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Reporting on issues in education reform

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States and Districts and Comprehensive School Reform

Just about every state and thousands of districts are engaged in developing ambitious expectations for student learning and linking other policies, such as student assessment, to the standards. In addition, thousands of schools have undertaken their own reforms intended to improve teaching and learning and to maximize achievement on the standards.

Many schools have turned to external partners for assistance in these efforts. Some of the partners offer reform designs intended to affect all aspects of school operations, including curriculum and instruction, school organization, professional development and resource use. These might be called “whole” or “comprehensive” school reforms (Slavin and Fashola, 1998). This type of reform is spreading rapidly. According to one recent overview, over 2,100 schools are affiliated with either Bob Slavin’s Success for All program, James Comer’s School Development Project, or Henry Levin’s Accelerated Schools (Fashola and Slavin, 1997). Designs supported by New American Schools are used by over 700 schools.

In this policy brief, we discuss implications of the use of such school-level reform designs for state and local policymakers. The more schools choose such reforms, the more is being learned about the importance of the state and local roles in facilitating appropriate matches between designs and schools and in supporting design-based improvement over time. The number of schools embarked on these reforms is likely to at least double over the next several years as a result of new federal legislation, so the opportunities and challenges for policymakers will grow accordingly.

In the Fall of 1997, Congress authorized competitive grants to provide up to \$50,000 per year per school for the use of comprehensive reform models. Beginning in July, 1998, Title I schools will be eligible for \$120 million of the funds provided; non-Title I schools may compete for \$25 million. The Comprehensive School Reform Development Program (CSRSD), also known as the “Obey-Porter” program for its Congressional sponsors, provides funds for states to use in competitive grants to local school districts that submit applications specifying which schools will participate and the reform programs they will implement. States and localities must demonstrate their ability to select “only high quality, well-defined, and well-documented comprehensive school reform programs,” provide technical assistance and support, and evaluate the effects (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

In discussing implications for the state and local role, we draw on lessons from the experience of designers and educators working with New American Schools (e.g., Odden, 1997a; Odden, 1997b) and on emerging findings from current CPRE studies of capacity-building interventions and their scale up. We also draw on findings about successful school-based reform that are relevant whether or not schools are working with a national reform network. Home-grown reform models also need state and local support, and they would be eligible for assistance under the CSRSD program as long as they employed research-based components that have been replicated successfully; were comprehensive and supported by stakeholders; used technical assistance from an entity, such as a university, with experience in providing support to comprehensive school reforms; and were carefully evaluated against measurable goals.

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First we discuss the importance of evaluating reform options as part of the process of choosing designs. Then we examine the role of states which have the responsibility for making grants to local educational agencies under the CSR program and the broader imperative to assure that districts and schools are providing quality opportunities to children, designed to meet the standards the state has set for achievement. Finally, we turn to districts, examining what is known about providing support and quality control to school-based reform.

We realize that many of the responsibilities we suggest for states and districts represent significant departures from their normal operating procedures. New ways of making decisions, allocating resources, assuring quality and the like may require some difficult adjustments on the part of states and localities. In fact, states and districts will have to learn how to create and sustain supportive operating environments over a period of time. We want to be clear that making meaningful changes in operating environments will not be easy; they are unlikely to occur overnight. Rather than expecting that all states and districts will be able to make such adjustments readily, we should view the CSR program, and the school reform design movement more generally, as an opportunity for states and districts to learn how to create supportive structures and processes.

Evaluating Design Options

A first task for policymakers is providing schools advice about the effectiveness of various design options. Both state and local policymakers should seek the best evidence possible. The decisions they will make about which designs to support will affect the futures of children, significant investments of staff time and public funds, and community support for public schools.

