

# CSR Connection



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## Brokering External Policies to Raise Student Achievement: The Case of Plainfield, New Jersey School District

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### Introduction

As part of its 1998 decision, in *Abbott v. Burke V*, the New Jersey State Supreme Court ordered the State Department of Education to provide funding for “whole-school reform,” also known as comprehensive school reform (CSR)<sup>1</sup>. CSR was one of the remedies selected by the court to help schools in 28 high poverty, urban districts improve student achievement. After four years of implementation in New Jersey, CSR is proving to be a promising reform strategy that fosters higher achievement and may ultimately close the achievement gap in New Jersey (Slavin, 2003). It also has the unintended consequence of helping states, districts, and schools meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets set by the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation.

<sup>1</sup>Abbott uses the term whole-school reform; however, whole-school reform and comprehensive school reform are used interchangeably. Following the practice of federal legislation, we have chosen to use the term comprehensive school reform to refer to the reform mandated by Abbott.

This report examines the actions taken by Plainfield Public School District (PPS), one of the districts affected by the Abbott decision, to implement Abbott policy. Plainfield provides an example of a district that has adopted a CSR model and experienced a significant increase in language arts literacy achievement results across all its elementary schools. Although a cause and effect relationship between model adoption and improved achievement results cannot be established with certainty, improvement since the district's adoption of a CSR model is impressive and encouraging (Supovitz, 2003). The examination of actions taken by Plainfield to implement Abbott policy will focus on two questions: (1) What relationship, if any, exists between successful model implementation and improved student achievement? (2) How can districts help schools successfully implement CSR models?

## Background

The educational policy context of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) requires states to create a single accountability system. At the core of this system states must set Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets based on the gap between where districts and schools currently are in meeting NCLB goals of 100% proficiency in reading and math by the 2013–2014 school year. In addition, with its emphasis on closing the achievement gap, the law stipulates that schools and districts must disaggregate results by student sub-groups (race, ethnicity, social economic status, limited English proficiency, and special education). Not meeting AYP targets for even one sub-group of students for two years can identify a school as needing improvement. For many high poverty urban districts with the majority of its students belonging to multiple sub-groups, the gap between where they currently are and AYP targets is large and daunting.

Abbott policy is a large-scale, standards-based, systemic reform nested within an NCLB accountability system based on student achievement of state content stan-

dards. Abbott's funding, programs, and strategies were crafted to achieve the dual goals of *equality* of educational resources and *equity* of educational outcomes, which coincide with the federal governments' ESEA history of targeting federal funds to high poverty schools and designing policies, such as NCLB, to close the achievement gap.

The plaintiffs in *Abbott v. Burke*, known as the "Abbott districts," are currently engaged in a state reform mandated by the 1998 New Jersey State Supreme Court decision *Abbott v. Burke V*. The resulting Abbott policy is "an unprecedented series of entitlements for disadvantaged children including whole-school reform in elementary schools, pre-school for three and four year olds, a comprehensive facilities effort, after-school programs, and summer school" (Advocacy Center for Children's Educational Success with Standards). In the 1998 New Jersey context, CSR in elementary schools referred to four things: (1) teaching of the state's core curriculum content standards through adoption of a comprehensive school reform model; (2) school-based decision making; (3) a local accountability system; and (4) the use of data to drive decision making, for example, by requiring districts to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to acquire and allocate resources based on demonstrated need.

Despite repeated attempts over the last fifty years, large-scale education reform efforts have largely failed to make a difference (Fullan, 2000). According to Fullan (2000) a lack of attention to issues of implementation with regard to local institutions and cultures has contributed to this failure. Broadly speaking, implementation requires (1) getting teachers to change instructional practice and (2) understanding that in order to change practice it is critical that schools have both the institutional and individual capacity to make the changes.

