



Benchmarks

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Taking Stock: Lessons on Comprehensive School Reform from Policy, Practice, and Research

Introduction

For over two decades, the American Educational Research Association and the Institute for Educational Leadership have jointly sponsored the Education Policy Forum Luncheon Series featuring speakers and discussion of topical issues at the Library of Congress. During the 2000-2001 series, the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) partnered with these organizations and took the lead in coordinating a series of three sessions devoted to comprehensive school reform (CSR). Together, the three sessions were designed to stimulate provocative discussions about the context, purpose, and promise of CSR to turn around low-performing schools.

NCCSR invited the following diverse group of practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and model developers to present CSR issues from a variety of perspectives:

- Dr. Susan Bodilly, RAND
- Dr. Denise Borders, The McKenzie Group
- Ms. Wendy Buckwalter, MicroSociety, Inc.
- Dr. Hugh Burkett, U.S. Department of Education
- Ms. Gail Clark, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning
- Dr. Rebecca Herman, American Institutes for Research
- Dr. Larry Leverett, Superintendent of Schools, Plainfield, NJ
- Dr. Beverly Mattson, RMC Research Corporation
- Ms. Susanna Purnell, National Association of State Boards of Education

NCCSR
2121 K Street NW, Suite 250
Washington, DC 20037-1801

AskNCCSR@goodschools.gwu.edu

www.goodschools.gwu.edu

Telephone 1 (877) 766-4CSR or 4277

Fax 1 (877) 308-4995

About NCCSR—A partnership of The George Washington University, the Council for Basic Education, and the Institute for Educational Leadership

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform collects and disseminates information that builds the capacity of schools to raise the academic achievement of all students. Through its web site, reference and retrieval services, and publications, NCCSR is the central gateway to information on CSR. If you have documents on CSR that should be added to our database, please contact us for submission information.

This issue of Benchmarks provides highlights from the three sessions with an emphasis on the lessons that the speakers have learned from personal experience as well as research.

Supply and Demand: The Beginning of CSR

Comprehensive school reform (CSR) is a framework for using research to move from multiple, fragmented educational programs to a unified plan with a single focus — academic achievement. Having been asked to speak about the emergence of CSR, Dr. Bodilly offered an interesting market-based analysis of the changes in thinking about school reform over the past ten years. On the supply side, she pointed out the effective schools research, the Catholic schools that became well known for succeeding with low-income students, and the development of coherent and comprehensive models by university researchers. On the demand side, she saw the increased pressure on low-performing schools and the creation of grants for schools through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program. According to Dr. Bodilly, “you had a supply being built over time, a demand being built over time, and a mechanism to clear the market. That is, schools with Title I monies could apply for CSRD funds through an RFP process.... And that’s when you got comprehensive school reform.”

Do CSR Models Work?

Dr. Herman, a researcher with the American Institutes for Research who served as the project director for the Educator’s Guide to Comprehensive School Reform, addressed the question of whether or not CSR models have the potential to improve student achievement. She reported that

In The Educator’s Guide we found that no models had uniformly positive effects, and no models had uniformly negative or neutral effects. In other words, no model worked in every case and every situation. We did find three models that had strong evidence of effects on student achievement, and we’re talking about noticeable effects... substantial effect sizes, where students are moving up a grade or two in their achievement levels. The three models that had strong evidence of effects were Success for All, High Schools That Work, and Direct Instruction.

There were five models that had promising evidence of effects, and in that case they might have had good evidence but not quite enough studies. The models might have been a little newer. Those were Community for Learning, Core Knowledge, Different Ways of Knowing, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, and the School Development Program.

