Evidenced-Based School Restructuring

At a Glance

During the 2007-08 school year, approximately 3,600 schools nationwide had not met NCLB requirements and were engaged in restructuring efforts. This Information Capsule examines various intervention methods school districts have used to restructure failing schools. Two of these methods include whole-school reform programs and career and technical education. Resources are also provided to assist the reader in need of additional information concerning evidenced-based school reform.

In 1994, the Improving America's Schools Act introduced the concept of holding schools accountable for student performance. Although the act encouraged states to assess whether schools were making progress, it lacked the ability to enforce sanctions on schools that did not meet performance standards. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 created a model that allowed states to enforce sanctions. NCLB's goal is for every student to be reading and doing math at or above grade level by 2014. NCLB requires annual testing in grades 3 through 8 and imposes sanctions on schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP is a series of annual performance goals set by the state for each school district and school as well as for the state as a whole. Indicators include reading and mathematics scores on state-administered assessments and graduation or attendance rates.

In January 2007, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced *Building on Results: A Blueprint for Strengthening the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).* As part of the blueprint, the U.S. Department of Education created a differentiated accountability model that allows states to distinguish between schools in need of dramatic intervention and those that are closer to meeting their goals. Additional resources and more flexibility are provided to schools most in need of intensive intervention and significant reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

In July 2008, Florida was one of six states selected by the U.S. Department of Education to implement its proposed differentiated accountability model. Florida's differentiated accountability model aligns and integrates the state's school accountability system with the NCLB requirements. The model allows the state to identify the lowest performing schools and apply a more flexible system of support and intervention (Florida Department of Education, 2008).

There are five approved methods of school restructuring under the NCLB guidelines. The school can reopen as a charter school, replace or remove most of the school staff, contract with a private management company to run the school, turn operation over to the state, or engage in some other form of major restructuring that makes significant changes in the staff and governance of the school.

Efficacy of the five reform strategies remains virtually unconfirmed. Therefore, there is a lack of research information and evidence from which to base informed decisions. Although exact numbers are not yet available, there is one strategy that appears to be chosen more frequently than the others and it is described in greater detail below.

A study conducted by the Center on Education Policy (Scott, 2008) estimated that during the 2007-08 school year, 3,599 schools nationwide had not met NCLB requirements and were engaged in restructuring efforts. This represented a 56 percent increase from the 2006-07 school year. Although no official data are available on the number of schools choosing each of the five available restructuring options, the overwhelming majority of schools appear to be selecting Option 5: "Other: Engaging in another form of major restructuring that makes fundamental reforms" (Feller, 2006; Hassel, 2006).

Florida's Differentiated Accountability Model eliminates the NCLB restructuring option where the state takes over management of the school and mandates districts use one of four possible strategies. The state's model also modifies the NCLB language concerning Option 5 to include, "Close and reopen as a district-managed turnaround school." Therefore, the information that follows pertains to the educational literature regarding how schools can be restructured so that a "turnaround" or significant improvement is possible.

Restructuring for "Turnaround" Schools

Since no single school reform method is appropriate for all school situations, the "turnaround" option presumably allows the district to tailor the solution to the environment at the particular school. Strategies used by the schools opting for this or similiar restructuring methods have included the following (National High School Center, 2007):

- Close the school and reopen it as a theme school with new staff.

- Restructure the school into smaller schools housed within the same building (e.g., school-within-a-school model, learning academies, etc.).

- Close the school and assign the students to other schools within the district.

- Combine the target school with another higher performing school.

- Revise the grade-level configuration at the school by expanding or narrowing the grades housed at the school.

- Revise the kindergarten schedule to all day and/or every day.

- Use grant funds to hire staff to provide professional development to the newly formed teams of teachers.

A few cautions are in order. First, many schools focus their reform efforts on changing the process or structure of the school. These reforms can include instituting block scheduling, limiting school size, and changes in grade configuration. The assumption is that changing these organizational components will have a significant impact on student academic performance. Research has shown that while these may be important changes, they are rarely sufficient to influence student outcomes. Concentrating on such reforms may also limit the attention paid to strategies such as course content and quality instruction that generally have a more powerful effect on student academic performance (U.S. Secretary of Education's High School Leadership Summit, unknown date).

Secondly, research evidence illustrates that reducing school size alone does not necessarily improve student outcomes. This reform should be implemented with other improvement strategies in order to have a significant impact on students' academic performance (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2008).