Abbott policy has attempted to attend to issues of implementation by selecting whole-school reform models as the means

to change classroom practice. In so doing it has provided support, in the form of training from model developers, to build the individual capacity of teachers and the institutional capacity of schools to change their practice. In a study of the “New American Schools Scale-up Phase,” however, RAND (1998) noted that developers do not accomplish implementation by themselves; rather, “many interdependent, interconnected factors [are] important in supporting implementation in the schools.”

Complex external policies have elicited a range of responses from district central offices. Some districts have not implemented these policies effectively, “intentionally ignoring or knowingly reworking state policy . . . in some cases deviating from its intent by interpreting and often misconstruing the policy message or content” (Marsh, 2000). Other districts have been effective in using external policies as a lever to raise student achievement by acting as brokers, implementing these policies creatively and in ways sensitive to the local context.

Since the mid 1990s researchers have begun to re-examine the role of the central office. Stimulated by a new paradigm of teaching and learning found in standards-based, systemic reform, and new organizational structures for restructuring school governance, central offices are being viewed as levers for educational improvement (Charles A. Dana Center, 2000; McLaughlin et al., 2002; Togneri, 2003). This view no longer adheres to old notions of central office personnel as masters of administrative rather than pedagogical skills (Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Hightower, 2002) but instead suggests that central offices can make positive contributions in the area of teaching and learning across schools within their district.

## Methodology

The overarching research question for this study was: What district central office

actions were taken to support local schools in implementing strategies related to the Abbott decision? The sub-question addressed in this report is: What actions were taken by the Plainfield Public Schools central office to facilitate the selection and implementation of a CSR model? To answer these questions the study uses a grounded analytic framework to classify and assess the actions taken by central offices engaged in reform. The framework was developed by McLaughlin et al. (2002) in a study examining the actions of eight districts engaged in reform in four states. The researchers concluded that actions taken by these “reforming” districts could be organized into seven domains:

- Improving teaching and learning
- Developing the profession
- Partnering with non-system actors
- Responding to exogenous policy
- Allocating resources
- Communicating within and beyond the system
- Creating local systems of accountability

Although McLaughlin et al. found that the districts did not engage with equal intensity in each domain, the researchers did identify strategies appropriate for each domain. All domain actions should support the development and implementation of a coherent theory of teaching and learning. Actions characteristic of reforming districts are outlined below.

*Improving teaching and learning.* Principles of teaching and learning are developed to focus policy decisions and practice and develop the system’s capacity for continuous improvement. Actions appropriate to this domain include providing a scaffold for developing instructional policy tools, instruction, and conducting data collection.

*Developing the profession.* Principles of teaching and learning are translated into instruction across district schools and classrooms. Actions appropriate to this domain (1) support the notion that learn-

ing is an integral part of professional practice for all educators and (2) build the system's capacity to bring about and support professional judgment grounded in scientific and clinical knowledge.

***Partnering with non-system actors.*** Relationships are developed with non-system partners who can support high quality teaching and learning by providing expertise, knowledge, and fiscal, physical, and human resources.

***Responding to exogenous policy.*** State and federal policy tools and pressures such as accountability are used to advance local instructional reform work. Appropriate actions include (1) use of non-system policies from professional associations, funding organizations, national and local partnerships, and professional networks, and (2) modification and supplementation of exogenous policy to forge coherence of the district policy environment.

***Acquiring and allocating resources.*** Resources are acquired and used strategically to support coherent instructional reform strategy. Appropriate actions include (1) basing funding on the needs of each school rather than on the basis of pupil headcounts, and (2) distributing teacher expertise across schools. In sum, districts that are working strategically to improve teaching and learning are aware of differences within and between their schools, and they target resources differentially to meet system-wide goals.

***Communicating within and beyond the system.*** Multiple channels of communication are used to develop a shared understanding of the principles of teaching and learning that guide system improvement efforts. Appropriate actions include (1) use of *vertical* channels (between central office and schools), horizontal channels (between schools and among individuals in similar positions within the system), and *external* channels (between district actors and families and community), (2) use of two-way communication, and (3)

directing communication to appropriate stakeholders in appropriate ways.