While Dr. Herman is confident that CSR can increase student achievement, she is concerned that early research has shown that the “outcomes depend heavily on implementation.” For Dr. Herman, that raises several questions: “How easy are different types of models to implement? What support does the developer provide to ensure that implementation goes smoothly, or to help it go smoothly? And what are the responsibilities of each of the players in implementing a reform model?” In response to these questions, she provided the following information:

- Research indicates that it is easier to implement more directive models as opposed to philosophical or process-oriented models. However, that does not mean that these models are better or will be more effective in the long run.
- Developers of the more philosophical or process-oriented models are easing implementation by

Dr. Larry Leverett, superintendent of schools in Plainfield, NJ:

We're a small community district with 7,400 children. Our mission is as follows: The Plainfield public schools, in partnership with its community, shall do whatever it takes for every student to achieve high academic standards, no alibis, no excuses, no exceptions. It's not a mission that we just hang on a wall, post on our promotional material; it's a mission that we work and live and strive to make happen each and every day.

About 25 to 30 percent of the 1,000 people involved in the Plainfield education enterprise are at a level of "mission warrior." These are people who are seriously committed to getting the work done; who, like many of you, are engaged in a more passionate way, beyond the 9 to 5 commitment, to ensuring that this mission lives and breathes and remains the central focus of our work. We are a pre-K-12 Abbott school district. The thirty Abbott school districts are the state's poorest school districts.

This is a district that was once a solid, middle-class suburban school district until the rebellions of the mid-'60s. Following the rebellions of the mid-'60s and continuing into the '70s and '80s, lots of different kinds of flight occurred, such as by the white middle class. Attention to standards and attention to expectations declined as the population became browner, blacker, yellower and redder and poorer. Not only did expectations recede, but so did student performance, and so did the sense of connectedness between the schools and communities.

We have been on a reform agenda for the past six years. I have been superintendent of schools in Plainfield now for six years, and I just got my contract renewed for another three. Thirteen of our schools are involved with whole school reform models. Ten are implementing America's Choice, two are implementing the Ventures Initiative, and one is involved in the implementation of Accelerated Schools.

In our journey with whole school reform, we have had some challenges locally in helping the model developers to find ways to be more inclusive. In Plainfield, 11.8 percent of our children are classified as having special needs. About 35.2 percent of the children who are so classified participate in inclusion-oriented programs. A recent study was published in New Jersey that arrayed the classification and inclusion rates from urban to suburban and it was very disheartening -- urbans have higher classification rates but also lower inclusion rates, which says something else about the challenges that we face in urban schools.

The whole school reform models that we have been engaged in have not paid a lot of attention to special populations. We're a growing limited English-speaking population and we've had to come up with our own designs, working with our model developers — primarily America's Choice — to translate the America's Choice model and the other models to adapt to local conditions, to serve needs of special-needs children and limited English-speaking children. We are beginning to see evidence of impact, particularly in the America's Choice schools.

In New Jersey, there are three cohorts of Abbott schools. We are in the second cohort. And our five America's Choice schools in Plainfield, when compared to the implementation of whole school reform models in other second cohort Abbott schools — as measured by the performance of our students on the grade four state high-stakes test in language arts literacy, which has been our focus — ranked top in that cohort of schools. So we're seeing measurable results in lots of different ways, but we also have bunches of challenges.

offering supportive materials. These include recommended, but not required, curricula and governance structures.

- Developers of all types of models are also creating implementation guides and benchmarks that indicate what schools should be doing to fully adopt the model.
- Schools must select models very carefully, based on their needs and options, and remember that no model works in every situation. The staff as a whole must also make a commitment to “seeing the reform through the early rocky period.” Three to five years may be needed to fully integrate the model into the school.
- Districts must provide an environment that is conducive to reform by allowing “schools to have some of the decisions that are going to make a difference, decisions like curriculum, ... decisions on staff, on professional development, on budget, so that they have the flexibility to implement the model.”