Slavin and Fashola (1998) advise that those considering designs focus on student performance data and on replicability, but also point out the importance of asking questions about the availability of technical support and training and program costs (p. 108). The U.S. Department of Education's guidelines for the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program suggest that four types of evidence be used in selecting designs:

- the theoretical or research foundation of the program;
- evaluation-based evidence of improvements in student achievement;
- evidence of effective implementation; and
- evidence of replicability (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

The guidelines provide some useful criteria for reviewing such evidence and ranking or grouping programs based on the available evidence.

Unfortunately, most of the currently popular designs lack much of this evidence. Typically they have been advanced by supporters because the model is associated with a well-known educator or theorist, because they have worked well in pilot sites, because they are based on a plausible theory of school reform, or some combination of these factors.

Given the importance of evidence, policymakers should make use of published reviews that try to bring together what is known about designs. Included in this category are *Show Me the Evidence* by Robert Slavin and Olatokunbo Fashola; *The Results-Based Programs Directory* published by the Kentucky Department of Education; the *Catalog of School Reform Models* by the Northwest Regional Laboratory with assistance from the Education Commission of the States; and the work of the Office of Best Practices in Philadelphia.

But policymakers should also ask their own questions about evidence. It was clearly the intention of Congressional sponsors that the CSR program promote the use of data and research in decisionmaking about reform. In screening models to evaluate the evidence and determine their fit with re-

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form goals, policymakers should assure that questions such as the following are addressed—either by the state itself in providing advice to locals or by district and school leaders who make the ultimate choices. State officials can require districts to respond to such questions in their applications for assistance under the CSRD Program in order to justify their choice of models and the proposed matches between schools and particular designs.

1. What theory of instructional improvement underlies the design?

Schools will be successful with external designs only if they have a clear vision of what they want to accomplish and understand how various alternative designs meet their needs. Evaluations should clarify the theory of action underlying various school reforms so that educators can assess the extent to which designs focus on instructional improvement and how they intend to go about such improvement. For example, does the design target curriculum? School structure? Parent involvement? Teacher decision-making? If the focus is primarily on any of the latter three, or on other aspects of schooling not directly tied to the classroom, how do the designs link those aspects to the ultimate goal of improving teaching and learning?

2. How good is the evidence?

What evidence is provided about effects? Are data available for all the schools undertaking a particular design or have designers provided data only about a successful subset? Is there a comparison group or control group against whom performance by sites using the design may be compared? How are results measured and over how many years?

Does the research inform us about the process of change entailed in the program and tell us how instructionally relevant improvements are best made? Does research focus on the core elements of schooling, indicating how the design affects content, pedagogy, student grouping, assessment and the like? Does it tell us how to translate the design into practice under varying conditions?

3. Are effects sustained?

The Department of Education guidelines call for three years of evidence, but many evaluations look cross-sectionally at effects on students in particular grade levels, and the important question of whether the learning gains are sustained over time and contribute to higher levels of performance by students in subsequent grades remains unanswered. Few programs are likely to have such data, but it is important to raise the issue and important to track gains in learning after a program has been implemented.

4. Have the effects been disaggregated?

A program may have persuasive evidence of effectiveness but this may mask its relative ineffectiveness with certain groups of students. Local decision-makers need to know whether the program is likely to be effective with populations like those served by their own school or district.

5. How long does it take to produce positive results?

Programs vary widely in the amount of local development required, the amount of staff training required. Some are well-developed and highly specified and can be implemented quickly. Others may take years. How important this is will

probably depend on the political environment and the amount of pressure on the schools to improve performance.

6. Under what conditions has the program failed to produce positive effects?

All programs fail under some circumstances. It is important to ask about failures and what contributed to them. Are the contributory factors also likely to be present in the school or district considering adoption? It may be worth calling leaders in a jurisdiction in which the program failed to see what can be learned about the threshold conditions necessary for success.

7. Are there important prerequisite conditions for obtaining good results?

Some programs may require levels of knowledge and skill or resources that exceed the levels typical in the district or school considering adoption. How will these gaps be closed? Can the program be implemented successfully in the interim? There may also be space or technology requirements that cannot be satisfied in the short run. All essential conditions should be understood before a decision is made.

