

It's Not Just the Curriculum:

Why Systems Make or Break Literacy Success

Success for All FOUNDATION®

> It's useful to stop from time to time and remember why we do what we do, and for whom.
>
> ~ Robert Slavin, Co-founder, Success for All



Despite dedicated efforts by many teachers and administrators and significant investments in literacy initiatives, curricula, professional development, and intervention programs, only 31% of 4th graders read proficiently. Among kids living in poverty, that percentage drops to 19%.

This isn't a new crisis. For decades, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has revealed consistent declines in the reading performance of low-achieving students. However, their struggles were often blamed on circumstances such as poverty or challenges at home.

But in 2019, prior to the pandemic, reading scores showed a decline across *all* student groups, indicating it wasn't just some students who struggled to read, it was all students. This spurred significant attention from policymakers, educators, advocacy groups, and media. Journalist Emily Hanford's groundbreaking *Sold a Story* podcast revealed how flawed reading instruction became the norm in schools—leaving generations of children without foundational literacy skills and teachers unprepared to help them.

The shift toward the science of reading is a necessary course correction, but it's not enough. The latest NAEP results—among the lowest in history—prove that without systemic support, even the best curriculum falls short.

In her search for solutions, Emily Hanford visited Success for All schools in Steubenville, Ohio that, by every metric, should be failing. Except they're doing the opposite - outperforming even the most affluent schools in the country.

What the educators in Steubenville (and other SFA schools throughout the country) are doing doesn't require high per pupil expenditures, additional funding, extra staff, or more initiatives. In fact, their focus is quite streamlined.

For many schools, success will require doing things very differently. In all cases, it will mean doing what's proven to work for all kids. The question isn't whether schools can solve the literacy crisis. *They can.*
The question is: Are they willing to do what it takes?

Sincerely,

Julie Wible
CEO

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> **If you genuinely care about the goal, you'll focus on the system.**
> **~ James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits***

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What it really takes to solve the literacy crisis

In addition to the implementation of Science of Reading and Science of Learning research, real improvement requires a shift in how we think and how we organize schools (and the people in them) for success. At SFA, we've pulled out a few of the principles you'll experience throughout this e-book that will challenge you to do both. These are lessons we've learned through both research and experience, but they're also living ideas meant to be revisited and refined in context. As such, they're likely to create tension. But, as you'll often hear us say, there's growth in discomfort. We hope these ideas get you thinking - but more importantly, improving.

Stop thinking of it as a literacy crisis.

There's a science to how children learn to read.

There's a science to how we teach them.

Success requires more than a reading program to do both effectively, it requires an entire system that aligns curriculum, instruction, professional development, interventions, assessment, and leadership.

Through this system, every adult in the school uses a shared approach to help every child learn to read and achieve at the highest levels.

Too often though, our systems are ineffective. So if you're going call it something, call it a system crisis.

Disrupt the status quo

Real improvement doesn't require a lot of money or extra time or additional positions. It does require a willingness to do what's proven to work, which requires you to think differently about how money, time, and people are utilized. This is how effective systems are built.

In many SFA schools, including those in Steubenville, Ohio, for example, every teacher becomes a reading teacher for the same 90 minutes everyday, allowing for student grouping according to current level of mastery. Regrouping is a fluid, effective process that fills learning gaps quickly and effectively.

Raise the bar (with support)

High expectations are an expression of belief in others: *We set this high bar because we believe you can reach it and we're going to help make sure you do*. We must believe in each other and we absolutely must believe in our students - all of whom want - and can - learn to read! Holding educators and students and families to this expectation and providing them with the training and instruction required to meet it keeps everyone accountable for results. Raise the bar but make sure people have what they need to meet it - even if it means disrupting the status quo.

Overcome the sunk cost fallacy. If it's not working, let it go

One of the hardest things to do in education—or in life—is to walk away from something into which we've invested time, energy, and resources. That mindset is what psychologists call the sunk cost fallacy—the tendency to stick with something simply because we've already put so much into it, even when the evidence says it's not working.

Holding on to ineffective practices doesn't make past investments more valuable, it makes them more costly. And not just financially. It costs us student potential, teacher morale, and years of progress that could have been made if we'd pivoted sooner. In SFA schools, the return on investment isn't only in improved reading outcomes. Teacher retention rates improve, attendance goes up, and intervention and special education placements and costs go down.

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Collect data and use it

What gets measured gets better. Data provides immediate insights into what's going well and what needs attention. When teachers and leaders have clear goals and timely insights, they can spot gaps early and adjust supports in real time. That's how momentum builds.

