

# THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

## A CSR Agenda: Emerging Themes for Research, Policy and Practice

By Naomi G. Housman

### Introduction

There is a growing sense of promise that comprehensive school reform (CSR), as distinct from—but building upon—past school improvement efforts, will succeed where other waves of reform have failed. The increasing participation of schools, districts and states in CSR efforts, the investment by private corporations, and the 1997 federal funding of schoolwide reform efforts through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program have created great momentum across the nation. In addition to the CSRD program, the reform of Title I in 1994 and President Clinton's May 2000 Executive Order have underscored the common, guiding purpose of all school improvement efforts: to increase student learning and achievement in the nation's lowest performing schools.

In an era of standards and accountability, schools are under greater scrutiny than ever before. With more and more schools exploring, planning for and implementing CSR, the school building is also becoming a place where researchers, model developers, external facilitators and other technical assistance providers cross paths. When efforts are coordinated and coherent, the increased attention and assistance can have a positive impact on the school. Thus, it is imperative to do the difficult work of building bridges between research and practice, wherein collaboration and communication are standard practice.

In June 2000, the Second Annual Research Symposium on comprehensive school reform was convened by the



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National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform; AEL, Inc.; the COSMOS Corporation and the McKenzie Group in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and Planning and Evaluation Service. The invited panel included representatives from research institutions, professional education associations, state departments of education, regional educational laboratories and the U.S. Department of Education.

The participants were asked to bring their research, policy and practice-based experiences to the table toward the symposium goals of sharing "an increased knowledge about current research, a sense of direction for sustain-

ing a network of researchers and a potential agenda for future research.”

This brief summarizes the highlights of the discussion and key questions posed by the panelists. The remarks are organized into three areas:

- Planning for CSR
- Implementing and sustaining CSR, and
- Future CSR research and policy implications.

## Setting Forth: What Research Says About Planning for CSR

The panelists were challenged to translate the research findings about what works in CSR into real technical assistance and support for practitioners, particularly in the planning stages. “There’s a consensus about what the challenges are for implementation...not so much about how to help schools overcome these challenges,” stated Amanda Datnow of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. In response, panelists identified the following ways in which school staff and technical assistance providers can work together to lay a strong foundation for change:

- Make improved student achievement—what happens in the classroom—the focus of reform efforts.
- Participate actively and reflectively in formative evaluation as an ongoing process.

## Keys to the Successful Implementation of CSR

### Leadership

- School and district level leaders who will withstand high stakes pressures and uphold a long-term vision
- Leaders who stay long enough to see change through
- New leaders who will sustain and support current reforms, rather than starting from scratch
- Teachers who are also leaders
- District policy that supports sustained leadership

### School and Community

- Ownership of and broad-based support for change
- Basic school functions under control (e.g., attendance, behavior)
- Recruitment and retention of high quality teachers
- Ongoing professional development for teachers and administrators

### Policy

- Reconciliation of the threat posed by high-stakes accountability
- Alignment of state and district policies and standards
- More time in the competitive grant process
- Greater district and school-level commitment to in-service teacher professional development

### Technical Assistance Providers

- Models demonstrated effective with different student populations and in different school contexts
- Training and support to help schools strategically plan, set goals, use data and assess progress on an ongoing basis



- Think about, and allocate, funds and other resources in non-traditional ways (i.e., not as “entitlements” but as a means of improving student achievement).
- Use, interpret and share data to drive decision-making at all stages.
- Work collaboratively within and across the school, district and state levels.

In addition to building capacity in different skill areas, a key role identified for technical assistance providers is to help school communities learn to ask the tough questions—of themselves

and of external assistance providers—and to seek their own solutions. It was noted that learning how to engage in the process of critical inquiry and making it a habit of the school community is particularly important in schools that have seen many reforms come and go, leaving the staff distrustful and disengaged.

“[CSR is] not a stage, it’s not a series of stages, it’s an ongoing effort to change practice, behavior, and beliefs.”

– Daniel Humphrey

“Reform implementation is not simply a school-level event. . . . It’s a co-construction of state and district forces, as well as design team actions.”