8. What are the initial and recurring costs?

Not all programs can provide adequate cost data, and external providers may take their costs into account but not identify all of the local costs (number of teachers, teacher time, school-based facilitators, summer work, equipment and materials purchases, etc.). Will the program require schools or districts to reallocate existing resources? In addition to recurring costs associated with the design in general, there may be costs particular to certain settings. For

example, if the adopting district or school has high teacher turnover or expects many retirements, how will new teachers be trained?

Allan Odden estimates that, for a school with 500 students, the costs of the seven different New American Schools designs range from about an extra \$110,000 to an extra \$350,000, on top of “core” staffing of a principal and one teacher for every 25 students. These costs and core staffing do not include planning and preparation time for teachers, which could add an additional \$200,000 to the costs above the core. This raises the overall cost above the core to an extra \$310,000 to \$550,000 (Odden, 1997b). He finds that most schools are spending more than that amount above the core already and suggests that schools look at this extra amount, often spent on specialist pay, as a potential resource to pay for the implementation of the designs. Of course, under the CSRD program, schools are eligible for grants to support a portion of the costs.

9. How well specified is the program?

A highly specified program provides clear guidance about what practitioners must do to implement the program and achieve the results associated with it. The knowledge and skill required are clearly identified and there are well-designed professional development programs available to help people acquire them. Instructional materials may also be provided. Little development is needed locally. A less specified program may offer a set of design principles or a philosophy that can guide local program development but the burden falls heavily on the implementers to translate the principles into an operational program. Schools should understand the requirements of different programs, and should be guided to choose designs that they can realistically implement.

10. What support is provided and how good is it likely to be?

If the provider offers technical assistance and training, is it well-designed? Is it easily accessible? Is it timely? For what period of time is it provided? Have other replication sites had good experiences with the provider? Is the staff assigned to work with the adopting district or school experienced? Many providers have had trouble maintaining quality support as they expand. If the provider is rapidly increasing staff to serve schools, how is it ensuring quality support? Will the CSRD program strain the capacity of popular designs, and what are designers doing to meet expanded demand? Those selecting designs should visit and talk to people in other sites using the model, but they should not limit their investigation to original sites that may have received especially heavy support. They should call schools and districts that have recently adopted the program and ask about the support they are currently receiving.

Questions Worth Addressing

- What theory of instructional improvement underlies the design?
- How good is the evidence?
- Are effects sustained?
- Have the effects been disaggregated?
- How long does it take to produce positive results?
- Under what conditions has the program failed to produce positive effects?
- Are there important prerequisite conditions for obtaining good results?
- What are the initial and recurring costs?
- How well specified is the program?
- What support is provided and how good is it likely to be?
- Will local capacity to support the designs be developed?
- Does the program fit well with previous local investments in instructional improvement?
- Is the program complete?
- What are the opportunity costs?
- What is the provider willing to be accountable for?

11. Will local capacity to support the designs be developed?

Will the provider train local staff or local university personnel to provide the support that schools will need over time and that subsequent adopting sites will need? This will help control costs and build local capacity to solve problems. It will make it more likely that the local jurisdiction will be able to take the program to scale. How will the provider work with parents to assure that they understand the design and to involve them in children’s learning?

12. Does the program fit well with previous local investments in instructional improvement?

If the local district has recently invested heavily in a new mathematics or literacy program which is believed to be effective, it does not make sense to cast it aside and adopt a new one that is part of a comprehensive school design. The public may question the expenditure and teachers will certainly question the “revolving door” approach to curriculum. So which models fit best with what the school or district is already doing, and build upon the capacity that has been developed?

