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ABSTRACT

This booklet offers state, district, and school leaders guidance both in understanding comprehensive school reform and in identifying effective comprehensive school-reform programs and the organizations that develop and help implement them. It focuses on the new federal program known as the Comprehensive School Reform Development (CSRD) Project, a program that allocates funds to states through Title I and the Fund for the Improvement of Education resources. CSRD is a new source of dollars to help policymakers improve schools on a grand scale, and comprehensive school-reform models were developed to meet this need. The models have a number of defining characteristics, which include high standards for all children, research-based and research-tested programs, and a common focus on goals. Effective models of CSRD feature professional development; an alignment of resources; benchmarks; a fit with school needs and faculty support; parent and community involvement; and a capacity to assist large numbers of schools and to offer significant expertise and experience in providing assistance. Reform proposals must undergo rigorous review. They must employ proven methods for student learning, replicate successfully in other schools, and provide high-quality professional development. A checklist for identifying effective models is presented. (RJM)

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COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE MODELS

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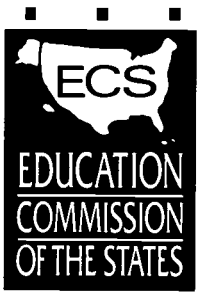

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IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE MODELS

In November 1997, the U.S. Congress allocated $150 million in new federal funds to help states support school improvement efforts. The bipartisan legislation, sponsored by Representatives John Porter (R-IL) and David Obey (D-WI), reflects a growing belief that comprehensive school reform programs are an effective way to raise academic achievement for all students.

Traditionally, federal dollars have been targeted for individual programs — a math program, a literacy program, a program for limited-English-proficient students, a program for high-poverty students. What distinguishes this new allocation, known as the Comprehensive School Reform Development (CSRD) Project, is its clear message that a collection of such add-on programs does not necessarily add up to a coherent schoolwide vision that drives effective reform.

CSRD allocates funds to states through the Title I formula and the Fund for the Improvement of Education. Under this initiative, individual schools will receive, on a competitive basis, grants of at least $50,000 to implement a comprehensive school reform model and pay for technical assistance to support implementation. How these grants flow to schools, and which schools receive these grants, will be determined at the state and district levels. While the federal legislation identifies criteria for what constitutes a comprehensive school reform model, individual states also have a great deal of leeway in determining which models receive funding.

CSRD is a new source of dollars to help answer a question many state policymakers already are asking: how do we help failing schools? And while these funds are targeted specifically for this purpose, the exciting news is that the entire Title I program — literally billions of dollars — could be used for the same thing. This new funding represents the tip of the iceberg in terms of federal dollars and opportunities to use them for focused state school improvement efforts.

This booklet, one of a three-part series, is designed to offer some guidance for state, district and school leaders in understanding this approach to school reform and identifying effective comprehensive school reform programs, as well as the organizations that develop and help implement them.

The Nature of Comprehensive School Reform

Comprehensive school reform models have a number of defining characteristics, which are reflected in the legislation. Those characteristics include:

- ***High Standards for All Children:*** Upgrade the education program for all students, rather than particular groups such as "high achievers" or "at-risk students."
- ***Comprehensive:*** Address all core academic subject areas, instruction and school organization (including the use of time, staff and other resources), and include all grade levels in the school.
- ***Research-Based:*** Incorporate research about best practices and help schools reorganize staff, schedule, etc. to use resources more effectively to support instruction — so every school does not have to start from scratch.
- ***Research-Tested:*** Are the subject of rigorous and ongoing evaluation by independent organizations to assure the highest quality of implementation and results.
- ***Common Focus on Goals:*** Give a school faculty and community a shared vision for the school and a common focus on goals; provide an organizing framework that shapes and directs the school's reform efforts, so faculty, parents and students know where they are going before they start; and help keep schools focused through personnel and leadership turnovers, preventing the frequent derailment of reform efforts.

- ***Professional Development*:** Incorporate what research shows is most effective: high-quality, on-going professional development with in-school support and concrete tools and materials directly related to the school's central focus. Professional development activities are tied clearly to improving student achievement. This approach contrasts with typical professional development activities, which often consist of one-shot workshops without ongoing reinforcement and no opportunity for individual staff members to learn together.
- ***Alignment*:** Align all resources — human, financial, technological — across grades and subject areas; help schools reorganize structures, systems and staffing; and serve as an organizing framework to reduce fragmentation and refocus the school on teaching and learning.
- ***Parent and Community Involvement:*** Offer innovative and effective ways to engage parents and community members in schooling, and forge links with service providers that address the students' and families' nonacademic needs.

Identifying an Effective School Reform Model

Leaders in some states have asked whether "homegrown" reform efforts (those developed by a particular state or local community) are eligible for funding under CSRD. For this legislation to have the intended impact, all contending reform approaches, whether national or "homegrown," must be subject to the same rigorous selection criteria. For example, the legislation specifies that reform models "must employ proven methods for student learning, have been replicated successfully in other schools and provide high-quality professional development."

Clearly, if a comprehensive school reform approach that was invented and tested in your state (or local communities in your state) demonstrably meets these criteria, that program will be eligible for funding under the new law. States are encouraged to review the complete list of criteria in the legislation to determine whether local reform models meet these standards. ECS can provide states with copies of the federal legislation.

