
SUMMARY

Upon its founding in 1991, New American Schools (NAS) sought to engage the nation’s best educators, business people, and researchers in the task of creating, testing, and fostering the implementation of schoolwide designs not constrained by existing regulations, rules, and conventions. These beginnings of “break the mold” schools evolved to the point where, in 1995, NAS began to widely diffuse the designs to a large number of schools within partnering school districts—a period known as its scale-up phase. NAS’s mission during this phase has been to use design-based assistance to help schools and districts raise the achievement of large numbers of students.

Initially, RAND helped NAS design a request for proposals and conduct a national competition for designs. Subsequently, RAND studied the initial implementation of the designs during the development and demonstration phases, providing feedback to both NAS and the design teams. With the beginning of scale-up of the NAS designs in the fall of 1995, RAND’s research agenda expanded to provide a comprehensive assessment that aims to inform NAS, the design teams, partnering jurisdictions, educators, and the general public with lessons learned about comprehensive school reform

RAND’S ASSESSMENT OF NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS

NAS’s approach is ambitious and complex. The strategy relies on school designs and design-based assistance to change the school organization, the professional life of teachers, and classroom environments as a way to improve student learning opportunities and achievement. A variety of institutional, social, political, and eco-

conomic factors need to be aligned for successful implementation, consistency and coherence, and ultimate success. As a result, any assessment of the NAS initiative has to be multidimensional and multifaceted and must rely on a variety of data and a wide array of indicators. It is a difficult and analytically complex undertaking. Yet it is critical to understanding the progress of schools implementing schoolwide reform, especially because so little research has been conducted in this relatively new educational policy area.

Critical Issues

The NAS design teams and the assistance they provide aim to promote greater cohesiveness and coherence in a school's mission and programs as well as collaboration among its staff. One hypothesis is that over time, implementation within each school will deepen and all school staff will embrace and engage in activities supportive of the visions of the design, especially if the design continues to provide assistance and teachers continue to become more familiar with it. Each design may then become schoolwide, and a second hypothesis can be examined: schoolwide designs will improve teachers' and students' educational opportunities and performance.

However, a danger in educational reform initiatives—especially those within urban settings with complex economic, political, and social challenges—is that designs may be just another “program” that is turned on and off at selected times during the school day, week, and/or year. As time goes on, the NAS designs may be at risk of being turned off altogether, especially if districts and schools lose their focus on NAS and turn to other reform efforts.

This issue is one that RAND will address with its longitudinal sample of implementing NAS schools. If teachers, design teams, and districts can sustain their focus on the NAS designs to structure the educational opportunities of students and teachers, the designs will likely become more widespread within schools.

In future analyses we will examine trends in implementation to understand the degree to which key design team features become integral components of the schools in our sample. In addition, we will report trends in school performance indicators as provided by districts in their public reports about the schools' test score perfor-

mance, absenteeism rates, and disciplinary problems. Most important, we will seek explanations for school performance trends within the participating school districts. Such explanations are critical for drawing lessons as the nation moves farther along the path of comprehensive school reform and considers it as a productive way to spend federal and local funds.

Key Questions

To assess this complex effort, we are conducting analyses aimed at answering five key questions:

- What were the NAS schools like before they implemented the designs?
- How have the designs and the assistance they provide evolved over time?
- Are the critical components of the NAS designs being implemented across a wide array of schools? Why or why not?
- Do the NAS designs extend beyond changes in school organization and governance and permeate classrooms to change curriculum and instruction?
- Over time, what is the progress of the schools being assisted by NAS design teams in improving student and school performance?

Data Collection

RAND is using a variety of data to address the key questions. Along with the district-provided data, we have collected information through interviews with principals and teachers, focus groups, case studies, surveys, observations, school and classroom artifacts, and document analysis. In a supplementary study of classroom practices, we are administering a commercial test to elementary students in NAS and non-NAS schools in San Antonio, Texas. All of these data inform our understanding of the reform that NAS is attempting to accomplish in districts, schools, classrooms, and the academic life of the nation's students.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report has a dual purpose. First, it presents our data collection plan for addressing the key questions. The plan is discussed within the context of the overall NAS effort. Second, it presents our findings from answering the first question: What were the NAS schools like before they implemented the designs? We rely on data from partnering school districts and retrospective accounts provided by principals during phone interviews conducted in the spring of 1997. These data provide information about schools' demographic, climate, and performance characteristics at the beginning of NAS's scale-up phase.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND FUTURE WORK

For the most part, NAS design teams began assisting schools facing many academic and social challenges. The majority of the NAS schools are urban, low-achieving, poor, and predominantly minority. Baseline information from the 1994–1995 school year reveals that NAS schools, on average, were performing at or below the district average on the mandated tests the year before designs began assisting schools in their restructuring efforts. Generally, then, NAS designs are attempting to change the academic lives of students and the professional lives of teachers in difficult environments.

NAS design teams partnered with schools that had challenging climates. We compared the NAS school climate indicators to a national sample. A greater percentage of NAS principals reported problems—including poverty, difficulties with the English language, racial-ethnic tension, lack of school readiness, student and teacher absenteeism, and verbal abuse and disrespect of teachers—than did principals in the national sample.

Whether design teams and the assistance they provide to these schools improve students' educational opportunities and performance is an open question. Future RAND reports will document and explain trends in both implementation and school performance, and the social and organizational factors related to them. The aim of our analysis is to monitor the implementation and performance trends in a large sample of NAS schools and to explain why those

trends occur. With such knowledge, we will provide some additional lessons learned about the conditions under which designs can work effectively to improve student achievement across the nation.