



# Benchmarks

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## Where Can I Find Research on Comprehensive School Reform Models? NCCSR Collects and Summarizes the Research for Practitioners

A frequent and important question posed to NCCSR is, “What research is available on a particular comprehensive school reform (CSR) model?” This question has taken on greater significance with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, generally known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In planning and implementing comprehensive school reform, schools are now required to employ proven strategies and methods for student learning, teaching, and school management that are based on scientifically based research and effective practices and that have been replicated successfully in other schools. As these higher standards and criteria are applied to the process of examining research for evidence of effectiveness, practitioners will need help sorting through the numerous studies, and assessing the quality of what they find. As an immediate response to this need, NCCSR created the Research Database on School Reform Models.

At its core, the Research Database on School Reform Models is a collection of existing research on CSR models; however, it is more than just an online library of research studies. An NCCSR researcher has written summaries of the studies (appropriately called Research Summaries), and research analyses (called State of the Research Reports); both are included in the Database along with links to the full text of the high-quality research studies on school reform models. These products were created to help practitioners locate, understand, and incorporate research on CSR models into their schoolwide improvement processes and to meet the legislated requirements for scientifically based educational practices.

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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.

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This edition of Benchmarks showcases a State of the Research Report from the NCCSR Research Database on the Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for All Students (ATLAS) Communities model. We, at NCCSR, hope you find this Report and the others available in the online Database helpful as you attempt to navigate the wealth of evidence that exists on CSR models. The Research Database on School Reform Models is available at <http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/csr/RDB/index.html>.

## State of the Research Report: The Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for All Students (ATLAS) Communities Model

By Olga Bain, Ph.D.

### Origin of the Model and of the Key Approach

ATLAS Communities are school communities of Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for All Students. ATLAS was formed as a partnership of four educational organizations and four collaborating school districts in response to a request for proposals by the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC, later NAS) (Hatch, 1998). ATLAS was conceived in 1992 and was selected among the original 11 designs to be supported and scaled-up by NAS. The founding organizations of ATLAS included James Comer's School Development Program (SDP) at Yale, Theodore Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) at Brown, Howard Gardner and David Perkins' Project Zero (PZ) at Harvard, and Janet Whitla's Educational Development Center (EDC) in Boston. The partner organizations sought to complement each other's strengths and, at the same time, to cre-

ate a coherent integrated design that would become more than the sum of its constituent parts.

The ATLAS model draws on the approaches developed by the partner organizations, such as the school-community connections and school organizational and governance structure of SDP, the curriculum development and pedagogy of CES, the professional development and technology of EDC, and the authentic assessment and instructional practices derived from the approaches of teaching for understanding and multiple intelligences of PZ (both of these originate from constructivist learning theories and developmental psychology). "Authentic" implies that teaching, learning, and assessment occur during meaningful, intellectually challenging practices, and that they develop students' abilities to carry out such intellectual inquiries on their own. As one of the ATLAS descriptions highlighted, the model recognizes the diversity of students and adults in a variety of ways—in their particular familial and cultural surroundings and the convictions that emerge from these, in their individual developmental paths, and in their varied ways of knowing. Furthermore, the model seeks to accommodate and nurture these differences and, at the same time, it encourages all children to succeed even if their routes to success vary.<sup>1</sup>

### Description of the Model Components

The key organizational feature of ATLAS is a pathway of schools—a feeder pattern of schools, from kindergarten to high school, that are brought together by common goals—to enhance student learning and to shape other parts of the school system (school policies, professional development, and school management) in order to support authentic teaching and high levels of student achievement. This common vision is achieved by integrating five principles: 1) authentic teaching and learning is driven by questions, a focus on understanding, and a process that involves challenging, purposeful, and sustained

learning; 2) ongoing cycles of planning, action, and reflection characterize effective teaching, learning, and organizational change; 3) relationships matter, because learning is a social activity; 4) shared leadership, commitment, and communication build a collaborative culture for learning, and 5) members of ATLAS schools and pathways see themselves as part of broader, integrated learning communities (ATLAS design document as cited in Squires and Kranyik, 1997).

Seven elements of the design serve as a framework for realizing its goals and principles, while the application of these principles shifts in response to the maturation of the learner as s/he moves along the pathway. These elements are

1. Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment;
2. Personalized Learning Environment;
3. Inclusive Organizational and Management Structures;
4. Flexible Policy;
5. Professional Development;
6. Parent and Community Involvement;
7. Enabling Media and Technology.

ATLAS was rated as compatible or highly compatible with service-learning by the American Youth Policy Forum in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

## Overall Research Base

The research base on ATLAS schools has shifted its focus from the early studies that focused exclusively on implementation issues toward several more recent studies that examine the model's effect on student achievement. Still student achievement studies are scarce, with only 6 out of the 22 studies in the NCCSR Research Database providing detailed data on student achievement impact. The 1999 review report (Herman et al., 1999) does not consider ATLAS' effect on academic achievement due to the lack of quality studies. The 2002 review report (Borman et al., 2002) classifies ATLAS as one of the

12 CSR models that has quality research on student achievement impact as contrasted to 17 other CSR models that lack adequate research evidence.

