

School Redesign: Partnerships that Fit

Increasingly, educators are embracing an expanded definition of student success and looking for ways to realize this vision for their students. Too often, educators feel alone in this journey, unaware that innovative, equity-focused solutions already exist that could meet their needs. The first challenge is for these parties to find each other. The second is for them to determine whether they are a good fit.

At NewSchools, we have witnessed how the right innovation can have a profoundly positive effect on educators who are eager to redesign their classrooms and schools. That's why in 2017 we began investing in what we call "model providers."





Model providers are organizations that partner with a school or system to improve learning outcomes for a whole school or meaningful portion of it. They offer a bundle of integrated tools and resources (a "model"), plus implementation support. By working alongside educators to implement the model, they are able to share responsibility for results.

We believe there is great promise in supporting model providers and helping them scale their impact.

Organizations consider the model provider path because it is a compelling way to scale their impact. However, they must be deliberate about how they pursue growth. First, it does not make sense to scale an ineffective model. A model needs to demonstrate consistently positive, equitable results at a small scale before being considered for scale. Second, successful implementations need the right conditions. One consistent pattern we observed: While model providers often want to grow by working with many types of schools, they cannot be effective in all situations. Their success depends not only on their model, but also with whom they partner.

With the support of a strong partnership, a model can create lasting impact.

We use the term "model provider" to refer to an organization that does the following:

-  Partners with schools and systems to improve learning outcomes for a whole school or a meaningful portion, such as a full content area for a grade band (e.g., middle school math, K-8 social-emotional learning).
-  Offers a bundle of integrated resources, tools and supports designed to help schools reach those outcomes.
-  Provides schools with implementation and change management support, either as a direct service or through trusted third-party partners.
-  Sets ambitious goals for student outcomes and shares responsibility for results.
-  Establishes connections among its network of partner schools to share ideas with one another and continuously improve the model.

[READ ABOUT NEWSCHOOLS' INVESTMENT FOCUS ON MODEL PROVIDERS.](#)

Partnering for Change

'Partnership' may seem an odd term for the relationship between a model provider and a school or network. After all, with traditional product adoptions, the vendor treats the school as a customer. It provides educators with the product, offers some initial training and supplemental materials, and then leaves them on their own to work out the details of implementation.

The model provider-school relationship is not a transactional relationship; it is far more involved. The implementation of a model (when done well) requires communication, collaboration, and mutual accountability. A model provider is not merely selling a product or replicating a program -- they are assisting a school community in the process to reimagine itself. For this level of change, the two must truly become partners.

In a paper we co-authored with Transcend Education and Summit Public Schools, we identified a set of conditions that seem to have the most influence on a community's readiness to redesign their schools. [These "5 Cs" \(conviction, coalition, clarity, capacity, and culture\)](#) can also be applied to the conditions required for a strong model provider-school partnership. But these do not specifically address what is needed for a productive relationship between a school and an outside provider. Our review of the literature uncovered a relevant piece from 2002 called ["Guide to Working with Model Providers"](#) from the Comprehensive School Reform era. Though elements of this piece still resonate, others are less relevant today.

So we took the discussion to our model providers and other innovators -- asking about their experiences in securing and working with partner sites to pilot their offerings. Most of what we discovered focused on what was needed at the school or network level to ensure a model's best chance of successful implementation. We call these **Partnership Readiness Conditions**.



[LEARN MORE ABOUT MODEL PROVIDERS IN OUR ARTICLE, "MODEL PROVIDERS: NEW PATHWAYS TO INNOVATION."](#)

What are the Optimal Pre-Conditions?

If the key to a model's success is in the partnership, then emphasis should be placed on the compatibility of the model and school. Initial buy-in is important, but it is not enough to ensure that the relationship will thrive. A school community may be very motivated to adopt a new model, but if the current ecosystem is not a good fit, adoption will be far more challenging--often at great cost to both the school and the model provider.

