



## The Case for Fortified Teaching and Learning Environments

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Today, one in four children in the United States is growing up in poverty. Many are exposed to violence, chronic insecurity, loss, and disruption. Poverty inflicts a traumatic form of stress on their developing brains. It interferes with learning. It impacts behavior. It undermines belief.

Children don't shed what they have experienced at the schoolhouse door. It all shows up in the classroom. It causes them to be distracted, to tune out, to be nervous, impulsive, and distrustful. It interferes with their ability to focus, interact with others, tackle rigorous academic material, and progress in school successfully. It makes it harder to prepare them for college and career.

Our nation's under-performing schools share common challenges: children unready to learn, teachers unprepared to teach students with intense needs, and principals ill equipped to act against such adversity. Collectively, these challenges pose a pattern of risk: risk to student development, risk to classroom instruction, and risk to school-wide culture, each capable of derailing academic achievement.

Today in New York City, 65% of public schools are significantly under-performing because of this pattern of risk. Imagine the urgency to find a cure if this were a disease affecting 65% of our students. Without a remedy for these schools, students will not have the knowledge and skills for employment, will not be able to lift themselves out of poverty, and could well become a burden to society if they have children in their teens or end up in prison.

Across the country, states, districts, and schools are carrying out strategies to revamp curricula and strengthen the capacity of teachers to bring students from differing backgrounds and levels of knowledge and skills to higher standards. Students have to engage deeply with more demanding content and persist in doing so. At a fundamental level, many children must for the first time develop academically oriented identities. Meeting this challenge successfully will be possible only when educators recognize that students acquire knowledge and skills best when their developmental needs are understood and addressed by the adults they interact with every day at school.

To date, the education reform movement has under-recognized the specific impacts of poverty on child development and the associated challenges for schools. It has been a mistake to assume that principals and teachers would figure out how to overcome the obstacles facing high-poverty schools without specific training and support. Children need more than reading, writing, and arithmetic to harness their potential to learn and succeed. They need a **fortified teaching and learning environment** that reduces stress; fosters positive connections with adults, peers, families, and communities; delivers rigorous and engaging content; and promotes attributes common among all successful students, including motivation, self-regulation, tenacity, and resilience. This environment is a prerequisite for healthy growth and academic performance in all children, in all schools.

This fall, with the encouragement of Acting Deputy Secretary Jim Shelton at the US Department of Education, Turnaround has advanced a **unified theory of action** to mitigate the risks associated with



poverty, and promote development and achievement for all students. Organizations including CASEL, City Year, Communities in Schools, New Profit Inc., New Teacher Center, and others have joined in this effort and are defining the attributes, competencies, and measures that best depict a ***fortified teaching and learning environment***.

We are doing this to dispel notions of silver bullets and to speak clearly and honestly about the level of risk in high-poverty schools. We are doing this together because each of us knows that no matter how strong any one component of the reform effort is, no matter how great our accomplishments as individual organizations may be, none is sufficiently strong enough to meet the variability of stress, development, and performance we see in our under-performing schools – and to do so at scale.

***The Case*** we are making is for a student development centered perspective on school improvement. It is grounded in emerging threads of knowledge and practices drawn from neuroscience, child development, and the practices of schools that have “beaten the odds.”

***The Case*** we are making is that as districts, schools, and teachers seek to move all students to the deeper, more complex learning tasks that prepare them for college and career, they need environments designed to develop the capacities of children to engage, take risks, and build resilience on behalf of learning.

***The Case*** we are making is that when key environmental attributes are sequenced properly, in the right dosage, and for sufficient duration, schools reach a tipping point where the risks to academic growth are driven down, readiness increases dramatically, and student growth and performance for many more students becomes a reality.

***The Case*** we are making is that a ***fortified teaching and learning environment*** should be a pillar of education reform, one that will lay a critical foundation for the success of the reform effort overall.