

Recent Research on Comprehensive School Reform:
What's Working, What's Needed

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Preface

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, in 2001, educational leaders and policymakers have devoted much of their energy to ensuring that schools, districts, and states comply with the provisions of the new law, especially that they create adequate systems by which to measure school performance. However, now that the majority of states have their data collection and reporting systems in place, and now that thousands of failing schools have been identified, attention must begin to turn to the challenges of school *improvement*.

There can be no doubt that the educational standards and accountability movement has helped to jump-start hundreds of school reform initiatives across the country. Yet those initiatives require more than a push. Having been presented with powerful incentives to improve, low-performing schools still need the tools, blueprints, and expertise necessary to make school change happen.

Tools, blueprints, and expertise – grounded in scientific research – are precisely what is offered by high-quality models of Comprehensive School Reform. Research on CSR practices has a central role to play in the next stage of No Child Left Behind, both in terms of identifying the most viable strategies for improving school performance and in framing the regulations that guide state and district decision makers.

For NCLB to evolve from start-up phase to maturity, it must provide the supports and services that research shows to be the essential components of school improvement, including a rigorous curriculum, proven methods of instruction, an effective strategy for professional development, a sophisticated assessment system, training for school and district leaders, and ongoing guidance by external change agents – and all of these parts must come together to form a coherent whole. The teaching methods must align with the curriculum, the curriculum with the assessments, the assessments with state standards, the state standards with college entrance requirements, and on and on.

Many of the external providers for Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) have become essential tools for helping the highest poverty schools and districts meet the

challenges of NCLB. Almost half of the schools served by CSR developers have more than 75% of their students eligible for free and reduced lunch programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Some designs, such as Modern Red SchoolHouse and Success for All, serve almost exclusively such high poverty schools (Borman, et al., 2003). States routinely target CSR funding to schools that are failing to make AYP, again allowing CSR funding to support those schools in greatest need. Almost a third of the schools currently served by external providers are in rural areas that have limited access to technical and professional support locally. As the work of American Institutes of Research (AIR) researchers (Zhang, Shkolnik, and Fashola, 2005) show, though, many nationally known CSR providers do not simply work with high poverty schools, but they work with those that have weaker track records in student achievement than comparable schools.

Since 2000, CSR providers expanded many of their services to meet the needs of schools that are challenged by the expectations of NCLB. Technical assistance in reading, for instance, is routine for nearly all of the major CSR providers—especially in the intermediate and middle grades where little additional support is available to schools. Conversely, the reporting requirements of NCLB have enhanced greatly the ability of CSR external providers to help troubled schools. With state assessment data now available at the beginning of the school year, CSR providers can help schools identify and remedy both individual and organizational weaknesses.

High quality educational reform takes time. NCLB gives the proper measure of urgency to the needs of underserved children, yet the risks associated with that are real. Urgency brings the risk that teachers, pressured for quick changes, rely upon instructional strategies that yield short term changes in students' knowledge, but not long term understanding of critical concepts in mathematics or self-sustaining strategies to improve reading comprehension (Bransford, et al., 1999, Newmann,, et al., 2001b). Relying on strategies that yield short-term changes can generate passing scores for students, but those same children will return in the fall having forgotten what they had learned. Helping teachers use strategies that create learning for the long-term is a critical contribution that well-researched CSR models can provide to our nation's most challenged schools.

For nearly a decade the federal CSR Program has supported the implementation of proven, well-researched, effective models of school improvement, each of which combines all of the necessary components of effective schooling and links them to an overarching set of educational principles. Further, and as the present research report describes, those CSR models are having a positive impact. The earliest evaluations of CSR found modest benefits for the low-income, high-need schools served by the federal program; newer studies have begun to paint a clear picture of CSR's effectiveness. It promotes higher student achievement; it gets better results the longer it is in place; it improves the overall climate of the school; and it makes good use of taxpayer dollars. To date, federally-funded CSR programs have served more than three million students across the country – and they have begun to make good on their original ambition, which is to join educational research to practice more closely than has ever been accomplished before. In fact, CSR has already become the most well-researched school improvement strategy on record.

