Disseminating What Works: 
Key lessons for policy and practice

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In the last two decades educators have worked hard to move from “a nation at risk” to one that “leaves no child behind.” Beginning in 1989 and continuing throughout the 1990s, education policy advocates focused on developing a vision and then building broad-based consensus for what is now commonly referred to as “Standards-Based Reform.” For the first time in our nation’s history, a growing consensus was developing that all students (not just the top 10-20 percent) needed to be exposed to a rigorous, standards-based program of curriculum and instruction, if they were going to effectively compete in the 21st century. This concept succeeded, after a 10-year campaign, in fundamentally changing expectations for what all students needed to know and be able to do. Additionally, it made it imperative that the practitioner and public policy communities begin to think quite differently about strategies to accomplish this ambitious goal. The struggle to move from vision to reality is one that continues today.

The remainder of this paper will seek to shed light on the market and industry that have developed as a result of changed expectations, and, more recently, the development of federally-mandated accountability systems and sanctions. This market includes three critical elements: 1) “demand” – evolving needs of schools and systems driven by factors such as incentives, resource constraints, and technological advances; 2) “supply” – the landscape of a more robust and sustainable infrastructure to support this demand and the achievement of high standards and continuous improvement at the school and school system levels; and 3) “quality” – developing clear, objective criteria for provider performance, enabling school and system personnel to judge efficacy and, hopefully, make decisions accordingly.

I begin by outlining what I believe is a critical and essential shift in thinking and practice related to the goal of disseminating “what works” on a broad national basis and the related emergence of school reform organizations as a new industry. Next, I reflect on the federal policy called Comprehensive School Reform (CSR), which was enacted in 1997 and serves as an important case study for policy makers that seek to drive a focus on quality, scale, and sustainability of effective programs. Finally, I share some thoughts on an element missing in the current debate about school and school-system reform, specifically an understanding about the “non-academic” needs of our most economically disadvantaged youth and targeted strategies to address them. In this section, I strongly suggest that we as a nation will continue to have marginal impact on student achievement and long-term success in the absence of clear focus on such issues as the social, emotional, health, legal, family, and academic needs of our most at-risk populations.

Disseminating What Works – A New Industry Emerges

“The original Department of Education was created in 1867 to collect information on schools and teaching that would help the States establish effective school systems. While the agency’s name and location within the Executive Branch have changed over the past 130 years, this early emphasis on getting information on what works in education to teachers and education policymakers continues down to the present day.” (U.S. Department of Education Web site, 2006)

For decades, “disseminating what works” in education has been a process generally defined by the following steps: 1) research and evaluation to determine
efficacy; 2) documentation through formal reports, journal articles, and other written work products; and 3) distribution of new research insights through conferences, mailings, formal publications, and, more recently, via the Internet. For the most part, new information is considered effectively “disseminated” if it is made broadly available, not if it is put into effective widespread use. While building broad-based awareness of what works to educate students to high standards is necessary, it clearly is not sufficient to achieve the actual goal. An important question to ask is: why? While there are probably 94,000 (the approximate number of schools in our system) answers to this question, some common reasons include the following:

- Lack of time on the part of practitioners and administrators to review and consider new research-based strategies, as well as the absence of a common school-based culture focused on identification and investment in the use of benchmarked best practice;
- Lack of commitment to the concept of “what works” due to too much “noise” in the growing education marketplace and the absence of respected and widely used information sources that promote effective options;
- Shortage (or, in some cases, complete absence) of on-the-ground expertise to properly adapt research findings to local context and then make them sustainable over time; and
- Insufficient systems to drive continuous improvement and results for large numbers of students and adults, due to the nascent state of many local systems of data aggregation, analysis, and use.

The challenge of identifying, understanding, and then making operational within diverse local contexts “demonstrated best practice” has been tackled effectively by successful businesses for many decades. Such businesses recognize that continuous improvement and high-quality results require information about what works aligned with direct investment in your people (e.g., human capital development) to make it happen. Additionally, such businesses have recognized that the process can not be a one-shot training or “three-year reform fix”, but rather must be an ongoing practice of data gathering, analysis, insight, and team-based facilitated change and improvement. Some large companies, such as General Electric (GE), have developed substantial internal expertise and capacity to facilitate the learning and improvement process. Others have sought out the ongoing support and assistance of a myriad of management consulting firms (e.g., Bain, McKinsey, and Deloitte), recognizing that this work falls outside of their core competence. Either way, these successful enterprises have recognized the need and then made available the resources to enable their employees to continuously learn, improve, and grow. While the initial investment in the development and roll-out of such improvement processes was largely driven by significant competitive threats, today such investments are considered standard practice and a regular line item in annual corporate budgets. Unfortunately, this is not yet the case in education. It does, however, represent the critical path to success at scale in the future.

