Center for Model Schools

Key Drivers Whitepaper

Executive Summary

This white paper explores how three key drivers – Safety & Trust, Communication & Collaboration, and Capacity & Efficacy – are essential to school and district success. These three drivers are deeply aligned with the UChicago 5Essentials framework, a research-based school improvement framework that defines the essential conditions for improving student outcomes. The five essential factors for school improvement are: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment, and ambitious instruction (Hart et al., 2021). Strong performance on the 5Essentials provides the climate and coherence that allow Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) to function effectively. The 5Essentials survey includes measures of each of the essential factors to evaluate aspects of schools' culture and climate and provide insights into schools' organizational strengths and opportunities for improvement. A study of the 5Essentials survey found that all 22 core measures on the survey were positively and significantly associated with schools' improvement (Hart et al., 2021).

The Center for Model Schools Key Drivers are also grounded in the evidence of seminal and recent research studies that have examined the factors that help schools improve and succeed. This white paper explores the alignment of the key drivers with that evidence base, including research on continuous improvement, collective teacher efficacy, effective professional learning, and the Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL). The paper then explores what each of the key drivers looks like at the classroom, school, and district level and the types of evidence that teachers and leaders can collect to assess their alignment with and improvement on each of the key drivers.

Introduction

School and district leaders are passionate, knowledgeable experts who are well aware of the challenges that they face in education today. They must lead the learning recovery in their schools while facing stagnant or even decreasing budgets. They must manage teacher shortages and student absences while ensuring a safe, effective learning environment. They must ensure the well-being and mental health of staff and students, all while navigating the politicization of schools. These challenges are complex—they require leaders and school systems to adapt the way they think, act, and operate in order to identify and implement effective solutions. Fortunately, leaders across the country are up to the task. Leaders' tireless efforts on behalf of their students and staff, combined with the right knowledge and resources, will lead to improved teaching and learning and successful, effective schools.

To meet these challenges, school and district leaders should focus on three key drivers for school improvement: Safety & Trust, Communication & Collaboration, and Capacity & Efficacy. While many leaders utilize MTSS as a framework for organizing prevention and intervention, the organizational conditions measured by the 5Essentials are the precondition for MTSS to function coherently, especially in disadvantaged contexts where climate, trust, and program coherence strongly relate to improvement trajectories. (UChicago Impact, 2024; MTSS Center at AIR, n.d.) Effective leaders know that to create effective schools they must implement coherent strategies to support the well-being of students and educators, improve teaching and learning, and accelerate the achievement of every child. Schools that employ exemplary, scalable strategies to ensure a culture of high expectations for each and every student will demonstrate rapid growth. These schools ensure that all students are academically prepared, equipped with social and emotional skills, actively engaged in joyous learning, have meaningful interactions with peers, and find

relevance in content and materials. These schools lead the way and inspire leaders and teachers at other schools to join the movement.

Safety and Trust

Definition and Importance

Safety and Trust refer to the psychological and physical well-being of students and staff, and the presence of mutual respect and reliability in relationships. Effective leaders can ensure safety and generate trust by leading with ethics, equity, and according to professional norms. They ensure that services, activities, and resources cultivate safe, supportive, and inclusive environments. Their leadership generates trust with teachers, students, and the community. The U.S. Department of Education, MTSS implementations, and the Professional Standards for Education Leaders have informed the evidence base for safe and inclusive school environments.

Alignment to 5Essentials

Safety and Trust are important components of four of the 5Essentials for school improvement: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, supportive environment, and involved families. For Effective Leaders, the core measure of Teacher-Principal Trust is present when teachers feel respected by the principal, trust the principal to put students first, and think the principal cares about them personally and professionally. An aspect of Collaborative Teachers is the core measure of Teacher-Teacher Trust, which emphasizes that teachers respect other teachers as experts and leaders and feel comfortable discussing personal and professional issues with their colleagues. For Supportive Environment, the core measure of Safety is present when students feel safe both in and around the school building, and while they travel to and from home. The core measure of student-teacher trust is present when teachers treat students with respect, keep their promises, and listen to students' ideas. One part of Involved Families is Teacher-Parent Trust, which emphasizes that teachers work to build relationships with families, feel respected by families, and think of each other as partners in teaching students (University of Chicago, 2023).

