



# Benchmarks

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## Comprehensive School Reform: Meeting the Needs of All Students

In order for comprehensive school reform (CSR) to be an effective approach to school-wide improvement that incorporates every aspect of a school — from curriculum and instruction to school management — it must meet the needs of all students. This means that the CSR plan should include specific strategies for enabling language minority and special education students to meet challenging academic content and performance goals.

This issue of NCCSR Benchmarks provides an introduction to serving special needs students through CSR. Specific recommendations are included to help educators ensure that their CSR initiatives are truly comprehensive.

## English Language Learners in a Comprehensive School Reform Context

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## English Language Learners

The challenge for schools with English Language Learners (ELLs) is twofold – to *teach* English language acquisition and to meet challenging content standards. Schools engaged in comprehensive school reform (CSR) have the additional challenge of meeting the needs of ELLs within a unified school program. If the CSR goal of school improvement is to occur, schools with ELLs must attend to the language acquisition needs of this student population explicitly. English Language Learners (ELLs), also known

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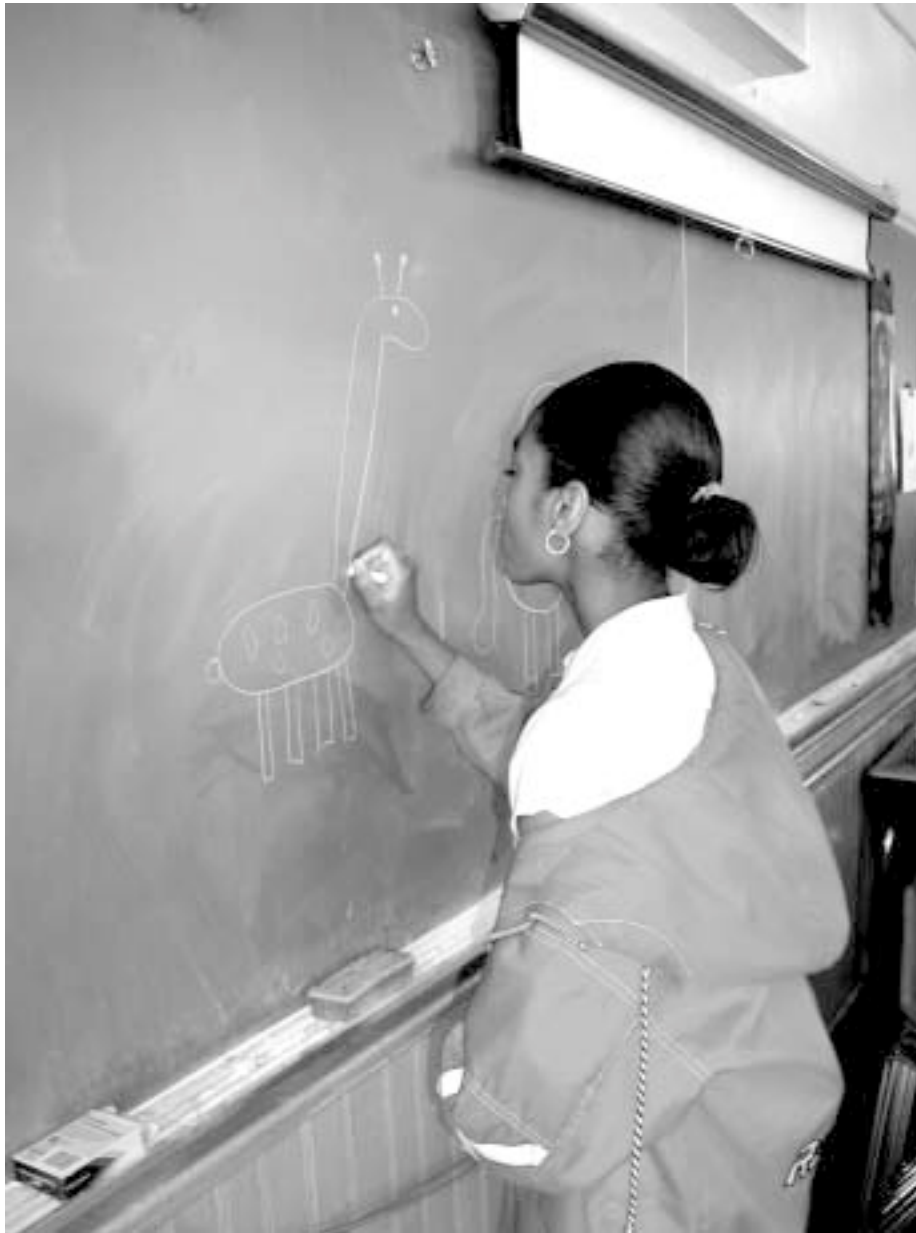
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as limited English proficient (LEP), are those students for whom English is a second language and for whom grade-level proficiency in reading and writing in English are affected by a lack of adequate English language skills (Berman et al., 1995). As of 1996-97, the reported number of LEP public school students comprised 8 percent (3,405,915) of the total reported public school enrollment in grades K-12 (NCBE, 1998). The 1990 Census data indicate that more than 40 percent of LEP stu-