Over the last decade an emerging school improvement industry has begun to take shape, providing a wide range of options for schools and school systems to access both
research and expert coaching (onsite, offsite, and online). These organizations (referred to as design teams, models, and providers) were substantially influenced by the efforts of early network developers, such as Bob Slavin (Success for All), Hank Levin (Accelerated Schools), and Ted Sizer (Coalition of Essential Schools), as well as the unprecedented private sector investment orchestrated by New American Schools (NAS). In general, these efforts sought to be responsive to the demand for better results for all children, recognizing that traditional dissemination practices and government-sponsored supports (e.g., the Regional Education Laboratories) would simply not get the job done.

In 1991, NAS, a nonprofit corporation formed by the chief executives of some of our country’s most successful businesses, planned to develop “a new generation of American schools.” NAS organized a five-year research and development competition that resulted in 11 independent organizations being selected for funding and technical assistance to develop “comprehensive school designs.” Based on performance, NAS gradually focused on a portfolio of eight designs and invested more than $130 million in the selected organizations. Each design team created an approach to reorganize an entire school around a unified vision and a shared plan for higher student achievement; quality professional development for teachers, principals, and other school personnel; greater parental and community involvement; ongoing evaluation of progress and performance for continuous improvement; and closely tied networks of like-minded educators.

In 1996, NAS urged design teams to adopt a national dissemination strategy based on fee-for-service, recognizing that grant-reliant reform could not go to significant scale in this country. NAS supported this strategy by providing the seed capital and technical assistance to help design teams operate as professional service firms, financially independent of NAS. With NAS as a partner, they entered into agreements with a group of major school districts across the country to implement their models in at least one-third of the districts’ schools. Today all eight of these organizations are working in thousands of schools and operate totally independently from NAS.

In 1999, NAS joined hands with other education, business, and public policy groups to help educators and parents decipher among the organizations offering comprehensive school reform programs and services. NAS sponsored an independent blue ribbon panel composed of leaders across the spectrum of public education – from Chester E. Finn, Jr. of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation to Sandra Feldman of the American Federation of Teachers – to craft and endorse guidelines to help schools, teachers, parents, and others determine which of these organizations and service providers truly offered quality comprehensive school reform services. In 2001, NAS built on the work of the blue
ribbon panel by helping to form the Education Quality Institute (which eventually became the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center at AIR), an independent, nonprofit organization with the aim to help consumers of education products and services select programs that meet locally defined needs, adhere to quality guidelines, are research-based, and have been proven to work.

The comprehensive design organizations referenced above are now integrally part of a larger universe of providers seeking to provide fee-based and grant-supported services to our nation’s schools and school systems. In the business community a market such as this would be depicted through a comprehensive “market map”. The “map” looks at all the potential providers within, in this case, the multi-million dollar universe of school district consulting services. This provider universe would include the following major categories: non-profits (such as those mentioned above and organizations like Bridgespan consulting); for-profits (e.g., Edison, the Parthenon Group, McKinsey Consulting); universities, which are non-profits but sufficiently different to get their own category (e.g., University of Virginia, Vanderbilt, University of Pennsylvania/CPRE), and government entities (e.g., regional education laboratories, comprehensive assistance centers) All of these entities are competing to meet the demand for support and assistance in building the capacity of school districts to develop and manage a portfolio of schools that are capable of getting all (or most) students to high standards. [NOTE: Attachment A provides an example of a market map, depicting the CSR market by grade level.]

As policy makers look to learn from and build on the last decade of work in school and school system reform, consideration should be given to this broad array of options (with their respective strengths and weaknesses) and how policy maker actions can improve or weaken the development of this emerging infrastructure. During the last decade, real strides have been made in the development of a more entrepreneurial and robust infrastructure to support and sustain improvement in the education field. That said there is still much work to be done to ensure quality in this market as well as sufficient capacity to meet the growing needs in our nation’s school systems. The experience of the last decade (including the work of New American Schools) provides great insight into the type of financial and technical assistance investments required to help quality program providers codify their offerings and develop the appropriate models for staffing, service delivery, and finance to enable them to work with an increasing number of schools in a sustainable manner. A useful focusing question for policy maker consideration might be the following: is it better to target government resources to continue to develop a healthy market for district support services (e.g., create a competitive program for districts to access resources to work with quality providers) or to directly create government-sponsored technical assistance organizations? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?

