

# What Works Clearinghouse



Dropout Prevention

January 24, 2008

## First Things First

**Program description** *First Things First* is a reform model intended to transform elementary, middle, and high schools serving significant proportions of economically disadvantaged students. Its three main components are: (1) “small learning communities” of students and teachers, (2) a family and student advocate system that pairs

staff members and students to monitor and support progress and that serves as a bridge between the school and family, and (3) instructional improvements to make classroom teaching more rigorous and engaging and more closely aligned with state standards and assessments.<sup>1</sup>

**Research** One study of *First Things First* met the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) evidence standards with reservations. The quasi-experimental research design included students from Houston high schools—3 *First Things First* schools, each matched to 10 or 11 comparison schools. Based on this one study, the WWC

considers the extent of evidence for *First Things First* to be small for staying in school. That study did not examine the effectiveness of *First Things First* in the domains of progressing in school or completing school.<sup>2</sup>

**Effectiveness** *First Things First* was found to have no discernible effects on staying in school in its first year of implementation.

	<i>Staying in school</i>	<i>Progressing in school</i>	<i>Completing school</i>
<b>Rating of effectiveness</b>	No discernible effects	na	na
<b>Improvement index<sup>3</sup></b>	Average: -1 percentile point	na	na

na = not applicable

1. The descriptive information for this program was obtained from publicly available sources: the program’s website ([www.irre.org/ftf](http://www.irre.org/ftf), retrieved October 2007) and the research literature (Quint, Bloom, Black, & Stephens, 2005). The WWC asks developers to review the program description sections for accuracy from their perspective. Further verification of the accuracy of the descriptive information for this program is beyond the scope of this review.
2. The evidence in this report is based on available research. Findings and conclusions may change as new research becomes available.
3. These numbers show the average improvement indices for all findings across the study.

## Additional program information

### Developer and contact

Information on *First Things First* is available from the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), which developed the intervention. Address: 308 Glendale Dr., Toms River, NJ 08753. Web: [www.irre.org](http://www.irre.org). Telephone: (732) 557-0200.

### Scope of use

*First Things First* was first implemented in 1998 in the Kansas City, KS, school system. IRRE reports that, as of December 2007, 11 districts in seven states were operating schools using the *First Things First* model.

### Description of intervention

*First Things First* is a reform model designed to boost student achievement in schools serving a large number of economically disadvantaged students. The model's goal is to help students acquire the skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education and the labor market. It has three main components.

*Theme-based small learning communities.* *First Things First* reorganizes high schools into small learning communities of up to 350 ninth to twelfth graders and their teachers, each with a guiding curricular theme (such as science and technology). Twelfth graders can participate in internships associated with the theme of their learning community. As students progress through high school, they remain in their learning communities, with the same peer group and teachers.

*Family and student advocate system.* Each student in a *First Things First* school is assigned an advocate, typically a teacher from the small learning community who serves as a mentor and

a liaison between the school and the student's family. Advocates work with about 15 students and meet with them weekly in groups and one-on-one. They also contact the student's family regularly to discuss academic progress and any challenges facing the student in and out of school.

*Instructional changes and supports.* *First Things First* emphasizes a more rigorous and engaging curriculum closely aligned with state standards and assessments. The model calls for a careful review of all course offerings to ensure that they closely correspond to state curriculum standards. It also directs schools to develop and regularly administer common assessments that reflect these standards and that mirror the format and content of state tests. Student performance on these regular assessments is then used to guide and improve classroom instruction. *First Things First* also offers professional development and technical assistance to improve the rigor of course offerings and the ability of teachers to reach students of all learning styles.

### Cost

According to IRRE, the additional annual cost of operating *First Things First* in the first two years of program implementation (above and beyond the cost of traditional high school) ranges from \$150 to \$275 per student. Beyond the initial start-up phase, annual per student costs are somewhat lower, ranging from \$100 to \$175. These costs include curriculum, materials, and ongoing technical assistance. IRRE reports that the per student cost of implementing *First Things First* varies depending on the size and number of the schools implementing the model, current staffing levels, and other factors.

## Research

Five studies reviewed by the WWC investigated the effectiveness of *First Things First*. Four studies were included in one research report (Quint, Bloom, Black, & Stephens, 2005), but of the four, only the study in Houston, Texas met WWC evidence standards with reservations. The three other studies—conducted in River-view Gardens, MO; Kansas City, KS; and Shaw and Greenville, MS—did not meet WWC evidence screens. A fifth study of *First*

*Things First* (Gambone, Klem, Summers, Akey, & Sipe, 2004) also did not meet WWC evidence screens.

The Houston study included in the Quint et al. (2005) report focused on three Houston high schools that implemented *First Things First* from 2001 to 2004. These three schools were each matched to high schools in the district that did not implement *First Things First* but had similar achievement test scores. To

## Research (continued)

estimate the effect of the program the researchers first compared the average outcomes of ninth graders who entered *First Things First* high schools in the years immediately after the program was implemented with those of ninth graders from the same schools in the three years just before program implementation. They made similar calculations for the comparison schools. Their estimates of the effect of the program represent the difference between these pre-post implementation comparisons in *First Things First* high schools and the comparison schools. The study made similar estimates of the effects of *First Things First* in a set of Houston middle schools but did not include any outcomes relevant to the WWC review of dropout prevention interventions.