***Creating local systems of accountability.*** The district's vision of high quality and equitable teaching and learning are upheld by the development of a system to support the use of data. Appropriate actions include the development and use of (1) education outcomes and performance standards, (2) systems for monitoring progress, (3) mechanisms for providing feedback and sanctions, and (4) routines for regularly evaluating and refining district action in each domain. Accountability should establish structures to facilitate norms of collegial collaboration and shared accountability for instructional practice.

***Leadership*** and the use of *data* cut across all seven domains of action. Leadership stems not only from formal authority but also from expertise that is distributed throughout the system and is focused on shared reform goals and strategies. Comprehensive data are collected to inform the system about its performance, by monitoring student achievement, internal consistency, and system coherence around policy and practice.

The framework developed by McLaughlin et al. was chosen for this study because of the similarity between the eight districts examined in their study and New Jersey's Abbott districts. Both samples included reforming districts focused on improving student achievement. Furthermore, the McLaughlin et al. study was found to be the only district-level study that provided a theoretical framework of district actions that can inform districts engaged in reform implementation/change process.

A case study approach was used because actions taken in relation to reform implementation are embedded in "real" schools and districts and as such reflect complex and dynamic relationships. Plainfield Public School District was selected for the study because of the statistical association of overall model implementation with above-average gains in student learning (Supovitz, 2003).



Interview data were collected from the following personnel in the Plainfield central office: Superintendent, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Evaluation, Director of Accountability, and Supervisor of Literacy. At the school level two principals were chosen, one from a school that had adopted America's Choice early on, another from a school that adopted Ventures and later infused strategies from America's Choice into the Ventures model. In addition, documents pertaining to achievement results on the state fourth grade assessment from 1998–2002, demographics, strategic planning, accountability, walk-throughs, performance requirements for administrators, and the reorganization of the district central office were collected.

A matrix consisting of three variables per domain was developed to guide the coding process. In order to establish a degree of confidence that actions reported by respondents fit into the domains of action framework, four readers coded and sorted central office interview data into the appropriate domains. The coders were trained over a period of two days to look for indications that respondents addressed domain variables. As a result of these discussions coders agreed on key words that were relevant to each domain. The coders independently reviewed each central office interview and then met to report how data were coded and then compiled the results, which included differences and agreements among them. The author reviewed the coded interviews to verify presence of variables and then examined principal interviews and central office documentation to corroborate the findings.

### **Plainfield Public Schools: The Context for Reform**

To understand steps taken by Plainfield to implement Abbott policy, it is first necessary to understand the district context in terms of demographics and reform steps the district had taken before it was granted Abbott status.

Plainfield Public Schools is a high poverty urban district located in northern New Jersey, twenty-eight miles from New York City. It consists of 15,000 households in a culturally diverse community of 46,000 people with approximately 30,000 African Americans, 12,000 whites and 4,000 Hispanic and Asian students combined. Table 1 provides district demographic information from the 2001–2002 School Year.

In the mid 1990s, before the landmark *Abbott v. Burke V* decision, a group of concerned Plainfield citizens formed a coalition in order to form a new school board that, in turn, would hire a new district superintendent. In 1995, Dr. Larry Leverett was selected as the new superintendent. His mandate was to implement district-wide reform focused on increasing student achievement. In an interview conducted in 1999, Dr. Leverett described the state of the district on his arrival. He characterized student performance as exceptionally low and district leadership as poor. In the face of newly revised and more rigorous state content standards, district leaders failed to think strategically about how to improve student achievement. In fact, according to Leverett, there seemed to be no correlation between the focus at administrative council meetings and what was going on in the district regarding student achievement.

The lack of leadership in the district central office was exacerbated by an uneven and adversarial relationship between the Board (central office and Board of Education) and teacher's union, in which the union president exerted an inordinate influence on policy initiatives.