– Amanda Datnow

Whether there are criteria, or preconditions, that a school must meet prior to implementing CSR—and whether or not applying such criteria is ultimately constraining, or even relevant, for high poverty, low performing schools—was widely debated by the panelists. Mary Ann Millsap of Abt Associates, Inc. proposed that there are three basic preconditions that a school “must have in place before it gets into a reform agenda, particularly if it’s bringing in reforms that were developed externally to the school”:

- The school is **functioning** (discipline, absenteeism, staffing are under control).
- There is not only passive administrative **support** but also **advocacy** at both the school and district level.
- There is “**buy-in**” within the school building.

Panelists considered the impact—both from policy and practice perspectives—of applying criteria to schools as a precondition for implementation of CSR. Robert Yin of the COSMOS Corporation wondered “to what extent the prospects for reform are... limited or constrained” based on the proportion of high poverty schools that start with those preconditions. Sheila

Rosenblum of Rosenblum Brigham Associates added that failure to meet preconditions could present a barrier for schools most in need of schoolwide improvement, given that “the highest need and high-poverty schools most likely have the least capacity.”

The issue was then raised about the role and approach of model developers, who are often the closest to the school at the point of initial engagement in CSR. It was noted that developers do not share a uniform—or may not have any—set of criteria or preconditions for change. For example, while some developers will help schools become ready for implementation, others will launch into implementation regardless of the school’s current capacity for change.

Other panelists cautioned against applying preconditions in a way that approaches change as a linear process. While things may move along more efficiently when preconditions or the aspects of reform are applied in a staged manner, what often gets left behind is “a real analysis of the vision... at the heart of the reform effort.” Daniel Humphrey of SRI International concurred by citing findings from a Pew study of seven urban districts that were identified as “well-positioned to implement standards-based reform.” Though these districts progressed quickly using a staged approach to develop and implement standards, they did not ultimately change belief systems about children’s ability to meet those standards.

As the dialogue continued, panelists considered the impact of state policy on success of reform efforts. Constance Bergquist of Education Systems Design, Inc. suggested that lessons may be found in an analysis of states’ varying policies for allocation and competition of CSRD funds. For instance, if states do not allow sufficient time for planning, is

## **Key Questions: Planning for CSR**

**How can data be used to create demand for change?**

**What are the challenges of integrating state reform standards with reform models? Is integration possible with all models?**

**Are there “preconditions” that a school must meet prior to implementation? Do different models require different levels of readiness or capacity for change?**

**Can models be categorized as “prescriptive” vs. “philosophy-based” with some corollaries to the required time investment?**

**Which models facilitate communication among teachers and principals, within and across schools in a district or region?**

**How can a school determine which model(s) would best fit its needs and context?**

it realistic to expect that preconditions have been met? Another key to the impact of planning may be shown through a comparison of low performing schools implementing CSR as a result of a non-competitive local or state intervention fund, and schools receiving funds through the state

CSRD grant competition. Would the school and district level planning and preparation initiated by the competitive grant process have a significant impact on the successful implementation of CSR?

The question of school readiness and preconditions for change caused some panelists to reflect on the broader meaning of CSR and what lies at the root of successful implementation, and thereby sustainability. Humphrey said the key lesson for CSR is that “it’s not a stage, it’s not a series of stages, it’s an ongoing effort to change practice, behavior and beliefs.” Datnow offered a similar description when the issue of school buy-in was raised. She described its importance as “getting teachers to buy into school improvement as an overall concept in changing the way they think about student achievement, about their role in the classroom and what they do” so that buy-in represents “not just a structural, but a cultural shift in the interaction between teacher and student.”

This raised many questions about the meaning and process through which school buy-in for reform is established. Too often, the 80% vote required by some models is attained without real understanding of the model and what will be required of the staff in the long term. A range of possible factors—principal coercion, staff disengagement, inadequate support from the model developer, pressure from the district or state, inadequate time to investigate the options—all can play a part.

Nonetheless, establishing buy-in through a vote-taking can be meaningful if, according to Millsap, “you’ve really assessed where you are, if you’ve tried to match, you’ve tried to define what your school’s needs were and match them to what those external resources are. . . . The vote doesn’t say that everybody has bought in. The vote says that they’re willing to try.”

“School reforms don’t produce achievement gains.... It’s changes in teaching. And school reforms don’t cause changes in teaching. What causes changes in teaching are organizational, instructional, structural events that occur in that school. So research has to look at all three.”

