
SCALING UP: The New American Schools in Memphis

NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS (NAS) IS A PRIVATE NONPROFIT CORPORATION FUNDED FROM CONTRIBUTIONS FROM BUSINESS, INDUSTRY, AND FOUNDATIONS. THE CORPORATION HAS FUNDED THE DEVELOPMENT OF “EFFECTIVE DESIGNS” FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND IS ENGAGING IN NATIONAL SCALING UP OF THE USE OF THE DESIGNS. IN THE SCALE-UP, STATES AND DISTRICTS SIGN ON TO BECOME NAS JURISDICTIONS, COMMITTED TO SELECTING AND IMPLEMENTING A “CRITICAL MASS” OF THE NAS DESIGNS IN THEIR SCHOOLS.

CRESPAR researchers are following and studying the process and the results of the scaling up effort in one jurisdiction—the Memphis (Tennessee) City School District. Their study provides another example of how the scaling up process may work in one district, moving from the use of effective designs in a selected number of schools to the use of the designs in a large number of schools — a critical mass — in the district.

Memphis City Schools serve an 80+% minority population with a mean poverty rate that is high even for urban districts. The question addressed in Memphis is straightforward—given district support, can a critical mass of schools in a large urban school district select effective restructuring programs, implement them, maintain them, and make a difference in the achievement of their students?

During the Spring of 1995, over 90 Memphis City Schools attended an “exposition” featuring six New American Schools (NAS) designs plus the Accelerated Schools and Paideia designs. The six NAS designs were ATLAS Schools, the Audrey Cohen College model, Co-NECT Schools, Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound, Modern Red Schoolhouse, and Roots and Wings. Over 50 school faculties proposed implementation of one of the designs, and 34 were funded to begin implementation over the Summer of 1995. The CRESPAR

team began gathering data before the exposition, and will continue the data collection and study through 1999 and perhaps beyond.

The researchers present preliminary evidence that scaling up is occurring — by the Spring of 1997, over 45 Memphis schools had selected and were implementing one of the eight designs. The researchers also report, based on case studies in 16 schools, information about which designs are easiest to implement, which designs in which schools are proceeding well or not so well, and what kinds of district adaptations and supports are helpful or not helpful in the scaling up process.

First year data gathering at the sites included classroom observations, teacher interviews and focus groups, and principal interviews. Outcome data (attendance and achievement) were made available by the Memphis City Schools. The researchers reported on the first year of implementation of the designs in a special issue of the international, refereed journal, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement (SESI)*, edited by Amanda Datnow and Sam Stringfield of Johns Hopkins. First year findings are detailed in the various articles of the *SESI* special issue, and evaluation outcomes are synthesized by CRESPAR researcher Steven Ross and others at the University of Memphis. The findings include:

Selection of Designs

Over one-half of the schools in Memphis City Schools expressed a sufficient level of interest in the designs to send a team of teachers, administrators, and community leaders to the initial exposition.

All eight of the school restructuring designs were found to be sufficiently attractive to merit proposed implementation by at least four schools.

Except for Roots and Wings, there were no obvious demographic differences among schools selecting the various designs. All schools choosing Roots and Wings served high-poverty communities and intended to use Title I schoolwide project funds to support the designs. A variety of restructuring designs were found attractive by diverse schools for equally diverse reasons.

Initial Reaction to Pre-Implementation Preparation and Early Restructuring Experiences

With the exception of Paideia training, Memphis City Schools’ teachers perceived the Summer 1995 training to be generally insufficient. Interestingly, the Paideia training was provided exclusively by other Tennessee teachers who had years of experience implementing Paideia, whereas other

training teams were dominated by team-based developers and professional trainers. Teachers tended to conclude that the design teams' training lacked the levels of specificity they believed they would need to implement the designs.

The three designs which teachers rated most likely to have positive impact on student achievement were Roots and Wings, Paideia, and Modern Red Schoolhouse. However, nearly a third of teachers reported that they were unsure of the outcome effects on students, with the largest category of uncertainty being teachers who felt it was "too early to tell" the eventual effects.

By mid-Fall of 1995, teachers in schools that chose designs that specified general outlines but left the specifics of curriculum development to individual schools were the most likely to report a feeling of being overworked.

Predictors of Success in

First-Year Implementation

Common perceptions of strengths included the revitalization of schools and teachers, and the initiation of new school organizations and teaching strategies.

Common concerns involved the need for more focused training, more time for teacher collaboration, and strategies for integrating curricular and learning activities with the skills assessed by state-mandated testing.

Designs that appeared to demonstrate the most substantive first-year changes in teaching and learning activities included Audrey Cohen College at the elementary school level, Roots and Wings (all elementary), and Paideia (middle and high school).

Designs that appeared to demonstrate the most first-year progress in team building and goal setting included Accelerated Schools, Co-NECT, and ATLAS.

In an analysis of schools (independent of

specific programs) experiencing the most initial success in implementing the reforms, the following conclusions were drawn:

- All of the restructuring efforts require a great deal of energy, time, and commitment from the teachers, administrators, and school community.
- Restructuring initiatives that provided classroom materials and guidelines for instruction generally started faster than designs emphasizing teacher-developed materials.
- Issues of focused leadership and on-going, long-term, focused professional development appeared likely to determine substantial parts of the long-term successes of the schools. However, relative to what might be called "reasonable progress," the Memphis start-up implementations were successful — with no unresolvable problems.

