



Benchmarks

Volume 2, Issue 3

Summer 2001



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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.

Schoolwide Improvement through Statewide Collaboration: The New York Think Tank

Introduction

The New York Think Tank is devoted to supporting low-performing schools by identifying, disseminating, and providing technical assistance on effective, research-based strategies for schoolwide improvement. Formed as a collaboration of New York's technical assistance providers, the Think Tank began in 1998 in response to the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR) program.

Partners in the Think Tank include the New York Technical Assistance Center, New York State Education Department, New York City Board of Education, Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, New York City Teacher Centers Consortium, Effective Schools Consortium Network, and State School Support Teams.

Throughout the past year, the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) has been exploring the roles of state and local education agencies in supporting low-performing schools. We have found several states that have developed models for delivering support and technical assistance to these schools. In April 2001, as a part of this exploration, an NCCSR staff member attended a Think Tank meeting. Impressed with the group's collaborative spirit and commitment to helping schools improve, she felt that the Think Tank offered an interesting approach to technical assistance delivery for other states, districts, and technical assistance providers to examine.

“Working together members found that by collaborating they were able to influence each other more than when they tried to ‘fix’ each other. For many people that was internalized. Now members are trying to figure out what the implications of this learning are for working with schools.” — Seager

This issue of Benchmarks contains excerpts from interviews with the following Think Tank members:

- Everett Barnes of RMC Research Corporation and the Region II Comprehensive Assistance Center also known as the New York Technical Assistance Center or NYTAC,
- Levander Lilly of the Metropolitan Center, NYTAC,
- Terry Mehrer of the Teacher Center, United Federation of Teachers,
- Tom Orsini of the New York State Education Department, and
- Andrew Seager, the Think Tank’s facilitator, of RMC and NYTAC.

NCCSR: Why and how was the New York Think Tank formed?

Barnes: NYTAC was working with the New York State Education Department on issues related to the Improving America’s Schools Act and comprehensive school reform and was also providing assistance related to school improvement directly to school districts. A couple of years into that process the CSRD program was announced by the U.S. Department of Education. CSRD promotes research-based, effective programs for low-performing schools. New York had already been doing a lot with using research-based

programs. New York didn’t want CSRD to be just another project. We wanted to figure out how CSRD interacts with Title I requirements and the other existing New York initiatives in school reform. So NYTAC proposed that a group of people from the New York State Education Department, NYTAC, and the intermediate technical assistance agencies in New York struggle collectively with what the unknowns were around the CSRD program and try to put definitions around things that were not clearly defined.

When we proposed the idea for the Think Tank, the list of people that should be considered as participants was very long, mostly because of politics or the hierarchy of the bureaucracy. It almost immediately became larger than anything you could handle effectively. We decided to only invite organizations that provide direct technical assistance to schools and districts.

The Think Tank started dealing immediately with the New York Education Department staff members who were going to be responsible for preparing the New York State application for these funds and administering this program. For a state to get CSRD money, it had to submit a proposal to the U.S. Department of Education that discussed how it was going to target the lowest performing schools and what processes the state would use to ensure quality in the applications. The proposal talked about how the state was going to provide technical assistance and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the CSRD program.

Lilly: The Think Tank was formed about four years ago to address some of the needs that were created when CSRD was authorized by Congress. There was a need to have a forum whereby technical assistance providers in New York could share ideas and begin a process of formulating strategies on how we could provide technical assistance on a statewide basis. This was a new endeavor. The State Education Depart-

ment saw a need to develop uniformity in terms of how technical assistance would work throughout the state of New York. During the time when the Think Tank was first formed, I was the team leader for the New York City Technical Assistance Team (within NYTAC). In that role, the team and I worked closely with the State Education Department, the Board of Education, and the New York City School-Based Support Team in what later became known as the New York City CSRD collaborative. We had quite a few schools in New York City that were eligible for funding through CSRD. We were able to use the Think Tank as a forum to share ideas on how we could support and provide technical assistance to newly funded CSRD schools.

NCCSR: How has the Think Tank grown or changed over the past few years?

