

Case Studies of Rural Schools Implementing Comprehensive School Reform Models



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Building Knowledge to Support Learning

Case Studies of Rural Schools Implementing Comprehensive School Reform Models

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ABSTRACT

During the school years of 1999-2000 and fall 2002, five small, southwestern rural schools were studied using case study methodology to determine their success in implementing comprehensive, school-wide, and research-based improvement model(s). Each of these schools received three-year grants of \$50,000 per year under the aegis of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program. Anecdotal and self-reported data verified by classroom observations and local student progress assessment results indicated that the schools were successful in implementing their chosen CSR model(s) and made some gains in student academic performance. Analyses of state-mandated tests proved inconclusive.

CSR grant winners—five small, southwestern rural schools—received a minimum of \$50,000 each year for three years to implement research-based, comprehensive school reform models.

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR) program, a three-year federal initiative to reorganize and revitalize low-performing schools. CSR grant winners received a minimum of \$50,000 each year for three years to implement research-based, comprehensive school reform models. The CSR program had several unique features, such as a relatively long grant period; local adoption of comprehensive, research-based reform models; and provision of external support by CSR model technical assistance providers. The grant program is administered by state education agencies, and school systems, including rural schools, were encouraged to apply for funding.

Small, isolated rural schools have long posed a challenge to state and federal policy makers. Small schools have frequently been judged as too costly and

Of the 46.5 million students attending public schools in the U.S., approximately 5 million students are educated in rural schools and approximately 1 million attend schools with enrollments of less than 450 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

ill-equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students. Policy makers often suggest consolidation of smaller schools into larger schools as the best solution for these problems. To illustrate this point, the number of school districts in the U.S. declined from nearly 128,000 in 1931 to nearly 16,000 in 1998. In the same period, the number of one-room schools dwindled from 150,000 to less than 1,000. Nevertheless, a sizable number of small schools continue to serve students in rural areas. Of the 46.5 million students attending public schools in the U.S., approximately 5 million students are educated in rural schools and approximately 1 million attend schools with enrollments of less than 450 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Although consolidation of small schools continues to be of interest, the practical problems of geography (terrain and distance) and politics (small school and community advocates) preclude consolidation from becoming the only solution to providing quality education in rural areas.

Small, rural schools will likely continue to educate significant portions of students in the U.S. while facing the challenges of limited resources, isolation, declining enrollments, aging facilities, limited curricula, and diminishing political influence. These challenges prompted the question of whether small, rural schools could benefit from CSR grants.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study addressed two major objectives:

1. Given the relative isolation and limited access to resources, will small, rural schools be able to utilize additional funds to adopt and implement a comprehensive school improvement effort?
2. If these small, rural schools are able to garner the additional resources and implement a comprehensive school reform model, will such efforts positively impact student learning?

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

School improvement is a socio-political process that depends on the cooperation and involvement of many individuals and groups to make it work. This seems to be particularly true of small schools located in the fish bowl environment of small rural towns. Although these schools are isolated from the social and political mainstream, their small size places their inhabitants under close scrutiny and direct observation. In addition, small towns and their schools can become comfortable with the status quo and conservative in their willingness to explore new educational innovations. Case study methodology was chosen in order to closely examine and observe these dynamics and their influence on an externally driven and funded school improvement process.

A case study approach (Merriam, 1991) begins with carefully selected situations (cases) that permit close examination of a number of variables in a holistic fashion. Small schools and their community fit well with case study research methods because of the relative small size and tightly bounded settings. Case

study methodology also depends on gaining access to and the trust of participants involved at the local school and community levels. It relies on a free flow of shared perceptions cross-validated by observations and printed materials. Typical small rural school cultures and values are compatible to building trust and cooperation if, of course, approached in a mutually respectful manner.

To implement this study, five small, rural schools were identified, one each in the southwestern states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. This region of the United States is challenged by population sparseness, high poverty, diverse ethnic groups, conservative political values, and faltering or weak economies (Beeson & Strange, Fall, 2000).

