GETTING STARTED

Where to Begin

To be successful in launching a local Ready Schools Initiative, it takes a team approach that includes both schools and the larger community. It takes careful planning, leadership, and an ongoing commitment to building and sustaining partnerships to develop both a School-Based Team and a Community Team that support the overall school district initiative. To meet your goals, you must take a broad-based and multi-layered approach that involves diverse representation from across your school(s) and community.

Do you develop an individual School-Based Team first or a Community Team? Do you get central office staff involved first or a principal? Do you first develop a community- wide plan or an individual school plan? There is no right answer — it depends on what best fits your community and environment. The most successful Ready School efforts take both approaches.

If you start with the development of a School-Based Team, make sure you quickly integrate participants from the community into your planning process. Involve families, early education providers, civic organizations, and community leaders in your planning and implementation process. If you start at the community/school district level, be sure to include principals and teachers from schools with a strong interest in implementing a Ready Schools approach.

When a Ready Schools effort starts at the school level, it may be less likely to be sustained if there is no district-wide and community commitment to building a strong research-based educational foundation for young children ages 3-8. The Community-District Team is essential to the ultimate success of high quality PreK-3 education. However, it is equally important that Community-District Teams be informed by the Ready Schools efforts at the school level. Community-District Team work is grounded in the real issues and needs of schools and early care and education providers.

Most important is that you get started! Begin where you have your strongest advocates and build from there to create a shared vision for your local Ready Schools Initiative.

Ready School Teams — Roles and Responsibilities

The Community-District Team is typically comprised of representatives from the school district, individual schools, the local Smart Start partnership, early childhood providers, parents, community agencies, business leaders, and other stakeholders. The Community-District Team is responsible for providing resources and supports to schools, addressing transition issues between the early childhood community and schools/district, promoting collaboration across the community to serve PreK-3rd grade children and families, and advocating for Ready Schools across schools and community.

The School-Based Team typically includes the school principal and/or assistant principal, PreK-3rd grade teachers, parents, early childhood providers, and other community stakeholders. The School-Based Team conducts a Ready Schools Assessment using the High/Scope assessment instrument, analyzes data, and develops an action plan based on areas for strengthening and priorities.

