
DRIVEN BY RESULTS AND A DECADE OF EXPERIENCE

by New American Schools

Comprehensive school reform “arguably holds out the greatest hope of producing categorical change” in schools.¹

The best available information and our own experiences suggest comprehensive school reform (CSR), while not problem-free, has great potential for success and has become the dominant school reform model in the nation’s classrooms. However, its ability to reach large numbers of schools and students depends in no small part on changes in the culture of school systems and, above all, a move from policies dominated by the quick fix of the day to practices driven by results and continuous improvement. The nation should continue to invest in CSR with an eye toward improvement, given the promise shown. Now is not the time to move on to the “new, new thing.” This is especially true, given the recent passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which requires educators to meet tougher accountability standards or risk sanctions and corrective action imposed by states and the federal government. Congress’s willingness to make permanent the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR/D) program, to increase its funding level this year, and to identify CSR as a strategy low-performing schools should consider for school improvement is a recognition of what has been accomplished to date.

¹“Better By Design: A Consumer’s Guide to Schoolwide Reform,” a report by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

During the past decade, New American Schools (NAS) has evolved from a developer and supporter of specific whole-school reform efforts to an organization dedicated to successful and wide-scale implementation of comprehensive improvement strategies that have been proven to work or have exceptional promise. This evolution presented many challenges that provide insights into what is needed to ensure sustained improvement efforts. Our contribution to RAND's *Facing the Challenges of Whole-School Reform: New American Schools After a Decade* is an attempt at articulating what we have learned and where we are headed, with the hope it will contribute to a continuous process to improve and grow. It also is in keeping with the NAS tradition of looking critically at our actions and learning from our mistakes. RAND has been an invaluable partner in this endeavor.

Without RAND's insightful findings and strategic advice, we would have lost our way on the road to continuous improvement. As a result of our ten-year relationship with RAND, we are committed to rigorous, ongoing evaluations of all that we do to ensure quality design and delivery of programs and services for schools and students. While we did not always agree with RAND and its evaluation approaches, we respected and valued its role in improving public education and, specifically, comprehensive school reform. We extend special appreciation to Tom Glennan, Susan Bodilly, and Mark Berends, all leaders in comprehensive school reform research.

We have learned many lessons about what is needed to increase student achievement through the successful implementation of comprehensive improvement plans in classrooms. Arguably, the most important lessons focus on school readiness, district policies and practices, quality controls, evaluations, and community support. We have taken these lessons and built a strategy around them to achieve our decade-long mission of increasing student achievement. While our mission has not changed, many of the activities we now undertake are different from what they were ten years ago or even two years ago.

This chapter explains why we have chosen this strategy. First, it reviews NAS's history. Then, it discusses the important concept of comprehensive school improvement that includes CSR designs or

models. It then turns to a description of the lessons learned and our current areas of interest.

NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS: 1991–2001

In 1991, New American Schools, a nonprofit corporation formed by the chief executives of some of our country's most successful businesses, planned to develop "a new generation of American schools." NAS organized a five-year research and development competition that ultimately provided 11 independent organizations with funding and technical assistance to develop "comprehensive school designs." Over time, NAS invested more than \$130 million in the organizations, now known as design teams. They created models that reorganize an entire school around a unified vision and a shared plan for higher student achievement; quality professional development for teachers, principals, and other school personnel; greater parental and community involvement; ongoing evaluation of progress and performance for continuous improvement; and closely tied networks of like-minded educators.

Beginning in 1991, NAS contracted with RAND to develop and manage an independent evaluation of our work. During the past ten years, RAND's evaluative studies, critical feedback, and reports have helped NAS to identify and define the weak links and missing components of comprehensive reform strategies for schools and school districts and later would contribute substantially to new service offerings provided by NAS to states, school districts, and schools, including charter schools.

In 1996, NAS urged seven of the design teams to adopt a national dissemination strategy based on fee-for-service. We supported this strategy by providing the seed capital and technical assistance to help them operate like professional service firms, financially independent of NAS. With NAS as a partner, they entered into agreements with a group of major school districts across the country to implement their models or designs in at least one-third of the districts' schools. About that time, NAS began to finance the design teams on the basis of loans rather than grants through a self-sustaining investment program that eventually became the Education Entrepreneurs Fund. Today these design teams work in almost 4,000 schools and operate totally independently from NAS.