dents are immigrants and twice as likely as other students to be poor. Many of these LEP students live in urban areas and attend high poverty, low performing schools targeted for CSR.

In the past, specific resources from federal and state levels were directed toward these students and separate school-level programs were set up by districts in an effort to meet their needs. With the U.S. Department of Education's 1998 Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR) program, decisions about teaching and learning that affect ELLs have devolved to the school level. Schools with CSR grants must have a comprehensive design for effective school functioning that enables all students to meet challenging state content and performance standards (Public Law 105-78).

Many schools, through CSR, have adopted research-based models in order to provide a unified school design for effective school functioning. Unfortunately, many of the models do not include

training in teaching methodologies and specific curricula for English language acquisition that provide ELLs access to the challenging content standards that should be applied to all students equally. The caution here is that although research-based models establish a shared vision around a quality education and a design for effective school functioning, schools with ELLs may need to adapt model designs in order to apply standards uniformly. Alternatively, schools with ELLs developing their own unified school design must also be mindful of their language-based needs.

## School Characteristics and Strategies for Inclusion of ELLs in CSR

Berman et al. (1995), identified schools that appropriately include ELLs in a school reform program in a study contracted by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). Characteristics of these schools include:

- ◆ School restructuring supporting improved teaching and learning for all students.
- ◆ A comprehensive language acquisition program.

- ◆ A challenging language arts curriculum.

In the curriculum-approved CSR models, the majority do not address how to provide a comprehensive language acquisition program for ELLs.

McLeod (1996) identifies features of a **comprehensive language acquisition program**. Primary features include:

- ◆ **Schools integrate English language acquisition with the entire educa-**

### CSR in Action

While visiting schools across the country with Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program grants, staff from the U.S. Department of Education discovered schools that had put English Language Learners at the heart of their CSR plans. Reporting on two approaches to including all students in dual language programs, they wrote:

“An urban school with a high percentage of limited English proficient students selected a reform model that included a Spanish-language component. The model has a curriculum and materials specifically designed for Spanish speakers, and features literature originally written in Spanish rather than simply translated into Spanish. In this dual language program, English language learners receive their primary literacy instruction in Spanish followed by an English as Second Language block. Once students achieve English proficiency, their primary literacy instruction is in English, supplemented by a literature block in Spanish later in the day.

“Other schools visited are using variations of this dual language approach. One school uses a two-way program in which an equal number of Spanish speakers and English speakers learn both languages together, while another school gradually increases the amount of time students are taught in each language. At this school, kindergarten and first grade are taught 90% of the time in Spanish and receive 10% of instruction in English. In second grade the ratio changes to 80:20. This pattern continues until fifth grade, when instructional time is equally divided between English and Spanish.” (p.8)

The Department’s full report on these site visits, *CSR in the Field: Final Update July 2000*, is available on the Internet at:

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/csrd00reportfinal.pdf>.