13. Is the program complete?

Many programs that have had some success are incomplete. They may have an elementary curriculum but not a middle grades curriculum, or a K-8 curriculum but no high school curriculum. They may have promising programs in language arts and mathematics but no program in science or at least no evidence of its effectiveness. The school or district needs to consider these gaps, and when they are likely to be filled, and determine whether they can live with them.

14. What are the opportunity costs?

Districts have multiple needs, and face numerous pressures from parents and state officials. Districts and schools have some finite capacity to engage in development and training. If a promising program demands most or all of that capacity and does not address some pressing needs, it will leave little or nothing to respond to those needs and may be a bad choice. All choices involve opportunity costs—how else might the time and money be invested?

15. What is the provider willing to be accountable for?

Is the provider willing to be held accountable for the quality of the training, for the timeliness and quality of technical assistance, for timely provision of materials, and for helping to explain the program to parents? Will providers make additional training available to teachers if the program was faithfully implemented but has not produced results after a reasonable period? Will they negotiate benchmarks of progress that allow both parties to judge the quality of implementation? Local leaders should enter into these relationships as they would all contracts.

Some of these questions about reform programs can only be answered by local leaders. Some must be answered by program developers and technical assistance providers. They may not be able to provide good answers to all of these questions, but asking them will permit an adopting district to make more

informed choices. It may also prompt developers and providers or state and federal agencies to begin to collect the information needed to answer them.

Given differences in designers’ ability to answer such questions, policymakers might be interested in categorizing models by the quality of their evidence and their potential for effects. For example, models could be identified as:

- A. *Proven*:** those models with evidence of sustained positive effects in multiple sites from independent evaluations using experimental designs and comprehensive information about costs and the conditions for successful implementation.
- B. *Promising*:** those models with solid evidence of effects in a limited number of sites or with evidence from non-experimental studies.
- C. *Plausible*:** those models whose designs are based on highly regarded

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theory and are consistent with other research on schools, instruction, and learning. For example, the designs concentrate on teaching and learning, provide rich opportunities for professional development and include other features characteristic of good school-based reform. (See Newman and Wehlage, 1996; Shields and Knapp, 1997)

Policymakers that decide to permit investments in Type B and C models should be prepared to invest in research on their effectiveness or to persuade others to do so. They also should set more stringent conditions about the characteristics of schools that adopt such models. Certainly schools characterized by poor performance, weak leadership, disruption and conflict, or low morale should not be encouraged to adopt Type C models whose successful implementation is likely to require good leadership, high task commitment, and high levels of cooperation.

In our view, policymakers' responsibility does not end with the identification of effective designs. In fact, there are many other important ways both state and local policymakers must support comprehensive school reform if schools are to be successful.

The Role of States in Supporting Comprehensive School Reform

States have at least three types of responsibilities with respect to comprehensive school reform. They set the general framework for education within the state and they should attend to how school design reform plays a role in their overall strategy and how their own policies can support it. States should evaluate the capacity of districts to support reform and the fit between district con-

ditions and school design options. Finally, states should assure that designs, and the extent to which schools and districts are providing the necessary support, are evaluated over time. Again, the CSRD program provides a mechanism for states to require that districts demonstrate how they will support reforms as part of their application. And, as we mentioned before, many states will have to work hard to develop capacities to assess district operations and to evaluate reforms over time. The CSRD program provides an opportunity both for states to learn how to take on such roles and for research on how such learning occurs.

1. Assuring Fit Between Comprehensive School Reform and the State's Instructional Strategy

As noted previously, just about all states have or are in the process of developing standards for student learning and are developing assessments linked to those standards. Title I and other federal programs are giving greater impetus to this movement, requiring that participating states have both content and performance standards, appropriate assessments, and accountability tied to the standards.

While there is significant commonality among states in the nature of these reforms, there are also important differences. The assumptions about content and pedagogy differ. Some states are more specific than others in the wording of standards; some break the standards down by grade-level while others specify what must be mastered by key breakpoints like 4th and 8th grade. Some states have designed their own assessments to align with their standards; others have purchased commercial tests that they deem appropriate. Some of the assessments have perfor-

mance components and place more stress on higher-order skills. Other assessments are more traditional in format and focused on more basic skills.

