



All Children Learn & Thrive

Building First 10 Schools and
Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Key Findings: Overview

First 10 Schools and Communities bring together school districts, elementary schools, and early childhood programs to improve the quality and coordination of education and care for young children and their families. They work to improve teaching and learning, deepen partnerships with families, and provide comprehensive services for children and families.

First 10 initiatives take two basic forms. **First 10 School Hubs** are anchored by a single elementary school, which provides direct support to families and collaborates with nearby early childhood providers. **First 10 Community Partnerships** bring together multiple elementary schools, school district leaders, and early childhood programs to improve the quality and coordination of early childhood education and care throughout a geographic area or community.

Key findings:

1

First 10 Schools and Communities are aligning prekindergarten and elementary school education and reworking curricula, assessments, and instruction.

2

First 10 School Hubs are providing influential supports to families and other caregivers of children ages 0–4 and then continuing those supports throughout elementary school.

3

First 10 Community Partnerships demonstrate that communities can develop **and implement** ambitious plans to improve the quality and coordination of education and care for young children and their families.

4

First 10 School Hubs and First 10 Community Partnerships operate on different levels and have complementary strengths and weaknesses; together they suggest a combined model that has great potential as a further innovation.

5

First 10 Schools and Communities present an alternative approach to improving children's experiences in the early years, one that contrasts with the way many communities are attempting to improve early childhood and elementary school education.

6

First 10 Schools and Communities encounter common challenges, including structural barriers, lack of capacity and/or commitment, and sustainability.

7

States play a critical role in supporting First 10 Schools and Communities by creating a conducive policy environment and providing financial support, technical assistance, and networking opportunities.

Executive Summary

A growing body of research has identified specific causal links between poor educational outcomes and cognitive, health, environmental, and other factors correlated with poverty. (Henig, Riehl, Rebell, & Wolff, 2015, p. 20)

The first decade of a child's life provides the foundation for later learning, growth, and development. Too many children, however, face a number of obstacles from a very young age, particularly those who struggle with the effects of poverty and ongoing opportunity gaps. A movement is underway in the United States to improve children's experiences during these critical early years. In many communities, elementary schools, early childhood centers, and community organizations are forming partnerships to focus on the needs of young children and their families. The communities at the forefront of this movement are developing coherent and mutually reinforcing sets of strategies that include:

- **effective teaching and learning** sustained over many years
- **strong partnerships** with families
- **comprehensive health and social services** for both children and families

This combination of supports and services is among the most powerful strategies we have to address yawning opportunity gaps, ensure educational equity, and raise achievement for low-income children.



First 10 Schools and Communities: An Emerging Improvement Strategy

Decades of research confirm that young children need **continuity of high-quality experiences** throughout early childhood in order to realize their potential. *Continuity* here refers both to alignment of care and learning as children grow older and to the coordination of programs and services at each stage of development. Experiences should build on previous ones as children increase their knowledge and skills, and programs and services should be coordinated in order to have the largest impact (National Research Council [NRC], 2015; Reynolds & Temple, 2019; Tout, Halle, Dailly, Albertson-Junkans, & Moodie, 2013).



