

FirstSchool

What is FirstSchool?

FirstSchool provides research expertise and professional development support in collaboration with states, districts, schools, administrators, and teachers. We partner with entities 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 reform is based on:

- *Reinvigorating a professional culture that respects the expertise of teachers and leaders and actively involves them in reform efforts*
- *Belief in the process of collaborative inquiry and a mindset of continuous improvement*
- *Guiding states, districts and schools towards a more effective use of data 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 a genuine partnership*

Our team is based at the Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Center 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 education partners at every level.

What does FirstSchool do?

Collecting data about typical student experiences and examining activity settings, content areas, and instructional interactions is central to our work. We use a robust research base to draw attention to areas that are emphasized in the State Standards and the Common Core, and that predict success for young children, such as



Research-based Instructional Practices

oral language and vocabulary development, scaffolded instruction and higher order thinking. We help educators inquire into their instructional strengths and areas for improvement in their practice. Our goal is to connect the specific decisions teachers make about curriculum and instruction to system wide efforts to boost children’s academic, social, and emotional development.

We work with state and district **teams** to determine areas of interest and help them develop as a culture of collaborative inquiry. To enhance their professional learning communities, we help them 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 **districts/schools** with opportunities for professional knowledge 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, educators must first develop a shared mindset towards reform that unites their school culture.

We work with **leaders** at the district and state level to set the support structures and systems in place that are necessary to successful reform. We believe that while individual teachers are instrumental to student success, they cannot move forward without the involvement of leaders who facilitate their efforts and integrate them into other reform. Leaders 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, sharing values and professional development with community early childhood programs, 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.

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