In SFA schools, progress monitoring is built into the system. Teams review results together, celebrate gains, and support one another in solving persistent challenges. That culture of data-driven action keeps everyone focused on what matters most: helping every child learn to read and achieve at the highest levels.

Develop leaders everywhere

Leadership is about impact. In schools that defy the odds, leaders are intentionally developed at every level - district, school, classroom, hallways, lunch tables, PE teams, reading groups, etc.

Teachers lead in their classrooms. Students take ownership of their learning and lead among their peers. Administrators lead their teams. Families become active partners.

Built-in distributed leadership at every level creates unstoppable growth.

Celebrate wins

Improvement is a process, not a single event. We must be honest about what's not working and what's missing. But if we only focus on that, we risk discouraging students and educators alike.

In SFA schools, celebration is defined as feedback - when we receive feedback on the specific actions that resulted in a win, it reinforces the replicability and scalability of those actions.

Every step forward—big or small—deserves recognition. Celebrating progress generates momentum and reinforces consistent and relentless effort that pays off.



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Part I:

Curriculum changes aren't enough



Genuine and lasting change in a school depends on changing the system in which the school operates, not just parts of the school that can be eliminated or swapped out if the system stays unchanged.

– Robert Slavin

Today, many states have shifted their focus toward the Science of Reading, with policy makers in those states passing laws or adopting guidelines that mandate the use of Science of Reading-based reading instruction in schools. This is an exciting shift, however, but it isn't enough.

At SFA, we know, through decades of experience and research, that schools are complex ecosystems and without alignment across leadership, instruction, professional development, assessment, interventions, and student support, even the best programs struggle to create lasting impact.

Without a cohesive system through which a science of reading-based curriculum is implemented, monitored, and aligned, teachers will continue to feel frustrated and children will continue to struggle.

What You Can Expect When the System Works

In *Sold a Story*, journalist Emily Hanford visited Steubenville, Ohio—a district using Success for All to support reading instruction and that, despite high levels of poverty, has some of the strongest reading scores in the country. Emily asked a teacher there a simple question:

> "Have you ever felt unequipped to teach a child how to read?"
>
> *The teacher looked confused, like they didn't quite understand the question.*
>
> "You haven't faced a kid you were like, I don't know what to do?" Hanford clarified.
>
> *The teacher shook her head.*
>
> "No," she said. "I've never felt that way. I feel very equipped and prepared to get that job done."

That kind of confidence doesn't come from a program alone. It comes from alignment—a system where the curriculum, professional development, coaching, leadership, and assessments all work together.



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Does this sound familiar?

Table A: When Systems Break Down

The patterns described below are common, so if they feel familiar, you're not alone. Identifying them is the first step toward changing them. Do any sound familiar to you?

Table A – Common conditions in fragmented systems	
No clear instructional process	Teachers aren't given a proven, research-based instructional process they can rely on so they're left to figure out instructional approaches and strategies on their own.
Too much time building lessons	Without ready-to-use, aligned materials, teachers spend hours searching for what to teach with no guarantee the lesson will meet student needs.
Fragmented student learning	Instruction varies widely across classrooms and grades, creating gaps in skills and limiting progress.
Lost instructional time	Teachers spend too much of the day managing transitions, reteaching missed concepts, or delivering reactive interventions leaving limited time for high-quality, grade-level instruction.
Intervention is siloed	Support programs don't reinforce what's happening in the classroom, creating confusion for students and missed growth opportunities.
Disconnected professional development and coaching	Coaching and professional development is infrequent and generic and rarely aligned to instructional goals or student outcomes.
Data without direction	Assessment results are collected but are often inconsistent and not used to inform instruction in real time.
High absenteeism and behavioral disruptions	When students feel disconnected or unsuccessful, attendance drops and office referrals rise—making learning even harder to recover.
High special education referrals	When core instruction and interventions aren't connected or fall short, more students are referred to special education. Gaps widen, costs rise, and students second guess their potential.
Limited family connection	Schools want to involve families in meaningful ways, but with limited time and support, efforts often default to surface-level volunteering instead of true academic partnership.