Designs that receive a state's blessing should be compatible with the state's general instructional strategy as expressed by its standards. Some reform designs focus more strongly on basic skills than others and will provide quicker results in states where assessments have the same focus. Such designs may not, on the other hand, satisfy policymakers wishing students to demonstrate more higher-order skills. Other designs are better suited to standards and assessments that stress student ability to solve problems and understand alternative solutions. Such designs may not fare well in a more basic-skills oriented system and may prove disappointing to policymakers. Some designs do not say much at all about curriculum, instead focusing on processes school faculties, parents and communities can use to develop good curriculum. In these cases, policymakers might examine the curricula that have emerged in schools already using this design to judge their fit with the state's instructional goals. If the state is establishing standards for professional development, as a number are (Massell, 1998), the designers' professional development approaches should meet those standards. Designs also vary in time line, and in the order and speed with which they tackle various components of schooling; some time lines may not be compatible with the state's own expectations about the rate of improvement. (See Shields and Knapp, 1997)

States must also evaluate the extent to which they support the school design strategy with their own policies. For example, if they wish designers to concentrate on improving student learning

in their work with schools, as we would argue they should, policymakers should assure that accountability provisions focus designers' attention on site-level student performance. How does comprehensive reform fit with the state's strategies for intervening with schools identified in need of improvement under Title I or some other accountability framework? To undertake comprehensive reform, schools must be able to marshal the necessary resources, often by combining funds from a number of discrete funding streams. Accordingly, states should support the integration of base funding from district funds, Title I and other federal programs and state categorical programs.

2. Assessing District Capacity to Support Comprehensive School Reform

As part of their regular review of district improvement plans and/or as part of the CSRD process to award grants to districts proposing school designs, states should examine district ability to support comprehensive school reform. In addition to general conditions supporting school-level improvement, like a good balance between accountability/quality control and autonomy (see the following section on districts), states should ask themselves about particular district conditions and develop mechanisms, if they don't already exist, to learn about such conditions. For example, is student mobility so high in some districts that common curricular elements across makes schools a great deal of sense? Should the set of design choices either be limited or be combined with such common elements? If very different designs are judged to be compatible with the district's standards and student population, it would make sense for parents and students to be able to choose among them. Is it possible/feasible for parents/students to have choices about which schools to attend?

Do schools and districts have the infrastructure needed to fully optimize designs with special resource requirements (such as technology for Co-NECT or Modern Red Schoolhouse designs)?

3. Providing Continuing Evaluation

States should play a continuing role in assessing design success and associated factors over time. Evaluation/research is a key component of accountability with respect to external "vendors" because other accountability mechanisms will have trouble sorting out the vendor role from the role of the "buying" schools in producing successful results. Only research, conducted over time, can sort out these factors. Such research is going on in some settings, such as Memphis (Stringfield, et al, 1997) and Miami (Stringfield, Millsap, and Herman, 1997), but not in many jurisdictions. States should disseminate information about best practices as they are identified.

The District Role in Comprehensive School Reform

Districts play numerous, important roles in stimulating and sustaining successful approaches to comprehensive school reform. Too many districts assume that if schools are free to adopt unique, comprehensive, schoolwide approaches to education reform, then there is little for the district to do. They assume that reforms will occur only at the school level and that little change will be required in the district, that in fact, the district's responsibilities may lessen because of the roles assumed by design teams. The opposite is the case. Districts are crucial to making school-based reform work and many will have to learn new ways of operating in the process.