Of course, evidence of CSR's effectiveness is not yet conclusive, but it is the nature of the best of social and cognitive science that evidence will be at best persuasive, not conclusive. This report offers a powerful reminder that evidence on the efficacy of a number of comprehensive school reform and improvement programs continues to mount – out of the political spotlight, perhaps, but important, nonetheless. Certainly, this research needs to be center stage in the effort to create better schools for the nation's children.

What is CSR, and why do we need it?

Comprehensive school reform (CSR) began in the early nineties as an attempt to overcome the incoherence arising when schools—especially those serving a high proportion of children from low income families—adopted a wide variety of remedies that failed to fit together—in terms of instructional content or methods, scheduling requirements, local culture, or, perhaps, staffing needs. Model developers struggled with identifying validated school policies needed to support change in practice; determining what changes were best done simultaneously; which sequence of other changes in practice worked best; and how and when staff development should occur to effect change.

Teams initially chosen to develop comprehensive designs by the New American Schools Development Corporation varied in their approach to helping schools. In particular, they varied in what aspects of schooling would set the foundation around which all other changes in practice would be integrated. Designs, for example, differed in their assumptions about the essential driver of school improvement—such as school culture, academic standards, technology, instructional materials, or instructional methods—and developed models or processes for change that would support the development of high performing schools. Regardless of the design’s approach, though, the substantial changes in practice anticipated with CSR suggested that strong teacher buy-in was an essential companion to district support (Berends, Bodilily, and Kirby, 2002).

With the advent of Federal CSR funding, states have relied upon those funds to help their neediest schools—ones most vulnerable to the new pressure for Adequately Yearly Progress. Districts collaborating with external providers of CSR were initially challenged to maintain coherence of district goals as different designs took root in their schools. Almost a decade later, districts have found ways to gain the benefits of coherence in collaboration with CSR models.

Effective school improvement requires ownership by those instituting change. Peter Drucker (1986), one of the most important advisors in business in the past 50

years, puts it this way: “[Instituting a change in practice] requires that any decision become “our decision” to the people who have to convert it into actions. This in turn means that they have to participate responsibly in making it.” Ouchi (1981) attributes the success of the Japanese automotive industry to the degree to which all workers were involved in major decisions and quality control. The extraordinary quality of Toyota cars, for instance, arose when line workers were expected to offer suggestions on how to improve the production process and were held responsible for inspecting parts prior to inserting them into cars in the production line.

Ownership implies, as Drucker’s remarks suggest, that those responsible for executing a policy were involved in the decision. First, and foremost, such involvement usually leads to better decisions—ones that fit the particulars of most schools. Second, ownership reduces the need for enforcement activities—such as monitoring classrooms to make certain that the pacing policy is used by each teacher. Instead, with ownership, teachers and school administrators are intrinsically motivated to ensure that new practices are institutionalized. External providers of comprehensive school reform, particularly when they are chosen by school staff, can provide the ownership needed.

More challenging, at times, is the degree of coherence that CSR providers and districts are able to achieve at a given school. Some district administrators choose to gain coherence through centralizing a number of decisions, such as those in curriculum (textbooks, pacing charts, and lesson plans), staff structures, scheduling, and discipline policies. At some level, centralization can compromise to important conditions for school improvement: the specific needs of students at a given school and the ownership, and thereby the accountability, of school staff. CSR providers can help districts secure that balance.

However, CSR designs are more than merely coherent, more than a means by which ownership is established by staff in a given school. Just as important, they must have a solid grounding in *research*.

