A Framework for Thriving Schools

Student success is difficult to define, yet palpable when observed. Student success is nuanced and highly personalized and rightly so, as that allows us to celebrate individual growth, achievement, and overcoming adversities, as well as the many people who play a supporting role along the path of a long academic career. Despite the ways we individualize it, the hallmark of student success remains constant: creating personalized opportunities for students to reach their full potential, and imparting upon students the knowledge, skills, confidence, and agency in order for them to see that potential in themselves.

School success is similarly difficult to define. Over the last two decades, we have narrowed the way we talk about successful schools. Test scores have become the primary indicator of school success to the point that other indicators that we may value as a society are overshadowed. As a result, we haphazardly provide supports to schools and fail to systemically remove barriers that prevent some students from thriving.

Our search for solutions has not yielded the sustained system improvement that we desire. It is time for us to examine the conditions that enable and sustain student success and the barriers that continue to hinder them.

What is a school where all students thrive?

Thriving schools exhibit and possess the beliefs, structures, and supports necessary for all students to grow academically and develop agency. A thriving school is a place where all students benefit from a culture of belonging, while also providing engaging, well-rounded educational experiences that reflect who they are and are relevant to the world around them.

What is Thriving Schools Framework?

The Nashville Public Education Foundation believes that student success is multifaceted and is greater than, but inclusive of, annual accountability measures. We believe that conversations around student success should, in addition to mastering content standards, include more discussion of student growth and the development of student agency and self-sufficiency. Discussing these three outcomes as interrelated, we believe, is the type of nuanced conversation that more accurately reflects what we hope for our students—that they are learning how to access and apply information while pursuing their goals with confidence.

The Thriving Schools Framework acknowledges the pivotal role that a variety of stakeholders have to play in building schools where all students thrive every day. The framework was heavily influenced by research on both the principles of positive youth development, specifically its emphasis on inclusiveness and building on strengths, and the robust body of research on school quality. From these different yet related research sets, a framework has emerged that conceptualizes a thriving school as existing on a dynamic student-centered developmental continuum, rather than as a static, absolute designation.

While the research clearly points to conditions that enable students to thrive, there is little guidance on how to develop those specific conditions. As a result, thriving schools will look different from one another and schools that we may consider thriving based on aggregate achievement measures may have gaps in opportunities and experiences that need to be addressed to ensure that all students have the same opportunity to thrive.

Why a Thriving Schools Framework?

As a byproduct of school accountability, a significant body of research has emerged around school quality and school turnaround. While many of the findings are represented in this framework, Thriving Schools emphasizes the interrelatedness of these conditions recognizing the impact of, but without centering solely on, the school leader as the primary lever. The framework positions the student experience in an inclusive and supportive school culture and access to engaging and relevant educational experiences as the leading indicators that a school is thriving. However, these conditions do not occur by happenstance. They must be intentionally cultivated through effective school leadership and ambitious instruction and sustained by a culture of collaboration and the equitable distribution of resources necessary to support each unique school population. It is only then that what we want for all of our students—academic success and student agency—can occur.

The use of a thriving schools framework allows us to highlight meaningful differences among school conditions and measure the ability of a school community to thrive, rather than focusing on characteristics of a school's population. The magic happens through the interplay of these conditions that, when considered individually, are significant but not sufficient to create and sustain the experiences and outcomes we desire for all kids.

What do these elements mean?

Effective school leadership is demonstrated by the ability of the principal to envision and develop four conditions within the school: 1) a culture of instructional excellence; 2) effective and efficient operational systems; 3) trusting relationships with teachers, staff, students, families, and community members; and 4) a network of support for students by fostering a strong culture of community within and around the school.

An **inclusive and supportive school culture** welcomes and supports students and families from all backgrounds and is reflected in equitable access to opportunities and experiences coupled with individualized supports that allow all students to fully participate in school.

Engaging and relevant educational experiences are the daily interactions between teachers and students that inspire and motivate students, providing them with the skills and knowledge to understand and relate to the world, as well as spark a life-long curiosity and joy for learning.

Ambitious instruction encompasses both the high-quality teaching demonstrated by rigorous, yet appropriate instruction and a variety of opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery, as well as the high expectations that communicate belief to students.

Culture of collaborative learning both values and leverages collaborative practice and mentorship as the key foundations for professional growth and student success. Highly effective cultures of collaboration move bi-directionally from teachers to students, thereby strengthening the educational experiences within the school.

Resource alignment is the intentional equitable distribution of community, district, and school resources that creates engaging educational experiences and inclusive and supportive school culture.

Student performance is both student growth (how students are improving over time) and student achievement (absolute performance against a standard at a moment in time).

Student agency is the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that allow students to take intentional action to create positive change in their lives and the world around them.

ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL: Through effective leadership, the principal leverages resources, systems, and structures to create a culture of learning that supports and develops teachers, students, and families.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER: Through ambitious instruction and collaboration, the teacher ensures instruction is authentically accessible, effective, and engaging to all students while also teaming with other educators to support the professional growth of themselves and each other.

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