While some schools institute one of the methods described above or a combination of those listed, other schools implement a school-wide reform strategy. Some of these whole-school improvement models can be "home-grown" or developed locally within a district, while others are vendor-sponsored commercially available school reform efforts aimed at the entire school. The section that follows describes several of the more successful and to some degree evidenced-based whole school reform models used around the country.

Whole-School Reform/Improvement Models

The reader is referred to the Report on Middle and High School Reform Models prepared by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (CSRQC) for an elaborate examination including quality ratings for 18 whole-school reform models. Each model included in the report was used at a minimum of 40 schools and at least three states. Each reform model is reviewed and includes information relative to programmatic focus and goals, costs of adoption and implementation, research evidence relating to impact on academic achievement, and ratings on a six-point scale from "Very Strong to Negative."

Information pertaining to four of the eighteen reform models receiving the highest program ratings is described below. Although these four models generally received the highest ratings among the programs examined ("Moderate"), they did not reach the highest possible rating ("Very Strong") on all the factors rated. It seems there is considerable work remaining before school reform efforts in general and the research conducted relative to them obtain the ideal or "gold standard." These four reform models achieved positive effects on student achievement and were rated "Moderate" for both reading and mathematics. A rating of "Moderate" was determined by the credibility of the evaluative research supporting the model and the actual impact or effect the model had on student academic performance. Program effects on dropout and graduation rates were rated as "Limited" for the four models reviewed below. A rating of "Limited" indicates the programs had some degree of effectiveness in these two areas. However, more rigorous research is needed to fully support the models' efficacy in solving such school-related problems.

The following represents a brief overview of only several whole-school reform models. The discussion that follows in no way is intended to be an exhaustive examination of these programs. The interested reader is referred to the documents referenced at the conclusion of the report for additional information.

Talent Development High School. The model was developed by The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR), housed at Johns Hopkins University's Center of Social Organization of Schools. The program was first used in 1994 and as of March 2007, 43 school districts in 15 states were operating schools using the Talent Development High Schools model which includes both organizational and curriculum reforms. Restructuring strategies for large high schools include the establishment of small learning communities that include ninth grade academies for first year students and career academies for students in grades 10 to 12. The model emphasizes high academic standards and a college-prep curriculum for all students. It also provides a "double dose" of mathematics and language arts courses for ninth and tenth grade students. Curriculum coaches trained in the program at Johns Hopkins are assigned to each school. The cost is estimated to be approximately $350 per student above and beyond the costs of operating the traditional high school program.

School Development Program. This model incorporates the primary components of the "Comer Process" developed by James Comer, professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine. This reform model can be traced back to Dr. Comer's early work from 1968. The process essentially emphasizes that school personnel should support child development through the organization and management systems established at schools. Schools are to foster the child's and adolescent's psychological and physical development along six developmental dimensions including: physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical. The School Development Program (SDP) emphasizes rigorous standards, partner relationships between the school, parents, and the community, and professional development activities for teachers and administrators. This model has training and learning materials which can be purchased but does not provide an actual curriculum in subject areas such as reading and math. The SDP Learning, Teaching, and Development Unit provides curricular services in the form of consultation visits and training at one of the SDP training centers in Illinois and Maryland. Training in SDP is also offered at Yale University at the cost of $850 per person. Additional information regarding costs was not provided by CSRQC.

First Things First. This program is intended for elementary, middle, and high schools serving students from all backgrounds and different types of communities. It is said to have particular relevance to students from diverse racial and

economic backgrounds. The model was developed in 1996 by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) and is currently being implemented in seven states. The three main components of the model include small learning communities, a family and student advocate system, and instructional improvements. The advocate system pairs staff members and students to enhance monitoring and to support students' progress throughout the school year. Classroom teaching is made to be more rigorous, interesting, and insures the curriculum aligns with state standards. Although costs vary depending on the size of the school and the number of schools implementing the model, approximate costs are $315,000 in the first year, $260,000 in the second year, and $175,000 in the third year. These costs reflect district-level expenses and those for one school. As the number of schools increases, costs per school decline.