Evidence Base

Effective leaders lead schools and systems that are safe, supportive, inclusive, and fair. Rigorous, culturally relevant, and welcoming learning environments include consistent, evidence-based approaches to discipline. Harsh or unfair discipline practices and disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline practices for disadvantaged groups can contribute to students feeling unwelcome, unsafe, and unsupported. The U.S. Department of Education has developed five guiding principles to ensure a safe and inclusive learning and work environment:

- Foster a sense of belonging through a positive, welcoming, and inclusive school environment with access to mental health services for students and educators;
- Support the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of all students through evidence-based strategies, including a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Framework and early intervention strategies;
- Adequately support high-quality teaching and learning by increasing educator capacity through ongoing, collaborative, curriculum-based professional learning;
- Recruit and retain a diverse educator workforce; and
- Ensure that the formation and implementation of student discipline policies includes families and treats students with dignity and respect (U.S. Department of Education, 2023)

Effective leaders create a positive district and school culture that promotes a sense of safety, respect, inclusion, and support for all students, teachers, and families. One of the essential elements for school improvement is a

supportive environment, where students feel safe in and around the school and find teachers trustworthy and responsive to their academic needs. A school with a supportive environment has students who demonstrate behaviors that lead to academic achievement, has a high level of mutual trust and respect between students and teachers, and has a feeling of safety both in and around the school building, and while students travel to and from home (Hart et al., 2021; Bryk, 2015).

Trust among staff is a strong predictor of school improvement and student achievement. Leaders can foster respectful interactions, demonstrate personal integrity, promote competence, create a culture that shows genuine concern for the well-being of others, encourage inclusive decision making, and support professional collaboration to build and sustain relational trust within their school communities. Schools with high relational trust show greater gains in student learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Schools frequently adopt MTSS to organize academic, behavioral, and well-being supports. Effectively implementing tiered routines depends on a supportive environment and relational trust between leaders, teachers, and students to sustain necessary components like universal screening, problem-solving, and follow-through. When safety and trust are strong, as reflected in the 5Essentials indicators, schools are better positioned to operate MTSS as a coherent, improvement-oriented system rather than a set of disconnected compliance tasks (UChicago Impact, 2024; MTSS Center at AIR, n.d.).

The Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL) describe several ways that leaders can increase safety and trust within their schools. Standard 1 is Mission, Vision, and Core Values, and states that leaders are expected to cultivate a culture of openness, caring, and trust that emphasizes student well-being, inclusiveness, and continuous improvement. The second PSEL standard, Ethics and Professional Norms, emphasizes that effective leaders act with integrity, fairness, and transparency and promote trust, perseverance, and ethical behavior. Standard 3, Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, ensures that each student is treated fairly and has equitable access to resources and support. The fifth standard is Community of Care and Support for Students, which emphasizes that leaders are expected to build and sustain a safe, caring, and inclusive school community, which includes developing trusting relationships with students, staff, and families, and responding to their needs with empathy and support (NPBEA, 2015).

A leader's approach to instruction and assessment should also take the key drivers of Safety and Trust into consideration. When education is viewed through a sociocultural perspective, leaders promote a culture of learning instead of accountability, encourage responsive and equitable teaching, foster classrooms where students' identities and sense of belonging are central to learning, minimize the harmful effects of grading, and support professional learning to help teachers feel valued and prepared. The sociocultural perspective also considers the importance of safety and respect to learning and assessment, which reinforces the need for a focus on social and emotional learning in curriculum and professional learning programs (Shepard, 2019).

In Practice

A classroom that exemplifies Safety and Trust has teachers that have developed positive relationships with students, clear expectations with consistent rules and routines for all students, and an environment in which students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions. Safety and trust are deeply embedded in the classroom culture. Students feel empowered to take ownership of their behavior and learning. Teachers foster a climate where every student feels valued, respected, and included. Within this climate, teachers embed Tier 1 routines with predictable expectations, restorative responses, and SEL practices, that reduce unnecessary referrals and increase the effectiveness of any targeted Tier 2/3 supports (NCSSLE, n.d.). Relationships between teachers and students are characterized by mutual trust, understanding, and respect. Teachers are seen as approachable and dependable. Students also develop strong bonds with their peers, contributing to a supportive classroom environment. Students take on leadership roles, such as mediating peer conflicts, leading classroom discussions, or mentoring younger students. This empowerment further reinforces trust and a sense of safety. Teachers regularly reflect on their practices, using data (e.g., surveys, behavioral trends) and student input to maintain and enhance the environment of safety and

trust. They serve as role models, consistently demonstrating integrity, empathy, and fairness. The classroom culture aligns seamlessly with school-wide safety and trust initiatives, contributing to a cohesive, supportive learning environment.

