the community students and staff work together toward high, school-wide standards.

Each learning community has at least one language arts, math, science and social studies teacher and at least one theme teacher so that students can usually stay within the community for all of their core classes and one thematic elective.

“Transitional” or “newcomer” communities allow students, particularly English-as-a-second-language students, to build their language skills and adjust for several months before they choose a theme and move to a permanent community. High school “opportunity centers” serve the needs of new or returning drop-out students who need to recover significant numbers of credits before joining the thematic learning communities.

Small learning communities integrate elective class teachers with the rest of the staff and provide opportunities for students to connect their learning to the outside world and to their educational and career goals.
• Work with students and families to identify interests, build strengths and head off problems.

• Support students' academic and behavioral progress using a continuous stream of information from other teachers, the school and the district.

• Plan and lead at least two meetings each year with each student and parents or guardians.

• Get in touch with each family at least once a month.

• Help other faculty and staff work effectively with the student.

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**In the Kansas City, Missouri School District, It’s Achievement First!**

Starting in 2003, the Kansas City, Missouri School District (KCMSD) embarked on its own reform initiative dubbed *Achievement First!* (AF!). According to school district officials, AF! is a comprehensive, research-based, reform initiative, which is supported by a $6 million, four-year grant provided by the Gates Foundation.

AF! is currently being implemented in the school district’s four comprehensive high schools and Paseo High School. There are plans eventually to expand AF! district-wide. As a result of AF!, KCMSD officials have said they expect to strengthen teaching and learning and significantly improve student outcomes, including statewide assessment scores, graduation rates, and post-secondary success.

AF! combines components of *First Things First*, developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, with Talent Development High School (TDHS) Courses, developed by Johns Hopkins University.

Core features of AF! include the following:

**Small learning communities** (SLCs) of students and staff, organized by themes. The same group of eight to twelve staff persons stays with the same small group of students for all four years of high school. The Themes are integrated into core academic courses, and a thematic course of study is created and linked to post-secondary education and careers.

**The Family Advocate System** creates a bridge between the small learning communities and students’ families. Each staff member becomes an advocate for 15-17 students and their families and stays with them the entire time they are in the school.

**Improving instruction** becomes an intensive focus for instructional staff working together in their small learning communities and their disciplinary teams. All staff study and practice rigorous, standards-based instruction focused on actively engaging all students.

**TDHS courses** provide curricular materials designed to help freshmen make a successful academic and personal transition into high school and to provide enriched academic supports to students who require additional preparation in language arts and math.

District leaders predict that AF! will produce results similar to those experienced by the KCK school district. They expect to see improved MAP scores, a higher percentage of students entering 2-4 year colleges, and increased graduation rates by 2007.
Refer families and students with specific interests and needs to the appropriate people within the school and the community.

“It’s really going back and trying to build the relationships with kids and their families,” said Superintendent Daniels. “Research clearly shows that for disenfranchised kids living in poverty, until you build personal relationships with those kids and their families, you’re not going to get those gains,” he said.

“It used to be you could go through four years of high school without seeing some parents,” said Wyandotte High’s Chambers. The First Things First program encourages the schools to reach out to urban families in creative ways. “For a parent-teacher conference, if you can’t come to us, we’ll come to you, or even meet at McDonalds,” she said.

Focus, Rigor and Accountability

As the small learning communities were becoming established and attendance started to improve, the school district also focused on bringing basic skills up to par. Gering said the decision was made to focus on one key learning area: literacy. “We decided we were going to lower student-to-teacher ratios, improve the time and quality of teaching spent with students and make sure our teachers were equipped and trained, all around literacy,” Gering explained. “We had to set priorities and decided to do literacy first, suspecting it would help in all areas. Students have to be able to read math problems on the state assessments that are written with language that is at or above grade level; even with math you have to be able to understand what’s written before you can begin to solve the problem.”

According to Gering, the school district’s success in raising language arts achievement bolstered the First Things First program. “We have an incredible capacity for teaching kids and now it’s time to apply the same strategies - more rigorous work and higher standards, more teachers and time, and better instructional training - to math.” In 2001, KCK fourth-graders scored at 31 percent proficiency in math. Last spring, fourth-graders raised their scores to 56 percent proficiency in math.

IRRE’s Connell admitted it was challenging. “We had to figure out how and what to teach to meet the instructional goals of engaging kids in learning, making sure that what is being taught is aligned with what kids will be accountable for and making sure the work is challenging and rigorous and allows them all to achieve proficiency,” he said. “Then we had to develop professional strategies so that all teachers understand how to meet those three goals. Apparently the strategies have worked.”

