

What Works: Lessons from High-Performing Schools

A Building Better Schools Resource

For nearly 30 years, NewSchools has partnered with visionary education leaders and entrepreneurs creating new possibilities for students. Through that work, we've seen that schools don't have to choose between academic excellence, students' well-being, and innovation — they can deliver across all three.

This synthesis shares lessons from six high-performing schools featured in our Building Better Schools series. It's designed for educators, funders, and policymakers looking for evidence of what's working in public schools today and practical guidance to strengthen their own efforts.

Across these schools, students are exceeding academic expectations, gaining the skills and confidence to pursue college and careers, and learning in communities where they feel seen and supported. Their stories reveal concrete ways schools can align focus, culture, and community partnership to deliver results that last.



NewSchools

Featured Schools



[Discovery Polytech
Early College High School](#)
(Springfield, Massachusetts)



[Valor Collegiate Academies](#)
(Nashville, Tennessee)



[La Promesa High School](#)
(Houston, Texas)



[Yu Ming Charter Schools](#)
(Oakland and San Leandro, California)



[University High School](#)
(Memphis, Tennessee)



[New School San Francisco](#)
(San Francisco, California)

[Visit our website for full case studies.](#)

Lesson 1

Focus Drives Excellence

Clarity of purpose and coherent design lead to lasting academic results.

When schools try to innovate everywhere at once, focus fractures and coherence fades. The schools in our series took the opposite approach: they chose where to innovate and where to adopt proven practices. When a school identifies its core innovation and aligns hiring, curriculum, scheduling, and resources around it, excellence follows.

Example Highlights



Valor Collegiate Academies

Adopted Achievement First's academic curriculum while focusing innovation on its "Compass" framework for human development. This clarity of focus allowed Valor to maintain high expectations and a deeply supportive school culture. Valor now ranks in the top 5% of Tennessee schools for performance and posts ACT scores in the 99th percentile of all open-enrollment high schools.



Discovery Polytech Early College High School

Focused its innovation on integrating high school, college, and career experiences through ten career pathways. Within two years, 85% of students passed their college courses, with 82% of credits transferable, outperforming the average community college student.



University High School

Developed eight career pathways such as entrepreneurship, public health, and engineering while adopting proven practices like AP and dual enrollment through the University of Memphis. The results: 100% of sophomores in dual enrollment earned college credit and 78% of AP students earned college credit.

Lesson 2

Family Partnership Requires Structure and Resources

Authentic engagement is built, not scheduled.

Traditional engagement efforts like newsletters, family nights, and occasional surveys rarely build lasting partnerships. The schools we studied created systems that made family partnership ongoing, reciprocal, and resourced. They shared decision-making power, employed family liaisons, and designed feedback systems that strengthened trust over time.

Example Highlights



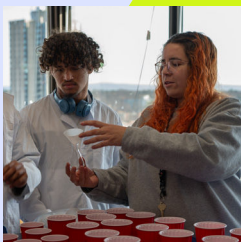
Yu Ming Charter School

Hired a Family Engagement & Outreach Manager, launched family affinity groups, and ensured access to tutoring and technology. These structures kept families connected and influential in school decisions, contributing to Yu Ming being among the top 1% of California schools, with families rating it favorably for culture and belonging.



New School San Francisco

Built deeper engagement through its Home & School Council and a “Family Education Series” that helped caregivers understand the school’s inquiry-based model and support learning at home. Multi-channel communication through ParentSquare and WhatsApp kept families informed and responsive.



Discovery Polytech Early College High School

Partnered with families as co-navigators of early college, offering workshops that explained how earning college credits in high school can lead to higher-wage careers. Families co-created individualized college-and-career roadmaps and reported greater confidence navigating higher education, with some parents enrolling in college courses themselves.

Lesson 3

Excellence Requires Broader Measures and Longer Timelines

Growth unfolds at different speeds; measurement should too.

When accountability revolves solely around annual tests, slower-developing outcomes such as belonging, language growth, and habits of success often go unseen. High-performing schools align measures to the real rhythms of learning, sequencing courses and supports to reflect how growth unfolds over time.

Example Highlights



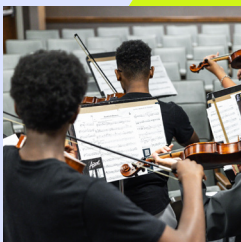
La Promesa High School

Discovered that students could master rigorous content even as they developed English proficiency. In the same year that 86% passed Biology, 75% passed U.S. History, and 98% met Algebra standards, only 13% of students advanced one English-proficiency level. This insight prompted a redesign: Biology shifted to 10th grade, Environmental Science to 9th, allowing more time for language development before high-stakes testing.