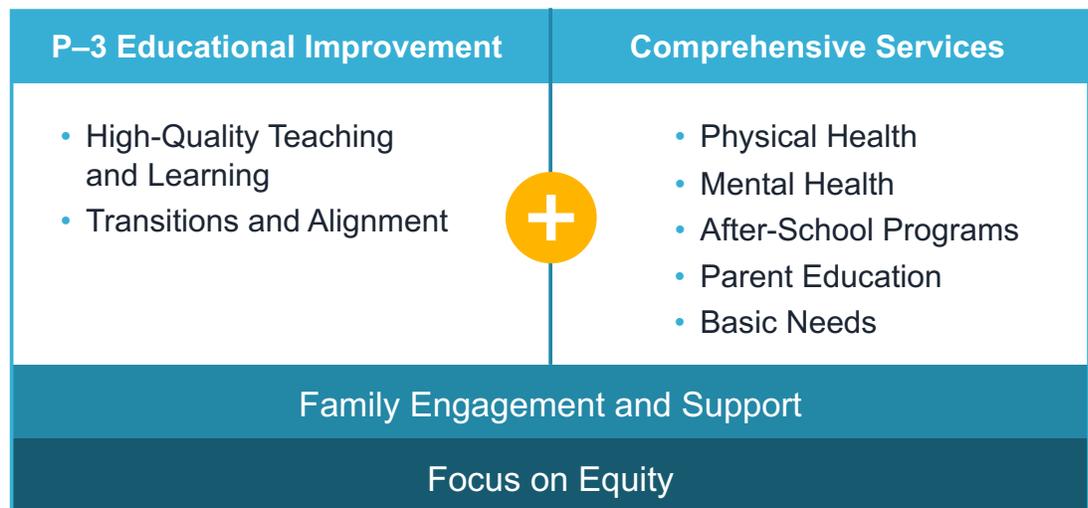
Model programs, such as the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, have demonstrated the longitudinal impact of combining effective teaching and learning in the early grades, family engagement and partnership, and comprehensive supports for children and families (Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, & White, 2011). On a larger scale, communities such as Union City, New Jersey, and Montgomery County, Maryland—as well as a pilot project in several communities in Hawai'i—have shown greatly reduced achievement gaps while improving outcomes for all. These communities have made significant investments in improving teaching, learning, and family support in the early years and then sustaining these efforts over a period of years (Kirp, 2013; Marietta, 2010; Marietta & Marietta, 2013; Zellman & Kilburn, 2015).

This research, coupled with practitioner assessments of local needs, has influenced the school and community initiatives described in this study. These initiatives are ambitious, comprehensive, and multifaceted in that they combine improvement efforts inside classrooms with extensive family engagement and comprehensive supports for children and families. In doing so, they draw on two reform approaches:

- **P–3 educational improvement**, which focuses on improving the quality and alignment of programs and services across the early childhood–elementary school continuum (Guernsey & Mead, 2010; Kauerz & Coffman, 2013; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014; Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008).
- Community schools and related models of **comprehensive services** that connect children and families to a range of supports, including health and mental health services, after-school and summer programs, parent education programs, food banks, and other crisis management and basic needs assistance (Moore et al., 2017).

The innovations these communities are implementing suggest the outlines of a promising model, here called **First 10 Schools and Communities** (see Figure 1). This study follows Reynolds and Temple (2019) in adopting a broad definition of early childhood as including the first 10 years of life (i.e., “First 10”). *First 10 Schools and Communities* refers to the combination of high-quality teaching and learning, family engagement and partnership, and comprehensive services for children and families. **First 10, understood here as roughly the first decade of children’s lives**, signals the importance of collaboration between school districts, elementary schools, and early childhood programs—and it sets as a priority improving quality and continuity across the early childhood—elementary school continuum.¹

**FIGURE 1: First 10 Schools and Communities:
P–3 Educational Improvement Plus Comprehensive Services**



The First 10 Schools and Communities described in this study are all attempting to address **educational equity** with the goal that **all** children receive what they need in order to develop to their full academic and social potential. These schools and communities all serve large numbers of low-income children and families and large numbers of children and families of color. While no community is addressing all areas of need across the full continuum, each has exemplary areas of strength. Together, these innovations suggest a wide range of strategies that other communities can learn from and draw on as they design similar initiatives.

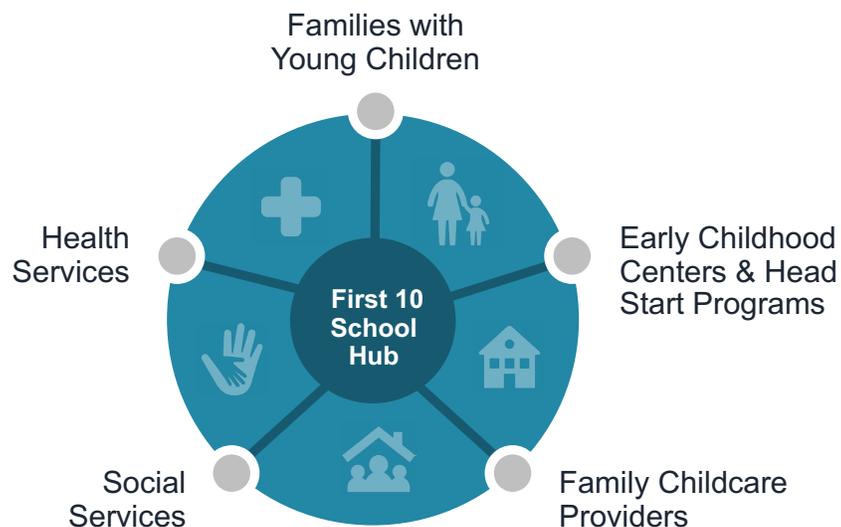
¹ The benefits of using the term *First 10 Schools and Communities* are discussed in greater detail in the Introduction.