It was Dr. Leverett's perception that in 1995 Plainfield Public Schools operated in a reactive mode, which he summarized as follows:

- The organization's time frame was the past.
- Its focus was diffused.
- Its planning consisted of justification of actions.

- Its change mode was punitive.
- Its management style was to fix blame.
- Its structure was fragmented.
- Its perspective was on self.
- Its motivation was to avoid pain.
- Its development was around survival.
- Its communication style was to force-feed.
- Its leadership was enforcing.

The new superintendent worked to change the culture of Plainfield Public Schools in order to lay the groundwork for improving student achievement. Dr. Leverett took steps to change beliefs and values of Plainfield stakeholders by initiating conflict management training. Consultants were

brought in to conduct efficacy training for 90% of the school staff, helping to change negative perceptions about the ability of Plainfield's poor, urban children to learn. To help frame these changes, an organizational consultant was hired to work with Plainfield over a two-year period to redesign the organization and help to develop a shared vision and mission, and common beliefs.

Finally, Dr. Leverett worked to reform the organizational structures of Plainfield Public Schools. This involved the following initiatives:

- establishment of the District and School Leadership, Innovation, and

**Table 1. District demographic information from SY 2001–2002**

<b>Student Enrollment</b>	7,492
<b>Personnel</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Assistant Teachers</li> <li>• Custodians/Maintenance</li> <li>• Administrators</li> <li>• Support Staff (secretarial)</li> </ul>	782 137 94 55 90
<b>Governance</b>	The system is governed by a nine-member elected Board of Education.
<b>Number of Schools</b>	13 10 Elementary Schools (Grades K-5) 2 Middle Schools (Grades 6-8) 1 High School (Grades 9-12)
<b>Years of Experience - Teachers</b>	12 (State Median: 14)
<b>Years of Experience - Administrators</b>	28 (State Median: 26)
<b>Revenue Sources</b>	Local Taxes 16% State Taxes 82% Federal/Miscellaneous 2%
<b>School Budget</b>	\$120,794,000
<b>Total Per Pupil Cost</b>	\$9,343
<b>SAT Scores for HS Seniors</b>	Verbal 400 (State Average 499) Math 409 (State Average 513)

Change Councils (LINCC), whose purpose was to oversee the design, implementation, and assessment of reform efforts in the district;

- adoption of two assessments, GOALS, a commercial norm-referenced test, and Targeted Assessment Process (TAP), an assessment based on New Jersey content standards;
- creation of a process to help teachers and students use TAP and other data to create individual goals and action plans for students; and
- formation of the Administrators' Study Group, in which principals meet twice a month in Plainfield. One meeting a month is devoted to discussing research literature on improving literacy instruction.

Although these strategies helped stimulate organizational change in PPS, they did not produce any real progress in student achievement results. Dr. Leverett felt that for student achievement to improve, adults would have to change their instructional practice and the organization would have to monitor its performance in order to have the information it needed to determine if reforms were working. To achieve these goals—changing practice and monitoring performance—the superintendent embarked on two actions: (1) successfully lobbying the state legislature to re-designate Plainfield as an Abbott district in order to get the educational resources needed for reform changes—PPS had previously lost its Abbott status—and (2) creating another central office position, an accountability director, whose charge would be to develop and implement a local accountability system.

From this point on Plainfield Public School District focused on the domain of teaching and learning and made strategic decisions to broker the resources provided by Abbott policy to improve student achievement in the district.

## Plainfield Findings

Actions taken in Plainfield to support reform are organized below within the seven domains of the McLaughlin et al. (2002) framework. Results are based on interviews with central office personnel, principals, and supporting documentation, which included

- ESPA assessment data,
- Curriculum and Instruction Staffing Chart,
- Standards for Implementing and Monitoring A Balanced Literacy Program,
- Core Requirements for Plainfield Administrators,
- Plainfield's response to Assistant Commissioner McGinnis' Abbott Concept Paper,
- The Work of the Central Office in Plainfield: A Support Network for Classroom Change,
- Description of the Reorganization of the Curriculum and Instruction Unit,
- Summary of Strategic Goals and Objectives for 2002-03,
- Core Requirements for Plainfield Curriculum and Instruction Staff, and
- Plainfield Public School Accountability System.