Ms. Purnell echoed many of Dr. Herman’s findings regarding the relative ease of implementing more concrete models and the responsibilities of schools and districts in bringing about successful implementation. Reporting an early finding from her study of Success for All, Ms. Purnell said

Two of the schools almost had a complete turnover of the staff within three years. A combination of different factors have played a role in compensating for the loss of most of the staff trained on that model: the district supported the design and encouraged other schools to adopt it so that new teachers could go to other schools for training, and the fact that within the schools the design has facilitated the set-up of a community of sharing through peer observation. Because the design itself is so specific and almost scripted, and the model developer provides continuing technical assistance, one could go into these schools and recognize what they were doing.

Deep Leadership: A Key Factor for Implementing and Sustaining CSR

On the topic of school leadership, Dr. Leverett and Dr. Burkett agreed that in order for CSR to be successful, leadership must be distributed throughout the school. After acknowledging the importance of the principal, Dr. Leverett went on to ask, “how much leadership can we distribute throughout the organization, and how deeply can we penetrate the organization to establish new ideas about leadership in

schools and leadership in classrooms? Not only leadership in appointed positions, but leadership that we can nurture in ways that allows people to have influence on the structures, the culture, the climate, the rules, what gets rewarded, what doesn't get rewarded. [It's a matter of] reframing leadership roles of people who are in nontraditional roles, like a classroom teacher as leader, so that he or she can have influence throughout the school on important policy and practice decisions.”

Expanding on the same idea, Dr. Burkett addressed the issues of turnover and sustainability as follows:

The role of the principal is key. But ... the language I use is “deep leadership.” Deep leadership has to go beyond the principal; because when the principal leaves, and he will leave or she will leave, the reform can't leave.... It's taking a strong leader as a principal, and then creating within that building a big cross section of other teachers and indi-



viduals in the building who will step up and own the reform effort. Then, those teachers who have built that leadership infrastructure within that building need a say in who that new principal is that comes in when you have a transition. So principal succession is an important part of a district plan. [Finally, the district needs to say that] if you're going to be the principal here, you also had to buy into this. Your job is to actualize our vision.

The District's Role: Pressure and Support

Larry Leverett drew on his experience to emphasize that the district's role in CSR is striking a delicate balance between pressuring schools to improve and supporting their efforts. He explained that

We are a school district that is implementing three different models in 13 different schools. There is going to be, no matter what you do, a certain amount of variability from school to school and even [for schools using] the same model.

But there also has to be a certain measure of consistency across the model that all schools are expected to meet. [The district must provide] a combination of both pressure and support: all pressure, no support – little change; all support, no pressure – no change. So the tightrope that the district has to walk is how much pressure, how much support ... to get a certain amount of consistency to ensure that we don't bastardize the well-researched models that we are implementing.

Dr. Beverly Mattson of RMC Research Corporation shared a vignette from an elementary school in one of her studies:

The principal, in his first year, before they applied for a CSRD grant, decided he really needed to work on consensus building and the school culture. And he took a whole year, actually, working with the faculty, analyzing all of their assessment data and trying to look at what had been effective in the past, what hadn't been effective, and reaching a consensus then on what needed to be changed in order to improve student performance. Then they did a review of different CSRD models and decided on Community for Learning.

They are now in their second-year of implementation and the principal is providing that leadership and that support, but he is also having to support the staff through all of the changes that they've made, because Community for Learning has changed their roles and responsibilities. Everybody is reorganized now and team-based. They've changed ... practices ... and there are 12 dimensions of instruction that they have to implement. And teachers are talking about how difficult it is with all of these changes to keep up with it, and with the pressure then to actually raise student performance. So the principal talks about always having this balance between supporting people through the personal and the organizational change, as well as keeping the pressure on so that they keep the momentum before burning everybody else out.

Illustrating Dr. Leverett's point about pressuring schools to have a certain amount of fidelity to the model, Ms. Purnell offered the following example:

What happened in at least one school was that the special education teachers decided they needed more time so they took a curriculum that divided into three-day units and stretched them into a five-day units for the whole school year, which meant those children never had a chance to even get through a year's worth of work. And it was almost like ... converting to a design for falling farther and farther behind.