The schools selected for this study were a purposeful sample (i.e., they were chosen for their potential for representing a cross section of rural schools and different comprehensive school reform models). Members of the state educational agencies provided necessary information and assistance in the selection of the five schools for this study. Table 1 displays the schools selected and criteria used in their selection. To protect the privacy of these schools, pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

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Table 1: Characteristics of Rural Case Study Sites and Related Data

CHARACTERISTICS	COPPER NM	CROSSOVER TX	LIBERTY OK	SUGAR LA	SUMAC AR
School Size	71	277	244	260	364
Grade Levels	K-5	K-12	PreK-12	PreK-6	K-6
Community Size	600	350	1,700	1,864	2,200
Distance from Metropolitan Area (in miles)	167	60	50	50	150
Title I Eligible	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch (percent of students)	71	70	72	98	56
CSR Model(s)	Success For All	Reading Renaissance, Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement, Accelerated Reader, Accelerated Schools	Effective Schools Model, Accelerated Reader	Early Literacy Initiative	Core Knowledge; Investigations in Number, Data, and Space; Literature-Based Reading

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Phases one and two of this study pursued the following general questions. These questions were explored in interviews, school/classroom observations, and supportive documentation.

1. What CSR models were selected by the schools of this study, why, and to what degree were they implemented?
2. What factors contributed or impeded the implementation of their selected CSR models?
3. What role did the model developers and their technical assistance providers play in the implementation of the chosen CSR models?
4. How were the respective schools of this study impacted by their CSR grant?
5. How did the rural context help and/or hinder the school improvement process?
6. To what degree did the selected CSR model influence student academic progress and how was this reflected in the schools' respective state-mandated tests?

The data collected to answer the above questions were carefully analyzed (Miles & Huberman, 1984) for patterns of consistency and unanimity of perceptions. Each school case was prepared and a meta-analysis was conducted across all five cases. Both common experiences and significant unique events were noted and reported.

Each case (i.e., school site visit) was conducted in a similar manner. Two- to three-day visits were arranged once the chief school administrator agreed to participate in the study. Prior to the visit, each school received a brief one-page summary of the study and a copy of the interview protocol. Upon arrival at the schools, the primary contact person assisted in developing a schedule for the interviews, leaving some open time for classroom visits and other observations. With one exception, all classroom teachers, building principals, and school district administrators were interviewed individually; in one school, teachers were interviewed in small groups. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and isolated area of the school to ensure interviewees' privacy. Interviewees were assured that their identity would be kept confidential and their names would not be used in the report of the study. A written record of each interview was made and later, usually the same afternoon or evening of the interview, the

record was summarized vis-à-vis the interview protocol questions. Observation notes also were summarized. Pertinent documents and reports were tagged by sites and filed for future reference. Following each school visit, telephone interviews were conducted with the CSR model technical assistance providers for the respective schools. These interviews were structured to gather additional information and to provide a check on teachers' perceptions regarding the CSR models' implementation and in-service and coaching experiences.

After the Phase one fall and spring visits, a site summary was prepared for each school. This summary described the school and its community as well as detailed responses for each of the general questions that guided the inquiry. The individual site report concluded with a summary of the school's progress in the first year of their CSR grant. The site summaries for the first year were subject to a meta-analysis that resulted in a written report of Phase one's observations and conclusions (Carlson, 2000). This report was shared with each of the participating school districts and state education agencies.

Phase two of this study was conducted following the conclusion of their respective CSR grants in a similar manner to the Phase one study. Interviews were conducted with essentially the same school personnel that were interviewed during Phase one. All of the schools had experienced some minor personnel turnover except for Liberty where the turnover was more extensive at the secondary school level and among the principals. When turnover occurred, their replacements were added to the interview sample. Phase two used questions similar to those that guided the inquiry in Phase one; however, Phase two focused on what was or was not accomplished and the impacts that the CSR program had on the students, teachers, school, parents, and community. State-mandated test scores were collected and analyzed. A second report (Carlson, 2003) was prepared and shared with each of the participating schools and state agencies.