A school that exemplifies Safety and Trust has an inclusive culture where all students and staff feel like they belong and are valued, access to support like counselors and mental health resources, transparent communication between students, staff, and families, and facilities that are well-maintained, secure, and conducive to learning. Proven strategies, such as SEL integration, are formalized into school policies and practices. The school's MTSS routines (screening calendars, team protocols, and equitable discipline reviews) are inhabited by trust, which encourages honest data use and consistent follow-through across classrooms (UChicago Impact, 2024). Teachers and staff are trained to maintain consistent implementation across all grade levels and classrooms. Students, families, and staff are fully integrated into school improvement efforts. For example, student councils may lead initiatives to promote inclusivity, while family advisory boards provide input on safety and trust initiatives. Teachers are empowered to take leadership roles in fostering trust and contributing to a positive school culture. Safety and trust are deeply embedded in the school's identity and are regularly monitored through surveys, focus groups, and behavior data. Celebrations of success (e.g., reduced bullying rates, improved survey results) reinforce the commitment to these values.

A district that exemplifies Safety and Trust has policies that prioritize equity to ensure that every school has what it needs, engages the community to build trust, provides professional development to staff on building safe classrooms, and has a coherent system to address and identify needs and ensure accountability. Safety and trust strategies proven to be effective are scaled consistently across all schools, with attention to ensuring equity across diverse contexts and communities. Districts regularly use data to monitor progress and measure impact, publishing transparent reports to maintain accountability. District MTSS guidance explicitly links access to interventions with supportive environment and staff-trust indicators on 5Essentials surveys, reinforcing that climate is the foundation for tiered supports rather than a parallel initiative (UChicago Impact, 2024). Schools, families, and community organizations are fully integrated into trust-building efforts. Partnerships are leveraged to support mental health, security, and social-emotional learning districtwide. Success stories are celebrated and shared across the district to reinforce a culture of safety and mutual respect. Safety and trust are institutionalized as core values, embedded in district policies, hiring practices, and resource allocation. Leaders prioritize long-term relationship-building and continuous professional development to maintain trust at every level of the district.

Evidence to Collect

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups can gather data on the extent to which students, teachers, and families agree that the leaders of the school ensure a safe and inclusive learning and work environment. The surveys can also address feelings of trust and respect amongst and between leaders, teachers, students, and families. Pair 5Essentials climate indicators (e.g., Safety; Teacher–Teacher and Teacher–Principal Trust) with MTSS discipline and referral data to examine whether Tier 1 climate conditions are enabling or impeding targeted supports. Disciplinary data on plans and practices can be analyzed to determine how many issues with safety arise, how they are dealt with by school leadership, and whether there are any disparities in how discipline is administered to specific student populations. Curriculum, professional learning, and assessment programs can be investigated to ensure there is a focus on equity and cultural responsiveness.

Communication and Collaboration

Definition and Importance

The Communication and Collaboration driver emphasizes open, structured, and frequent communication among educators, students, and families. Effective leaders collaborate with teachers and families to set a bold vision and clearly communicate what adults must do to ensure equity and students' academic success and well-being. Leaders should create their compelling vision collaboratively with the local community to ensure that all stakeholders buy in. They collaborate with educators in the system and people in the community to navigate through different values about education and approach to change. They create a set of shared values that are reflected in the vision and a strategic plan for teaching and learning. Coherent, aligned systems developed through communication and collaboration are a critical part of leading effective schools, and ensuring that all activities are mission driven. The evidence base for the importance of communication and collaboration in developing and enacting a shared vision, coherence, and collective efficacy is based on the work of community schools and the research of Hattie, Mapp, Fowler, and others.

