



The Federal Comprehensive School Reform Program and School Turnaround:

Key Evaluation Findings ▀

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Established as a demonstration program in 1998 and authorized as a full program in 2002 as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the federal Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program was designed to catalyze significant improvements in school performance among low-achieving schools. It emphasized two major concepts. First, school reform should be comprehensive in nature, strengthening all aspects of school operations — curriculum, instruction, professional development, parental involvement, and school organization. Second, school reform should involve the use of scientifically based research models — that is, models with evidence of effectiveness in multiple settings.

Under CSR, schools receiving program funding agreed to implement the 11 legislatively mandated components listed below

- 1) **Proven methods and strategies** for student learning, teaching, and school management that are based on scientifically based research and effective practices and that have been replicated successfully in schools with diverse characteristics.
- 2) **Comprehensive design** for effective school functioning, integrating instruction, assessment, classroom management, and professional development, and aligning these functions into a schoolwide reform plan designed to enable all students to meet challenging state content and performance standards and to address needs identified through a school needs assessment.
- 3) **Professional development**, including high-quality and continuous teacher and staff professional development and training.
- 4) **Measurable goals** for student performance and benchmarks for meeting those goals.
- 5) **Support from staff members**, including school faculty, administrators, and other staff members.
- 6) **Support for staff members**, including school faculty, administrators, and other staff members (added in 2001).

7) **Parent and community involvement**, including meaningful involvement of parents and the local community in planning and implementing school improvement activities.

8) **External assistance**, including high-quality external support and assistance from a comprehensive school reform entity (which may be a university) with experience in schoolwide reform and improvement.

9) **Evaluation**, including a plan to evaluate the implementation of school reforms and the student results achieved.

10) **Coordination of resources**, which involves identifying how other available resources (federal, state, local and private) help the school coordinate services to support and sustain the school reform.

11) **Scientifically based research** designed to significantly improve the academic achievement of students participating in such programs as compared with students who have ▀▀

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not participated in such programs, or to provide strong evidence that such programs will significantly improve the academic achievement of participating children (added in 2001).¹

This report draws on two studies conducted on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education by WestEd and by WestEd and American Institutes for Research, respectively: 1) a five-year longitudinal evaluation to assess the overall implementation and effectiveness of CSR, and 2) a related study of CSR schools that experienced either rapid improvement (i.e., made quick and dramatic improvements in student achievement over a one- or two-year period) or slow and steady progress (i.e., made noteworthy student achievement improvements over a four- or five-year period).² The report summarizes key findings about the overall implementation and effectiveness of the CSR program and what was learned regarding achieving school improvement or turnaround.

Key findings about implementation and outcomes of the CSR program ▾

The overall finding from our evaluation is that the federal CSR program did not yield comprehensively reformed schools. Although states receiving CSR funds largely succeeded in passing them along to those schools most in need, schools receiving CSR awards made little progress in implementing more than just a few of the 11 mandated components. Moreover, schools that received the awards were largely indistinguishable in achievement gains from non-CSR schools with similar baseline achievement and demographics.

As shown below, in both 2003 and 2007, both CSR and non-CSR schools implemented fewer than half of the program's specified components. While the number of implemented components rose slightly for both CSR and non-CSR schools during this period, CSR schools remained similar to their non-CSR counterparts in number of implemented components.

Average Number of CSR Components Implemented by CSR and Matched Non-CSR Schools in 2003 and 2007						
	Elementary Schools			Middle Schools		
	2003	2007	Change from 2003 to 2007	2003	2007	Change from 2003 to 2007
CSR Schools	3.9	4.6	0.7**	3.4	4.1	0.6*
Non-CSR Schools	3.5	4.4	0.8**	3.2	4.2	1.0**
Difference Between CSR and Non-CSR Schools^a	0.4+	0.1	0.1	0.2	-0.1	0.3

a Due to rounding, reported differences may not reflect arithmetic differences shown in table. + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; $N = 150$ for CSR elementary schools; $N = 124$ for non-CSR elementary schools; $N = 112$ for CSR and non-CSR middle schools.

Given these findings, it is not surprising that receiving a CSR award was not associated with improvements in either mathematics or reading achievement. Five years after initially receiving their CSR awards, schools receiving awards did not demonstrate larger achievement growth than matched comparison schools that did not receive CSR grants. In fact, achievement gains were nonexistent in CSR elementary schools, were marginally lower than their comparison schools in middle school mathematics, and were no different from their comparison schools in middle school reading, as shown below.

Average Gains in Students Scoring Percent Proficient or Higher on Content Assessments for CSR and Matched Non-CSR Schools From 2003 to 2007				
	N	Average Gain in Percent Proficient		
		CSR Schools	Non-CSR Schools	Difference
Elementary Mathematics	493	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Elementary Reading	563	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Middle School Mathematics	291	0.2*	2.8**	-2.6+
Middle School Reading	294	n.s.	2.5*	n.s.

Note: "n.s." indicates not statistically significant; + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Tests for the statistical significance of achievement gains for CSR and non-CSR schools are t-tests to assess whether the value is different from zero. The differences between CSR and non-CSR schools are assessed through paired t-tests.

¹Source: Title I, Part F, Section 1606 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

²U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service. (2010). *Evaluation of the Comprehensive School Reform Program implementation and outcomes: Fifth-year report*. Washington, DC: Author; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service. (2010). *Achieving dramatic school improvement: An exploratory study*. Washington, DC: Author.

