LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In five years of operations, NAS has proved to be an adaptive organization. It began with a visionary and somewhat simplistic mission: to design high-performance schools that cast off the shackles of rules and convention. As it engaged in the process of design, development, trial, and scale-up, its vision evolved and its actions began to reflect the realities of operating in real schools located in real school systems. NAS continues to emphasize creating high-performance schools but has now embraced a much more complex mix of design, assistance, and systemic reform as the means to creating such schools on a wide scale.

As we have tried to emphasize in the previous chapters, much has been learned in the course of these five years. NAS's experiences, as well of those of other organizations promoting whole school reforms, have now shaped new federal legislation and policies intended to promote the use of comprehensive, schoolwide reforms in ways broadly consistent with those lessons. Yet, much remains to be learned. The NAS initiative itself continues to be a work in progress. RAND's evaluation will continue to examine and document the initiative for three more years.

In this final chapter, we summarize the lessons we have drawn in earlier chapters and briefly describe planned RAND analyses that we expect will contribute future lessons.

WHOLE-SCHOOL DESIGNS

The crucial premise that underlies the NAS initiative is that high-performance schools have a design that unifies and guides their

efforts to ensure that all their students meet demanding standards. A design articulates the school's vision, mission, and goals; guides the instructional program of the school; shapes the selection and socialization of staff; and establishes common expectations for performance, behavior, and accountability among students, teachers, and parents. It makes clear the student behaviors the school expects when it accepts a student and the nature of the work environment a teacher must accept if he or she takes a job in the school. It provides criteria for the recurring self-evaluation that is essential to continuing improvement in any organization's performance.

At its heart, the premise has two bases of support:

1. A commonsense belief that a clear focus on goals and a coherent set of programs to meet those goals is the hallmark of an effective organization

2. Years of research on the qualities of schools that are effective in meeting the needs of their students and the communities in which they live.

Each of the NAS designs provides both a vision for a high-performance school and guidance for its program.

A second key premise is that there is no one best design. Schools and school communities differ in many important dimensions. Students and teachers bring a variety of talents and skills. Communities have distinctive values. Schools themselves have existing histories and cultures that will inevitably lead them to see some designs as preferable to others. Because of this, NAS has supported the development of eight designs and has encouraged schools and school districts to consider whole-school designs developed by others.

While the purposes of a design are common among the Design Teams, the conception of what constitutes a design is not. Chapter Two suggested that some of the designs provide fairly prescriptive guidance and materials related to the organization and conduct of instructional programs. Others provide core principles, guidance for organizational development, and materials to support that development. Some of the teams expect the instructional programs of schools that successfully implement their designs to be quite similar; others expect those programs to be distinctive in each school but to

be unified by underlying principles and practices that are common among schools using their designs. Some designers hope that it will be obvious the minute one walks into a school that the school uses their design; others believe that you must probe deeper before you find the principles and practices that show a school uses their design.

For a variety of reasons, RAND's analysis has not and will not address the question of whether specific NAS designs work better for one or another class of schools. As a practical matter, for much of the time we have followed NAS, the designs have been under development. There has not been time for them both to be fully implemented and to affect significant proportions of the instruction of large groups of students. At a more fundamental level, as the preceding chapters have sought to demonstrate, a design itself does not lead to an outcome. Rather, the performance of a school is the product of a complex interaction of the school (its students and faculty), the school district environment, the assistance provided to the school, and the design itself. Even with the sample of nearly 200 schools we are now tracking, it will be impossible to disentangle these effects.

At present, each Design Team can point to schools that suggest that their designs can lead to significant improvements in student outcomes. In increasing numbers of sites, the designs have begun to be implemented. For the foreseeable future, the experiences of these sites provide the best information available to those seeking to decide whether a well-implemented design is likely to help their school to improve its performance significantly.

The term "well-implemented" is critical. A design cannot be expected to play a major role in a school's performance if it is not implemented. Implementation is the principal issue on which RAND's evaluation has so far focused.

DESIGN-BASED ASSISTANCE

In Chapters Two and Three, we noted that our research suggests the level of design implementation achieved by a school is a function of both the design itself and the quality and character of the assistance provided to a school as it implements the design. It is also a function

of the character of the operating environment provided by local and state school systems.[1]

Assistance Strategies

As Chapter Two suggests, Design Teams have distinctive assistance strategies. Some start by seeking to help the school's staff rapidly change what goes on in its classrooms; others help organize or reorganize the content and practice of school governance. Some seek initially to work with all staff simultaneously; others focus on instructional leaders. Some believe that introducing concrete and fully developed materials is most effective in making lasting change in school practice; others believe that the lasting implementation of their design will occur only if school staff engage in significant curriculum development activities.

