

THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

Leadership for Student Learning: Changing Expectations

By Elizabeth L. Hale and Michael D. Usdan

Leading Reform

The question, “Who can lead America’s schools?” looms large in the nation today. Richard F. Elmore emphasizes the seriousness of the situation that prompts the question. He says, “Schools are being asked by elected officials — policy leaders, if you will — to do things they are largely unequipped to do . . . to assume responsibilities they are largely unequipped to assume . . . [In] this situation the risks and consequences of failure are high for everyone, adults and children alike, but especially high for children.”¹

The question is a frequent topic of discussion at professional education meetings as well as in governmental circles and in corporate and foundation boardrooms throughout the country. The issue of educational leadership has reached almost frenetic dimensions. Foundations, school groups, governmental agencies, business groups, higher education and non-profit groups (including our own organization) are all scurrying to develop proposals and programs focused on school leadership for the 21st century.

The widespread adoption and implementation of standards-based reform initiatives has suddenly changed the definition of successful educational leadership. Principals (as well as superintendents) who previously succeeded because of their skills in working with teachers, students, parents and the community are now being assessed according to their ability to raise test scores. Instructional leadership has rapidly become the major if not, in many cases, the exclusive criterion for success in educational leadership positions.



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The establishment of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program simply escalated the changed definition of successful educational leadership.² CSRD sent a clear, bi-partisan policy signal that although the school reform debate was likely to continue, “enough was known — about how children learn and how schools change — for action.”³ The legislation provided funding to low-performing schools and expanded a movement begun in the early 1990s to reform schools through the use of schoolwide reform strategies based on externally-developed, research-based school reform models.

Today, there are approximately 288 school reform models that have been implemented in schools that receive CSRD funding. Of the 1,817 schools receiving CSRD funding,

27% (492 schools) are classified as low performing.⁴ The lessons learned from these disparate school reform efforts point toward some additional requirements for school leaders. *CSRSD in the Field: Final Update* documented lessons learned about developing and implementing school reform programs, supporting reform efforts and ongoing implementation. It also provided overall impressions and considerations for states, districts, schools and technical assistance providers. The report documented the need to help principals develop the *unique* leadership skills necessary to achieve comprehensive school reform, but stopped short of enumerating them.⁵

Each of the *CSRSD in the Field* reports noted the need for new and more stable school leadership. In CSRSD schools, the new leader must be able to make data-based decisions, be knowledgeable about school reform in general and about specific school reform model, and be capable of working effectively with partners internal and external to the school. After a short two years of experience, disparate comprehensive school reform efforts have unmasked the need for principals who can build a scaffold or infrastructure of support for change both inside and outside of the school.

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Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

President Clinton’s May 3, 2000 Executive Order, “Actions to Improve Low-Performing Schools,” reinforced the nation’s commitment to improving low-performing schools and confirmed a national priority: improving low-performing schools. “Turnaround,” a commonly used business term, describes the circumstances of companies in operating distress. In business parlance, CSR and CSRSD require instructional leaders who can “turnaround” low-performing schools. These school leaders must possess new “know-how” and be able to

- ◆Collect and use data.
- ◆Develop benchmarks.
- ◆Find and use time to assess their needs and investigate appropriate reform models.
- ◆Meet the needs of all students and develop clear understandings with external partners.
- ◆Work collaboratively with teams of staff members inside the school.
- ◆Understand and be knowledgeable about the change process.

Principals of CSRSD schools must be able to “rally the troops” and give the staff “hope”⁶ that the changes they seek can be achieved. It has been documented that this kind of change takes time, so these principals must also give the staff “staying power.” In short, CSRSD requires facilitative leaders who can change the traditional patterns of interactions both inside and outside of schools.

There is no denying the legitimacy of ratcheting up the principal’s responsibility for academic

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achievement, the transcendent mission of the schools. But, to perform previously de-emphasized leadership tasks and, we might say, tasks for which so many have not been trained, principals must become skilled instructional leaders. The U.S. Department of Education, through its first-ever Principals’ Leadership Summit in July 2000, has created a practitioners’ group of principals from every state in the nation and from Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands to inform its research, policy and practice agenda on the principalship and on school leadership. In a pre-summit survey of the principals selected to represent their states, 16% of the principals said that it was reasonable to expect principals to be instructional leaders, but a slightly larger group of the principals (18%) said that this was not a reasonable expectation. The survey had a 78% response rate.

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.

In addition, a majority of the principals (57%) said that while the expectation was reasonable, attendant and competing challenges required much of their time — issues such as discipline, special education, record keeping, accountability and assessment, working with parents and counseling overworked and stressed staff members. Many respondents readily admitted that their day was spent dealing with a multitude of tasks unrelated to instruction and that they had reached a practical limit

of what duties they could perform. One principal commented, “Whether or not it is a reasonable expectation, however, is debatable, [because] by design and circumstance there are substantial barriers to being able to carry out this mission.”

