



Benchmarks

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Educators’ Perspectives on Comprehensive School Reform

NCCSR is pleased to present the experiences of three educators implementing comprehensive school reform (CSR). This issue of Benchmarks provides a snapshot of the change process in the Chula Vista Elementary School District in San Diego County, California, with articles by the superintendent, a principal and a teacher. Each discusses the challenges and rewards of CSR from his or her own perspective at the district, school or classroom level.

For more information on the Chula Vista Elementary School District, including their vision and student-based decision-making, please visit their web site at <http://www.cvesd.k12.ca.us/>.

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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.

Lessons Learned

- ◆ Create a context for change.
- ◆ Foster staff participation and engagement.
- ◆ Focus on student achievement.
- ◆ Engage in data driven, student-based decision-making.
- ◆ Appreciate and understand the implications of the unique qualities of each school.
- ◆ Do not place blame; stay focused on goals.
- ◆ Continue to inquire and review the change process.

Comprehensive School Change: Perspective of a Superintendent

By Libia Gil, Superintendent, Chula Vista Elementary
School District, San Diego County, California

In the 1993-94 school year, my first and primary challenge in my new role as a superintendent was to confront the inertia and comfort in maintaining the status quo. The traditional organization culture of “everything is great ... don’t-rock-the-boat” was evident. This attitude contributed to an inflated perspective of the district and inhibited the questioning of historical practices. I concluded that my initial task was to *cause disequilibrium and discomfort*.

Creating a context for change demanded that I model an inquiry process that took several months of individual interviews with principals, representatives, staff, parents and community leaders to identify patterns of concern and issues to be addressed. In addition to a series of “Listening Forums” conducted in various communities across the school district, a Curriculum Management Audit was conducted to provide external feedback. It was interesting to note that during this time, the simple question of “why?” always evoked the predictable response of “That’s the way we have always done it!”

These validation processes established the concept for data driven decision-making. Systematic data collection to *focus on student achievement* was introduced through the publication of school profiles that highlighted five-year patterns of demographic shifts as well as student data ranging from attendance and discipline to achievement assessments. Subsequently, biannual comprehensive customer satisfaction surveys from students, parents, staff and the community were also conducted, disseminated and publicized. The new practice of publishing information and sharing data widely was a startling shift for most of our schools.

During my assessment period, one clear message conveyed at all levels of the organization was the belief that schools existed to serve the central office. The control and command

functions of the central office were well recognized and accepted. Reversing that belief and *redesigning the roles and responsibilities* of the central office to that of a provider of service and support for schools was a difficult and traumatic process. The cultural shift was particularly painful for individuals who believed that they had been devalued and was particularly disturbing for individuals who had been reinforced for their ability to maintain hierarchical control functions. A systematic decentralization process eliminated many redundant centralized positions and a consolidation of roles was undertaken to support schools in the quest for improved student achievement. An exciting and engaging eighteen-month journey with staff, parents, students and representative community stakeholders established *a shared vision and values* that continue to guide our daily work. The Board of Education fully participated and supported the process and formally adopted the outcome framework. Immediately following this action, another inclusive process was undertaken with all stakeholders to identify a set of *strategic goals* that were again adopted by the School Board.

Today, a fundamental belief in the District is that the goals for our students are nonnegotiable. There is no room for compromise in setting high expectations, rigorous standards and powerful learning for all students; however, *HOW* we get there can and should be flexible. Recognizing that children and communities have

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— Libia Gil

“The most significant learning is that comprehensive school change efforts cannot be sustained without a concurrent comprehensive district change effort.” — Libia Gil

unique needs, multiple strategies must be developed to reach our goals. All schools are encouraged to initiate and/or adopt whole school change models to improve learning for all students.

We have learned that there is no single program or model that is the solution for all schools and that the most significant attribute for the successful implementation of any program is that the school staff believes in its efficacy. We make the assumption that teachers and parents are in the best position to make good decisions for children when given appropriate resources and data. We have also learned that simply shifting decisions to the school site does not guarantee that student interests are placed first and foremost so we have substituted the “S” word from Site-Based Decision-Making with *Student-Based Decision-Making*. The formal adoption of a set of essential questions includes: “How does this decision improve learning for students? How is it aligned with our shared vision and values?” These serve as reminders that all decisions at all levels of the organization need to stay focused on students.

At this time, the Chula Vista Elementary School District has 39 schools and continues to grow at a rate of one new school per year. Currently, there are five charter schools (a sixth is pending) that include partnerships with the Edison Project, School Futures Foundation and

MicroSociety. In addition, there are four Accelerated schools, five Comer schools, a standards-based model school and a school with a focus on Direct Instruction.

