What is FirstSchool?

FirstSchool provides research expertise and professional development support in collaboration with districts, schools, administrators, and teachers. We partner with school communities that want to focus on improving the school experiences of African American, Latino, and low-income children in PreK-3rd grade. Our vision of school transformation is based on:

- Reinvigorating a professional culture that respects teachers’ expertise and actively involves them in efforts to improve teaching and learning
- Guiding schools towards a more effective use of data within a culture of collaborative inquiry that offers new lenses through which to view and inquire into practice
- Designing generative curriculum that is aligned, balanced, integrated, relevant, and developmental, using children’s own funds of knowledge as a key resource
- Developing instructional practices that foster cultures of caring, competence, and excellence
- Developing home-school partnerships that value families’ perspectives and involve them in genuine, reciprocal communication about their children’s learning

Our team is based at the Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina –Chapel Hill. We have extensive experience within the educational field as both practitioners and researchers. Our ground-level knowledge and experience helps us form meaningful relationships with school partners at every level.

What does FirstSchool do?

We observe in individual classrooms, collecting data about typical student experiences, examining activity settings, content areas, and instructional interactions. We use a robust research base to draw attention to areas that are emphasized in the Common Core and that predict success for young children, such as oral language and vocabulary development.
We engage **teachers** in dialogue to help them identify both instructional strengths and areas for improvement in their practice. Our goal is to connect the specific decisions teachers make about curriculum and instruction with boosting children’s academic, social, and emotional development.

We work with **grade level teams** to determine grade-specific areas of interest and help them develop a culture of collaborative inquiry. To enhance their professional learning communities, we focus on creating a supportive discussion space, where teachers can safely share their challenges and better relate data to instructional practices that are appropriate for their students’ developmental level.

We provide **schools** with professional development designed to create more seamless connections between grade levels and consider whether current policies and practices advantage or disadvantage sub-populations of children. In order to work towards common goals for improvement, teachers must first develop a shared mindset towards improvement that unifies their school.

We work with **leaders** to set the support structures in place that are necessary to engage a school community in successful transformation. We believe that while individual teachers are instrumental to student success, they cannot move forward without the involvement of leaders who facilitate their efforts. Administrators need to provide teachers with a work environment that supports professional learning and growth, just as they expect teachers to create positive learning environments for students.

We engage other members of the **school community**, bringing together district personnel, inviting families to share their perspective during focus groups, and/or administering surveys about school culture to a wide range of staff members. For example, we help schools strengthen home-school partnerships by exploring families’ practices and beliefs and valuing their unique knowledge of their children, as well as the role they play in their children’s learning. By providing a holistic view of schooling from multiple perspectives, we can better inform leaders who are working to improve the lives of students during the crucial early elementary years.