– Steve Ross

## Compelling Findings: What Research Tells About Implementing and Sustaining CSR

CSR research often points to leadership as a key factor for all stages of the CSR process. One researcher cited a study of matched CSRD and control schools in which the control schools with strong leadership outperformed CSRD schools. In addition, a literature review of CSR studies over the past ten years showed that there is a vast amount of consistent and compelling data on what makes an effective principal for schoolwide change.

Panelists shared research and experience challenging traditional notions of leadership. They proposed that, for successful implementation of CSR, an individual leader’s attributes or responsibilities are less important than the leader’s ability to construct leadership as a shared responsibility. Superintendent Libia Gil stated her belief that effective leadership is not determined “while we’re there,” but by what happens at the end of a leader’s tenure. Gil is working in California’s Chula Vista School District to create a lasting shift from top-down leader-

ship to a model in which central office plays a supporting role in building capacity at the site level. Gil believes this is not only a strategy for implementation, but also a key to long-term sustainability. “The real question is, how do we engage community to provide that leadership and to keep us moving, that is focused on our personal level of commitment, and an organization that is driven and operated by basic principles—rather than what is externally driven?”

District policy also plays a crucial role in supporting effective leadership. This is particularly true in districts where accountability pressures, high-stakes testing, and frequent changes in leadership make it difficult to sustain long-term change efforts. Steve Ross of the Center for Research in Education Policy observed that “Where you have effective principal leadership, I think the design works or no design works... and if they don’t see the district involved in that reform, then those reforms fade away after the money is spent.”

Scaling-up and bringing coherence to all the “moving parts” of CSR remains a challenge. Datnow’s research has shown that “reform is a multi-directional interaction” wherein top-down and bottom-up influences are both possible. “Reform implementation is not simply a school-level event.... It’s a co-construction of state and district forces, as well as design team actions.”

Ted Hamann of the LAB at Brown University cited lessons from statewide reform in Maine that further supported the concept of a multi-directional interaction for support and scaling-up. In this case, the flow of interaction is among “heterogeneous schools” with respect to how far along each school is on a reform continuum. More and less advanced schools are supporting and learning from one another.

## Key Questions: Implementing and Sustaining CSR

How can evaluation be used to link instructional strategies with student achievement?

What are the differences in implementation and sustainability between external and home-grown CSR programs? Selected and mandated models?

What forms of leadership support CSR on the school and district levels?

What indicators can be used for identifying teacher leaders?

In the midst of this complexity research bears out that, if fully implemented, CSR models can work. Citing a longitudinal sample of students in a Comer School Development Program and a matched comparison school, Millsap noted that “when fully implemented these models can work” in high-poverty, urban schools.

Tom Glennan of the RAND Corporation has found through years of research and interaction with practitioners that a significant factor determining success or failure of any reform is coherence among reforms. Failure is almost certain when, “inserted on top of these models are a whole set of other initiatives that may or may not bear any relationship, but are run by different people and have different accountability chains.”

While research shows that CSR can have a positive impact on standardized test scores and teacher renewal, there are also signs that the immediate pressures posed by high-stakes accountability demands are trumping long-term reform efforts. Humphrey remarked, “Our finding in a couple of different studies indicated that we seriously—in the 90s—underestimated the political and technical problems associated with assessment of standards.”

## Moving Ahead: Directions for the CSR Research Agenda

Panelists, while offering a range of directions for future CSR research, expressed a great urgency for research that is both timely and useful to practitioners and policymakers. Research that explores how to sustain school improvement efforts is a top priority, particularly now that CSRD schools are moving into their third year of implementation.

Further, research that would serve the most urgent needs of the policy and practice arenas would focus on issues of parity in student outcomes, incorporating findings on how different students (such as English Language Learners and minority students) learn in different contexts. Given increasing demands for accountability, it is also important for research to shed light on the amount of time needed to show progress in student achievement with different students and with different approaches to school reform.