These two reports and their respective site summaries provide the data base for the findings that follow.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

As stated earlier, both Phase one and Phase two studies were guided by a similar set of research questions. However, Phase two was more reflective in nature and examined state-mandated test data to determine the impact of these CSR models on student achievement. The text that follows is a general summary of results to these questions.

1. What CSR models were selected by the schools of this study, why, and to what degree where they implemented?

As shown in Table 2 (page 10), the selected CSR models varied from school to school of this study. The selection of each school's particular CSR model was complicated and linked to the unique history of the school. There is little doubt, however, that the opportunity to acquire extra funding to meet local needs played a major role in schools pursuing CSR grants. It is also important

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Each of the five schools (especially Crossover, Copper, and Sugar) had been identified as low performing and subject to some state education agency review. Interviews revealed that school personnel were concerned about their schools' performance on state-mandated test(s) and the consequences if low performance resulted.

to recognize the influence of state accountability programs that established specific student outcome standards and testing programs to measure schools' performance. Each of the five schools (especially Crossover, Copper, and Sugar) had been identified as low performing and subject to some state education agency review. Interviews revealed that school personnel were concerned about their schools' performance on state-mandated test(s) and the consequences if low performance resulted.

The schools of this study achieved varying degrees of success implementing their CSR programs. Table 2 summarizes these results for each school.

Table 2: Summary of School Implementation Effects

SCHOOLS	CSR MODELS	CSR IMPLEMENTATION RESULTS
Copper, NM	Success for All	Nearly fully implemented. Had some difficulties with obtaining tutors, reducing site facilitator to part time, and encouraging parent involvement.
Crossover, TX	Reading Renaissance, Accelerated Reader in reading and mathematics, Accelerated Schools, Teacher Expectations, and Student Achievement, parent center, and computer labs	Nearly fully implemented. Implemented all programs except Accelerated Schools, which was partially implemented at the secondary level and still in progress.
Liberty, OK	Effective Schools Model, Accelerated Reader	Nearly fully implemented. Had some difficulties in sustaining momentum and support into Year 3.
Sugar, LA	Early Literacy Initiative Project	Fully implemented the Early Literacy Initiative Project in Pre-K through grades 3.
Sumac, AR	Core Knowledge; Investigations in Number, Data, and Space; and Literature-Based Reading	Partially implemented. Had some difficulties in sustaining Core Knowledge in Year 3. Delayed Literature-Based Reading implementation to years 2 and 3. Investigations in Numbers, Data, and Space was fully implemented.

Sugar topped the list by fully implementing its CSR plans and working to extend its early literacy success to the upper elementary grades. Copper, Crossover, and Liberty faced some difficulties but were generally successful. Sumac had difficulty in overcoming teacher resistance and other distractions that stemmed from teachers' limited involvement in proposed curricula changes; these hurdles caused Sumac to pull back, especially in the math component of its CSR program.

2. What factors contributed to or impeded the implementation of their selected CSR models?

The following factors contributed to CSR implementation:

Teacher Factors

- Teacher observations of student progress and success (5 of 5 schools)
- Teacher cohesion and joint planning (5 of 5 schools)
- Teacher acquisition of a sense of empowerment and professional competence (5 of 5 schools)

Most of the teachers from the five schools agreed that the factor that made the most positive impact on CSR implementation was observing student progress throughout the process. Daily, weekly, and periodic assessments (e.g., Success For All eight-week assessments) of student work provided tangible evidence that students were making sufficient progress and, in most cases, showing more improvement than past students did using old programs and methods. All of the teachers shared in implementing new programs and techniques, which resulted in a heightened awareness that joint planning and sharing were needed. This was further reinforced by in-service programs offered by each of the CSR models' technical assistance providers. The feeling of mastering new demands and noticeably impacting student achievement contributed to their sense of empowerment and professional competence.