Comprehensive School Reform: Lessons for Policy Makers

Comprehensive school reform “...arguably holds out the greatest hope of producing categorical change” in schools. (“Better by Design: A Consumer’s Guide to Schoolwide Reform” – a report by The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.)
Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) provides an important case study for consideration by policy makers. The strategy was targeted at the school rather than the district level, but did attempt to address the issues of demand (creating incentives for changed behavior at the school level), supply (creating a real market for providers of research-based school programs), and quality (developing a consumer report mechanism to enable school and school system personnel to differentiate between high and low quality options). While the execution of the policy (or program) was imperfect, this market-based approach reached scale (about 10,000 schools) in a short period of time (about five years) with quality (Geoff Borman’s report indicated that this strategy was more effective than traditional Title I approaches). While the language of CSR is not currently in vogue with the current administration, the strategies inherent in CSR continue to permeate the education policy and practice landscape across the nation. In reflecting on this program, several lessons for both policy and practice come to mind.

The CSR initiative was different from most high-poverty programs and policy that preceded it in four significant ways:

1) **Competitive versus formula-driven program.** The use of a significant sized (minimally $50,000 per school) competitive grant as an incentive did have real impact on leveraging changed behavior at the school and system levels compared to the traditional allocation of more Title I money through formulas, which tends to fund more of the same ineffective activities.

2) **Focus on evidence rather than pet projects.** While the culture is continuing to evolve and develop, CSR served as a powerful catalyst for the serious consideration of research and evidence to drive decision making regarding the allocation of scarce resources to support student achievement.

3) **Focus on team versus individual improvement.** The entire CSR process, beginning with the need for faculty-wide buy-in to a whole-school change approach, facilitated the development of a school-wide, data-driven process with the common goal of helping all students achieve at much higher levels.

4) **Market-based versus regulatory approach.** CSR was a voluntary program and not one-size-fits-all. CSR provided the early experience for what is now commonly referred to as “portfolio management”. In this approach, the system’s role is to ensure that families have access to a supply of diverse and high-quality schools – some of which may be operated by the system itself, with others managed by an array of providers. The chief functions of this type of system are to hold schools accountable for attaining standards for all students; to see that resources are distributed equitably; and to make sure that schools have access to appropriate technical support, whether provided centrally or through other kinds of partnerships.

CSR also provided insight into three important shifts in how policy can directly and positively impact practice:

1) **Capacity building versus traditional dissemination.** CSR facilitated the development of a new consulting infrastructure in the United States, serving as an
effective alternative to the traditional technical assistance (“clearinghouse”) model of the past (e.g., Regional Labs and Centers). CSR also helped school and system personnel to see the strength, rather than weakness, of seeking to identify and implement, with expert support, external best practices.

2) Development of professional networks. The selection and participation in professional school networks (e.g., Success for All, Direct Instruction, and Accelerated Schools) provided the opportunity to engage in and access ongoing action research, leading to the development of professional learning communities and a culture focused on continuous improvement.

3) Results at scale. In a relatively short period of time, a complex change strategy was implemented (at various levels of success) in thousands of schools across the nation, and, on average, showed more powerful results than the high-poverty schools strategies that preceded it. Across all studies, a clear message emerges that, when implemented well, CSR gets results for children. A lot is now known and should be leveraged about how to successfully implement research-based programs at scale and with sustainable results.

The Missing Link: Comprehensive Scaffolds

On a final note, while the discussion of CSR above points to promising advances in the field of school reform and improvement, it is clear that we still have a long way to go to overcome pervasive and persistent achievement gaps in this country. After 15 years of focused effort in the field of school reform at the national and local levels, I am persuaded that we will not succeed in closing these gaps until we commit to broadening our policy focus to include what some might consider the “non-academic” needs of our most economically disadvantaged children. If you look at standards-based reform over the past 10-plus years, it is clear that many education leaders believe that all you need to get in place are high standards, rigorous curriculum, aligned assessments, and quality professional development. Research and results to date, however, clearly indicate that this is simply not enough to get the job done for all students.

If the nation is truly committed to leaving no child behind, policy makers and practitioners must begin to focus, in an integrated way, on the social, emotional, health (including mental), legal, family, and academic needs of our most economically disadvantaged youth. Interventions, such as Say Yes to Education, which are focused on such comprehensive supports are demonstrating that it is possible to get dramatically better results (e.g., significantly higher high school graduation and post-secondary education attainment rates). These strategies do require additional investments in such activities as diagnostic assessments by social workers, after-school and summer programs, early literacy supports, etc. However, if research clearly indicates that it is possible to achieve dramatically better results for our most at-risk populations, one must responsibly ask why we are not pursuing such strategies at scale today.

[NOTE: Attachment B provides an overview of the research on key obstacles to post-secondary access and attainment for low income students. The four key obstacles noted provide the framework for the Say Yes to Education, Inc. Theory of Action.]