

SCHOOL REFORM FOR YOUTH AT RISK:

Analysis of Six Change Models

Volume I: Summary and Analysis

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Models, Volume 1: Summary and Analysis

Analysis and Highlights

Background

The Office of Policy and Planning participated in an international study on children and youth at risk of school failure with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The purpose of this joint study was to identify strategies that have the potential for improving the delivery of services to students at risk of academic failure and their families and that have the potential for being replicated in other countries.

The report is an examination of programs that have been identified as holding promise for reducing the risk of school failure. Six different models are examined in 12 sites. The models studied were categorized as being curriculum-based reforms (i.e., projects to revamp curriculum) and governance-based reforms (i.e., projects to restructure school organizations). The curriculum-based reforms included Marie Clay's Reading Recovery, Robert Slavin's Success for All, and the Academy model. The governance-based reforms included Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools model, James Comer's School Development Program, and school-based management programs.

The report also compares the benefits derived from curriculum-based reforms with those derived from governance-based reforms. In addition, the report identifies the preconditions needed for effective adaptation of models and examines how to successfully replicate reform in other sites.

Selected Findings

- o The broader the scope of the intervention, the more its success depends on the circumstances at the school where the reform is to take place rather than on the content of the reform itself. For example, curriculum-based reforms, in general, require teachers to deliver instruction in a different way but they do not require the school to change. Thus, it is easier to implement a curriculum-based reform and they tend to look the same across sites. On the other hand, the implementing governance-based reforms varies greatly from one school to another because schools have different political and cultural characteristics.
- o When curriculum-based reforms are implemented correctly they have an immediate impact on student learning. This is not as true for governance-based reforms which tend to be long-range and constantly evolving. For these programs, increases in student achievement are less concrete in the initial years of the new system.
- o Successfully implemented curriculum-based reforms require good management skills and skilled teachers who are highly motivated. On the other hand, governance-based reforms depend on the ability of teachers and administrators to work well together as a group and on a leader that is able to promote a common vision.
- o In order for a successfully implemented reform effort to become part of the ongoing identity of the school, there must be sufficient time--for planning before adoption of the reform, for getting the reform underway, and for sticking with the reform long enough to let it take effect.

- o The amount of commitment a district must make to support a reform depends on the type. Curriculum-based reforms generally require financial support only, while governance-based reforms may require the district office to shift from a monitoring role to one of providing guidance.
- o It is expensive to initiate school reforms; however, since curriculum-based reforms are generally programs or packages of instructional materials, you can usually know exactly how much a curriculum-based reforms will cost. Governance-based reforms do not usually have defined costs.
- o Reform strategies that require teachers to use problem solving strategies tend to result in teachers using those strategies as an instructional technique in the classroom. For example, the more teachers work in groups and participate in decision making to implement school reform, the more they will have their students work in groups.
- o Getting parents involved in school reform is often extremely challenging, even when the reform is designed to offer parents opportunities to participate in making decision at the school. In the sites visited, despite the fact that all schools had made gains in this area, parents played only a token role on governing committees. Differences in race, ethnicity, and class between school staff and parents presented frustrating barriers to collaborative work.

Conclusions

- o The local setting and existing school culture are important considerations when implementing school reforms, particularly those that are governance-based.
- o Curriculum-based reforms need a realistic timetable for implementation, ongoing technical assistance, and competent management.
- o Governance reforms, in general, need several years for planning, gradual implementation, and flexible assessment mechanisms to monitor progress.
- o Adoption of curriculum frameworks or instructional objectives early in the process of carrying out a school-based management reform helps schools to maintain a focus when implementing the broader aspects of the initiative.
- o Increased professional opportunities for teachers and enhanced decision making contribute to increasing the chances that reforms, regardless of their type, will become institutionalized.

Additional copies of Volume 1 and the individual case studies of the projects contained in Volume 2, Promising Practices for Children and Youth at Risk of School Failure are available by writing to the Office of Policy and Planning, 400 Maryland Avenue, SW, Room 3127, Washington, DC 20202.