



**A collaborative model  
gives teachers the same  
supports that children need for  
early learning to succeed**

**BY SHARON RITCHIE AND SAM OERTWIG**



**A**lignment across the early childhood educational continuum has multiple definitions—and purposes—beyond making sure classroom learning experiences tie to curricular standards. And as schools work to move beyond one-size-fits-all curricula and focus on nurturing enthusiastic children who excel at academics and life, they must also consider and support teacher needs.

This is what's known as a parallel process—when the conditions that bring the best out of one group are the same that should be established for others. If the goal is to support student growth and development in a collaborative, creative, problem-solving environment, leadership must establish and maintain the same kind of culture and climate for the teachers.

According to "Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners," a 2012 review of literature published by the University of Chicago, children benefit from messages that help them develop positive beliefs, such as "I belong in this school community" and "I can succeed at this." Our experience has shown that adults need to internalize the same kinds of sentiments to excel.

An environment that supports growth for adults and children alike is one in which they feel safe and valued, in which competence and autonomy develop through relationships built on trust and respect, and in which excellence is believed possible for each individual and supported to become reality. This requires schools to value teacher expertise, exercise vigilance in equity issues, take context into account, and include teachers in decision-making. Such a school climate is built on a mindset of continuous improvement and a culture of collaboration.

Teachers who "expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment" are what MacArthur Award-winning education reformer and author Lisa Delpit calls "warm demanders." Warm demanders should also exist in the ranks of instructional leaders who expect a great deal from their colleagues, convince them of their own capacity to improve, and support them with a range of resources. Adults need to be cared for to be able to care for others.

### THREE CULTURES

Cultures of caring, competence, and excellence need to be in place before substantive learning, reflection, and growth can occur. The basic psychological need to feel connected to others and to have a sense of belonging to a larger community is known as "relatedness." A sense of relatedness helps one move beyond a natural first-person viewpoint.

Supporting relatedness begins with the notion that all members of a community are on a journey to grow and improve over time together. Student or teacher, such a mission entails working toward shared goals that are clearly articulated, understood, and considered worthwhile for the individual as well as the collective. Let's look at each:

**1. Competence.** A culture of competence ensures that each individual functions as a productive, successful, and contributing member of the community. Development of competence is important in that it furthers many of the skills and attitudes associated with success, including autonomy, interdependence, and the expression of voice. Children and adults alike must know that they are capable of successfully expressing their thoughts and ideas, and that others are interested in and respect what they have to say.

At the child level, learning how to express one's thoughts is critically important for adult-child and peer relationships, as well as the development of identity and self-efficacy. Development of voice supports children in the belief that their viewpoints are valued and helps adults get to know students socially and academically.

The instructional predictors of positive third grade outcomes all link to student voice: small-group instruction, oral language and vocabulary development, conceptual thinking in math, collaboration with peers, and metacognition, according to our 2013 book, *FirstSchool: Transforming Pre-K–3rd Grade for African American, Latino, and Low-Income Children*.

At the adult level, learning how to communicate one's perspective succinctly, knowing when and how to interject strategically, being able to listen effectively, and knowing to not take differences in opinions personally are skills that have advantages beyond the classroom.

**2. Collaboration.** Collaboration is an excellent vehicle for the development of voice. Through regular interaction with others, children and adults alike learn to better express their thoughts and ideas and effectively engage with a variety of individuals possessing different personality types, approaches to learning, social skills and cultural experiences. Autonomy is bolstered through the maturation of voice.

The opportunity for children and adults to practice voicing their thoughts, knowing they are listened to and valued, lets them know that what they think and know matters. According to the Kaiser Institute, healthy school cultures pair collaboration with autonomy because together, they promote a clearer sense of purpose and value. Autonomy ensures that all members of the school community know they can be self-sufficient, that what they think has an impact, and that they have some responsibility for the success and failure of the group.

**3. Excellence.** A culture of excellence is the crown jewel in a high-performing learning community, and it can only be realized when cultures of caring and competence have been firmly established. It is characterized by high expectations and rigor, along with the support necessary to enable each child and adult to flourish.

In a culture of excellence, both children and adults believe they are capable of doing high-quality, challenging work. They are motivated by mastery, wherein the focus is on developing skills, abilities, and dispositions through new approaches and where success is measured in terms of self-improvement.

Peers and colleagues are not viewed as competition, but as sources of support, inspiration, and feedback.

Classroom instruction and school meetings alike focus primarily on learning, analysis, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, rather than information exchange. Equity is addressed by providing what each participant needs to be successful in their next steps, and the prevailing sentiment is that no one succeeds unless everyone succeeds. Environments like these spark enthusiasm, interest, camaraderie, and passion for learning.

### ESSENTIAL CONTENT

Even the best process in the world will be empty without relevant, interesting, helpful content. Simply telling people the “right” thing has no value unless the strategies are supported. FirstSchool routinely includes professional development on a variety of topics; whether it’s an article recommendation or an in-depth study, we dedicate time to consider how something can or should impact practice.

Since those doing the talking are the same ones doing the learning, we instead urge inquiry and application of the ideas presented. We also provide materials for team members to use with school staff, knowing that it’s challenging to effectively transfer one’s own new learning to others. These tools support ongoing inquiry into best practices, forming a resource bank that empowers leaders to be agents of change.

Merging a parallel process with essential content has resulted in deep, sustainable change for teachers, leaders, schools, and districts. Leadership teams led the charge, bringing new expertise, shaping the conversation, modeling risk-taking, and supporting others in doing the same.

Although there were challenges along the way, we witnessed both hoped-for and unexpected results as educators’ love for their profession, respect for their peers, and compassion for the children they serve grew. And in our efforts to remain open and curious as learners, we forged many long-term relationships with the exceptional people with whom we worked. ●

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## About FirstSchool

In order to meet the social, emotional, developmental, and academic needs of pre-K–3 children, schools must develop cultures of collaborative inquiry and mind-sets of continuous improvement. They must focus on research-based instructional practices that foster caring, competence, and excellence; build familiarity with relevant research to engage in effective practice; and address equity by questioning practices and policies that impact less-advantaged children and children of color.

FirstSchool was developed with those needs in mind, and for the past 15 years, its tenets have been implemented in states, districts, and schools across the nation. Critical to its work is the formation and ongoing support of pre-K–3 leadership teams. In partnership with the principal and a teacher from each grade level, FirstSchool facilitates the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and habits necessary to support the successful growth and development of every child.

FirstSchool is not a program; it is a process—the start of a never-ending journey of growth and development. It supports educators in improving school climate, building effective classroom and peer interactions, and ensuring high-quality instruction for every child.



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