Alignment to 5Essentials

Communication and Collaboration are important drivers for all five of the 5Essentials for school improvement. For Ambitious Instruction, Communication and Collaboration is an important component of English Instruction and Math Instruction, to ensure that students engage with instructional materials and with each another to build and apply critical reading, writing, and math knowledge and skills. Quality of Student Discussion is also dependent on Communication and Collaboration to drive students to participate in class discussions and build critical thinking skills. For Effective Leaders, Communication and Collaboration helps build Program Coherence to ensure that educational programs are coordinated and consistent with goals for student learning. For Collaborative Teachers, Communication and Collaboration are central to the core measure of Collaborative Teachers, wherein teachers observe each other's practice and work together to review assessment data and develop instructional strategies. For Supportive Environment, Communication and Collaboration are essential for Peer Support for Academic Work, evidenced by students demonstrating behaviors that lead to achievement, and Academic Personalism, demonstrated by teachers' connection with students and their support in achieving academic goals. For Involved Families, Communication and Collaboration are essential to ensure Parent Involvement in School, demonstrated by parents being active participants in their child's schooling (University of Chicago, 2023).

Evidence Base

Collaboration and communication between leaders, teachers, students, and families enhance collective efficacy and instructional coherence. Collaborative school cultures are essential for building the shared belief of teachers in their ability to positively affect students. These environments foster instructional coherence, shared goals, and mutual accountability, all of which contribute to stronger collective efficacy (Hattie, 2018). In turn, the sense of collective efficacy leads to a more collaborative culture in schools and systems, in which best practices are shared and implemented, literacy instruction is integrated across the curriculum, families are involved in student learning, and problem behavior is dealt with fairly (Donohoo et al., 2018).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) thrive when communication structures and collegial trust are in place. Leaders who design and implement professional learning programs with teacher-to-teacher collaboration focused on instructional improvement—whether in PLCs, teacher teams, or group work in professional development sessions—have demonstrated improvement in teachers' instructional skills (Hill & Papay, 2022).

A collaborative environment allows educators to develop collective efficacy and professional capital. Professional capital is composed of human capital (the talent of individuals); social capital (the collaborative power of the group); and decisional capital (the wisdom to make sound judgments about learners). By increasing collaboration, schools and districts can increase teachers' social capital. Increasing social capital can increase human capital; less experienced and skilled teachers that work in a collaborative environment can improve (Donohoo et al., 2018; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Cultivating collaborative cultures and developing social capital are essential to improving coherence in a school district. Any significant change that is to occur within a group must be initiated by that group. Talented individuals are attracted to coherent systems with high social capital and they, in turn, add to the social capital. The four elements of cultivating collaborative cultures are:

- Fostering a mindset and culture of growth that values teachers and leaders, and supports learning, innovation, and action;
- Learning leadership that builds human, social, and decisional capital amongst its teachers by modeling learning and shaping culture;
- A collective capacity building that develops a growth mindset, cultivates collaborative student learning, builds educators' knowledge and skills, engages everyone with clear goals, fosters learning across roles, and follows a cycle of learning, application, reflection, and dialogue; and
- Combining a strong learning design that changes behavior with collaborative work to avoid frustration, surface learning, and (merely) personal growth and to achieve sustained and systematic shifts in learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Continuous improvement work presents both technical and adaptive challenges for leaders and requires them to have qualities to meet those challenges. Schools and school systems are incredibly complex environments, which leads to uncertainty around the most effective solutions to issues they face. Leaders in complex environments benefit from implementing adaptive practices to adjust to the uncertainty (Dunn, 2020). Adaptive leaders of large organizations faced with solving complex problems work collaboratively to diagnose problems utilizing multiple perspectives and then take action (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Effective collaboration structures, such as PLCs with clear protocols, transparent data sharing, and inclusive family engagement, provide the social architecture for coherent improvement cycles. When MTSS is implemented effectively, these routines operate as structured team problem-solving cycles within a culture of shared practice. Effective evidence-based routines allow leaders to focus on organizational coherence and adult collaboration central to the 5Essentials (UChicago Impact, 2024; MTSS Center at AIR, n.d.).

When making high-leverage decisions or changes to the school, effective leaders communicate transparently with all the relevant stakeholders (teachers, students, and families) about why the change is necessary and important and what impact it will have. Staff and families are engaged to provide input in the design and development of the change. When it is rolled out, staff and families deeply understand the "why" behind the program and see their input reflected in the design (Chiefs for Change, 2023).