1. Help schools make matches.

One of the most important district roles is to help sites select a school design that matches the needs of their students and the capabilities of their faculty. The design should become the school's vision and strategy for helping their students reach much higher standards; in fact, a truly comprehensive design replaces extant programs and strategies, pools funding from all sources, replaces the existing curriculum with the curriculum and instruction program that is core to the design, and overall becomes *the* new strategy for curriculum, instruction, serving special needs students, and classroom and school organization. Selecting a design, then, is a major decision; insuring that the design "fits" the school, therefore, is crucial. Research is showing that schools have much less information about designs, and about the breadth of what they include, than they need. Districts need to be aggressive in developing strategies that facilitate informed design selection by schools.

First, districts and design teams need to help schools match the capabilities of their faculties with design requirements. Some designs come with quite specific curriculum materials so require little curriculum development by a school's staff, while other designs come with only curriculum "principles" which require tremendous effort by faculty in developing curriculum units essentially from scratch. Some designs incorporate substantial computer technologies in deploying their instructional and management strategies, while others do not; those that do, require adequate data, voice and audio wiring and an ongoing budget for computer purchase, upgrading and maintenance. Some designs require substantial change in classroom and school organization, while others do not. Finally, some designs require large-scale resource reallocation, while other

designs require less fundamental change in how school resources are deployed. In short, the designs differ across several dimensions that have important implications for whether a design “fits” the needs, culture, capabilities, finances and aspirations of a school. The more school faculties, and their communities are aware of these differences, the better they can make a good “match” when they actually select a design.

To help schools make good design selections, then, districts could organize design fairs, during which school teams can visit with design teams and have specific discussions about these design issues. Districts should provide travel funds for school teams to visit school designs “in action” in order to more fully understand what a design looks like in operation, to see how a design works with students similar to those in their school, and to talk with other teachers

about how the design works and the requirements for design implementation. Districts also should demand that designers provide data on design impacts in different contexts with different types of students and work with schools to review these findings alongside data about school needs and strengths.

2. Imbed the comprehensive school design approach into the district’s and school’s continuing operations.

The comprehensive school design approach to education reform is not an “add-on” program; it becomes the primary if not the sole strategy to education improvement. Thus, it is important for each school and the district as a whole to insure that school and district strategies are aligned. Just as many districts are now working hard to do, localities engaging in comprehensive school reform need to create detailed

curriculum content and student performance standards that mesh with state standards, and ask that each school design align their standards and testing processes with those of the district and state.

Districts also need to understand that engaging in comprehensive school reform constitutes a large scale educational change process, requiring both new activities and new ways of approaching old functions. They need to create an awareness on the part of teachers, schools, central office, parents and the community of the need for such fundamental change, and then design and manage the change process itself. Districts also should review all their functions to assure that each supports this type of reform. For example, districts need to require that site improvement and instructional plans focus on implementation of the selected design, particularly its curriculum and instruction program. They should review their professional development budgets to assure that design-based technical assistance is covered. Supervision and evaluation should be focused on good instruction as defined by the design. Districts should foster consolidated application plans for state and federal categorical dollars so that they can be pooled and used to help implement and operate the chosen design. And, districts should target accountability to improved student achievement in the core academic subjects, the goal of education reform and the primary goal of nearly all school designs.

3. Design a new district operating environment.

In addition, districts need to design a new operating environment that provide the key elements that help make school-based design work as an education reform strategy. Creating such a new environment entails as much or more

The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR D) Program

The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR D) program, new in 1998, will help raise student achievement by assisting public schools across the country to implement effective, comprehensive school reforms that are based on reliable research and effective practices, and that include an emphasis on basic academics and parental involvement.

In establishing the program, Congress and the President recognized the potential for the wider use of proven, research-based models for comprehensive school reform. Building upon and leveraging ongoing efforts to connect higher standards with school improvement at the State and local level through Goals 2000 and Title I, this initiative will help expand the quality and quantity of schoolwide reform efforts that enable all children, particularly low-achieving children, to meet challenging academic standards.