An interesting question on all these designs is that you can you manipulate the designees to fit your local needs, but at what point [does this] change the nature of the design? And

that's what we are struggling with right now: did these teachers push the pacing of the instruction too far out of sync and did they give instruction as specified a fair chance?

Reallocating Resources

As many schools in the first round of CSRD are now finished with their three year grants, many educators, policymakers and researchers are wondering if the schools will remain committed to CSR and reallocate resources so that they do not need the grant to continue implementation. Dr. Burkett explained that he tries to help schools view the CSRD grant as start-up funds, not funds for full implementation. Dr. Bodilly added that RAND's studies found that roughly 60 percent of the costs of a CSR model were for teacher

time. Thus, she hopes that schools will not think of CSR in terms of additional dollars, but in terms of reallocating current dollars and staff positions.

But reallocating resources is not as simple as it may seem. Ms. Purnell emphasized that reallocating means letting go of some existing programs, and possibly people. She shared the following example from her research:

We found a big barrier to implementing the parental involvement element of the model was that over the years the school had invested in its own parent program. And it was, “Oh, we’re going to do cooking, you know, this night. And this night some guy’s going to come in and help you do your income tax form.” That’s nice, but the model came with parent programs dealing with questions like how do you help your child read? That was getting lost because of this existing structure. So this involves abandonment of what people have invested in, or at least making room for what’s in the new model.

Model Developers’ Accountability

In discussing model developers’ accountability, Ms. Buckwalter from MicroSociety presented three critical issues: readiness for reform, fidelity during implementation and evaluation for continuous learning.

During the pre-implementation phase, Ms. Buckwalter thinks model developers “have a responsibility to the schools to work with them to determine their level of readiness and to determine how they are a match with the program.” Since staff members and conditions will change over time, she also thinks of readiness as a continuing process that the model developer and school must reassess occasionally.

During implementation, Ms. Buckwalter sees two issues that model developers need to emphasize — fidelity and capacity. Regarding fidelity towards the model, her main concern is that the school staff has a common purpose and implements the model to achieve that purpose. If the model and the school’s needs are a good fit, then proper implementation should be the key to meeting the goal. Capacity is also a focus of implementation so that the school will be developing a deeper understanding of and commitment to the model, and thus developing the ability to sustain implementation over time.

Lastly, Ms. Buckwalter addressed the model developer’s responsibility to help the school use data. She explained that “sometimes in a busy school day, assessment may be the last thing anyone is thinking about – really assessing what students are learning on a regular basis, and using that data to inform instruction.... It is a responsibility of the model developer to make sure that happens, to get staff comfortable with having that happen, and to get administration comfortable with making it happen in the schools.”

Obstacles and Benefits

Although CSR can be a rewarding process, educators are likely to face a few challenges along the way. As Ms. Clark pointed out, change is difficult. Without some external pressure like designating the school as low-performing, the whole staff may not agree to undertaking comprehensive change.

Once a school is considering CSR, there may be some difficulty in developing a common understanding of the process among the various stakeholders. Larry Leverett explained that the board, superintendent, community and teachers all “have a different clock running in their heads when it comes to the rate of

change for CSR and that causes lots of conflict within organizations. We haven't figured out a strong way to communicate to the various publics how complicated these changes are and how much time and effort is really necessary."

Based on his work as a superintendent and with the U.S Department of Education's CSRD office, Dr. Burkett has identified a few challenges for educators interested in CSR. He says the CSRD office struggles "to get schools to understand that our program is about a whole school change."

Dr. Burkett also sees many issues with alignment such as schools selecting models that do not align with the district curriculum or state standards. Dr. Borders elaborated on that issue by saying, "people are selecting models as programs sometimes. And the norm is still a hodge-podge of programs being selected to address myriad needs within a district. And what is lacking is the alignment of programs, the alignment and coherence."

Finally, Dr. Burkett explained that he thinks "much of this work has slowed down because people don't believe that all the kids can really do the work.... We still see programs focused on groups of kids with the really hard kids being left behind. Trying to create

and develop that belief that we can really bring all kids up to a point where they can meet high standards, I think, is the thing that slows us down more than anything else."

