



## **Comprehensive School Reform and District- and School-Based Improvement**

by

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America has recognized for some time that children born into poverty—and thereby at greater risk of school failure—are in need of extra support. However, despite a generation of federally funded efforts to provide that targeted help through Title I (originally Chapter I) funds for school improvement, there have been only isolated successes. Despite our efforts, the gap in reading scores between low-income and high-income students has remained unchanged for 20 years. High-school graduates from our country's bottom income quartile do not read as well as 9-year-olds from the top income quartile. According to recent state reports, 8,600 Title I schools are not only failing to educate their children to meet state standards, but are failing to make adequate yearly progress toward that basic requirement.

The purpose of this *Spotlight* is to reaffirm the importance of an integrated district- and school-based approach to comprehensive school improvement. The central premise of an integrated approach is that effective change begins with the district superintendent's plans, then flows through the principal's hands, to be implemented by an informed and involved school staff, and only then affects teaching, learning, and individual student achievement in a comprehensive, lasting way. Any break in that linkage increases the likelihood that well-intentioned plans and the investment of resources will be wasted as changes fail to achieve desired results or efforts

decrease after an initial burst of activity and optimism.

Since 1998 the chief tool for school improvement in Title I schools has been the guidance and additional funds provided to schools through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR) program (renamed Comprehensive School Reform [CSR] in 2001). Under CSR, school improvement must be comprehensive in scope and depth, so that changes in curriculum and instruction help all students and are aligned with and supported by appropriate school management, extensive professional development, collaborative planning, and parental involvement. Despite its intentions, however, the program has had very little effect on student achievement; students in schools implementing CSR improved only marginally better than students from schools not implementing CSR (Borman, Hewes, Rachuba, & Brown, in progress). This minimal effect on student achievement is perhaps due to the CSR focus on school-based change. This focus may have inadvertently slighted the district role in guiding effective school improvement. Indeed, the most recent synthesis of studies of whole-school reform models reveals that none of the surveyed studies attempted to relate the role of the district to academic success (Wong, Manning, & Nicotera, forthcoming)—a symptom of this focus. Having only a peripheral role in the CSR program, some district offices may have “signed off” on a school's participation without really supporting it or

planning to sustain it. This oversight could lead, for example, to implementation problems as basic as a failure to protect the time necessary for model-related staff development. Moreover, a district that has not made a commitment to a school's reform plan is unlikely to make the difficult decisions (e.g., reallocation of funds) that might be needed to successfully implement a plan.

The Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, offers a wide range of experience in identifying elements critical to transforming failing schools and creating high-achieving school districts. LSS is currently a central partner in developing strategic management plans for the Philadelphia and District of Columbia public schools, and the following discussion provides practical suggestions for turning low-performing districts and schools into high-performing learning communities.

### **District-Based Improvement: A Plan for Action**

The beginning of an effective school improvement process must be a comprehensive district plan. It need not be complicated; it may vary from one school to another; and it will certainly be different from district to district in its details and in the decisions that are or are not delegated to the schools involved. District plans should draw on the guidance provided by the 11 Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) com-

ponents of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. Districts may implement pre-existing models or develop their own: The impressive work to turn around low-performing schools in District #2 in New York (Elmore, 1997), and the transformation of six low-performing districts into exemplars of achievement described by Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) were entirely district-developed; and the Clover Park reforms (Davis, Sagmiller, & Hagans, 1999), although involving CSR models, were based on yearly, school-based, data-driven district plans for change, reorganization of the district office, and district-driven reallocation of resources.

The districts cited above, as well as other successful reform plans, exemplify three critical elements of district planning: (a) clear communication from the superintendent regarding the goals that are to be accomplished at the school level, best stated in objective terms; (b) assignment of responsibilities to individual schools, either to develop a plan that will accomplish the designated objectives, or to implement a plan developed by the district; and (c) an accountability process that holds principals responsible for implementation of plans, achievement of objectives, and, if necessary, further responsive adjustments if goals are not met. For effective implementation, these elements must be incorporated into planning efforts. It is not sufficient to simply announce the importance of the objectives and the expectation of accountability. Staff look to external signals (e.g., continued attention, resource availability) to judge the “reality versus rhetoric” of a plan (Bodilly, 1998), and principals guide their behavior by their assessment of their superior’s determination to follow through: “Sometimes in schools you feel as though you just need to wait out changes that you don’t buy into right away. . . . But this superintendent was saying, ‘I have high expectations and they’re not negotiable. And I plan to stay here until I see those expectations met’” (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001, p. 64).

### How to Achieve and Maintain School-Based Improvement

At the school level, there must first be a CSR plan—such as the Community for Learning program developed at Temple University—comprehensible to

and approved by the staff involved. A completed CSR grant proposal will not do as a substitute. While it is intended to be *about* the school’s improvement plan, it necessarily lacks critical information such as a time line, identification of key personnel and their responsibilities at different points in the implementation, and changes in assignments or resource allocations that are instrumental to the implementation of the plan as it unfolds. Without such detailing, elements that are included to fill a blank space on a grant application are unlikely to be sustained during implementation.

Second, many successful improvement programs incorporate extensive, ongoing, school-based support for the adoption and adaptation of new teaching practices. The particular structure adopted to provide ongoing instructional development seems not to be critical, so long as the teaching staff receive the resources and guidance they need to implement new ideas, evaluate the results of implementation, and adapt their practice accordingly. Implementation guidance supported by collegial discussion seems to be at the core of the “instructional program coherence” that led to stronger student achievement in Chicago (Newman, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001), and threads through the descriptions of District #2 in New York; and adaptive lesson planning and collegial discussion are at the heart of the efforts of Cawelti and Protheroe’s “eight-step schools.” Additionally, it is useful to conduct cluster or item analysis of achievement at the individual student level.

Third, lasting improvement relies on the creation of the appropriate infrastructure to maintain and sustain comprehensive improvement after the original implementation period ends. The “collegial involvement” aspect of continuous support for instructional change is itself a key element of maintenance, particularly important in schools with high yearly staff turnover. In such schools, staff members who are present for the second and third years of implementation of a CSR model were not present for the initial training, and contracts with design providers typically do not provide for retraining. Given these circumstances, a high-turnover school that wishes to maintain its initial momentum for

change must rely on district- and school-based support.

Last, those considering ongoing support for instructional change should remember that neither implementation, nor maintenance, nor sustainability, come free. They all rely on new staff or new staffing and scheduling patterns that will most likely not be funded by a CSR grant, which is meant only to provide start-up funds for planning, design assistance, and initial implementation training. Ongoing comprehensive school improvement will inevitably require new district-based funding, most likely provided through the reallocation of current resources. Reallocation is a painful and politically difficult task, but it is a price that must be paid by districts determined to implement the changes that lead to steadily improving student achievement.

### References

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