

# Texas Study of the Comprehensive School Reform Grant Program

## Interim Report

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## INTRODUCTION

THE TOPIC OF SCHOOL REFORM HAS ATTRACTED CONSIDERABLE attention and funding from a range of stakeholders including the federal government, state governments, philanthropists, local schools, and the general public (Quint, 2006), yet the process for implementing successful reform largely remains a mystery. The purpose of this evaluation is to provide a case study and cross-case analysis of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) implementation in 10 of the 170 school sites in Texas during the second year of three-year CSR grants awarded by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). TEA operates two CSR programs, the Improving Teaching and Learning/CSR (ITL/CSR) Grant and the CSR—Texas High School Initiative (CSR—THSI). The programs emphasize school-wide improvements through curricular change, sustained professional development, and increased involvement of parents. Both programs also promote school-wide reform aimed at coherently integrating the 11 CSR components to enable all students to meet challenging academic standards. Research indicates that key factors to consider regarding the evaluation of CSR implementation are local context, model selection and adoption processes, school capacity, external support, internal focus, pedagogical change, and restructuring outcomes.

The evaluation was guided by the following research objectives:

- Define where schools started and schools' capacities to implement reform in terms of materials, staff, planning time, and resources
- Measure the external support provided by an external Technical Assistance Provider or the school district
- Measure internal focus defined as teacher buy-in, integration of model strategies with existing programs, and progress monitoring
- Assess pedagogical change, including how closely instructional strategies align with model specifications and how widely these changes in teaching are being made
- 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
- Assess the level of implementation at this interim stage of the grant program and implementation fidelity

This interim evaluation report provides a preliminary assessment of promising practices, barriers and catalysts to successful implementation, changes in school climate, and the sustainability of reform efforts at case study sites. A final round of data collection and reporting will occur in spring 2007.

## METHODS

Case studies were developed for 10 of the 170 grantee schools. The case study sites were randomly selected to be reflective of participating schools in terms of grant type, school size, location, CSR model, and implementation level. Two-member evaluation teams conducted two-day site visits to each site during spring 2006. Instruments used for the evaluation and development of case studies included the following:

- Principal interview
- CSR Coordinator interview
- Teacher interviews
- Teacher focus group
- Parent focus group
- Student focus group
- School Observation Measure (SOM) (CREP, 1998)
- Document review
- Technical Assistance Provider survey
- A survey of all professional staff administered to all 170 grantee schools as part of the full evaluation<sup>1</sup>

Data collected through site visits to the 10 campuses were organized into case studies and member-checked by schools. The 10 schools were then categorized into three implementation-level groups through analysis of site-visit data, survey data,<sup>2</sup> and the overall implementation scale.

The three implementation levels used to categorize schools in this report include the following:

- High-Level Implementation category schools in the “Implementing” phase
- Middle-Level Implementation category schools in the “Piloting” stage
- Low-Level Implementation category schools in the “Planning” stage and the “Not Implementing” stage

At the time of data collection for this interim report, no schools were judged to be in the “Fulfilling” stage in which the CSR model has been institutionalized.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey combined the Comprehensive School Reform Teacher Questionnaire (CSRTQ) (Ross & Alberg, 1999) and the School Climate Inventory (SCI) (Butler & Alberg, 1989). Survey responses on the CSRTQ from the Low-Level Implementation group tended to be similar or higher than responses from the other two groups. This pattern may be a result of how staff at low-implementing schools may agree with items as a consequence of lacking a thorough understanding of CSR.

<sup>2</sup> The survey data for one school (School 10) were not included in the calculation of any low-level implementation averages aligned with the evaluation questions because the staff had yet to be trained on model strategies and demonstrated a severely limited understanding of the 11 CSR components. However, their responses to the survey were the highest of any schools, which conflicted with data collected during the site visit. Together, this information indicated that School 10 was an outlier.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Because this is an interim assessment of progress, drawing conclusions and providing recommendations for future implementation efforts may be premature. However, based on the data collected, common points emerged as relevant across schools and may be useful to similar schools engaging in complex school reform efforts. It should be noted that some approaches and components associated with the facilitators to CSR implementation at the high-implementation category schools are definable, tangible, and replicable while others are nuanced, specific to the site, and difficult to replicate. Specific discussion of relevant data at the schools is provided in the individual case studies and cross-case analysis.

This section identifies the main factors that facilitated or stalled CSR implementation at the sites and provides a summary of the evidence followed by recommendations associated with each specific factor.

### *Application Process*

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

Across the schools, the grant application process unintentionally hindered full staff participation in model selection and adoption. The turnaround time was short, applicants were not required to obtain a full faculty vote, and signed support was only required from the site-based decision-making committee. While a faculty vote does not ensure strong implementation, it does raise awareness about CSR efforts and represents an important step towards the shared leadership that CSR promotes.

