

RAND Research Brief

EDUCATION

Reforming America's Schools Observations on Implementing "Whole School Designs"

New American Schools (NAS) is a nonprofit corporation established in 1991 by the private sector to support the America 2000 educational reform initiative. NAS was tasked with significantly improving students' academic performance by developing and implementing new paradigms of K–12 education, known as "whole school designs," in communities across the nation. This approach was based on the premise that high-quality schools each possess a "design" that guides the school's mission and instructional program and that establishes common expectations for accountability and performance among students, teachers, and parents.

To date, NAS has completed three phases of its initiative. During Phases I and II, design teams produced and tested multiple, independent whole school designs in approximately 150 schools. Their experience indicated that effective implementation support was at least as important a determinant of success as the quality of the design itself. (The accompanying table contrasts implementation of whole school designs with more traditional approaches to school reform.) During Phase III, NAS dramatically expanded its demonstration program. Ten educational

jurisdictions agreed to implement whole school designs in at least 30 percent of their schools. By June 1997, more than 550 schools were implementing the designs.

Recent RAND research examined the degree to which NAS's Phase III schools were able to implement the designs, the factors that influenced design implementation, and prospects for future expansion efforts. The authors found that the Phase III expansion process, termed "scale-up," was characterized by a high degree of complexity. The combination of multiple actors, aggressive timeframes, institutional barriers to change, and lack of familiarity with the designs resulted in significant variation in the degree to which schools implemented their designs. Despite these challenges, however, approximately half of the participants could demonstrate implementation of core design elements across all aspects of the school after only two years.

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The aggressive timeframe for scale-up forced the beginning of Phase III to overlap the end of Phase II and thus contributed to many of the initial implementation difficulties. Because the design teams were required to become self-supporting during Phase III, they had to simultaneously perfect their designs, develop marketing materials and fee schedules, and increase the number of schools they serviced. Several of the teams also faced staffing difficulties and leadership turnover during this period, which subsequently impeded their ability to provide adequate implementation support to their client schools.

This compressed timeframe also affected the design selection process. Many schools felt rushed and felt that they had to make a significant commitment to a design based on incomplete information. Those that did not clearly understand the nature of their design or who felt

Comparison of Whole School Designs with Traditional School Reform

Reform Element	Whole School Designs	Traditional Reform
School vision	Begins with design choice and evolves through implementation	Not required
Focus of effort	Entire school	Single component, usually subject matter or grades
Duration of reform	Intense, initial 2–3 year effort; then ongoing process	No set time
Source of technical assistance	Design team	No set pattern
Source of curricular materials	Varies	Varies
Professional development	Integral to design	Responsibility of individual
Staff organization	Integral to design	Function of district rules
Progress measurement	Benchmarks established by design team	Usually not explicit

“forced” by their districts to adopt a particular design showed lower levels of implementation. Additionally, the selection process fell at an inopportune time in the school budget cycle. Schools had already completed their annual budgets well in advance of choosing a design and thus had few funds available for design implementation.

NAS has resolved many of these early issues. The selection process is more open and begins much earlier, allowing schools adequate time to understand the designs and to prepare for implementation. The design teams have a better grasp of their cost structures and can provide more detailed information on the schools’ likely resource commitments. However, numerous structural barriers to implementation remain.

ENDURING ISSUES

Design-specific, institutional, and political factors all directly affected the level of design implementation. For example, designs that provided extensive supporting materials, professional development, and benchmarking goals tended to be implemented more rapidly than those that did not. Similarly, designs that focused on the core elements of schooling (such as curriculum and instruction) showed higher levels of implementation than those attempting broader change (in elements such as school governance and community involvement).

All designs encountered some degree of conflict between their objectives and institutional realities. For example, designs often favored innovative educational methods over compliance with existing rules, regulations, and educational practices. Schools, however, had to implement these designs within well-established bureaucratic constraints. Many designs required that schools possess independent decisionmaking authority over their curriculum, personnel, professional development, and budget. Generally, the schools lacked this authority. To

obtain it, they had to successfully negotiate numerous institutional barriers, including district-mandated curricula, teacher accreditation requirements, state-mandated staffing, and state funding guidelines.

A school’s ability to manipulate existing resources (and gain access to additional financial support) was crucial to successful design implementation. Though extra funds were required to pay for the design teams’ fees, the majority of implementation costs were for standard budgetary items, such as teacher training and professional development, in-house facilitators, planning time, and materials and conference fees. These items were covered by reallocation of existing school resources.

For better or for worse, politics played a role in all of the implementation efforts. Factors that facilitated design implementation included strong, stable district leadership; perceived district-level commitment to the initiative (particularly in the form of financial backing); and a culture of cooperation and trust between school and district, as well as between faculty and principal. Conversely, factors that impeded design implementation included leadership turnover (such as a new principal or superintendent), extreme labor-management conflict, and state budgetary or other political crises.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

As the authors have noted, “there are still no easy answers, no silver bullets.” Whole school designs alone cannot accomplish change. Educational reform is a complex process in which multiple actors simultaneously determine the outcome. The need to create consensus among these actors (NAS, school districts, design teams, schools, teachers, parents, and students) inevitably leads to slow progress. However, the NAS initiative has demonstrated that with hard work, dedication, and sufficient resources, progress is certainly possible.



RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. This research brief summarizes work done within RAND Education and documented in Lessons from New American Schools' Scale-Up Phase: Prospects for Bringing Designs to Multiple Schools by Susan Bodilly, Brent Keltner, Susanna Purnell, Robert Reichardt, and Gina Schuyler, MR-942-NAS, 1998, \$15.00, ISBN: 0-883-2632-1, and in New American Schools After Six Years by Thomas K. Glennan, Jr., MR-945-NAS, 1998, 90 pp., \$15.00, ISBN: 0-8330-2602-X, both of which are available from National Book Network (Telephone: 800-462-6420; FAX: 301-459-2118) or from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; or Internet: order@rand.org). Building on more than 25 years of research and evaluation work, RAND Education (formerly RAND's Institute on Education and Training) has as its mission the improvement of educational policy and practice in formal and informal settings from early childhood on. A profile of RAND Education, abstracts of its publications, and ordering information may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>).