In the analysis of the sources, two indicators were considered: (1) numbers of sources in which a particular action was mentioned and (2) consistency with which an action was identified and explained across sources.

*(1) Numbers of respondents identifying action.* In most cases, the actions described below were identified by central office personnel, and often verified unanimously by principals. Corroboration of these actions was found with somewhat less consistency in the supporting documentation. Differences among sources can often be accounted for by the relevance of actions to particular personnel or documents. For instance, it is not surprising that a Director of Curriculum and

Instruction will be more attuned to the literacy focus in the early grades than a Director of Evaluation.

(2) *Consistency of descriptions.* The consistency with which district actions were described across sources was an important factor in determining which actions the district meaningfully took. A high degree of consistency would indicate a common understanding of the action taken, making it more likely that the action would have the desired effect. A low degree of consistency would indicate a lack of understanding of or consensus about a given action that could undermine the ostensible purpose of the action. Consistency of this nature was difficult to document. In general, however, this study found a high degree of consistency in how actions were described, indicating a shared understanding of most actions and the goals of those actions.

The following descriptions provide an account of actions taken by the Plainfield central office to implement reform vis-à-vis the framework developed by McLaughlin et al. (2002). In the interest of readability, direct representation of data from the study is restricted to Table 2, (located on page 9) which provides a summary of data related to the first indicator, numbers of sources identifying particular actions.

*Teaching & learning.* Plainfield developed and expanded over time two core strategies in this area: (1) principles of teaching and learning for literacy that integrated the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards with a balanced literacy approach, and (2) use of principles to scaffold data collection instruments to develop the system's capacity for continuous development.

In the first instance, the principles of teaching and learning led to the selection of a CSR model, America's Choice, not once but twice. The first time was prior to Plainfield's re-designation as an Abbott district when PPS applied for Comprehensive School Reform Demon-

stration (CSRSD, the former federal grant program, now called the CSR Program) funds and selected America's Choice because its main features—standards and assessments, an aligned instructional system, a planning system based on performance data, and a focus on literacy in the early grades—were aligned with district principles of teaching and learning for literacy.

America's Choice was selected a second time when Plainfield was re-designated as an Abbott district and administrators negotiated with the state for its continued use despite the fact it wasn't on the state list of approved models. In addition, although Abbott stipulated that schools and not central offices should choose a CSR model, Plainfield central office encouraged schools to choose the model most aligned with existing district priorities and principles of teaching and learning: standards-based literacy (reading and writing) instruction that used a balanced literacy approach. Initially, eight out of 10 district elementary schools chose America's Choice. Of the two schools that chose other models, one chose Ventures, a CSR process model without specific curricula. Plainfield administrators worked with developers and the school's staff to combine the America's Choice curricula with Venture processes. The other school that had initially adopted a different model ultimately changed over to America's Choice once staff saw the impact it was having on student achievement results. The use of a single CSR model provided two benefits: (1) in a district with high intra-district mobility it afforded students with the same program as they moved from school to school and (2) central office administrators were able to focus their support, thereby becoming more efficient and effective.

The second strategy that Plainfield focused on was building the system's capacity for continuous improvement. This capacity was built by the creation of data collection instruments that provided feedback on teaching and learning by monitoring curricula and instruction practices and ongoing