Two First 10 Structures

First 10 Initiatives are emerging in two main forms: **First 10 School Hubs** and **First 10 Community Partnerships** (D. Jacobson, 2016).

First 10 School Hubs (see Figure 2) are anchored by **a single elementary school**. With school district support, they place special emphasis on ensuring that teaching and learning in the early grades are developmentally appropriate and of high quality. They provide comprehensive services not only to school-age children but also to young children ages 0–4 and their families—thereby strengthening partnerships with these families. They partner with family childcare providers, Head Start programs, and early childhood centers in their catchment areas on quality, alignment, and transitions.

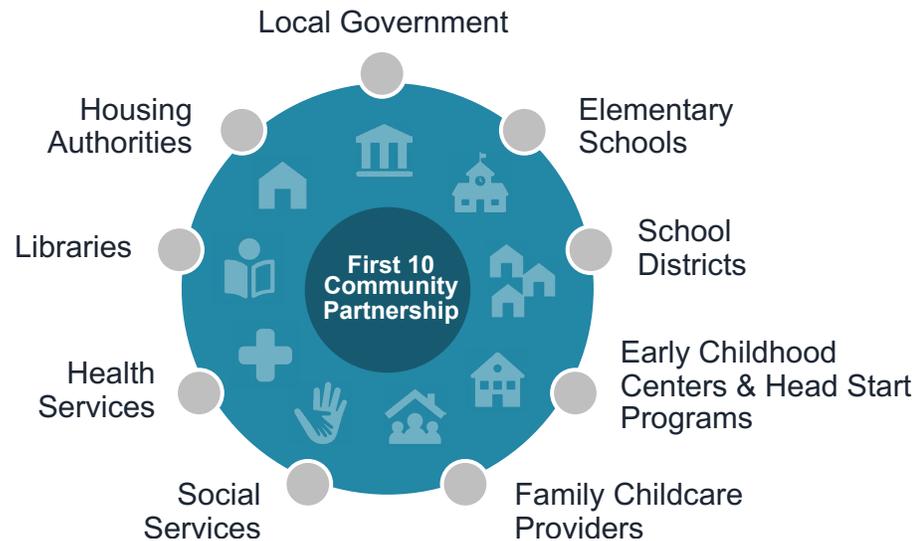
FIGURE 2: **First 10 School Hub**



First 10 Community Partnerships (see Figure 3) bring together **multiple** elementary schools, district leaders, family childcare providers, Head Start programs, early childhood centers, and other community partners to improve the quality and alignment of programs and services in systematic ways **throughout a geographic area or community**, which could be a county, a city or town, or a neighborhood.²

² In small communities with only one elementary school, the distinction between a First 10 School Hub and a First 10 Community Partnership blurs significantly.

FIGURE 3: First 10 Community Partnership



A First 10 School Hub might run weekly play-and-learn groups in the school for neighborhood families with infants and toddlers; develop trust and relationships with the families and then build on those relationships to connect families to health and social service agencies; work with nearby family childcare providers and early childhood centers on the transition to kindergarten; and provide coaching to early-grades teachers on early literacy, early math, and/or social-emotional development.

In contrast, a First 10 Community Partnership might select a high-quality play-and-learn group model to be used throughout the neighborhood or community; organize a common foundation of professional development for all the home visitors working in the area; design a quality improvement initiative for cohorts of family childcare providers and/or early childhood centers; develop a community-wide transition-to-kindergarten plan; and implement new curricula and professional development in the early grades **across a school district**.

School districts play important roles in supporting First 10 School Hubs and coordinating First 10 Community Partnerships. First 10 Community Partnerships are being formed at the county and regional levels as well, supporting local communities within their jurisdictions.

An Exploratory Study of First 10 Schools and Communities

This study was funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation. It takes as its starting point the above-mentioned conclusions of the early childhood research community regarding fragmentation and continuity (NRC, 2015; Reynolds & Temple, 2019; Tout et al., 2013). The implication for child-serving organizations is that they must master and coordinate three strategies: high-quality teaching and learning, family engagement and partnership, and comprehensive services for children and families.

