INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For some time, there have been many debates about the need to reorganize schools to create learning opportunities more consistent with the changing needs of American society. Concerns about how well the American education system is serving societal needs have a long history in this nation (Kliebard, 1986; Cuban, 1990; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). For example, the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education’s report, A Nation at Risk, stated, “Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being taken over by competitors throughout the world. . . . If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war.” Not surprisingly, new educational interventions and experiments emerged.

The debates about the state of education in the United States will continue. And given that the recent release of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed that U.S. high school students continue to lag behind those of other countries, efforts to improve student achievement scores in this country will also continue. In addition, as educational and income inequalities persist and American society becomes increasingly diverse, attention to equity will continue as well (see Kozol, 1991; Jencks and Peterson, 1991; Smith, 1995; National Research Council, 1997; Jencks and Phillips, 1998).

The emerging reports on the condition of American education and new policies and innovative activities have established a positive climate for reform. The conventional wisdom is that schools should
and could do a better job of helping students learn basic and higher-order skills in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and technology (Newmann and Associates, 1996; Johnson and Immerwahr, 1994).

THE NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS REFORM EFFORT

In this context, with attention directed toward improving equity and excellence, the New American Schools (NAS) initiative was launched during the summer of 1991. National educational goals emerged from policy forums such as the 1989 meeting of then President George Bush and state governors. These goals evolved into part of President Bush's America 2000 effort to support new elementary and secondary school designs; further support for NAS was then provided through the Clinton administration's Goals 2000.

Despite this general federal support, NAS and the development of the designs were initially funded solely by the private sector. 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, work rules, and conventions. Thus, NAS's aim was to help develop “break the mold” schools to provide innovative options within the public education sector as a way to better educate students for the societal needs of the 21st century.

The initial goal of NAS was to help a large number of schools change their organization and practices so as to improve student learning. To make this goal a reality, NAS organized its work into several phases:  

- A competition phase to solicit proposals and select designs;
- A development phase of one year to develop the ideas in the proposals in concrete ways;

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1 A more detailed description of the history of the NAS initiative and the design teams appears in Bodilly, 1998; Glennan, 1998; and Stringfield, Ross, and Smith, 1996. See also Herman, 1999; Ball et al., 1998; Stringfield and Datnow, 1998; Datnow and Stringfield, 1997; Ross et al., 1997, 1998; and Stringfield, Millsap, and Herman, 1997. For descriptions of NAS and the design teams on the Web, see http://www.naschools.org, which has links to each design team’s Web site.
• A demonstration phase of two years to pilot the designs in real school settings; and
• A scale-up phase in which the designs would be widely diffused in partnering jurisdictions across the nation.

RAND first helped NAS to design a request for proposals (RFP) and conduct a national competition for design proposals. Subsequently, RAND studied the initial implementation of the designs during the development and demonstration phases, providing feedback to both NAS and the design teams (Bodilly et al., 1995; Bodilly, 1996; Mitchell, 1996). Figure 1.1 shows the NAS phases and RAND’s roles.

KEY QUESTIONS UNDERLYING RAND’S ASSESSMENT

With the beginning of scale-up of the NAS designs in the fall of 1995, RAND’s research agenda expanded. We began to address broader questions to document the progress of the NAS initiative:

• What were student performance and school climate like in the NAS schools before they implemented the designs?

Figure 1.1—Phases of New American Schools Initiative and RAND Roles
• 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?

This report lays out RAND's analytic plan for addressing these questions. It also provides an answer to the first question: What were the NAS schools like before they implemented the designs? For this report, 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 the schools' demographic, climate, and performance characteristics at the beginning of NAS's scale-up phase.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT**

Chapter Two describes NAS's approach to schoolwide reform and RAND's overall analysis plan and data collection efforts for assessing the NAS initiative in terms of the five key questions listed above. We discuss the importance of a more thorough empirical understanding of schoolwide reforms or comprehensive school reform as the nation continues to grapple with how to improve the learning opportunities of its students. Chapter Three provides details of the RAND sample and presents a baseline description of the NAS schools in our sample in terms of their demographic and school climate characteristics. We also summarize school achievement levels during the baseline year to provide a better understanding of what the NAS schools were like before the design teams began assisting them. A brief summary of our findings and the work ahead appears in Chapter Four.