To evaluate this initial compatibility, the model provider and school community should mutually assess the **Partnership Readiness Conditions** -- those qualities within the school ecosystem that are required for the model to be implemented successfully. This includes many of the variables of the school's ecosystem, including a school or network's leadership, mission or vision, teacher investment and readiness, and professional culture.

Identifying Partnership Readiness Conditions is an important part of a model provider's journey to find the right partners. They also aid a school or network in assessing their own readiness (and willingness) to

commit to the adoption of a new model, especially one that may cause significant changes to their ecosystem.

Now, if a school or network does not meet all the readiness conditions established by the model provider, it doesn't mean the partnership (and implementation of the model) is destined to fail. However, it is a warning sign that both parties should take seriously. We have found that when these conditions are not met, the model provider must expend considerably more in resources, energy, and time to make it work. Rather than going forward with a partnership in this case, a better option may be to change strategy or revisit the partnership at a later date. A school team that does not feel that it has the capacity to make the necessary changes might also consider finding another partner that could help them improve in those areas before re-engaging with the model provider.

[READ A DETAILED OVERVIEW OF HOW TO CLARIFY YOUR OWN PRCS](#)

Identifying, Assessing, and Leveraging Partnership Readiness Conditions

Through our work with model providers, we identified five important observations about Partnership Readiness Conditions:

- 1. The impact of a model depends on the right conditions.**
- 2. Effective leadership and a growth-oriented staff culture are essentials.**
- 3. Model providers and potential partners should conduct an objective and cooperative evaluation of readiness conditions.**
- 4. The evaluation should inform a final decision and lay the groundwork for a productive partnership.**
- 5. Even after launching a partnership, model providers and their partners must continue to invest in and nurture their relationship.**

We will discuss each observation in detail, explaining how model providers and their school partners can best leverage the readiness conditions to select and maintain their partnerships. To demonstrate how organizations may apply these observations to their own partnerships, we will also provide examples from two organizations that are pursuing model provider strategies -- Achievement First and EL Education.

These observations are derived from our work with model providers, but we suspect they are relevant beyond that context and hope these lessons might be useful in any situation where a school or network engages in a deep, sustained partnership with a third party.

Case Studies: About Navigator and EL Education



Achievement First

Achievement First (“AF”) was founded on the belief that all children—regardless of race, zip code, or economic status—deserve access to a great education. The network currently includes 37 high-performing K-12 public charter schools spanning New York, Rhode Island and Connecticut, and an open-source and partnership division, AF Accelerate, that shares the resources and strategies that helped AF students achieve success.

Achievement First began as a school and later grew to develop a model provider initiative, “Navigator. It supports district and charter schools interested in improving academic achievement by adopting AF’s open-source curriculum and instructional practices. Navigator provides schools with a comprehensive set of instructional materials, scope-and-sequences, unit plans, and assessments, paired with intensive coaching for elementary and middle school math and middle school English language arts.

Navigator successfully scaled their impact to include a partnership with 62 schools and networks, supporting achievement gains for more than 20,000 students. The team will partner with 150 schools and networks within five years and incorporate additional innovative elements as they expand.

Navigator refined their approach to partnering with schools over several years of experience. What they learned ties directly to the model’s offerings: their partners need consistent coaching support on instructional leadership strategies over multiple years to set them up for long-term success.



EL Education

EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning) is an established model provider with more than 25 years of experience growing and sustaining both a network of 160+ school partners and a K-8 English language arts literacy curriculum used by innovative districts across the country. EL Education’s comprehensive model supports schools in realizing an expanded definition of student success by integrating character growth with knowledge and skill mastery.

Central to EL Education’s success is their deep understanding of the role of partnership in the model provider journey. About 10 years ago, EL Education assessed the performance of schools in their network and noticed a range in school quality and consistency. One cause of this variation could be traced to the success conditions at the school level. In fact, these conditions predicted, with startling consistency, the fidelity of implementation of the EL model and student level impacts.

Positive change occurred with EL’s increased attention to Partnership Readiness Conditions at the outset, a willingness to turn down partnership opportunities when success conditions were not sufficient, and the ongoing monitoring of these conditions over time.