Need Further Information? For state funding allocations, program guidance answering frequently asked questions, and more, check out CSR D’s web site on the U.S. Department of Education’s home page at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform>. You may also contact the Comprehensive School Reform Program at 202-205-4292, or at 1-800-USA LEARN, or by e-mail at compreform@ed.gov.

of a transformation from typical operations as any school adopting a design will face. Technical assistance activities provided by the federal and state governments should include help to districts in learning how to reorder their operations.

First, districts need to redesign their school budgeting systems to provide school sites with budget authority (including the funds for school level instructional personnel) based on per pupil formulas that include adjustments for different student needs. Budget flexibility at the school level is critically important because the cost-structure for each design is quite different from that in a traditional school, and sites need the authority to reallocate school resources—particularly school personnel resources—to the needs of their chosen designs.

In particular, sites should be aggressively encouraged to redeploy the use of the bulk of their dollars from both federal and state categorical programs. For many high poverty schools, Title I dollars often are sufficient to finance all design costs. Schools with a poverty concentration of 50 percent or higher should be encouraged, if not required, to use categorical dollars for a schoolwide program, and to apply for those dollars through some type of consolidated application.

Second, districts need to give personnel authority to schools by allowing them to recruit, select, train and supervise all professional personnel. Comprehensive reform works only when the individuals in the school are committed to the design, including the extra effort it takes to transform the school over a multiple-year time period into the design vision. Creating this flexibility requires close work with teacher unions as both central office placement of teachers in schools and seniority transfer bumping

are incompatible with a strategy that relies on schools developing faculties committed to specific designs.

Third, districts need to create a school-based information system that provides each school site with the data and ideas necessary to make good decisions on budget, curriculum, instruction and improvement. Such a system should include data on many elements such as revenues, expenditures, expenditures to budget, multi-year student achievement, effective curriculum programs, and sound professional development programs. Hopefully, the system will be interactive and computerized, and will focus on helping all schools engage successfully in the design implementation and improvement process.

Fourth, districts need to create school-based accountability systems (or use state-developed systems) to assess the degree to which schools are producing improvements in student academic achievement. Too often, states, districts and schools adopt reforms but fail to establish systems and processes to determine whether they are working. School-based education reform will work better if districts systematically measure school-level performance, largely student achievement in academic subjects, assess whether the reforms and designs are producing expected improvements, and attach consequences to success and failure.

Fifth, districts need to invest substantial funds in professional development programs that enhance core instructional skills as well as develop the new leadership and management skills needed by principals, teachers and central office personnel. To be sure, design teams should provide intensive training and professional development in the expertise needed for schools to implement the specific elements of the school design. But in addition, educators need leader-

ship and management skills related to budget development and monitoring, personnel selection and induction, coordinating and leading within-school team and planning meetings, and leading the school's change process of transformation into the design. Further, many teachers will need to strengthen their core instructional skills that serve as a foundation for the additional and more focused pedagogical expertise required by their particular design. Put differently, districts cannot assume that design teams will provide all of the needed training and professional development for comprehensive school reform. There will still be a need for an extensive district-run professional development program—focusing both on core instructional skills and on the leadership and management skills at the school and district levels—to undergird implementation of comprehensive school designs.

These five key elements of a new operating environment take concerted district attention and usually require creation of new operational rules and procedures that affect district and school roles. In reviewing district proposals for CSRD funds, states need to review the degree to which districts have committed to creating such an operating environment. Although changing the operating environment will take time and present many challenges, commitment to change is the first step and without such changes at the district level, the ability of schools to implement designs is severely limited (Bodilly, 1998; Knapp and Means, 1997; Newmann and Wehlage, 1996; Odden, 1997a).

4. Find an approach to supporting comprehensive school reform that fits the district.

There is no “one” way for districts to adopt a comprehensive school design approach to education reform. For

example, one district approach is to give schools wide choice of designs—both external and internal—and to view the district as more of a matchmaker than manager of design-based reform. This more decentralized approach reflects the strategy of many districts (e.g., Broward County, Cincinnati, Memphis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Seattle) that have become partners with the New American Schools.