These days, teachers not only hold themselves accountable, they hold their colleagues accountable. “The elementary teachers say ‘We’ve worked really hard with these kids, don’t you dare screw them up,’ and the middle school teachers say ‘Please keep sending us stronger and stronger kids.’ It’s a wonderful place to be right now,” said Gering, a former middle school principal.

Empowering Teachers

First Things First depends upon teachers being given the tools and the autonomy to do their jobs. There is an emphasis on teacher training as well as on taking collective responsibility for the success of the students. Teachers within a small learning community form a team that works together to come up with the instructional strategies that will work in the classrooms. “You have to ask what can we do differently in this small learning community to ensure the success and continuous improvements of your small learning community students,” said Gering.

Interestingly, one of the best ways to hold ineffectual teachers accountable is to create a team setting. For example, the practice of looping, in which students and teachers stay together for two or three grades, usually benefits both students and teachers. However, looping can also expose ineffective teachers. When the team, as well as parents and students all see a problem with a low performing teacher, they will work to improve or, if necessary, coach out the ineffective teacher in order to raise the overall professional standard. “That can happen when you’re working the way you’re supposed to be working,” Gering said.

Leadership

Successful urban school reform has been an elusive goal for cities across the country. New strategies have come and gone, usually at great expense, with very little result. While KCK’s success hasn’t been easy and still isn’t complete, it is considered a model for other school districts. KCK’s school reform efforts have been recognized in national publications like US
Since implementing First Things First, statewide test scores in the KCK school district have made impressive gains. The charts below show reading and math test scores for the district since 2001, including preliminary 2003-04 test results.
News and World Report and Education Week and the district has been designated a dissemination site by the U.S. Department of Education. The district receives more than 30 visits a year from other districts around the country that are eager to learn about its successes.

Gering noted that, in the beginning, community and political pressure not to change was very strong. It seemed that even when things were going very badly, it was more comforting than the unknown. So why has school reform been successful in Kansas City, Kansas? Gering attributed much of the success to the school district’s leadership.

- The school board hired a superintendent who was committed to the reform. When he was hired, according to Daniels, his first words were, “We’re going to continue First Things First.”

- The school board has a strong relationship with its superintendent. “They trust the leader they hired and don’t micromanage,” Gering noted.

- Daniels and Gering, the district’s key leaders of the reform, met with stakeholders throughout the community to communicate what was happening and why, and to engage the audiences in the process.

- The school district maintained its link with Connell and IRRE for both support and accountability. “As much as we fight about things (with Connell), I know he has the best interest of the whole process at heart,” said Gering. “It’s hard to change systems, but he has to hold us accountable to what we said we wanted to do,” Gering said.

- District leaders stayed focused on the overall vision and goals without getting distracted by other agendas.

- Leaders persisted when they didn’t get improved achievement results in the first two or three years. “We knew we were going to have to stay committed to the targets and the pieces that needed to happen. People understood that you have to allow some time for the reform to work. Even if you don’t see immediate results, we have to stick to the course on something that is this important,” Gering said.

Community Support

First Things First partners refer to the KCK school district’s reform initiative as not only district-wide, but community-wide. Families, community members, elected officials, and business owners have all come together to make First Things First a success. Nonetheless, Cindy Cash, President of the Kansas City, Kansas Chamber of Commerce, gives the credit to superintendent Daniels. “Ray understood what this community would tolerate and embrace, and where the walls would be and where he’d have to climb over those walls,” Cash said. “He collaborates so well. Everything good that has happened in our community has happened because of collaboration - making sure everyone is welcome to the table.”

The chamber has actively supported First Things First by providing both teachers and students with private sector resources that connect the classroom to the outside world. Students and teachers each have opportunities to see the business world application of skills being taught in the classroom.

Mayor Carol Marinovich, who has presided over the economic revitalization of Wyandotte County, said the value of a strong, urban school district cannot be underestimated. “Schools reflect the community,” said Marinovich. “The tremendous growth in student achievement coupled with economic development growth has combined to make KCK a shining example of what can be achieved in an urban community.

“The quality of the education our children receive plays a major role in the future success of our community,” Marinovich said. “If our children have the opportunity to attend quality schools, our community will have a stronger business climate and a higher quality of life.”

Budget Cuts Threaten Progress

This summer, the KCK school board, like many school districts, found itself facing some tough financial decisions. In June, the board had to trim $8 million from the school district’s budget, forcing the elimination of its entire 2005 summer school program. The board had already slashed $13 million from the district’s budget since 2002. Board members
are worried that the budget cuts, which will also mean the elimination of four instructional coaching positions, higher student-to-teacher ratios, the loss of funds for textbooks and technology, and more meager teacher raises, could jeopardize the progress of First Things First. At the time, board president Gloria Willis was quoted in The Kansas City Star as saying, “In the past three years, we have done so well academically, realizing we are not where we need to be. There are just some things that we’re not going to be able to do. Without the money, we can’t do it.”