- **Include sufficient time and support to meet CSR expectations concerning model selection.** At the grant award and administration level, future application processes should be guided by considerations such as allowing sufficient time for needs assessment and encouraging applicants to include the majority of staff in research and selection of reform models as well as model adoption.

### *Leadership*

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

At each of the three high-implementation schools, there was either leadership at the district level or a committed cadre of teachers or strong principal at the school level to support integration of CSR into existing school improvement efforts. These schools benefited from having a strong CSR advocate who provided a defined and widespread message or vision to guide CSR

implementation. At the other sites, schools lacked a clear understanding of the goals of their CSR efforts and staff buy-in appeared delayed or stymied.

- **Establish a dedicated CSR advocate to lead 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.

### ***Model Choice and Context***

- ***Implementation success did not depend on CSR model choice if schools selected a model appropriate to the local context and provided leadership for sustainable school-wide reforms.***

Choosing a model aligned with the 11 CSR components was not enough to ensure high implementation. In fact, only one of the high-implementation schools chose a CSR-aligned model while all three low-implementation schools chose models traditionally aligned with the 11 CSR components. The high-implementation schools, however, created locally appropriate models that addressed reform school wide. Some of the lower implementing schools confined their efforts to limited models not designed for comprehensive school-wide reform (e.g., AVID, Princeton Review), impacting small numbers of staff and students. If the model is not aligned, meeting the requirements of CSR takes more resources and a much more concerted effort at coordination with other school activities. At low-resource schools already overwhelmed by issues such as safety and security, this level of focused programming may create a barrier to fuller implementation.

- **Choose a model that can be tailored to campus-specific needs while addressing all CSR components.** Matching model choice to the context of the school limits obstacles to implementation. Models that do not meet at least most of the 11 CSR components may be successfully implemented but may take more resources and time than are available.

### ***Clear Goals***

- ***High-implementation 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-implementation 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 extraneous, unrelated programs or treating CSR as an add-on program.

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

## Capacity

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

High-implementation schools used funds to deliver well-defined and focused training school wide. Just providing training to large numbers of teachers is not enough, as demonstrated by some low-implementation schools that received over 1,000 hours of intensive external support. High-implementation schools also created internal capacity for redelivery. Additionally, the training was not added on to other professional development but was the foundation for other programming. This approach to training enabled school culture to be built around model philosophies. Schools with lower implementation levels tended to treat capacity either as fragmented, by purchasing materials and supporting personnel not directly related to CSR efforts, or in a narrow sense, by only providing a limited number of staff and students with expensive support.

- **Build school capacity through focused campus-wide training.** 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.

## Pedagogy and Collaboration

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

Teachers at high-implementation schools were applying CSR-related teaching strategies in classrooms. In one school, in accordance with the model approach, all teachers implemented several project-based learning units each year. This level of implementation and coordination indicates that teachers were provided with effective training, were given time to understand the training, and were able to transfer this new learning to their classrooms. This process also 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. Subject-area cadres and peer observation processes are a few other examples of successful collaborative activities at high-implementation schools.

- **Support classroom application.** Achieving instructional change requires ongoing support, collaboration, and time. This commitment must occur 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, and, most importantly, dedicated time to collaborate with their colleagues.

## ***Identifying Intermediate Outcomes and Monitoring Progress***

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

The success of identifying intermediate outcomes and monitoring progress towards them varied across schools. At high-implementation 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. At middle- and low-implementation schools, grant leaders often failed to define intermediate outcomes and provide a systematic process for monitoring them. Without intermediate goals, such as improvements in student motivation, student attendance, staff buy-in, or teacher collaboration, staff were unsure about the success of their efforts and felt overwhelmed because student achievement had yet to be impacted. Schools that monitored program implementation formatively indicated seeing progress with their CSR efforts.

- **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 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.

## ***Sustainability***

- ***High-implementation schools developed plans for continuing programs and activities initiated with CSR grant funds.***

High-implementation 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-implementation campus, the school's identity was built around its CSR model and teachers were hired to teach there based on their interest in participating in the school's program.

- **Plan for sustaining CSR efforts beyond grant funding.** Finding and securing resources for the continuation of CSR programming 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.

Most of the case study sites faced obstacles common to low-resource schools serving high-poverty student populations. These include a history of failure and low expectations, entrenched dysfunctional culture, safety and security issues, staff resistance to change, high teacher turnover, or multiple uncoordinated programs. At one school, these barriers seriously threaten the investment made in CSR efforts. For example, staff resistance to change has stalled CSR efforts. For other schools, these barriers may have caused a delay in implementation, but most have been able to pilot their CSR programs successfully and have viable plans for expanding from the piloting stage to the implementing stage. It is of note that some of these campuses are large urban high schools in large urban districts, which traditionally face significant challenges. Finally, the sites implementing CSR at a higher level have capitalized on local contexts and have been able to provide a firm foundation for school-wide reform. These schools are already seeing impacts for students and the culture of the school. The next round of data collection will document the continued progress of implementation efforts across these campuses.

