

AVOIDING Déjà Vu

Lessons from the Federal Comprehensive School Reform Program for the Current School Turnaround Agenda



A federal policy forum, produced by WestEd with the Knowledge Alliance Center for Knowledge Use on March 29, 2011 at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC.

Proceedings developed by Mike Bowler

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The Background ▾

Yogi Berra's famous redundancy, "It was like déjà vu all over again," referred to the number of times he had seen the famous Yankee sluggers Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris hit back-to-back homers in the early 1960s.

That, of course, was a positive — at least for the Yankees. This year, the title of the March 29 Policy Forum at the U.S. Capitol, "Avoiding Déjà Vu: Lessons from the Federal Comprehensive School Reform Program for the Current School Turnaround Agenda," referred to what was largely a negative. Convened by WestEd, with the Knowledge Alliance Center for Knowledge Use, the session reviewed a WestEd evaluation of the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program — the déjà vu, if you will — and how the mostly negative results of the CSR evaluation could inform and improve the new Obama administration's School Improvement Grants (SIG) program.

With Max McConkey, Chief Policy and Communications Officer at WestEd, moderating, four respondents reacted to the WestEd report, which was presented by Martin Orland, the organization's Director of Evaluation and Policy Research

and lead author of the CSR study. The panelists represented a good mix: Gerry House, a former Memphis superintendent with considerable CSR experience; Christopher Steinhauser, Superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District, California's third-largest district; Frederick Hess, resident scholar and education policy expert at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research; and Cheryl Smith, now with Kaplan, Inc., but a longtime Capitol Hill staffer who, in a previous professional life, advised Congressman David Obey on the creation of the CSR legislation.

Between 1998 and 2006, when the federal CSR spigot turned off, about 7,000 schools received three-year renewable grants of at least \$50,000 to establish comprehensive programs in low-performing schools. The programs had to incorporate 11 components (originally, 9), ranging from "effective, research-based methods and strategies" to "evaluation of implementation and outcomes."

CSR had its own clearinghouse, a consumer guide, a meta-analysis in 2002, and dozens of research projects varying in scope and quality. A review of the CSR literature finds few hints of home runs. For example, an American Institutes of Research (AIR) rating of

22 widely used CSR models in 2006 found no model "very strong," only Success for All and Direct Instruction were found to be "moderately strong." Six models received a "limited" rating and seven, including a few models with household names in education circles, received a "zero" rating.

What's different about the School Improvement Grants? For one thing, though there were virtually unlimited options on the CSR menu, only four choices, three of them highly prescriptive, are on the SIG menu. And even the "transformational" model, which looks the most like the old CSR, requires replacing the principal.

Are we entering new territory here, or is this déjà vu all over again? What findings of the WestEd report resonate with the panelists? What should be done by the federal government and others to foster school turnaround? All of these would be taken up in the panel discussion.

The Conversation ▾

Orland got right to the "lead" as he opened the forum. "The federal CSR program failed to yield comprehensively reformed schools," he said. "That

is really the bottom line.... I should just sit down.”

While states receiving federal CSR dollars “largely succeeded in passing them along to those schools most in need,” Orland said, at the same time, “schools receiving CSR awards made little progress in implementing...the 11 mandated components.” Results in the CSR schools were no better than those in matched comparison schools, the WestEd research found. Just 12 of 262 initially low-performing CSR schools made significant improvements in reading and math over the next two years. In short, “successful school turnaround was a distinctly rare event.”

The study found there was “no single recipe for attaining successful turnaround.” WestEd, with AIR, conducted case studies of 11 schools that had achieved dramatically improved achievement results. “We found,” said Orland, “that all schools reported new strategies in broad areas such as school leadership, school climate, instruction, securing external support. However, and more significantly, the specific practices and their sequencing varied substantially across the schools.”

One of the most important study findings was that sustaining school turnaround proved so difficult. Of the 11 successful schools in the study, two were unable to sustain their turnaround over the longer run, and those schools that were able to sustain faced “constant challenges, including high levels of student and teacher mobility.” Those rare schools that did turn around quickly had a lot of help from the outside, Orland said. The stereotype of the charismatic local leader who fights the good fight against established norms and central office bureaucrats doesn’t hold true. In fact, the opposite was the case. “Turnaround success appeared to be clearly related to state and school district support.”

Finally, said Orland, “some noteworthy differences in school turnaround policies from our own were observed in four other nations.” In a separate policy report, WestEd commissioned national experts in Australia, Canada, England, and New Zealand to describe their country’s attempts to reform low-performing schools and to highlight examples of success. One noteworthy distinction: All four countries had policies for comprehensively examining the operations of identified low-performing schools and then tailoring strategies “to match external assistance to needs.” Little of this close examination and tailoring was done in the United States during CSR’s long run.