Researchers have formally evaluated components of the First 10 approach. Studies of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, Boston's prekindergarten curriculum and coaching model, a pilot project in five communities in Hawai'i, and of some community school models have found positive results (Moore et al., 2017; Reynolds et al., 2011; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; Zellman & Kilburn, 2015). External evaluators are currently evaluating some of the community initiatives described in this study, including the efforts in Normal (Illinois), Omaha, Boston, and Cambridge.

There is a long history of initiatives to align early childhood education with elementary school and to improve the transition to kindergarten. Similarly, there is much precedent for building early childhood systems, and community schools have been part of the American education landscape for at least a century. A central premise of this study is that **First 10 Schools and Communities represent an important new wave of efforts to improve the quality and coordination of programs and services for children.** This study investigates the two main types of First 10 structures described above: school hubs and community partnerships.

This study aims to gather, analyze, and share information regarding First 10 Schools and Communities during this important early stage in their development in order to inform future efforts.

A second premise of this study is that **First 10 Schools and Communities are at a point in their development where formative implementation research can be especially useful.** Formative implementation research focuses on three core questions: (1) What is happening?, (2) Is it what is expected or desired?, and (3) Why is it happening as it is? (Werner, 2004).

This study aims to gather, analyze, and share information regarding First 10 Schools and Communities during this important early stage in their development in order to inform future efforts.

The author conducted a national scan of communities by interviewing a range of national experts, interviewed leaders in 18 communities, and conducted site visits to 6 communities: Normal, Illinois; Multnomah County, Oregon; Omaha, Nebraska; Boston and Cambridge,

Massachusetts; and San Francisco, California. Of the communities described in this study, with the exception of some of the work in Boston and Cincinnati, all the initiatives in this study were funded with **public funding**, as indicated in each case study.

Summary of Key Findings

1

First 10 Schools and Communities are aligning prekindergarten and elementary school education and reworking curricula, assessments, and instruction.

An integral component of improving the full early childhood–elementary school continuum is specifically addressing the quality and alignment of teaching and learning from prekindergarten through third grade (preK–3). Improving preK–3 teaching and learning requires three broad tasks:

- Establishing the early years as school and district priorities and working to align prekindergarten and K–3 education—both within elementary schools and between elementary schools and community-based prekindergarten programs.
- Making substantive changes in instructional approaches in order to most effectively educate young children, including balancing teacher-centered and student-centered teaching and learning, increasing teacher-child interactions, and incorporating social-emotional learning.
- In elementary schools, incorporating this special focus on the early grades into a coherent overall schoolwide system, supported by school districts, that promotes quality teaching and learning throughout the elementary grades (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

2

First 10 School Hubs are providing influential supports to families and other caregivers of children ages 0–4 and then continuing those supports throughout elementary school.

In addition to working to improve preK–3 teaching and learning, First 10 School Hubs support children and their families—beginning with expectant mothers, infants, and toddlers, and continuing through elementary school. Several different models in different parts of the country have had significant success in building strong, highly supportive relationships with families of children ages 0–4 through supports such as play-and-learn groups and home visits and by connecting families to health and social services.

First 10 School Hubs also develop partnerships with nearby family childcare providers and early childhood centers to work on quality improvement, teacher professional learning, and/or family engagement and partnership.

3

First 10 Community Partnerships demonstrate that communities can develop **and implement** ambitious plans to improve the quality and coordination of education and care for young children and their families.

First 10 Community Partnerships develop and implement strategic plans designed to improve prenatal care, infant and toddler care, center-based and district prekindergarten, and the early grades of elementary schools. These broader partnerships bring together the child-serving organizations in a community for both within-sector and cross-sector collaboration. Common elements of successful First 10 Community Partnerships include:

- A clear equity agenda that focuses on low-income children and their families and children of color and their families
- The development of ambitious strategic plans that include improving early education quality and alignment, partnering with families, and providing comprehensive services for children and families
- New organizing structures to manage and coordinate collaboration between school districts, city and/or county agencies, and community-based programs
- The use of implementation benchmarks that are conscientiously implemented, monitored, and adjusted

