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Comprehensive School Reform

by Elizabeth Hertling

In a time when education is characterized by scattered, piecemeal reforms, comprehensive reform seems to be the "magic bullet" that promises academic success for all students. Rather than focusing on specific student populations or programs, comprehensive reform seeks to reorganize and revitalize the entire school.

The schoolwide-reform movement has many school districts jumping on board, especially with the incentive of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program. In 1997, Congress appropriated \$150 million for the CSRD, and through these funds almost 3,000 schools nationwide will receive awards of at least \$50,000 to implement comprehensive school reform models.

Although comprehensive reform models are many and varied, they share a common focus such as high standards for all children, they address all academic areas, their programs are research-based and research-tested, their curriculum resources are aligned across grades and subject areas, and they facilitate parent and community involvement.

Comprehensive reform promises sweeping change—and success—but does not come without its problems. Many schools have had difficulties with implementation due to insufficient commitment and resource problems, as well as poorly chosen programs. The works reviewed here may provide school leaders with some guidance when determining whether a schoolwide-reform program is best for their school, and, if so, which program to choose and how to implement it.

American Institutes for Research provides educators with comprehensive profiles and evaluations of twenty-four of the leading schoolwide programs available.

Educational Research Service, Inc. offers a valuable resource manual that explains the hows and whys of comprehensive school reform.

Thomas K. Glennan, Jr. chronicles the successes and failures of New American Schools after six years of implementing schoolwide reform.

Policy Studies Associates, Inc. outlines the planning process for administrators considering implementing whole-school reform.

Eugene C. Schaffer and colleagues explore the top ten impediments to any successful reform effort.

American Institutes for Research. **An Educator's Guide to Schoolwide Reform.** Arlington, Virginia: Educational Research Service, Inc., 1999. 141 pages. *Available from:* Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. 703-243-2100. \$15.95 plus \$3.50 shipping and handling.

Web site: <http://www.ers.org>

Choosing the right schoolwide reform is one of the most difficult choices administrators face. A plethora of programs are available, and it is often difficult for schools to obtain accurate and objective information. This guide may help teachers and administrators reach a decision about whether schoolwide reform is right for their school, and, if so, which approach will best meet their needs. Other reports, like this one, discuss schoolwide approaches; however, this is the only guide that rates the approaches based on how well they meet a common set of high standards and compares them with one another in terms of reliable evidence.

Twenty-four comprehensive-reform programs are evaluated in this guide. For each, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) provides the following information: an overview of the program, evidence of positive effects on student achievement, central components of the program, type of support provided by the developer, costs, and contact information. A table details all twenty-four programs' strengths in the following areas: positive effects on student achievement, developer support, and costs.

Each program is rated in two different areas: student achievement and developer support. In these areas programs are rated as "strong," "promising," "marginal," or "weak." In the case of student achievement, an additional rating of "no research available" is also added. To determine the ratings in the area of positive effects on student achievement, AIR reviewed (1) studies that reported a broad range of achievement outcomes, (2) studies made available to the public, and (3) changes the developers reported in test scores. To determine the ratings for the support that developers provide schools, access to appropriate types of support, the frequency and duration of support, and the tools provided to help schools evaluate their implementation process were evaluated.

AIR advises school leaders to follow seven steps before selecting a schoolwide reform approach: identify the school's needs, investigate alternative approaches, ask the developers questions, call a random sample of schools using the approaches, visit schools whenever possible, match the developer's

requirements with available resources, and vote on the decision.

Educational Research Service, Inc. **Comprehensive Models for School Improvement: Finding the Right Match and Making It Work**. Arlington, Virginia: Author, 1998. 114 pages. *Available from:* Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. 703-243-2100. \$30.00 plus \$3.50 shipping and handling.

Web site: <http://www.ers.org>

This Educational Research Service (ERS) report begins with an overview of the comprehensive-reform movement. Educational policy-makers are paying increased attention to this movement because of the federal funding and the mixed results of traditional Title I programs. Educators are attracted to the promising results from schoolwide designs.

Next, the focus moves to how districts can choose the best reform model for their district. ERS emphasizes the need for self-study, to become a "knowledgeable chooser." The staff of each school needs to evaluate its strengths and needs, carefully consider the reform options, and build full and active support for the program.

The authors use the analogy of choosing a prescription drug for a patient. Penicillin, aspirin, and chemotherapy may all aid the sick, but they are not appropriate for every patient. Some comprehensive reforms strive to improve reading in first-graders, while others try to foster higher order thinking in teenagers. Which program best fits with the school's vision, goals, and needs is for the staff to figure out.

Chapter 3 then profiles seventeen comprehensive-reform models, discussing what each program entails, what resources are available for implementation, what commitments and resources are required for implementation, where the program is now being used, and how to contact developers.

Choosing a ready-made schoolwide-reform program is not the only option. Schools can also design their own program. Chapter 4 details important elements such as curriculum and instruction, programs for at-risk students, and family support. ERS cautions schools about engaging in the time and care that it takes to design their own program without first taking a close look at existing programs already available for their use.

Finally, the report discusses how to implement schoolwide reform. Potential problems may arise in several areas: scarcity of resources, lack of parent and community support, leadership problems, and insufficient commitment. ERS suggests ways to avoid implementation problems, such as including

parents and the community in the process, and setting clear standards for the program.

Glennan, Jr., Thomas K. **New American Schools After Six Years**. Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 1998. 90 pages. *Available from:* RAND Education, 1700 Main St., P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138. 310-393-0411. \$15.00 plus \$3.00 shipping and handling.