New School San Francisco

Aligned what it measured to how students actually learn. Individual Learning Plans tracked academic, inquiry, and social-emotional goals, providing a fuller picture of growth. In 2024, the school was recognized as high-performing by the State of California, with 72% of students proficient in reading (54% districtwide) and 68% in math (46% districtwide). Teachers celebrated growth across competencies such as self management, relationship skills, and inquiry-based thinking, showing that broader measures could coexist with positive academic results.



University High School

Elevated joy as an organizational priority alongside achievement after seeing that relentless pressure created student stress. The team began monitoring well-being with the same rigor applied to academic data. Students continued to perform among the top schools in Tennessee while reporting higher satisfaction and stronger growth mindsets.

Lesson 4

Codification Strengthens and Spreads Innovation

Clarity enables both quality and scale.

Keeping a model in the founding team's heads or avoiding documentation for fear of rigidity invites uneven implementation. Codification forces clarity about what is essential, what is flexible, and under what conditions success occurs. The schools we studied documented their models to strengthen internal practice and prepare for sustainable scale.

Example Highlights



Valor Collegiate Academies

First codified its student development model (Compass) internally to maintain quality as it expanded to new campuses. This choice clarified coaching practices and sustained results. Valor then developed Compass Camp, which now supports 60+ schools across 25 school networks, reaching ~30,000 students nationwide.



Yu Ming Charter Schools

Partnered with Transcend Education to codify their dual-language immersion model, identifying which elements were core to success versus context-specific. This clarity ensured fidelity to the model as Yu Ming expanded to more diverse neighborhoods.

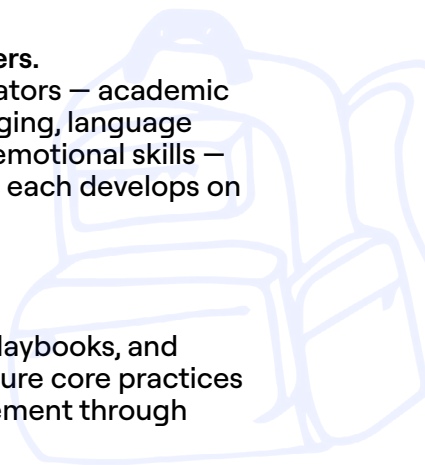


Discovery Polytech Early College High School

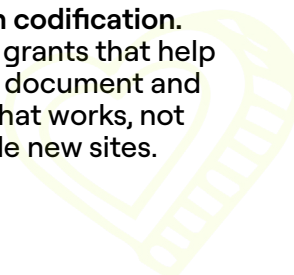
Documented not just what worked but why and under what conditions, helping other schools in Springfield's Empowerment Zone replicate success. This process also revealed internal implementation gaps that the team addressed to improve outcomes.

Actions for the Field

FOR SCHOOLS

- 1. Focus from Day One.** Identify your core innovation – the lever that drives all other improvements and align everything around it.
 - 2. Build partnership infrastructure.** Design systems that make two-way communication and shared ownership routine, grounded in an understanding of families' language preferences, communication styles, and decision-making norms.
 - 3. Measure what matters.** Track multiple indicators – academic achievement, belonging, language growth, and social-emotional skills – acknowledging that each develops on its own timeline.
 - 4. Codify as you build.** Create templates, playbooks, and exemplars that capture core practices and sustain improvement through growth.
- 

FOR FUNDERS

- 1. Fund focus, not sprawl.** Prioritize schools that articulate a clear innovation and support them with multi-year funding for depth, not just breadth.
 - 2. Measure broader outcomes.** Support schools in tracking holistic outcomes such as academic mastery, well-being, belonging, and agency.
 - 3. Invest in codification.** Provide grants that help schools document and share what works, not just scale new sites.
- 

FOR POLICYMAKERS

- 1. Enable flexibility for focus.** Create policies that allow schools to partner for non-core functions and share resources across networks.
 - 2. Elevate authentic engagement.** Require schools to show how family and community input informs design, renewal, and accountability decisions.
 - 3. Redefine accountability.** Encourage multi-measure systems that value growth in academics, belonging, and readiness for college and career.
- 