

THE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

“We tend to put considerations of family, community and economy off-limits in education reform policy discussions. However, we do so at our peril. The seriousness of our purpose requires that we learn to rub our bellies and pat our heads at the same time.”

— Paul E. Barton, Educational Testing Service
Facing the Hard Facts of Education Reform

For children, learning is as natural as breathing or sleeping. Their young minds readily embrace and investigate phenomena they encounter and they easily gather, consider and store information from a multitude of sources. Children learn in different ways, and many factors, including physical and learning disabilities, can help or hinder the process. Creating an environment in which all children can learn at high levels is a challenge for every school in America — a challenge that community schools are designed to meet.

In this chapter, we present an overview of the five conditions for learning that the Coalition believes are essential for every child to succeed. Creating these conditions for learning is a continuous process. Depending on the needs of their own student populations, most community schools will devote more attention to some conditions than to others. Without these conditions in place, however, many children will not succeed and fewer children will realize their full potential.

The Conditions for Learning

Condition #1: The school has a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.

Condition #2: Students are motivated and engaged in learning — both in school and in community settings, during and after school.

Condition #3: The basic physical, mental and emotional health needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.

Condition #4: There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families and school staff.

Condition #5: Community engagement, together with school efforts, promote a school climate that is safe, supportive and respectful and that connects students to a broader learning community.

Several recent reports from well-respected researchers and organizations have been issued on effective learning environments. Page 16 presents a brief summary of their findings. While each of these studies has approached the subject in different ways and used different terms to describe its findings, their conclusions are remarkably similar and reinforce our five conditions for learning.

In the remainder of this chapter, we briefly describe the community school approach related to each condition and cite the research from numerous disciplines on which these conditions are based. The chapter shows the clear connection between what we know about the essential conditions for learning and what community schools are doing to foster them. Vignettes provide examples from local schools.