Observation 1:

The impact of a model depends on the right conditions.

A well-designed model does not guarantee success. As stated earlier, the performance of a model depends on its compatibility with the school ecosystem and the readiness of the school to effectively adopt new structures and strategies. Therefore, prior to entering into new partnerships, a model provider should reflect on the specific conditions or variables necessary to optimize the model's chances of success. **The pre-partnership reflection should include:**

1. Identifying the unit of change

The *unit of change* is the element of the educational system a model is ultimately trying to impact. This could be a single classroom, a school, or an entire network of schools. The unit of change directly impacts the identification of Partnership Readiness Conditions (see #3 below). For instance, if the unit of change is an individual classroom, the support of leadership is important, but not as essential as it is if the unit of change is the entire school.

2. Creating a partner profile

A *partner profile* is an objective set of criteria-- such as grade level, geographic location and subject area-- that a model provider uses to target the kinds of schools it considers a good fit. For example, a model provider might want to target schools within their own area (the Northeast, for instance) that are actively seeking a new middle school math solution.

3. Determining Partnership Readiness Conditions

Before forging into new partnerships, the model provider should create its Partnership Readiness Conditions. These can be informed by previous partnerships, if applicable, or intuition if they are just getting started. Then, it should differentiate between the non-negotiable and the "nice-to-have." Model providers should focus on the most essential traits-- making their list of conditions as simple and clear as possible. These essential Partnership Readiness Conditions may address both structural variables (e.g. professional development calendar, budget availability, instructional leadership positions) as well as human variables (e.g. leadership effectiveness, staff culture, change management).

Once established, these conditions should be clearly articulated so potential partners can assess their ability and willingness to meet them. Establishing and communicating these readiness conditions upfront greatly increases the likelihood of a compatible partnership -- which, in turn, reduces the likelihood of squandered resources, inconsistent implementation and poor results.

The Dynamic Nature of Partnership Readiness Conditions

Partnership Readiness Conditions should not be viewed as inflexible rules-- forever governing the model provider's partnerships. Instead, these conditions should be fluid and evolve as the model scales. In the earliest stages, a model provider typically seeks partnerships with early adopters who are eager to pilot a new model. At this stage, partnership readiness conditions may include a willingness to collaborate, previous experience with early adoption, and flexibility with timelines. After this initial piloting and with later iterations, the model provider may change the readiness requirements to emphasize implementation integrity and stability.

Case Studies: Determining Readiness Conditions



Achievement First

AF’s current “unit of change” for the Navigator model is K-8 math and 5-8 literature. AF partners equally with individual schools and districts or networks, though they seek to drive change down to the individual classroom level. Therefore, their “unit of change” may differ from their “unit of partnership,” but in these instances, they are able to leverage system-wide structures to support school and classroom improvement.

AF’s readiness conditions for Navigator include:

- Committed and effective leaders.
- Receptiveness to observation and feedback.
- A staff culture that exhibits a growth mindset.
- Openness to and adequate time for coaching.
- A school culture that is not a barrier to instruction.



EL Education

In the work of their network of schools, EL Education identified individual schools as their “unit of change.” They believe change happens at a school level; therefore, school leaders and teachers must be supported in their pursuit of school redesign.

EL Education’s readiness conditions include:

- Leadership effectiveness.
- Schoolwide equity focus.
- Shared leadership structures.
- Positive staff culture.
- District/network support.
- Site-level autonomy to innovate.

Observation 2:

Effective leadership and a growth-oriented staff culture are essentials.

Partnership Readiness Conditions may differ from model to model, but there are some important constants. Leadership and staff culture, for instance, are consistently cited as the most important readiness factors. According to our analysis, these traits are absolute “must-haves” of any successful partnership.

Given, there is no perfect school or system. Even high-performing schools may have some disenchanted teachers; even the best leaders occasionally make poor decisions. While perfection is not the goal, the school culture and leadership must reflect one of stability and health in order to effectively partner with a model provider.