> Increasing the number of children who are ready for school and succeeding at third grade is not the sole responsibility of any single agency or professional group; rather it is a shared community concern. Effective strategies require multiple actions at the individual, family, and community levels.
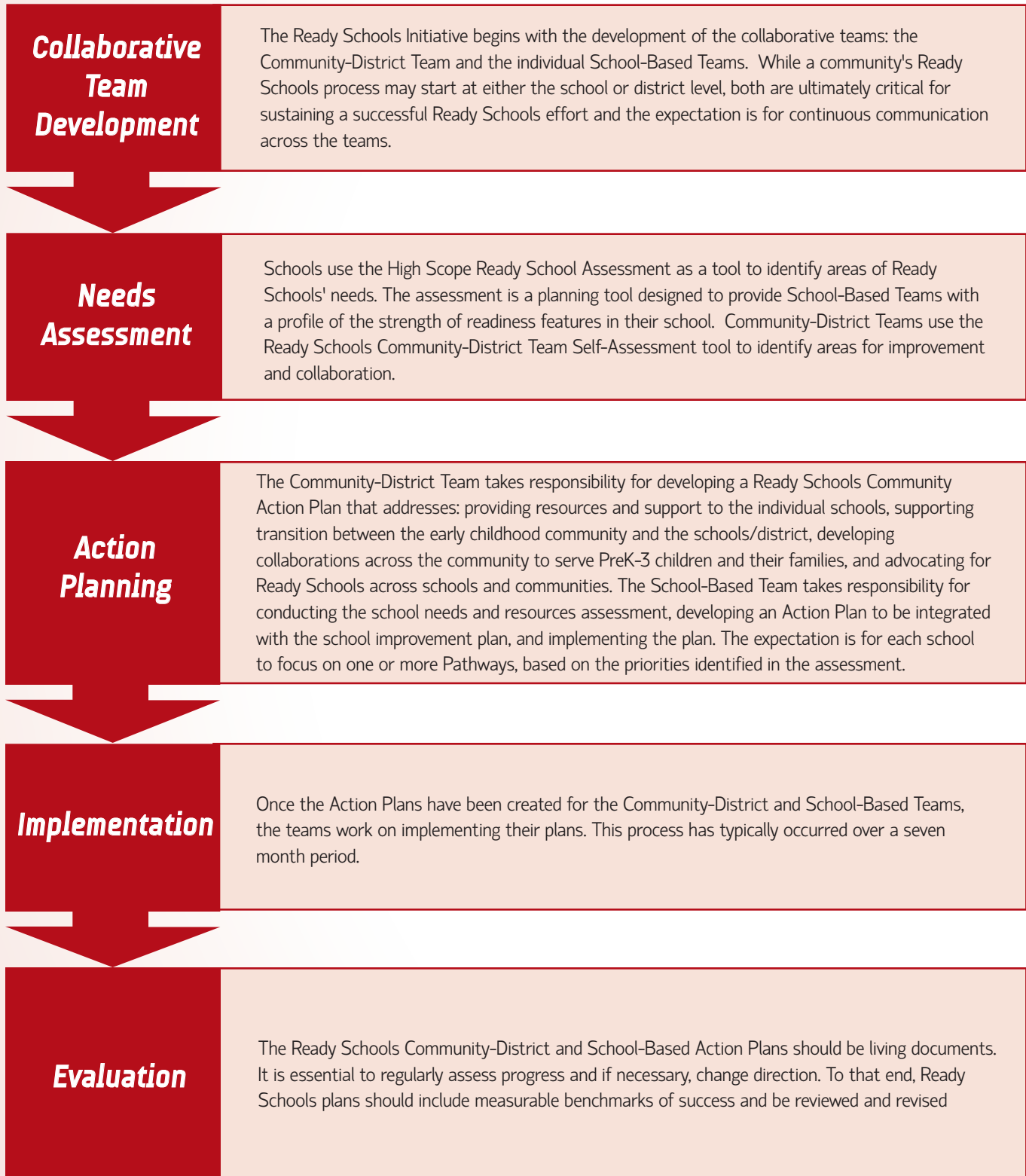>
> – Schorr & Marchand, 2007

Ready Schools Implementation Process At-A-Glance

Collaborative Team Development

The Ready Schools Initiative begins with the development of the collaborative teams: the Community-District Team and the individual School-Based Teams. While a community's Ready Schools process may start at either the school or district level, both are ultimately critical for sustaining a successful Ready Schools effort and the expectation is for continuous communication across the teams.

Needs Assessment

Schools use the High Scope Ready School Assessment as a tool to identify areas of Ready Schools' needs. The assessment is a planning tool designed to provide School-Based Teams with a profile of the strength of readiness features in their school. Community-District Teams use the Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment tool to identify areas for improvement and collaboration.

Action Planning

The Community-District Team takes responsibility for developing a Ready Schools Community Action Plan that addresses: providing resources and support to the individual schools, supporting transition between the early childhood community and the schools/district, developing collaborations across the community to serve PreK-3 children and their families, and advocating for Ready Schools across schools and communities. The School-Based Team takes responsibility for conducting the school needs and resources assessment, developing an Action Plan to be integrated with the school improvement plan, and implementing the plan. The expectation is for each school to focus on one or more Pathways, based on the priorities identified in the assessment.

Implementation

Once the Action Plans have been created for the Community-District and School-Based Teams, the teams work on implementing their plans. This process has typically occurred over a seven month period.

Evaluation

The Ready Schools Community-District and School-Based Action Plans should be living documents. It is essential to regularly assess progress and if necessary, change direction. To that end, Ready Schools plans should include measurable benchmarks of success and be reviewed and revised

Community-District Team Process

The saying *"it takes a village to raise a child"* is an essential philosophy of the Ready Schools movement.