Seager: Initially a major agenda item was that of roles. We had a number of different organizations all responsible for CSRD. There were NYTAC, the Regional Educational Laboratory, the New York State Education Department, five regional centers and an urban center in New York City all charged with working to implement CSRD. We all had the sense of an urgent need to work in schools. Essentially, we were suspicious of each other and there was some competition. Consequently, an important early piece of work was to develop mutual understanding among the different organizations, what each does best, and to talk about how we could work together. There was a lot of time spent on a matrix of different organizations and what their roles and responsibilities were. The product wasn't as important as the discussions that occurred. Through this and other work, members began to develop relationships and understand how they could work together. New York State is large, but relation-

ships are very important. Over a period of a year and a half, relationships built across organizations. People began to call each other informally and ask questions.

Really important in this whole process was the willingness of the New York State Education Department to involve others in policy making and in policy decisions, rather than holding them close to their own chests. The idea of having everyone from School Support Team members to those responsible for policy in the same room to work out how best to implement CSRD was new and different. It enhanced communication up and down the lines as well as across organizations. Going from discussions that centered on “Why did you invite those folks?” to “We’re all in this together” was an important marker of the growth of the organization. It has been my job to apply different group processes and theories (such as Open Space Technology, for instance) to keep the conversations useful and lively, and to minimize the impact of hierarchical roles.

We learned that collaboration and trust weren't built just talking with each other, but also by working together. A significant feature was that members were specifically working on products together that would be used. For instance, what are the criteria by which we are going to assess school and district applications? And there was a real understanding that it was by talking and doing together that we had created those connections.

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We then got to the stage where there had been a lot of change in the state, the creation of ten Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs) from the old five regional centers plus New York City. Right from the outset there had been a sense that in the long run the agenda of the Think Tank was not just about CSRD, but about school reform. With this new set of RSSCs, we've also changed the focus from CSRD alone to CSRD being one of the elements. We are still trying to work out some of the ways in which the group works together and to define some rules. In our old competitive ways [before the Think Tank] we had been trying to do things to "fix" each other. Working together members found that by collaborating they were able to influence each other more than when they tried to "fix" each other. For many people that was internalized. Now members are trying to figure out what the implications of this learning are for working with schools.

The Think Tank continues to have people excited about joining and participating. It's been a really interesting process to see how people work together. The challenge of working on comprehensive school reform as a whole rather than CSRD is one we haven't really gotten under our belts – how to do it and how to do it well is something we are still struggling with. How can the Think Tank have the important conversations about how we help school reform? Since CSRD said "this is how you will do it," we didn't have discussions about what we really understand

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change is, and what are the most effective methods for achieving that. It's so easy to just be content experts and provide content expertise without having the important conversations about what we believe about how school change happens. We are just beginning to get into those discussions and explore them by doing such things as bringing in case studies.

NCCSR: How has the Think Tank combined CSRD with ongoing school reform efforts in New York?

Barnes: New York for many years has had state legislation talking about the identification of low-performing schools and what actions the districts and state needed to take with those schools. They also had created the New York Sharing Success program that was modeled after the federal National Diffusion Network program. So New York State was putting its own money into identifying practices that would improve reading, mathematics, science instruction, and so on. The state was making money available both to disseminate those practices and to help districts and schools adopt those practices. So you had mechanisms in place; they were just not used to doing it at a level where you were talking about whole school reform. Initially many districts and schools saw a CSRD model as the comprehensive reform program. So we had to re-educate people – the idea was not that you got rid of what you had been trying to do, but rather that you use CSRD to complement and fill the void in those comprehensive plans that you had already developed.

Lilly: School reform efforts in New York are not new. However, the Think Tank and its work with CSRD enables us to think and focus more clearly on the need to find better ways to support schools and their ef-