Effective schools with strong partnerships between the school, families, and the community are led by leaders who have invested resources and infrastructure into these relationships. The relationships are built on trust, value the input of all families, and give them opportunities to be partners in decision-making. Teachers are provided professional learning for and are supported in their efforts to communicate and collaborate with families from diverse backgrounds. There is clear and consistent communication between the staff, students, families, and community. Schools that implement these strategies have more engaged students with better social, emotional, and academic outcomes; motivated teachers who are more likely to stay; and families that feel less isolated and develop stronger relationships with their children and the school's teachers and leaders (Mapp et al., 2022).

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders emphasize the critical role of Communication and Collaboration in fostering trust, improving school culture, and advancing student learning. Standard 1, Mission, Vision, and Core Values, emphasizes that leaders are expected to engage the school community in open, inclusive communication to collaboratively develop a shared mission and vision. Standard 7, Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, states that leaders must develop a professional culture marked by collaboration, trust, and continuous improvement. The eighth standard is Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community, which emphasizes the importance of involving parents and community members in the school's activities and decision-making processes. Effective leaders engage staff, students, families, and community partners to create and sustain positive, collaborative, and productive relationships and engage in clear and consistent communication with families and the community about the school and students (NPBEA, 2015).

Effective schools develop a process to communicate student progress between teachers and with families. Effective leaders have the opportunity to transform assessment so that it truly communicates meaningful information about what students know and can do, motivates students to learn, and creates alignment and coherence across fragmented school systems (Schneider and Hutt, 2023). They use data systematically to ask questions and obtain insights about student progress, to tailor instruction to the needs of each student, and to monitor continuous improvement. They foster a data-driven culture within the school system and develop a data system to effectively gather, analyze, and use the data to communicate progress (Hamilton et al., 2009).

In Practice

A classroom that exemplifies Communication and Collaboration has teachers that encourage questions, discussions, and feedback from students, well-designed group activities that allow students to learn from each other, clearly defined routines, goals, and expectations, and consistent communication with families. Teachers co-plan lessons and engage in peer observations. Open and effective communication becomes a norm. Students routinely engage in discussions, debates, and collaborative problem-solving, demonstrating respect and empathy. Students take initiative in leading classroom discussions and providing feedback to peers, demonstrating confidence in their communication abilities. Collaboration evolves into peer-led initiatives, where students design and lead group projects or mentor younger peers. Teamwork becomes seamless, with students naturally dividing responsibilities and resolving conflicts constructively. Students regularly reflect on their own communication and collaboration practices, setting personal goals for improvement. Families become active partners in the learning process, contributing to classroom projects or collaborating with students on service initiatives. Classrooms extend communication and collaboration efforts to include community partners, integrating real-world opportunities for students to work alongside professionals or local organizations.

A school that exemplifies Communication and Collaboration has leadership that prioritizes open and ongoing communication with and between staff, has clear and consistent goals and values, provides teachers with the time, space, and incentives to engage in PLCs that analyze data and share best practices, and engages students and families in decision making. Grade-level teams meet weekly to analyze student work and adjust instruction. Collaborative practices are fully integrated into the school's culture, with all staff routinely engaging in team-based problem-solving and planning. Peer-to-peer mentorship flourishes, with experienced teachers coaching newer staff and sharing successful practices. Schools actively include students in leadership roles, such as student councils or committees that address school-wide issues. Families are seen as partners, with opportunities to co-develop initiatives, contribute to decision-making, and participate in goal-setting for the school. Schools continuously assess and refine their communication and collaboration practices to ensure they remain effective and aligned with evolving needs. Successes are celebrated publicly, creating momentum and reinforcing the value of communication and collaboration within the community.

A district that exemplifies Communication and Collaboration creates opportunities for cross-school collaboration, engages the community to increase resources available to schools, provides consistent and ongoing information to students, staff, and families, and ensures that all members of the community are able to access the communications. Cross-school PLCs and leadership institutes foster vertical and horizontal alignment. Successful

collaboration models are scaled across all schools in the district with schools that have seen success serving as mentors or exemplars for others. Cross-departmental collaboration at the district level ensures consistency and alignment with the district's overall goals. Stakeholders at all levels (students, teachers, administrators, families) are empowered to lead collaborative efforts and contribute to district-wide initiatives. District leaders create sustained opportunities for family and community involvement in district planning and decision-making. Collaboration becomes a deeply embedded part of the district's culture. Ongoing data collection and feedback loops ensure a culture of continuous improvement and that communication structures remain responsive and effective.

