ERIC DIGEST

DECEMBER 1998 NUMBER 124 EDO-EA-98-8

Whole-School Reform

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In recent years, a new generation of programs has become available to educators with a promise that they will help all students, even those on the margins, succeed in school. These programs have in common the assumption that school reform, to bring about measurable improvement, must embrace the whole school.

Don't try these programs, warn their developers, if you want only piecemeal improvements or if you can't wean yourself from the notion that reform is a one-time event. Be prepared to reexamine and change all parts of school life, from attitudes and culture to leadership, parent and community involvement, curriculum, facilities, and, of course, financing.

Many schools have implemented whole-school reform models, and evidence on the programs' performance is mounting. Interest in the models is certain to grow now that Congress has appropriated $150 million for the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRD). Almost 3,000 schools will receive awards of at least $50,000 each to implement whole-school models or to develop their own research-based reforms aimed at helping all children meet challenging state standards.

This Digest describes several of the programs that have been designed to bring about whole-school reform, spells out the factors that determine their success, and takes a closer look at the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program.

What Is Whole-School Reform?

Whole-school (or comprehensive school) reform is a broad brush that covers a diverse set of nationwide and local programs. In their most visionary expression, these reform programs are cross-disciplinary efforts that involve home, school, and community in the intellectual development and personal nurturing of all children.

"This new approach," says Brent Keltner (1998), "takes an integrated view of the reform process. It is based on the concept that the way to successfully improve school performance is to simultaneously change all elements of a school's operating environment so as to bring each element into alignment with a central, guiding vision."

Robert Slavin, founder of Success for All, is quoted as saying, "We do a heart-lung transplant. One of the things we learned is that if you don't deal with both instruction and curriculum and school organization, things start to slide back. In a Success for All School, there's nothing to slide back to—it's all gone" (Lynn Olson 1998).

Essential to the policies and practices of these reform efforts is the belief that gains in student outcomes require a reconceptualization of traditional notions of teaching and learning (Robert Cooper and colleagues 1998).

What Are the "New American Schools" Programs?

Several of the programs receiving attention in the whole-school reform movement are being promoted by New American Schools (NAS). This private organization was formed in 1991 as the New American School Development Corporation (Glennan 1998). With an initial goal of creating designs to enable students to reach high educational standards, NAS has evolved into a program that offers training and implementation assistance.

NAS emphasizes the need for professional development that is consistent with the scope and content of the designs. Because NAS initiatives require at least a three-year effort to implement supportive operating environments, design teams also work with jurisdictions to establish adequate funding, which includes access to CSRD money.

Eight designs represent the diversity of approaches within NAS. They are America's Choice Design Network, ATLAS Communities, Co-NECT Schools, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Modern Red Schoolhouse, Purpose-Centered Education—The Audrey Cohen College System of Education, Roots and Wings, and Urban Learning Centers (Educational Research Service 1998). Although the designs have differing emphases, they share several characteristics:

- They aim to help all students reach high academic standards.
- They are comprehensive in their approach; address all core academic subject areas, all types of school organization, and all grade levels; and align all resources (human, financial, and technological).
- They incorporate best-practices research and are the subjects of ongoing evaluation aimed at continuous improvement.
- They provide faculty and community with a shared vision, focus, and organizing framework that shapes and directs reform efforts.
- They provide high-quality professional development for teachers and administrators.
- They offer innovative and effective ways to involve parents and community in schooling.

What Are Some Other Promising Whole-School Programs?

Other comprehensive programs, some local and some nationwide, are attempting to bring improvement in public schools. Several prominent ones are reviewed by Schaffer and colleagues (1997):

- *Comer Model (School Development Program)*. Developed by James Comer and the Yale Child Study Center, this program creates a cadre of significant adults in students' lives—at home, in school, and in the community—who work together to support and nurture each child's total development.
- *Success for All*. Developed by Robert Slavin and associates at The Johns Hopkins University, this research-based schoolwide program uses prevention and intensive early intervention to achieve and maintain success through the elementary grades.