**Table 2. Numbers of sources identifying actions related to the seven domains**

	Central office administrators				Principals		Supporting Documents
	DCI	SCI	DE	DA	1	2	
Teaching and learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Balanced literacy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Standards-based literacy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Assessments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Aligned instructional system	✓	✓	✓	✓			YES
Data-based decision making		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Literacy focus in early grades	✓				✓		
Developing the profession							
Central office model training	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Partnering with non-system actors							
Strategic planning	✓						
Conflict resolution				✓			
Efficacy				✓			
Social-emotional learning	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Responding to exogenous policy							
Using district goals to modify state policy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Acquiring and allocating resources							
Breaking down subject silos	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Providing support to schools	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Communication							
Supervisors on LINCC teams	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Develop a common language	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Creating local accountability systems							
Quarterly review	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
School accountability review	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES
Walk-throughs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES

Note: DCI=Director of Curriculum and Instruction, SCI=Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction, DE=Director of Evaluation, DA=Director of Accountability

ing assessment of student learning. A criterion referenced test (TAP) and portfolios were developed by the district to inform teachers about student learning and instruction as well as other classroom monitoring instruments (checklists and rubrics for reading and writing workshops) used to collect data during walk-through(s) that provided feedback to teachers on curricula and instruction.

*Developing the profession.* America's Choice provided in-depth literacy training and worked within schools and classrooms to translate that knowledge into instruction across schools and classrooms within Plainfield. America's Choice, however, did not initially offer to provide training to central office administrators. At the request of Plainfield administrators, central office administrators received training in America's Choice strategies, such as reading and writing workshop. This action signaled that learning about the America's Choice model not only was important for teachers but also was an important part of professional practice for administrators. It also allowed central office administrators to (1) develop an in-depth knowledge of the CSR model that enabled them to be an onsite resource for the model, and (2) monitor and evaluate teachers and participate in the conversation between the developers and schools, enabling central-office personnel to align the model to district policies and create instructional coherence in the district. In addition, the creation of a local accountability system that included both school accountability reviews and classroom walk-through(s) provided formal mechanisms for data collection that built the clinical knowledge needed for teaching and learning decision making.

*Partnering with non-system actors.* Over the years Plainfield had formed strategic partnerships focused on changing the organizational culture: Strategic Planning, Conflict Resolution, and Efficacy. Plainfield's approach to Abbott policy CSR implementation was no different. First, the choice of a CSR model was strategic in

that America's Choice was aligned with existing district priorities and principles. Second, the relationship between developer and district was conceived as a partnership. Plainfield central office administrators and the model developer worked together to modify model strategies to fit the district/school context as opposed to the district merely buying a pre-packaged service from the developer. Plainfield viewed its relationship with the developer as "equal-equal," that is, as McLaughlin et al. (2002) put it, a coming together of district and developer expertise, knowledge, and physical and human resources in order to build the district's capacity to support high quality teaching and learning.

Plainfield also developed other long-term strategic partnerships to change beliefs, enhance student learning, and monitor reform implementation. Dr. Jeff Howard from The Efficacy Institute worked with Plainfield staff to change their beliefs about intelligence using a model of learning based on the idea that intelligence can be built through effective effort; Dr. Maurice Elias of the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at Rutgers University worked with central office administrators and teachers on teaching the social-emotional skills that students need for success in school and connecting those skills to academics; and the International Center for Educational Accountability and others worked with Plainfield stakeholders to develop their local accountability system.

*Responding to exogenous policy.* Plainfield modified Abbott policy so it would cohere with district policies. In 1999 neither America's Choice nor Ventures was on the state approved list of whole-school reform models for Abbott implementation. Lack of access to these two models could have derailed Plainfield's reform efforts, because Plainfield had already adopted America's Choice in 10 schools as part of the federal CSR program. Plainfield, however, petitioned the state for the continuation of America's Choice, as it was aligned with district goals and priorities. Plainfield's commitment to district goals

and priorities provided a rationale to modify state policy. Policy modification allowed Plainfield to build on the work already being done in the district and avoided changing models merely for the sake of compliance.

In addition, *Abbott V* required the development of a local system of accountability providing rewards and sanctions. Early on, most Abbott districts ignored this mandate, whereas Plainfield staff understood that the value of a local accountability system was its ability to (1) define and create shared expectations for school performance in areas other than student achievement results and (2) provide a formal mechanism for data collection that could be used to inform decision making.

