

In July 1991, New American Schools (NAS)¹ was established to develop designs for what were termed “break-the-mold” schools. Funded by the private sector, it sought to engage the nation’s best educators, business people, and researchers in the task of creating, testing, and fostering the implementation of school designs that were not constrained by existing regulations, work rules, and conventions. NAS’s initial goal was to create designs and associated teams that would help schools enable their students to reach high educational standards. It then moved to implement the new designs in a significant number of schools as an element of a strategy for promoting wider education reform.

This report describes RAND’s perspectives on the evolution of NAS’s mission. RAND has served as an analyst-adviser to NAS from its beginning. It has also been and continues to be the major evaluator of NAS’s program. The perspectives described here now guide this evaluation, and the report thus provides important background for that evaluation.² While the report’s principal goal is to describe the NAS initiative, it also draws some broad lessons for potential users of NAS’s work based on analyses that we have completed and have published or will soon publish in other reports.

¹The organization was originally known as the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC). In 1995, it was shortened to New American Schools, symbolizing its move from development to scale-up design. We will use the abbreviation NAS throughout this report.

²Appendix A provides a very brief overview of the components of this evaluation.

THE INITIATION OF NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS

NAS began as a component of America 2000, a broad educational initiative announced by President George Bush and Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in April 1991. It was the major research and development component of that initiative. In announcing the creation of NAS, the President said:

We must also foster innovation. I am delighted to announce today that America's business leaders . . . will create the New American Schools Development Corporation—a private-sector research and development fund of at least \$150 million to generate innovation in education. . . .

The architects of New American Schools should break the mold. Build for the next century. Reinvent—literally start from scratch and reinvent the American school. No question should be off limits, no answers automatically assumed. We're not after one single solution for every school. We're interested in finding every way to make schools better. (U.S. Department of Education, 1991, pp. 54–55.)

Other parts of America 2000, including national standards and tests, provisions for school choice, and the development of America 2000 communities, garnered much of the public's attention. When the design initiative was discussed, educators and the research community split on the likely value of the NAS Development Corporation. Many thought that there was already good practice in the field and that capitalizing on such practice deserved higher priority. Others were skeptical about the business involvement. However, many did think that a new school-design effort that put aside some of the assumptions forced by existing laws and regulations had potential value. These perspectives are captured in quotes from prominent observers at the time.

Michael Timpane, then president of Teachers College, spoke for those critical of the emphasis on reinvention of schools:

It is wrong-headed to suggest that the greatest problem in education is not knowing what to do and that we must wait for privately-funded design teams to come up with ideas. There are many good ideas already in practice including those championed by Ted Sizer, James Comer, Bob Slavin and many others. The problem is learning

how to shepherd these ideas through unwieldy bureaucracies to principals and teachers in every school, people who are just beginning to believe that they can take charge of their professional lives and schools. (Timpane, 1991, pp. 19–20.)

While not totally dismissive of the business involvement in the development of new schools, Gordon Ambach, then and now executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, clearly wanted to be sure that the effort was closely tied to the public school system.

I cannot comprehend why the Secretary and the President consider a private research effort to be the centerpiece for system change for the most important function of government—education. . . . Privately funded R&D is welcome but it must be linked with public systems and public authority to be effective. (Ambach, 1991, p. 39.)

Michel Kirst, a Stanford professor with wide experience in elementary and secondary education, as well as research, was more positive. After discussing failures in previous government R&D efforts to develop model schools and important research questions raised by the President's proposals, Kirst wrote:

I disagree with critics of the President's program who say that the existing array of schools contains all the necessary variations and we should merely do more research on current promising practices. Schools are highly constrained by various laws, regulations, non-government policies (e.g., SAT and the Carnegie units), and organizational rigidity. The New American Schools Development Corporation is needed to break loose from these impediments (Kirst, 1991, p. 38.)³

Having more than \$40 million in pledges, NAS put aside the critics' concerns and forged ahead with its program. Three and a half months after opening for business, it issued a request for proposals (RFP) that attracted nearly 700 proposals. In June 1992, 11 Design Teams were chosen to begin the design and development process. A year later, two teams were dropped and the remainder began to work

³Kirst became a member of the NASDC's Education Advisory Panel.

with about 150 schools to develop, demonstrate, and begin testing their designs in schools.⁴

Two years later, seven of the teams were chosen to move forward to scale up their designs, largely in 10 jurisdictions that had agreed to partner with NAS in the effort. The timetable for the entire program is pictured in Figure 1.1. As the program evolved through these three phases, experience led NAS leadership to change its character substantially.

