



## Do the Models Fit? Towards Comprehensive School Reform for English Language Learners

Kate Menken

The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRSD) program was funded by the federal government in 1997 to provide financial incentives for schools that need to substantially increase student achievement, particularly schools receiving funding through Title I (Helping Disadvantaged Children Meet High Standards) of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as amended. Title I funds are currently available to two million English language learners (ELLs) - that is half of all ELLs, and almost one-fifth of all students served by Title I (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Undersecretary Planning and Evaluation Service, 1999a). It is, therefore, important that the needs of these students be addressed through comprehensive school reform (also known as schoolwide improvement or reform).

### Addressing the Needs of ELLs through Comprehensive School Reform

Schoolwide reforms funded by CSRSD are intended to incorporate reliable research and effective practices, and include an emphasis on academics and parental involvement. These programs seek to stimulate schoolwide change covering virtually all aspects of school operations, rather than a piecemeal, fragmented approach to reform (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The federal legislation for the CSRSD initiative mandates specific program components, each of which has implications specific to English language learners that must be addressed for successful program implementation.

Funds that schools receive through the CSRSD initiative must only be used for school reform programs that integrate, in a coherent manner, the following nine components listed in the federal legislation (H.R. 390, 1997):

- Effective, research-based, replicable methods and strategies
- Comprehensive design with aligned components
- Professional development
- Measurable goals and benchmarks
- Support within the school
- Parental and community involvement
- External technical support and assistance

- Evaluation strategies
- Coordination

Each of these components is listed below, with a corresponding set of questions for consideration when English language learners are served through schoolwide reform programs. These questions draw upon the work of Hansel (2000) and McKeon (1998).

*Effective, research-based, replicable methods and strategies.* Have the methods and strategies employed proven effective in the education of ELLs, to ensure that they also meet challenging academic standards? Is evidence of effectiveness based on multiple measures that are accurate and reliable when employed with ELLs?

*Comprehensive design with aligned components.* Is the schoolwide improvement plan fully inclusive of ELLs in school management, classroom management, curriculum, assessment, and instruction? Does the plan allow for the implementation of the best language support program option for the ELL population within a particular school and community?

*Professional development.* Are ample opportunities provided for high-quality, sustained training and professional development that prepares educators to work effectively with ELLs? Is professional development in the education of ELLs provided to all school faculty, administrators, and staff and not solely to ELL specialists?

*Measurable goals and benchmarks.* Are there measurable goals for the performance of ELLs and benchmarks for meeting those goals that are appropriate, accurate, and reliable for this specific student population?

*Support within the school.* Are programs selected and supported by all school faculty, administrators, and staff, including those directly involved in the education of ELLs? Is it required that school faculty, administrators, and staff work collaboratively to ensure the success of ELLs? Is a school climate fostered in which linguistic and cultural diversity is seen as a rich resource, and where high expectations are set for the performance of ELLs?

*Parental and community involvement.* Are opportunities provided for the full involvement of ELL parents and community members in the planning and implementation of school improvement activities? Are the challenges specific to forging partnerships with language minority communities addressed (e.g., translation of school materials into home languages, selection of activities that are culturally appropriate, etc.)?

*External technical support and assistance.* Is high-quality external technical support provided from a CSR entity with experience or expertise not only in schoolwide reform and improvement, but also in the education of ELLs?

*Evaluation strategies.* Is there a plan for evaluating program implementation that is inclusive of ELLs? Does it evaluate the impact of programs on the achievement of ELLs, whereby data is gathered and disaggregated according to language proficiency?

*Coordination of resources.* Are resources coordinated to ensure sufficient funding is allocated to supporting and sustaining educational programming for ELLs?

## **The Impact of Comprehensive School Reform Models on ELLs**

Comprehensive school reform models are plans for schoolwide improvement that address various aspects of school operations, and are being widely implemented in schools across the nation as a primary means to accomplish reforms. Models provide a variety of resources to schools, including curricula, assessment tools, technical assistance, professional development, and guides for school administration. Schools typically contract with model developers for school improvement materials and professional development for a period of three or more years (National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, 2000).

Through early comprehensive school reform implementation efforts, it has become clear that the capacity of models to meet the needs of ELLs must be developed as models “scale-up” and expand to new locations - particularly to those with diverse student populations. Although schoolwide reform models are currently being implemented across the United States in schools with significant ELL populations, very few of the models specifically address their needs. Furthermore, it is unclear which of these models, if any, are effective in the instruction of ELLs.