Just as CSR puts the spotlight on student achievement, so must research focus on what happens in the classroom. What impact is the reform having

## Strategies for Bridging the Research-Practice-Policy Divide

- Develop standards of quality for research that include criteria for common measures, control groups, longitudinal studies and usefulness to practitioners and policymakers.
- Conduct a meta-analysis of current research findings.
- Regularly produce syntheses of research for use by, and accessible to, practitioners and policymakers.
- Create more opportunities for researchers and practitioners to work together so that research is field-initiated and action-based.
- Use participatory, formative evaluation to engage practitioners and researchers together in an ongoing and reflective process

on teaching, the interaction between teacher and student and, ultimately, improved student achievement? How are deeply held beliefs about student ability shifting, particularly for populations served by the lowest performing schools? How is student achievement being defined and measured in new, more meaningful ways?

Datnow suggested that researchers take a more in-depth look at what is working in the classroom across reform models, and how it is tied to outcomes, asking not only “is it being implemented or not, but what does implementation look like in that particular model and in a different model?” Ross supported the idea of focusing more closely on the classroom and the school by stating that

“school reforms don’t produce achievement gains.... It’s changes in teaching. And school reforms don’t cause changes in teaching. What causes changes in teaching are organizational, instructional, structural events that occur in that school. So research has to look at all three.”

Rebecca Herman of the American Institutes for Research noted that because no one “magic bullet” model or implementation strategy exists, the field would be well served by research focusing on the subtle interaction between models and school context. However, because of the impact of context on model success, clear findings on which models work and where they work are unlikely. Rosenblum made the case that research can be most useful when it happens where CSR happens—at the school. Ross concurred, stating that, “the most fundamental kind of research that we can promote is formative evaluation at the site level.” In order to make research useful at the school level, researchers were urged to tap into practitioners’ expertise, asking them what is working and what areas bear further investigation. Both practitioners and policymakers would be served by research that is more closely connected to what is happening in the classroom; practitioners then need that data returned to the classroom for immediate use. Steve Fleischman of the American Federation of Teachers illustrated this disconnection with an analogy: “What teachers and folks who work in schools think they’re often doing is battlefield or emergency medicine, and what they hear researchers talking about are ‘wellness’ programs.”

Other panelists also expressed the urgency for education researchers and practitioners to be proactive and timely with research findings. Ross stated, “We may not know the answers about results, but we do know the answers about implementation, and we need to get that word out very quickly, or

someone else will tell the story for us and we'll be doing the same thing again in ten years."

Finally, panelists cited a great need for a meta-analysis that addresses the "how to" of overcoming implementation challenges. To be more politically savvy, researchers should agree to common measures (so that findings can be more easily synthesized), and establish standards for high quality research. Research standards could include criteria for longitudinal studies, control groups and usefulness to the field.

A broad range of questions for future CSR research was posed throughout the course of the two-day symposium. The list below captures some of the key questions.

## Continuing the Dialogue

While a great deal is known about what does work in schools, successfully implementing, sustaining and scaling-up schoolwide improvement efforts are still challenges for researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Many fundamental questions remain about leadership, governance, instruction, learning and policy, and how all of these pieces work together to turn around low performing schools. Further, school reform efforts must forge ahead amidst an ever-changing social and political landscape.

### **Key Questions: CSR Research and Policy Implications**

How is success for schoolwide improvement defined?

What are the district, state and federal policies that support and/or obstruct CSR efforts?

Why and how is CSRD resisted or adapted at the state and local levels?

What states are integrating state and federal funds, such as Title I and CSRD?

What are the policy implications if research indicates there is a threshold of stability, i.e., "preconditions" for implementation?

How do schools balance current reform efforts with new ones?

How do schools implement reform under high-stress conditions, such as high staff turnover?

Do schools receiving CSRD funds through a competitive process have different results from those receiving funds through a non-competitive, intervention process?

Given the urgency and high stakes being applied to districts and states, the demand for new ideas, solutions and tools is great—as is the need to translate and share the results of this work across school, district and state lines. More opportunities for constructive dialogue—such as that which took place at the Research Symposium among researchers, practitioners and policymakers—will move schools closer to the reality of improved learning and achievement for students.

## About the Author

Naomi G. Housman, Ed.M., is based at the Institute for Educational Leadership and is the assistant director for outreach for the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform. Ms. Housman has taught in high poverty urban communities, and coordinated an innovative after-school and summer academic program for students in Boston’s lowest performing public schools. Ms. Housman has also worked in policy and research on issues of teacher recruitment, training and retention.