But other districts have taken a more system-wide and centrally directed approach, embarking on common instructional improvement strategies. In such districts, a fairly limited set of external designs might be chosen. For example, Houston has chosen to concentrate on one school design: Success For All and Roots and Wings. To date, about 80 of its elementary schools are in the process of implementing this one design. In Houston, the district plays a substantial role in coordinating and shoring up the support given by the national network connected to this school design.

Other districts, such as Community District #2 in New York City, have decided to invest substantial time and effort in developing strong, core instructional expertise for both teachers and administrators; schools are given substantial autonomy for developing specific curriculum approaches, but the district has been aggressive in creating a high level of core instructional expertise across the entire district (Elmore, 1997; Elmore and Burney, in press). Other districts have allowed schools to create their own school designs, though some provide more district support for such efforts than others.

CSR funds could be made available for any of these strategies to school reform. Districts engaging in more “home-grown” approaches should: 1) require schools to provide a research and practice basis for the core elements

of their designs, 2) have a clear accountability system in place largely focused on year-to-year improvements in student academic achievement so there are data to show if the “home-grown” strategies are working, and 3) invest substantial time, effort and money into ongoing professional development in instructional skills, curriculum development and leadership expertise. Indeed, for these districts, it will be primarily their responsibility (rather than national design networks) to build the school capacity to implement a program that helps more students reach much higher standards. Districts should consider the fit of the designs with their overall approach and with reforms already underway.

5. Monitor and control the quality and performance of design teams.

For districts that have one or more external, national design teams actively working with their schools, an important district role is to monitor the quality and performance of design team work. This role entails helping schools negotiate prices for design team technical assistance and materials, setting timelines for key design team activities, monitoring prompt and quality deliverance of services promised, and disseminating data on how different design teams are working in their district. Districts should take the lead in creating explicit contracts between the district/school and various design teams, and for helping schools work through any problems that might result or modifications that might be required over the 3-5 years the schools will be engaged with the design teams.

These quality control and monitoring tasks should not “interfere” with design team operations. The goal is to help schools identify as clearly as possible what the design team will provide the

school, what the schedule for providing the services and products will be, and what costs this will entail, and then to monitor compliance with that agreement.

6. Create a public engagement process that informs parents and the community about comprehensive school reform.

Comprehensive school reform, particularly for those districts that allow schools to select from among many designs, represents a major change from typical school and district operations. Parents, the community and the general taxpaying public will want to know why districts and schools are deploying such a different strategy, will need to learn the advantages of the strategies, and even will need to learn something about each design and its approach. All New American Schools districts learned quickly that a specific, focused and comprehensive public engagement process is needed to ensure that the public and parents are aware of and support these new approaches to educational improvement.

Districts need to design a public engagement process around the comprehensive school reform strategy to make sure parents and the public:

- are aware that district performance requires an aggressive and new education strategy to raise student achievement;
- become broadly familiar with the core elements of the different designs the schools select, and how they are or can be aligned with district and state standards;
- are integrally involved in school selection of designs, and involved at

the school level in monitoring design implementation; and

- are involved in some type of district wide monitoring of design implementation and reporting on both implementation and student achievement results.

In short, there are several important district roles and responsibilities that need to be addressed in order to support school-based education reform. States need to review the degree to which districts are committed to these new roles, functions and redesigned system elements as they review applications for CSRSD funds and then help them to learn how to make these changes over time. Unless districts engage in these new activities and sustain schools' abilities to implement designs, the likelihood of success is reduced.

Conclusion

Comprehensive school reform, and the CSRSD Program in particular, provides schools opportunities to make use of expert assistance in order to improve instruction. However, in order to maximize the potential of design-based assistance, careful planning and monitoring are needed. State and district policymakers have important roles to play in assuring wise matches and continuing productive relationships between schools and designs.

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