America's Choice School Design. This model was first introduced in 1998 and is intended for students in grades K-12. It was developed by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). This model is said to include research-based best practices from around the nation and also from Europe and Asia. This particular reform model is used in 547 schools enrolling approximately 350,000 students in 97 different school systems in 16 states. Entire school districts have adopted the model and two states, Georgia and Mississippi, have adopted it as their preferred solution for low-performing schools statewide. The programs design features include: standards and assessments; aligned instructional systems, leadership, management, and organizational strategies; professional learning communities; and parent as well as community involvement. It also provides for extensive support for staff development at the school site. The basic middle school design costs approximately $80,000 to $100,000 and the first year implementation for the basic high school design costs approximately $85,000 to $105,000.

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

A number of experts in the field of school reform contend that many school districts are overlooking an area of education that has much to offer low-performing inner city middle and senior high schools. Challenging CTE courses providing an interesting curriculum can also serve as a reform strategy in the form of multiple pathways (Hoachlander, 2008). Pathways are programs that combine technical training and academic studies organized around "real-world" industries/fields. Some of the areas included in pathway systems have been finance and business, health science and medical technology, building and environmental design, information technology, and arts, media and entertainment.

These pathways are intended to prepare students for both post secondary education and a career. Programs are said to include a challenging academic component including courses in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies and a demanding technical component that provides knowledge for the specific industry addressed by the pathway.

At the present time, California offers 296 Partnership (Career) Academies organized around 15 major industries (Hoachlander, 2008). The California Center for College and Career or ConnectEd manages demonstration sites throughout California that employ the multiple pathway programs. ConnectEd reports that one of the chief advantages to such training is the inclusion of the business community into high school education. CTE courses offered in California public high schools also meet the academic entrance requirements for admission to state post secondary institutions.

Although the number of high quality research studies examining the efficacy of CTE is limited, a study conducted by Stone, Alfeld, Lewis, and Jensen (2006) demonstrated that such training can lead to higher test scores if the program is implemented appropriately. This research paired CTE teachers with mathematics teachers who taught math content that was part of the CTE teachers' subject areas. CTE areas included automotive mechanics, business, information technology, and others. Lesson plans were developed to teach math in the context of the CTE subject area. Students taught using this "integrated curriculum" significantly outscored students in the control group on two tests of math ability.

Applying academic content to CTE helps to motivate students since the classroom instruction appears more relevant to real-world situations. Other research suggests that multiple pathways which integrate academically demanding CTE with standard academic subject areas can be particularly beneficial for students who have experienced limited success in the standard high school program (Hoachlander, 2008).

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR RESTRUCTURING

The literature suggests that the process of turning around failing schools is very different from the process of gradual improvement in schools that are already performing at satisfactory levels (Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007). Researchers have found that successfully restructured schools utilize the following strategies:

- **Planning for turnaround.** A year of planning is important for successful restructuring. Once restructuring efforts begin, however, there is no set time table for when schools will begin to realize success (Learning Points Associates, 2007; Center on Innovation and Improvement, 2007).

- **Comprehensive set of strategies.** Restructuring strategies should be aimed at all components of the school. Successful schools have a clear mission that guides daily activities and a comprehensive set of strategies. Schools improve when they understand and work with the many interrelated parts of the educational system that impact student achievement, including discipline, extracurricular activities, and professional development (Learning Points Associates, 2006; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

- **High expectations.** Schools that have successfully restructured have high expectations that all students will learn. They hold students to high standards, but provide them with the support needed to succeed (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Learning Points Associates, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

- **Rigorous and relevant curriculum.** Successfully restructured schools maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction. They make the changes needed to establish instructional priorities and strengthen student learning. Instructional programs and assessments are closely aligned to academic standards (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Learning Point Associates, 2007; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

At the high school level, research has indicated that the curriculum must be both rigorous and relevant. Increasing the level of rigor for all students promotes the attainment of higher level skills. Increasing the relevance of the high school curriculum has a positive effect of students' levels of engagement and allows them to combine real world experiences and academic coursework. Researchers agree that career academies are one way to increase curriculum relevancy and ease students' transitions to the workplace. Stern and Wing (2004) found that students enrolled in career academies reported receiving more support while in high school, were more likely to combine academic and technical courses, and were more likely to work in careers connected to their schooling.

- **Targeting all students.** High performing schools implement strategies that target all students, including those who have been historically under served (Kim & Crasco, 2006; Learning Points Associates, 2006).