The Plainfield school accountability rubric provides an example of how expectations are defined in areas other than student achievement and a formal mechanism for data collection. *Under Goal 1: Improve Student Achievement through Instructional Rigor and Alignment to Standards* Plainfield identified traits or processes that they believed would lead to improved student achievement results: incorporation of New Jersey's Core Curriculum Content Standards into the work of students and staff; the use of classroom assessments to drive instruction and provide feedback to students; utilization of instruction that meets grade-level standards; development of students' abilities to articulate how their work reflects standards; and identification of social, emotional and academic needs of students.

*Acquiring & allocating human, physical, and fiscal resources.* Plainfield did two unique things in this domain: (1) lobbied for re-designation as an Abbott district in order to get increased resources for model implementation, and (2) reorganized its Curriculum and Instruction Department by (a) breaking down the organizational silos dictated by subject area (math, literacy, science, etc.) that administrators worked in and (b) defining

the work of Curriculum and Instruction as providing support to schools as opposed to the "telling, directing, mandating and enforcing" mode in which it had previously operated. By taking this action, Plainfield enabled administrator expertise to be distributed across district schools.

*Communicating within & beyond the system.* Plainfield built on an already existing structure (LINCC) to enhance communications about CSR model implementation by placing supervisors onto the school LINCC leadership teams. These teams are sub-committees of LINCC that meet weekly to focus on issues of teaching and learning by looking at the data from quality reviews and conducting focused walks through classrooms. The LINCC strategy enabled central office staff to become part of the school team, thereby creating a two-way vertical communication channel (between school and central office) for making decisions regarding teaching and learning, which, in turn, reinforced coherence within the district's policy environment. Also, horizontal channels were utilized when central office and school staff took the time to develop a common language around instruction within the district. For example, prior to model adoption Plainfield used the term *reading workshop* to refer to the time students engaged in independent reading at their developmental level and provided some response to demonstrate that they had done the reading. America's Choice used the term *reading workshop* to refer to a process whereby students were given a one-hour reading block that included independent reading and guided reading. Central office administrators worked with literacy coordinators and design coaches to develop a shared understanding of *reading workshop*, and to determine the support needed to ensure consistent implementation. As a district administrator put it, "whenever you do anything that is a little bit different, you can expect a push back. The question is do you talk to people about the push back and try to help them process it, or do you just blow them off and just do without helping them? In

terms of support, we try to push the idea that everything we are asking you to do [needs] support and we are here to do that.”

*Creating local systems of accountability.* Despite the existence of state and federal accountability policies, Plainfield recognized the importance of “owning” its own accountability system. Stakeholders understood that it was only through shared or collective responsibility that Plainfield would accomplish its mission. To develop a shared responsibility for improving student achievement, Plainfield built an internal accountability system that identified core expectations for principal, teacher, and school performance and a system to support the use of data in these areas. The Plainfield accountability system collects data in the following areas: (1) *education outcomes*, through TAP, portfolios, and standards-based report card, (2) *reform implementation progress*, by collecting data on CSR model implementation through quarterly reviews conducted by America’s Choice, and (3) *mechanisms for providing feedback, rewards, and sanctions*, through focused classroom walk-through(s) and school accountability reviews that measure indicators pertaining to model implementation and partnerships between schools, family, and community.

**Student Achievement Trends in Plainfield**

The findings from this study demonstrate that Plainfield worked in all seven domains when implementing a CSR model—America’s Choice—that focused on literacy

**Table 3. Total Percentage of Student Proficiency in Language Arts Literacy**

	1999	2000	2001	2002
<b>% Proficient</b>	31.2	43.7	63.8	77.5

<sup>2</sup> Reported data for years 1999–2002 was not disaggregated by student sub-group. Data will be disaggregated by sub-group in school year 2002–2003.