In 1997, Congress passed the CSR program, in response to NAS's and others' initial successes and the long-term potential for CSR to improve public education. Since its passage, approximately \$900 million has been appropriated to help schools and districts start up CSR efforts. As a result, hundreds of organizations have begun to offer school reform services and products.

In 1999, NAS joined hands with other organizations to help educators and parents decipher the differences among organizations offering CSR programs and services. NAS sponsored an independent blue-ribbon panel composed of leaders across the spectrum of public education—from Chester E. Finn, Jr., of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation to Sandra Feldman of the American Federation of Teachers—to craft and endorse guidelines to help schools, teachers, parents, and others determine which of these organizations and service providers truly offered quality CSR services.

In 2001, we built on the work of the blue-ribbon panel by helping to form the Education Quality Institute (EQI), an independent organization whose aim is to help consumers of education products and services select programs that meet locally defined needs and adhere to quality guidelines, are research based, and have been proven to work.

Importantly, that same year, we shaped a decade's worth of classroom experience, extensive research, and independent evaluations into a coherent set of consulting and operational services, products, and tools, offered through two divisions within New American Schools: the NAS Service Network and the Education Entrepreneurs Fund. These offerings support and partner with the design teams as well as many other quality providers of comprehensive services working in schools. But, the primary objective is to help educators at all levels create the environments necessary for quality comprehensive school improvement to take root and flourish.

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: A SYSTEMS APPROACH, NOT JUST A CSR DESIGN OR MODEL

At this point, it is important to draw a distinction between individual CSR designs or models and comprehensive school improvement. The former is an approach offered by an organization at the school

level; the latter is a broad systemic strategy for improvement that includes CSR designs. Comprehensive school improvement supports improved student achievement through the coherent alignment of CSR designs or models with policies and practices at the state and district levels related to school leadership and governance, curriculum and instruction, professional development, accountability and evaluation, resource allocation, and community engagement, among other areas.

Numerous studies, particularly the RAND reports, have found that the success of any design is the joint product of efforts by the design's developer, the school, and the school district. As a systemic strategy for increasing student achievement, comprehensive school improvement involves the use of a design as well as external support to achieve student performance objectives; a commitment by teachers and staff to the model—often in the form of a vote; investments of teacher time and district funds; the involvement of the superintendent's senior staff to align district policies to reinforce those investments; the engagement of the community and parents; and means of measuring the quality of design implementation and student outcomes. States and outside organizations, such as NAS, that work with designs and local educators also can influence the outcome of this joint effort.

Models, whether “home grown” or nationally developed, are a necessary part of this strategy—they drive change at the school level, but the model or design and its developer are only one part of the equation. *Models must be implemented to be effective.* Successful implementation requires that the individual design be aligned to the school's needs and that the school's teaching staff freely commits to the design and is given the time to train and implement it. The design's developer also must provide the necessary school-level assistance in implementation. Importantly, the implementation process, including the technical assistance, needs to be fully financed. Finally, the Board of Education and the central office must give high priority to the support of design implementation in all of its policy processes.

At the national level, comprehensive school improvement involves evaluating these multiparty implementation processes across districts with the best available information, identifying what works and

what does not, determining why, directing investment and purchasing decisions to designs or models that do work, throwing out what does not work, and repeating this cycle. Here is where federal and state education policies, philanthropy, and organizations, such as NAS, can have high leverage and direct influence. Over time, this system will assure a winnowing that leaves the best models or designs at the top.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Applied research and continuous evaluation is key to identifying and disseminating best practices to increase student achievement. However, poorly conducted research does more harm than good and unfairly stigmatizes schools and students.

Underlying all reform and improvement initiatives is an assumption that performance and results will be assessed in a fair and accurate manner; however, current approaches to measuring and evaluating student and school performance often are misleading and unfair. As a result, news accounts of school rankings do not offer a complete picture of what is happening in classrooms. Teachers cannot develop the individualized instruction needed for student improvement. School leaders cannot be fairly judged by the public on their ability to increase student achievement.