4

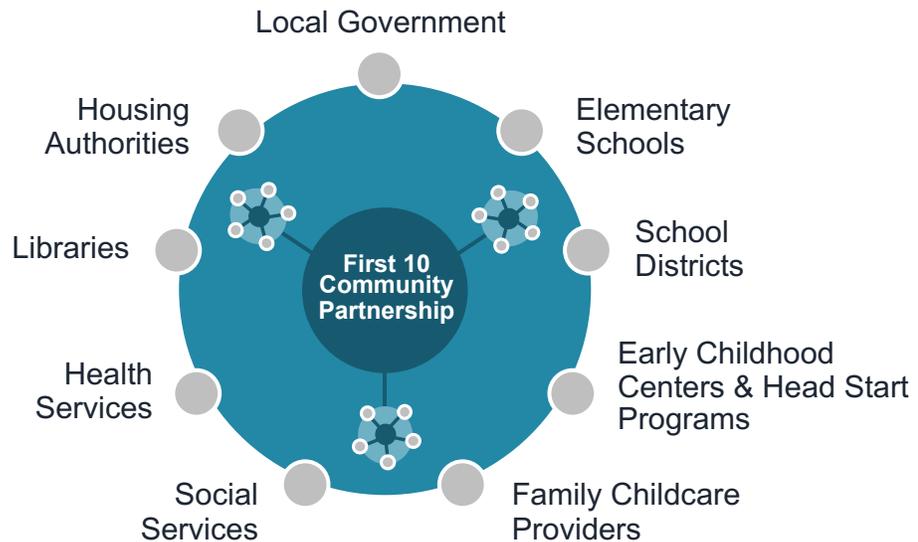
First 10 School Hubs and First 10 Community Partnerships operate on different levels and have complementary strengths and weaknesses; together they suggest a combined model that has great potential as a further innovation.

First 10 School Hubs' specific strengths stem from the direct relationships they build with families and early childhood providers in their neighborhoods or catchment areas.

First 10 Community Partnerships operate across broader geographic areas—and often across school districts—to promote consistency and coordination and to build capacity around common approaches, systems, and processes.

To date, some communities have developed elementary school First 10 School Hubs, and others are building First 10 Community Partnerships. The potential, however, of **combining the two models** is significant. In a combined model (depicted in Figure 4 below), a community would develop a community-wide First 10 Community Partnership to work on improving quality across organizations and programs, improving systems, and coordinating transitions. Included in this work would be systems of support for elementary schools functioning as First 10 School Hubs, serving young children, their families, and early childhood providers in the schools' catchment areas or neighborhoods. In this combined model, First 10 Community Partnerships and First 10 School Hubs each work to improve teaching and learning in preK–3 classrooms.

FIGURE 4: First 10 Community Partnerships with School Hubs



5

First 10 Schools and Communities present an alternative approach to improving children’s experiences in the early years, one that contrasts with the way many communities are attempting to improve early childhood and elementary school education.

Cross-sector partnerships focused on education are proliferating across the United States, and most of these collaborations include goals for kindergarten readiness and third grade proficiency. These partnerships are often referred to as *cradle to career* and/or *collective impact* initiatives (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2016; Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, & Wolff, 2016; Henig et al., 2015). Prominent examples include the StriveTogether network, the Harlem Children’s Zone, and Promise Neighborhoods (discussed further in Chapter 3). First 10 initiatives share some similarities with these partnerships, yet they differ from the way that most collective impact and cradle-to-career initiatives are currently structured in several important ways.

The most consequential difference revolves around the relationship between the public schools and early childhood organizations. Whereas most cradle-to-career initiatives create separate teams to work on kindergarten readiness and early-grades reading, **First 10 initiatives form partnerships to work on quality, coordination, and alignment across the full early childhood–elementary school continuum**, beginning with prenatal care and extending through elementary school.

6

First 10 Schools and Communities encounter common challenges, including structural barriers, lack of capacity and/or commitment, and sustainability.

First 10 Schools and Communities are designed to bridge the gaps between early childhood and elementary school education and between education, health, and social services. The communities described in this study are developing new structures, strategies, and processes to improve quality, coordination, and alignment, but, as one would expect, they have encountered significant challenges as they attempt to change entrenched systems, patterns, and behaviors.

The challenges that First 10 Schools and Communities face include implementing developmentally appropriate, standards-aligned instruction; bridging early childhood education and K–12 education; engaging school districts and principals in First 10 work; tailoring implementation to match district priorities in multi-district initiatives; improving racial and cultural competence; assessing impact; and sustaining initiatives over time.