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Part II:

Think subtraction, not addition

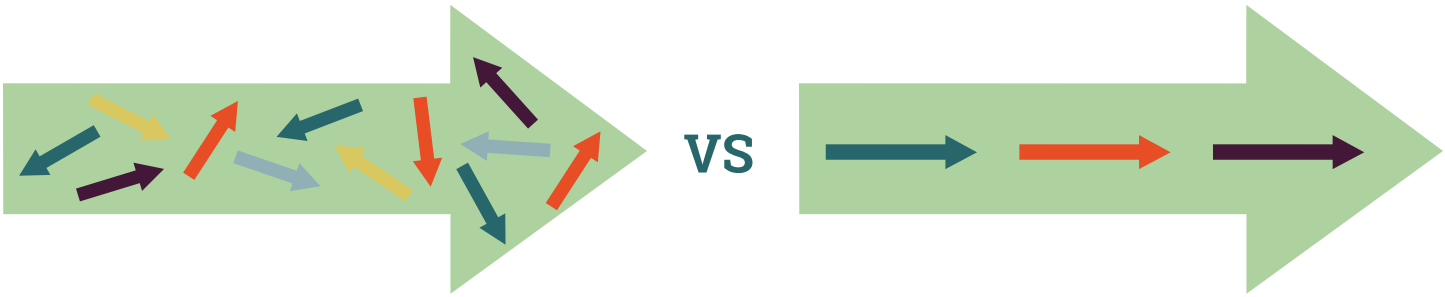




Too often, schools identify problems in isolation and, as a result, respond with a patchwork of programs and short-term fixes: A new reading curriculum, or an innovative training. But none of it works together, nor does it address the underlying issue.

That's how we end up spending more money, overloading teachers, and still falling short for students.

A strong system doesn't add to the workload. In fact, it subtracts from it. When we implement structures that support high attendance, deep engagement, effective instruction, and exposure to a high quality, engaging curriculum, we simplify and streamline effort. Educators become laser-focused on what matters most. This focus produces deeper engagement, positive cultures, and better results.



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Let's take a closer look.

Table B – When Schools Build Strong Systems

In schools where literacy outcomes are rising, there's a system of support in place that creates clear, consistent conditions.