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School Factors

- Instructional materials provided in a timely fashion (5 of 5 schools)
- School-schedule adjustments to provide teachers with release time for planning and in-service training (5 of 5 schools)
- Staff in-service programs, including on-site training and classroom consultations by external CSR models' technical assistance providers (5 of 5 schools)

Having much needed instructional materials available in a timely fashion was a real morale booster among the teachers of these schools. School administrators, project directors, and other personnel made a significant effort to solicit from teachers their instructional needs and/or anticipated these needs and ordered necessary books, curriculum guides, computers with ample software and Internet connections, CDs, and videos. Most of these items had not been available in the past due to budgetary constraints. These schools also managed to solve the age old problem of finding time for teachers to plan and train in areas related to their CSR projects. This was mostly accomplished by schedule changes which set aside specific days for in-service and adjustments in the scheduling of special subjects. Teachers found snippets of time before and after school and in the hallways for discussions. In-service training and classroom

coaching of teachers also played a major role in supporting teachers and keeping them motivated to stay the course.

External Factors

- State-level and mandated testing programs (5 of 5 schools)

Although teachers felt the state-mandated tests were too narrowly focused and over emphasized, all agreed that the tests required their careful attention and preparation of students. For example, the Crossover faculty were concerned about their past test scores and threatened state takeover if their scores did not improve. In Sumac, teachers paid additional attention to these tests and returned to the “basics.” In the remaining schools, teachers expressed less concern, but were nevertheless aware of the tests’ importance. In fact, these schools showcased test results at the end of the school year as evidence of successful implementation of their new CSR programs.

The following factors impeded CSR implementation:

Teacher Factors

- Teacher resistance to implementing proposed programs (4 of 5 schools)
- Teacher overload and stress (4 of 5 schools)
- Teacher turnover (4 of 5 schools)

Although all of the schools were to some degree successful in implementing their CSR plans, they did encounter some difficulties along the way. Teacher resistance surfaced in each of the schools though the magnitude of the resistance varied. Copper, Crossover, and Sugar experienced far less resistance, most likely because school and district administrators involved teachers or their representatives in the development of their grant proposals and those who had doubts were willing to go along with the majority’s decision. In Liberty and Sumac, the resistance was deeper and more vocal and extended to the community. Teachers felt stressed and overloaded, but as one teacher noted, “We’ll just have to do it.” Turnover varied among the schools and was handled in different ways, but all five had to figure out how to orient and train new personnel so that they could fully support the change effort.

School Factors

- Limited funds to support hiring needed extra personnel (three of five schools)

Three schools (Copper, Liberty, and Sugar) each expressed the need for extra personnel to ensure successful implementation of their respective CSR programs. Additional state funds were not available and the schools had to make do with what they could afford with grant and local funds.

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External Factors

- Insufficient involvement of parents and community members (five of the five schools)

All of the schools lamented that they were not successful in improving parent involvement. Although three schools (Crossover, Copper, Sugar) made special efforts to engage parents and community in a positive and supportive way, they did not feel successful. At the conclusion of the three-year CSR grant, Liberty faced mounting financial debt and was unable to obtain support from its school board to continue working with the Center for Effective Schools at the University of Oklahoma.

3. What role did the model developers and their technical assistance providers play in the implementation of the chosen CSR models?

All of the schools reported that the CSR models' technical assistance providers played a significant role in the implementation of their respective CSR models. These consultants were effective in building rapport with their teachers, provided onsite consultation and training that involved demonstration teaching in the classrooms, and were responsive between onsite visits through telephone and e-mail communications. Rural isolation proved to not be a major barrier as technical assistance providers kept in close contact with their respective schools and made timely visits that were seen as ample in supporting the instructional needs of school personnel.

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4. How were the respective schools of this study impacted by their CSR grant?

