In 2014, FirstLine’s four schools exceeded the city’s average performance but were still falling short of where they wanted student learning to be. Furthermore, FirstLine’s school and network leaders all struggled to meet new teachers’ needs as the network transitioned to new, more rigorous Common Core State Standards.

Network leaders and principals decided to collaborate across schools to dramatically scale up professional learning to support teachers, and to increase overall instructional rigor by implementing new standards-aligned curriculum and better differentiating learning for students.

Four years later, three of New Orleans’ top five highest-growth elementary schools are in the FirstLine network. Between the 2014-15 school year and the 2017-18 school year, teachers’ ability to deliver rigorous and engaging instruction improved—as a result, students’ overall proficiency increased by 10 percentage points in math, from 50 percent to 60 percent.
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ERS Districts at Work Framework

We studied eight school systems that struggled with the same challenges as many urban districts around the country—and like many others, the eight systems we studied set strategic priorities that they hoped would address their challenges. What sets these eight school systems apart is that they didn’t stop there.

Think of these strategic priorities as a gear—without focusing on what is needed to power it, the gear stays stationary. Just setting the right strategic priorities is not enough to produce or sustain the results district and school leaders hope for.

Leaders from FirstLine Schools and the other school systems we studied rolled up their sleeves to carefully and collaboratively construct three other gears that effectively powered their strategic priorities. They developed a clear theory of action by identifying: (A) the big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priorities, and (B) how the central office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. To power their theory of action, these school systems made tough trade-offs in a series of resource shifts, and they made process shifts to ensure central office management structures enabled schools to efficiently, effectively, and sustainably implement the changes.
FirstLine Schools: Strategic Priority

Like many school systems around the country, FirstLine teachers and students struggled to adopt more rigorous Common Core State Standards. Many of FirstLine’s teachers were in their first two years in the profession and didn’t have the time or content expertise to write standards-aligned lessons. This common challenge was compounded by FirstLine’s unique circumstances: Leadership believed the network’s four schools were too small to have effective expert-supported teaching teams that focused on a shared grade level or subject area.

To address these challenges, FirstLine Schools set goals: improve student performance and better meet the needs of students and teachers. Then, network leaders identified the most important strategic priority needed to achieve those goals:

Dramatically increase professional learning for teachers and school leaders.

FirstLine Schools set up shared-content, collaborative teacher teams across all four (now five) K-8 schools. With the support of instructional experts, these professional learning teams analyzed student data and implemented the curriculum.

**FirstLine Schools: Network at a Glance**

- **Black and Latinx* Students (2018)**: 98%
- **Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch (2018)**: 90%
- **Students Receiving Special Education Services (2018)**: 14%

“Latinx” is the gender-neutral alternative to “Latino” or “Latina,” meaning a person of Latin American origin or descent. Common pronunciation is “lah-TEEN-ex” or “lah-teen-EX.” ERS chose to study districts with high populations of black, Latinx, and low-income students to highlight school systems that are actively addressing longstanding inequities.
FirstLine Schools: Theory of Action

Leaders from FirstLine Schools didn’t stop after setting the network’s strategic priority: First, they identified big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priority. Then, they identified how the network office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. Together, these school-level changes and network office supports formed FirstLine’s theory of action. To power their theory of action, network leaders made a series of resource shifts and process shifts. Going beyond an initial strategic priority by developing and powering this theory of action is what sets FirstLine Schools apart.

FirstLine’s theory of action was composed of three major parts:

#1  
Centralize and reorganize school schedules to enable teachers to collaborate on shared content.  

Why?  
Because of FirstLine’s small school sizes, leaders chose a somewhat unorthodox approach of cross-school professional learning teams. However, for these cross-school teams to work, all schools needed to operate on the same daily and weekly schedules.

#2  
Invest in supports to help schools maximize the value of collaboration time.  

Why?  
Once FirstLine created time for collaboration, they needed to support schools to ensure that time was expert-led and used effectively to meet teachers’ and students’ needs—including analyzing student work, adapting curricula for students, and building teachers’ skills.

#3  
Engage in a shared dialogue about changes to school leaders’ and teachers’ roles.  

Why?  
These new approaches to professional learning and scheduling required significant adaptive change on behalf of school leaders and teachers. Network leaders reorganized this early and invested time and effort to understand different perspectives and provide clarification.
#1

Centralize and reorganize school schedules to enable teachers to collaborate on shared content.

