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Comprehensive School Reform in Utah
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University of Utah researchers recently completed an evaluation of comprehensive school reform in sixteen Utah schools. As part of the evaluation process, researchers reviewed Criterion Reference Test (CRT) scores for all students in the sixteen schools. The findings were dramatically positive. Student scores in these schools often moved from significantly below the statewide average score to very close to the average.

A copy of the full report is available by clicking here.

Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) is the federal program that was a forerunner to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with its first funding allocation given during FY-1998. It is also intended to be complementary to NCLB in that it provides schools, especially those with high percentages of low-income children, the tools necessary to meet NCLB standards. The US Department of Education defines the purpose of CSR in this manner:

"To help schools undertake comprehensive reforms grounded in scientifically based research and effective practices, including an emphasis on basic academics and parental involvement - so that all children can meet challenging State academic content and achievement standards." (US Dept. of Education website)

Education department officials determined that by focusing on high poverty schools—those that receive Title 1 funding and have the most to lose under NCLB—the CSR program could have the greatest impact. Schools are asked to submit a grant proposal for funding under CSR and are guaranteed at least $50,000 a year for the three years in which the program is implemented. In order to have their application approved, potential CSR schools must follow the process outlined by the Department of Education below:

- Identify needs through a rigorous needs assessment
- Investigate research-based solutions
- Gain support from everyone involved
- Develop a comprehensive program that integrates the eleven CSR components
- Commit the time and resource necessary
- Plan to evaluate and strengthen the school’s efforts regularly

As indicated in the above bullets, there are eleven components to Comprehensive School Reform. Schools are required to integrate all eleven and provide evidence of integration and performance measures. The eleven components are as follows:

1. A CSR program that provides ongoing, high quality professional development for teachers and staff;
2. A CSR program that is supported within the school by teachers, administrators, and staff;
3. A CSR program that provides support for teachers, administrators and staff;
4. A CSR program that provides for meaningful parent and community involvement in planning, implementing and evaluating school improvement activities;
5. A CSR program that uses high quality external technical support and assistance from an external partner with experience and expertise in school-wide reform and improvement;
6. A CSR program that plans for the evaluation of strategies for the implementation of school reform and for student results achieved, annually;
7. A CSR program that identifies resources to support and sustain the school’s comprehensive reform effort;
8. A CSR program that has been found to significantly improve the academic achievement of students or demonstrates strong evidence that it will improve the academic achievement of students;
9. Employs proven methods and strategies based on scientifically-based research;
10. Integrates a comprehensive design with aligned components; and
11. Includes measurable goals and benchmarks for student achievement.

Based on these eleven components, researchers evaluated the sixteen schools using a teacher survey instrument and, as mentioned above, an analysis of CRT scores. The findings are good news for Utah schools and the CSR program in general and are summarized below. To see a copy of the survey instrument, click here. To examine CRT data for each school, click here.

Findings reveal that:

- CSR provided an opportunity for school faculty and staff to work cooperatively to achieve CSR goals. In the words of one survey respondent- “there was no more my kids and your kids. All the teachers are concerned about the success of all students in the school.”
- Most respondents indicated they wanted to keep certain aspects of their CSR programs, even without additional funding.
- With very few exceptions, there is a clear, consistent, and often dramatic improvement from 2002 to 2004 in the student achievement test results of participating CSR school students relative to the state averages on criterion-referenced state tests in language arts, math, and science.

Additionally, there is consistent improvement from 2002 to 2004 in the student achievement test results of BOTH the “proficient” and “non-proficient” student groups. Typically the proficient students’ scores are moving from a 2002 score of at or near the state mean to a 2004 score of noticeably above the state mean. By contrast, the non-proficient students are more typically moving from a 2002 score that is significantly below the state mean to a 2004 score that is near or at the state mean.

In summary, the comprehensive school reform program seems to be an important tool for educators in the high-stakes world of standardized outcomes testing. CSR provides an opportunity for schools to assess what is working well, what needs improvement and how to focus faculty, staff, students, parents and other resources around academic achievement. The consistently high rates of improvement among student test scores as well as test participation in CSR schools are a small indicator that it is possible for Utah’s most disadvantaged students to succeed under NCLB.