

Texas Study of the Comprehensive School Reform Grant Program

Final Cross-Case Study Report

August 2007

Prepared for the Texas Education Agency

Resources for Learning, LLC

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COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM (CSR) GRANT PROGRAM**



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CREDITS

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Resources for Learning (RFL), specializes in mixed-methods program evaluation design and management, survey design and administration, and qualitative and quantitative data analysis and reporting. RFL works with state and regional education agencies; universities, districts, and campuses; and other entities engaged in the education of young people.

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NATIONAL CONTEXT

SINCE THE 1960S, SCHOOL REFORM INITIATIVES HAVE EVOLVED FROM remedial pullout programs aimed at at-risk students (Borman, Wong, Hedges, & D’Agostino, 2001) to systemic approaches to school change (Smith & O’Day, 1991). In the early 1990s, the systemic approach provided a new focus for designing innovative whole-school reform models through “design-based assistance organizations” (Bodilly, 2001).

Results from these efforts guided the establishment of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSR) in the Fiscal Year 1998 Appropriations Act for the U.S. Department of Education, Public Law 105–78. The CSR Program, operating from 1998–2001, emphasized nine required components or strategies for reform and stressed the goal of whole-school change. The reauthorization of Title I as Part F of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB) continued the use of federal funds to support low-performing, high-poverty schools in the implementation of scientifically based programs and strategies aimed at helping students meet state content and academic achievement standards through the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program.

As of fiscal year 2007, the CSR program was considered duplicative of Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Title I, Part A supports comprehensive school reform, which is also the purpose of Title I school-wide programs (Title I school-wide project statutory provisions Sec. 1114 of NCLB). Title I, Part A also is designed to help improve low-performing schools, which is the purpose of the state school improvement set-aside in Title I (Sec. 1003 of NCLB). Currently, efforts are being made to redirect CSR program funding to the Title I Grants for Local Educational Agencies to reduce program duplication and administrative burden. Redirecting the CSR funds to Title I will allow troubled schools to carry out comprehensive reform without the extra administrative burden of applying to a separate grant program.¹

After almost a decade of whole-school reform, national research documents the difficulties of both implementing reforms that are indeed comprehensive

¹ For more information, please visit the following website: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/detail.10000184.2005.html>

(Kurki, Aladjem, & Carter, 2005) and building the foundations for CSR sustainability beyond the federal funding period (Taylor, 2005).

STATE CONTEXT

This evaluation focuses on the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) two CSR programs: 1) the Improving Teaching and Learning (ITL)/Texas Title I CSR grant program; and 2) the CSR/Texas High School Initiative (THSI) grant program. Though the ITL program has funded multiple cycles of grantees, this evaluation focuses only on Cycle 3 ITL campuses, in addition to all campuses funded through the THSI program. In 2004, Texas received \$11,818,764 in CSR-designated federal dollars that were distributed to 85 schools through Cycle 3 of the ITL grant program. Awards ranged from \$69,980 to \$150,000 in 2005, from \$50,000 to \$105,000 in 2006, and from \$18,750 to \$39,875 in 2007. The state distributed an additional \$11,965,695 in 2005 to another 83 schools through the THSI grant program. Grant awards ranged from \$70,000 to \$150,000 in 2005, from \$50,000 to \$105,000 in 2006, and from \$22,700 to \$47,670 in 2007.² Due to the decision to redirect CSR funds to Title I in 2007, year three awards for grantee schools were greatly reduced from expected amounts and averaged \$39,000 per school.

STUDY PURPOSE

This study represents one component of a larger program evaluation effort conducted by TEA that examines the impact of comprehensive school reform on student achievement. This portion of the evaluation included surveys, case studies, and a cross-case analysis. The goal of this study was to apply a research-based framework to describe the implementation process, including facilitators and barriers, for 10 sites introducing comprehensive school reform under the ITL Cycle 3 and THSI grant programs. Sites were chosen to reflect the two grant programs, geographic diversity, demographic diversity, CSR models, and implementation level. An interim report was published in September 2006 based on a first round of data collection conducted in spring 2006.³ Final reports (a case study report and a cross-case study report) were developed following a second round of data collection in spring 2007.