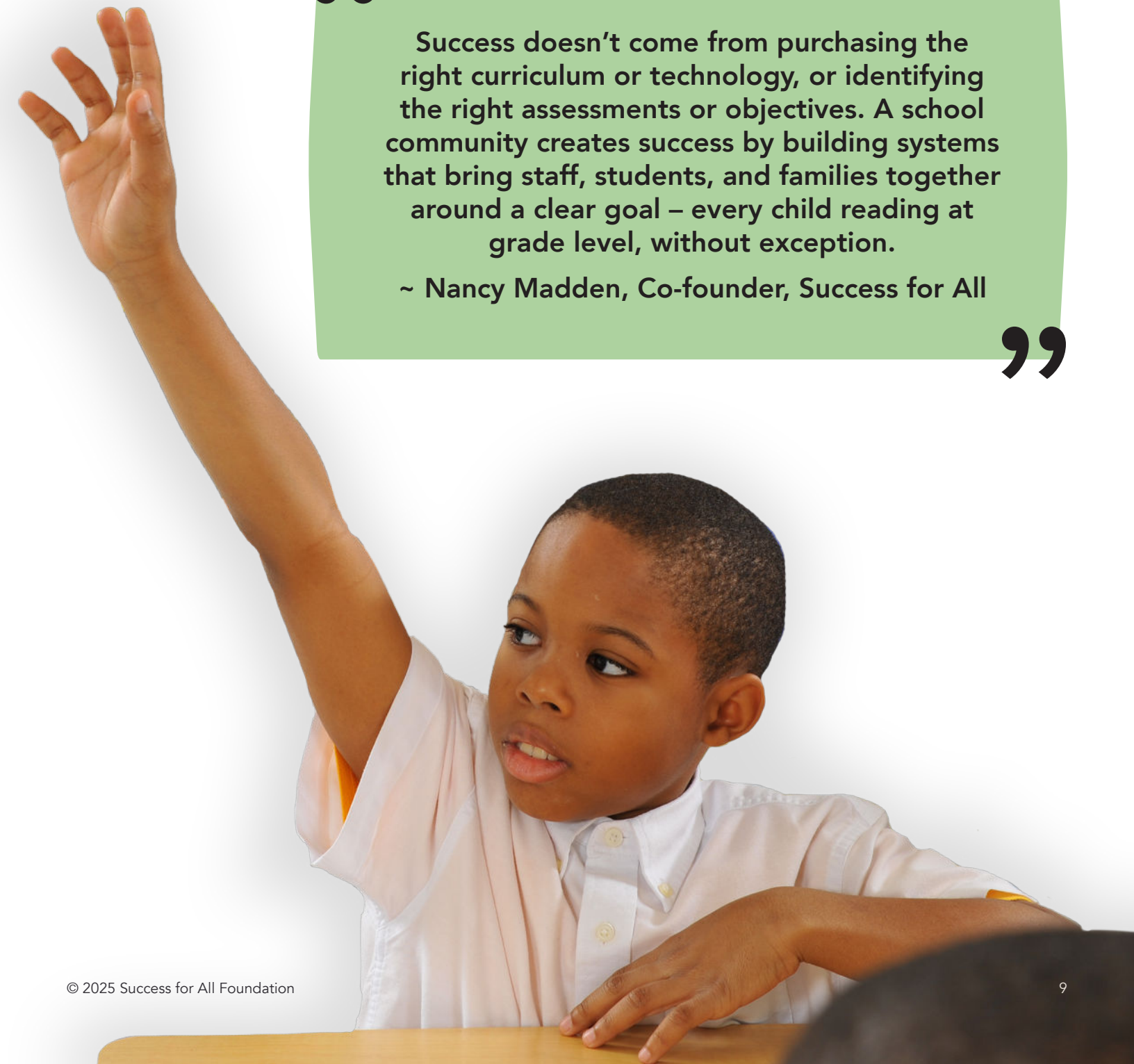
Table B – Common conditions in cohesive systems	
Every teacher follows a proven process	Instruction is guided by a research-based, step-by-step approach grounded in how students actually learn to read.
Lessons are ready to teach	High-quality, aligned materials free teachers to focus on preparing and delivering instruction, not building it from scratch.
Learning builds across classrooms and grades	Skills and strategies progress in a clear, coherent sequence, giving students continuity and steady growth year over year.
Instructional time is protected and purposeful	Teachers spend the bulk of each day delivering high-quality, grade-level instruction through consistent routines and efficient transitions.
Intervention reinforces core instruction	Targeted support connects directly to what students are learning in class, accelerating progress.
Coaching is embedded and actionable	Regular, in-class support helps teachers refine practice, build confidence, and adjust in real time.
Data drives daily decisions	Frequent formative assessments inform instruction before gaps widen.
Students show up and stay engaged	Success breeds motivation: attendance improves and behavioral disruptions decline, creating a culture where everyone can (and does) learn.
Right support at the right time	Strong core instruction and early intervention address learning needs before they escalate, reducing unnecessary special education referrals and helping more students succeed in the general classroom.
Families are engaged partners	Parents know how to reinforce learning at home and feel connected to classroom goals.

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We've spent decades refining our systemwide model, which ensures literacy success is sustained and strengthened over time.

Lasting impact requires schools to strengthen their system, not just replace curriculum. When they do, school becomes a place where everyone knows they can succeed. Replacing fragmented efforts with a systemic, research-backed approach helps schools ensure that teachers and students achieve real and lasting success in very aspect of their educational experience.

> **Success doesn't come from purchasing the right curriculum or technology, or identifying the right assessments or objectives. A school community creates success by building systems that bring staff, students, and families together around a clear goal – every child reading at grade level, without exception.**
>
> **~ Nancy Madden, Co-founder, Success for All**



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Part III:

Build a system that works



Making the shift

Improving literacy takes more than adding programs or switching curriculum. Real, lasting change starts by rethinking how your entire school is organized to support learning, how time is used, how instruction is delivered, how teachers are supported, and how progress is measured.

Below are five foundational elements of high-performing literacy systems and what they look like in action.

Scheduling that protects instructional time

To achieve real and lasting gains in literacy, schools must design schedules and staffing models that center around what students need most: consistent, targeted instruction every single day.

Here's what it looks like in SFA schools:

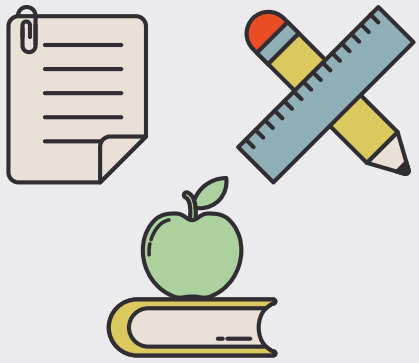
- Smaller, targeted literacy groups, allowing for more intensive, targeted instruction that meets students at their current level.
- Strategic staffing, where every teacher is part of delivering high-quality literacy instruction.
- Instructional consistency across classrooms and grades, ensuring that all students receive structured, research-based instruction that builds foundational skills.

