

Achieving Nationwide School Improvement through Widespread Use of Effective Programs and Practices

BEFORE WE CAN TALK ABOUT MOVING EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES INTO WIDESPREAD USE, WE HAVE A PRELIMINARY QUESTION TO ADDRESS — DO WE HAVE EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES THAT, IF USED NATIONWIDE, WOULD ACTUALLY IMPROVE THE ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS PLACED AT RISK?

CRESPAR RESEARCHERS SAY YES, based on the Center's own work to produce effective programs and on studies and analyses conducted to identify such programs. The Center's Success for All and Roots and Wings programs have ten years of longitudinal data supporting their effectiveness for increasing student reading achievement. The Center's High School and Middle School Talent Development models each now have two years of promising data. The Center's Action Team model for promoting school, family, and community partnerships is supported by almost a decade's worth of quantitative and qualitative evidence showing that schools can promote partnerships, which in turn can enhance student outcomes.

Many studies by CRESPAR researchers have also identified other programs and practices that are in small-scale use throughout the nation which have sufficient research evidence to suggest that they are effective in improving student achievement. In *Special Strategies for Educating Disadvantaged Children: Final Report*, Sam Stringfield et al. report the results of a three-year study to identify effective programs being used in Title I schools. The programs examined included Success for All, the Comer School Development Program, the Paideia Program, the Coalition of Essential Schools, Reading Recovery, individual schoolwide projects, and others. The researchers conducted research reviews and studied the programs in use in 25 urban, suburban, and rural schools.

Implementation of the programs varied among the sites and was almost always a struggle, influenced by local variables, availability of resources, the degree of staff, district, and state commitment, the amount of ongoing professional development, and other factors. But the CRESPAR researchers drew a positive conclusion from their findings: "Students placed at risk of academic failure are capable of achieving at levels that meet and perhaps exceed current national averages, and strategies for making this happen are already in place in some schools. The ability of disadvantaged students to achieve academically was clearly demonstrated at some of the Special Strategies sites." In particular, two replicable programs — the Comer School Development Program and Success for All — showed marked gains on standardized tests.

Two other recent CRESPAR studies, both best-evidence reviews of the research, identify and present the evidence on effective programs and practices for students placed at risk. Olatokunbo Fashola and Robert Slavin, in "Promising Programs for Elementary and Middle Schools: Evidence of Effectiveness and Replicability," examine elementary and middle school programs in general. Then Fashola and Slavin, along with CRESPAR researchers Margarita Calderón and Richard Durán, also examine the research evidence on programs that might be effective specifically for Latino students. In both studies, the researchers conclude that: "Schools can do a much better job of educating low-income and minority students, using methods and materials that are readily available. There are approaches that are effective and appropriate for a wide variety of objectives."

School reform designs being developed as part of the New American Schools' five-year initiative are also beginning to show evidence of effectiveness as they are being implemented in schools and districts nationwide. This effort is now in its fourth year. Nine designs are described by CRESPAR researchers Sam Stringfield, Steve Ross, and Lana Smith in *Bold Plans for School Restructuring: The New American Schools Models*. The book provides an introductory chapter that discusses the New American Schools' vision, chapters on each of the designs, and a chapter that describes a formative assessment of the first year of implementation. In another CRESPAR activity, the identification and documentation of effective schools for low-income African American students is being carried out by Beverly Cole-Henderson at Howard University. In a selected bibliography derived from examining approximately 2,000 documents, Cole-Henderson identifies numerous studies that report on school programs and practices that make a difference in achievement for low-income African American students.

Thus, during the past decade, a substantial number of school improvement programs have been developed and put into use in a limited number of schools. The logical next questions are: Can these restructuring programs be "scaled up" to widespread use in schools throughout the nation? Can they, in widespread use, maintain the effectiveness they've shown in more limited use? Can the time come when most schools in America are using proven effective programs and most students in America, and especially students now placed at risk, are achieving better because of them?

CRESPAR researchers are addressing these questions in a number of ways. As Center programs are themselves being scaled up for use nationwide, the researchers are studying the processes and problems involved. At the same time, research teams are studying other scaling up efforts, including the New American Schools process. ■