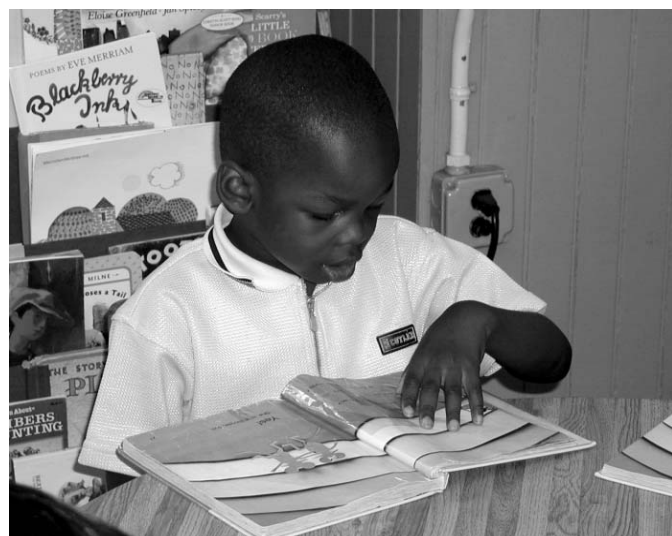
forts in the implementation of school reform. We are able to get schools and technical assistance providers to think about the need to use research-based strategies as opposed to fly-by-night activities as a way to improve student achievement.

Mehrer: In New York City, each school writes a comprehensive educational plan that assesses its progress and prepares an instructional plan for the entire school. We have used that as an anchor to which we have attached school reform issues such as the Title I schoolwide program and CSRD. The plans have been in place in New York City for over ten years, so the concept of comprehensive school reform was not new to us. We wanted CSRD to fold into existing reform initiatives. We didn't want CSRD to be looked at as just another funding source, but as a school reform program.

Title I schoolwide program schools were co-mingling Title I funds with tax levy funds in order to develop a comprehensive program for all of the students in their school. So, when CSRD began, the idea of comprehensiveness was not new to me or to the state support team facilitators who were working with the project. It might have been new to some of the schools because of a high turnover rate in administrators and teachers in New York City. The main difference between schoolwide programs and CSRD was that CSRD was connected with research-based models. The research-based model brought in the idea that instructional practices need to be based on studies that have demonstrated increases in academic achievement.

Orsini: In terms of the general state reform effort, CSRD is seen as one of a number of tools that are available to be implemented to initiate school reform, especially in high needs, low-achieving schools. In New York we have developed what is called the Regional Network Strategy and key to the strategy is the establishment of ten Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs). We use a combination of Goals 2000, IDEA, Title I School Improvement, CSRD, and a

handful of state dollars to establish and run these centers. One center serves New York City and is a union between the United Federation of Teachers and the New York City Board of Education. The other nine centers are overseen by district superintendents. We have in New York, outside New York City, something called Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) that constitute supervisory districts. In May 1999, our commissioner charged these thirty-six district superintendents with raising the achievement level of low-performing schools in their service delivery areas. In order to help the district superintendents with that goal or meeting that charge, we established the centers and have been allowing the district superintendents to supervise them. All of our CSRD administrative funds and Title I School Improvement dollars are being dedicated toward these centers. These centers are very focused on, as we put it, "zapping the gap" in low-achieving schools. How they go about doing that is left up to them. There are a number of tools and collaborations that are available to them to accomplish this. Whole school reform, through the Title I schoolwide option, through CSRD, through the infusion of other funds such as Goals 2000, it is all part of the same package.



NCCSR: What does each organization bring to the Think Tank?

Lilly: The New York Technical Assistance Center (NYTAC) is one of fifteen federally funded programs whose mission is to work comprehensively with schools, school districts, and the Department of Education. Since NYTAC has been around for over five years assisting schools, we are able to share some of our successes and limitations with the Think Tank. For example, given our scarce resources, we found ways to work effectively with clusters of schools and school districts throughout the state. We were able to share with Think Tank members the work that we developed with parent training, school districts, and the New York City Board of Education. NYTAC, on the other hand, has learned a great deal from other Think Tank members around student assessment and other related topics.

Mehrer: Our organization [the Teacher Center] brings a new perspective on technical assistance for schools. We are the only teacher practitioners within the Think Tank. All staff at the Teacher Center, and all of the technical assistance providers for school reform from the Center, are licensed teachers. We are still very close to the practitioner in the classroom, the children, parents, and community. So we bring a school-based point of view to the whole concept of school reform. We know that when information goes back to districts and/or schools the message doesn't always get to the people who are in the trenches. We are closely tied to those people. For example, we'll have a citywide showcase of research-based models in the fall. What happens after that showcase will only be heard by the facilitators and technical assistance providers who go into the buildings and talk with the teachers, parents, and administrators in that school and district. They'll tell us what they really feel about what's happening and how things are going. We try to bring this feedback to Think Tank meetings.