Dr. Burkett also pointed out a few benefits of CSRD for the schools involved. First, Dr. Burkett has seen very high percentages of CSRD schools working with external technical assistance providers and receiving support from other external sources. Second, he sees a great deal of time being devoted to professional development. Moreover, the schools are offering high quality, sustained professional development that is focused on teaching and learning. Finally, Dr. Burkett said that many schools are reporting having received training on how to use the results of assessments to inform teaching. Overtime, all of these benefits should contribute to higher quality teaching and increases in student achievement.

Research and Design Needs

One area in which more research is clearly needed is in determining the impact of school reform models on students with disabilities and students with limited, or no, proficiency in English. Dr. Mattson reported on her studies of Success for All. She found

Dr. Hugh Burkett, former superintendent of schools in the Clover Park School District near Tacoma, Washington, and current project manager of the CSRD office in the U.S. Department of Education:

I had two schools in my district, side by side, both 90 percent free lunch, both 80 percent minority, both did the same model, had the same district support, had the same amount of money per pupil. One school flourished and the other school didn't go anywhere. So in this case it wasn't about the model not being able to work, because it worked very, very well in one school. In my opinion, it's about the will of the people who work in that building to make it work. And whether it's that model or anything else, it's about the will of the people who work in those school buildings to decide they're going to do the right things for kids.

that “in most of the studies that I've reviewed, they only talk about how they reduce the number of students in special education. They don't talk at all about the academic results for kids with disabilities or even for English Language Learners.”

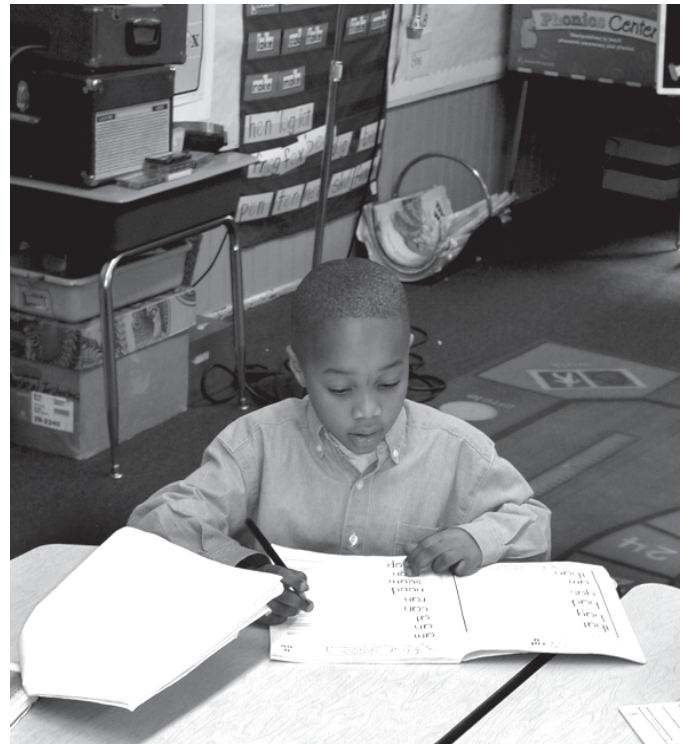
In addition to the lack of research, Dr. Mattson sees a lack of attention to students with special needs among model developers. She thinks the districts and schools have to figure out on their own how to adapt models to meet the needs of all of their students.

Dr. Leverett agreed saying “that has been the experience in our schools, that the model developers have sort of forgotten about including in their designs strategies to promote inclusion and strategies to promote children with limited English-speaking proficiency. And that is a real issue because most of these CSR schools are in high-poverty, low-performing school districts.... There needs to be a push back on the developers to encourage them to broaden their lens when it comes to issues of inclusion, because locally designed solutions that are not research-based won't get us anywhere.”