Embedded leadership development and coaching

One-time training sessions won't achieve meaningful change. Schools need sustained, job-embedded professional development that supports leaders and teachers alike.

Success for All provides:

- On going, intensive training on our science of reading-based curriculum and science of learning-based instructional process.
- In-classroom coaching that helps teachers refine instruction in real time.
- Ongoing leadership development that equips principals, facilitators, and teacher-leaders to drive continuous improvement and shared ownership.



Systemwide data-based decision making

What gets measured gets better. Schools that successfully improve literacy outcomes collect data and act on it.

Success for All supports schools with:

- Regular progress monitoring using research-backed assessments that track student growth in foundational literacy skills, advanced comprehension, and use of oral language among all children to articulate their thinking.
- Dedicated data meetings to analyze trends and adjust instruction accordingly.
- Targeted intervention tracking to ensure struggling readers receive timely, aligned support.

Alignment across core instruction and interventions

When all parts of the instructional system work together, meaningful learning gains happen more quickly.

Here's what that looks like in SFA schools:

- Consistent instructional frameworks grounded in evidence.
- Intervention programs that reinforce classroom instruction rather than compete with it
- Collaboration between general education and intervention teachers to ensure a seamless learning experience for students.

Engaged families as literacy partners

Families are critical to reading success but schools need practical ways to connect with them around student learning.

Success for All supports authentic family engagement through:

- Tools and resources that help families understand what and how their children are learning.
- Opportunities to support reading at home in fun, meaningful ways.
- Clear, consistent communication that builds trust and shared accountability for student success.

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Part IV:

The evidence that SFA works

The Data That Prove It Works

Success for All is built on the belief that every child can and must succeed as a learner. Grounded in decades of research, SFA is a system that integrates strong, effective instruction, early intervention, and a rich, well-structured curriculum. SFA includes built-in support to prevent gaps from forming and catch and address them quickly when they do.

Every part of the school is organized around that goal. Every adult is part of the solution.

In schools that implement Success for All with fidelity, the results are measurable and visible across classrooms, schools, and communities:

Tier 1: Strong Evidence

SFA is one of the only literacy solutions in country to earn the highest possible evidence rating under federal education law.

+26% Average increase in reading proficiency across schools implementing SFA in 2024–2025

96% of principals strongly agree that SFA contributes to measurable gains in student achievement.

96% of principals say they would recommend Success for All to other school leaders.