The Design Teams also vary in the manner in which they attempt to monitor progress and introduce quality control. Some have detailed checklists of practices they feel should be apparent in schools and classrooms implementing their designs. Others have broader benchmarks that guide their site visits and that structure feedback to the school. Several seek to engage schools (or networks of schools) in the development of their own benchmarks and assessment of their own progress.

The level of resources devoted to implementing a design is obviously important. These resources include the time of school staffs, facilitators, and other school-level personnel devoted to managing the implementation, as well as services and material from the Design Team. RAND fieldwork and analysis suggest that monetary value of the time of teachers and design-specific personnel is often three times the fees paid to the Design Teams for services and materials. The Design Teams have varied both in the level of resources they seek and their ability to induce schools and districts to make such resources available.

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[1]This broad observation is documented in both RAND's published review of Phase 2 demonstration lessons and our forthcoming analysis of the first two years of scale-up experience.

RAND's Evaluation

RAND's program of evaluation and analysis has and will continue to describe and assess the implementation of the NAS designs. In the first two years of scale-up (1995–96 and 1996–97), we have tracked the experiences of 40 schools. In early 1998, we will report on the levels of implementation these schools have achieved and the reasons for differences in these levels. This analysis reflects and is limited by the early experience of the Design Teams as they started to provide design-based assistance on a wide scale. The teams and NAS itself have no doubt learned much from their experiences in the past two years, and RAND will conduct another series of case studies of design implementation beginning in the fall of 1998.

It is important to recall that the objective of the NAS initiative is to improve the performance of students, not to faithfully implement designs. Thus, the major focus of RAND's work from now to the end of 2000 will be on assessing the impact of the combination of the designs and design-based assistance on school organization and outcomes. To do this, we are tracking a variety of outcomes in nearly all the schools that began implementing NAS designs between the fall of 1995 and the spring of 1997 in seven jurisdictions. These data are being provided by the participating school jurisdictions.

In addition, surveys of teachers and principals in these schools will provide information concerning the nature of design implementation, perceptions of the quality of the assistance, the resources invested in the school's implementation effort, and the respondents' perceptions of the progress that the school has made. When this data collection is completed, it will provide an unprecedented longitudinal record of whole-school reform in nearly 200 schools.

The data will permit us to examine the progress of schools in achieving improvements on a variety of outcome measures emphasized by the individual jurisdictions. While it will be difficult to disentangle the effects on student outcomes of the design itself, the assistance, and the nature of the school, the multifaceted nature of the data-collection effort will provide important opportunities to increase our understanding of factors related to school transformation and outcomes.

Both resource constraints and the realities of such a large-scale initiative as that of NAS have limited RAND's ability to probe deeply into school-level effects of the designs and of design-based assistance. To partially compensate for this shortcoming, we will mount a narrower but more intensive three-year study in a sample of classrooms in 20 or more schools implementing NAS designs. This study will involve observations and artifacts of classroom practice and measures of student outcomes that are better aligned with design objectives than districtwide tests. The study will allow a more precise (if more limited) comparison of both classes of designs and the assistance provided to implement the designs.

Together, the studies of design implementation coupled with the longitudinal studies of outcomes will provide a rich picture of the effect of the NAS initiative on schools.

THE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT PROVIDED BY SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS

The decision NAS made to ally itself with a group of educational jurisdictions had profound consequences for the operations of the Design Teams, as well as for the NAS staff. As we have seen, such alliances were originally considered because a supportive operating environment appeared crucial to the implementation of designs using design-based assistance. Resources were needed to pay for design implementation. School-level authority was required to implement distinctive designs, reallocate resources required by those designs, and select staff whose talents and professional beliefs were consistent with the design. The activities of the central office should support—or at least not impede—the implementation of the designs. The leadership of the district and the community had to provide the clear signals needed to induce school-level personnel to undertake an exhausting and uncertain effort to transform their school.

However, the decision to seek a commitment from jurisdictions to transform 30 percent or more of their schools signaled a larger goal as well. NAS did not want schools using its designs to be unique and exceptional schools granted exceptional authority and autonomy by a district. Rather, it hoped the schools would be regular schools

existing in large numbers. It wanted schools with high-performance designs to become the norm rather than the exception. In retrospect, it seems clear that NAS substantially underestimated the changes required in the chosen districts' operating environments if they sought transformation of 30 percent of their schools. Similarly, it underestimated the willingness of districts to make those changes. However, its intent to promote such change seems clear.