- **Starting with quick visible improvements.** Staff at chronically failing schools may be convinced their school does not have the potential to change. When school leaders produce a quick visible improvement, they may help to change the school's culture and dispel the belief that the school will never change. Experts agree that fast, focused results during the initial restructuring year can serve as a catalyst for more positive change, help establish credibility, and reduce staff resistance. They suggest starting with a goal that can be achieved quickly. Strategies that require district review and approval or district funding are unlikely to be implemented quickly. School leaders should consider strategies they have the authority and funds to implement and that don't require the involvement of all school staff (National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; University of Virginia, 2008a; Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007).

Researchers caution that it is equally important to follow up the quick improvement with strategies that will sustain the success. Cleaning and repairing facilities might be followed by regular inspections and maintenance. Providing uninterrupted blocks of instructional time can be followed by a review of how that time was used and professional development for teachers on how to effectively use large blocks of time (National Center for

Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

- **Focusing on a limited set of problems.** A key element of successful restructuring efforts is the concentration of effort on a limited set of important problems. Successful turnaround leaders spend more time and money on a few targeted strategies and discontinue practices that don't have a big impact on school improvement (University of Virginia, 2008a).

- **Freedom to act.** The Center on Innovation & Improvement (2007) conducted a study that synthesized the literature from the education sector and other public, nonprofit, and private sectors. They found that one of the themes related to successful restructuring efforts was the ability of school leaders to act autonomously when implementing reforms. Schools undertaking restructuring efforts had a higher chance of success when the district allowed them as much freedom as possible from the regulations regarding curriculum, scheduling, transportation, and discipline. The authority to hire and fire personnel or at least alter their working conditions was identified in multiple cases as an important freedom that influenced effective turnaround.

- **Strong leadership.** Research has shown that leadership is a critical determinant of restructured schools' success. Selection of each school's leader is an important first step in the restructuring process (University of Virginia, 2008a; Education Commission of the States, 2007; Learning Points Associates, 2006). The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008) stated that because the current school leader is usually associated with past strategies, a new leader immediately signals change. However, the Center suggested that if there is no change in leadership, the existing leader can signal change by radically altering leadership practices.

Studies have indicated that effective school leaders take a common set of actions during successful school turnaround efforts (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; University of Virginia, 2008a; Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007; Learning Point Associates, 2006). Successful leaders:

- personally design instructional improvement efforts;
- implement strategies even when they deviate from established school practices or traditions;
- eliminate distractions and competing programs that may interfere with the school's goals;
- personally analyze organizational performance data and make an action plan based on the data;
- have high expectations for all staff and students;
- communicate a positive vision to staff members and community stakeholders;
- communicate clearly with school staff by publicly announcing changes and anticipated actions and meeting regularly to discuss issues;
- maintain a highly visible presence in classrooms;
- share leadership and authority;
- demonstrate a willingness to make the same types of changes asked of their staff; and
- establish a cohesive culture.

One challenge faced by many restructured schools is a lack of stable leadership. Improvement takes time and frequent leadership changes jeopardize reform efforts. Effective leadership is stable, enabling programs and strategies to be sustained long enough to become part of the school's culture (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

- **Committed staff.** Successfully restructured schools are staffed with committed employees. Prior to commencement of reform efforts, principals should assess the strengths and weaknesses of the staff and identify members who are not fully committed to the turnaround effort or who do not have the qualifications to carry out the reform strategies. It is important to note that school turnaround case studies and the business turnaround research do not support the wholesale replacement of staff. Schools should focus on replacing only a small number of staff whose continued presence may hinder change efforts (National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; University of Virginia, 2008a).

Experts have observed that changes to school staff sometimes conflict with the terms of existing collective bargaining agreements, especially when districts seek additional teacher time to work with data or attend professional development sessions. They recommend that districts solicit support from unions at the outset of the restructuring effort (National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

- **Selecting and retaining highly effective teachers.** Principals at schools engaged in the restructuring process should select teachers who show great potential for affecting a successful turnaround. Research has suggested that the competencies that appear to be necessary for teachers in restructuring schools include the ability to (University of Virginia, 2008b):
  - set goals for the organization and make well-planned efforts to achieve these goals despite barriers;
  - motivate others and influence their thinking and behavior to obtain results;
  - stay visibly focused, committed, and self-assured despite the controversy and stress often associated with turnaround efforts; and
  - engage in problem solving, including analysis of data to inform decisions, making logical plans that other staff can follow, and ensuring a strong connection between school learning goals and classroom activity.