Evidence to Collect

Research can investigate the degree to which the school has worked to collaboratively engage staff, students, families, and communities in decision-making through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Site visits can help to place the school in the context of the community and study the partnerships that have formed between the school and the community. Researchers can analyze meeting agendas and minutes to assess levels of communication and collaboration between leaders, teachers, and families. Effective schools will have a comprehensive plan for gathering and using multiple data sources and how they communicate progress to teachers, students, and families. Research can investigate the formation of these data plans as well as their implementation. Research can seek to identify the types of data sources that are most useful for driving school improvement through document collection and analysis and the ways that communication throughout the system contributes to a shared sense of continuous improvement through surveys and interviews.

Capacity and Efficacy

Definition and Importance

Capacity refers to the skills, resources, and structures that enable effective teaching and learning. Efficacy is the belief in one's ability to impact student outcomes. Effective school and district leaders structure learning opportunities that build capacity and collective efficacy among teachers and staff. Leaders must effectively manage talent to ensure that educators are supported, developed, and held to a high standard. The evidence base on capacity building and collective efficacy is drawn from the research of Hattie and the evidence base for professional learning is informed by the research of Darling-Hammond, Short, and Hirsch.

Alignment to 5Essentials

Capacity and Efficacy are aligned with all the 5Essentials for school improvement. Ambitious Instruction includes Academic Press, which measures the extent to which teachers expect students to do their best and meet academic demands. Effective Leaders includes the core measures of Teacher Influence, which ensures that teachers have a voice in decisions regarding school policies and practices, and Instructional Leadership, which ensures that leaders set high standards for teaching and student learning. Collaborative Teachers includes the core measure of Collective Responsibility, which is similar to collective teacher efficacy in that teachers have a sense of responsibility for student achievement, school improvement, and professional growth. Collaborative Teachers also include School Commitment, in which teachers demonstrate commitment to the school, and Quality of Professional Development, in which leaders work to increase the capacity and efficacy of teachers by ensuring that professional learning is rigorous and focused on student learning. Under Supportive Environment, the core measures of School-Wide Future Orientation and Expectations for Post-Secondary Education are aligned with the key drivers of Capacity and Efficacy. Finally, Involved Families includes the core measure of Parent Influence on Decision-Making, which ensures that the school has created opportunities for families to participate in developing academic programs and influencing school curricula (University of Chicago, 2023).

Evidence Base

Richard Elmore introduced the idea of reciprocal accountability and capacity in relationships. Leaders have the responsibility to ensure that the people they are holding accountable for performing work have the capacity to do it. By providing the needed support to educators for delivering effective instruction, effective leaders help educators to increase their ownership and engagement in their teaching (Elmore, 2000).

Effective leaders build capacity by investing in people first. As school leaders across the country face challenges including learning recovery, teacher shortages, and fiscal cliffs, they must focus their investments on what makes the most positive impact on their students, and that is investing in hiring, training, and retaining great teachers (Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, 2021).

Collective teacher efficacy is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018). The belief that educators have in their capacity to improve student outcomes is known as collective teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Hattie's research (2016, 2018) has found that collective teacher efficacy is the greatest factor influencing student achievement, with an effect size three times that of socioeconomic status. A high level of collective teacher efficacy is manifested in high expectations for all students, a laser focus on student learning, and a sense of collective accountability to move the needle on student achievement.

Clear routines for screening, diagnostic assessments, intervention delivery, and progress monitoring can operationalize collective efficacy when they are embedded in coherent systems and supported by leadership and professional learning. Allensworth (2025) offers practical guidance for selecting useful metrics, designing continuous-improvement routines, and aligning early-warning indicators with MTSS so that data use strengthens trust and shared responsibility. Complementary evidence from the Learning Policy Institute underscores that coherent, collaborative, and sustained professional learning is associated with improvements in instruction and student outcomes, reinforcing the 5Essentials focus on ambitious instruction and strong professional communities (Allensworth, 2025; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017).

Effective leaders provide ongoing professional learning for teachers to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills needed to deliver high-quality instruction. Effective professional learning changes teachers' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practices, which builds capacity and leads to measurable growth in student outcomes. This type of professional learning is content-focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, offers feedback and reflection, and is of a sustained duration (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017).