Traditionally, evaluation staffs in central offices determine the performance of individual schools by comparing the average scores of students in a particular grade in one year with the average scores of a different set of students in that same grade in the next year. The typical year-to-year comparison of averages in a grade says more about the students—and especially their socioeconomic status—than the quality of the classrooms in which they sit. Few districts actually look at how the same group of students improves over time. Yet, this is the best way to determine what schools add to student learning.

This type of comparison is generally known as a “value-added” approach. While not perfect, it offers significant improvements in precision and accuracy over most current evaluation techniques employed by districts today, including some of those used by RAND in its studies of the NAS-affiliated designs. It also permits evaluators to

control for important variables such as student mobility, socioeconomic status, and prior achievement levels. Evaluation systems must allow districts and schools to measure year-to-year progress as well as measure student achievement in comparison to absolute standards. A system enabling understanding of both is a powerful driver of change and improvement.

Through the Services Network, we now offer assistance to educators in evaluation techniques, as they collect, use, and manage student-level data to ensure that fair and accurate information is driving decisionmaking in and outside the classroom.

2. Individual schools and teachers need assistance to help them prepare for change. At the same time, superintendents and others must recognize that while all schools can improve, they do not all need an external change agent to reform or improve.

It seems like an obvious statement, but it cannot be emphasized enough: If schools and teachers do not believe they need to change and are not prepared to rethink and restructure what they do, no amount of money or muscle will force it upon them. We have learned that prior to making substantive changes to curriculum or instruction, schools and districts need assistance in planning for and preparing for more effective teaching and learning programs as well as long-term change and continuous improvement.

We also now recognize that while all schools in a district may need assistance to build their capacity for continuous improvement, they all do not necessarily need an externally developed design or model to reform or improve. Outside providers are not for everyone, although together they offer a broad range of consumer choice and individually provide real opportunities for tailoring. Some schools can and always have done it themselves.

Still, ties to a national model can offer enormous benefits, even for high-performing schools. Even a highly competent staff might reasonably elect to buy and tailor a compatible design rather than build it from scratch; students might benefit from a thoughtful, research-based design faster. External models also provide a means of maintaining a school's coherence in the face of staff and principal turnover. Moreover, existing models provide a ready-made network of like-minded school staff, connected by local, regional, and na-

tional meetings, as well as the Internet. And design “brands” do offer a simple means by which high-performing schools can help parents and teachers understand the school’s education program and philosophy, thus fostering good matches of the school with prospective employees and students.

3. Investing in schools alone is necessary but not sufficient for meaningful and sustained improvement. States and school districts must develop policies and practices that support the school improvement processes and become embedded into a district’s culture to ensure they last beyond one dynamic superintendent.

NAS has learned that a school-by-school improvement strategy is a necessary but not sufficient approach for creating sustained improvement in student achievement. Teachers, students, and other school staff interact within systems of federal, state, district, and school policies and practices that comprise and shape the conditions under which teaching and learning take place. In the broadest terms, the conditions we are concerned about have to do with *opportunities, capacities, and incentives* for improvement. The extent of their alignment is what New American Schools means by *system-level coherence*.² Unfortunately, many urban schools operate under relatively incoherent conditions, both programmatically at the school level—with multiple competing improvement efforts under way simultaneously,³ and at the district and state levels—with evaluation, accountability, scheduling, professional development, decentralization, and compensation policies that are not aligned with schools’ improvement efforts. Briefly stated, this is what opportunities, capacities, and incentives mean to NAS:

Opportunities for improvement pertain to the level of flexibility schools have to be creative in taking corrective action. Strategies that

²Several education researchers have written about the concepts of opportunities, capacities, and incentives as well as levels of coherence in educational systems (see, for example, Paul Hill, Christine Campbell, and James Harvey [2000], *It Takes a City: Getting Serious About Urban School Reform*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC; Anthony Bryk et al. [1998], *Charting Chicago School Reform: Democratic Localism as a Lever for Change*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo.).

³See, for example, F. M. Newmann, B. Smith, E. Allensworth, and A. Bryk, “School Instructional Program Coherence: Benefits and Challenges,” Consortium on Chicago School Research, January 2001.

promote increased opportunity include various forms of decentralization such as site-based budgeting, performance-based contracts to manage groups of schools within existing systems, and public charter schools that operate entirely outside the traditional district. Other opportunities for improvement include district and school policies that give educators a freer hand through new allocation of resources and innovative scheduling of the school day and year.