Effective Community-District Teams:

›   Create a Community-District-wide vision for Ready Schools that assures the success of all children in all schools.

›   Target changes that need to occur in every school such as a district-wide transition plan, kindergarten orientation program, and PreK-3 curriculum approaches.

›   Create a district-wide professional development program for school leaders that emphasizes Ready Schools concepts.

›   Conduct community forums to get broader community input into and involvement in a district-wide Ready Schools approach.

›   Build bridges to greater understanding and cooperation between families, early education, and K-3 teachers.

›   Generate increased resources as well as greater integration and use of community assets into schools.

›   Serve as an advocate at the local, state, and national level for the resources and support necessary for Ready Schools.

Who should be on a Ready Schools Community-District Team?

The composition of this team will vary by community. It should be customized to fit each community's needs, resources, and realities. Participants might include:

☐   School personnel, including administrative and support staff and teachers working in an elementary school;
☐   Central office staff, including superintendents, school board members, curriculum specialists, and support services staff;
☐   Early education professionals, including teachers and program directors;
☐   Early childhood service providers and advocates;
☐   Families with children ages 3-8;
☐   Social service providers;
☐   Medical professionals;
☐   Community, business, and faith leaders; and
☐   Higher education representatives.

Note that school system personnel are at the top of the list of members for the Community-District Team. School leaders at all levels are critical for the success of Community-District and School-Based Teams. Evaluation results from the NC Ready Schools Initiative showed that principals' participation on both the Community-District and School-Based Teams were instrumental to the overall success of the Ready Schools efforts in communities.

Steps to Success for a Ready Schools Community–District Team

1. Create a vision for what you want Ready Schools to look like in your schools and community. This vision should be comprehensive for what the district, schools, and communities need to do both independently and in partnership to support Ready Schools' efforts.

2. Use the Ready Schools Partnerships assessment tool to examine your community's resources, interest, capacity, and barriers to achieving your Ready Schools vision.

3. Determine the role of the Community-District Team in advocating for and guiding Ready Schools' efforts. Building leadership, public engagement, and political will is essential. Leadership for this initiative should be shared by the community (e.g., local Smart Start partnership) and the schools.

4. Conduct forums to get broad input into how the community can best support the initiative. Hear what families, teachers, school administrators, early care professionals, and community members have to say. Have them talk with each other to build greater understanding about challenges as well as the potential resources and assets that may be available.

5. Integrate input from the community forums and School-Based and Community-District Team members.

6. Conduct an inventory of community and school assets, resources, and needs.

7. Use the data and input gathered to develop a Community-District Action Plan that includes strategies for integration of Ready Schools concepts across the community and schools. Consider inluding information such as:
   - » Community-wide school transition plan;
   - » Kindergarten orientation process that links with early education and supports both children and families;
   - » District-wide professional development program that is for families, early educators, and PreK-3 teachers and staff; and
   - » Alignment of the curriculum in the district's elementary schools across early education and PreK through 3rd grade.

8. Integrate existing and new community resources into this Community-District Action Plan.

9. Use a variety of tools to measure the progress in individual schools. Use the data from these tools to update your Community-District Action Plan. Tools are described in the Using Data in the Ready Schools Assessment Process later in this Getting Started chapter.

10. Develop the infrastructure and communication plans necessary to ensure regular communication between the Community-District Team, the individual School-Based Teams, and the broader community. Consider taking a few minutes at each meeting to highlight a program or agency or issue that impacts children (ages 3-8), schools, or families.

The Community-District Team should serve as an ongoing resource to individual schools and district-wide efforts. Ongoing communication and regular updates to the action plan are essential for continued progress.

Community Forums – A Critical Step to Ready Schools Success

In addition to building greater understanding and awareness about Ready Schools within the community, forums garner critical information that may be useful to community planning. Use community forums to identify:

> **Leadership** – Who is interested, excited, able, and willing to lead the process?