School personnel were asked to share their perceptions of how their CSR models impacted various groups of people, including students, teachers, school, parents, and community.

Students

Across the board, school personnel were particularly enthusiastic about the degree to which their students improved literacy (e.g., reading, writing, spelling) and mathematic skills (e.g., computation, reasoning, problem solving). They also observed that students were more interested in reading, especially reading independently and using library materials, including computer software.

Teachers

School personnel reported an increase in teacher expectations for student performance and an acknowledgement of past underestimations of student learning potential. Teachers expanded their repertoire of teaching methods and learned to work more closely with their colleagues.

School

School personnel generally noted that the positive gains they experienced became woven into the tapestry of their schools' culture and organization. Improvements were noted in the physical plant and in attitudes toward the school. Faculty collaboration to implement new curricula and instructional practices resulted in greater respect across the board and reduced the negative stereotyping of colleagues so common in the past.

Parents

School personnel indicated that parents were more supportive of the schools' efforts; they hypothesized that this increase in support was at least partially attributed to observed improvement in their children's academic achievement. This was not the case in all of the sites. At Liberty and Sumac, pockets of parental concern threatened to derail CSR school improvement efforts.

Community

It was difficult to ascertain the degree to which the respective communities were impacted by CSR efforts. Little evidence exists of their concern or interest. However, state-mandated tests results and impending greater state control may change this in the future.

In general, the schools' CSR programs positively impacted various school and community groups. Students, the primary target group, benefited the most because teachers started to recognize the importance of their success and acquiring confidence in making a difference in their students' academic achievement. As one teacher observed, "We will never be the same again. This was the best thing that could have ever happened to us." This observation echoed across the schools and is the legacy of having chosen to participate in the CSR grant program.

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5. How did the rural context help and/or hinder the school improvement process?

At the onset of this study, it was thought that the rural context would more negatively than positively influence schools' success in implementing their CSR programs. As noted above, rural schools often serve a significant numbers of low income and minority children and suffer from inadequate funding (Beeson & Strange, 2000). These schools are frequently located in faraway places making access to supportive educational services difficult if not nearly impossible. And these schools' communities are often viewed as conservative in nature, often exemplified in a suspicious attitude toward and resistance to new educational innovations.

On the positive side, however, most rural schools are small in size which, in turn, makes it easier to communicate internally and to share ideas. Also this smallness permits closer scrutiny of student performance and hopefully timely and needed interventions.

This study demonstrated that the schools of the study were able to overcome many of their limitations while taking advantage of their small size. The influx of additional funds for a three-year period of time provided much needed fiscal nourishment that local and state sources typically could not provide. The nature of projects selected addressed the special learning needs of all children and provided valuable insights and methods in working with low income and minority children. This focus on the children minimized community conservatism and resistance to new programs. Further, the isolation of these schools was reduced as well by the commitment of CSR models' technical assistance providers to exert their presence in the schools and to maintain close liaison throughout the three-year period of the grant.

The small number of faculty and students involved (except for Sumac) enabled close monitoring of pupil progress and sharing of ideas to deal with situations requiring some adjustment. Students' progress was closely monitored and classroom teachers were not shy about requesting assistance from the CSR models' technical assistance providers in dealing with more troubling cases.

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6. To what degree did the selected CSR model influence student academic progress and how was this reflected in the schools' respective state-wide mandated tests?

The five states' testing programs differed in which grades were tested and how the test results were aggregated. Regardless of the methods used, each state established certain minimums of performance and classified schools according to their test results. In addition to these state-mandated tests, some of the schools tested their students at certain grade levels on standardized achievement tests. The test results of each school are reported in detail in Carlson, 2003. Reported here is a summary of those findings.

Determining the improvement of pupil performance over the three years of the grant proved challenging. First, pupil turnover in small classes made comparing classes of children (i.e., cohort groups) over time a difficult task. In some cases, the test results of classes of less than 25 pupils were not reported. Further these small classes and their aggregated results were often distorted by just a few very low performing students.