Capacities for improvement pertain to the knowledge, skills, and abilities of those who lead, direct, and administer change: top officials at district and school level, teachers, staff, parents, and other members of the community. Examples of strategies that build capacities include the implementation of whole-school reform models; training and leadership development strategies; and investments in information technology.

Incentives for improvement pertain to the structure of accountability and compensation systems. Incentive-based strategies include establishing rewards for meeting federal, state, district, and school expectations for academic achievement, and consequences for failing to do so.

The mission of the Services Network is to align education policies and practices to foster strong organizational performance and high student achievement. The Services Network operates on the principle that coherence among opportunities, capacities, and incentives can be achieved both by transforming existing school systems—the school district as we know it today—and by creating new systems of schools operating under charters or contracts. Both approaches are vital dimensions of a comprehensive national strategy for improving education.

To accomplish its mission, the Services Network offers an integrated set of *State and District Services* and *New School Services* through strong internal capacity and best-in-class strategic partners. Each set of services includes four components: (1) needs assessment, (2) strategic planning, (3) implementation assistance, and (4) quality assurance and feedback. To assist its clients, the Services Network draws on its capacity in key competency areas, which include:

District Redesign

- Leadership and management
- Professional development
- Resource allocation
- Community engagement
- Charter and contract school arrangements

Accountability and Evaluation

- Accountability policy development
- School review and evaluation
- Information management and analysis

Special Education

- Interpretation of federal, state, and local law and funding streams
- Student assessments
- Program design and implementation
- Management of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process
- Development of Medicaid reimbursement processes

Charter and Contract Schools

- Authorizer application and approval processes
- Accountability plan development and monitoring
- School start-up coordination help on facilities, personnel, budget, and data systems

Governance Training

- Authorizer renewal and revocation decisions processes
- Lessons from new schools for district redesign

4. Most schools and districts need sustained, high-quality support from external organizations to build capacity and leadership at the local level.

While most schools and districts need and want assistance from external organizations to help them improve student performance, the providers of these services and products, mostly nonprofits, often lack the capital and business expertise to offer large numbers of schools sustained, high-quality work *simultaneously*. They also lack the capacity to link and partner with other quality providers. As a result, NAS is supporting education providers through its Education Entrepreneurs Fund. The Fund provides financial resources, technical assistance, and consulting in business planning and marketing to help promising education organizations and companies deliver consistently superior programs and assistance to a growing network of schools over time. Currently, the Fund makes investments in design teams to help them improve their offerings to schools and make them available to more schools. For example, design teams have used loans to pay for up-front operating expenses in classrooms, while they wait for payment from schools recently added to their client list. These loans provide the necessary cash flow to give design teams the flexibility to work with the school system's billing cycle and the ability to add the staff and systems necessary to expand their work to larger numbers of schools. Investments also have been used to improve design teams' technology offerings, curriculum materials, and school-level technical assistance.

The Fund also seeks to make nonprofit organizations more accustomed to thinking and operating like businesses, helping them benefit from business and marketing models as well as long-term strategic plans. This function falls under the Fund's Education Entrepreneurs Network, whose mission is to help providers and other "education entrepreneurs" turn promising ideas or small-scale classroom techniques and tools into products, programs, and services that can be widely used in school settings. Entrepreneurs in the field of education are breaking new ground every day in classrooms,

demonstrating their work can raise student learning. For example, foundations often fund the creation and initial development of an innovative program that has met with success in a few classrooms; however, little support is available to help nonprofits actually launch the resulting product or service into the larger education marketplace. By providing technical, marketing, and business assistance, the Network fills this role and helps nonprofit organizations expand beyond a few pockets of excellence. It also stimulates mutually productive partnerships among education providers, creating a more efficient marketplace that ultimately brings high-quality products and services to those students who most need them.

5. Educators, parents, and the larger school community must have a way to measure the performance of these outside organizations that consult and/or provide services and products to schools.

Parents, business and community leaders, and other members of the public need a resource to help them make well-informed decisions, based on trusted research, instead of political whim and opinions of interested parties. This has become increasingly difficult. Today more than 300 organizations receive payment for their services through the federal CSR program; however, we have no real quality standards in place. Quality should not be confused with perfection—it is a process of continuous improvement; evaluating, throwing out what doesn't work, and focusing on what does. Our experience suggests that in the absence of good information about which programs can be relied upon to do good work, the good, the bad, and the ugly are thrown together in an undifferentiated mass that schools, districts, and the public cannot hope to untangle. When consumers can't trust anyone, they trust no one.