FirstLine’s K-8 schools typically staffed no more than three teachers per grade (in elementary) or two per subject area (in middle school). While this level of staffing is common in K-8 schools, FirstLine leaders believed this team size limited teachers’ opportunities to benefit from content-specific expert support and learn from others’ approaches to teaching shared content. FirstLine’s solution was to think outside the box. Network leadership knew they would maximize investments in professional learning by bringing teachers together in larger, cross-school teams. To implement and sustain this change, they centralized decision-making around school scheduling and changed the annual planning process to allow for networkwide consensus-building.

Process Shifts

Roles

The network changed the master scheduling process from individual, school-level decision-making to collaborative, network-level decision-making. This allowed instructional leaders to organize teacher teams across schools (instead of within individual schools) so that a sufficient number of teachers could collaboratively internalize the curriculum, analyze data, and plan lessons. The decision-making process for these new, common schedules was coordinated by the network office but involved significant collaboration with school leaders. The network organized several Friday morning brainstorming sessions with school and network leaders to answer the question “What would it take to have more consistently rigorous and engaging classrooms across our network?” Chief Academic Officer (CAO) Sabrina Pence shared, “We had this very organic time where all the school leaders were brainstorming ideas and we came up with our plan based on stuff we had heard around the country. We knew Success Academies [a New York charter network] was doing deeper teacher professional development, and we knew of another school that had figured out how to rearrange schedules so that teachers could participate in professional development as a group.”

At a leadership retreat, both network and school leaders worked to identify all “design challenges” associated with convening cross-school professional learning teams. To address the scheduling coordination challenge, a task force of network and school leaders formed to propose specific scheduling recommendations that were subsequently adopted. During the first three years of implementation, the network convened teachers in teams for one full day each week called “Teacher Prep Day.” CAO Sabrina Pence worked with school leaders to carefully align nearly every element of their daily schedules to make these common, cross-school Teacher Prep Days work; for example, they had to create schedules that allowed all of the network’s science teachers to meet each Tuesday.

“I just started this week in a new position, so something I appreciate is how helpful everyone is and that they share tips to make sure all teachers can be successful. The content director is always prepared and giving us what we need and time to practice, plan, or work with our teams.”

-FirstLine teacher
During the 2017-18 school year, FirstLine shifted to using an early release day each week called “Teacher Professional Learning Time,” or Teacher PLT. This meant schools were no longer required to match their daily schedules down to the minute. However, the coordination that began as part of Teacher Prep Days carried forward to the implementation of other networkwide strategies, such as the upcoming adoption of a new social-emotional learning curriculum that has daily time requirements.

“Getting to hear from other teachers who are teaching the same content is so valuable. We get to touch base formally and informally about what’s going well or not in class and make adjustments together. It also provides a structure to intellectually prepare lessons that wouldn’t be happening on our own.”

-FirstLine teacher

**Timelines**

The shift to centralized decision-making around scheduling and professional learning required a longer annual planning timeline for feedback, consensus, and rollout. The network decided to begin the annual planning process earlier (November instead of January) to allow for community- and school-level feedback on priorities. During this time, network leaders preserved school leaders’ professional learning time for reading and discussing research about the major instructional shifts under consideration for the following year. This gave school leaders opportunities to ask questions of network leadership, share feedback, and build ownership over the change. Network leadership reconvened in January to identify all design challenges associated with any major strategic shifts. Then, cross-functional teams, including staff from schools and the network, worked throughout the spring to proactively address each challenge.

As an example, CAO Sabrina Pence shared, “Design challenges are the long list of things you need to do to make your strategic priority happen. If I’m implementing new curriculum, do I need to change the schedule? Maybe the new curriculum calls for 90-minute ELA lesson blocks and we currently have 75-minute blocks—what would we need to do? That ELA shift might then have implications for math. Then what about lunch scheduling? We make a list to make sure we actually do all the stuff to make our big change happen.”

*Artifact #1: FirstLine Schools Professional Learning and Planning Calendar*
#2

Invest in supports to help schools maximize the value of collaboration time.

