

COMPREHENSIVE DESIGN

What exactly does it mean for a reform program to be “comprehensive”? There seems to be a great deal of misunderstanding, particularly among schools and districts that have applied for funding under the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration legislation. Many school and district leaders have mistakenly believed that simply adopting one of the nationally known “comprehensive school reform” models is all it takes to bring about the complex changes needed to improve student achievement.

It is easy to see how many schools have focused their attention more on finding the right reform *model* rather than on developing a complete reform *program*. Listings of models have been published in many places, model developers are featured at showcases, and guidelines for selecting a model are widely available.

In fact, adopting a reform model – usually an externally developed, research-based approach to improvement – is only one possible step in the process of creating a larger, ongoing comprehensive school reform effort. If a model (or models) is adopted, it should be integrated with the larger plan for reform into a coherent strategy for school improvement. The focus of a comprehensive school reform program should be the entire school community. All aspects of school improvement – including professional development, governance, external assistance, and financial resources – should work together to strengthen the school’s core academic program.

Characteristics of Comprehensive School Reform

Integrates the following components into a coherent, schoolwide — *comprehensive* — program:

- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment strategies based on reliable research and best practices
- Ongoing professional development
- School governance
- Meaningful parent and community involvement
- Evaluation

Is guided by measurable goals and benchmarks that are tied to state standards

Is supported by faculty, administrators, and staff members

Uses all available internal and external resources — financial, human, and technological

More and more school and district leaders have come to appreciate the importance of a systematic approach to school reform that coordinates all aspects of a school’s operations to help students achieve challenging academic standards. Clearly, being comprehensive is the challenge of school reform. As shown in the sections that follow, there are ways that district and school leaders can ensure that this challenge is met.

THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERS

The primary role of district leaders is to establish strong, clear direction that helps schools set reform goals and begin the process of aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. However, the direction set should be broad enough to allow schools to make site-based decisions about how to align the various components of reform.

Guidelines for District Leaders

- ❖ Lead a collaborative effort to create overall vision, mission, and goals.
- ❖ Involve representatives from all buildings in the development of a districtwide comprehensive school reform plan.
- ❖ Set the expectation that school improvement plans will address all of the components of comprehensive school reform.
- ❖ Provide resources for professional development and other technical assistance to help school staff learn how to address the components.
- ❖ Provide schools with choices about how to use funds and how to govern themselves.
- ❖ Encourage schools to articulate how their reform efforts are linked to district goals and reform efforts.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERS

The primary role of school leaders is to help everyone keep the big picture of comprehensive school reform in mind. It's easy for people to get caught up in details and day-to-day problems and get off task. Principals and other school leaders must take the lead in keeping everyone focused on the larger vision and goals of reform.

Guidelines for School Leaders

- ❖ Use every opportunity to keep the vision and goals for reform foremost in everyone's mind and tied to school activities.
- ❖ Stay focused on what it means to be comprehensive. As a challenge arises in one aspect of the school (e.g., a new state assessment is mandated), carefully consider how it will affect the rest of the school (e.g., the culture and climate).
- ❖ Establish organizational structures such as grade-level teams. Involve all staff in decision making related to the selection, implementation, and evaluation of the approach to reform.
- ❖ Work with staff to build understanding of how the components of reform will work together.
- ❖ Provide opportunities for staff to discuss how the components support one another in practice.
- ❖ Look for evidence that the components support, rather than interfere with, one another.

**KEY CHALLENGE:
MAKING THE COMPONENTS WORK
TOGETHER**

A key challenge in designing a comprehensive school reform plan is figuring out how to make the various components work together in a coherent way. The irony is that the term “comprehensive” may suggest that school reforms need to be broad and expansive, addressing everything under the sun, so to speak. But this is not the case. Instead, schools need to be focused on a single goal or set of goals that guide all their reform efforts. In this way, reform efforts become more integrated and, thus, more comprehensive.

The first step in designing a comprehensive school reform plan is to focus on clearly defined, broadly agreed-upon goals. Students’ achievements of high academic standards is a good place to begin when establishing goals.

For Example . . .
Goal: 80 percent of students will reach proficient levels for mathematics standards as gauged by their achievement on the statewide assessment.

Next, schools should determine whether the “stuff” of schooling (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment) will help them accomplish those goals.

For Example . . .
Does the curriculum reflect the knowledge and skills addressed on the test? What new instructional strategies do teachers need to use to increase students’ understanding and skill?

Where to Begin

Create a clear vision for reform that is tied to state and district standards.

Identify all of the aspects of the school that may be affected by or integral to reform.

Consider the schoolwide effects of the proposed plan. Does the plan address the various aspects of the school system (i.e., the "stuff" and the "people," as well as the "structures" that bring them together)?

Make sure stakeholders understand and endorse the reform plan.

The next step is to make sure that the “people” element of schools (e.g., professional development, school climate, behavior management) will help school leaders reach their identified goals.

For Example . . .
What professional development experiences do teachers need to help improve students’ achievement levels on the statewide test? How can teachers better share information about students’ progress?

Finally, school leaders should strive to make sure their organizational “structures” (e.g., accountability systems, community engagement, and the use of resources such as time and money) also support school goals.

For Example . . .
How should we convey students’ progress to parents?

In practice, the school's comprehensive reform plan should result in an integrated, coherent approach designed to meet identified goals. As the plan is implemented and refined along the way, teachers and school leaders should continue to look at the schoolwide impact of the program particularly in terms of student achievement. McREL's (2000) *Asking the Right Questions: A Leader's Guide to Systems Thinking About School Improvement* is one tool school leaders might use to determine whether school improvement efforts do, in fact, address all parts of their school system in a comprehensive, integrated way that results in higher achievement for all students.

RESOURCES

- Fuhrman, S., Elmore, R., & Massell, D. (1993). School reform in the United States: Putting it into context. In S. Jacobsen & R. Berne (Eds.), *Reforming education: The emerging systemic approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Hassel, B. (1998). *Comprehensive school reform: Making good choices for your school*. Oakbrook, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Available: <http://www.ncrel.org/csri/choices/intro.htm>
- McREL. (2000). *Asking the right questions: A leader's guide to systems thinking about school improvement*. Aurora, CO: Author.

U.S. Department of Education. (2000). *Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program continuum for assessing the comprehensiveness of school reform plans*. Washington, DC: Author.

Web Sites

- National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform. <http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/>
- U.S. Department of Education. Guidance on the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program. <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/csrdgui.html>