



Research Brief

THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

The District's Capacity To Improve Student Achievement

Introduction

In *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed Into High-Performance Systems*, Gordon Cawelti and Nancy Protheroe examine the practices of six school districts that have proven highly effective in improving student achievement in low performing schools. This Research Brief summarizes the key findings regarding the districts' ability to establish system-wide reforms and effect change on the school and classroom levels. These findings are based on two-day site visits to profiled schools during which official school documents were collected and interviews were conducted with the superintendent, central office staff, principals, and teachers

Establishing Standards

The research demonstrates that districts have the capacity to create and sustain meaningful system-wide reforms. The districts studied have established fundamental practices and standards that have served as the basis of the change process. Such practices and standards include the following:

- Curriculum standards that primarily focus on the basic skills measured by the state, with emphasis placed on the teaching of reading and literacy
- External agents to convert existing curriculum information into standards-based material

- Instruction based on overall test content and on thorough coverage of specific skills
- Tools for teachers to provide extra assistance and specific follow-up tutoring
- Interim measures of student progress to assess the level of mastery

Using Knowledge and Resources

System-wide achievement depends on cooperation among teachers, administrators, and district officials. Districts that provide essential resources and supports can empower schools to perform diligently and function as members of a cohesive effort. Such resources and supports include the following:

- 1) Effective Budgeting and Monetary Support
 - Allocation processes that are decentralized to the building level, allowing for greater accountability to be placed on individual schools
 - Strategies to guarantee consistent funding from the district
 - Flexibility to reallocate monies for special programs after mid-year reviews

2) District-wide Staff Development

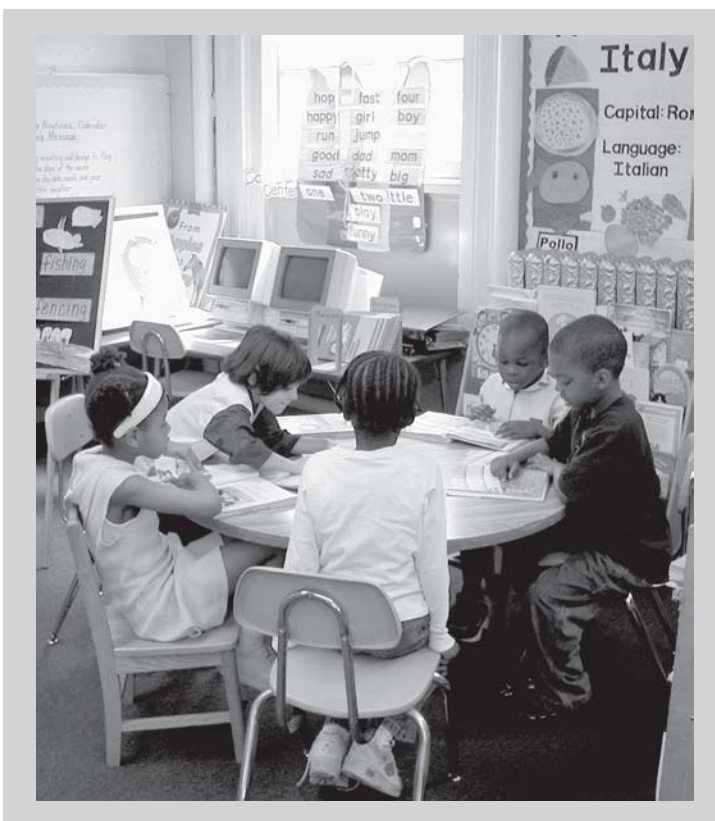
- Development opportunities to foster a collective identity among school and district personnel
- Goal-setting and leadership retreats to determine system-wide objectives
- Time reserved to focus on relevant classroom topics such as technological understanding

Source

High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems was published by Educational Research Service (ERS). Information on ordering a copy is available at <http://www.ers.org/>

"Pointing to a particular extraordinary principal or teacher is no longer enough. Districts must organize themselves so that high standards for all students are expected in all of their schools."

— Cawelti & Protheroe, p.1



Restructuring for Greater Accountability

The researchers broadly define restructuring as taking the necessary action to make schools more “robust and responsive” (p.101). They conclude that charging principals and teachers with the development and implementation of their own plans enhances school accountability for student learning.

Challenges to Change

This study indicates that system-wide improvements can be shaped at the district level. However, the process of changing the nature of an organization is one that is accompanied by inherent obstacles. The researchers found that some schools and districts face challenges such as

- Disappointment among some school-based staff members that they will be expected to abandon programs they feel are beneficial for their students

- Lack of cohesion among the programs being offered in a school, typically including the attempt to change too much at once

- Unwillingness of staff to fully support programs, with attitudes ranging from indifference to hostility

- Frustration with trying to find time for subjects such as science, social studies, or the arts and for fostering students’ higher-order thinking skills when the focus is on basic skills in reading and math

According to Cawelti and Protheroe, successful districts exhibit leadership that effectively engenders school and teacher support for a shared vision of student achievement.

NCCSR Recommends

Based on Cawelti and Protheroe’s summary of findings, NCCSR recommends the following steps to aid districts in the employment of system-wide reform efforts:

- Encourage district leadership to develop and nurture commonly shared beliefs about learning and to develop a means of incorporating multiple research-based changes over a period of years.
- Restructure systems by decentralizing management and budgeting to the building level.
- Align standards, the curriculum, and assessments to ensure that the local and state frameworks match and utilize item-by-item and student-by-student analyses of student responses to test items.



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 the databases and actively sending useful information to educators and policy makers at the local, state and national levels. Through the web site, reference and retrieval services, and publications NCCSR is the central gateway to information on CSR.

Visit NCCSR’s web site at
<http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu>
Email: AskNCCSR@goodschools.gwu.edu

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

Toll Free Phone: (877) 766-4277
Toll Free Fax: (877) 308-4995

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement. It is operated by The George Washington University under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0137 in partnership with the Council for Basic Education and Institute for Educational Leadership. 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.