

Professional capacity: This support refers to the quality of the faculty and staff recruited to the school, their base beliefs and values about change, the quality of ongoing professional development, and the capacity of staff to work together. Elementary schools where teachers were highly committed to the school and inclined to embrace innovation were five times more likely to improve in reading and four times more likely to improve in math than schools weak on this measure.

Student-centered learning climate: This support refers to whether schools have a safe, welcoming, stimulating and nurturing environment focused on learning for all students. Elementary schools with strong safety and order were two times more likely to improve in reading than schools weak on this measure.

Instructional guidance: This support refers to the organization of the curriculum, the nature of the academic demand or challenges it poses, and the tools teachers have to advance learning (such as instructional materials). Elementary schools with strong curriculum alignment were four times more likely to improve in math and reading than schools weak on this measure.

Researchers also found that weakness in one area can amplify the negative effects of another weakness, while strength in one can amplify the positive effects of another. For instance, 33 percent of schools with weak teacher educational backgrounds and 30 percent of schools with weak professional communities stagnated. But 47 percent of schools with weaknesses on both measures stagnated.

To summarize, school organization drives improvement, and individual initiatives are unlikely to work in isolation. This has strong implications for states and districts focused on any number of reforms that have gained increasing political currency—for example, improving teacher quality, turning around low performing schools, or mandating a single curriculum.