Effective Leadership

For a school or network to sustain a strong partnership and strategically implement an innovative model, there must be stable and effective leadership at all levels, regardless of the model’s unit of change. Classroom-level change models need school-wide support and school-level change models need commitment from system-level leaders.

When leaders are champions for equity and deeply believe in a model’s ability to improve outcomes for all students, their commitment is infectious.

Effective leaders are important to a model’s success because of their ability to advocate for change, engage a diverse range of stakeholders in a new vision and address barriers to implementation. Further, strong leaders are able to prioritize actions and resources, set sustainable pacing objectives, and persist through the inherent challenges of school redesign.

A Growth-Oriented Staff Culture

The implementation of any model will struggle without the engagement and commitment of those staff members responsible for its implementation. We have found that schools with a positive staff culture - one that exhibits high levels of trust between adults and a commitment to boldly pursue equitable outcomes for students - offer the best conditions for a model to thrive. Conversely, when the staff exhibits apathy, disengagement or hostility, they are less apt to respond positively to change, engage in the adoption or collaborate with others in the model’s success. A staff member who is *mandated* to adopt a model will do it far less effectively than one who does it because they want to.

While partnering with a school that already has a positive staff culture is ideal, the model providers we work with admit that many prospective partners still have work to do in this area. It may take time to establish the kind of high-functioning culture that will allow their model to thrive. However, model providers generally find that their baseline requirement is a staff that has a sense of possibility - a *growth mindset*.

Staff members who are committed to growth, both individually and collectively, are willing to take risks, expend extra effort and pursue continuous improvement. They embrace an evidence-based system to evaluate their efforts and respond proactively to the results. For them, constructive feedback is not viewed as a personal affront, but as a way to improve and innovate on behalf of the students.

Case Studies: Leadership and Culture as Readiness Conditions



Achievement First

Early pilots revealed how important school culture and leadership were in determining the impact of the Navigator model, which is why their partner readiness conditions focus heavily on these traits.

The readiness conditions for Navigator center on receptiveness to observation, feedback, and coaching because those qualities are integral to the Navigator model. When AF partners with a school, routine coaching is a core component of the program. If the proposed scope of the partnership is too extensive for the partner, AF will work with them to determine a more appropriate scope (e.g. number of schools or grades).



EL Education

EL Education's Partnership Readiness Conditions emphasize effective leadership and positive staff culture. EL Education requires that school leaders

- Demonstrate the readiness to lead complex change.
- Are committed to creating equitable outcomes for all students.
- Share leadership across a team that supports a partnership with EL Education.

EL requires that, "The staff generally exhibits a healthy, professional culture with the basic levels of trust necessary to engage in collective improvement."

Observation 3:

Model providers and potential partners should conduct an objective and cooperative evaluation of readiness conditions.

Creating a clear set of readiness conditions is a powerful first step in preparing for a partnership, but this preparation will have little use if the readiness conditions are not assessed in a structured and consistent way. It is one thing to note that a growth-oriented staff culture is an important condition, but how will that be assessed, and how is that condition weighted against all other conditions?

Therefore, the evaluation of the Partnership Readiness Conditions is as important as the conditions themselves. A model provider should focus on the following:

Creating a clear process. Model providers should outline and communicate a clear process for assessing the readiness conditions. This includes determining how, when, and with whom the evaluation will take place, as well as the most effective way to use any evaluative tools.

The intensity of the assessment process and the timeframe needed to conduct an analysis varies by model. Some assessments may be conducted remotely through virtual conversations, webinars and seminars, while others may be more immersive with multiple site visits, ongoing collaboration and deep staff engagement. Similarly, some evaluations may take a couple of weeks, while others may be conducted over many months.

