WASHINGTON B. COLLADO

Four Pillars to Guide
VISIONARY
EDUCATORS

Structuring Schools That Serve
Students in Poverty

Foreword by
Douglas Reeves

CORWIN

Thank you

FOR YOUR
INTEREST IN
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Four
Pillars to Guide Visionary Educators.

LEARN MORE about this title!

CORWIN

Introduction

"Is our society ready to take on this challenge? Are we able to provide education that will develop these more complex skills—not just for a small slice of students who have traditionally been selected for the kind of ambitious learning represented in elite schools and advanced programs, but for the vast majority of children in communities across the country?"

—Linda Darling-Hammond (2010)

Families send their children to school because they want to set their children on a path to success, independence, and the capacity to pursue their life dreams. They place immense hope in schools, trusting that the school has in place the systematic structures necessary to fulfill their mandate and provide students with an excellent education. All schools face obstacles from multiple fronts that make fulfilling their mandate challenging, but schools serving communities of high poverty have even more obstacles to overcome. Low-socioeconomic (SES) communities have unfortunate challenges, such as limited access to financial resources and limited access to health care; the families often have food insecurities and poor housing conditions, with limited access to technology and means of supporting their children's academic lives.

Schools serving these families require a special mandate to ensure that the students in their school are able to overcome the challenges of their environment and family economic status. These students deserve the same education as students from affluent communities, but they require additional support to attain that equity.

Families from low-socioeconomic backgrounds often face additional academic challenges due to limited access to resources, such as books, technology, educational services, and supportive services. Furthermore, low-SES conditions affect access to food and health care and can lead to higher rates of absenteeism and transiency. Children from these communities often come from families with limited educational backgrounds, which limits their ability to support their children academically. English language learners and students with special needs, who are more prevalent in high-poverty communities, also require a greater degree of attention and services from the school community.

Certain educators find fulfillment in serving communities of poverty and creating educational opportunities where they are lacking. They know and understand the impact education can have on breaking the cycle of poverty. This urgency to meet the needs of families can sometimes result in a lack of strategic coherence—the proverbial "throwing spaghetti at the wall to see what sticks" plan. Pressure from the community, families, the district, and the state, as well as political pressures, can lead schools to implement several disparate initiatives without coordination. This book proposes instead *a systemic coordination of strategic thinking, planning, and implementation of action plans that are borne out of real-life analysis of the students and their families' needs.* Students are better served when educators take on a cogent and organized approach, addressing students' needs with efficiency (Reeves, 2023).

In this book, I most often use the term "low-socioeconomic" to refer to families, students, and communities that are facing scarcity in regard to money, food security, home stability, health care, and access to technology and education, among other life necessities. I also use the terms "high poverty" and "low-SES," among others. I acknowledge that none of these terms are perfect or exact, nor do they describe the full breadth and diversity of the families of focus in this book. I have deliberately included stories of real students, families, and educators to emphasize their humanity and dignity above all rather than the obstacles—socioeconomic or otherwise—they may face. These terms describe life conditions that can be mitigated through equity-driven schools and visionary leadership on the part of educators.

Visionary leaders are educators who establish learning organizations supported by four essential pillars: The first pillar represents visionary

leaders who have a vision for a path forward along with action plans; the second pillar represents those educators who cultivate and see the value of family and community engagement. The third pillar represents those educators who serve with an equity mindset and clarity to ensure that inequities do not prevail and negatively impact students' academic and social-emotional life. Finally, the fourth pillar represents those educators who provide personalized support for students to be able to achieve at their highest potential. This systemic coordination of the four pillars increases strategic thinking and increases vital alignment for coordination, which is crucial to meeting the needs of all students, particularly students from low-SES families.

The Four Pillars for Leading Beyond the Poverty Line

In architecture, a pillar—used to support the main frame or the entire building—must be strong, solid, and able to support heavy weight. In society, "pillars of the community" are the stand-out members who hold the fabric of the community together. They are individuals whose values, ethics, work, and credibility are, or should be, valued and emulated. I chose the symbol of "pillars" because I want to convey the physical image a visual that certain elements in education can serve as the stalwart and trustworthy supports that families from low-SES backgrounds can rely on to provide effective educational systems that will give their students the skills and confidence to fulfill their dreams. The pillars mentioned here (vision clarity, family engagement, equity, and emotional and academic support) work together in a coordinated fashion to serve the needs of communities in high poverty.