A commitment to research has been central to CSR since its inception. For instance, CSR received much of its early support from New American Schools (NAS), a White House sponsored and industry funded organization created in 1991 specifically for the purpose of identifying and supporting *research-driven* models of whole school reform. The selection process was highly competitive – out of 700 models that sought NAS approval, just eleven were chosen, and only seven were given funding and other support for scaling up their work. From the start, then, the CSR designs that received backing were those that were most clearly consistent with findings from substantial lines of research on cognitive development, teaching and learning, the sociology of organizations, educational leadership, and so on. Further, those CSR designs

Eleven key components to be included
in every CSR model
as defined by NCLB

1. **Proven methods** and strategies for student learning, teaching, and school management that are grounded in scientific research and that have been replicated successfully in schools with diverse characteristics.
2. **Comprehensive design** for effective school functioning, integrating instruction, assessment, classroom management, and professional development and aligning these functions into a schoolwide reform plan designed to enable all students to meet challenging state content and performance standards.
3. **Professional development.** High-quality and continuous teacher and staff professional development and training.
4. **Measurable goals** for student performance and benchmarks for meeting them.
5. **Support from staff.** Support from school faculty, administrators, and staff.
6. **Support for staff.** Support for school faculty, administrators, and staff.
7. **Parent and community involvement** in planning and implementing school improvements.
8. **External assistance.** High-quality external support from a comprehensive school reform entity with experience in schoolwide reform.
9. **Evaluation.** Plan to evaluate the implementation of school reforms and the student results achieved.
10. **Coordination of resources.** Identification of how other available resources (federal, state, local, or private) will help the school coordinate services to support and sustain the school reform.
11. **Scientifically based research** to significantly improve the academic achievement of students participating in such programs as compared with students in schools who have not participated in such programs.

Source: *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001), Title I, Part F, Section 1606.

have proven themselves willing, over time, to submit their work to rigorous evaluation by independent researchers, who have followed closely their implementation, cost effectiveness, and impacts on factors such as school culture, teacher morale, and especially student achievement (Berends, 1999; Bodilly, 2001; Berends, et al., 2002).

Likewise, research-based models were emphasized by the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (also known as the Obey-Porter Act, after its sponsors), enacted by Congress in 1998 with strong bi-partisan support. And the federal commitment to research-based school reform was reinforced in 2001, when the CSR Program (now the CSRP, since it is no longer a “demonstration” project) was folded into No Child Left Behind, placed under Title I. (Additionally, Title I sets aside a portion of its funds for states to invest in school and district improvement strategies such as CSR.)

Moreover, shortly after NCLB was enacted the Department of Education took the unprecedented step of commissioning numerous large-scale evaluations of leading CSR models, to be conducted by some of the nation’s foremost research firms and intended to complement several other studies directed by university based scholars, research institutes, and CSR model developers themselves. While some of those evaluations are still in progress today, it can already be said that no other school reform movement – nor, for that matter, any set of commercial, off-the-shelf educational programs – has been studied as closely or as carefully as CSR.

In the present report, we synthesize this late-breaking research, describing the results of a number of recently published studies as well as several studies that are soon to be released. Our goal is to provide policymakers, school reformers, and others with the most current data available, so as to ensure that they are fully informed about the effectiveness and appropriate uses of CSR when making decisions about education spending, policy, and priorities. No doubt, the future of CSR – particularly the federal CSR Program – does merit such careful consideration. This is no trivial movement, after all, nor is its work duplicated by the more recently enacted No Child Left Behind

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legislation, of which it is now a part. Rather, CSR represents a substantial and important investment in its own right, one that makes a crucial contribution to the larger reform agenda. In fact, Comprehensive School Reform helps to maximize the value of NCLB. For those schools deemed to be in need of improvement, CSR offers powerful, well-researched designs for change, providing the strategies and the guidance required to make Adequate Yearly Progress and, more broadly, to raise student achievement.

50 Most Commonly Funded CSR Models

(Schools awarded federal CSR funding, nationwide, 1998-2004)

Source: Southwest Educational Laboratory, CSR Awards Database, <www.sedl.org>. Retrieved February 1, 2005.