> **Sparks** – Where is the energy that can be maximized to create greater synergy in the community?

> **Common Purpose/Commitment** – To what will people dedicate their energies and time?

> **What Works Already** – This is the foundation on which to build and the substance that can be shared from one community to the next. It's what gets people excited. It also helps people feel they can tackle the next question.

> **Frequent and Persistent Sources of Frustration** – What comes up repeatedly that can suggest priorities for future change? People are motivated to work on solutions to things they perceive as problems or roadblocks to progress.

> **What Tools Are Available** – such as assessment tools; information sharing tools; tools for families; and resource guides.

> **What People Dream About** – Where do people want to go? It's important for people to have the opportunity to be creative in the process and not just listen or fill out paperwork.

> **Families First** – No matter how wonderful children's early care and education program or school setting is, families will always be children's first and most influential teachers. What do families care about and need to be successful?

Answers to such questions provide important feedback to schools and communities not only in the beginning, but also as change occurs and new priorities are set.

How often should community forums be held? While there is no magic number, it is helpful to hold these on an annual basis as a barometer to measure community buy-in and to get input into next steps.

Ready Schools in Action: Community Forums in Region A Lead Change Process

The Region A Partnership for Children, together with the local school system, facilitated a series of community forums discussing services for children from preschool through the early grades. The Region A Partnership serves Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties as well as the Cherokee Indian Reservation.

Participants engaged in conversations about the nature of preschool and elementary school, how to support effective transitions, what families dream about for their children, where schools are strongest in their response to families, and how to set priorities for the future.

The energy from the community forums sparked the greatest interest in working on transition and family support. School representatives made a commitment to working with community members to develop materials to share with families about early literacy, curriculum, and child development.

Over the course of a year, some very practical changes occurred; including a new kindergarten orientation process, the development of transition materials for PreK through 3rd graders, resource materials for families focusing on curriculum and transition, changes to the environments of schools, and enriched professional development plans.

School-Based Team Process

When an elementary school launches its Ready Schools Initiative, some important questions to explore are:

> What is our vision for ensuring the success of all children?

> How well do we meet the needs of all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, family background, or preschool experience?

> What do we believe about young children and how they learn? Does our instruction reflect those beliefs?

> How many children are retained in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade and what do we know about the results of retention both through research and our own experiences?

> What practices support how young students best learn?

> How do teachers use school curriculum to link to children's culture/background?

> How do we work together to support each other in order to further student learning? Who should be involved in the school improvement process?

> How does research guide our practices for developing language, reading, mathematics, science, and social/emotional skills?

Who should be on a Ready Schools School-based team?

Like the Community-District Team, the School-Based Team should include a cross-section of members from the school and the community and should mirror the demographics of the student population. The School-Based Team might include:

- ☐ Principal and/or other school administrators;
- ☐ PreK teacher, if school includes PreK classrooms;
- ☐ Kindergarten teacher;
- ☐ Other primary grade teachers in grades 1-3;
- ☐ Parents;
- ☐ School counselor, social worker, or other support personnel;
- ☐ Community members (preferably a member of the Community-District Team if possible);
- ☐ Area child care providers and PreK teachers (may include those providing after school care);
- ☐ Business, community, and faith leaders; and
- ☐ Health care providers.

Think in terms of community assets, resources, and needs as you develop your team. Different groups and staffing levels need to be represented so the team "belongs" to everyone. You may also want to take an existing school committee — such as the School Improvement Team — and broaden it by integrating it with the School-Based Team. In this way, people may not see it as something "new" or more work, and it will become part of the school's overall planning. If you are using an existing team, make sure you incorporate multiple perspectives by including members of different races and cultures, families, and community members. Regardless of who is on your team, success depends on open dialogue, trust, commitment, and a willingness to be honest about the school's strengths and areas needing improvement.

