



Benchmarks

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Comprehensive School Reform Implementation in New Jersey: Perspective from the State and District Levels

By Deborah Appelbaum and Bruce Latta

One of the provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 that has gained considerable attention is the set of interventions and consequences undertaken when schools fall short of adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals. These consequences range from identifying the school as “in need of improvement” and providing technical assistance to changing school operations and governance. Many school leaders are understandably anxious to turn their schools around and avoid the most severe interventions by the states. These schools often opt to use comprehensive school reform (CSR) as a means of catalyzing improvement.

Research supports the idea that CSR—by offering a shared vision of reform and focusing all school staff around a common goal—can serve as a powerful means of raising student achievement. There is also evidence that, when CSR is mandated, schools seeking to implement CSR and CSR models are likely to face certain challenges. The work of two National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) Network of Researchers members studying CSR in New Jersey, Dr. Jonathan Supovitz of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Dr. Bari Erlichson of Rutgers University, sheds light on both the potential of CSR when well implemented and the obstacles associated with mandated reform. Learning from the lessons of the “Abbott Decision Districts” in New Jersey, school and district leaders and state policymakers can better prepare for effective CSR implementation as they strive to meet the demands of NCLB.

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CSR in New Jersey: The Abbott Decision Districts

In 1997 and 1998 the New Jersey State Supreme Court made two landmark decisions that ordered the New Jersey State Department of Education (DOE) to increase funding for the neediest districts in the state so they could implement remedial measures. Referred to as Abbott IV and V, these verdicts are part of a pattern of decisions made to address unequal educational inputs that started in 1973, when the state's funding policy was found to be unconstitutional. The roots of the Abbott decisions were economic, but in Abbott IV and V the court set out an agenda for reform, the cornerstone of which, especially at the elementary level, is comprehensive school reform (CSR).



The New Jersey Supreme Court decisions govern 30 “property-poor” districts, referred to as “Abbott districts.” The schools in Abbott districts must implement CSR, enact class-size reduction, offer early childhood development for three- and four-year olds in full-day and full-year school sessions, increase personnel, and build new facilities.

The costs of the reform are considerable. An Abbott district, on average, receives 72% of its revenues from state sources. Recently, mounting financial pressures in New Jersey prompted the NJ DOE to request that the Abbott V mandates for whole-school reform and supplemental programs be eliminated, a request that frustrated staff from many Abbott districts. On June 24, 2003 the New Jersey Supreme Court issued several decisions (Abbott X) that reaffirmed the Abbott versus Burke mandates. The Court rejected the NJ DOE's request to reduce the Abbott districts' 2003-04 budgets, and instead required Abbott schools to continue implementing whole-school reform and supplemental programs as mandated by the Abbott V (1998) decision. The New Jersey Supreme Court also ordered an unprecedented cooperative effort between the NJ DOE and key stakeholders to draft new Abbott regulations.

Mandated Reform and Implementation Challenges

Dr. Bari Erlichson, who has been studying CSR in New Jersey since 1998, identified implementation and structural issues that affect reform efforts in New Jersey's Abbott districts. Implementation issues include the selection of CSR models, lack of time, and lack of capacity to support the reform. Structural issues consist of changes in governance structures and lack of coordination among involved parties.

The first implementation issue, the selection of CSR models by school staff, is critical to the success of the reform because it encourages teacher buy-in and

can improve implementation of the program. The Abbott V decision required schools to adopt a proven, effective whole-school design or use Success For All – Roots and Wings as the presumptive elementary school model. If a school could not decide on a model, it received Success For All. In the first year of Erlichson’s evaluation, less than one in four teachers felt that they had been adequately involved in the selection of the school’s CSR model. A similar percentage of teachers also indicated that they had not received information on all of the models prior to making a decision. These percentages improved in subsequent years, but still remain below the 80% threshold of support established by the NJ DOE. Qualitative interview data suggest that schools chose models based on perceived alignment with the school’s current practices rather than on self-assessment of weaknesses or needs.

The final two implementation issues identified were a lack of time and capacity to implement the CSR model. All CSR models—even prescriptive models—require time to implement. Certain models oblige teachers to work collaboratively while others require the preparation of curricular materials. In some cases, schools were hampered because they were not able to provide time during the school day to help staff implement the programs. The models also require that site-based and support staff build their capacity to implement the programs. This capacity can be lost through turnover of teaching, district, model developer and state staff.