In 1999, to address the need for useful and reliable consumer information on CSR providers, NAS sponsored a blue-ribbon panel of notables from across the political and philosophical spectra of public education to develop and endorse a set of rigorous quality guidelines. This year NAS, along with the Council for Basic Education, helped create the independent EQI, a *Consumer Reports* for education. Much more work needs to be done to make these guidelines the industry standard and EQI the recognized standard-bearer of quality; however, a first step has been taken, and we welcome involvement by all who care about quality in public education.

Had the guidelines, EQI, or something like them been in place during the past few years, educators and the public would have been better informed about issues around quality, evaluations, performance, and related topics. Consistent with this lesson, NAS now only seeks partnerships with providers who focus on student performance, commit to independent quality reviews, and allocate resources to assure continuous improvement within their organization and within partner schools.

6. The policies that shape public education are inherently political. As such, we must build broad community understanding and support for school redesign.

To ensure community engagement is informed by research rather than empty rhetoric, we must commit ourselves to communicating fair and accurate information on a regular basis and to involving key stakeholders in the decisionmaking process. We learned that school improvement efforts must be built on a broad base of support, rather than the tenure of one charismatic leader. In some districts implementing comprehensive school reform models, schools demonstrated a healthy return on the considerable investment of district funds and staff time, but neither the broader district systems supporting the CSR strategy nor the designs themselves were embedded sufficiently in the school systems and within their stakeholder groups to assure the strategy's continuation in the absence of leadership commitment. In many school systems, it is far easier for district leaders and the central office to go back to the old ways than to continue the redesign effort.

But, for the work to succeed over the long term, the endorsement of a more permanent decisionmaking body—the community as a whole—must be cultivated. Today NAS stresses the importance of community involvement through the Service Network's offerings, which help educators and school leaders develop and implement an intensive and substantive engagement plan with parents, teachers, community and business leaders, and others around school improvement strategies.

THE FUTURE OF NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS

As a leader in comprehensive school improvement strategies, NAS is proud of its record and the accomplishments of the CSR design teams. We believe they are among the best school reform programs widely available today. However, we should be counted among the first to recognize that no silver bullet exists for school improvement. NAS has never defended setbacks as success, nor have we celebrated successes as miracle cures. Instead, throughout the RAND evaluation effort, we have openly published our own and the design teams' mistakes and failures, while embracing them as opportunities for improvement rather than reasons to abandon our work.

We operate as a learning organization, dedicated to continuous improvement, putting these values into practice:

Quality. We will work only with education providers who have demonstrated results of higher student achievement, increased student attendance, decreased dropout rates, greater parental and community involvement, and other indicators of success.

Scale. We will work to move beyond a few islands of excellence by supporting promising and proven programs that can be replicated to ensure large-scale implementation of successful comprehensive school improvement strategies.

Sustainability. We will work to ensure continuous improvement by helping the best strategies sustain their impact and become permanent features of the public education landscape.

Comprehensiveness. We will work to promote the alignment, consistency, and durability of school improvement strategies, avoiding the adoption of disparate programs that are disjointed in practice.

Collective action. We will work to get education providers to join together for the common goal of improved student performance and, importantly, network best-in-class providers to help develop a unique, coherent set of services and products that can easily be matched to meet the specific challenges facing any school or school district.

Choice. We will work to ensure that educators, parents, and community leaders are able to select from a diverse portfolio of high-

quality options to determine what improvement strategy is best for their students and unique needs, especially for those schools and students most in need.

New American Schools' mission is to help the country raise achievement for all students through the implementation of comprehensive school improvement strategies at the school, district, state, and national levels. Our mission is far from complete. As we reach our tenth anniversary, NAS continues to break new ground, transitioning from a largely grants-driven initiative to a professional services organization. Bolstered with the accomplishments of the past decade, New American Schools is uniquely positioned to link and deliver superior, research-based education services that together give states, districts, and schools the tools and assistance needed to ensure that all children succeed at high levels.