For Fiscal Year 2005, federal funding for CSR stands at \$205 million. Using those funds, the states direct at least \$50,000 per year, for three years, to carefully selected, low-achieving, high-poverty schools, which in turn use the money to implement CSR models. Since 1998, more than 5,400 schools, serving more than three million students, have received funding from the federal CSR Program, and thousands of other schools have applied for funding.

	<u>CSR Model</u>	<u>Total Schools</u>		<u>CSR Model</u>	<u>Total Schools</u>
1	Success for All	452	26	ATLAS Communities	54
2	Lightspan	291	27	AVID	53
3	Accelerated Schools	235	28	Community for Learning	52
4	America's Choice	209	29	California Early Literacy Learning	45
5	Co-Nect	167	30	Integrated Thematic Instruction	42
6	Coalition of Essential Schools	165	30	School Renaissance	41
7	High Schools That Work	156	32	National Writing Project	36
8	Direct Instruction	148	32	Whole School Improvement	36
9	Effective Schools	139	34	Breakthrough to Literacy	34
10	School Development Program	115	34	Reading Renaissance	34
11	Ventures Initiative and Focus System	111	34	MicroSociety	34
12	Modern Red SchoolHouse	95	37	Everyday Mathematics	33
13	Core Knowledge	93	37	Talent Development	33
14	Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound	90	37	Urban Learning Centers	33
15	Reading Recovery	76	40	Accelerated Reader	31
16	Onward to Excellence II	74	40	Carbo National Reading Styles	31
17	Turning Points	70	40	Compass Learning	31
17	Renaissance Learning	70	40	Learning Network	31
19	Literacy Collaborative	68	44	Responsive Classroom	30
20	4 Blocks of Literacy	67	45	First Steps	29
21	Roots and Wings	66	45	Target Teach	29
22	HOSTS	62	47	High School Transformation	28
23	Coaching Model	61	47	Success-in-the-Making	28
24	Different Ways of Knowing	60	47	Extended Literacy Learning	28
25	Middle Start	56	47	Professional Learning Communities	28
			(50)		

What does the research say?

In 2001, a team of well-regarded education scholars – led by Geoffrey Borman, of the University of Wisconsin – conducted what is generally considered to be the most thorough review of CSR research to date (G. Borman, et al., 2003). More specifically, Borman and his colleagues looked at “all known research on the achievement effects of [29 of] the most widely implemented, externally developed school improvement programs known as ‘whole school’ or ‘comprehensive’ reforms” (p. 125).

The researchers combed through more than 800 studies, 232 of which they selected for further review, after discarding those that lacked sufficient relevance, scope, or methodological rigor to be included. The conclusion of their meta-analysis: CSR was having a positive impact on student learning: “The overall effects of CSR are meaningful and are somewhat greater in magnitude than the effects of other interventions that have been designed to serve similar purposes and student populations” (p. 159).

Most important, they found that CSR was having a modest but positive effect on the achievement scores of *low-income* students, over and above the gains associated with other interventions. And when the researchers focused exclusively on Title I-eligible schools, they found that students where externally-developed CSR programs existed did better than those who attended non-CSR schools, even if those schools offered a range of other special resources and programs. Noted Borman, et al., “The average student from a CSR school.... outperformed 55 percent of the children from [other] Title I schools” (p. 160).

Yet, while Borman, et al.’s report – the first serious, scholarly effort to synthesize the existing research – found CSR to be a promising approach, worthy of continued federal investment, the researchers themselves pointed out that as of 2001, the evidence was still too thin to support more than a qualified endorsement.

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Since 2001, however, many CSR models have had time to mature, research methodologies have become more sophisticated, CSR projects have been subject to numerous independent evaluations, results have begun to pour in, and the evidence on behalf of CSR's effectiveness has grown increasingly strong.