Phase 1. The initial operations concentrated on the designs and their designers. All the designs were for entire schools. All but one Design Team (Roots and Wings) expected to work with all grade levels from K-12. The Design Team leaders possessed a wide variety of backgrounds, but most were “idea people” and researchers rather

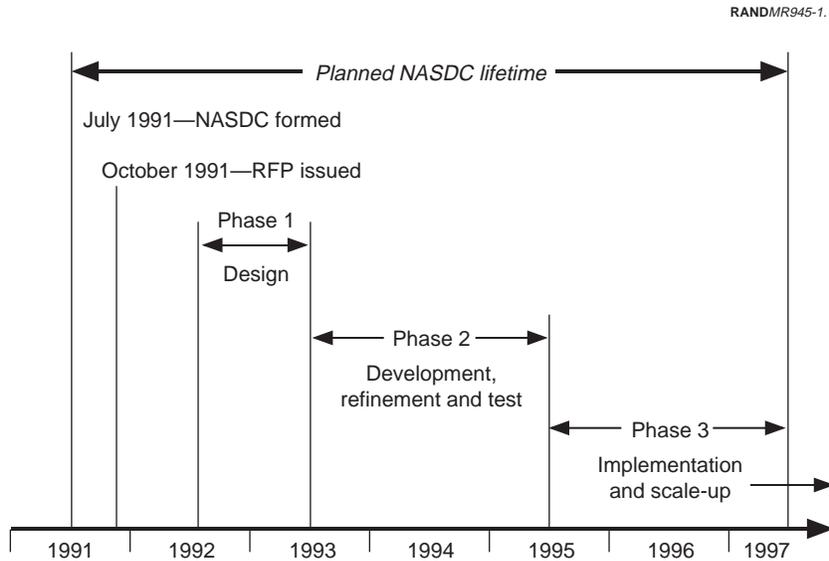


Figure 1.1—Schedule for New American Schools Program, 1991

⁴See Appendix B for a description of the different designs.

than experienced managers of sizable operations. The designs were chosen on the merits of the proposals and the team's performance in follow-up interviews. Little or no attention was devoted to whether the organizations in which they were housed—universities, private firms, or nonprofit research and service entities—had any long-term interest in promoting or marketing the design. Most of the teams probably viewed the initiative as a five-year activity, after which the team members would move on to new ventures.⁵

Phase 2. In Phase 2, as the teams began to work in schools, all concerned began to recognize the importance of the services provided in association with the implementation of the designs. In each case, while there were documents and curriculum materials that described the design, the most important part of the implementation process was the provision of assistance to the schools that were involved. Because the designs were evolving, this assistance often involved joint designer and practitioner exploration of problems that arose in implementing the design. As RAND conducted site visits to study the implementation of the designs, it became clear that the assistance was at least as important as the quality of the design itself. In its report on this phase of NAS activities, RAND used the term “design-based assistance” to describe what it had seen.⁶

The shift from primary focus on designs to a focus on a combination of designs and associated assistance profoundly changed NAS's conception of its product. By the end of Phase 2, NAS viewed its primary products as both service-providing organizations and the designs. Because the teams would need to survive after NAS's lifetime, it urged the teams to develop fee schedules and to prepare to move to operations supported largely by fees charged for their services. More generally, it began to work with the Design Teams to improve their marketing and to think about organizing operations to provide assistance to numerous schools. The Design Teams, preoccupied with finishing their design, demonstration, and testing tasks during Phase 2, had little time to devote to this shift.

⁵RAND's research related to the results of Phase 1 is contained in Bodilly (1995).

⁶RAND's research on Phase 2 is summarized in Bodilly (1996).

Phase 3. RAND’s fieldwork in Phase 2 suggested that, in wide-scale implementation, the NAS designs were likely to face important systemic barriers to implementation. Individual schools needed authority and capacity to change their program and staff as the designs required. Most schools required clear guidance from the districts or the state concerning the skills and knowledge that they were expected to help students acquire. While NAS provided resources for implementation in Phase 2, schools or their parent jurisdictions would need to provide the investment resources needed for the Design Team fees and other costs of implementing the designs in Phase 3.