Orsini: Our organization [the State Education Department] is the policy setting agency for comprehensive school reform. The genesis of the Think Tank was to help our agency establish effective and fair policies regarding the implementation of school reform. For the first three years CSRD had been the focus of these policies. And the implementation of CSRD has been the thrust behind our policy making. But now we are looking at the whole package of tools that are available to initiate comprehensive school reform and so the conversation of the Think Tank is also being expanded. One of the things that we are trying to initiate is collaboration with other networks that exist throughout the state, be they community social service agencies, community based organizations, or other networks that are funded by our agency such as the Bilingual Technical Assistance Centers and the Comprehensive Health and Pupil Service Centers. We are trying to get everybody into this mix and focus all that attention on the lowest performing schools. That gets to be kind of a big nut to crack, trying to do that on a regional level.

NCCSR: What impact has the Think Tank had on your organization?

Barnes: Talking from a NYTAC perspective, the Think Tank did two things. One is, it convinced all of us that what we said in our proposal was in fact, gospel. What we said in our proposal for the Comprehensive Center was that our approach was not about a group of experts treating a client that has a deficiency. This is about collaboration among partners that have varying degrees of strengths and weaknesses in terms of their expertise and their understanding. The Think Tank solidified that philosophy for us because when we began dealing with some of the issues around

CSRD or developing rubrics or creating associated products, it was a team effort. We had people from the State Education Department working with our staff as collaborators and partners. We had people from the BOCES, which are the intermediate agencies in New York, contributing and it was clear that everyone had expertise that supplemented what we had as a Center. So that was good for us.

Lilly: The Think Tank has had a lot of impact on NYTAC. Historically, the many regions in New York State have worked in isolation. The Think Tank has afforded us the opportunity to see the state more as a whole. We are now able to see that all regions of the state have many common challenges involving their schools and students. Therefore, we can learn and share ideas on how to provide appropriate technical assistance to schools. We know, for example, that in low-performing schools the need for more parental involvement and professional development are challenges that all regions must address.

Mehrer: We've developed a better working relationship with upstate. We used to think a strategy from upstate would never work in New York City, or one from New York City would never work upstate. The Think Tank has changed that by providing a forum for sharing ideas. It has closed the gap between upstate and downstate. We realize that certain problems in terms of low-performing schools are similar. We've learned to listen to each other and share ideas for working with schools and districts.

Orsini: I can only speak to the part of the State Education Department which is focused on Title I implementation and other set asides of Title I such as Title I Schoolwide Improvement and CSRD. The Think Tank has been a tremendous help to us in formulating effective policies to implement our programs. It is a vehicle where a lot of the stakeholders can get together and it has allowed us to make decisions based on substantial input and research. The Lab at Brown and

“We’re trying to get schools and districts to struggle with this concept of a coordinated, comprehensive, schoolwide improvement program. What does it look like, how do these elements interact? Where does the model that you are adopting fit and where do you have to then compensate for where it doesn’t fit?” — Barnes

NYTAC both have access to a wide array of research that they bring to the table. We also have the agencies that do the hands-on implementation of our programs, namely the RSSCs and the central administrative staff of the New York City public school system.

NCCSR: What has made the collaboration successful?

Barnes: When you have necessarily separate service providers in existence through competitive grants and contracts, they don’t necessarily trust one another and they are often reluctant to collaborate. Previous efforts at trying to do this type of collaboration really had not been successful. The thing that surprised all of us was that literally from the first day when we brought everyone together to say this is what the Think Tank is and here’s what we’d like to do with it, there was no competitiveness. At one meeting I came back in toward the end and I said to the group that if I were an outsider and I walked into this group of thirty people and listened to you talk and listened to what you were doing, I would never guess that you came from twelve or thirteen different organizations. That was a real lesson and benefit. Early on that trust laid the groundwork that has allowed the Think Tank to survive and move along in terms of its maturity.

