

POLICY AND PROGRAM STUDIES SERVICE REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Implementation and Early Outcomes of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program

The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRSD) program provides financial assistance to help schools develop and implement systematic approaches to schoolwide improvement that are grounded in scientifically based research and effective practices. The goal of the program is to enable all children to meet challenging state academic content and achievement standards. The annual grants of at least \$50,000 per school support the initial implementation costs of adopting a research-based reform strategy over a three-year period.

Created in 1998, the federal CSRSD program builds on the research on effective schools and expands the concept of the Title I “schoolwide” program that was first introduced in the 1988 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Before 1988, federal funding for low-income and low-performing schools was to provide targeted services to students on an individualized basis. Schoolwide programs allow high-poverty schools to use federal resources in a comprehensive, integrated way to reform the entire school to meet the educational needs of all students in the school. The CSRSD program, targeted to schools serving the same high-poverty student populations, provided additional resources to help schools implement a cohesive reform plan. Schools receiving CSRSD grants must use these funds to implement a reform strategy that is based on rigorous research, within a plan that addresses the nine components of comprehensive school reform that are described in the law.

The 1998 law required a three-year national evaluation, and the Department released its first report in 2000, documenting the early implementation of the CSRSD program. This report updates the implementation data from the 2000 report and analyzes preliminary data on achievement outcomes for CSRSD schools. Data sources include the National Longitudinal Survey of Schools (NLSS), National School-Level State Assessment Score Database, the Field-Focused Study of the CSRSD Program, and the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) database of grantee information.

Key Study Findings

CSRSD funds are well targeted.

- CSRSD funds are more likely to be received by schools with a high proportion of students who are low income, minority, and limited English proficient. Almost half (46 percent) of CSRSD schools were in the highest poverty category (defined as having more than 75 percent of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches), compared with only 17 percent of all schools in the U.S.
- CSRSD schools are more than twice as likely to be identified as in need of improvement under Title I (37 percent) compared with Title I schools generally (17 percent).

CSRSD schools are more likely to adopt external reform models, and staff in CSRSD schools showed greater support for the school’s chosen reform method. In a number of other areas, CSRSD schools and non-CSRSD schoolwide programs did not differ significantly, although this was often because the non-CSRSD schools as well as CSRSD schools were highly likely to report practices associated with comprehensive school reform.

- By 2000-01, every CSRSD school reported having adopted an externally developed reform method, compared with 71 percent of non-CSRSD schoolwide schools.
- Teachers in CSRSD schools were more likely to report that the school’s reform method had improved teaching, professional growth, and students’ engagement in learning “to a great extent.”

- Principals in CSRD schools were more likely to report that professional development activities in their school were influenced by school plans, student assessment data, and state or local content standards.
- On most other measures—comprehensive planning, measurable goals, parent and community involvement, and evaluation—the NLSS surveys did not find significant differences between CSRD and non-CSRD schoolwide programs.

Case studies in 18 sites indicate that implementation of the nine CSRD components was mixed.

- While half of the 18 CSRD schools were fully implementing their chosen method, implementation was uneven or faltering in one-third of the schools, and at three of the schools, implementation was minimal or had stalled completely.
- Nearly all of the case study schools were engaged in moderate to intensive professional development, and most of this professional development was provided through an external technical support team.
- Less than half of the case study schools had in place reforms that were judged to be comprehensive. Some of the schools had comprehensive plans, but staff were unaware of or detached from any comprehensive vision associated with these plans; in other schools, there was neither documentation nor staff understanding that demonstrated that the school had a comprehensive plan.
- All but one of the schools had goals and benchmarks for measuring student progress.
- High turnover among staff and students at some schools resulted in a transient level of staff and parent support for the reform effort. Few schools had defined strategies to produce broad and sustained parental and community involvement.
- Most of the case study schools were coordinating funds to support the reform effort, but nearly all of the schools were unclear about the amount or source of new funds that might be used to implement the research-based method after the CSRD award has ended.

Early evidence suggests that student achievement improved in CSRD schools, but there was no relationship between CSRD funding and improved student achievement.

- Overall, CSRD schools made gains in reading and mathematics in about one-fourth of the states. Among elementary schools, CSRD schools made gains in reading in 10 out of 28 states; they made gains in mathematics in 9 out of 27 states.
- However, states with significant improvement in student achievement for CSRD schools also had significant growth in achievement for non-CSRD schools.
- Looking at change in the within-state rankings of CSRD schools compared with all other schools in the state, more states show positive average gains than declines, particularly at the elementary level. These gains are slightly more prevalent in states that have assessment trend data available for a longer period of time (three years instead of the usual two years), raising hope for further analyses when additional years of data are available. However, most of the gains (and losses) were not statistically significant.

These findings regarding student outcomes are preliminary, because the time frame covered here is too short to expect large effects of the CSRD program. Most schools had been receiving CSRD funding for only one or two years, and the state assessment data that was available provided only one or two years of achievement change data. Additional time would allow for deeper implementation of reforms. Additional time would also provide increased data points, allowing for a more robust analysis. A later report on student achievement in the first cohort of CSRD grantee would offer a better understanding of the progress of schools participating in this program.