Orland concluded that “our experiences suggest two implications for federal policy. First [is] that the challenge of achieving substantively meaningful and sustained school turnaround should not be underestimated.” Second, successful turnaround “is not formulaic. Because of this, policymakers need to be both humble and nimble. They should design and implement support strategies that are flexible enough to be applied to diverse local contexts, rather than ones that implicitly assume one size will fit all.”

Moderator McConkey then introduced the panelists and opened the conversation to them. What were their main “take-aways” from the WestEd findings? Smith said she realized again “how very difficult it is, in general, to measure educational interventions on a very large scale, particularly in the public education sector where you have a lot going on — governance, instruction, parental involvement, and so on.” She said those who put together the Obey-Porter CSR legislation had the right idea long before No Child Left Behind (NCLB). “The idea was to get schools to take a look at research-based models as opposed to selecting...interventions that someone

else thought might work or that someone on the school board might like.”

To Steinhauser, the report confirmed that “mandates alone will never achieve the desired outcome unless you have a support structure, and it has to be system support, LEA support. It is not just that one school. It can be 5 schools, 10 schools; in my case it is 91 schools. How do I get everybody on?” House said that not all of the 11 CSR components are equal. She referred to three “buckets” that are necessary in reform: a schoolwide vision for instruction; relationships that foster a culture of teamwork; and a continuous focus on improvement. If schools focus on these key features, the rest of the 11 components will take care of themselves, she said. Hess, provocative as always, summed up: “So mostly what I can tell from the last 40 years is that we don’t know what we are doing.” Rather than “dropping a whole bunch of dollars on people with a whole bunch of prescriptions on how to spend [them],” Hess said, “let’s create an environment where people are allowed to come forward with models they want to try and create a new process in which they are actually competing for dollars.”

McConkey asked the two “practitioner” panelists on the panel, former Superintendent House and Superintendent Steinhauser, whether Hess’ views on the federal role make sense. House said the federal role should be to identify, from the research and from evaluation studies, practices or models that make a difference. Then “it will make a huge difference and be worth it.” But she cautioned that districts “need a support system. I’m not sure the system needs mandates and compliance.” Steinhauser was even more enthusiastic about local control and flexibility. “Give me the resources, hold me accountable, as Mr. Hess said.... And I would take it one step further. Take all

of my federal programs and put them in one block grant. Bypass the state, completely bypass the state.”

McConkey asked Smith, the panel’s “lawmaker,” how she might “reconfigure” legislation if she had a magic wand. She noted that the panel had so far failed to discuss the much different political contexts in which CSR and SIG came about. Those who mapped out CSR “couldn’t say you have to look at these 10 models and pick one. We had to provide for local flexibility... One of the reasons we didn’t see the results we would have liked to see in CSR is that we built in local control, local flexibility.”

McConkey followed up with Hess. “The data out there suggests there are plenty of superintendents who do not have the capability of giving that flexibility without a support system or clear guidance.”

Yes, it’s absolutely a clear problem, Hess said. Eighty-nine percent of superintendents, he said, have never worked outside K–12, and most have been trained in traditional graduate schools of education. “I do disagree with the notion that the folks in Washington, DC, any more than me in a 10-story office building in Washington, are in a position to write statutes [that are] going to make superintendents get much better in their jobs or be much more effective. Second, are there things that might be done to provide staff building or supports which would help middling superintendents become more like Gerry or Chris?”

McConkey turned back to Orland for more reflections on the international comparisons. “One of the things that struck me,” Orland said, “was that the relationship between the superordinate level of government and the subordinate level was not around

regulations and sanctions...It was very much a tailored kind of support strategies after a comprehensive examination as the first step. The second step was deciding what kind of support mechanisms made the most sense. It was really an eclectic set of strategies across the countries.” This was an opening for the moderator to ask House about her post-superintendent role in providing support that is not governmental. Schools, she said, are not really very good at identifying outcomes: “What is it that we want to achieve and how do we know whether it has been achieved?” Schools, she added, “have become places where test remediation has taken the place of real learning.” Her work is to free schools to do different things, to experiment, from time to time to “expose their vulnerabilities.”

Steinhauser described the partnerships and collaboratives Long Beach Unified School District has entered into with nearby districts, one of which resulted in 800 more Long Beach kids becoming proficient in algebra. “That is the sharing of your best practice, taking a good idea, deciding how we can make it even better.” Steinhauser and Hess agreed that it’s simplistic to package the Long Beach model as something that “works” and place it on the national education store shelf as a matter of policy. You really can succeed, said Steinhauser, but success doesn’t come from the store. “You have to have people who are willing to trust you, you have to have team building, and — to be honest — you’re going to make a lot of mistakes. It’s okay to fail; you learn from the failures.”