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The evaluation design had two purposes: 1) to enhance and provide corroborating evidence for TEA's quantitative evaluation; and 2) to assess CSR implementation in order to inform current and future program development for

² Source: CSR database, operated by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory and TEA program staff

³ The interim report is available on the TEA website at: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/opge/progeval/CampusWide/index.html#csr>

school-wide reform grant programs (e.g., Texas High School Redesign and Restructuring Grant). The work by the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) at the University of Memphis and the Field-Focused Study of the CSRD Program conducted by COSMOS Corporation for the U.S. Department of Education (2003) guided the evaluation design. The evaluation addressed the following objectives:

- a. Define where schools started and the local context
- b. Define school capacity to implement reform in terms of materials, staff, planning time, and resources
- c. Measure the external support provided by an external Technical Assistance Provider or the school district
- d. Measure internal focus defined as teacher buy-in, integration of model strategies with existing programs, and progress monitoring
- e. Assess pedagogical change, including how closely instructional strategies aligned with model specifications and how widely these changes in teaching were being made
- f. Assess the extent to which schools restructured outcomes to consider intermediate outcomes for students (such as positive affective impacts) and the broader school community, including teachers and staff and parents
- g. Assess the level of implementation and prospects for sustainability

Through investigation of these questions at the interim and final stages of funded activities, the evaluation provided information about how comprehensive school reform impacts schools, including barriers to and catalysts for implementation and the sustainability of reform efforts.

After developing case studies for each of the 10 schools, the evaluators assessed the level of CSR implementation at each site using an instrument that measures strength of implementation in alignment with the research framework:

- ◆ High-level implementing schools were those in the “Implementing” phase
 - Four schools—two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school
- ◆ Middle-level implementing schools were in the “Piloting” stage
 - Three schools—one middle school and two high schools
- ◆ Low-level implementing schools were those in the “Planning” stage and the “Not Implementing” stage
 - Three schools—three high schools

The evaluators then conducted a cross-case analysis that combined site visit and survey data across all 10 sites and provided summaries of each implementation level by research objective.

A summary of findings and recommendations from the cross-case study report is provided below. A full analysis by implementation level and a full description of findings and recommendations may be found in the cross-case study report. Full descriptions of each school with detailed implementation information may be found in the case study report.

FINDINGS

Intentions for Seeking Funding

- ***The reasons schools sought funding impacted CSR implementation.*** School intentions in seeking CSR grant funding generally fell into two categories: 1) those supplementing schools budgets without a unifying goal; and 2) those continuing preexisting school programming or using funds to initiate CSR programs because school goals for improvement intersected with grant goals.

Model Selection and Adoption Process

- ***Across implementation levels, school staff played a minimal role in the model selection and adoption process, which delayed initial staff buy-in at most schools.***

Several factors complicated the model selection and adoption processes at grantee schools. These included some aspects of the grant application process and school interpretation of staff participation requirements. The CSR literature provides a strong research base for the importance of the adoption process to later implementation and characterizes the implementation process in three ways: informative, inclusive, and legitimate (Aladjem & Borman, 2006). Informative processes provide information about the model to staff. Inclusive processes provide staff with a role in choosing a model. Legitimate processes allow for full unrestrained staff participation in model selection and adoption. Data indicated that staff participation in selection processes at study schools represented, at best, informative inclusion.

External Progress Measures

- ***Methods of tracking CSR progress require attention.***

Caution should be used when interpreting some CSR progress indicators, as they can be misleading, particularly when there are no observations from external staff to confirm reports. Generally, responses from low-implementing schools regarding implementation levels on TEA-required progress reports were over-inflated because school staff had a limited understanding of CSR goals. Additionally, data collected across both time periods indicated that schools with low CSR implementation reported similar ratings on school climate measures to schools with higher CSR implementation. In these cases, improvements in school climate may have been more related to having access to funding than successful use of funds in grant-intended ways. Also, research documents that schools engaged in school reform may report low levels of school climate due to the number and extent of changes occurring

as a consequence of CSR implementation. Alternatively, improvements might not have been related to grant funding at all.