• *Paideia Program.* A development of Mortimer Adler and others in association with the Institute for Philosophical Research, Chicago, this program focuses on high academic achievement for all students, regardless of background, with goals including the acquisition of basic knowledge, development of basic intellectual skills, and enlarged understanding of universal ideas and values.

• *Coalition of Essential Schools.* Developed by Theodore Sizer, CES is a high school restructuring program that aims to get students to use their minds well by simplifying curriculum so each student will master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge. Site personnel control the program's implementation.

• *Schoolwide Projects.* Funded with Title I money, these programs include schoolwide strategies for all students in schools with a poverty ratio of as low as 50 percent. Typical projects have reduced class size, eliminated pullout instruction, increased staff development, and acquired new classroom materials.

What Governs the Success of Whole-School Reform?

As with all efforts to improve schools, success is not automatic. A Rand Corporation researcher told Olson, "We're basically, in our analysis, providing a cautionary tale about how difficult it is to grow reform quickly." She went on to say, "We want to have a 'buyer beware' sign out there. Don't think you can just buy this off-the-shelf technology, plug it into a school, and then things are going to improve."

Two factors are critical to success, states the RAND report: "Schools where educators felt that they adopted a design without fully understanding it or that they were forced to adopt a design showed lower levels of implementation than schools that were well-informed and had freedom of choice" (Glennan and colleagues).

Measurable success, the report noted, came in districts that "had stable leadership that strongly supported the designs, were free of political crisis, had a culture of trust between schools and the central office, provided some school-level autonomy in such matters as budgets and hiring, and provided more resources for professional development and planning."

Failure of reform, as well, can be traced to several issues: (1) financing; (2) leadership; (3) commitment to the program; (4) perceptions of the general public, parents, and students; (5) staffing; (6) curriculum; (7) political pressures; (8) racial problems; (9) insufficient facilities; and (10) problems of management and scheduling students and staff communication (Schaffer and colleagues).

Success, then, depends on many factors. Patricia Wasley and her colleagues (1997) say that the school's staff must share a common image of a different, more rigorous kind of schooling, be able to deal directly with difficult and often controversial issues, and be willing to receive and act on critical feedback from external sources. In addition, the faculty must have or develop self-analysis skills to monitor data on student achievement, as well as be able to deal simultaneously with multiple aspects of school redesign—curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture. Involvement of parents is also crucial.

How Do Schools Apply For Federal Funds?

Those schools and districts that see the need and choose to pursue a whole-school approach to reform will find a wide range of choices. For many schools, an important consideration will be the program's cost. Thus the recent availability of funds from the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRD) is expected to make whole-school reform more attractive to many schools.

To qualify for CSRD funds, schools must select or develop a program that thoughtfully integrates such key elements as curriculum and instruction, student assessment, teacher professional development, parent involvement, and school management (U.S. Department of Education 1998). Then, through their local districts, schools can apply for funding through their state education agencies, which have been allocated the funds by the U.S. Department of Education.

A key feature of the funding requirements is its encouragement of schools to examine well-researched, externally developed models that have been replicated with proved results. However, locally developed programs that have research-based evidence of effectiveness are also eligible for CSRD funding.

Funds became available to states on July 1, 1998, and will remain available until September 30, 2000. Funding requirements are available on the U.S. Department of Education's website (see below). Schools need not be eligible for Title I to qualify. To contact the U.S. Department of Education, call 1-800-USA-LEARN.

Beyond need, will, and funding, the best advice seems to be to choose a program with a proven record that fits your school's particular needs.

RESOURCES

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WEBSITES

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New American Schools home page: www.naschools.org

"Thomas" Website, Library of Congress: http://thomas.loc.gov

U. S. Department of Education: http://www.ed.gov.offices/OESE/compreform

A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management • College of Education, University of Oregon • Eugene, Oregon 97403-5207

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. OERI RR93002006. The ideas and opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, ED, or the Clearinghouse. This Digest is in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. EA 029 547.