Leaders invest in professional learning for themselves and their teachers that includes structural design features like collective participation in which teachers practice and reflect on the curriculum, models of learning that evolve from initial use to ongoing support to building capacity, and a considered use of time. These elements of effective curriculum-based PL must exist in a system with strong leadership, adequate resources, and coherence towards common goals (Short & Hirsh, 2020).

One of the most impactful ways that school and system leaders can advance their teaching and learning agenda and increase the capacity and efficacy of their teachers is through the selection and implementation of curriculum. When implementing standards-aligned curriculum, both technical and adaptive leadership is needed to address the problems of practice that prevent teachers from effective implementation. Effective leaders have adaptive attributes that allow them to strategically mobilize people, resources, policies, and procedures in support of a clear and consistent vision for instructional change that will enhance the capacity and efficacy of the teaching staff (Pak et al., 2020).

When leaders select high-quality instructional materials, they must understand that the selection of the curriculum is only the start of the implementation process. These leaders study the instructional materials to understand the conditions that are necessary for an effective implementation. They figure out how the instructional

materials can replace some of what teachers are already doing in their classrooms (e.g., using curriculum-embedded assessments instead of outside tests) and ensure that teachers are both provided with and given the time and space to take advantage of curriculum-based professional learning focused on implementing the new curriculum (Freitag, 2023).

Effective leaders understand that data is essential to building capacity and efficacy by providing insights about student progress, tailoring instruction to the needs of each student, and monitoring continuous improvement. Educators can use data to make instructional changes aimed at improving student achievement, such as: prioritizing instructional time, targeting additional individual instruction for students who are struggling with particular topics, more easily identifying individual students' strengths and instructional interventions that can help students continue to progress, gauging the instructional effectiveness of classroom lessons, refining instructional methods, and examining schoolwide data to consider whether and how to adapt the curriculum based on information about students' strengths and weaknesses (Hamilton et al., 2009).

The sixth PSEL standard is Professional Capacity of School Personnel, which highlights the importance of providing ongoing professional learning for teachers and other school personnel. Effective leaders recruit, hire, support, develop, and retain effective and caring teachers and other professional staff and encourage collaboration to enhance collective teacher efficacy. Leaders plan for and manage staff turnover, and provide opportunities for effective mentoring of new teachers. They develop teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and practice through differentiated opportunities for learning and growth, guided by an understanding of adult learning and development. They deliver actionable feedback about instruction and other professional practice through valid, research-anchored systems of supervision and evaluation to support the development of teachers' and staff members' knowledge, skills, and practice (NPBEA, 2015).

In Practice

A classroom that exemplifies Capacity & Efficacy has teachers that are well-prepared and have the requisite Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) to implement high quality instructional materials (HQIM), are given time, space, and opportunity to pursue professional learning (including coaching), use formative assessment data to differentiate and personalize instruction, and students that believe they can achieve because their learning is scaffolded and they are given opportunities to pursue personalized learning paths. Teachers use data to differentiate instruction and reflect on practice. Teachers use brief, high-leverage progress measures to check learning trajectories every one to two weeks and adjust Tier 1 instruction first, reserving targeted interventions for clearly diagnosed needs. Teachers consistently use a wide range of advanced instructional strategies and are confident in their ability to meet diverse student needs. Students demonstrate autonomy in their learning, employing strategies like peer teaching, project-based learning, and critical self-reflection. Teachers take on mentorship roles, supporting newer colleagues in building capacity and efficacy. Leadership opportunities arise for teachers, such as leading professional development sessions or facilitating PLCs. Students are fully engaged and take ownership of their learning. They confidently apply knowledge, problem-solve collaboratively, and seek challenges. Teachers and students regularly assess and reflect on their progress, celebrating successes while identifying areas for further growth. Capacity and efficacy are sustained through a culture of learning, adaptation, and celebration.