**Table 4. Percentage of Student Proficiency in Language Arts Literacy at School-Level**

School	1999	2000	2001	2002
Barlow	48.4%	24.4%	52.2%	68%
Cedarbrook	34.9%	63.6%	65.8%	89.1%
Clinton	5.1%	45.7%	56.5%	60.5%
Cook	35%	39.5%	62.3%	77.5%
Emerson	26.6%	42.4%	65.7%	80.3%
Evergreen	33.8%	50.8%	76.0%	78.0%
Jefferson	40.7%	52.4%	79.5%	80.0%
Stillman	28.8%	31.0%	58.6%	71.1%
Washington	11.8%	29.2%	50.0%	77.8%
Woodland	38.9%	37.2%	61.9%	81.6%

in elementary schools. As Table 3 shows, over a four-year period (1999–2002), we see a rise in the total percentage of student proficiency on the state’s fourth grade Elementary School Performance Assessment (ESPA) assessment in language arts literacy.

Data for individual schools, as shown in Table 4, are even more dramatic. First, some schools have increased the number of proficient students by over 50% over this four-year period. Second, 9 out of 10 Plainfield elementary schools meet the state’s AYP benchmark of 68% for language arts literacy. <sup>2</sup>

**Conclusion**

This report began with two questions: (1) what relationship, if any, exists between successful model implementation and improved student achievement, and (2)

how can districts help schools successfully implement CSR models?

Regarding the first question, we can see in Plainfield that student achievement improved dramatically in language arts literacy after implementation of America's Choice. With regard to the second question, classification of Plainfield's actions around America's Choice implementation gives a clearer picture of how central office administrators must perform if central offices are to help schools successfully implement a model. The following points summarize the findings:

- Alignment of a CSR model with existing district goals and priorities helped staff stay focused and resulted in refinement of instructional practice rather than change for change's sake.
- Selection of one model for implementation across the district (1) helped the district create a common language around instruction; (2) encouraged instructional consistency across district schools; and (3) enabled the central office to focus its support to schools.
- Training central office administrators in the model design was an important step in the process of supporting and sustaining implementation of the CSR model. Model developers were not always present nor did they stay on indefinitely in a district.
- Development of a local accountability system allowed formal monitoring of the model implementation process that enabled administrators to provide ongoing feedback to schools. School accountability reviews, quality reviews, and walk-throughs measured school implementation levels of America's Choice. Local accountability helped to build staff responsibility for and understanding of changes that needed to be made to instructional practice.

Actions taken by Plainfield's central office offer insight into strategies districts can use to change instructional practice to improve student achievement and meet

AYP targets mandated by NCLB. The Plainfield central office clearly understood that to improve student achievement it needed to address internal realities as well as seek external opportunities to lever internal changes. Internally, Plainfield focused on (1) changing the organization by shifting the relationship between the central office and schools from the "telling, directing, mandating, and enforcing" mode to a collaborative, shared-responsibility mode, and (2) changing instructional practice by adopting a CSR model aligned with their own instructional goals and priorities. The external opportunity for Plainfield was the Abbott policy. Plainfield leadership was able to shape that policy by getting the state to agree that the district could continue to use the America's Choice model, despite its not being on the state's approved list. As a result, Plainfield was able to develop an illustrative budget that provided the human and financial resources to meet the district's needs.

Other central offices will need to assess how the business of improving instructional practice is conducted. Is the work of the central office within the district to be conducted in the old "telling, directing, mandating, and enforcing" mode that characterizes a hierarchical bureaucracy or can the old paradigm be changed to one of collaboration and shared responsibility that supports school-based decision making? With regard to external policies, will central offices focus on policy compliance to the exclusion of true implementation of strategies that change teacher practice or will they broker these policies to fit the needs of their district so that student achievement can improve?

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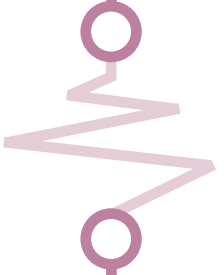
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