

THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

Academic Standards and Comprehensive School Reform**By Christopher T. Cross****Introduction**

Educators today are facing the major tidal forces of standards, assessments, and accountability. Within this era of high stakes testing, a desperate search for ways to raise student achievement and avoid labels such as “failing school,” “student not promoted,” and “not eligible for diploma” has fueled the movement to seek packaged, research-based approaches to success. While some of these efforts have focused on quick fixes, the most thoughtful efforts emphasize solutions that will result in permanent change and sustained improvement of student learning. Comprehensive school reform (CSR) can be a potent strategy for achieving these positive, lasting results.

In many states and districts, reform efforts have successfully integrated the aforementioned tidal forces and CSR. Yet in many districts and states these efforts are not integrated. They remain separate and are given decidedly unequal attention, in funding, in political support, and in implementation.

While many factors contribute to the failure to integrate these efforts, conversations with those charged with school and district leadership reveal an unease with knowing exactly how to “connect the dots.” CSR is a very effective mechanism that can be used to link the pieces and create a plan to overcome a pattern of disconnected activities. What do schools need to consider relative to standards and assessments as they plan to implement comprehensive school reform?



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CSR Models and Alignment with Standards

One of the dangers of opening the market to model purveyors is the potential for hucksterism. The Obey-Porter pot of money that provides schools with at least \$50,000 per year or more for CSR implementation has attracted some model developers who have not paid enough attention to the demands of the standards movement. School staff members considering a model need to become savvy consumers of data and be able to ask developers, before entering into a contract with a developer, “How does the model address local and/or state standards?”

Almost every school needs to meet standards, and Title I schools are required

by law to meet state standards and demonstrate performance on standards-based assessments. It is simply not enough for a developer to assure a school that the model and standards are aligned. Model developers should be expected to demonstrate the alignment, if alignment is specified. Unless the model has been developed within the confines of the standards and assessment system in a particular state, the model should permit the school or district to implement and perhaps modify the model in a way that will support those required standards and assessments. A crosswalk between the model, standards, and assessments must be created for the school. Or, in the case that a school or district makes a conscious decision to replace the established accountability system with the model developer's, everyone involved should know and understand this decision before the design is adopted and implemented. In addition, a full



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 (CSR/D) administered by the U.S. Department of Education. Schools that are awarded CSR/D 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 schoolwide improvement. The models help them focus all of their resources on achieving their improvement goals.

explanation of the model's professional development and technical assistance program should be spelled out at the onset of the contract.

The importance of alignment cannot be overstated. If the standards and assessments that comprise the accountability system are not reflected in the content that is taught, then the school may find that its performance, as measured by these public accountability systems, is imperiled. That, of course, could unseat the entire reform effort. The public, including political leaders, has little tolerance for data that confuse people with one set of indicators showing improvement and another no improvement or even decline. This scenario often

occurs when states or districts administer both normed and standards-based assessments without any regard for the conflicting messages the test results will convey. The state and district need to be clear about their goals, the measurement of these goals, and how they are going to educate the public about these issues.

An even more important component of the alignment issue is the matter of professional development. Schools need to assure themselves that they can handle the situation if it is unclear or if the developer provides for no relationship between the model's academic program and school's standards and assessments. While the school or district may make a conscious decision to go in a different direction, everyone involved should know and understand that before a model is adopted and implemented.



Standards and Time Pressures

Some CSR models have been abandoned by schools at an early stage because the school, district or state was impatient to see results, not realizing the necessity for or having the political patience to understand that some models require a long period to take root. This is especially the

case where extensive teacher training is required, or where major staff turnover occurs. The models that may take longer to implement often provide greater potential for alignment with standards and assessments. The models that are more prescriptive and content focused may create a greater challenge in alignment.

The interaction between models and accountability systems requires a great deal of exploration. As noted above, some models require a long-term commitment for implementation. Other models may yield results sooner, a “quick fix,” and yet produce fewer sustainable or systemic changes. If, for example, the accountability law or policy that pertains to a school, district, and principal links immediate increases in academic achievement with financial compensation for teachers and the principal, then a decision may be based on short-term solutions. If, however, the accountability

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provisions reward change that takes longer and is deeper, then another range of models may be given consideration. There are reports of schools starting with shorter-term solutions and then abandoning them in favor of models with a systemic basis. Similarly, there are reports of schools realizing that they don't have time to wait through the stages of a systemic model and opting for a shorter-term solution.

State and district policies on what constitutes "success" can heavily impact the kinds of CSR reforms individual schools will implement. A definition of success beyond a simple school ranking on a single test will mean that reforms that take longer to implement are less likely to become derailed.

With careful planning and patience, comprehensive school reform can be a very powerful tool for improving student achievement. Schools

examining what to do and whom they might turn to for assistance must be prepared to be thorough, tough, and patient. Most importantly, the school community must be committed to seeing CSR as a way to improve student learning on a sustained basis.

About the Author

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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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