McConkey then transported the panelists to Maryland Avenue in Washington, DC, where they became Secretary of Education for a day. (Smith became a member of Congress.) Given what we’ve learned from the great CSR experiment and from NCLB, given

the new Common Core venture and School Improvement Grants, “what, perhaps radical, changes would you make in federal policy in order to have a better shot at school reform than we had in the ‘90s?”

“Secretary” Orland said he would launch a “sustained, long-term” federal commitment to school turnaround, long beyond the short cycles necessitated by political reality. Such commitment, he said, is necessary to build knowledge capacity, “and that takes time and patience.”

“Secretary” Steinhauser said he would order a total alignment of all federal programs, including those in higher education. He said he would shift the federal focus from “compliance” to the “quality of outcomes.” He also conceded that, given these views, he “wouldn’t be in the job very long.”

“Congresswoman” Smith said she would wave her magic wand and put the legislative and executive branches on the same school reform page. “One of the things I saw with CSR was that when political leadership changed on the executive level, decisions seemed to wax and wane as to whether this program should be implemented and how it should be implemented.”

“Secretary” House said she would order research on the sustainability of school reform. She also said she would take the politically unpopular position that education policy is inseparable from health and social services policy. “There are other things in these kids’ lives that need to be fixed [and] that are beyond the schools to fix, and I think there has to be a coordinated approach to do that.”

“Secretary” Hess said he would like to create “this kind of dynamic that [Steinhauser] alluded to, where this stuff is actually sinking in and is

being implemented with fidelity by people who believe in what they're doing." People get better at what they do, Hess said, not by reinventing the wheel, but by figuring out "how to do one thing vastly better" (and then another, and another).

From the Audience ▸

Attending the forum at the U.S. Capitol were about 75 invitees, mostly from education organizations based in Washington, DC, but also including staffers from Capitol Hill. The audience Q&A took up most of the last half-hour and added a new dimension to the discussion.

Q: Of all the components of CSR, teaching and learning are at the core, and perhaps CSR tried to take too big a bite?

A: House noted that CSR had more success "when the reform models had a very explicit focus on the instructional pieces. Some other [less successful] models focused more on school governance. So I do think that the teaching and learning comment is well said and that it is at the core of what we are trying to get at and probably something we should be very focused on." Smith agreed. It's not that components other than teaching and learning aren't important. "It's that they evolve from the teaching/learning aspect." Or they should. Too many times, Smith said, "professional development" occurs in a vacuum with little thought about its purpose, which is to improve instruction.

Q: How can higher education play a role in school turnaround?

Steinhauser said, "There is an absolute moral responsibility for higher education to be right there with K-12

and for all of us to work together." Of great importance, he said, is aligning K-12 and higher education so that a student's move from secondary to higher education is seamless.

Q: Given today's economic climate and how schools are funded, what are the implications for the states?

A: Smith drew laughter when she noted that, in nearly 90 minutes of conversation, no one in the audience or on the panel had discussed the nation's severe budgetary woes, "the 800-pound gorilla in the room." The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), when it happens, will take place in a financial environment "very, very different and very constrained," she said. But both Smith and Hess said they saw opportunities in the nation's financial crunch. Hess said the crisis will cause educators and policymakers to "start thinking about how do you do these improvement models in ways that are cost-neutral," about ways to reallocate scarce dollars. "And I think while we are going to get a lot of hand-wringing, [this] really creates an opportunity for a new generation of responsible, level-headed educational leadership that has had difficulty emerging thus far."

Airline Speeches ▸

McConkey asked each panelist to conclude with an "airline speech." This is the two-sentence reply each person would give on the flight home when the stranger in the middle seat says, "You were just on a panel in Washington, DC making recommendations for policy in education. What did you learn?"

"Well, I'm reminded of the Einstein quote about insanity, that we all know insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different

results. I think what we heard today are examples of some very different things that we can do in terms of government, and in terms of educational and instructional strategies," said Orland.

"There is no single process or single method to get a desired result. And my second thought is that we must think radically differently in the future to achieve our outcomes," said Steinhauser.

"I'm just glad I'm not having to make the hard policy decisions that are facing folks on Capitol Hill right now," said Smith.

"Teaching and learning and student outcomes have to be at the core of the work we do," said House.

"One, I think there's a disconnect between what the Administration's blueprint for ESEA envisions and what a number of very different thoughtful folks have raised today," Hess said. "And two, I think there are some opportunities for rethinking school improvement in a way that has perhaps not traditionally been the case."



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