In Chapter Three, we suggested that many of the districts NAS allied with did not initially understand the nature of the proposal that NAS was making. They did not understand the nature of the designs or the level of resources required to implement them. Many of the district leaders appear to have viewed the initiative as simply another in a long string of reform initiatives, albeit one having the prestige of association with the business community and prominent national reform figures.

When it recognized how far the operating environments in the jurisdictions fell short of what it desired, NAS began to identify expert assistance and pressure the jurisdictions to make use of it. More importantly, as NAS negotiated with new partner jurisdictions, it sought to clarify the qualities of the operating environment necessary if design-based assistance is made a cornerstone of a district reform effort.

In Chapter Three, we reviewed what we learned about these qualities from staff in schools and districts. In particular,

1. Schools and the community need to be clear that school transformation using design-based assistance is a cornerstone of the district's reform efforts. The absence of such clarity significantly lessens many schools' willingness to engage in the effort required to implement a design.

2. A district must be willing and able to aggregate the resources necessary to support the costs of school transformation and have the political and managerial capacity to allocate those resources to the schools engaged in such transformation.

3. The district, schools, and design-based assistance organizations must devote the time and effort needed for a school to make an

informed choice about committing to a particular design. There must be an effective process to match schools with designs.

4. The district (and the state) must grant individual schools the authority they need to implement the design—authority both to change school practices and staffing in accordance with the design and to reallocate resources necessary to engage in implementing the design.

5. The district must act to ensure that its accountability systems and the designs its schools choose have some degree of alignment. Accountability systems—e.g., student assessment programs, school-level report cards, and personnel performance assessment systems—provide many of the incentives that shape the actions of schools. Lack of a reasonable degree of alignment between the designs and the accountability systems significantly impedes implementation.

6. The professional development practices and policies of the district (and its unions) should support the implementation of school designs. The implementation of a school design involves the professional development of its staff. District professional development policies that are incongruent with an emphasis on design-based assistance are both wasteful and distracting.

This is a daunting list of requirements. At this stage of the NAS initiative, few districts are likely to be willing to contemplate the necessary changes. Some districts with strongly entrenched bureaucracies may simply be unable to make such changes without significant external pressure. Districtwide school reform with design-based assistance as a cornerstone is clearly not likely on a wide scale in the near future.

Fortunately for NAS and its Design Teams, such districtwide reform is not a necessary condition for design-based assistance to make an important contribution to the performance of students. Individual schools or small clusters of schools, with less extensive support from parent districts, can implement designs with the assistance from the Design Teams. Districts can provide resources and support for a limited number of schools without the major changes just mentioned. In the process of such implementation, evidence concerning the power of designs and design-based assistance will accumulate. If

such power is there, perhaps increasing numbers of districts will find it desirable to make significant use of design-based assistance and to make changes in their operating environments needed for such extensive use.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

When NAS was founded, designs for schools were viewed as its major product. A correlate of such a view was that designs should be put to a test so that it could be said that they were "proven." The test would be provided by an evaluation that studied schools implementing designs, checked whether the design was implemented, and measured the performance of students who had been through schools with well-implemented designs.

The evolution of the NAS initiative described in this report suggests that this view of the feasibility of "proving" the designs is too simplistic. Few proposals, submitted or chosen, promised designs that were so clearly specified that it would be possible to easily gauge their implementation. Experience with even the more concretely specified designs suggests that an important contributor to the likely performance of a school is the assistance that schools receive in implementing the designs. As NAS moved to scale-up the designs in a number of districts, the importance of the school readiness and leadership, district policies, and district political environments became more apparent. The performance of a school would clearly be a function of the design, the assistance received as it was implemented, the nature of the school itself, and a variety of qualities of a district's operating environment. Attributing a school outcome to the design alone is clearly inappropriate.

RAND's evaluation has been designed to produce information concerning the overall impact of the NAS initiative, largely as it unfolded in its first five years. It will provide both policymakers and NAS's backers with a picture of outcomes that have been achieved and the reasons for successes and failures. This is important information that has consistently been sought by the board of directors of NAS as it has tried to determine whether the organization has "made a difference." They have viewed such information as an important legacy of the entire effort.

Important as this information may be, however, it will not deal with arguably the most important contribution the NAS initiative has made. The initiative has helped focus policymaking attention on whole-school reform and created or enhanced a set of organizations that possess the incentive and knowledge to help schools to achieve such reform. Assessing the value of this contribution is work for the future.