Challenges Ahead for CSR

Looking ahead to the next several years, Dr. Bodilly and Dr. Borders see a few issues that CSR policymakers, researchers, and practitioners will have to address. Dr. Bodilly's concerns are related to schools' ability to implement models, to sustain reforms, and to develop coherent improvement plans. She explained her concerns as follows:

We've never had really clear proof that, in fact, schools as a whole could take these designs and adopt them, even with assistance.... And, in fact, we sort of jumped the gun. We jumped into providing funding for this type of reform without actually having proven it out.... There's no single district where a lot of the



schools are trying to convert. That means no one has really addressed the issue of whether or not you need a district level policy change or new policy strategies to support this reform so that it ... is sustained after the federal dollars stop. Finally, the emphasis of the legislation was on comprehensive, ... [but] what people really tried to develop was coherence. What we see when implementation fails is that people have adopted CSR as just one more marginal program to add to their schools. Unless we move away from “sort of comprehensive” and move back to the notion of coherence and how to develop coherent, sustained reform, I think this reform may go by the wayside.

Dr. Borders also identified three key issues that she hopes the field will address – defining models, stating models' purposes, and accelerating results.

Resources

An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform

http://www.aasa.org/issues_and_insights/district_organization/Reform/index.htm

Beyond the List: Schools Selecting Alternative CSR Models

<http://www.mcrel.org/csrd/beyondlist.pdf>

Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, U.S. Department of Education

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

Education Policy Forum Luncheon Series: Transcripts from the Three Sessions on CSR

<http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/csrl/trans.htm>

Implementing School Reform Models: The Clover Park Experience

<http://www.nwrel.org/csrdp/clover.html>

New American Schools' Concept of Break the Mold Designs: How Designs Evolved and Why

<http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1288/>

Plainfield Public Schools Web Site

<http://www.myschoolonline.com/site/0,1876,34755-23021-38-4107,00.html>

RMC Research Corporation

<http://www.rmcdenver.com/>

Implementing Reform: What Success for All Teaches Us about Including Students with Disabilities in Comprehensive School Restructuring

http://www.nasbe.org/Educational_Issues/Reports/implementing_reform.pdf

The Catalog of School Reform Models

<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/catalog/index.shtml>

The McKenzie Group

http://www.mckenziegroup.com/flash/tmg_Splash.htm

What is a model vs. a program? What makes a model comprehensive? Knowing that some people are already asking these questions, Dr. Borders thinks we will have to arrive at better definitions of programs, models and comprehensive models. Regarding what is currently available, she explained that “some of them are reading programs. Some of them are programs that focus on problem solving. Others are basic skills programs. I think we’ll have a much deeper conversation about the models, what comprehensiveness means.”

Dr. Borders also raised questions about models’ purposes for learning, saying that

Some of the models are really focused on problem solving and thinking and writing. Others are focused on basic skills. Others are focused on governance issues. Others are focused on com-

munity and bringing in parents. When you get to the purposes of schooling and learning, I think that we’ll have much deeper and better conversations about what the needs are in particular communities around a model. And schools will much better discern what a model is going to give them and what they have to do to complement that model to really get all of the components that are going to bring them a comprehensive program that is going to bring about significant results.

Finally, Dr. Borders emphasized that the CSR movement must bring about accelerated results for low-performing schools. Instead of just “isolated islands of excellence,” in the future more districts will better monitor and support schools to bring about consistently solid performance.

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Contact NCCSR:
*The National Clearinghouse for
Comprehensive School Reform
2121 K Street NW, Suite 250
Washington, DC 20037-1801*

Web Site:
<http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu>

Toll Free Numbers:
*Telephone: 1 (877) 766-4CSR or 4277
Fax: 1 (877) 308-4995*

Ask NCCSR: *AskNCCSR@goodschools.gwu.edu*

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National Clearinghouse for
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2121 K Street NW, Suite 250
Washington, DC 20037-1801



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