Over the last few years, then, what has the research shown about the effects of Comprehensive School Reform?

CSR RAISES STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Consistent with and expanding upon the results of Borman, et al.'s meta-analysis, a number of recent evaluations have found statistically significant increases in student achievement at schools and districts implementing CSR models. For example:

- Researchers at American Institute for Research (AIR) and the University of South Florida studied 649 schools implementing eight of the better known CSR models and found that that “CSR was found to have an effect on student achievement when CSR design implementation progressively improved to a high level alongside implementation length” (Aladjem and K. Borman, 2005).
- Second-year outcomes of a national randomized longitudinal evaluation of *Success for All* at 38 schools found significant school level effects of assignment to *Success for All* on three of four literacy outcomes measured. (G. Borman and Slavin, 2005).
- In a 2004 study of 45 schools implementing the *Modern Red SchoolHouse* design, the Center for Research on Education Policy found that MRSR students had made impressive gains relative to similar students in their districts. In 1998, when the design was implemented, just 44 percent of participating schools were outscoring their comparison schools on math and language arts assessments; four years later, MSRSH students were outperforming their peers more than 50 percent of the time (Sterbinsky and Ross, 2004b).
- In a meta-analysis of smaller studies, researchers at SkyMark Corporation found that of the 68 schools adopting the *QuEST* design between 1995 and 2004, partnering

schools gained an average of 8.1 points on standardized tests over four years, compared to 5.7 points for their statewide peers (David, 2004).

- Within two years of implementing the *Middle Start* CSR model state-wide, Michigan's middle school students showed a 5.7 percent increase in reading scores over and above the growth achieved at demographically matched control schools (Gopalan, 2004). Between 1999 and 2001, *Middle Start* schools receiving federal CSR funding saw their passing rates on state reading assessments rise from 36 to 43 percent, while the passing rate for comparison schools declined from 36 to 35 percent (Mertens and Flowers, 2003).
- A 2003 University of Pennsylvania study of the *America's Choice* school design on the academic performance of 4th-6th graders in the low-income, largely African-American, Plainfield, New Jersey, public schools revealed that "even after statistically controlling for the background characteristics of teachers and students and for students prior test performance, teachers' implementation of America's Choice was associated with significantly higher learning gains for students" (Supovitz and May, 2003).
- A 2003 Johns Hopkins University study found that after being implemented for four years in six low-income Baltimore elementary schools, *Direct Instruction* had helped students make dramatic test score gains in reading and math. Between 1st and 3rd grade, for example, average scores rose from the 16th to the 48th percentile in math and from the 17th to the 49th percentile in reading (MacIver, et al., 2003).
- A recently-concluded, multi-year study tracked the academic progress of more than 3,000 Baltimore city students – 1,388 enrolled in *Success for All* schools and 1,848 of them not – from first through eighth grade. Students participating in the SFA program were found to score significantly higher on reading tests, were assigned to special education classes far less often, and were nearly three times more likely to be promoted from the third to the fourth grade (G. Borman and Hewes, 2003).
- A 2003 University of Illinois study found that between 1998 and 2000, students at nine Boston *Turning Points* schools dramatically outperformed their peers from seven comparison schools on Massachusetts reading, math, and science assessments.

Dramatic gains were recorded for both regular education students and Limited English Proficiency students, with the greatest improvements seen at schools that had most fully implemented the *Turning Points* design (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2003).