It is most rewarding to observe the enthusiasm and energy of staff and parents who embrace a whole school change effort. Multiple assessment data results indicate a positive growth pattern for students in all programs.

The greatest challenge is to create communication structures for ongoing learning and to share best practices across the various models. The most significant learning is that comprehensive school change efforts cannot be sustained without a concurrent comprehensive district change effort.

From... “It’s Not Our Fault”... To “No Fault”

By Marjorie A. Grigsby, Principal, Loma Verde
Comer School, Chula Vista Elementary School
District

Decline in student achievement was of major concern to the Loma Verde School community. Other concerns included student attendance, mobility and perceived lack of parental support. Before trying comprehensive school reform, we had already implemented numerous programs to solve problems as they occurred. We felt that we were doing everything possible to help our students; however, the result was fragmentation and frustration. We were working harder with diminishing returns and it was evident that we had to change.

As the principal at the school, I had to take a hard look at my role and behavior as a leader. This began an intense and often painful period of self-reflection. I learned to take responsibility and recognize that if systemic change were to occur, it would be up to me to change. Most significantly, I had to model the attitudes and behaviors that I wanted to see in my staff. I developed a sense of urgency that was internal instead of external. I quit worrying about pleasing others and focused on doing what was best for children and my school.

We had “pockets of excellence” but lacked a mechanism to provide unity of purpose. We began a year long process of inquiry where we evaluated the effectiveness of programs and eliminated those that were not meeting the needs of the students and community. We had already begun moving in the direction of the Healthy Start Initiative that focuses on collaboration with all stakeholders and strengthening families in order to improve student achievement. With the encouragement and support of our Superintendent, Dr. Libia Gil, we decided to investigate research-based school-wide change models, such as the Comer School Development program.

Before making a commitment, a group of teachers and parents visited an exemplary Comer School in San Diego. The positive climate at the school, enthusiasm of staff and community and significantly improved student achievement convinced us that “Comer” was something that we wanted to further investigate. As a result, a teacher leader and I attended the Principal’s Academy at Yale University in July of 1998. This proved to be the catalyst needed to give us the impetus to change and provide a powerful unifying mechanism.

The more we learned about the Comer philosophy, the more we recognized that the underlying principles were aligned with the district’s philosophy of student-based decision-making. The district provides each school with the opportunity to achieve these goals in its own way. The Comer School Development Model provided a blueprint for achieving these goals. In addition, the Comer framework of communication and collaboration also enhanced our efforts to provide support to families through the Healthy Start Initiative. For these reasons, we selected the Comer model.

Upon our return from the Principal’s Academy at Yale, the teacher leader and I presented the Comer philosophy to the staff. From this presentation, a team of 14

members representing staff and parents volunteered to attend training at San Diego State University. This group then returned to train the rest of the Loma Verde staff. Over 30 parents and community members and our entire classified and certificated staff attended the training. This training was unique in that it was initiated, planned, and facilitated largely by staff and parents. This was important as it created a strong sense of ownership for the process. The training received rave reviews.

One of the most critical parts of transitioning into a Comer school was the staff and parent buy-in and participation. Modifying our way of thinking was going to be an overwhelming task, and without enthusiasm from the stakeholders we would not be successful. To help us better understand the Comer philosophies, we invited Roger Cunningham, a former principal at a Comer school, to serve as a mentor, coach and consultant. He has been an invaluable part of our transition. He is able to give us regular feedback on our progress and help us avoid common pitfalls. He helps to remind us where we have been and where we are going.

Today, Loma Verde is Chula Vista Elementary School District’s first Comer school. Several other schools have seen the potential in the Comer process and are taking steps toward joining Loma Verde in our efforts to help students and families achieve their highest potential.

“It is our job to create a child-centered environment where all decisions are made in the best interest of children, and where all children reach their highest potential.”

— Marjorie Grigsby

In our second year as a Comer school, we are still experiencing growing pains. Change is a difficult process. Adapting to that change has been our biggest challenge. As an entire staff, we are now reflecting on and examining our instructional practices to find solutions. I am tremendously excited about the change that I have already seen. Enthusiasm for the Comer model has continued to grow and develop as the three principles of collaboration, consensus building and no-fault are integrated into our everyday interactions. The no-fault principle has been the most powerful as it holds us accountable. It says that there are no excuses for lack of student achievement. Our parents are sending us their children and trusting us to inspire and guide them to be all that they can be. It is our job to create a child-centered environment where *all* decisions are made in the best interest of children, and where *all* children reach their highest potential.

Comprehensive School Reform

By Robert Birdsell, Teacher Grades 5/6,
Juarez-Lincoln Accelerated School, Chula Vista
Elementary School District

From the teacher's perspective comprehensive school reform can be exciting, be deeply unsettling, and sound very risky. My experience with new reform models, reculturing and re-inventing of a school community began with the change of administrators at the school site.