FirstLine leaders recognized that simply providing time for collaboration wasn’t enough to reliably and sustainably improve instruction—they had to put underlying support structures and enabling conditions in place to ensure that time was used meaningfully. The most effective job-embedded professional learning includes a standards-aligned curriculum to serve as a starting point for planning instruction, dedicated content experts who facilitate teachers’ professional learning, and clear protocols for reviewing student work to inform adjustments to instruction. 

Resource Shifts

**Time**

FirstLine freed time for both teachers and school leaders to participate in collaborative teams for two to six hours per week. From 2015 to 2017, the network released all teachers for one full “Prep Day” (six hours) per week, for a total of 407 hours per year. To do this, they added an average of six full-time staff members to schools (a mix of coteachers in grades K-2 and enrichment teachers in grades 3-5) to cover the professional learning time via intervention blocks that included extracurriculars and push-in time from academic support staff. The network invested $325,000-$350,000 per school for this staff, which they funded both through discontinuation of other programs and support from private philanthropy. When this model became cost-prohibitive due to flat state funding and rising expenses, the network maintained a total of 159 professional learning hours per year by using early release days to provide all teachers with two hours per week for cross-school teacher professional learning time (Teacher PLT). Additionally, principals and assistant principals came together for two and a half hours per week for leader professional learning time (Leader PLT); during this time, network-level instructional coaches helped them grow their content expertise and prepared them to facilitate teachers’ professional learning time.

**Money**

The network purchased a Common Core-aligned curriculum for all grades and core subjects, a one-time networkwide investment of $125 per student or roughly $86,000 per school. During the first two years of cross-school professional learning, teachers spent much of their collaboration time designing lesson plans from scratch. The new curriculum allowed teachers to more effectively use their time together to focus on analyzing data and adapting existing content for diverse student needs.

**People**

FirstLine devoted both school- and network-level staff to support teachers’ professional learning. The network hired one new content lead per core subject (math, ELA, science, and social studies). During Leader PLT, these content leads prepared school leaders to facilitate professional learning for math and ELA teachers and directly facilitated professional learning communities for science and social studies teachers so that school leaders could focus on...
building content expertise in math and ELA. Content leads also led training on new curriculum materials and Common Core State Standards, and they provided individual on-site coaching to both school leaders and teachers.

In addition to teaching staff FirstLine Schools hired to free up teachers’ time for professional learning, all schools **maintained a larger administrative staff than typical school systems**. These school-level administrators **divided their responsibilities between instructional and operational leadership**. At each campus, the school director led the overall strategic vision for the school and managed day-to-day operations alongside the dean of students. Principals and assistant principals had an instructional leadership focus and worked in pairs to oversee grades K-5 and 6-8. They also facilitated Teacher PLT and provided individual coaching and support. In total, the network employed between five and seven leadership staff per school of 500-700 students—more than double the number of leadership staff in a typical K-8 school. 

CEO of FirstLine Schools Jay Altman explained that these administrative staff were an investment in “enabling conditions” to facilitate “teachers doing their best work.” To sustain this trade-off, FirstLine maintained larger class sizes and used City Year tutors and other academic support staff (including school leaders) to push-in and provide personalized learning for students.

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**Process Shifts**

**Mindsets**

FirstLine’s content leads **encouraged collaboration and transparency among school leaders** via facilitation of weekly Leader PLT. This played out in many ways—for example, all school leadership teams posted their weekly Teacher PLT implementation plans to Google Drive so they could share agendas and facilitation materials. School leaders also co-created preparation checklists for Teacher PLT to make sure they all understood the daily logistical aspects of leading professional learning. Finally, school leaders regularly engaged in collaborative analysis of student work. They identified common gaps in student learning to brainstorm next steps together and identified points of variation across schools to collaborate on how to replicate effective practices.

- **Artifact #2: Teacher Professional Learning Time Preparation Checklists**

**Data & Tools**

Content Leads and School Leaders **engaged in weekly data analysis to shape each Teacher PLT agenda**. During Leader PLT, school leaders set six-week goals for Teacher PLT by analyzing data from student assessments and teacher observations. Each week, they compared notes on ongoing classroom walkthroughs to update and tweak the content focus. Director of Teaching and Learning Kirsten Feil shared, “Content Leads meet with school leaders to say, ‘We’ve noticed trends in your building. How typical is this?’ Together, they’ll agree that folks are still not understanding a given skill or content area, so let’s first address that in Leader PLT to make it a focus of Teacher PLT.”