With these limitations, Table 3 (page 16) displays a summary of each school's overall test results. When possible, test results were examined at the same grade level (grade-level comparisons) and for the same students (cohort comparisons) over the three years of 1999-2002.

These analyses proved inconclusive regarding the impact of the CSR grants on student achievement across the five states. Copper and Crossover made more consistent and positive scores over time. Liberty, Sugar, and Sumac showed some declines in their performance by the third year of the CSR grant period. These test results contrasted sharply with teachers' ongoing monitoring of student progress using individual assessment approaches (e.g., reading inventories, skill assessment software, independent seatwork, and daily teacher observations) and periodic student assessments required by their CSR programs.

Table 3: A Summary of Test Results

SCHOOL	TESTS ADMINISTERED	GRADE LEVELS	RESULTS
Copper, NM	Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills	Grades 1-5	<u>Grade-level comparisons</u> showed a steady gain in both reading and math. <u>Cohort comparisons</u> showed an improvement in reading and slight decline in math.
Crossover, TX	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills	Grades 3-8, 10	<u>Grade-level comparisons</u> showed a significant increase in the percentage of students passing the 70% minimum in reading and math. <u>Cohort comparisons</u> showed a similar increase as they moved from grade 3 to 4. The greatest improvement was noted in math.
Liberty, OK	Iowa Test of Basic Skills & OK Core Curriculum Tests	Grades 3 & 5	<u>Grade-level comparisons</u> for grade 5 showed marked improvement in reading for the last year of the grant, 2001-2002, and a decline in math. <u>Cohort comparisons</u> showed a slight improvement in math and less so in reading.
Sugar, LA	Louisiana Educational Assessment Tests & Iowa Test Composite	Grades 1-5	<u>Grade-level comparison</u> at grade 4 showed some improvement in English Language Arts and math. <u>Cohort comparisons</u> showed a decline in both reading and math from grade 3 to 5.
Sumac, AR	Arkansas Benchmark Exams & Stanford Reading & Math Achievement Tests	Grades 3-5	<u>Grade-level comparisons</u> for grade 4 showed a decline in literacy and slight improvement in math. <u>Cohort comparisons</u> showed a decline in both reading and math for grades 3 and 5.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The results of this study generally supported other related school improvement studies (cf., Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Borman et. al, 2002; Crandall et al., 1982; Datnow et al., 2000, and Stringfield et al., 1997) and a rural specific study (Carnegie Corporation of N.Y., 2002).

The results of this study generally supported other related school improvement studies (cf., Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Borman et. al, 2002; Crandall et al., 1982; Datnow et al., 2000, and Stringfield et al., 1997) and a rural specific study (Carnegie Corporation of N.Y., 2002). This study focused on small, rural schools involved in the CSR grant program. Below are some conclusions from this study.

First, and foremost this study clearly showed that rural isolation, small size, and limited fiscal and personnel resources do not necessarily limit a school's capacity to improve. In other words, a small grant of \$50,000 per year over a three-year period of time provided the necessary funds and impetus to make major improvements in a school's programs. There were no endemic characteristics of

these small, rural schools that prevented them from successfully implementing school-wide, comprehensive change.

Second, the added funds, albeit minimal by some standards, enabled budget strapped rural schools to purchase much needed consultant services and instructional equipment and materials to successfully implement major instructional changes. In nearly all cases, this was missing from these schools in the past.

Third, although state-mandated testing programs do not enjoy wide support among school personnel and many parents, they did play a major role in motivating the schools of this study to pay closer attention to all students' progress. As one school superintendent stated, "The time for excuses is over."

Finally, this study demonstrated that teachers can make a difference. They do need additional resources to transition from present practices to those more promising. Federal funds can help stimulate and support the change process. It is unfortunate that these funds are not offered on an even more long-term basis to help institutionalize required changes. ■

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