Using the right tools. Model providers should consider the most effective and objective tools for measuring each condition. In some instances, it may be beneficial to use multiple tools to assess a single condition. Some tools that may be useful include:

- A written application process
- Site visits
- Classroom observations
- Interviews with key stakeholders
- Surveys of educators, students, and/or families
- Performance tasks

Assigning a rubric or set of standards. Using the conditions as a starting place, the model provider should create a rubric or set of standards to assess the data obtained in the evaluation. Establishing these standards beforehand will allow the model provider and school or network to jointly engage in an objective analysis, using the same, predetermined criteria.

With the right tools and process in place, a model provider and a prospective school or network partner have what they need to conduct a thorough evaluation to determine whether the model is the right fit in this situation.



Case Studies: Evaluating Readiness Conditions



Achievement First

AF has developed a multi-step evaluation process for prospective Navigator schools that provides opportunities for both parties to evaluate compatibility.

The process and tools they use include:

- A written application.
- Phone interviews and site visits to assess leadership commitment and effectiveness, observation and feedback practices and growth mindset.
- Classroom observations and debriefing with site leaders to simulate the coaching process that partners will engage in once they are in the program.
- A “mutual fit exploration” that includes an in-depth overview of the expected commitment and responsibility of both the Navigator Program (weekly coaching, monthly site visits, monthly virtual and self-directed professional development) and the partner (weekly observation of teachers, uploading observation videos, and tracking interim data). This clarity gives potential partners the opportunity to self-select out of the program during the application process if they do not think it will be a fit for their school.



EL Education

EL Education has an extensive five-month partnership development process that begins after an initial vetting of potential partners (held annually). Readiness conditions are evaluated through a four to six day site visit in which EL provides staff with information about the EL Education model to ensure opportunities to build commitment.

During this time, EL staff members evaluate each of the following:

- Staff culture
- Teacher-leadership interactions
- Commitment to equity
- The climate of risk taking and innovation
- The openness of adults to feedback

At the conclusion of the process, EL Education asks faculty members to complete a survey about their readiness and to vote on the model adoption. At least 80% of the faculty must vote in favor

Observation 4:

The evaluation should inform a final decision and lay the groundwork.

After the model provider and school analyzed data collected during the evaluation process, they must decide if the other is a good fit and whether it's the right time to partner.

When the answer is clear. The decision to partner may be an easy one, with both parties agreeing to move directly into a full partnership. In other cases, after a period of exploration, the two may conclude that they just are not compatible. This decision may be difficult-- both parties have sacrificed time and resources to get to the evaluation stage, and there may be political implications to consider. However, it is far better to make this difficult decision at this point rather than after a partnership has been formalized. A failed partnership can be costly and demoralizing on both sides. For model providers, a challenging partnership can also draw resources away from other implementations, and compromise their success, too.

When the situation is more complicated. There may be some situations in which even the best designed and administered evaluations yield results that are difficult to interpret. The results may not confidently assure a model provider of a school's readiness to partner, or a school may not meet the criteria for readiness *right now*, but

perhaps there is still great potential for a future partnership.

In situations that do not point to a clear yes or no decision, the model provider and school should work together, using the rich data obtained in the evaluation to make decisions about next steps. This may include the following:

- Making special arrangements or adjustments to create time to address concerns.
- Rescoping the partnership; for example, reducing the number of grade levels or classrooms in the adoption, making changes to professional development support, or slowing scale-up.
- Suggesting a planning year in which the model provider works with the school (collaborating, offering training) to address insufficient conditions before moving forward with full model implementation.

If the two parties do decide to move forward with the partnership (whether special arrangements are made or not), the information they have gathered through the evaluation process will be useful as they begin implementing the model and continue to nurture their relationship.

Case Studies: Making a Final Decision



Achievement First

Rescoping the partnership

Teacher observations and coaching are integral to the Navigator model. Therefore, if a partner does not have the staffing capacity to support coaching at the level they require, AF will work with partners to rescope the partnership. For instance, if a building has a low teacher-to-coach ratio, AF may reduce the scope of the implementation to fewer grades or classrooms to ensure all teachers have an appropriate level of support.



EL Education

Knowing the importance of educator buy-in, EL Education requires that at least 80% of teachers vote in favor of adopting the model.