The harsh reality is that many of our current educational leaders are not prepared to provide instructional leadership. In order to develop instructional leaders and leaders who can “turnaround” our low-performing schools we need to make significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of school leaders and in the ways



school leaders are prepared and supported on the job. For good or for ill, the spotlight is now on individual schools, individual school leaders, staff and individual (student) performance. The need is great to ensure that our most public of local leaders — school principals — are prepared to take on the new challenges of the job.

Change in our decentralized and fragmented education system is rarely driven exclusively by either top-down or bottom-up strategies. In true democratic fashion, change is both top-down and bottom-up and flows concurrently in both directions. However, there must be more synergy between top-down reform initiatives promulgated by policy leaders at the top (governors and business leaders) and the practitioners at the delivery system level who actually deal with students in the classroom.

Step by Step is a collection of the best available resources to assist principals and others in constructing strategies to address all the components of comprehensive school reform — from getting started to demonstrating success.

Please visit Step by Step at:

www.goodschools.gwu.edu/SBS/index.html

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If the rules of the game have changed in terms of our expectations of administrative success, how can we positively and realistically reconfigure the role? If principals (and superintendents) are to be judged by their instructional leadership skills in raising test scores and achieving performance goals, how can the jobs be restructured? Could experienced, successful teachers begin to serve as instructional leaders, freeing principals to perform their important traditional roles as managers and leaders who work with parents and the community on the political and social agenda? Would it help if principals’ professional development began to focus on needed new skills and capacities such as data-based decision making or working more effectively in shared leadership situations? Would the creation of networks of CSR principals provide peer support, as well as help to disseminate best practices and lessons learned?

It is time to rethink how such diverse administrative responsibilities are handled and to conceive

"The basic idea of distributed leadership is not very complicated In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform the complex tasks involved without distributing the responsibility for leadership and creating a common culture that makes this distributed leadership coherent. It is the 'glue' of a common task or goal-improvement of instruction-and a common set of values . . . that keep distributed leadership from becoming another version of loose coupling."

— Richard F. Elmore ⁷

of redeploying leadership functions under concepts such as the one — distributed leadership — espoused by Professor Richard Elmore of Harvard University. It is also time to rethink the diverse systems for providing ongoing professional development and support to principals. More strategies for supporting principals, similar to the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform’s web-based “Step By Step,” are needed.

In fact, it is time to take action. We need to generate more realistic delineations of functional responsibilities and increase the capacity of school districts and other technical assistance providers

to strengthen the scaffold of support for principals, the leaders who, in turn, are now expected to operate more democratically and as facilitators inside and outside of the school. Such actions will make school leadership positions more rewarding and, equally important, such actions will make it possible for school leaders to be more successful. It has become increasingly clear that John Gardner's "anti leadership vaccine" has become prevalent in public education as communities throughout the nation grapple with a vanishing pipeline of prospective principals and superintendents. Such actions will help make school leadership positions more appealing.



We will be missing a major opportunity if we do not seize the moment and capitalize on the saliency of the leadership issue to fundamentally reconfigure how we recruit, prepare, induct and sustain school leaders. It would be tragic if we viewed the current emphasis on leadership as just another fad, an issue that will receive short-term attention by funders and policy-makers and then be preempted by another "hot button" concern and drift back into the woodwork for another two or three decades. Indeed, if this latter scenario occurs, we will lose a golden opportunity to build on the unprecedented visibility and significance of education as a national priority issue. We also will lose the opportunity to help our low-performing schools and ensure better academic outcomes for all students.

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Endnotes

1 Richard F. Elmore, Building a New Structure for School Leadership. The Albert Shanker Institute, Winter 2000, p. 40.

2 The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program was established in the FY '98 Appropriations Act for the U.S. Department of Education, Public Law 105-78; the legislation directed the program to be implemented using guidance provided in the Conference Report accompanying the Appropriations Act, House Report No. 105-309.

3 Paraphrased/excerpted comments, Additional Views Submitted by the Honorable David Obey and the Honorable John Porter on the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Bill: "The Road To Better American Schools." The Congressional Record, Volume 143, 1997.

4 Southwest Educational Development Laboratory CSRD Awards Database, August 2000.

5 CSRD in the Field: Final Update. U.S. Department of Education, July 2000.

6 Dale Kalkofen, Vice President, District Services, New American Schools, Presentation, AEL Summer Academy, August 2000.

7 Richard F. Elmore, "Building A New Structure For School Leadership." American Educator, Winter 1999-2000, p. 11.

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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