Web site: <http://www.rand.org>

Principals and teachers who are considering comprehensive school reform may find it helpful to turn to research on schools that have already adopted designs. This publication describes the evolution of New American Schools (NAS), a nonprofit, private effort to foster significant educational reform. Established in July 1991, NAS's goal was to develop whole-school designs that would help schools to enable their students to reach high educational standards. Glennan examines the program's evolution, and the lessons learned, during six years of implementation.

There are eight NAS designs. Although each design is different, they all do the following: articulate the school's vision, mission, and goals; guide the instructional program; shape the staff; and establish common performance standards for students and teachers.

Originally NAS emphasized the strength and integrity of the designs themselves, but its leadership quickly realized that success depended on effective implementation of the reforms. NAS then sought to better equip the Design Teams that helped with implementation. This required changes in the composition of the Design Teams, because they had not been chosen for their skills in management, marketing, and product-refinement.

Glennan chronicles the changes in fiscal and human resources and in authority structure at the district and state levels that the designs require. Resources need to be increased to support implementation. Experience has shown that individual schools need the authority to make changes that the designs require. Professional development of teachers is also crucial to success.

The author also cautions schools about the time required to implement schoolwide designs. NAS researchers found that the Design Teams worked intensely with schools for three or more years to implement designs. Schools must spend considerable time engaging parents and the community, as well as planning and providing professional development. Considerable funds are needed as well—NAS fees may reach \$50,000 per school for each of those three years. However, if the school's restructuring succeeds, the reward is a reduction in the divisiveness that often accompanies piecemeal reforms.

Glennan points out that the NAS designs are not solely responsible for a school's success. Other factors

such as leadership, teacher quality, union support, and community support also play key roles in successful implementation.

Policy Studies Associates, Inc. **Implementing Schoolwide Programs: Volume I, An Idea Book on Planning**. Washington, D.C.: Author, 1998. 220 pages. [ED 423 615](#). Available from: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 7420 Fullerton Rd., Suite 110, Springfield, VA 22153-2852. 800-443-3742. \$38.97 plus \$5.15 shipping and handling.

Web site: <http://www.edrs.com/default.cfm>

This volume highlights resources for planning schoolwide programs and measuring their success. (Volume 2 details specific programs.)

The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), through the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), gave schools greater flexibility and resources to undertake whole-school reforms.

Meaningful planning procedures and efforts to track the school's improvement have been sorely lacking in most schoolwide-reform programs, the authors contend. To fill the void, this publication offers many practical suggestions, including checklists and sidebars that help districts comply with the ESEA funding requirements when planning their schoolwide-reform efforts.

Section I discusses the elements and processes of schoolwide programs. Section II gives an overview of the schoolwide planning process.

Key elements involved in planning for comprehensive school reform are detailed in Section III. The authors suggest six key steps: establishing a planning team, conducting a comprehensive needs assessment, clarifying needs and identifying research-based strategies, setting schoolwide program goals, writing the plan, and finalizing the plan. Generally, this planning process takes a full year. The authors discourage schools from working in isolation, and advise them to take advantage of technical support.

The technical support available to help schools in the planning process is the subject of Section IV. School support teams (SST) are one option. They vary widely from school to school, but may include a core group of teachers and administrators experienced in implementing schoolwide reform, as well as consultants and university experts. A successful SST will include practitioners with diverse experiences that they can apply to many situations. As well, leadership is not fixed. The publication offers examples of actual SSTs and how they functioned.

Section V explores accountability issues. The authors recommend that the implementation process be evaluated at least four times a year, utilizing several measurement strategies. The evaluation should be aligned with the school's objectives and goals. The authors also emphasize the importance of reporting the evaluation results to key stakeholders in the school, such as parents and the community.

Schaffer, Eugene C., and colleagues. **Impediments to Reform: An Analysis of Destabilizing Issues in Ten Promising Programs.** Arlington, Virginia: Educational Research Service, Inc., 1997. 17 pages. *Available from:* Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. 703-243-2100. \$12.00 plus \$3.50 shipping and handling.

Web site: <http://www.ers.org>

This publication identifies and describes specific impediments to school reform that were identified in the study *Special Strategies for Educating Disadvantaged Children*. The ten impediments were found to be widespread within both elementary and secondary schools, and they have the potential to destroy school-reform efforts. By becoming aware of these potential problems, school leaders have the opportunity to either prevent them or cope more effectively with their effects.

Financial problems were reported in the majority of sites studied. Examples included a lack of federal funding and the layoff of teachers and substitutes because of insufficient funds.

Leadership problems sidetracked reforms in several schools. The authors give an example of a principal who did not understand the value of the program, and of teachers and a principal who did not agree on the major elements of the program.

Lack of commitment posed problems as well. Some teachers viewed reforms as fads that will not last and therefore they did not commit themselves fully to implementation.

Public, parent, and student perceptions played an important role in reform. If parents and students had little knowledge about the reform, they were often unwilling to participate.

Staffing issues also posed a major problem, according to the authors. Teacher recruitment was difficult for some sites, and teachers did not have the skills needed for the programs and required additional professional development.

Curriculum issues were also an impediment. If the program does not meet the needs of students at the school, or if school- and state-level goals for students differ significantly, reform efforts may suffer.

Political issues can cause problems, particularly if administrators alter or delete programs for political rather than curricular reasons.

Racial conflicts also are a barrier to reform. Examples include divisiveness among staff along racial lines, or principals who were charged with overt and covert racism.

Facilities posed a problem for some schools in the study that struggled with inadequate buildings and classrooms.

Finally, the authors identify management and communication issues as potential impediments to reform. If there are problems managing students, or if communication among staff members is poor, reform may not be implemented fully.

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