Making the decision to say "no"

EL Education has learned through experience that sometimes it is necessary to "pass" on partnerships that do not meet the conditions for readiness. In these instances, both parties will offer direct feedback about the areas that need improvement with the intention of re-engaging (or re-assessing) later.

Observation 5:

After launching a partnership, model providers and their partners must continue to nurture their relationship.

Schools have a complex, dynamic ecosystem built from many variables. These variables naturally change over time--teachers retire, new leaders are hired, school enrollment ebbs and flows. And, of course, the adoption of an innovative new model has a profound impact on the school or network. The model provider-school partnership is equally dynamic.

Change is natural and necessary, but it can also be problematic-- especially if the variables that change affect those conditions required for partnership readiness. For this reason, the ongoing monitoring of partnership conditions needs to be built into the model provider-school relationship.

Just as a model provider works with the school to develop routines and structures to continually monitor the model's implementation (Is it being implemented with fidelity? Did new challenges arise? What is the student impact?), they should also work together to regularly monitor the school's conditions and provide early intervention if essential conditions

are no longer optimal. These conditions should be evaluated at least once a year, but quarterly check-ins are recommended. Evaluation methods and tools at this stage may be similar to those used in the initial evaluation. They may include:

- In-person check-ins with school and systems leaders
- Surveys
- Focus groups
- Team observations

One of the biggest challenges occurs when there is a change in building or system-level leadership. When this happens, the "effective leadership" readiness condition must be reassessed, the new leadership may need to be educated on the model, and the terms of partnership may need to be reinstated. Additional check-ins and evaluations may need to be performed to ensure a continued alignment of vision, resources and priorities.



Case Studies: Nurturing Relationships



Achievement First

AF is able to evaluate the conditions at their Navigator partner sites both directly and indirectly through the extensive coaching support and progress monitoring of data that are part of the model's offerings. This support includes the following tools and assessments:

- Weekly review of teacher observation data.
- Interim assessments to gauge student learning.
- Leader and teacher surveys completed in late fall.
- Skip-level meetings two times per year with Navigator Program leaders and site implementers to gather feedback and address challenges.
- 2x2 feedback sessions between coaches and partners. In these sessions, a Navigator coach and partner each provide two pieces of positive feedback (what the other is doing well) and two pieces of constructive feedback (what the other can do to improve).



EL Education

EL Education prioritizes routine evaluation of partnership readiness conditions. In the event conditions deteriorate after the launch of a partnership, EL develops a Partnership Success Plan that addresses those areas of need that require attention. Depending on the area of need, a school or network's Partnership Success Plan might include any of the following:

- A preliminary conversation regarding a model provider's findings and evidence that the partnership is not on track.
- Mutually agreed-upon benchmarks and indicators to address areas of concern.
- A documented, time-bound plan to work toward critical areas of concern.
- Checkpoints to review evidence of progress and to make decisions about next steps to address the conditions for school improvement (including at times the challenging decision to exit the partnership).

Closing Thoughts

Having a great model and a willing school or network is not enough for success. The two organizations must connect on a deeper level. That's what makes a partnership a great fit. And when well-matched organizations form a strong partnership, great things are possible. Our work with model providers over the last several years strengthened our belief in the value of partnership. We have seen what is possible when a model provider and educators work together to redesign a school, aligned in the mission of supporting students in achieving the knowledge, skills and habits they need for a lifetime of success.

But to achieve this level of impact, there must be compatibility. The model provider must know which Partnership Readiness Conditions - such as effective leadership and a growth-oriented staff culture -

are required for successful implementation, and they must work closely with the school or network to evaluate and cultivate them. Only through collaborative, honest reflection can the two sides truly partner to improve opportunities and outcomes for all students.

Our hope is that these observations provide a useful framework for model providers and educators alike to consider as they explore school redesign partnerships. And while our focus is on partnerships between model providers and schools, we believe these lessons can be applied to any kind of strategic partnership. After all, as the African proverb says, *"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."*