7

States play a critical role in supporting First 10 Schools and Communities by creating a conducive policy environment and providing financial support, technical assistance, and networking opportunities.

Developing First 10 systems at the state level requires changes in both state policy and state support for community-level First 10 initiatives. Expanding access to high-quality early childhood services, including prekindergarten and childcare for children ages 0–3, is an important component of the state role. First 10 state policy also includes aligning standards and assessments, improving and aligning data systems, and improving career and leadership development (D. Jacobson, 2016).

States can support First 10 improvement at the community level by providing initial financial and technical support for a “backbone” organization to convene and coordinate First 10 School Hubs and Community Partnerships (Waters Boots, 2013). Important questions that follow from this study and that states must address are how to

support First 10 School Hubs, how to support First 10 Community Partnerships, and how to support the combined partnership-hub model depicted in Figure 4 above. A related question is whether regional entities will provide support to communities around First 10 improvement.



Also important is building the community's capacity to develop, monitor, and adjust strategic plans as needed (Bornfreud, Cook, Lieberman, & Loewenberg, 2015; D. Jacobson, 2016). The experiences of the communities described in this study suggest three additional areas in which states can provide targeted support for First 10 improvement:

- Developing and/or identifying curricula, assessments, and instructional guidance that integrate academic and social-emotional learning in developmentally appropriate ways aligned to how young children best learn
- Promoting collaboration between school districts and community-based early childhood centers
- Developing the capacity of school districts, elementary schools, and early childhood centers to deliver high-quality teaching and learning, engage families in meaningful partnerships, and provide comprehensive services for children and families

The Role of First 10 School Hubs and Community Partnerships: A Theory of Action

In addition to these seven findings, the cases described in this study suggest the **goals and objectives** that First 10 Schools and Communities should support, the **kinds of schools and community institutions** they are trying to build, and the **roles these partnerships play** in supporting these goals. In doing so, the cases inform a **theory of action** for First 10 Schools and Communities.

A *theory of action* tells a story about how a package of strategies is expected to lead to positive outcomes, creating what some have called a *causal story line*. In effect, a theory of action is a hypothesis, as in, "If we implement these activities, these outcomes will result." These hypotheses can be tested over time. In this way, the theory serves as a guide or framework for implementing a group of strategies deliberately, coherently, and consistently (Argyris & Schön, 1978; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

Theories of action are often summarized as "if-then" statements that convey the causal storyline underlying the expected link between action and outcomes. The First 10 Theory of Action is summarized below and depicted graphically in Figure 5. It outlines how First 10 initiatives can create a *virtuous circle* among families, schools, and communities—an ongoing cycle in which each strengthens the others.³ (A more detailed explanation of the First 10 Theory of Action, illustrated by examples drawn from the study, can be found in the Conclusion.)

³ A *virtuous circle* is the opposite of a *vicious circle*.

FIGURE 5: A Theory of Action for First 10 Schools and Communities



The First 10 Theory of Action

If First 10 School Hubs and Community Partnerships perform four roles:

- Support professional collaboration to improve teaching and learning
- Coordinate comprehensive services for children and families
- Promote culturally responsive partnerships with families
- Provide strategic leadership and ongoing assessment

with the explicit aim of promoting a virtuous circle of collaboration and improvement among:

- **Effective schools**
- **Nurturing families**
- **Strong communities**

then communities will promote educational equity and close opportunity gaps, and all children will learn and thrive.

The goal of First 10 Schools and Communities is for **all children to learn and thrive**. Realizing this goal of **educational equity** requires that communities do the following:

- Ensure that all children have opportunities and supports to enable their educational success
- Eliminate the predictability of success or failure that currently correlates with any social, economic, or cultural factor, including race
- Identify and end inequitable practices
- Create inclusive environments for both adults and children⁴

To the extent that communities that implement First 10 initiatives are successful, children will experience a succession of coherent, high-quality experiences; families will engage in meaningful partnerships with schools in support of their children; and communities will be strengthened through better schools, more effective programs, improved coordination, deeper social connections, and expanding social trust.

⁴ Adapted from The National Equity Project (<http://nationalequityproject.org/about/equity>).

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The full report and additional information can be found at first10.org. The author gratefully acknowledges the many people who contributed to this study. Extensive acknowledgments and a complete bibliography are included in the full report.



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