Model Choice

- ***Addressing the comprehensive design requirement of CSR did not depend on CSR model choice.***

The comprehensive design component of CSR requires that programs include all students in all grade levels; address all subject areas; and impact instruction, school organization and governance, staffing, professional development, and parental involvement. As demonstrated by the schools in this study sample, choosing a model that was designed to be comprehensive was not enough to ensure comprehensive implementation. In fact, only one of the high-implementing schools chose a model designed for school-wide implementation, while all three low-implementing schools chose CSR models that were explicitly aligned with CSR goals. Overall, high-implementing schools chose models that were well aligned with school needs, developed coherent and comprehensive plans, and dedicated leadership for school-wide change.

Leadership

- ***A person or group of people was responsible for leading CSR efforts at high-implementing schools.***

High-implementing schools in the study benefited from having a strong CSR advocate who provided a defined and widespread message or vision to guide CSR implementation. This leadership was provided at either the district level or through a committed cadre of teachers or strong principal at the school level to promote CSR implementation.

District Agency

- ***Active district support led to potential sustainability.***

It was imperative in high-implementing schools that the district was actively involved, supportive, and proactive in expanding programming begun under CSR. In three of the four high-implementing schools, the district used the CSR school as a pilot site for district-wide adoption of the program. The district also usually supplemented the funding gap created by the decrease in CSR funding in the final year of the grant. These districts developed plans for systematically expanding a cohesive program. The districts also protected schools from additional competing initiatives and agendas. Perhaps most importantly, these demonstrations of district support indicated to school staff that their efforts had been successful and valuable.

Clear Goals and Protection From Competing Priorities

- ***High-implementing schools provided staff with a clear plan for CSR.***

Internal focus and the creation of a program that was “on message,” especially in terms of CSR integration with existing school programs, were critical for high-implementing schools. Teachers in these schools demonstrated a consistent understanding of the goals of their school’s CSR model. These

schools were also very clear and careful about not bringing in competing, unrelated programs or treating CSR as an add-on program.

Capacity

- ***High-implementing schools viewed the CSR grant as a vehicle for building infrastructure and capacity that could be sustained beyond the grant funding period.***

High-implementing schools used the CSR grant to build social capital and capacity by creating professional learning communities with a collective focus and shared values and norms. These schools increased capacity by either delivering well-defined and focused training school wide or training a cadre of teachers and then providing a systematic, monitored, and product-oriented process for redelivery of training.

Pedagogy and Collaboration

- ***Through extensive training and support, teachers in high-implementing schools were able to use CSR-related teaching strategies in classrooms.***

Considering that instructional change takes longer to achieve and occurs later in the implementation phase of school reform, it was noteworthy that teachers at high-implementing schools were applying CSR-related teaching strategies in classrooms to some extent. Achieving pedagogical change involved ongoing support in terms of formal and informal collaboration between teachers and external assistance providers and proved to be time intensive. Dedicated planning time was oriented around staff collaboration on key pedagogical approaches.

Internal Progress Monitoring

- ***High-implementing schools instituted formative monitoring across a variety of intermediate outcomes.***

At high-implementing schools, staff comments about model impacts demonstrated an understanding of progress and were evidence that the schools had provided tools and time for analysis and reflection around intermediate outcomes. Where schools did systematically review intermediate outcomes, such as ninth-grade retention rates for example, staff saw more immediate results from their efforts and were more enthusiastic about the prospects of continuing in the direction begun under CSR. Where TAKS was the only measure of success, staff were unsure about the success of their efforts because student achievement had yet to be impacted.