Gering, however, remains steadfast. “We’re cutting everything except instruction,” he said. “We have not cut teachers or our instructional approaches, which is critical. We’ve stayed focused on teaching and learning,” he said.

Where They Go From Here

KCK’s First Things First has demonstrated positive results in a short amount of time, but the work is far from over and more challenges lie ahead. “We’re extremely pleased with the results so far but I don’t want to give the impression we have finished the race.” said Gering. “We’re at 60 percent proficiency now, but there’s 40 percent we’re not reaching,” he acknowledged.

For Daniels, who announced in August he will retire after the 2004-2005 school year after nearly 40 years with the school district, the work has been hard but the rewards have been sweet.

“My message to the district: we’re not where we need to be, but we’re going in the right direction,” Daniels said. “It’s a work in progress and it’s complicated, but I think the district still needs to continue to improve what we’re doing. If we start backing off, that’s where things will slide. It isn’t easy, but we have turned the corner,” he said.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Schools everywhere are under pressure to demonstrate “adequate yearly progress,” as required by the No Child Left Behind law. For urban school districts which face an uphill academic climb, the pressure to raise test scores is especially intense. Now more than ever, urban school districts are eager for school reform strategies that work.

The Kansas City, Kansas School District seems to have found the answer.

Since 1996, KCK has quietly and doggedly pursued its First Things First school reform and has produced impressive results. The district’s test scores have gone from about 30% of its students achieving proficiency to 60% in just four years. As impressive as that is, district leaders say their work won’t be done until they can reach that last 40% of students.

Still, annual budget cuts, which, so far, have not threatened instruction, could endanger the district’s promising progress. This would be a heartbreaking failure not only for the children and families of Kansas City, Kansas but for all of us.

Recommendations

First Things First needs continued funding to ensure its success. School reform is long, difficult work. KCK’s progress, while remarkable, is still in its early years. It is imperative for the district to be able to continue this work, either with additional philanthropic help, public funding or both. The Kauffman Foundation helped launch First Things First with much-needed initial support. But, the foundation cannot continue to be the sole supporter for the school district’s reform efforts. Additional funding will be necessary to continue the district’s improvement. Area philanthropists and elected officials who are concerned about urban education will need to join forces to ensure that this effort continues.

The KCK community must ensure continuity of strong leadership. Following the successful tenure of Superintendent Ray Daniels, the community must make sure that its new school leader will build upon the work that’s already underway. As it did when former superintendent Jim Hensley left, the school board should base its hiring decision on, among other things, the candidate’s commitment to continuing First Things First.

Other school districts can learn from KCK’s example. Urban school reform is very difficult work. While virtually every urban district is engaged in reform
efforts, few if any districts can point to meaningful, sustained improvement in academic achievement, especially for low income and minority children. In Kansas City, Kansas, school reform is succeeding, and the proof is in the assessment scores. The ingredients that are making improvement possible – a visionary superintendent, a dedicated school board, a willing teachers’ association and local philanthropic support – can be reproduced in other communities. Moreover, other communities, both in Greater Kansas City and across the country, can learn from what is happening in KCK – both the successes and the failures. Only when districts like Kansas City, Kansas are the norm, and not the exception, will no child be left behind.

For more information on First Things First:

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First Things First
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You Are Invited to Join the Voices for Children Alliance

For more than twelve years, Partnership for Children has been working to improve the quality of life for all of Greater Kansas City’s children and youth. With help from our community partners, and people like you, we believe we are making significant progress in ensuring a brighter future for our children.

But metro area children and youth still face a myriad of problems. We must reduce youth violence and substance abuse. We need to increase the quality and availability of early education and out-of-school programs. We should ensure that every child has access to quality health care.

For these things to happen, we need you to get involved in the effort to better the lives of our children and youth. By becoming a member of PFC’s Voices for Children Alliance, you can have a meaningful impact on improving the well-being of our kids.

As a member of the Voices for Children Alliance, you’ll receive:

- The annual Report Card on the Status of Greater Kansas City’s Children and Youth
- Partnership for Children E-News
- Quarterly Issue Reports
- Advocacy on the municipal, county, state and national level

To become a member of the Voices for Children Alliance, just fill out the form below and mail it to the Partnership for Children. Or you can visit our website at www.pfc.org, and sign up online.

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Yes, I want to become a member of the Voices for Children Alliance

Annual Membership Dues

_____ $500 Champion  _____ $100 Advocate
_____ $250 Guardian  _____ $50 Supporter

Name ___________________________________________ Company ______________________________

Address ________________________________________________________________________________

Phone ___________________________ E-mail ______________________________

Return with check payable to Partnership for Children at:
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