I had been at Juarez-Lincoln Elementary School for three years before we received a new principal. During her first year she began asking critical questions of the staff. She would always preface her questions with a phrase that this would help her understand the unique qualities of the school. At this time our teachers were isolated beings. Teachers had little time or reason to interact with colleagues. Few team teaching situations

existed. The new principal began to ask questions of the processes involved in our decision-making, not only as a school, but also at grade levels. We started to look at the data that was collected and disseminated from the district office. We looked at the data by grade levels and started to see trends from grade level to grade level. The principal facilitated discussions with the staff about what we wanted for our students, all students. We knew we wanted to increase student achievement and implement a valuable and consistent program for English language learners. We divided into grade level teams to review our teaching strategies. We wondered what we were doing to get the results that we were getting. We started to look at our processes.

Our staff is known for its independence and outspokenness. We do not "go with the flow." After thought provoking enlightenment about our teaching strategies and processes, we began to want to get assistance in changing the way we were doing business. We could not continue as we had done. We began to research different school reform models. As a staff we recognized we were looking for a reform model that stressed process and individuality. Also, a reculturing of the students, school and community would be necessary.

Our community had a serious problem with gang involvement. Students were observing and acting in gang-like behaviors. We needed to reculture the school and seriously stress the importance of education for all students. According to Peter Stark, a strategic planning consultant, "it is critical that we change our focus and behaviors from a 'blame frame' to an 'aim frame.'" We needed not to point the finger of blame at the students, community, nor at our-

selves, but through working together and taking the higher ground would be able to do what was in the best interest of the students. We needed to create a climate for deep and lasting change.

I believe a major first step in this change climate was the openness and accessibility of the principal to the community. The principal was viewed as a person who would listen, counsel and act in the best interest of members of our community. These had traditionally been the disenfranchised and underrepresented parents of our community. Here was a member of an institution that was working in close conjunction with them — some for the first time.

While this was taking place the principal also continuously modeled collaborative decision making with the staff. This took time, time for discussion so that everyone was heard, or at least had the opportunity to express concerns. It was a new process for many of us and, therefore, we needed time for understanding the change process. These discussions were made safe by setting the norm of agreeing to disagree. The members of the staff were able to see that people disagreed with the idea or suggestion and not the individual. This was a major step that led to an openness and trust among the staff members.

After investigating school reform models for nearly two years we decided on the Accelerated Schools Process. The three basic principles closely matched our school “unity of purpose, responsibility coupled with empowerment, and building on strengths.” One of the challenges we faced after collecting data during the taking stock phase was to learn how to analyze and operationalize the data. Our question was what to do with all of the information we collected. We discovered that the inquiry process was the most time consuming yet produced the greatest change. It was difficult for many of us to stop jumping to solutions before we dug down to the compelling “why?” Our questioning needed to go below the surface and beyond the

obvious to challenge our long held beliefs and patterns of behavior that were hard to change.

We needed to develop a shared vision and create more opportunities for the community members to become more involved in the school. Our survey research indicated that students and the community would unite around using technology as a major focus. Parents and staff knew that students would need to be technologically proficient. Beginning technology instruction in elementary school would give students a head start in developing needed skills for the future.

Major areas of improvement were identified. Cadre groups were established to use the inquiry process in improving the school. The cadres met weekly and proceeded with the Accelerated Schools Process. Each cadre had identified facilitators and this led to developing more teacher leadership. My involvement with our technology cadre led to my becoming coordinator of our school’s involvement in Education First, a three-year grant with Pacific Bell, to infuse schools with state-of-the-art technology. As a result of our involvement with Education First we were also fortunate to work with Education for the Future, a foundation working with schools to produce a school portfolio and collect and analyze data for systemic school reform. We were now able to collect and analyze data more professionally to assist us in making better-informed decisions and therefore increasing student achievement. We have now become Juarez-Lincoln Accelerated School and through the change process have put into place vehicles to drive the kinds of change that directly impacts student achievement and overall success.

The following are among the lessons learned through this process:

- ◆ A shared vision must be created involving all stakeholders; the vision must be revisited annually.

- ◆ The change process should be reviewed continually. Change needs to be constantly nurtured or momentum is lost. It is so easy to get distracted.
- ◆ We have also found that change is connected to personality. When leadership changes it affects the site.
- ◆ It is important to search until you reach the compelling “why.” Refrain from quickly going from problem to solution before researching.
- ◆ Inquiry has been the most important process and the most difficult to learn. It’s time consuming, but leads to the most systemic and long lasting change.

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— Robert Birdsell

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