When we did get together, things emerged that have continued to support the collaboration. There's a mutual respect for one another's work, for the work ethic, for how seriously people take the issue of trying to improve schools, a respect for the quality of the thinking and the quality of the product or assistance that comes out of this effort. There's a symbiotic relationship. We know we need the state people that are doing school improvement and we need the intermediate agencies that are out directly in the schools doing school improvement in order for us, for example, at NYTAC to be able to extend our influence and resources. We don't have enough resources or staff to go out on a sustained basis and work with all of the districts and schools that need to be worked with. On the other hand, they need us because what we do, in terms of staying on top of what research-based practices are, in terms of the expertise that we have in areas like accountability and assessment systems – they don't do on a regular basis. We've come to recognize that we all need one another in order for us to be effective and do the job that we want to do.

You can put out information and findings from research-based practices – that in and of itself will not change organizations or peoples' behaviors. There needs to be an interaction associated with that. There needs to be somebody or something that's helping people make sense of what that looks like within the context of their organization or practice. So it's this marriage of the two elements and I think that's what has made it successful.

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NCCSR: How has the Think Tank helped CSRD schools?

Barnes: It is doing a lot of good for the technical assistance providers. There's a lot of evidence that the Think Tank has helped to create a common language across very different organizations that have a similar mission of improving low-performing schools. The Think Tank has helped those technical assistance providers understand the very complex issues associated with organizational change, whole school reform, and using research based strategies. The Think Tank has helped those individuals create processes or products that can be used in common by all of those service providers so there is a consistency in message and there's a consistency in the strategies that are used.

We also have gone out and worked directly with schools and districts that are implementing CSRD. Our message to those schools and districts has been that when you are looking at a CSRD model, you need to analyze it for where is it strong and where is it not strong. Where it is strong, is that what is going to complement what your needs are in your district? Is that going to complement the comprehensive reform plan that you as a district have defined? How are you going to fill in the holes? It has taken a major effort for people to say that CSRD is not the silver bullet; it's not the solution. It's a tool. It's a device that I use in my larger plan. We're not helping schools or districts put a specific CSRD model into place. That's the model developer's responsibility. We're trying to get schools and districts to struggle with this concept of a coordinated, comprehensive, schoolwide improvement program. What does it look like, how do these elements interact? Where does the model that you are adopting fit and where do you have to then compensate for where it doesn't fit?

Lilly: The Think Tank has been instrumental in helping technical assistance providers understand how

to provide quality support to schools. I feel that our knowledge has increased in this area. At Think Tank meetings we spend a lot of time in small and large groups discussing ways to assist schools. Some of the topics range from assisting schools with student data to improving instruction to working with schools on the implementation of their CSRD program.

But the Think Tank is no panacea. We still have problems. I don't want to paint a picture as if the Think Tank has solved all of our problems. But it has been very helpful in giving us a vision, a structure as well as professional development for those of us who provide technical assistance in our different regions.

Mehrer: When we started with the Think Tank, it was a new forum for sharing ideas across the state. We had upstate and downstate people getting together and developing common protocols to be used throughout the state – that was very important to us. It was important to the state leaders to work together. It was important to develop common protocols so that New York City was not different from upstate in the CSRD initiative. We developed rubrics for reading and scoring applications. It helped to unify the state. When I brought information back from the Think Tank to the technical assistance facilitators, they made sure that the schools realized that they were part of a bigger plan, that they were part of a statewide initiative, and part of a nationwide initiative. They conveyed to the practitioners that the idea of comprehensiveness came from the federal government and that everyone in New York State is working it out together.

Orsini: We have developed a rubric by which schools can guide the progress of their implementation. We have developed site visit protocols that allow us to gather information about the entire school reform effort and give feedback to the school and district staff. We share our perspective of what is happening and some of the things that they could do to improve the implementation process. All of those were developed by the Think Tank. The effect on the schools and dis-

tricts is quite direct. It gives us some tools and benchmarks to help guide the district and school staff through CSRD implementation.

Seager: People have said that they go into schools with much greater confidence. First, they know what the other organizations are doing and that they have jointly developed approaches, so they can talk with a combined voice. Secondly, they have access to information from the other organizations, which they can easily call if they need to. So it's had an immediate impact on the quality of technical assistance to schools and districts. The other benefit is more subtle. Given what we've learned about how we interact, what works and what doesn't in influencing each other, what does that mean for working with schools?

NCCSR: What has the Think Tank learned about providing technical assistance to low-performing schools?

Barnes: What we learned is what we have known for a long time. We haven't picked up any surprises about low-performing schools. What we're picking up is confirmation about what's been in the theory for a long time.