Steps to Success for a School-Based Team

1. **Assess the Situation.** The School-Based Team is responsible for conducting the school self-assessment. This initial assessment process is essential to understanding where you are and where you need to go as a community or school in reaching your goals. The data gathered from the assessment should inform all future planning. NC Ready Schools Initiative has used the High/Scope Ready School Assessment (RSA). It is an easy tool to use, but it is important that you take your time with the assessment. Teams must stop to critically analyze whether their school is meeting particular standards or not. Because the High/Scope RSA is not able to cover each essential aspect of change, the Pathway Sections of this Toolkit offer additional questions that teams may want to consider as they move more deeply into school improvement.

   The dialogue which occurs as a result of the assessment process is extremely important. If the assessment team is diverse in multiple ways, the responses to the assessment questions and the data collected will inspire conversations that you may not have anticipated. Team members' perceptions may differ based on their individual experiences. This assessment process is an important opportunity for dialogue among diverse team members that would not otherwise happen.

2. **Develop an Action Plan.** The plan should be based on the eight pathways to Ready Schools. Use the results of the assessment process to determine the specific areas on which to focus the greatest attention. Again, involve a broad array of perspectives and participants. The resulting action plan should become part of the regular School Improvement Plan. In selecting the pathway(s) to focus on, prioritize areas where you can build on school strengths, as well as those that will make the largest impact. Focus on two to three areas at a time in order to assure sufficient attention and resources for change and to be transparent to the community.

3. **Build Momentum.** As described in the first chapter, the key to Ready Schools success is to move from "traditional thinking" to "Ready Schools thinking." For this to happen, teachers, parents, caregivers, community members, and others need to be aware of the concepts of Ready Schools and the potential for positive change as a result. Get them excited about the possibilities and let them think creatively about the role(s) they can play in making it happen. Keep open lines of communication so everyone feels part of the process. At staff meetings, school events, etc., regularly share the research on Ready Schools issues, assessment results, and get input into the action plan. Involve the whole school and community in the Ready Schools process!

4. **Implement Activities and Practices.** Implementation of the action plan requires participation by everyone in the school as well as community participants, including early childhood program personnel, families, and other community organizations. It is important to delineate responsibilities and determine timelines, as well as assure everyone feels some responsibility for the success of the effort. Utilize businesses, faith-based organizations, and other community organizations to help provide the support needed to implement your plan. Resources available for funding may include Donors Choose, local community foundations, civic groups, and retired educators.

5. **Monitor, Evaluate, and Revise.** The Ready Schools plan should be a living document. It is essential to regularly assess progress and if necessary, change direction. Just like the school practice of teaching, reviewing, and assessing progress of students, the same approach applies to the Ready Schools process. Schools should revisit their High/Scope Ready School Assessments at least annually.

Using Data in the Ready Schools Assessment Process

Documenting evidence of Ready Schools pathway indicators on the High/Scope Tool makes progress visible and helps identify areas for improvement. The assessment team may want to use a large file or "drop box" to organize all of the indicators by High/Scope Dimensions and add documentation regarding specific indicators as it is collected. You may find that there is no evidence for some indicators, and this is not unusual. Allow adequate time to collect the evidence. It may be necessary to provide parent and community representatives with additional background information and support to be actively involved. Be cognizant of their background as you assign them to work on specific areas of self-assessment.

The following types of data might be useful to the School-Based Team as they gather information to complete a full assessment of needs and strengths and to develop action plans:

‣ **High/Scope Ready Schools Assessment.** This tool serves as a planning tool for School-Based Teams to use to evaluate their "Readiness Rate." One unique feature of the tool is the online profiler. Schools are able to input their scores from the assessment and analyze their growth potential or track changes over the years.

‣ **Partnership Self-Assessment Survey.** This tool was created by the National Program Office of Free to Grow, Mailman School of Public Health, for Head Start to help determine a community's collaboration capacity.