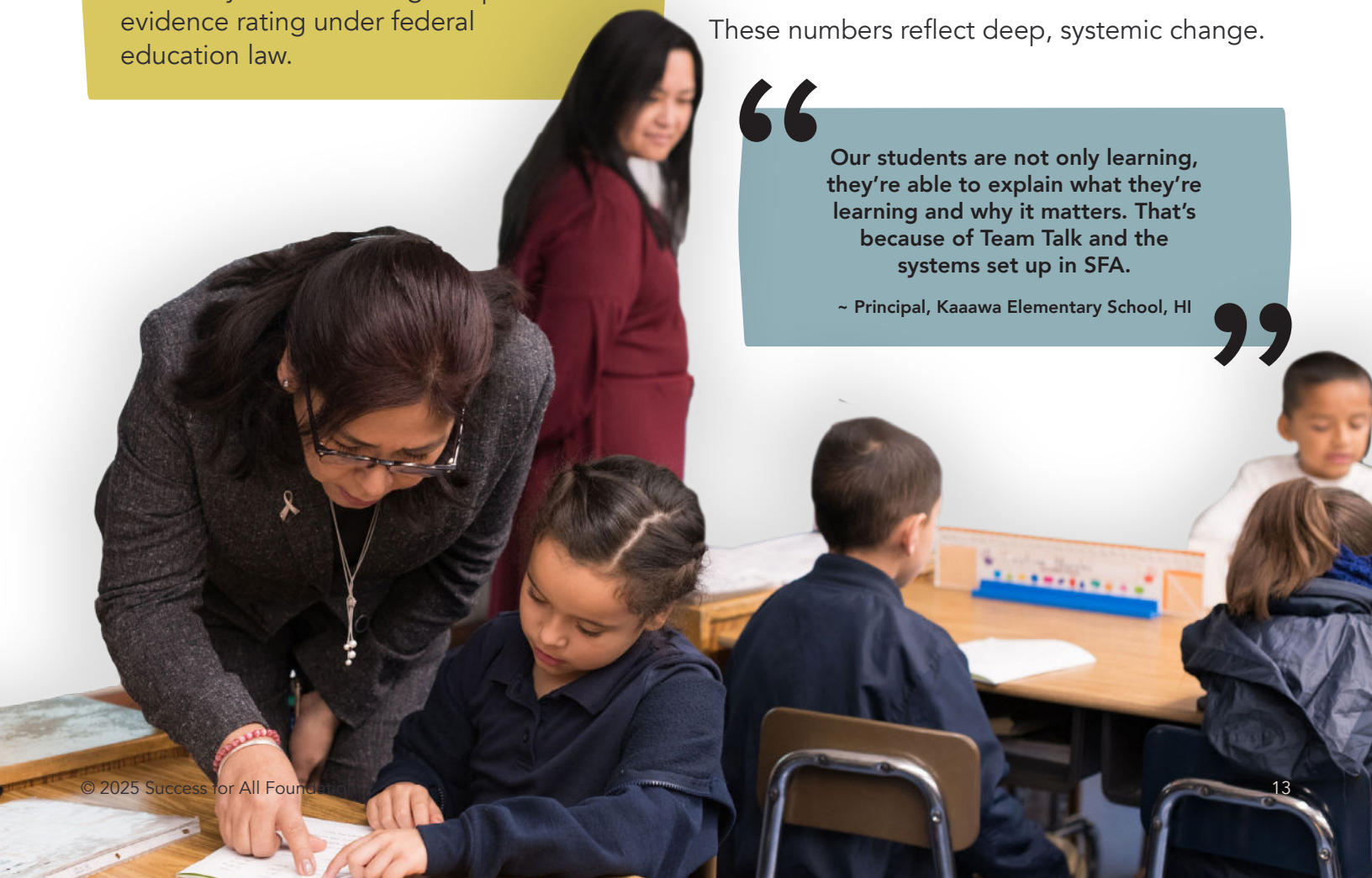
90% of teachers say SFA has improved their ability to teach reading effectively.

92% of principals report a positive shift in school climate, citing reduced discipline referrals, better attendance, and students' ability to articulate their learning.

86% of teachers find it easier to meet diverse student needs.

These numbers reflect deep, systemic change.

> **Our students are not only learning, they're able to explain what they're learning and why it matters. That's because of Team Talk and the systems set up in SFA.**
>
> **~ Principal, Kaaawa Elementary School, HI**



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Part V:

Where Can You Go From Here?

Reflection Tool



Whether you're still building buy-in or ready to make changes, this reflection tool is designed to help you pause, reflect, and take your first step. Use it to identify what's working, what's getting in your way, and what you can do right now to build a system that works for all students.

If You Need More Time to Process

Use these questions to guide a discussion with your team.

What is your system costing you?

- ☐ Are we using programs that don't deliver just because we've already invested in them?
- ☐ What does our data actually say about what's working and what isn't?
- ☐ What are we risking by holding on to ineffective programs or practices?
- ☐ What could we gain by letting them go?

Are we treating symptoms, or strengthening a system?

- ☐ Do we have alignment across instruction, leadership, and student support?
- ☐ Where are the biggest breakdowns in our system?
- ☐ How are those gaps limiting student learning and teacher effectiveness?

Is our team ready?

- ☐ Do our teachers, principals, and families have the tools to make literacy everyone's responsibility?
- ☐ What support do they need?

What does success look like for every child?

- ☐ If every student in our care could read proficiently, what would that mean for them, for us, for our community?

If You're Ready to Act

Use these prompts to help guide action toward a stronger system in your school.

Audit your investments

- ☐ List your current literacy programs, training, and interventions.
- → Are they delivering results? If not, name one thing you'll stop investing in this year.

Start a conversation

- ☐ Use this eBook with your leadership team.
- → Where do we see ourselves? What's one step we'll take toward a more cohesive system?

Measure what matters

- ☐ Choose one metric to track for 30 days—reading growth, attendance, teacher morale.
- → What do we hope to learn? What did we learn? What will we change?

Reach out to SFA

- ☐ Explore our model and $100K scholarship for Title I-eligible elementary schools.
- → What would it take to make this work here?

Bring SFA to your school—with $100K in support

$100,000 implementation scholarships are available for eligible K–5 Title I schools to adopt the Success for All model.

We'll work with you to assess fit, answer questions, and support your team.

Let's talk. Email kenly@successforall.org

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