The two structural issues, changes in the governance structure and lack of coordination among partici-

pants in the reform effort, are related. Until the Abbott decisions, New Jersey maintained a NJ DOE-district-school hierarchy system in which the NJ DOE had little direct contact with schools. As a result of the Abbott decisions, schools were at the center of reform effort and had direct contact with state support teams and model developers in addition to traditional ties to their districts. The onus fell on the schools to address competing demands, deal with inconsistencies in policies and messages, and navigate conflicts among state, district and school reform.

Student Academic Gains in Abbott Districts: Focus on Plainfield, NJ

Despite the continued legal struggles and implementation challenges, these schools are making gains, as research from Dr. Erlichson demonstrates. Dr. Erlichson noted at NCCSR’s June 2003 Network of Researchers meeting that both Abbott and wealthier New Jersey districts are improving, but that gains at Abbott schools tend to be larger than those in their wealthier counterparts. The results for the 2002 fourth grade Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA) in language arts are provided in the table below.

Elementary School Proficiency Assessment in Language Arts						
	Scores of All Students			Percent of Students Labeled Partially Proficient*		
	1999	2002	Gain	1999	2002	Decrease
Abbott	185	209	24	66%	30%	36%
Non-Abbott	209	224	15	29%	9%	20%
Gap	24	15		37%	21%	

* Partially proficient is the lowest category for the ESPA.

One of the Abbott districts, Plainfield Public Schools, is demonstrating particularly encouraging results. In a study presented at NCCSR's June 2003 Network of Researchers meeting, Dr. Jonathan Supovitz and Dr. Henry May of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania described the impact of the America's Choice CSR model in Plainfield.

The study is noteworthy because the researchers were able to link teachers' implementation of America's Choice to test scores of elementary students. By working with district administrators, Supovitz and May retained the confidentiality of teachers and students as they connected individual teachers' survey responses to test scores in the district's student achievement databases. As a result, Supovitz and May were able to determine several relationships between student learning and teachers' implementation of the model.

In Plainfield, a K-12 urban district of 7,500 students, 65% of students receive either free- or reduced-price lunch. As an Abbott district, each school in the district is required to adopt a whole-school reform model and receives additional state funds to implement the reform. Most schools in the district had adopted America's Choice by 2000.

Dr. Supovitz cited two goals for the study. First, his team wanted to determine the relationships between teacher implementation of the components of America's Choice and student learning. Second, they sought to examine whether teacher characteris-

tics were associated with teachers' implementation of America's Choice components.

Student learning was measured by examining the growth of student test performance from the spring of 2000 to the spring of 2001. The measure of implementation of the America's Choice program consisted of a 10-item scale that gauged the use of the important classroom components of the program such as rubrics, standards, the 25 Book Challenge (a component of the model) and book logs. The survey also asked teachers for information about the time spent teaching the Readers and Writers Workshops, the preparation for Readers and Writers Workshops, and their levels of agreement with the two beliefs that all students can learn and that the same standards should apply to all students. The survey was administered to all teachers of America's Choice across the nation, including Plainfield, in the spring of 2001.

Supovitz and May found that the overall implementation of the America's Choice model yielded signif-



icant effects at the upper elementary grades (4-6). There were positive effects for the lower elementary grades, but the results were not statistically significant. When questioned by researchers at the June Network of Researchers meeting whether the greater effects at higher grades could be a function of exposure to the model and the cumulative effects on the child, Dr. Supovitz responded that he found no satisfactory answer to why the result manifested as it did.

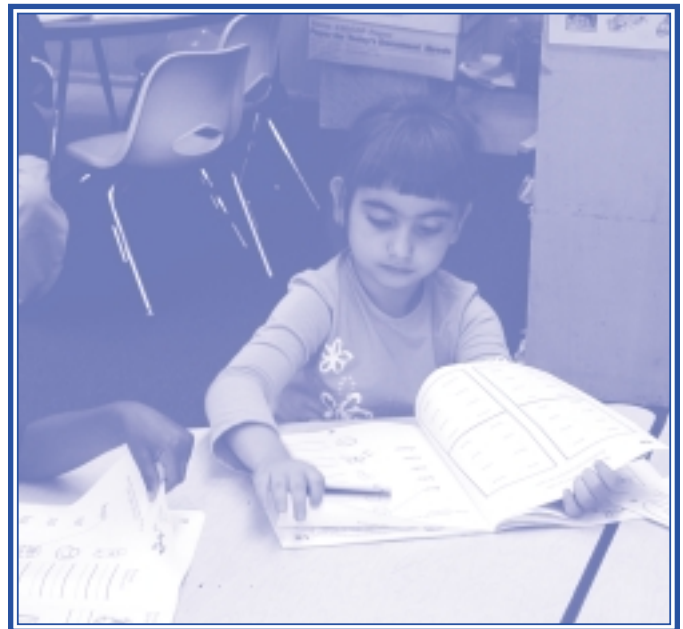
The time teachers spent implementing the Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop did not yield larger student gains. However, students of teachers who indicated that they felt prepared and comfortable teaching the workshops had significantly larger than average gains. This relationship may indicate that fidelity to the model is a factor of student achievement. The study found that there is no relationship directly between teacher attitudes and student achievement – teacher attitudes seem to be an intermediary factor that can influence deeper implementation of the model, which then does impact student learning.