## Extent of evidence

The WWC categorizes the extent of evidence in each domain as small or moderate to large (see the [What Works Clearinghouse Extent of Evidence Categorization Scheme](#)). The extent of evidence takes into account the number of studies and the total sample size across studies that met WWC evidence standards.<sup>4</sup>

The WWC considers the extent of evidence for *First Things First* to be small for staying in school. No study that met WWC evidence standards addressed the domains of progressing in school or completing school.

## Effectiveness Findings

The WWC review of dropout prevention programs addresses student outcomes in three key domains: staying in school, progressing in school, and completing school. The Houston study by Quint et al. (2005) assessed outcomes in the staying in school domain.

*Staying in school.* In the Houston study Quint et al. (2005) found no statistically significant difference after one year of implementation between *First Things First* schools and comparison schools in the percentage of ninth-grade students who attended school the following year. The effect size was not large enough to be considered substantively important by WWC standards.

## Rating of effectiveness

The WWC rates the effects of an intervention in a given outcome domain as: positive, potentially positive, mixed, no discernible effects, potentially negative, or negative. The rating of effectiveness takes into account four factors: the quality of the research design, the statistical significance of the findings,<sup>5</sup> the size of the difference between participants in the intervention and the comparison conditions, and the consistency in findings across studies (see the [WWC Intervention Rating Scheme](#)).

## The WWC found *First Things First* to have no discernible effects on staying in school

### Improvement index

The WWC computes an improvement index for each individual finding. In addition, within each outcome domain, the WWC computes an average improvement index across studies (see the [WWC Improvement Index Technical Paper](#)). The improvement

index represents the difference between the percentile rank of the average student in the intervention condition and the percentile rank of the average student in the comparison condition. Unlike the rating of effectiveness, the improvement index is based entirely on the size of the effect, regardless of

4. The Extent of Evidence Categorization was developed to tell readers how much evidence was used to determine the intervention rating, focusing on the number and size of studies. Additional factors associated with a related concept, external validity—such as students' demographics and types of settings in which studies took place—are not taken into account for the categorization. Information concerning how the extent of evidence rating was determined for *First Things First* is presented in Appendix A5.
5. The level of statistical significance was reported by the study authors or, where necessary, calculated by the WWC to correct for clustering within classrooms or schools and for multiple comparisons. For an explanation, see the [WWC Tutorial on Mismatch](#). For the formulas the WWC used to calculate the statistical significance, see [Technical Details of WWC-Conducted Computations](#). For the *First Things First* report, no corrections for clustering or multiple comparisons were needed.

**The WWC found *First Things First* to have no discernible effects on staying in school** *(continued)*

the statistical significance of the effect, the study design, or the analyses. The improvement index can take on values between –50 and +50, with positive numbers denoting results favorable to the intervention group.

Based on the one study of *First Things First* that met evidence standards, the average improvement index for staying in school is –1 percentile point.

**References**

**Met WWC standards with reservations**

Quint, J., Bloom, H. S., Black, A. R., & Stephens, L. (2005).

*Scaling up First Things First: The challenge of scaling up educational reform.* New York, NY: MDRC. **(Houston study)**

**Additional sources**

Quint, J. C., Byndloss, D. C., and Melamud, B. (2003). *Scaling up First Things First: Findings from the first implementation year.* New York, NY: MDRC.

**Did not meet WWC Evidence Screens**

Quint, J., Bloom, H. S., Black, A. R., & Stephens, L. (2005).

*Scaling up First Things First: The challenge of scaling up educational reform.* New York, NY: MDRC.<sup>6</sup> **(Riverview Gardens study)**

**Summary**

The WWC reviewed five studies of *First Things First*. One study met WWC evidence standards with reservations; the remaining studies did not meet WWC evidence screens. Based on this one study, the WWC found no discernible effects in the staying in school domain one year after program implementation. The evidence in this report may change as new research emerges.

Quint, J., Bloom, H. S., Black, A. R., & Stephens, L. (2005).

*Scaling up First Things First: The challenge of scaling up educational reform.* New York, NY: MDRC.<sup>7</sup> **(Kansas City study)**

Quint, J., Bloom, H. S., Black, A. R., & Stephens, L. (2005). *Scaling up First Things First: The challenge of scaling up educational reform.* New York, NY: MDRC.<sup>8</sup> **(Shaw and Greenville study)**

Gambone, M. A., Klem, A. M., Summers, J. A., Akey, T. A., & Sipe, C. L. (2004). *Turning the tide: The achievements of the First Things First education reform in the Kansas City, Kansas Public School District.* Philadelphia, PA: Youth Development Strategies, Inc.<sup>9</sup>

**For more information about specific studies and WWC calculations, please see the [WWC First Things First Technical Appendices](#).**

6. There was only one school in the study condition, so the analysis could not separate the effects of the intervention from the effects of the school.
7. Unlike the other sites in the MDRC study, *First Things First* was implemented districtwide in Kansas City. Therefore, unlike the other sites, comparison schools were selected from other school districts in the state. The effect of *First Things First* was estimated by comparing trends in outcomes in Kansas City high schools with similar trends for seven other Kansas high schools (outside Kansas City) with substantial minority enrollment and below-average test scores. With this methodology, the analysis could not separate the effect of *First Things First* from the effect of other factors associated with the Kansas City school district.
8. The outcome measures are not relevant to this review.
9. The study did not use a comparison group.