Maintaining Model Strategies and Provider Relationships

- ***High-implementing schools exhibited the potential to maintain model strategies and formal relationships with external Technical Assistance Providers.***

Data suggested that the four high-implementing schools in the study would independently retain formal TAP services or would maintain formal strategies and provider services through district-wide expansion of programs piloted at these sites. Two middle-implementing schools were likely to maintain some of the strategies adopted during CSR that had become part of school routine, but they were not likely to have the resources to maintain formal TAP services. Data indicated that one low-implementing site could continue to refer to itself as a CSR model school but that this likely would be in name only since little success towards implementing reform strategies occurred during the grant period. The other schools (one middle-implementing and two low-implementing) were likely to drop all ties associated with CSR models, including strategies, so that a year after the grant ends, there might be little evidence that CSR occurred. Accordingly, these schools made little progress during the grant period.

Sustainability

- ***High-implementing schools developed plans for continuing programs and activities initiated with CSR grant funds beyond the grant program.***

High-implementing schools had clear plans for continuing CSR programming. Either district support had already been committed or a strong infrastructure had been created through staff training. In either scenario, the continuation of school efforts was not dependent on grant funding. Building a strong school culture around reform efforts was also instrumental to ensuring sustainability. At one high-implementing campus that had used the same model for six years, the school's identity was built around it, and teachers were hired to teach there based on their acceptance of the model's philosophy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are presented in terms of the entity most likely responsible for recommended changes. The first three target the grant application and administration process of the state agency. The remaining nine are implementation considerations directed to districts and schools but that could also be encouraged by the state agency.

State Grant Administration and Monitoring

- ***Continue to educate applicants about the intent and goals of grants and expand the review of grant applications to include alignment with other grant awards and ongoing programming.***

While recognizing that the state has limited capacity to oversee the grant application process at individual sites, TEA should investigate the feasibility of providing mandatory pre-application grant development assistance workshops or information to ensure that grantees understand the goals of

the grant program. The educational service centers may be one avenue for providing pre-grant education. Applications from schools should also contain information about current school programs and be reviewed for plans to align programming, including evidence of similar goals, systemic implementation activities, management capacity, and alignment of proposed budget expenditures with implementation plans.

- **Continue to refine the grant application process and include additional guidelines, technical assistance, or planning grants to ensure grant applicants meet program expectations concerning model selection processes.**

At the grant award and administration level, TEA should continue to refine future application processes to include more explicit guidelines defining legitimate staff participation (for example, including a staff vote) and/or provide mandatory technical assistance for applicants. Schools appear to require education and support in how to include staff in this process. Providing technical assistance prior to grant award or providing web-based tools that guide model selection processes could be considered. Additionally, Requests for Applications (RFA) timelines should be guided by considerations such as allowing sufficient time for needs assessment and inclusion of the majority of staff in selection and adoption of reform models. Small planning grants and the use of educational service centers are other possibilities for facilitating this process.

- **Continue to review approaches to monitoring CSR progress.**

Continue and expand the use of progress reports using a format that includes multiple data points from multiple sources (district managers, principals, grant coordinators, and Technical Assistance Providers). This format allows information to be triangulated and provides a school-level measure of information consistency and coordination. Further, using reporting formats consistent with grant goals, research, and similar grant programs allows for comparison across years and programs. Identifying appropriate intermediate outcomes for reporting would also support formative evaluation purposes and state assessments of the status of reform efforts at grantee sites. For example, collecting the number of days and staff participating in CSR-related professional development activities would provide information about the extent of staff participation and investment in training. Providing monitoring and follow-up support for grant implementation could help schools refine local implementation activities, though the size of the state might prohibit such support.

District and School Implementation

- **Align model choices with local context and needs with clear plans for comprehensive implementation. Model choices and CSR plans**

should balance model philosophies and strategies with both CSR components and school mission, challenges, and practices.

Schools and districts should understand that matching model choice to the context of the school removes some obstacles to implementation and can lead to greater commitment to successful implementation. Further, evidence from this study indicates that no matter what type of model is chosen, comprehensive and philosophical, or targeted, schools must invest additional planning, leadership, and resources in order to integrate the model into the school context and implement it across all school components. Comprehensive models aimed at a philosophical shift in school operations require concerted efforts from leadership and staff to create, change, or refine the school's educational mission and practices. The model alone will not achieve this. Targeted models that were not designed to be comprehensive require significant supplements to serve as catalysts for school-wide change.