The CSRD legislation encourages schools to adopt or adapt programs researched and designed by external developers, although it does permit schools to develop their own designs and use external support from a group with experience or expertise in reform. There are a variety of external organizations available to provide technical support and assistance to schools, each of which has a somewhat different approach to implementation, use of resources and area of emphasis.

The experience and research of a number of national organizations — including the Education Commission of the States, New American Schools, the RAND Corporation, the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future — have generated important lessons about the characteristics of comprehensive school reform developers that contribute to school success. Based on all these sources, this section provides guidance as to what characteristics decisionmakers should look for in a developer.

- ***Results:*** The effective comprehensive school reform models have a track record of success, including improved academic achievement (as measured by standardized tests as well as other reliable assessments), higher-quality student work, increased level of difficulty of coursework, and greater engagement of students and teachers in their work.
- ***Comprehensive Approach That Addresses All Aspects of Schooling and Sets Ambitious Goals for All Students:*** Effective developers involve the entire school in working together and focusing on core academic learning and higher student achievement. The model should facilitate the elimination of pull-out

programs and other activities that fragment teaching and do not contribute to improved student learning.

- ***Replicable Strategies Based on Research and Extensive Development:*** Schools that work with comprehensive school reform developers benefit from millions of dollars of investments in years of research and development to create the reform models. This level of investment is difficult to duplicate locally and may take years to yield results. In addition, these organizations have succeeded in helping diverse schools replicate and master a schoolwide program that improves student achievement. Effective developers also continue to refine and improve their products and services to meet individual schools' needs.
- ***Focus on Professional Development:*** Comprehensive school reform developers offer high-quality, ongoing, intensive professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators. Much of this takes place at the school, and all of it supports implementation of the comprehensive design. These opportunities involve faculty members in collaborative work, directly tied to improved performance for students, with colleagues in their school and district.

  The larger assistance organizations give teachers the opportunity to participate in national networks of schools using the same design. These networks provide opportunities for school staffs to work with others who share a common vision; use materials and tools that have been developed in the context of that vision; and benefit from the work of a central entity that collects and disseminates ideas and serves as a quality control force. Forums for networking include conferences, online discussions, peer-to-peer reviews, and frequent newsletters and other communication forums.
- ***Benchmarks:*** School reform developers offer benchmarks that set clear expectations for implementation and help a school judge its own progress, as well as that of its students.
- ***Fit with School Needs and Faculty Support:*** Effective comprehensive reform developers help prospective partner schools identify specific strengths and

weaknesses, tailor implementation plans to meet those needs, and ensure the school faculty has given serious thought to whether the model is a good "fit" for the school. In addition, most developers work only with schools that have chosen to engage in the partnership, requiring that at least 60% — and some as high as 80% — of the faculty vote to adopt the design. None will work with a school in which faculty have not been included in discussions and exploration of design options.

- ***Community Engagement:*** Successful school reform developers help schools invite parents to actively support the education of their children, and community members to participate in the life of the school, by, for example, serving as resources in their areas of expertise or participating in the assessment of student work.
- ***Capacity To Assist Large Numbers of Schools and Significant Expertise and Experience in Providing Assistance:*** Many effective comprehensive school reform developers provide access to national experts, so partner schools get the benefit of working with the country's most respected thinkers on education, school improvement and raising student achievement. In addition, effective developers have the capacity to meet a variety of needs. They provide onsite implementation staff in most regions of the country, a highly trained headquarters staff and a broad base of experience working in schools in diverse settings. Developers with the capacity to help large numbers of schools have the following:

- — A documented model and accompanying materials
- — A proven plan for implementation
- — A professional implementation staff
- — A system of quality control for staff, implementation and evaluation
- — A procedure for establishing a long-term relationship with schools
- — A stable support staff and headquarters operation
- — A number of demonstration sites that school, district, state and community representatives can visit to better understand what the program looks like at various stages of implementation.

- ***Evaluation.*** Ongoing evaluation and accountability are top priorities of effective comprehensive school reform developers, with student learning always at the center.

Note: For more information about criteria for comprehensive school reform models and allocating federal funds under the CSRD, please see the other two publications in this series: Criteria and Questions *and* Allocating Federal Funds. *Both are available from the Education Commission of the States; 303-299-3692. Or download the text from our Web site: http://www.ecs.org.*

This document is the product of the collaboration and insights of many people, including the staff of New American Schools, the developers of the 17 comprehensive school reform models mentioned in the Comprehensive School Reform Initiative, and a host of educators and policymakers who gathered for the ECS Policies and Practices Forum in November 1997.

Copies of this three-part series are available for $7.50 from the ECS Distribution Center, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202-3427, 303-299-3692. Ask for No. AN-98-3. ECS accepts prepaid orders, MasterCard, American Express and Visa. All sales are final.

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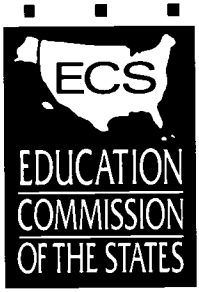

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