- A University of Memphis study of *Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound's* flagship school, in Denver, found that between 1998 and 2002 ELOB students outperformed similar students attending comparison schools in four area districts. Scores on the Colorado reading assessment were particularly impressive, with ELOB students scoring nearly 12 percentage points higher, across all grades and years, than did their peers (Sterbinsky, 2002).
- A 2002 University of Pennsylvania evaluation of 91 schools across the country using the *America's Choice* model showed that students performed at significantly higher levels in English language arts than did similar students at other schools. Even during the early stages of implementation, evaluators found, on average, "a 2-6 percent difference in average performance between students in America's Choice schools and non-America's Choice schools" (Supovitz, et al., 2002a).
- A 2001 study by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation found that after five years of implementation, the *Accelerated Schools* model helped low-income 3rd graders – representing eight schools, from all parts of the country – to post significantly higher-than-expected test scores in math and reading. The lowest-performing schools made the greatest gains (Bloom, et al., 2001).
- A 2001 U.S. Department of Education study found that students participating in *High Schools That Work* had significantly improved their performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Between 1996 and 1998, the numbers of students reaching target proficiency levels on the NAEP rose by 11 percent per school in mathematics, four percent in science, and eight percent in reading, with gains corresponding to students' increased enrollment in HSTW's recommended program of study (Frome, 2001).
- In a 2001 synthesis of data from 91 schools in three districts, University of Pennsylvania researchers reported that students participating in the *America's Choice*

model showed impressive gains in at least three areas: 4th graders at *America's Choice* schools achieved state language arts standards more quickly; 6-8th graders posted significantly higher reading scores; and elementary school students were given far more writing instruction, and performed significantly better in writing assessments, than did students attending comparison schools (Supovitz, et al., 2001).

- A 2001 study by the Center for Research on Educational Policy found that Memphis schools posted impressive gains in student achievement during the first stage of its large-scale CSR initiative, which began in 1996. Over three years – until the program was scaled up from 70 to 161 schools, sparking the political turmoil that eventually put an end to the reform – participating schools exceeded the average value-added gains of other schools in the district by 14 percentile points, and they exceeded state averages by nearly 18 points (Ross, et al., 2001).
- In a study of all Memphis schools by the Center for Research on Education Policy, *Accelerated Schools* had a gain in reading scores equivalent to going from the 30th to the 70th percentile – a gain greater than all other schools in the system (Ross, Sanders, and Stringfield, 1999).

CSR IMPROVES OTHER STUDENT OUTCOMES

- In Philadelphia, all five high schools using the *Talent Development* model have made remarkable progress in raising student achievement, increasing attendance, and improving student discipline. In four years, 9th grade pass rates in English, algebra, and science have jumped almost 17 percentile points. The proportion of students with high attendance rates (i.e., present in class over 90 percent of the time) grew by nearly nine percentile points, even as attendance dropped at neighboring schools. And in 2003 alone, four high schools posted 20-40 percent decreases in their suspension rates (Philadelphia Education Fund, 2004).
- In another recent study of *Talent Development* high schools, promotion and attendance rates rose significantly for first-time 9th grade students, and the percentage of 9th graders completing a core academic curriculum increased from 43 to 56 percent –

nearly three times the increase seen in comparison schools (Kemple and Herlihy, 2004).

- In a study by the Education Alliance at Brown University, teachers at *Accelerated Schools* reported greater reliance on community resources and incorporation of cultural traditions than comparison schools (Education Alliance, 2004).

CSR ENRICHES TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LIVES

- In focus groups, teachers taking part in the *Co-nect* school design indicated that the institution of common planning time allowed them to cooperate with fellow teachers to develop improved instructional practices. In turn, they said, this led to an increase in multidisciplinary projects, hands-on learning opportunities, cooperative learning opportunities, and the use of authentic forms of classroom assessment (Ross and Lowther, 2003).
- In Michigan, a team of independent evaluators found that at eleven schools involved in CSR – using models such as *Co-nect*, *Middle Start*, and *Different Ways of Knowing* – professional development opportunities greatly improved over three years, as indicated by teacher survey data (Plucker, et al., 2003).
- In a study of city-wide CSR implementation in Memphis, researchers found that nearly 80 percent of the most successful Memphis City Schools were distinguished as having “quality teaching or quality assessment practices.” About half of the most successful schools included continued professional development, such as training sessions and peer guidance (Sterbinsky, et al., 2003).