- **Collaborative relationships.** High performing schools create a culture of personalization. They encourage caring and supportive relationships between teachers and between students and teachers (Learning Points Associates, 2007; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). One strategy that has been found to increase collaborative relationships is establishment of small learning communities. Cotton's (2001) review of the research found that students attending small learning communities had higher graduation and attendance rates and their achievement levels were equal to or higher than students in larger schools. Smaller learning communities also reported higher levels of parent involvement and fewer incidences of negative social behavior. Cotton (2001) cautioned that reducing school size without changing instruction will not necessarily lead to increased student achievement.

- **Allocating resources strategically.** Inadequate funds can be an issue in any reform effort. Districts should provide schools with the maximum financial flexibility when they are engaging in the school restructuring process. When necessary, schools should reallocate funds that are currently available. For example, flexibility provisions in the NCLB Act allow administrators to reallocate some funds to support programs that will best meet the goal of increasing student achievement. Existing resources can often adequately support restructuring efforts if they are concentrated on the factors most in need of change. Convergence of all resources (fiscal, intellectual, curricular, and extracurricular) on one or two specific programs can have a positive impact on student achievement (Learning Points Associates, 2007; Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

- **Data driven decision making.** Studies have shown that high performing schools use data to make decisions. Careful analysis of data (including student achievement data; attendance and discipline data; data desegregated by demographic characteristics; fiscal expenditure data; and perception data) can help teachers identify strengths and weaknesses in student performance in order to adjust instruction accordingly. As part of the restructuring process, data should also be used to measure the impact of strategies and practices and to establish priority areas for instructional focus (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Learning Points Associates, 2007). Shannon and Bylsma's (2004) review of more than 80 research articles found that the timely use of data from a variety of sources led to more appropriate instruction in the classroom and higher levels of student performance.

- **Professional development.** School restructuring efforts must be supported by ongoing teacher professional development that is job-related and focused on the learning needs of students. It should be complemented

by close attention to classroom practices and coaching for teachers when necessary (Marsh et al., 2005; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008) and Learning Points Associates (2007), professional development should:

- be differentiated according to teacher needs and the subject areas targeted for instructional improvement;
- provide content and pedagogic knowledge; and
- show teachers how to use data for tracking student progress and developing more effective instructional strategies.

- **Community involvement.** Research on prior turnaround efforts has demonstrated the importance of engaging parents and community members so they are encouraged to become part of the reform process. Successfully restructured schools find ways for parents, policymakers, institutions of higher education, business and industry, and other segments of the community to support the restructuring effort (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2007; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Education Commission of the States, 2007; Learning Points Associates, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

In conclusion, a number of reform strategies are common to all successful school improvement models reviewed in this report. Instructional improvement, personalization, and rigorous standards are three of the most important ingredients to school reform. Transforming schools into small learning communities along with extended class periods, special developmental or "catch-up" courses, staff development training, as well as strong and informed leadership from the principal should be considered in the recipe for successful school reform efforts. Including interesting, demanding, and relevant career instruction in middle and senior high schools should also be included in the mix. Research indicates that the existence of only one or two of

these ingredients is not sufficient for improved student performance but rather the more ingredients present the more likely schools are to improve.

Additional Resources

The reader is referred to the following resources for additional information concerning models of evidenced-based school reform. Several of these sources synthesize research evaluated as valid and reliable from a number of educational fields.

- What Works Clearinghouse (WWC): Endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education, the clearinghouse focuses on reviews in seven areas, some of which include: beginning reading, elementary and middle school math, early childhood education, and programs for English language learners. This resource can be accessed at: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc.

- Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (CSRQ): Specializes in research regarding whole school reform programs such as Success for All, America's Choice, and education service providers such as the Edison Project. This resource can be accessed at: www.csrq.org

- Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BBE): A U.S. Department of Education-funded research center at Johns Hopkins University sponsored by the Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education (CDDRE). The CDDRE was established to evaluate district reform programs supported by proven strategies. This resource can be accessed at: www.bestevidence.org.

- National High School Center (NHSC): Provides information concerning high school reform and provides technical assistance regarding research-based reform models. This resource can be accessed at www.betterhighschools.org.

- American Association of School Administrators (AASA): This professional organization produces a directory of comprehensive school reform models which can be accessed at www.aasa.org.

All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at http://drs.dadeschools.net under the "Current Publications" menu.

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