

Indicator: The district ensures that school improvement initiatives include research-based, field-proven programs, practices, and models. (22)

Evidence Review:

The What Works Clearinghouse, the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, the Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education, and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory are all sources of information on the efficacy of improvement models. In science, the accepted “gold standard” for evidence is a controlled experiment. Controlled experiments in education are rare and there are varying gradations of quality of evidence from the anecdotal to quasi-experiments. Some sources are more liberal than others in determining what research is rigorous enough to “count” (i.e., is reliable and credible). For that reason, not all sources will cite the same research.

As of this writing, the What Works Clearinghouse (www.whatworks.ed.gov) provides reports of rigorously screened research on programs in elementary and middle school mathematics, character education, dropout prevention, early childhood education, English language learning, and beginning reading.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory maintains a catalog of school reform models at <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/catalog/index.shtml>. It provides descriptive information for each model – grade levels, main features, whether subject-area programs are provided, special populations, materials, and parent involvement, among others – as well as a description of the general approach and research findings. There are explanations of the assistance provided by the developer and the costs associated with adoption. References to selected evaluation reports – those commissioned by the developer and those by independent researchers – are given along with demographic breakdowns and contact information (provided by the model developer) for schools using the program.

The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (CSRQ) has released reports on education service providers (2006), elementary school reform models (2005), middle and high school reform models (2006), and enhancing participation of students with disabilities in school reform models (n.d.). The models are rated on the extent to which there is evidence of:

- Positive effects on student achievement (overall, for diverse student populations, and in specific subject areas)
- Positive effects on additional student outcomes, such as attendance or dropout rates
- Positive effects on parent, family, and community involvement
- A link between research and the model’s design
- Services and support to schools to enable successful implementation

Evidence was rated on how reliable and credible it was and whether the model’s impact was large or small. Note that a low rating does not necessarily mean that a model is ineffective; a model may also have a low rating if it has not been the subject of sufficient rigorous research. The CSRQ reports also contain breakdowns of cost data by program year and detailed descriptions of the models and the services provided.

Other resources are also available. The Best Evidence Encyclopedia (<http://www.bestevidence.org/>) is a free web site created by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education (CDDRE) that examines meta-analyses or other quantitative syntheses of educational research.

It is essential that you select a model that addresses your particular school's' needs; the model that worked at the school down the street might not be appropriate for your school if your needs differ from theirs. If your school's greatest need is to improve reading instruction, a model that emphasizes collaboration might not be the best choice, even though collaboration is a fine goal. Selecting a reform model or educational service provider with a proven track record cannot guarantee success at your school, but it will clearly improve the odds. Keep in mind that implementation is key; even excellent models may falter if implementation is not faithful and complete.

The National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA), a collaborative effort of the University of Texas at Austin, the Education Commission of the States, and Just for the Kids, provides a self-audit, the Best Practice Framework, (http://www.just4kids.org/bestpractice/self_audit_framework.cfm?sub=tools) that enables district and school staff to compare their instructional and organizational practices with those of consistently higher-performing schools and districts. The self-audit is also designed to diagnose issues of communication and policy implementation. Five questionnaires are available for district staff and ten for schools. Survey results can be completed online and results compiled automatically or questionnaires may be printed and tabulated by hand. The Framework includes:

- Curriculum and Academic Goals
- Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
- Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
- Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

The site also offers case studies of successful schools in 20 states that illustrate best practice in each of the framework elements.

The Reinventing Education website cited in the previous section contains a host of diagnostic instruments; links are at http://www.reinventingeducation.org/RE3Web/ctk?BrowseTools&action=OPEN_INDEX&view=1 (free registration is required).

Source: Carole Perlman, *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*

References and other resources:

- Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. (2005). *CSRQ report on elementary comprehensive school reform models*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved Fall 2006 from <http://www.csrq.org/CSRQreportselementaryschoolreport.asp>
- Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. (2006). *CSRQ report on middle and high school comprehensive school reform models*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved Fall 2006 from http://www.csrq.org/documents/MSHS2006Report_FinalFullVersion10-03-06.pdf
- Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. (n.d.) *Enhancing the participation of students with disabilities in comprehensive school reform models*. Retrieved Fall 2006 from <http://www.csrq.org/documents/EnhancingtheParticipationofStudentswithDisabilitiesinCSRModels.pdf>