*While the focus of CSRD is schoolwide change in schools, particularly Title I schools, where there is the greatest need to improve student achievement substantially, there is little information readily available with regard to which models are most appropriate for students learning the English language (ELL, or English language learners). Indeed, while a number of models have demonstrated some success in raising student achievement, thus far most do not address directly the learning needs of ELL populations although a growing number of nationally available models are placing more emphasis on this population. (Wilde, Thompson, & Herrera, 1999)*

Models that do not directly address the needs of the ELL population often entail the use of curricula, instructional materials and strategies that are inadequate and/or inappropriate for educating ELL students.

A middle school in Philadelphia, for example, adopted the *Talent Development* model in a neighborhood densely populated by ELLs. The model restructured educational programming and offered extensive professional development. In addition, school staff and administrators selected literature and corresponding curriculum guides from a list provided by the model developers. Since this model had never before been implemented in schools with substantial ELL populations, it did not require the use of literature appropriate to ELL students' language proficiency levels or to their cultures, and did not ensure that these students received necessary language supports. Furthermore, the professional development provided was not geared towards the education of ELLs. In response to teachers currently struggling in the implementation phase, the school district has supported local educators in their quest to account for the educational needs of these students within the model (J. Brown, personal communication, February 8, 2001).

A growing number of model developers are beginning to incorporate the needs of the ELL population during the development and planning phases. The *Success for All* model, for example, specifically targets disadvantaged children in inner city schools. One of the most common comprehensive school reform programs, it is currently being implemented in at least 747 schools (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NREL], 1999). The model restructures elementary schools, with a focus on reading, and prescribes curricula and instructional strategies for teaching. *Success for All* developed a Spanish version for its beginning reading program, “Lee Conmigo” and native-language assessments are available to support

English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual instruction through sixth grade. Researchers have begun to evaluate ELL performance in schools that have adopted the program (Durán & Slavin, 1996).

### **Issues in the Implementation and Evaluation of Comprehensive School Reform**

The recent attention paid to the creation and expansion of schoolwide reform programs has raised a number of issues and questions that impact all students, including ELLs. For example, research by the RAND Corporation on the first two years' implementation of New American Schools' whole-school designs (which include several models mentioned in the CSRD legislation) showed significant variation among the schools in the level of implementation obtained. Of the 40 schools in the study, about half (45%) were still at early implementation phases; four schools were still only in the planning stages. RAND identified several barriers to implementation at the school, design team, and district/institutional levels:

- Poor communication with schools, rushed and limited school choice in design selection, and negative school climate due to strife or leadership turnover;
- Unstable leadership of design teams, limited capacity of staff serving schools, inability of design teams to engage school and district support, and lack of emphasis on key criteria associated with design success (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development); and
- Unstable district leadership and political crises, distrust between central office and schools, and lack of resources (Bodilly, 1998).

These barriers indicate how important local politics are within a school and district for the success of whole-school reform. Furthermore, the RAND findings suggest it is extremely difficult to successfully implement comprehensive reform quickly.

Comprehensive school reform implementation shows the greatest effects on student achievement where: (1) programs are well-matched with local needs; (2) principals and central administrators fully implement the design, with adaptation to the local setting; (3) ongoing professional development and technical assistance are provided and are relevant to school issues and problems; and (4) curriculum is rigorous (Stringfield et al., 1997). How student achievement is measured, however, raises another critical issue pertaining to the inclusion of ELLs in comprehensive school reform: evaluation.

At the center of current debate is confusion over which schoolwide reform models, if any, improve education. While this issue affects all models, it is particularly complex in those programs serving ELLs. One of the primary criticisms of comprehensive school reform models has been that so little research exists to back up the effectiveness of the most popular models (Viadero, 1999). That was the conclusion of Olson (1999) in her review of *An Educator's Guide to Schoolwide Reform* (1999). The *Guide* surveys the research on twenty-four different whole-school reform models and suggests that little research addresses this area. According to Olson, this has serious consequences:

*... according to the report, "most of the prose describing*

*these approaches remains uncomfortably silent about their effectiveness.” That leaves schools in the tough position of deciding which model to choose with little evidence to go on.*  
(Olson, 1999)

A third of the models reviewed in the *Guide* provided no research offering evidence of positive effects on student achievement. Studies that did provide “[e]vidence of positive effects on student achievement” most often used standardized tests, including statewide assessments, to demonstrate their effectiveness (Herman et al., 1999).