The book is written to be a practical guide for how educational leaders can serve the needs particular to students from high-poverty schools. In this book, you will find practical strategies focused on the four pillars that will support a coherent and systematic approach to educational excellence—for all students. These four pillars, designed with students from low-SES families in mind, support the essential elements of (1) purpose, (2) family engagement, (3) equity, and (4) teaching, learning, and social-emotional balance (see Figure I.1).
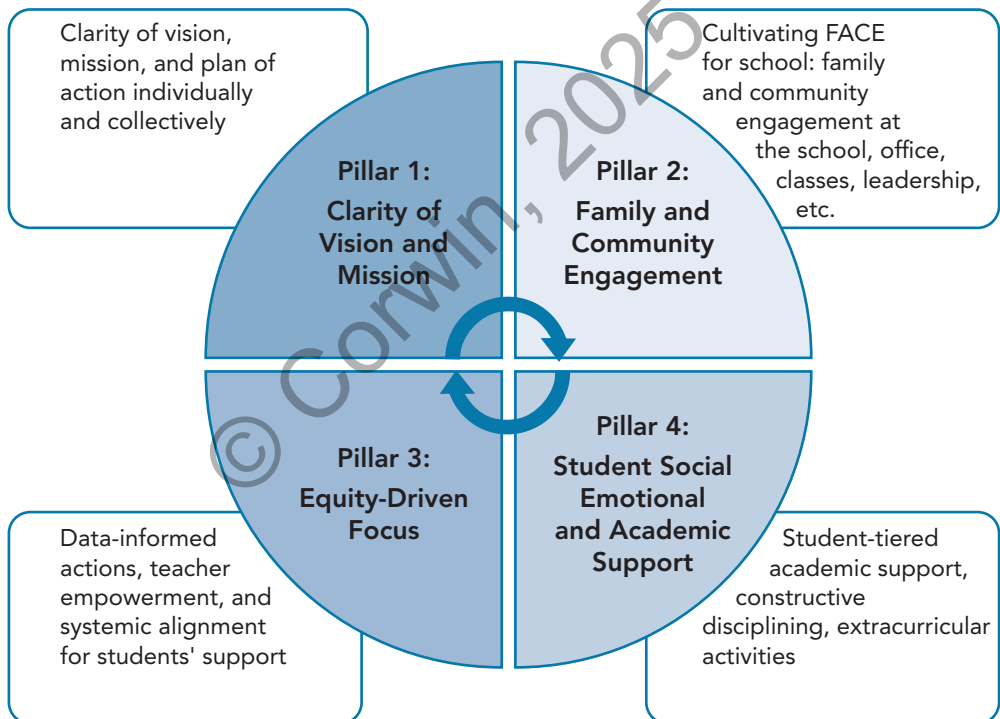
Figure I.1   The Four Pillars
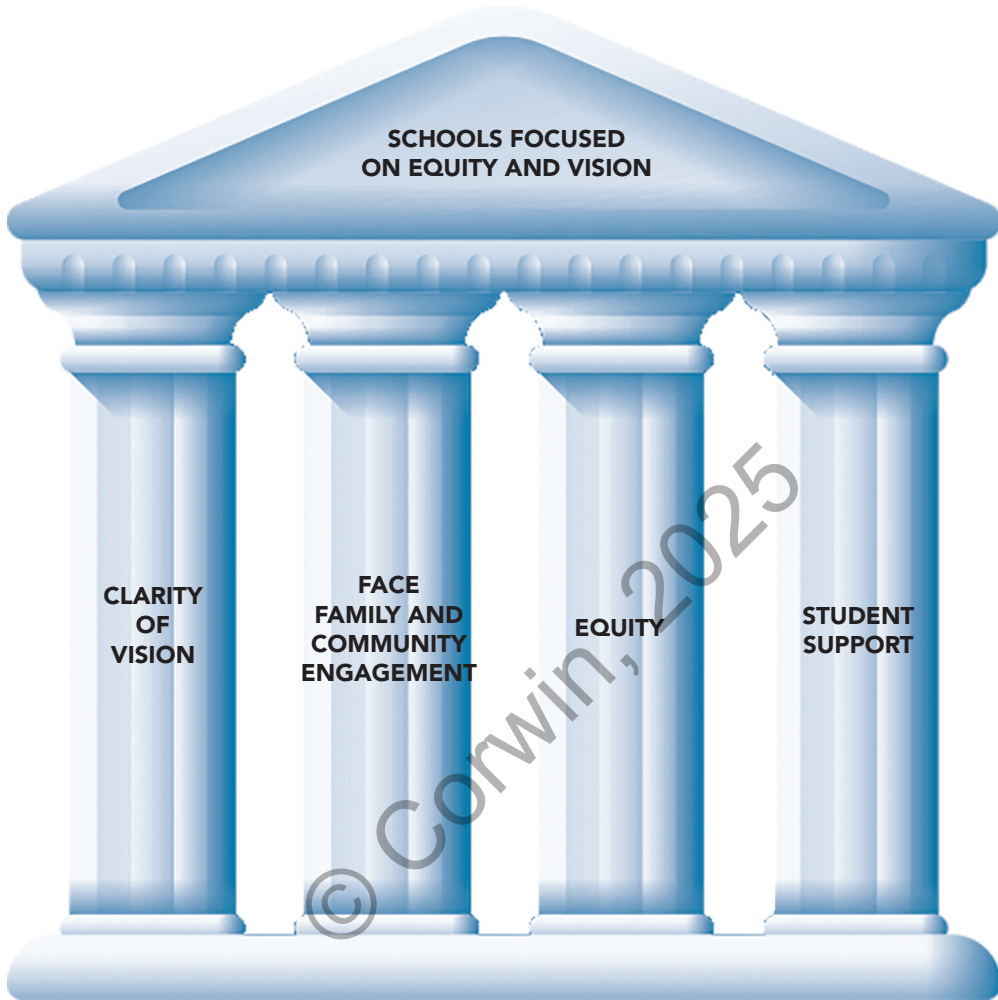
- **Pillar 1:** Vision: Clarity of purpose and mission to achieve goals
- **Pillar 2:** Family and community engagement (FACE)
- **Pillar 3:** Equity-driven focus
- **Pillar 4:** Student social-emotional and academic support