- **Artifact #3: Sample Teacher Professional Learning Time Agenda**
Engage in a shared dialogue about changes to school leaders’ and teachers’ roles.

FirstLine’s professional learning initiatives shepherded in an era of changes to the autonomy of school leaders. When the network was founded, school leaders had full autonomy over their schedule, staff, and budgets, and teachers created their own lessons and managed their own instruction. Despite network leaders working hard to build consensus, introduction of the professional learning initiatives represented a cultural shift and a change in responsibility and professional identity for many people. FirstLine leadership recognized how difficult this kind of cultural change can be, so they carefully attended to it by developing norms and routines to help leaders navigate their changing roles and participate in honest dialogue with each other.

Process Shifts

Mindsets

The network trained all staff on strong feedback practices, grounded in the leadership model of Radical Candor, which is focused on building the ability to “challenge directly and show you care personally at the same time.” The network reflected this commitment in the first strand of their new Leadership Competency Framework on growing personal leadership skills. Wheatley School Director Diana Archuleta shared, “Jay [Altman, FirstLine’s CEO] prioritized getting this school-network relationship stronger and healthier. That has been its own priority we are always working on, whether we are reading Radical Candor or teasing out conflicts and analyzing breakdowns in communication. We have an accountability to be sure that we are always talking to the person, not about them. That check is always in place: ‘Have you said this to them yet?’”

The network also encouraged school leaders to rely on the network for support. This resulted in more formalized documentation of network support for recurring operational routines. School Director Diana Archuleta collaborated with other network and school leaders to make decisions ranging from responding to a leaking pipe to changing the curriculum’s scope and sequence. She shared, “There was a moment this morning when it smelled like sewage. I wanted just to cancel school, but I was like, ‘I know not to make that decision on my own anymore.’ She reached out to the network’s operations team to devise a solution that kept students safe and allowed them to keep up their learning. This collaborative support also helped spread school-level innovation. When Diana Archuleta planned a curricular change in her elementary grades, she told herself, “If it’s good for our kids it might be good for all kids, so let’s consult with the group of school directors and the larger network team.”

Artifact #4: Leadership Competency Framework for Instructional Leaders (Teacher Leader, Assistant Principal, Principal, and School Director)

Roles

The network updated job responsibilities and decision-making protocols to reflect the transition to more intensive professional learning time. First, the network changed the recruiting and interview process for teachers to emphasize the new responsibilities related to
implementing PLT. CAO Sabrina Pence shared, “We are as transparent as possible about what it’s like to work here. The curriculum is the place where we probe the most [in candidate interviews]. We are a place with a fully built-out curriculum, and the role of the teacher is different—you are internalizing those lessons, delivering them, and diving into student work. That has to give you energy instead of creating your own lessons. We try to make that really visible for folks.”

Additionally, the network adopted the RAPID Decision-Making Framework, a decision accountability tool developed by consulting group Bain & Company, to clarify school leaders’ roles versus network leaders’ roles in key decisions throughout the year. CAO Sabrina Pence explained, “We use RAPID a lot when it comes to network and school decisions. When we launched our first five-year planning process, I came in and said, ‘I am the recommender and the approver. This group of senior leaders are the decision-makers. This group of additional staff are here for input.’ I think it helped clarify. What is uncomfortable is that it defines power dynamics. You have to be okay leaning into that.”

During the transition between Prep Day PLT and Early Release Day PLT, Sabrina Pence reflected, “We had to make a decision in a timely way for families, so I had to temporarily change roles. I realized that I was the decision-maker for making this change at the time because our families needed time to be able to plan for childcare needs. We also had to build systems aligned to our new schedule, and we had a lot of work ahead of us. Having the decision-making role up front and putting it out there has given us language—at least with RAPID, we’re talking about it more openly.”

Artifact #5: RAPID Decision-Making Framework

*High-need schools are complex schools. There are more variables you simultaneously have to address to be effective. The job of administrators is to minimize the compliance burden for teachers…minimize the cost of transactions that are not serving students and families…and make their work as sustainable as possible.*

-Jay Altman, CEO of FirstLine Schools
Results: Changes to the Teacher Experience

Teachers in FirstLine Schools now receive 159 hours (or 19 days) of professional learning time annually—almost triple the 56 hours that a typical school system devotes. FirstLine teachers learn from each other in expert-supported, shared content and grade-level teams across schools, instead of just within their schools. In annual teacher surveys, FirstLine teachers agree that cross-school professional learning time helped them deliver more rigorous, standards-aligned instruction. One respondent reflected, “The most useful aspect of PLT is getting ideas from other teachers at different schools in my grade level. This helps me deliver the lesson better so my students can understand the curriculum.”