## PANELISTS

**ELIZABETH HALE**, Moderator, Institute for Educational Leadership  
**ROSA ARONSON**, National Association of Secondary School Principals  
**CONSTANCE BERGQUIST**, Education Systems Design, Inc.  
**ROBERT BOURDEAUX**, Virginia Department of Education  
**JUDY BRAY**, Education Commission of the States  
**HUGH BURKETT**, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education  
**AMANDA DATNOW**, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, The University of Toronto  
**LAURA DESIMONE**, Pelavin Research Center, American Institutes for Research  
**HONOR FEDE**, American Association of School Administrators  
**STEVE FLEISCHMAN**, American Federation of Teachers  
**MARY HATWOOD FUTRELL**, National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, George Washington University  
**TOM GLENNAN**, RAND Corporation  
**TED HAMANN**, LAB at Brown University  
**REBECCA HERMAN**, Pelavin Research Center, American Institutes for Research  
**DANIEL HUMPHREY**, SRI International  
**B. SCOTT JONES**, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
**DENISE McKEON**, National Education Association  
**MARY ANN MILLSAP**, Abt Associates, Inc.  
**SUSANNA PURNELL**, National Association of State Boards of Education  
**JASON RAVITZ**, SRI International  
**SHEILA ROSENBLUM**, Rosenblum Brigham Associates  
**STEVE ROSS**, Center for Research in Educational Policy, University of Memphis  
**SUSAN SANCHEZ**, Office of the Under Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service  
**SHIRLEY SCHWARTZ**, Council of the Great City Schools  
**ALLAN STERBIN**, Center for Research in Educational Policy, University of Memphis  
**ROBERT YIN**, COSMOS Corporation

## About CSR and CSRD

Comprehensive school reform (CSR) is a systematic approach to schoolwide improvement that incorporates every aspect of a school — from curriculum and instruction to school management. Schools engaged in CSR use research-based designs (or models) to move from multiple, fragmented educational programs to a unified plan focused on increasing academic achievement. To promote engagement in CSR, Congress passed legislation (Public Law 105-78) to create a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration project (CSRSD) administered by the U.S. Department of Education. Schools that are awarded CSRSD grants must have a well-integrated plan with all of the following components: (1) effective, research-based, replicable methods and strategies; (2) comprehensive design with aligned components; (3) professional development; (4) measurable goals and benchmarks; (5) support within the school; (6) parental and community involvement; (7) external technical support and assistance; (8) evaluation strategies; and (9) coordination of resources.

For many schools the key to achieving CSR is using an externally developed, research-based model for school-wide improvement. The models help them focus all of their resources on achieving their improvement goals.

## New CD-ROM Discusses Research on Comprehensive School Reform

The Second Annual Research Symposium on Research and Evaluation Related to Comprehensive School Reform was held in Washington, DC, on June 26-27, 2000. Leading education researchers participated with representatives of professional education associations, the U.S. Department of Education, state departments of education, and regional educational laboratories. Their goals were to (1) learn more about current CSR research, (2) develop a sense of direction for sustaining a network of researchers, and (3) consider a potential agenda for future research.

A CD-ROM of the proceedings has just been released by AEL, Inc. Information appears in three

formats: a booklet inserted in the CD case contains a summary of the event; a complete PDF transcript of the proceedings is on the CD; and a presentation that includes video clips, narration, and text provides an overview and a chance to “meet” the panelists.

Researchers who work in areas related to comprehensive school reform can get copies of the CD-ROM from the AEL Distribution Center. Contact Chuck Caldwell at 800-624-9120 or [caldwelc@ael.org](mailto:caldwelc@ael.org).



## **About NCCSR**

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) collects and disseminates information that builds the capacity of schools to raise the academic achievement of all students. This is accomplished by continuously examining the literature related to comprehensive school reform (CSR), adding high quality materials to our online databases and actively sending useful information to educators and policy makers at the local, state and national levels. Through our web site, reference and retrieval services and publications, NCCSR is the central gateway to information on CSR.

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**Email: [AskNCCSR@goodschools.gwu.edu](mailto:AskNCCSR@goodschools.gwu.edu)**

**The National Clearinghouse  
for Comprehensive School Reform**  
**2121 K Street, Suite 250**  
**Washington, DC 20037**

**Phone: (877) 766-4277**

**Fax: (877) 308-4995**

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