CSR'S BENEFITS INCREASE OVER TIME

- In a 2004 report, University of Florida researchers showed that in schools that implement a CSR model for more than five years, student achievement gains are twice the magnitude of the gains posted at CSR schools in general. When schools

continue their CSR models for seven or more years, achievement gains are 2½ times as large (K. Borman, et al., 2004).

- According to the U.S. Department of Education, in a 2004 evaluation of the CSR Program, CSR can be an effective school improvement strategy, especially when schools make an effort to implement those models faithfully and to do so over a period of several years (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).
- In a three-year study that concluded in 2002, the Appalachian Educational Laboratory and the University of Memphis found that reading scores at twelve elementary schools improved dramatically in the third year of CSR implementation. In years one and two, students in schools with active CSR programs – including *Different Ways of Knowing*, *Success For All*, and *Direct Instruction* – merely kept pace with peers from comparison schools, but in year 3 they began to outpace those other students (Holdzkom, 2002).
- In a 2001 University of Pennsylvania study of *America's Choice* implementation in 23 schools, researchers found that, over time, classroom instruction became progressively more faithful to the CSR design. Teachers who were implementing the model for the 2nd time were eight percentile points more likely to follow the *America's Choice* curriculum (Supovitz, et al., 2002a).

CSR FUNDS ARE WELL SPENT

- Schools with high levels of implementation of research-based CSR designs have strong professional communities that support teachers as they continue to learn more about the craft of teaching (Aladjem and K. Borman, 2005).
- According to the U.S. Department of Education, the states have been successful in directing CSR funding to the neediest schools: “CSR funds are more likely to be received by schools with a high proportion of students who are low income, minority, and limited English proficient. Almost half (46 percent) of CSR schools were in the highest poverty category (defined as having more than 75 percent of their students

eligible for free or reduced-price lunches), compared with only 17 percent of all schools in the U.S.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

- In Philadelphia, the fully implemented *Talent Development* model costs just \$285 per student – equivalent to three percent of the \$9,050 the city currently spends per pupil – and that figure includes the expense of 3½ teacher coaches per school, curriculum materials, and evaluation services (Philadelphia Education Fund, 2004).
- In a 2003 study, researchers found that participating in *Success for All* cost schools only slightly more than did the reading and other academic programs paid for by comparison schools – the difference came out to roughly \$1,100 per student over grades 1-8, or just \$144.50 extra per student, per year (Borman and Hewes, 2003).

Staying the Course with CSR

Like any other reform strategy, CSR depends upon strong and sustained leadership above all else. The results of the Aladjem and K. Borman (2005) study of 649 schools implementing eight different models show that progress in implementation is positively related to the principal’s instructional leadership, the amount of developer’s assistance, and the existence of a professional community among teachers. Nationally known CSR providers can and do provide support to principals as instructional leaders and more often than not create professional communities among teachers at their sites. Staying the course, however, necessarily involves some factors requiring district support: stability for teachers implementing a CSR design and a principal who is, or who can learn how to be, an instructional leader.

Moreover, school systems must go into CSR projects with a realistic expectation of the costs. While many CSR initiatives turn out to be only marginally more expensive than the usual scattering of materials, curricula, and professional development workshops, many districts find it hard to swallow even a modest rise in costs, especially if the investment shows no immediate return.

Yet, educators do no favors for themselves or their students when they try to do school improvement on the cheap. Unfortunately, many districts have attempted to save money by purchasing off-the-shelf or “homegrown” programs, rather than investing in one of the most well-designed, research driven, and truly comprehensive models. Or, districts have tried a cut-and-paste approach, taking bits and pieces of various programs and trying to patch them together. However, patchy, low-quality programs don’t work and don’t last. They merely give CSR give a bad name.

In the long run, educators will create better schools only if they become wise consumers, spending a little more if that’s what it takes to secure a solid, durable investment.