- **Establish a dedicated CSR advocate charged with leading reform efforts.**

Schools and districts, with the support of the state agency, should identify leaders for reform efforts. The advocate can be an individual or a group at the district level or at the campus level. The charge to this person or group is to promote and support CSR efforts by disseminating the goals of comprehensive school reform, promoting a consistent and ongoing focus on CSR, and protecting staff from competing initiatives.

- **Develop strategies to promote coherent, stable, and scalable reform plans at the district level.**

Districts need to develop strategies to promote consistent and coherent reform plans that sustain an overall district mission, to provide district-wide support for school change, and to protect schools from competing initiatives.

- **Define and disseminate clearly articulated goals for the CSR program.**

Districts and schools should use program advocates to emphasize the goals of the reform. Staff members need to understand what is asked of them and how CSR supports existing school efforts. Taking time to define this message will help integrate CSR with other programs and eliminate confusion, especially if staff participation in initial model selection and adoption is limited.

- **Build school capacity and social capital through focused campus-wide training that promotes professional learning communities and the capacity for redelivery.**

Using resources to provide a focused campus-wide professional development effort ensures all teachers are trained, builds CSR understanding, and promotes collaboration around CSR efforts. Mechanisms for providing local

redelivery of training also help to build capacity in the long term and ensure sustainability, especially when schools are able to retain a critical mass of staff so that investments in capacity building are not lost.

- **Expect and support classroom application of model instructional strategies.**

Classroom application should be part of the goals disseminated by district or school advocates and TAPs. Achieving instructional change requires, first, the expectation of implementation, then, ongoing support, collaboration, and time. This commitment must come from instructional leaders if CSR efforts are ultimately to impact student achievement. Teachers implementing CSR model-promoted strategies in their daily practice need intensive support either from external assistance providers or the district, concrete product examples, and, most importantly, dedicated time to collaborate with their colleagues.

- **Monitor progress through both intermediate and summative outcomes.**

Defining intermediate outcomes demonstrates an understanding of the cycle of CSR and the time needed to achieve summative outcomes such as improved student achievement. A systematic process for monitoring progress around intermediate outcomes provides clarity, guidance, and focus and communicates the school's commitment to accomplishing the goals of CSR. This process also encourages optimism about growth. State support in encouraging identification of intermediate goals may be an avenue to investigate.

- **Promote district-wide adoption and expansion of successfully piloted strategies and relationships.**

Continuing model strategies with formal support from TAPs ensures new teachers will be provided necessary training and support; the efforts invested during CSR are not abandoned; and the school and district have a mission, commitment, and focus for growth. While schools may not always need formal model support to maintain strategies, especially once a model has become institutionalized, maintaining this support during piloting and early implementation has been shown to be linked to stronger and longer implementation.

- **Plan for sustaining CSR efforts beyond grant funding.**

Finding and securing resources either through reallocation of local district funds or through new grant opportunities to maintain programming begun under CSR is essential and indicates to staff that the school is committed to school reform—that CSR is not just a passing fad. Sustaining CSR efforts also relates to building capacity and school culture around CSR goals and strategies.

CONCLUSION

Most of the case study sites faced some obstacles common to schools serving high-poverty student populations. Success of reform efforts depended primarily on factors external to model choice, such as identification of a program advocate, district support, investment in teacher training, ability to retain teachers, and the match between grant goals and school goals. When these factors were combined, some schools were able to overcome contextual challenges. Consistent with prior research (Kurki, Aladjem, & Carter, 2005), study findings suggest the significance of advocates or agents (e.g., principal, district, teacher groups) and increased social capital in overcoming contextual barriers (e.g., socio-economic status, Limited English Proficiency, size). Positive school-wide change can occur across a variety of environments if advocates for change are actively engaged in the process.