1) The instability of those schools, that turnover in staff (faculty and administrators) raises the devil. If you try to build a culture that is respectful of the research, that is based on inquiry and self-examination, you can't have major elements of that culture leaving on a regular basis because then you are always back to ground zero.

2) There is not a shortage of resources. If anything, it's just the opposite. They are bombarded. They are so desperate to do a good job that they are grasping at

anything and anybody who comes and claims that they can help them be better. It's to the point where you can go into low-performing schools and they may have a dozen or more different programs operating, some of which have contrary philosophies and many of which cause conflicts over resources, time, and philosophy. Some of those programs operate even after the resources are gone. Teachers who were trained in a program from five years ago liked it so much that they are still using it, but nobody else is.

3) We've learned – as we've known – that it isn't all a school issue. The district office plays an incredibly critical role if you are going to improve and sustain that improvement in a school building. If a district office is not engaged in that, in a serious way, the improvement won't take place. We also know that issues that exist in schools are social or community issues.

4) Low-performing schools don't use data. They tend to go with their gut. They tend to say, "I know these kids and I know what they can and can't do. I don't want to be unrealistic and insensitive by asking them to do higher level standards when they'll never be able to do that. It's just going to frustrate them and get them to drop out of school." But they don't base those opinions on real data. They don't systematically use empirical data to examine their own practice or use research based findings to adjust what they are doing. They haven't gone in and substantiated that what they are saying they believe is in fact the truth.

5) They need tremendous amounts of support. That's not just dollars, it's not just professional development. They get professional development to death. They want to do a good job. They are not bad because they want to be bad. They are not bad because they are just indifferent and they don't like kids and can't teach. They are genuinely struggling. And many of them are overwhelmed with the circumstances in their district. Many of the good teachers in large urban districts get

recruited off to suburban school systems. It isn't just a dollar issue. They go off because the bureaucracies in those systems are often not as difficult to navigate as the bureaucracies in the large school systems. That results in many schools having to scramble to find emergency certified teachers for their classrooms. Improvement is about quality teachers/teaching; aligned curriculum and providing access to quality opportunities to learn.

Lilly: Helping low-performing schools is very difficult. It is labor intensive to assist schools and sustain student growth. We must spend time, energy, and resources to bring about change. Technical assistance providers must be knowledgeable of the research and strategies that will improve student achievement. Moreover, we must bring a certain sensitivity and knowledge about the school and an awareness of the school culture and school demographics.

The Think Tank was a collaborative created to address the many challenging issues faced by schools and districts. In its short tenure it has proved to be an essential and valuable solutions-oriented forum that is proud to be involved in making lasting changes in education.

Mehrer: It is difficult. It really is a group effort. There is a necessary state of readiness that must be present in each school that wasn't planned for by the Think Tank. As part of a team who goes into school buildings, I've now learned that you need a lot of upfront work. Good intentions are not always good enough. You can have support from a whole staff, but if your administrator isn't willing it's not going to work. Or you can have an administrator who is willing and influencing a staff to accept reform and that's not always going to work. Parents need to know what's going on and be involved in the planning. I think practitioners are sometimes forgotten; the people who are actually doing the work really need to have information.

Orsini: We've learned that there is no substitute for effective leadership at the building level. No program or research based reform effort can really succeed unless there is effective leadership at the principal level and at the assistant principal level. A number of schools that we have assisted have come along very nicely until there is a change in leadership and then, all of a sudden, things start to go downhill again. We've also learned that you cannot be directive when providing technical assistance. You have to get a good measure as to where the school is, not force the school to be where you think it needs to be at any given point in time. It takes a lot of time and a lot of effort before you see even minimal results. Finally, we've learned that

the more players that you have in the process, the better things go. In situations where we've been assisted by the Lab at Brown and by NYTAC, things have gone better than where we have tried to provide technical assistance on our own.

For more information on the New York Think Tank, visit its web site at <http://www.nyu.edu/education/metrocenter/csrd/thinktank.html>.

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Benchmarks is published four times a year. The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement and is operated by The George Washington University under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0137. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of The George Washington University or the U.S. Department of Education. The mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. Readers are free to duplicate and use these materials in keeping with accepted publication standards. NCCSR requests that proper credit be given in the event of reproduction.



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