Specifically, they must –

CHOOSE A HIGH-QUALITY CSR MODEL

Given the fiscal pressures bearing down upon most school districts, and given the numbers of schools facing urgent calls for reform – particularly those schools defined as “in need of improvement” under NCLB – it is hardly surprising that some cheap and underdeveloped school improvement plans have managed to thrive.

But while hundreds of homegrown and commercial reform projects now advertise themselves as CSR models, and while many of them offer plans for whole school change, most of them should be distinguished from those high-quality designs that are – and as the CSR movement has always emphasized – rooted in credible research into the effectiveness of specific interventions.

CHOOSE A MODEL THAT FITS

A number of studies show that in order to implement CSR effectively, reformers should take great care to choose a model that fits the particular school’s culture, mission, and capacities (Bodilly, 1996; Datnow, 2001; Datnow and Stringfield, 2000) and that is clearly aligned with district priorities and with state testing and accountability systems (Datnow and Kemper, 2003). Just as important, though, the model needs to fit the goals and priorities of district (Aladjem and K. Borman, 2005).

BE TRUE TO THE MODEL

Of the thirty-one Memphis City Schools that implemented CSR models in the late-1990s, eighteen were found to have raised student achievement significantly, for more than one year (Ross, 2001). Each of those highly successful schools was judged by evaluators to be a moderate- or high-level implementer of its particular CSR model. As a recent research report concludes, there is a “quantitative and qualitative relationship between implementation quality and student achievement gains;” in short, clearly-defined programs tend to be implemented more faithfully than others, and they tend to show greater achievement gains (Sterbinsky, et al., 2003; Glennan, et al., 2004; Desimone, 2002; Zhang, Shkolnik, Fashola, 2005).

ENSURE SUFFICIENT “BUY-IN”

While as yet undocumented, CSR developers find that of the most significant changes in the adoption process is the degree to which district administrators are involved in decisions about which CSR model schools should adopt. This is a healthy change. However, in order to have a significant, long-term impact on teaching and learning, a CSR model must – from the start – have the support, or “buy-in,” of a sizable majority of a school’s teachers and administrators. From the beginning of the CSR movement, developers have insisted that if a school was to proceed with a particular improvement model, a tipping point would have to be reached in the numbers of teachers and other staff who wanted to work with that model – and teachers’ commitment must be genuine, not coerced, as has sometimes been reported.

However, the importance of faculty buy-in is not just a matter of faith; it has been confirmed and reconfirmed by recent research findings. Without an initial groundswell of support, reforms are unlikely to be sustained beyond the first year or two (K. Borman, et al., 2004, 2000; Datnow and Stringfield, 2000).

GIVE PRIORITY TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is necessary but not sufficient for teachers and staff to be committed to implementing a CSR model school; they must also develop the professional capacities upon which the model depends. At the very start of any CSR project, design teams need to give teachers a complete overview of the model, respond to their concerns, help them to understand exactly what is involved in making the model work, and provide them with meaningful opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge required. Teachers must not feel belittled by the CSR model or implementers, but they must not be ignored either – if a school reform is to succeed, it must emphasize not just student achievement but also the intellectual development of teachers and administrators (Rowan, et al., 2004; Newmann, et al., 2001).

State officials have an important role to play in assuring that schools can make time for professional development. In particular, new sites need sufficient notice of funding to allow for summer institutes in their first months of implementation.

AND KEEP THE MODEL DEVELOPERS INVOLVED

The long-term success or failure of CSR implementations will be determined largely by the nature of relationship among schools, districts, and the CSR design teams working with them. As researchers have discovered, the most powerful advances in school quality and student achievement occur after a CSR model has been implemented for five or more years. However, few schools can sustain the necessary buy-in and remain sufficiently faithful to a particular design without the continued support, encouragement, guidance, and active participation of external change agents, preferably the model developers themselves (Berends, et al., 2002).

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