
SUMMARY

In July 1991, New American Schools¹ was established to develop designs for what were termed “break-the-mold” schools. New American Schools’ initial goal was to create designs to help schools enable students to reach high educational standards. Six years later, this simple goal has evolved into something considerably more complex. The notion of a whole-school design remains at the core of the New American Schools mission. Experience made clear, however, that designs by themselves were unlikely to effect change in schools; training and implementation assistance were also critical. New American Schools thus began to emphasize the role of its Design Teams in helping with implementation, calling this activity “design-based assistance.”

This shift in emphasis required changes in the Design Teams. These organizations needed to plan to become innovative professional-service organizations and to develop management, marketing, and product-refinement skills. The Design Teams had not been chosen for these skills and, in many cases, their parent organizations had limited interest in developing them.

Early experience also suggested that wide-scale implementation of the designs would require changes in districts and states. Resources would need to be aggregated to support the implementation. Indi-

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

vidual schools needed authority to make the changes the designs required. Professional development of teachers needed to be consistent with the needs of designs. Thus, in the last two years, New American Schools has devoted increasing attention to helping jurisdictions develop what it terms a “supportive operating environment.”

While working with districts and states to implement designs in a large number of schools, New American Schools and its teams came to understand that there is no regular market for design-based assistance. The Design Teams have developed assistance strategies that engage schools intensely for a period of three or more years. The designs are sufficiently distinctive that significant time must also be spent engaging parents and the community. Implementing a design requires schools and their staffs to devote considerable planning and professional development time to the implementation. The team’s fees may reach \$50,000 per school for each of these years.

Over six years, the New American Schools initiative has thus developed two key components: continued effort to improve designs and design-based assistance organizations, and the effort to create operating environments and markets in which the Design Teams can effectively sell their designs and services.

DESIGNS

While there is no blueprint for design content among the eight Design Teams, there is agreement concerning the functions of a design. A design articulates a school’s vision, mission, and goals; guides the instructional program; shapes the selection and socialization of staff; and establishes common expectations for performance and accountability among students, teachers, and parents. It provides criteria for the recurring self-evaluation that is essential to continuing improvement. It also articulates the student behaviors the school expects and the nature of the work environment a teacher must accept if he or she takes a job in the school.

The New American Schools designs differ in their content. They range from relatively specific descriptions of school organization and instructional materials to broader, less specific visions coupled with a process that will enable a school to achieve its vision. In part as a

result of urging both by jurisdictions and by New American Schools, most designs specify benchmarks intended to shape expectations for implementation progress and criteria by which implementation progress can be measured.

DESIGN-BASED ASSISTANCE

The New American Schools initiative advocates an intense, three-or-more year effort by schools to implement a design. A Design Team assists schools in this effort. The team uses its design to provide an initial vision for the school that organizes and gives purpose to the school's entire effort to restructure itself. Experience indicates that schools must have a genuine choice of both the vision and the Design Team for the effort to succeed.

The restructuring effort is intended to engage the whole school. If such engagement is achieved, it reduces the divisiveness often associated with reforms that deal with only a few classrooms or a single subject area. It is also intended to build a school's faculty into a team that shares responsibility for the performance of every student.

The assistance provided by the Design Team is shaped by the design. The assistance is sequenced in ways that the Design Teams have found effective in other sites. If the design ultimately becomes embedded in the culture of the school, it should guide the continuing professional development of its staff and the evolution of its program.

SUPPORTIVE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

New American Schools arrived at a core set of features that supportive operating environments must possess for design-based assistance to succeed. These features include (1) an effective process for matching schools with appropriate designs, (2) an ability to aggregate resources needed for design-based assistance, (3) a governance structure giving schools authority to implement designs, (4) an accountability process capable of reflecting both student and school performances enabled by the design and the district testing programs, and (5) means for coordinating professional development policies and design-based assistance.

Many of the jurisdictions have been working to improve their operating environments to incorporate these features. New American Schools has begun to develop diagnostic aids intended to help in these efforts.

As the New American Schools initiative unfolds, RAND will continue to evaluate its progress. Of course, the New American Schools initiative is only one of many factors affecting school performance in participating jurisdictions. Leadership, teacher quality, union support, and community support also play major roles in shaping those outcomes. No single evaluation study can hope to capture all the important factors. However, we hope that our analyses will contribute substantially to the public's understanding of this initiative.