Pillar 1 represents vision and mission. Schools can provide an exemplary education when school teams understand and accept their roles and responsibilities and look to collaborate with other teams. In the process, these educators discover or connect with their "why" (see Figure I.2). Pillar 2 represents family and community engagement. School leaders

working in areas of high poverty need to become informed about the needs particular to their community and conscientiously and strategically reach out to families to encourage their input if they want students to be successful. Pillar 3 delves into practical ways of implementing equity-driven initiatives by addressing inequities and leveling the playing field to set the stage for Pillar 4—creating a collaborative, supportive network to guide the students toward academic proficiency and social-emotional balance. Academic proficiency and social-emotional balance are inextricably linked. Social-emotional and academic support must be in place to assure all students that they can succeed in school with the necessary help.

Figure I.2   How the Four Pillars Work Together

Clarity of vision, mission, and plan of action individually and collectively

Cultivating FACE for school: family and community engagement at the school, office, classes, leadership, etc.

Pillar 1: Clarity of Vision and Mission

Pillar 2: Family and Community Engagement

Pillar 3: Equity-Driven Focus

Pillar 4: Student Social Emotional and Academic Support

Data-informed actions, teacher empowerment, and systemic alignment for students' support

Student-tiered academic support, constructive disciplining, extracurricular activities

Who Is This Book For?

Leadership matters. Educators are called upon to maintain the trust society has placed upon our shoulders. This book is written for school-based educators with school-based leadership aspirations. Leadership is not limited to school administrators; school leaders are all educators with a desire to lead learning and a desire to create a systemic structure

where teaching and learning can consistently take place. This leadership mentality can occur anywhere from the classroom, the counselor's office, the principal's office, the superintendent's office, and the boardroom. The need for coherent and focused leadership is all inclusive of individuals who said "yes" to serving as educators. This book is written with the following educators in mind:

- *Classroom and teachers in academic support positions*
- *Counselors and teachers providing social and emotional support*
- *Department chairs and grade-level leaders*
- *Educators leading family and community involvement*
- *Assistant principals and vice principals*
- *Principals*
- *District-based administrators working to support academic programs*

Features and Benefits

As a practical guide, this book is full of features to help you meet the particular needs of students living in areas of high poverty. These features include the following:

- **The four pillars:** A key feature of the book is the idea of the four pillars. These four support structures, when implemented systematically, work together to provide students with the help they need to succeed regardless of what obstacles they face.

- **Figures:** Throughout the book, you will find images and tables that present the research and information in easily accessible and digestible formats.

- **Quotable quotes:** In each chapter, a key point is highlighted in a pull quote. These serve both for emphasis and as a way for readers to easily find key passages as needed.

- **Vignettes:** These stories about real administrators and real students bring the research and strategies to life. They show that students living in poverty, learning a new language, and working with learning differences can succeed academically socially and emotionally when schools provide the support systems they need to reach their full potential. A few stories also show how the system has failed some of our students.

> Leadership is not limited to school administrators; school leaders are all educators with a desire to lead learning and a desire to create a systemic structure where teaching and learning can consistently take place.

- **Strategies:** Each chapter offers strategies for how school leaders can implement the four pillars in their own schools.

- **Activities:** Readers are encouraged to try the activities as a way to implement the ideas and strategies offered in the book in their own school contexts.

- **Key chapter takeaways:** The main points are listed at the end of each chapter as a quick reminder and review of what to focus on when applying the lessons on that topic.

- **Reflection questions:** The reflection questions are yet another way of inviting readers to consider how they can take the concepts discussed in the chapter and apply them in their own schools and districts.

When schools diligently realize the place they have in the community, understand the socioeconomic construct of the communities they service, and methodically address all elements within their control, and when their work methodically aligns their strategies with a clear vision motivated by ethical leadership, students, families, and educators win.