**tional program and create a comprehensive language development program for ELLs.**

Language development for ELLs in the study schools often used a complex combination of bilingual<sup>1</sup>, sheltered English<sup>2</sup> and ESL approaches. Schools did not rely on segregated or pullout ESL classes as the primary means of helping students acquire English. Further, the programs for ELLs were integrated and coordinated with the “regular” school program and ELLs were not isolated from their English-proficient peers. Schools’ reform planning created ways for assisting ELLs to acquire English in an orderly process over a period of several years. Schools were mindful of the need to develop strategies for ELLs to make the transition to all English instruction. Lastly, ELLs are required to engage in the same type of thinking, reading, and writing activities as their English-proficient peers.

**◆Schools encourage the natural use of language for meaningful communication.**

Students are allowed to use their native language to ask questions when they are unable to do so in English. In the study schools, many of the teachers of the sheltered classes were fluent in students’ native language. Although En-

glish was the median of instruction, students could ask questions in their native language and use their native language to help fellow students who were less proficient in English.

**◆ELLs are transitioned to English with flexible and individualized approaches.**

Acquiring English is seen as an ongoing process of increasing mastery that takes place over time. Schools in the study did not rely on categorizations of students’ English ability and did not expect them to move abruptly from bilingual or sheltered classes into “regular” classes. Instead, strategies were created to guide students toward success in all-English classes that took into account students’ variations of progress.

**◆ELLs are integrated with native English-proficient students.**

Schools in the study considered it important for ELLs to mix with English-proficient students for both pedagogical and social reasons. Pedagogically grouping ELLs with English-proficient students allows them to practice English in a natural language context. Socially, it promotes inclusion and prevents isolation and alienation.

**◆Students are engaged in literacy development activities.**

Schools consider literacy development an integral part of language acquisition. Schools in the study engaged ELLs in “deep” literacy activities such as reading authentic literature, literary analysis, and a multistep process of writing, editing and revising.

<sup>1</sup> Bilingual programs – instruction using English and the native language of students. There are two types of bilingual programs: (1) **transitional bilingual programs** where ELLs are instructed primarily in their native language in the early grades, with the proportion of native language instruction gradually decreasing and the proportion of English language instruction increasing as they move up the grades; and (2) **two-way bilingual** where both ELL students and English-proficient students study together to become proficient in both English and the native language of the ELL students.

<sup>2</sup> Sheltered English – instruction for ELL students in English adjusted to their level of fluency.

## Conclusion

To ensure that ELLs are included in comprehensive school reform their teaching and learning needs must be explicitly met when schools move to a unified school program. Thus the challenge for schools with ELLs is to *teach* both English language acquisition and challenging content. While CSR and CSRD schools may adopt research-based programs that restructure the school organization, implement challenging content curricula, and adapt instruction to improve student achievement, schools must integrate a comprehensive language acquisition program in the curriculum. Without addressing the English language acquisition needs of ELLs, schools jeopardize student achievement and risk not teaching all students to meet challenging state content standards.

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## Comprehensive School Reform and Students with Disabilities

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## Introduction

How do we help students with disabilities achieve, push for higher standards, take graduation tests and fulfill their individual educational needs at the same time? Comprehensive school reform (CSR) is a promising strategy for assembling the puzzle of inclusive classrooms, curriculum standards, student assessment, transition from school-to-work and individualized educational plans. CSR is not a single change that needs to take place, but rather a complicated set of issues and concerns that require careful consideration, vision, planning and an informed faculty who are ready and willing to undertake such efforts on behalf of their students. In-depth understanding of the needs of all students, including those with disabilities and the goals of CSR bring us closer to the acceptance of change. Attaining high standards, transition planning, inclusion and school-to-work are all essential parts of the CSR puzzle when put together to meet the needs of all students, including students with disabilities, and are integrated into the CSR plan of action.

