Abstract for Paper 1

Title: The Five Essentials: Helping Schools Organize for Improvement

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Purpose:

Researchers at the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) developed a comprehensive, empirically-grounded framework that practitioners and policymakers can draw on as they work to improve student learning in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and other urban districts. This paper documents the process by which the Five Essentials framework has moved from being theory to having validated measures to being a diagnostic tool that is being used in schools across the country to guide their reform efforts. It provides a case study of the CCSR model for using research and data to aid practitioners and policymakers in the search for solutions and shows the process for moving theory into actionable strategies that are being used by schools to improve their practices and student outcomes.

Setting and Population:

The analysis used to validate the Five Essential framework used data on Chicago public elementary schools during the period of 1990 through 1996.

Background:

One of most fundamental issues in school reform is determining how to create the conditions and enact the practices that lead to better student performance. Since its inception, CCSR has sought to help build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement while making the research relevant and actionable. CCSR has developed a framework, the Five Essentials so that the district administrators and practitioners can better understand what supports and contextual resources matter for school improvement, see their active role in shaping student outcomes, and develop more coherent approaches to solving their central problems.

In our first research agenda, we identified the study of schools as organizations as a major strand of work. This focus began in the time of decentralization, when local school council were being tasked with creating a school improvement plan and were seeking guidance in their efforts. The initial idea of the “five essential supports for school improvement” was developed by a large and
varied group of stakeholders as a way to capture and summarize evidence-based findings on widely agreed-upon characteristics of good schools. CCSR researchers used this initial series of conversations to develop a framework that included “five essential supports”: school leadership as a driver for change, parent-community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance. According to the framework, substantial school improvement requires building the social organization within schools and orchestrating initiatives across multiple domains.

Since the early 1990s, CCSR has been administering surveys to CPS teachers and 6th through 12th grade students. These surveys include items intended to capture the important constructs underlying the Five Essentials. Through repeated administrations of these surveys, the items have been honed and measures of the five essentials have been developed and analyzed for their reliability and validity. Fieldwork studies and interactions with school practitioners and administrators provided additional opportunities to gain greater insight into the constructs in the framework and further refine and validate the survey measures. The surveys allowed us to move the Five Essentials from a theoretical framework to something that could be measured in schools.

At the same time, CCSR was undertaking a project to develop better indicators of student outcomes. Without having appropriate indicators of student growth, assessing the framework’s relationship to school improvement would not have been possible. After the development of the outcome indicators, CCSR undertook a major study to validate the measures and framework against the new indicators of attendance trends and school productivity in reading and mathematics. The study found that schools that were strong in all five supports were at least 10 times more likely than schools with just one or two strengths to achieve substantial gains in reading and math. Moreover, a sustained weakness in just one of these areas undermined virtually all attempts at improving student learning. The implications of the study provided guidance on the school practices, as well as the school and community conditions that promote improvement.

To make the framework more actionable and relevant to schools, in 1994, CCSR began producing biennial reports that provide customized data to individual schools based on their teacher and student survey responses. The reports also show each school’s progress on different measures of the Five Essentials. The surveys and reports are now produced in partnership with CPS, and the reporting system has moved from paper to being online. The reports provide a diagnostic tool for administrators and practitioners to assess their schools progress, identify what areas need further support, and develop more coherent and targeted strategies for school improvement. They also help practitioners translate what would otherwise be an abstract framework into a tangible and actionable plan for their schools. The reach of these reports now extends to other school systems across the country who are now starting to use this survey and online reporting system.
The efforts to transform the Five Essentials framework into an actionable strategy for schools led to a direct impact on the district. Under then CEO Arne Duncan’s administration, the Five Essentials framework started to be a part of the district’s reform strategy. It was core component of CPS’s 2002 Education Plan to guide school improvement. CPS, with the input of practitioners and stakeholders, later refined and adopted the framework in their “Five Fundamentals for School Success” model. The model was used as the foundation for the mandated school improvement planning and approval process each Chicago Public school must undergo every two years.

Findings/results:

The process of moving the Five Essentials from a theoretical framework to an actionable set of leverage points and strategies that is being used in schools across the country took over 20 years and the efforts of countless people. And efforts to transform schools so that they create the conditions and enact the practices that lead to better school performance still have a long way to go. However, the process of transforming the Five Essentials into a framework that is being used in schools across Chicago has taught us a lot about what making research relevant to schools. First, the development of the framework was the product of not just research evidence, but long discussions over many years with practitioners and policymakers about what mattered in schools. Second, being able to measure the components of framework made what was theory into something more tangible. Third, having clear evidence about how the framework mattered for school outcomes gave it legitimacy. Finally, providing schools with customized reports about their performance on measures of the framework allowed them to use it as they developed strategies for improvement.