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Evaluating the Results of Whole-School Reform

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Whole-school reform (also known as comprehensive school reform) is a process that seeks to simultaneously change all elements of a school's operating environment so those elements align with a central, guiding vision (Keltner 1998). The ultimate goal, of course, is to improve student performance.

Frustrated by unsuccessful piecemeal reforms and spurred by the financial incentives of the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program, which makes $50,000 annual grants available to qualifying schools, educators are increasingly turning to whole-school reform to improve the performance of their schools.

Does whole-school reform really work? So far, the results are modestly positive. A 1999 study by American Institutes for Research found only 3 out of the 24 whole-school reform models studied presented strong evidence that they raised student achievement (AIR 1999). New American Schools (NAS) claims that every one of their designs, when fully implemented, has improved schools' attendance rates, parental involvement, and student performance. NAS adds, "Some schools have not achieved the results they expected, and a few have not experienced any improvement after adopting a design" (NAS 1999).

To determine whether its reform program is achieving the intended results, a school must be able to conduct an effective evaluation of the reform practices. "Schools that lack the ability to analyze their own results… will always be at a disadvantage," says NAS President John Anderson (1999).

Schools that do not evaluate their results are also at another distinct disadvantage: To renew CSRD program funding, schools are required to evaluate their whole-school reform programs. This Digest examines what is involved in such an evaluation so schools can determine what is working with their programs and what needs to be changed.

What Is Required by CSRD to Renew Funding?

Creating a flexible design and keeping the design realistic are two primary goals of CSRD evaluation (Clark and Dean 2000). State and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) must evaluate the implementation of CSRD programs as well as measure the results. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) advises SEAs and LEAs to consider two main data sources in their evaluation of CSRD programs: student performance and program implementation.

Performance measures should be aligned with the intended outcomes of comprehensive reform programs implemented in the state and should produce data that are both quantitative and qualitative. Evaluation should rely on the same assessments that are used to assess all students against state standards and can be supplemented by local or school-developed assessments of student performance. Schools may also wish to examine other aspects of school performance such as student attendance and parental involvement.

The need for program implementation data stems from the plethora of research that demonstrates the important role of implementation in comprehensive school reform's success. The U.S. Department of Education requires schools to track stakeholder support, parental participation, continuous staff development, and performance monitoring for implementation. Additional data should include the use of external technical assistance in implementing the program, the sources of the technical assistance, and the effectiveness of technical assistance (U.S. Department of Education).

How Can Schools Plan for a Comprehensive Evaluation?

The key to this process is addressing key questions early in the program, so that the evaluation process will reflect the needs, interests, issues, and resources unique to the school. "Effective evaluations that produce useful information for decisionmakers are not afterthoughts; they are integral to the program planning and implementation processes from the outset," advise Cicchinelli and colleagues (1999).

Yap and colleagues suggest that schools ask themselves several questions while planning their whole-school reform (1999). What does the school want to accomplish overall? What must be done to achieve these goals? How will they gauge progress toward their goals? How will evidence be gathered to demonstrate progress toward the school's objectives? How will the evaluation results be used?

Key stakeholders can gather as a group to agree on the answer to each question, or they can answer the questions separately before meeting to tabulate the results. It is important that any differences of opinion be expressed and considered, advises Hassel (1998).

According to Cicchinelli and colleagues, the evaluation process should remain flexible and realistic in scope. Standards for evaluation such as the Program Evaluation Standards established by the U.S. Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation or the Guiding Principles for Evaluation developed by the American Evaluation Association may be helpful.

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Involvement of key stakeholders in the evaluation process is crucial. Stakeholders may include parents, community members, teachers, administrators, boards of education, students, and others (Colorado Department of Education 1998).

While developing this preliminary list of evaluation tasks, administrators should also estimate staff time and expertise needed, as well as other necessary resources. These expenses should be weighed against the amount of available resources to determine if schools will need to collaborate with other agencies to obtain the needed staff time and/or resources (Cicchinelli and colleagues).

How Should the Evaluation Be Designed?

The manner in which whole-school reform is implemented determines in large part its eventual results. Therefore, the evaluation design must address these two components: how well the program's implementation is working, and what concrete results it has achieved (Yap and colleagues). Effective evaluation does not rely on a single tool to collect data.

"No single surveyor or all-purpose data collection tool meets the school's total information needs," cautions Policy Studies Associates (1998). Schools should plan on combining standardized tests and surveys with qualitative methods such as personal interviews and focus groups.

To assess program implementation, schools can review archival materials such as student records, program plans, and implementation logs. Educators may also want to conduct surveys or interviews with key stakeholders, as well as conduct classroom observations to monitor changes in instructional practices (Cicchinelli and colleagues).

To evaluate the concrete results of the program, schools often concentrate on student achievement and performance. Comparability plays an important role here. The Colorado Department of Education suggests including assessments that have a common scoring system and allow for comparisons across schools, districts, and states, such as the CSAP, The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and others. Policy Studies Associates reports that many schools link their goals to broader state goals that are measured periodically by their state's assessment programs. In this way, schools can examine results for several purposes.

Schools should not rely solely on standardized test to evaluate student achievement, the Colorado Department of Education warns. Schools should include classroom assessments that provide additional information such as writing samples, projects, experiments, speeches, demonstrations, and more.

What Are the Barriers to a Successful Evaluation?

Many elements can derail an evaluation plan. The most common problem, according to Yap and colleagues, is a lack of time: "Many teachers already feel overwhelmed, and the thought of one more thing to do can be daunting." Districts that lack resources for the evaluation may want to seek help from the program's developer or funding source.

Key stakeholders in the process also may not have the skills or experience needed to work cooperatively together. Or, they may be able to work together, but may not have any training in practical program evaluation, leading to a lack of understanding of how to use data to guide decisions (Yap and colleagues).

Lack of knowledge is not the only barrier to a successful evaluation. Many educators fear evaluation, thinking that the data will be used against their schools to expose inadequacies and jeopardize funding.

How Should the Evaluation Data Be Used?

"Once the hard work of gathering data is done, the really hard work begins," say Cicchinelli and colleagues. Obviously, the evaluation findings must be reported. But to create a useful report, evaluators must tailor the data to the audience, select the appropriate media to report the results, and deliver the findings in a timely manner.

Cicchinelli advises administrators to format the evaluation results for ease of use by all stakeholders. Principals might benefit from a computer-generated summary of assessments disaggregated by student groups receiving different types of instruction. School boards or state officials, however, might be more interested in statistical progress reports with charts and graphs comparing student performance data over the years.

Sharing results is not necessarily a one-time event. Yap and colleagues suggest schools establish an ongoing process to communicate results of evaluation to keep the school's community informed about the progress and quality of the program. Policy Studies Associates recommend assessment at least four times a year.

Educators should not forget the most important use of the data, however: to improve the program. It may be helpful to break the data into categories such as gender, ethnicity, student type, and grade level, so that schools can focus on their strengths and weaknesses (Yap and colleagues). Based on the evaluation results, educators can determine if changes in the program are necessary, if results-based goals and benchmarks need to be refined, or if action strategies need to be redesigned, replaced, or continued (Colorado Department of Education).

RESOURCES

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