## Standards-Based Reform

The Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities (McDonnell et al., 1997) was a project supported by The Governing Board of the National Research Council, representing members of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine. Their report, *Educating One and All: Students with Disabilities and Standards Based Reform*, highlighted many of the dilemmas that special education teachers are facing today. They noted that standards-based reform intersects with a long-standing special education policy framework, which has evolved over three decades to counteract a history of educational neglect, inequity and mistreatment.

The Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities supports the belief that the goals of standards-based reform, raising expectations, improving educational outcomes and strengthening curriculum content are as important for the students with disabilities as they are for all children. Difficulties arise when some features of effective curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities are at odds with the curriculum and instruction typically embraced by standards-based reform. Currently, content standards focus primarily on academic subject content, rather than vocational and workplace skills. The Committee stated that it is important that broader outcomes and school-to-work transition

planning not be neglected in the move toward standards-based reform. To achieve positive outcomes transition planning is mandated to begin at age 14 in the IDEA legislation.<sup>1</sup>

Clark and deFur (1999) noted that there is growing concern by policymakers that students with disabilities participate in statewide testing at a much lower rate than their peers without disabilities. Some school administrators have chosen to exclude students with disabilities out of concern that the overall school test scores would be lower. In addition, many standardized tests do not make any accommodations for students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities complain about stress and fear of test taking and feeling they are inadequate when forced to take tests on which they know they will not do well or even understand. Regardless of the reason for exclusion, there is a general concern that to automatically exclude a group or class of students from taking a test is discriminatory. Congress approved the IDEA requirement that students with disabilities be included “when appropriate” in general state and district-wide assessments, with accommodations. Furthermore, states are directed to develop and conduct alternate assessments for students for whom participation in the general state assessment would not be appropriate.

## Transition Planning

The Committee noted that special education has traditionally focused on a broad set of knowledge and skills that go beyond academic goals. To be well prepared in life after school, some students with disabilities require specific instruction in workplace readiness, vocational skills and independent living skills. Clark and deFur (1999) fear transition planning will become rooted in legislation rather than a logical process with a human perspective of multiple life transitions and adjustments. This is of concern since post secondary employment and community integration outcomes for these students remain discouraging (National Council on Disabilities, 1999, Harris Poll).

<sup>1</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates students’ right to a free and appropriate public education tailored to meet their individual learning needs. An IEP is used in establishing educational objectives and specifies the kinds of educational and related services they are to receive. Education in the least restrictive environment is a hallmark of this policy framework and has led to inclusion classrooms where students with disabilities are educated with their peers as much as possible.



Clark and Patton (1997) identified the transition planning areas as follows:

- ◆ Career planning options and employment (including workplace readiness and specific job skills)
- ◆ Supportive technology and daily living skills (including domestic areas)
- ◆ Financial skills (including income and money management)
- ◆ Advocacy and legal rights
- ◆ Functional academics, postsecondary education and lifelong learning
- ◆ Health (including medical services) and insurance
- ◆ Independent living, personal management, leisure and recreation

- ◆ Relationship, communication and social skills
- ◆ Self-determination and self-advocacy skills
- ◆ Transportation and mobility skills

Students with disabilities need on-going assessments to ensure that they are progressing appropriately in relation to their individual education plans (IEPs) as well as in relation to standards-based curricula. IEP accountability includes assessment for transition planning which monitors non-standards-based outcomes and can encompass the following areas:

- ◆ Interests, preferences, choice-making and self-determination skills
- ◆ Physical health and fitness

- ◆Motor, speech and language skills
- ◆Cognitive development and academic achievement
- ◆Adaptive behavior, emotional development and mental health
- ◆Independent and interdependent living skills
- ◆Leisure and community participation skills
- ◆Employability and vocational skills

The results of the formal and informal collection of data in these areas can contribute significantly to a meaningful individual education plan (IEP) which meets not only the letter, but the spirit of the law (Sitlington et al., 1996).