NAS began a search for jurisdictions that would provide environments in which schools using the designs would be likely to find support—what it termed “supportive operating environments.” It sent letters to some 20 jurisdictions (districts and states) asking if they were interested in joining with NAS to transform 30 percent of their schools using NAS or other whole-school designs.⁷ All responded affirmatively; 10 were chosen.⁸

The choices were made in March 1995. Because NAS wanted to see its Design Teams in a substantial number of schools in September 1995, a hurried effort to organize new activities in these jurisdictions ensued. It rapidly became clear that everyone had a great deal to learn:

- Organizing a process by which schools learned about and chose Design Teams was very difficult.
- The Design Teams were not well prepared to explain their designs to schools or to state and justify their fees to schools and school districts.

⁷The 30-percent goal was chosen arbitrarily. It was intended as a goal that was large enough to ensure that design-centered schools would become more nearly the norm than at present. Thirty percent was termed a “critical mass” of schools.

⁸The jurisdictions were Cincinnati, Dade County, Kentucky, Los Angeles, Maryland, Memphis, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Diego, and an alliance of four districts in Washington. Los Angeles was selected with the explicit understanding that it would not become a formal part of the effort for at least a year and has subsequently dropped out of the partnership. Two additional districts have now joined with New American Schools: San Antonio, Texas (1996) and Broward County, Florida (1997).

- There was normally no ready organizational home in a district or state to manage such an effort.
- Resources to purchase design-based assistance were not readily available in school district or state budgets.

In short, the initial experience of NAS and the Design Teams indicated that there was no regularized market for design-based assistance. If the initiative were to succeed, such markets would need to be developed.

As the extent of the difficulties became clear, NAS itself took a number of actions. It convened representatives of the jurisdictions and Design Teams to address the issues. It hired consultants to work with districts on resource problems and deployed its staff to help with developing effective matching processes. It also required Design Teams to prepare business plans and provide consulting on business planning, pricing, and marketing. By the end of Phase 3, NAS had thus expanded its concerns to include both the success of the Design Teams and the development of districts that were effective in using design-based assistance as a key component of their reform activities.⁹

In the course of the evolution of the initiative, NAS has addressed many of the issues raised by the observers cited at the beginning of this report. Most of the designs have built upon earlier work of reformers in the field. The initiative has begun to address the problems of “shepherd[ing] these ideas through unwieldy bureaucracies. . . .” NAS has worked closely with the education system as it seeks to promote the implementation of its designs. In doing so, it has sought to “to break loose from [the] impediments [of] . . . laws, regulations, non-government policies . . . , and organizational rigidity.” (Timpane, 1991.) In the course of this evolution, the initiative has lost much of the simplicity associated with President Bush’s initial announcement and has moved to dealing with the messier problems of promoting the transformation of ordinary schools in real communities.

⁹RAND will publish a study of the initial implementation of NAS designs in Phase 3. It will appear in the first quarter of 1998.

Table 1.1 provides a summary of the scope of the effort from 1993 to the beginning of the 1996–97 school year. By that time, New American Schools reported that the Design Teams were working with more than 550 schools in about 26 states.

OVERVIEW OF REPORT

As we have noted, this report describes the conception of the NAS initiative that RAND has developed in the six years it has worked with the initiative. It also summarizes some of the lessons that we take from our formative evaluation studies and lays out some of the questions we are investigating in our continuing evaluation of the program.

The report has three major chapters. The next chapter explores the designs and the concept of design-based assistance. It develops hypotheses concerning the potential benefits of such assistance that should be tested as the NAS effort continues.

Chapter Three examines the initial years of scale-up (Phase 3) for lessons concerning the impediments to effective use of design-based

Table 1.1
Schools Developing or Implementing NAS Designs 1993–97

Design Team	Phase 2		Phase 3	
	93–94	94–95	95–96	96–97
ATLAS	13	14	22	53
Audrey Cohen College	4	9	21	17
Community Learning Centers	8	10		
Co-NECT	2	5	19	42
Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound	12	11	23	37
LA Learning Centers	2	2		
Modern Red School House	27	9	16	47
National Alliance for Restructuring Education	81	84	121	217
Roots & Wings	4	4	52	140
TOTAL	153	148	274	553

SOURCE: NAS, November 1996.

assistance. While NAS has moved to assist several jurisdictions to deal with many of these impediments, it is too early for the effects of this assistance to be known.

Chapter Four reviews the problems the Design Teams faced as they moved toward self-sufficiency and greater independence from NAS. These problems have become an important NAS concern as its mission has evolved.

A brief final chapter reflects on the complexity of the NAS initiative described in the earlier chapters and the problems that this complexity poses for evaluators and for those seeking to understand the contributions that NAS is making to school reform generally.