A school that exemplifies Capacity and Efficacy has a shared vision for successful teaching and learning that is the focus of everyone in the school, staff that engage in professional learning focused on building capacity for improving instruction and student outcomes, and leaders that provide staff with opportunities, resources, and time to build capacity. Leaders provide coaching and time for collaborative inquiry. Coaches and lead teachers ensure that intervention programs, scheduling, and fidelity checks are easy to learn and implement so that collective efficacy grows from repeated instructional success rather than compliance. Professional development becomes embedded in the school's culture, with teachers routinely engaging in self-directed learning and leadership opportunities. Teachers feel empowered to take ownership of their practice and mentor others, fostering a growth-oriented environment. Leadership becomes distributed, with teacher leaders taking on key roles in driving professional learning and instructional improvement schoolwide. Collaboration evolves into a deeply ingrained norm, with staff routinely working

across grade levels and departments to address school-wide goals. Successes are celebrated and shared across the school, creating momentum and reinforcing collective efficacy. Data analysis and reflection become routine, with teachers and leaders confident in using data to inform decisions and strategies effectively. Resources are allocated with equity in mind, ensuring all classrooms and teachers have what they need to succeed.

A district that exemplifies Capacity & Efficacy implements initiatives focused on building the capacity of school leaders and teachers, invests in professional learning for both school leaders and teachers to develop their efficacy in delivering high-quality instruction, allocates resources equitably to help schools build capacity, and a clear, consistent vision that is aligned with measurable and achievable goals. District leaders develop systems for talent development and instructional leadership pipelines and scale proven capacity-building practices. This includes ensuring all schools adopt and adapt strategies that have shown success in pilot implementations. District professional learning sequences are structured around screening, diagnostics, intervention delivery, and progress monitoring, and are aligned to curriculum and framed as capacity-building for ambitious instruction, not as a separate initiative. Resources and support are allocated equitably to guarantee all schools have the means to achieve high efficacy. Teachers and leaders are empowered to take ownership of professional growth. Leadership pipelines are established to develop the next generation of school and district leaders. Communities are engaged more deeply, with partnerships formed to provide additional learning opportunities for staff. Capacity-building becomes a core part of the district's culture. Regularly updated professional development, ongoing self-assessment, and a commitment to shared learning ensure that efficacy remains high. Districts celebrate successes, recognizing schools and individuals and creating momentum for sustained progress.

Evidence to Collect

Research can investigate the extent to which the school system is implementing instructional systems that lead to measurable growth by performing an analysis of the curriculum, professional learning, and assessment programs that are implemented in the school. Schools should have instructional systems that are driven by data, and that data will be used effectively by teachers and leaders. Researchers can analyze MTSS fidelity artifacts (screening calendars, entry and exit criteria, and progress-monitoring rates) alongside professional learning participation and classroom implementation checks to assess whether capacity-building translates into consistent Tier 1 gains before expanding to targeted supports. Surveys and interviews can assess the degree of reciprocal accountability in relationships and whether educators believe they have the capacity to do the work for which they are being held accountable. Surveys can also evaluate levels and growth of teacher self-efficacy. Research that focuses on student outcomes and the instructional decisions that have resulted in those outcomes can assess whether this process has been effective.

Guskey's model for the evaluation of professional learning provides a template for data collection and research to assess the ability of professional learning to enhance teachers' capacity and efficacy. Research should collect data on educators' reactions, educators' learning, organization support and change, educators' use of new knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2000). Research seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning would benefit from considering a range of student outcomes—not only standardized tests, but measures of social-emotional learning, learning conditions, learning mindsets, learning strategies, and motivation as well. There is also a need for more robust observational research of professional learning that connects observations of the professional learning experience (workshop, coaching, or PLC) to observations of changes in instructional practices and student behaviors.

Conclusion

The integration of Safety and Trust, Communication and Collaboration, and Capacity and Efficacy into school systems is not only supported by research but also essential for sustainable improvement. These drivers, when aligned with the UChicago 5Essentials and the existing research evidence base, create a coherent and powerful framework for school success. Taken together, the 5Essentials create the enabling conditions under which systems like MTSS can operate coherently and turn data and interventions into coordinated, trustworthy routines rather than isolated initiatives. This paper has described that alignment and highlighted both seminal and more recent research studies that have demonstrated the importance of the key drivers to school improvement. Leaders can draw upon this evidence base as they consider the curriculum, professional learning, and assessment systems that will lead to success in their schools. This paper provides exemplars of how the key drivers look in practice at the classroom, school, and district level. Leaders can also find ideas for collecting data and evidence that will help them determine how effectively their plans, programs, and services are aligned to the key drivers. As leaders work to improve Safety and Trust, Communication and Collaboration, and Capacity and Efficacy in their classrooms, schools, and districts, we hope that they will contribute to the burgeoning evidence base and share their successes with others to improve outcomes for all students.

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