Evidence of effectiveness based on standardized tests is particularly problematic for ELLs, who are at a disadvantage with “one-size-fits-all” assessments - particularly when English-medium tests that were developed to assess native English-speakers are used to evaluate the content-area knowledge of ELLs. Assessment of an English language learner’s content-area knowledge administered in English may be greatly influenced by the student’s English language proficiency; as such, the tests measure students’ English ability rather than their ability in mathematics, science, or other areas. There is currently no shared understanding of how best to measure the achievement of ELLs on a wide scale, particularly as the tools currently being used to measure student progress are inadequate (Menken, 2000). As a result, there is a dearth of convincing research that indicates comprehensive school reform models are effective in the education of ELLs, and schools do not have the information they need to select a program and develop an effective plan for these students.

### **Research Directions in Serving ELLs through Comprehensive School Reform**

What is now needed is a great deal of research to evaluate the effectiveness of comprehensive school reform, particularly in the education of ELLs. Recognizing the need for further research, the *Catalog of School Reform Models* (1999) by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform provides information on over sixty models, including *entire-school* models (covering most aspects of school operations) and *skill- and content-based* models (reading, math, and so on). Descriptions of the models include information about the types of students served (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999).

Building on this work, the Southwest Comprehensive Center provides a description of schools that have implemented school reform models believed to be effective with the ELL population in their guide, *Comprehensive School Reform Models Addressing the Needs of English Language Learners* (Wilde et al., 1999). While the purpose of the guide is not to evaluate program models per se, the research team selected schools for inclusion in the study based on evidence that ELLs had been successfully incorporated into school reform models. Evidence of effectiveness in serving the ELL population is offered in the description of each school, based on such data as the performance by ELLs on wide-scale and school-based assessments, and their school dropout information.

Two forthcoming studies promise to begin filling some of the evaluation gaps. A longitudinal study by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, *Scaling Up School Restructuring in Multicultural, Multilingual Contexts*, is focused on the impact of externally-developed school reform models in schools serving multicultural/multilingual students (Datnow, 2000). A study by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, *Adapting Comprehensive School Reform Models for English Language Learners*,

examines the adjustments made to comprehensive school reform models as they are implemented in schools serving large numbers of ELLs (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000). What is particularly promising about these research projects is that, in addition to offering information about comprehensive school reform models and ELLs, the research is being conducted by third party researchers; previously, most evaluative research in this area was conducted by model developers themselves.

In addition, a panel created by New American Schools - whose membership is comprised of recognized education reform experts as well as representatives from major education associations and the business community - has created guidelines for comprehensive school reform models (New American Schools, 2001). The panel has set "standards of quality" for providing schoolwide assistance. "The aim is to help consumers decide which designs and providers would be right for their schools and which are most likely to yield results" (Olson, 2000). Guidelines such as these can shape the place held for ELLs in the implementation of comprehensive school reform.

### Recommendations

While new attention is being paid to the effects of schoolwide reform on ELLs, it is clear that further work in this area is urgently needed. The following recommendations are based on the information presented above:

- Models implemented in schools where ELLs are served must incorporate and directly address their needs;
- More research must be generated to evaluate all existing models and other aspects of comprehensive school reform in serving ELLs;
- Studies that plan to evaluate comprehensive school reform on a wide scale must include evaluations of the particular impact on ELLs; and
- Standards that shape the implementation of schoolwide reform should offer guidance on the inclusion of ELLs.

The full inclusion of students who are English language learners in reform models and other aspects of implementation holds the promise that these students also benefit from comprehensive school reform.

### Resource Guide

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#### Online Resources for Further Information about Comprehensive School Reform

Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
<http://www.aisr.brown.edu/csr/index.html>

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning  
<http://www.mcrel.org/programs/csrd/>

National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform  
<http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu>

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory  
<http://www.ncrel.org/csri/>

Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory At Brown University (LAB)  
<http://www.lab.brown.edu/public/csr/csr-index.shtml>

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory  
<http://www.nwrel.org/csrdp/index.html>

Region III Comprehensive Center

<http://r3cc.ceee.gwu.edu>

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory  
<http://www.sedl.org/csrd/welcome.html>

U.S. Department of Education  
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/index.html>

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