Results: Changes to Student Outcomes and Experience

FirstLine’s investment in cross-school professional learning is producing exciting gains in student engagement and growth. Student engagement and classroom culture has improved, as measured by the network’s “Community of Learners” strand of their teacher observation rubric. Average scores increased from 2.6 out of 5 during the 2014-15 school year to 3.0 out of 5 during the 2017-18 school year.

Since the 2014-15 school year, the network has made promising proficiency gains:

Student Growth: Percent of FirstLine Students Who Met or Exceeded Math Standards

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<th>2014-15 School Year</th>
<th>2017-18 School Year</th>
<th>Net Gain</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of FirstLine Students</td>
<td>50.2 percent</td>
<td>59.5 percent</td>
<td>9.3 percentage points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who Met or Exceeded Basic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Standards in Math</td>
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Percent of FirstLine Students who met or exceeded basic math standards increased by 9.3 percentage points.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>20.8 percent</th>
<th>25.6 percent</th>
<th>5.8 percentage points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of FirstLine Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who Met or Exceeded Mastery</td>
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<td>Standards in Math</td>
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Percent of FirstLine Students who met or exceeded mastery math standards increased by 5.8 percentage points.

During this time period, net gains in fourth grade math were even more impressive: the percent of FirstLine’s fourth grade students who met or exceeded basic math standards increased by 22 percentage points. The network is likely to continue to build on this progress—during the 2017-18 school year, three FirstLine schools placed in the top five highest-growth elementary schools for math in New Orleans.

What’s Next for FirstLine Schools?

FirstLine is currently still in the process of implementing new standards-aligned curricula in all core subjects, so PLT for teachers and leaders focuses primarily on curriculum adoption. Once the network has this new curriculum in place, teachers and leaders will navigate an evolving PLT focused on adapting and differentiating the new curriculum to best meet students’ needs. Facilitators will figure out how to efficiently introduce new teachers to a curriculum that current staff will already be familiar with. Additionally, the network is preparing to implement a new social-emotional learning (SEL) program called Valor. School and network leaders will make tough trade-offs to: (A) determine how much professional learning time gets allocated for SEL implementation, and (B) balance best practices with the necessary investments to deliver the core curriculum.
Sources

1 Louisiana Department of Education. February 2018 Multi-States (MFP by Site and School System). Student Attributes. www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/student-attributes

2 Email from Chief Academic Officer Sabrina Pence.

3 This vision for professional learning aligns with the Connected Professional Learning practices employed by high-performing and high-growth systems. See Igniting the Learning Engine from Education Resource Strategies. www.erstrategies.org/tap/connected_professional_learning

4 Email from Executive Director of Leadership Development Tom Shepley.

5 Email from Chief Academic Officer Sabrina Pence.

6 Email from Chief Academic Officer Sabrina Pence. The schoolwide estimate uses an average FirstLine School K-8 school size of 690 students based on 2017-18 enrollment.

7 Email from Chief Academic Officer Sabrina Pence. All schools have one school director, one principal, one assistant principal, and two deans of students. Larger schools have an additional principal and assistant principal.

8 Email from Chief Academic Officer Sabrina Pence.

9 Email from Chief Academic Officer Sabrina Pence.

10 Email from Chief Academic Officer Sabrina Pence.

11 Louisiana Department of Education. “2018-2025-progress-school-summary.” This Louisiana Department of Education measure is reported as the percent of test-takers in a school whose growth falls between the 60-99th percentile relative to peers nationwide. The three schools in 2017-18 were Samuel Green (66 percent), Langston Hughes (64 percent), and Arthur Ashe (63 percent). For more information on this measure see: www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/accountability/2018-student-progress-overview-webinar.pdf?sfvrsn=4

Photo credit: FirstLine Schools.

Note: Most of the content featured in this case study comes from interviews and email correspondence with FirstLine network and school leaders. Unless otherwise noted, all facts and data points are drawn from this qualitative data set.

Photos courtesy of FirstLine Schools.

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