Supovitz and May summarize that Plainfield is committed to America’s Choice with high implementation of the model. The study shows positive results, and findings suggest that greater fidelity to the model leads to greater performance gains. Furthermore, a teacher’s preparation on the use of instructional approaches does influence achievement, but the amount of time spent using the approach did not seem to have a relationship with student achievement.

Conclusion

The work of Erlichson and Supovitz and May are important as they add to our understanding of CSR

at the district, state and school levels. Beyond providing evidence that the America’s Choice model can contribute to student achievement even when mandated, the team helps us see, in concrete terms, the importance of school level implementation. Erlichson’s work is helpful in our understanding of how mandated reform can impede improvement efforts. The example of CSR in Abbott districts is helpful for schools and districts nationally struggling to meet AYP. Although NCLB may be less prescriptive than the Abbott Decision was about the types of reforms that must be implemented in schools AYP, there are still mandates for scientifically based and other reforms. The story in the Abbott districts offers evidence that CSR can be a powerful change agent, but also offers a cautionary note about what can be an expected school or district response—including legal battles—when schools are compelled to reform by an external entity.



Accessing the Research

Implementing Whole-School Reform in New Jersey: Year One in the First Cohort Schools (1999) – by Bari Anhalt Erlichson, Margaret Goertz and Barbara Turnbull

This report summarizes year one of a three-year study to evaluate implementation efforts of whole-school reform in three Abbott districts in New Jersey. The study seeks to determine what leads to effective implementation of various models throughout the state. The study investigators visited 32 of the 72 schools in the first cohort of schools to implement whole-school reform. Across the state, five models were chosen: Comer/School Development Program, Community for Learning/Adaptive Learning Environment Model, Coalition for Essential Schools, Modern Red Schoolhouse, and Success For All. The study highlights the implementation of three of these models and the budget processes in the 32 schools. Of the 32 schools, many reported limited information about the models, a lack of teacher involvement in the selection of the model, and a short timeframe that did not accommodate a careful and thorough deliberation of needs and model match. The report concludes with a summation of lessons learned and highlights of unresolved issues related to the state's Core Curriculum Content Standards and their assessments, and the handling of special education students.

This report is available at <http://policy.rutgers.edu:16080/cgs/pub.php>.

Implementing Whole-School Reform in New Jersey: Year Two (2001) – by Bari Anhalt Erlichson and Margaret Goertz

This report presents findings from the second year of implementation of whole-school reform and school-based budgeting in New Jersey. The authors draw upon visits to 57 separate schools in six Abbott school districts that were implementing one of six different models (Success For All, Community for Learning, Comer, Accelerated Schools, Co-nect, and America's Choice). Additionally, the results of the author's interviews with district, state department and model developers are presented. Results from a teacher survey of nearly 900 respondents detail the teacher's perspective during this time of school reform. An analysis of the school-based budgeting process and resource allocation patterns is also included.

This report is available at <http://policy.rutgers.edu:16080/cgs/pub.php>.

The Relationship between Teacher Implementation of America's Choice and Student Learning in Plainfield, NJ – by Jonathan A. Supovitz and Henry May

In 1998, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania was contracted to conduct the external evaluations of the America's Choice School Design. In this report, CPRE uses data from the district of Plainfield, NJ, which linked teacher implementation of the model to the test gains of the students who were taught by those teachers. The result is an uncommon piece of evidence that empirically links teachers' implementation of America's Choice to student learning. The pattern from these results seems clear and persistent: the students of teachers who more deeply implemented the America's Choice model, particularly the writers workshop component of the design, learned more than did the students of teachers who had lower levels of implementation.

View this report at <http://www.cpre.org/Publications/AC-05.pdf>.

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