## Inclusion and Curriculum

The inclusion of students with disabilities movement is an expression of a long-fought civil rights movement that has been in progress throughout the past several decades. It is another extension of the widely accepted philosophy of equal protection under the law (Kochhar et al., 2000). As this movement progresses, general and special education teachers alike are concerned about the content of curriculum taught in inclusion classrooms. There are many dilemmas facing a teacher when considering curriculum content, meeting standards and reaching all students in the class. Curriculum experts recommend that teachers consider the following 12 principles when they explore ways to modify curriculum to accommodate diverse learners:

- (1) Raise expectations for all students.
- (2) Create an integrated, coherent curriculum with connections across subjects.
- (3) Include what to cover and how the material fosters the ability of the learner to use and apply knowledge resourcefully in curriculum decisions.
- (4) Place learning in a context that makes sense to the learner.
- (5) Direct all learners toward common general standards of achievement.
- (6) Develop evaluations that include nontraditional evaluations of performance, such as exhibitions, which call for the resourceful application of knowledge more than just its display.
- (7) Engage learners in advanced academic work to prepare them for college placement.
- (8) Train teachers to be facilitators of learning and teach learners to be active doers and thinkers.
- (9) Give each learner an advisor, advocate or coordinator with whom the learner plans an academic program.
- (10) Integrate current technology into the curriculum so that all learners will be proficient in the use of computers for communication, computation and research.
- (11) Give learners who elect to concentrate their studies in vocational education the opportunity to engage in advanced study through structured apprenticeships that are patterned after work-study arrangements. These advanced occupational opportunities serve as a bridge between secondary school and college or employment, and they provide for an organized transition into occupations.
- (12) Develop additional planning and supports for the transition to college or work after graduation.

These recommendations are compiled from professional literature and are consistent with best practice in the exemplary inclusion programs (Hallahan & Kaufman, 1997; Marsh & Willis, 1999; Schmidt & Harriman, 1998). They can provide a foundation for CSR.

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## School-To-Work

The school-to-work movement is designed for all students, including those with disabilities. The importance of providing, expanding and improving the career development of students with disabilities is recognized and valued by the fact that transition planning is mandated as part of IDEA. There are many models of school-to-work programs, but they essentially have these common elements: career awareness, educational and occupational exploration, career preparation, self-knowledge and career planning.

Similarly, Kozinski (1994) said that any effective school-to-work model must be designed to help students develop the following traits:

- (1) A sense of purpose and direction;
- (2) A concept of self;
- (3) Basic skills and knowledge;

- (4) Positive attitudes about work, school and society and a sense of satisfaction resulting from successful experience in these areas;
- (5) Personal characteristics of self-respect, self-reliance, perseverance, initiative and resourcefulness;
- (6) A realistic understanding of relationships between the worlds of work and education;
- (7) A comprehensive awareness of career options in the world of work; and
- (8) The ability to enter employment in an appropriate occupation.

In a comprehensive improvement plan, school-to-work ties easily to transition planning because the above traits are precisely what transition planning is trying to accomplish.



## Conclusion

The Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities had two principles underlying all of their recommendations: all students should have access to challenging standards, and policymakers and educators should be held publicly accountable for every student's performance.

Special educators face the ongoing dilemma of presenting a challenging standards-based curriculum that will facilitate successful performance on statewide tests while simultaneously addressing the issues of school-to-work and valuable transition planning. To ensure successful comprehensive school reform that includes students with disabilities, we recommend the following four actions:

- ◆ Conduct comprehensive staff training in the following areas: legislation, transition planning (including assessment) and curriculum development.
- ◆ Establish a transition task force that will focus on making transition a priority in the school reform movement.
- ◆ Provide opportunities for curriculum workshops that give teachers the time to develop contextualized curriculum units and that integrate academic content standards with meaningful life experiences.
- ◆ Keep all students at the center of any decisions and policies which affect them, ensuring that policies are reasonable and meaningful and are not harmful in any way to any student's educational achievement.

Those who make public policy and decision makers at federal, state and local levels would do well to reflect on Alan Gartner and Dorothy Lipsky's (1992, p.123) questions:

*“The ultimate rationale for inclusion is based not on law or regulations or teaching technology, but on values. What kinds of people are we and what kind of society do we wish to develop? What values do we honor?”*

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