Comparative achievement gains were somewhat more likely in mathematics in CSR schools that selected models identified as having a scientific research base. However, only one-third of the schools receiving CSR awards selected such models.

Key findings about school improvement/turnaround ▀

While the federal CSR program as a whole was not associated with improvements in student achievement or school operations, researchers did find instances of targeted, sustained efforts that appeared to lead to achievement gains. Results from *Achieving Dramatic School Improvement: An Exploratory Study* not only highlight instances of noteworthy achievement gains among initially low-performing schools, but also expand the knowledge base about the challenges and intricacies of turning around achievement in these schools.

It is worth noting here how unusual it was for an initially low-performing CSR school to make and sustain significant improvements over time. From the study's CSR database of 262 initially low-performing schools in the year 2000, researchers were able to identify only 12 (or 4.6%) that were able to make significant improvements in reading and mathematics performance over the next two years (defined as a gain of one half of a standard deviation in performance relative to its state average), and were also able to sustain the gains over a third year. This finding suggests that, if history is a guide, few schools across the nation are likely to be making quick and substantial gains in student achievement that are sustained over time.

Key findings related to the schools in the study that were able to achieve dramatic improvement include:

Each school consistently addressed factors long identified in school reform research as contributing to improved student outcomes. The schools reported adopting and implementing new leadership styles, practices to improve school climate, new instructional strategies and practices, and strategies to secure external support. However, specific practices varied across schools. For example, about half the schools studied reported adopting distributed leadership practices (in which school staff shared leadership responsibilities with the principal). In one school, this meant that the school organized committees of teachers from across grade levels, while in another, senior teachers were tapped to roll out new strategies.

The schools combined their reform practices in a variety of different ways. Some schools placed greater emphasis on one factor (e.g., distributed leadership) than on another (e.g., transparent use of student-level data). Others chose a different order of strategies over time or identified unique ways to establish a coherent whole-school approach. This suggests that there is no single recipe for attaining school improvement. The same reforms may be more or less successful in different settings depending on differences in leadership, staff capacity, community support, and other factors. The energy, experience, and stability of leadership and teachers also influenced the interplay of reforms, and this interplay appeared to require ongoing monitoring and fine-tuning.

Sustaining school improvement may be as challenging as achieving it in the first place. Two of the schools originally identified as having made quick gains according to our selection

criteria showed considerable declines in subsequent years. Even schools that sustained their growth reported continuing challenges, including high levels of student mobility, maintaining a sense of urgency among both veteran and new staff, and/or continuing to develop new teacher leaders as experienced staff advanced to administrative positions elsewhere. In several cases, schools had to cope with diminished resources, even as they showed improvement — in some cases *because* of their improvement. These cases point to an often chaotic and sometimes irrational environment that can thwart the sustainability of hard-won gains.

School improvement did not occur in a vacuum. While much of the recent literature on turning around the achievement of low-performing schools focuses on changes at the school level, this study found few examples of schools that improved in isolation. Respondents rarely mentioned districts as inhibiting reform efforts (as is sometimes implied in literature on low-performing schools that improved), and often identified districts as being key initiators and supporters of school reform. State and federal accountability also appeared to push schools to change. Respondents noted both the pressure of chronic low performance and the need for greater alignment of state, district, and school efforts. Furthermore, additional resources supported many of the observed reform efforts. While the primary form of support was financial, respondents across many of the study schools provided examples of in-kind assistance, predominantly from their district, in the form of consultation and professional development for instructional coaches and teachers. Other forms of district support appeared subtler, such as assigning experienced principals with the explicit purpose of turning around the ▀▀

school or guiding reform efforts by establishing consistent expectations.

The importance of having a supportive external environment to help catalyze school reform was one of the reasons WestEd was also asked to examine the experiences of other developed countries struggling with similar school turnaround challenges to our own. National experts in Australia, Canada (Ontario), England, and New Zealand were commissioned to summarize how national or, in the case of Canada, regional jurisdictions approached identifying, supporting, and evaluating low-performing schools and to highlight examples of noteworthy system-wide successes. While that case-based examination yielded no “magic bullet” solutions, it identified some noteworthy distinctions between approaches in these other nations and prevalent practices domestically. For instance, the international cases offered strong examples, in each jurisdiction, of

school inspection systems that comprehensively examined the operations of identified low-performing schools and that determined well-specified policies for targeting external school assistance to schools with high needs. Such assistance was not limited to providing additional resources, but also included the assignment of experts or advisors to help support the operations of low-performing schools, creation of school improvement networks for high-need schools, support to design and implement specific intervention strategies, and frequent external progress monitoring.

Policy Implications ▾

The federal CSR program is a cautionary tale for those currently attempting to foster successful school turnaround. Taken together, our experiences in examining CSR and the broader

issue of school improvement suggest that the challenge of achieving successful school turnaround should not be underestimated. For CSR-funded schools, at least in the first part of the decade, turnaround was a distinctly rare event, one not easily generated through federal policy intervention. Further, the experiences in achieving and sustaining turnaround that are documented in our case studies of successful schools indicate that there is no simple or single formula for success. These findings suggest that federal policymakers should be thoughtful in designing and implementing support strategies that, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach, are flexible enough to be applied in diverse local contexts. ■

References ▾

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