## Key Research Findings on Implementation

In terms of a reform strategy, ATLAS is characterized as a comprehensive model due to its simultaneous emphases on the change of the school governance structure, relations of the school with outside-school stakeholders, and internal changes in curriculum and assessment. The focus on new modes of governance and management proved daunting both for the design team as well as for the schools that accepted the ATLAS model. Of the 22 studies included in the Database, well over one half focus exclusively on issues of governance and management, and several of the others devote some attention to governance. First, they point to the shortcomings of the ATLAS technical staff, who lacked either expertise in governance/ management and/or the knowledge of the local situation where ATLAS was introduced. They, then, go into the complex and differentiated perceptions of the ATLAS agenda of the local stakeholders that stood in the way of consensus on various reforms. For example, two studies indicate that principals were very positive about the ATLAS model whereas teachers were initially, at best, lukewarm—and moreover as time passed their interest seemed to wane (Bodily, 1996; Ross et al., 1997). Given these obstacles, most of the studies note that ATLAS was slow to get off the ground (Bodily, 1998; Smith et al., 1998; Berends et al., 2001) relative to other CSR models (which in the case of Memphis and Detroit were introduced at the same time in these sites). Reliance on teachers for developing curriculum was also responsible for the lack of rapid change. The case studies, however, indicate that the careful and persistent implementation of this “slow-starting” model resulted in sustained changes in instruction and management (Squires and Kranyik, 1997; Stringfield and Ross, 1997; Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1998).

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A paper written by the chair of the ATLAS Seminar, a cross-organizational discussion forum within the model, is a thoughtful account of the differences of the approaches that partner organizations brought to ATLAS (Hatch, 1998) and that led to difficulties in coordinating the efforts of the design team thus slowing down implementation at the initial school sites. Based on these conversations, ATLAS came to develop a more integrated and holistic reform model with an equal emphasis on governance/management and curriculum/instruction. These changes possibly contributed to the low implementation scores for ATLAS relative to other models introduced in the same locales. Nevertheless, ATLAS did gradually become accepted in a number of settings (Ross et al., 2000).

Two studies focus on the needs of children with learning disabilities, with one of these noting that the ATLAS model makes no provision for these children, though it calls for personalized instruction (Ahearn, 1994). Another study focuses on the development of study groups, which is an especially important component of ATLAS schools, noting that it takes some time for these groups to move through the several stages up to maturity, and it is especially when these groups achieve maturity that they have an important impact on teaching and, through improved teaching practice, on student learning (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1998).

## Key Research Findings on Student Achievement Effects

Of the 22 studies of the ATLAS model, only six provide careful reports on student outcomes and only three actually report the statistical significance of the outcome data. The 1999 overview report (Herman et al., 1999) asserts that most ATLAS research focuses on implementation with few studies of achievement. While ATLAS was first conceptualized in 1992 and launched in multiple sites in 1994, the complications associated with implementation led to an initial research focus on the chal-

lenges of implementation. Only from the late 1990s do we begin to see reports discussing achievement, and these often refer to higher than district- or state-wide average results in reading, writing, and math while presenting little supporting data with no tests of statistical significance (New American Schools, 1999) or referring to improvement in achievement tests and average Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores (Rosenblum Brigham Associates, 1998).

By 2001, however, Ross et al. (2001) are able to show significant achievement gains for the ATLAS schools that were implemented in the Memphis, TN, setting. The same group also reported positive findings in 2002 (Ross et al., 2002). In contrast, Thomas et al. (2002) indicate that the CSR schools implemented in Detroit, MI, fail to realize better scores on classroom environment or school climate when compared to a sample of control schools, and similarly that the CSR schools do not demonstrate any greater change in student achievement than the control schools. The CSR schools in Detroit following the ATLAS model tended to fall in the middle of the distribution in terms of these measures. It is thus interesting that Borman et al. (2002) report that the ATLAS schools have promising evidence of a positive impact on academic achievement, especially as Herman et al. (1999) earlier had noted that many of the studies of ATLAS schools have been carried out by the developer. Indeed, thus far there is scarcity of carefully reported evidence of the impact of the ATLAS model on academic achievement or other outcomes

<sup>1</sup>Orrell, C. J. (1996). ATLAS Communities: Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for All Students. In Stringfield, S., Ross, S., and L. Smith (eds.), *Bold plans for school restructuring: The New American Schools designs*, pp. 61-82. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>2</sup>Pearson, S. S. (2002). *Finding common ground: Service-learning and education reform—A survey of 28 leading school reform models*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

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*This Report presents a synthesis of the research listed below and collected in NCCSR's Research Database. Summaries of these studies are available at <http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/csr/RDB/ATLASlist.html>.*

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