‣ **Kindergarten Family Transition Survey.** This survey was developed for families to evaluate their perceptions and kindergarten transition experiences.

‣ **School Professional Staff as a Learning Community** (Hord, 1996). This questionnaire provides school staff the opportunity to give their perceptions about their school's functioning as a learning community. This data can be used by the Community-District Team to inform what needs to occur on a district-wide level.

‣ **Comprehensive Needs Assessment**. This tool was developed by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and assesses schools on multiple dimensions.

Observation, assessment, and documentation are foundational skills to successful teaching and to making meaningful and lasting improvement to any process or system. Enjoy the process of shared inquiry and discovery and be open to what you learn, reaffirm, and create together.

Pathways At-A-Glance

Each of the eight Ready Schools Pathways provides a framework for thinking about the topic, resources for reflection, and highlights best practices.

1. **Leaders and Leadership**

   The principal advocates for and leads the Ready School. School leaders believe that all children can learn and provide support and strategies for teachers and staff to acquire the requisite skills within the context of a learning community. Additionally, leaders of Ready Schools understand early childhood education and support teachers in the implementation of best practices for young children. The school garners support from the superintendent, central office, and school board.

2. **Family, School, and Community Partnerships**

   Schools and communities actively work together to address academic, social, and cultural needs of their students and families. The school implements practices and policies that encourage a variety of opportunities for community and family participation in all aspects of school life. The school enhances families' capacities to foster their children's readiness and to support children's learning and development in and outside of schools. The school functions as a community and partners with the outside community to provide opportunities and services to children and families.

3. **Transitions**

   Effective transition plans are school and community initiated to address the needs of the school, family, child, and community. There is ongoing communication and collaboration among elementary schools, early care and education (ECE), and families to ensure smooth transitions from the Infant-Toddler Program (Part C) to preschool, from preschool and home to school, and across grade levels within and between schools. The school participates in a variety of transition experiences for children entering PreK or kindergarten and across grade levels (PreK-3).

4. **Respecting Diversity**

   The school seeks to help children from all circumstances and backgrounds succeed; it interacts with children and their families in ways that are compatible with individual needs and family backgrounds. The school uses culturally appropriate curricula and instructional materials to enhance learning. Children with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds and circumstances are represented in curriculum, class materials, and activities. All of these children participate in a wide range of learning activities appropriate for their individual needs as full members of the school community.

5. **Engaging Environments**

   The school projects an open, child focused, welcoming atmosphere characterized by friendliness, respect, high teacher and staff morale, and the use of appropriate practices that support social/emotional development. The building and grounds are safe, inviting, and developmentally appropriate. The school's learning environments actively engage children in a variety of learning activities.

6. **Effective Curricula, Instruction, and Child Assessment**

   The school diligently employs educational methods and materials shown to be effective in helping a diverse population of children achieve appropriate academic growth to reach essential standards. Children with disabilities and other special needs are accommodated and included in the regular instructional programs to the maximum extent possible. Standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned from preschool through elementary grades and beyond; within a classroom, within a grade level, and across grade levels. Research and data help to drive instructional practice, and teachers plan within and across grade levels to ensure alignment and multi-level intervention strategies.

7. **Teacher Supports and Adult Learning Communities**

   The school supports the learning of adults as essential to children's well-being and achievement. Goals for adult learning communities include high-quality sustained professional development of school personnel as well as intentional parent and family participation in the planning and evaluation of children's learning. Adult learning communities work within and across grade levels, between homes and the school, and between the school and other educational entities and learning opportunities in the community. School leadership ensures that Ready Schools are purposefully organized in terms of space, time, tools, and resources to maximize support for all adults to work effectively together with children.

8. **Assessing Progress and Assuring Quality**

   The school systematically uses both formal and informal assessments to plan and tailor instruction to address individual student needs, to improve classroom practices and instruction, and to improve outcomes for all children. The school develops a data driven written improvement plan that includes strategies for maintaining its mission and goals over time and monitors progress toward them.