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# A First Look at Higher Performing High Schools: School Qualities that Educators Believe Contribute Most to College and Career Readiness

## Executive Summary

While national college and career readiness statistics suggest significant room for improvement, there are high schools across the country where students are advancing more quickly towards college and career readiness (CCR). What is it about these schools that educators perceive contribute most to their students' growth? How far along are these schools in implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)? The study addressed these and other questions by surveying educators at high schools across the country that have demonstrated strong progress towards CCR.

Researchers at ACT identified higher performing high schools primarily based on student growth in achievement between grades 8 and 12. Across 63 schools, 272 educators—evenly distributed across subject areas and leadership roles—completed a fall 2011 survey measuring school practices, aspects of school climate, and thoughts on the CCSS.

## School Qualities Contributing to College and Career Readiness

The school qualities believed to contribute most to college and career readiness reflected supportive and orderly school environments, as well as high academic expectations and focused instruction.

- Strong relationships between students and teachers was rated the strongest contributor to student achievement.
- Safe and orderly school environment was also among the strongest contributors.
- High expectations for students and teachers were consistently deemed important.
- Classroom management and maximization of instructional time in core academics were rated as strong contributors.
- Clear communication to teachers of expectations about student learning standards and curriculum was highly rated.
- Access to and effective use of quality curriculum and teaching resources were also commonly endorsed as strong contributors to student achievement.
- Use of assessments with instruction (e.g., use of formative assessment tools and alignment of classroom assessments and instruction) were deemed important by most educators.

## Perceptions of the Common Core State Standards

- About three-quarters of educators at higher performing high schools reported having at least moderate knowledge of the Standards as of fall 2011.
- District-level guidance for implementing the Standards has exceeded state-level guidance.
- Less than one in five educators believe that adequate funding is available to the district for implementing the Standards.
- Most educators are optimistic that the Standards will lead to improved CCR, though nearly one-third remain neutral.

## Common Core State Standards Implementation Progress

- Over two-thirds of educators at higher performing high schools reported that their school/district will have begun identifying differences between previous state standards and the Common Core State Standards before the end of the 2011–2012 school year.
- Less than one-third of educators reported that their school/district will have begun designing an evaluation system that measures student mastery of the Standards before the end of the 2011–2012 school year.
- The most common implementation challenge named by both teachers (33%) and administrators (34%) was lack of funding. Lack of time or resources (31% of teachers and 30% of administrators) and lack of teacher knowledge of the Standards (23% of teachers and 32% of administrators) were also cited.

## Conclusion

Understanding the beliefs of educators at higher performing high schools provides insight into the qualities of effective schools. But to translate the findings to better practice, one must understand how the most important practices and aspects of school climate fit within the larger picture of sustained school improvement. We recommend using the Core Practice Framework<sup>1</sup> as an organizing guide for coordinating improvement efforts across district, school, and classroom levels. Such efforts can promote the positive aspects of school climate deemed most important by the higher performing schools, make the contributing school practices more effective, and lead to improvements in college and career readiness.

<sup>1</sup> The Framework is built around five themes that need to be addressed in order to improve teaching and learning, and it cuts across district, school, and classroom practices. For more information, see [www.nc4ea.org/index.cfm/e/core\\_practice\\_framework](http://www.nc4ea.org/index.cfm/e/core_practice_framework).

