Teacher Attitudes toward Implementation of a Comprehensive School Reform Model in Two Urban Middle Schools: Communication Disconnect

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Abstract. In an effort to significantly improve student achievement and meet the mandates of No Child Left Behind, more public schools are turning toward externally developed comprehensive school reform (CSR) providers. CSR models provide a top-down direction for designing and supporting the process of school reform; tangible and accessible support for school change presumably steeped in research and literally packaged and delivered to the school site. Recognizing the difficulty of successful implementation and scale-up, this qualitative study offers a framework for assessing initial implementation of externally provided CSR models. Drawing on the existing literature regarding CSR implementation and scale-up, the field study team developed a framework that includes qualitative assessment of teacher attitudes toward program implementation from a variety of perspectives. This study provides an indicator of teacher attitudes during initial implementation and a related literature review to help guide a school district's formative assessment of implementation of a specific CSR model in two urban middle schools. This paper is focused on only one aspect of the findings: communication disconnect among relevant stakeholders.

1. Introduction

As public school districts continue to race against the timeline established by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the goal for all students to achieve academic proficiency by 2014, they face many challenges to meet assessment targets outlined by NCLB and state legislation [1]. Many districts experience restructuring as a result of failing to meet state assessment targets. *Restructuring*, as defined by NCLB, is a term reserved for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress after implementing one full school year of corrective actions. The local educational agency (LEA) in charge of school oversight must allow students enrolled in a restructured building or school the option to transfer to another public facility served by the LEA, continue to make supplemental services available to children who remain in the school, and implement an alternative governance arrangement. Alternative governance must include, at a minimum, replacement of all or most of the school staff relevant to the failure to make adequate yearly progress and implementing an external federally approved comprehensive school reform model [3]. Questions guiding this field study focused on teacher attitudes about initial implementation of the CSR program.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Recognizing the difficulty of successful implementation and scale-up of comprehensive school reform and drawing on existing literature regarding CSR implementation and scale-up [3, 4], the field study team developed a framework that includes qualitative assessment of teacher attitudes toward program implementation from a variety of perspectives. The field study team's task was to investigate teacher attitudes toward the professional development received through a CSR model; teacher attitudes toward implementation of the CSR model; teacher self-reporting about how implementation of the CSR model is impacting their own instructional practices; and what additional support, if any, might be necessary for effective implementation. The study was limited to two Title I urban middle schools, one newly restructured and one facing restructuring the following year. Primary strategies for data collection included a survey (N=26), classroom observations, document review, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Collected data were analyzed using the constant comparative method [6] until themes and categories emerged. Specifically, this study provided a template assessment of teacher attitudes during initial implementation of one comprehensive school reform model, allowing district leadership to identify implementation hurdles, and adjust and enhance program implementation to move more efficiently through the scale-up process.

3. Conclusion: Communication Disconnect

Research suggested scale-up, expanding a comprehensive reform model across a school or district, is a complex and multi-faceted process. There are many factors that constrain and facilitate successful scale-up, and evaluation over time is necessary with any CSR model implementation. A predominance of literature indicated little support for comprehensive school reform as a catalyst for improving the achievement of students, especially those students of poverty and/or from diverse cultural backgrounds. CSR models are difficult to replicate from one site to another and careful attention must be paid to contextualization, recognizing each school has a distinct culture and site specific needs to address. Restructuring, as defined by No Child Left Behind, may be a deterrent to implementation as some teachers won't "buy-in" to the process/model; restructured schools often employ beginning teachers, many new teachers to the system may or may not be ready for an intensive comprehensive reform model; and many teachers indicate concern as to whether or not they will be at the same school the following year due to restructuring requirements [4, 5].

The theme of communication disconnect emerged at various levels among the stakeholders. Teachers and leadership teams expressed their lack of understanding regarding the implementation of the CSR initiative. In addition, they also lacked awareness of the district's future plans regarding CSR. Teachers indicated the following, "We're wondering where do we go with this next year? What is the plan? We have no idea." They also said, "It's not cohesive across the district and there is still a lot of misunderstanding and unknown variables about implementation." While CSR site coordinators believed that communication between schools and CSR was open and going smoothly, teachers reported frustration with the lack of scheduled visits from CSR site coordinators. One teacher stated, "We have not had a lot of direct contact with our [CSR site coordinators]."

In an article, "Organizational Theory Applied to School Reform: A Critical Analysis," Bonner, Koch and Langmeyer, [2] reported that the interconnections through communication across all stakeholders groups are critical within a system to reach desired outcomes of an effective implementation. However, building level participants in this study emphasized there was a lack of consistent communication among stakeholder groups. Researchers' analysis of data supported a sense of disconnection among stakeholders implementing CSR model. This was apparent in comments made by classroom teachers, building administrators, and some leadership team members, but not evident in comments made by district administrators and CSR site coordinators. Throughout the research process, the lack of consistent communication continued to surface from teacher participants, while CSR site coordinators and district administrators suggested clear, established methods of communications were present. Teachers' frustration regarding the lack of contact and inconsistent scheduling with CSR site coordinators, in addition to their attempts to "figuring out the process as they go," was reiterated in comments during the data collection process. Furthermore, it was apparent in other themes of this study that the strategic plan (whether formal or informal) for communication across stakeholder groups was inefficient. For example, as previously indicated, teachers did not perceive support in the same way as district administration. Teachers indicated the lack of communication between groups caused additional and unnecessary work, as well as anxiety about program implementation.

These findings lead to the following emerging question for all stakeholders, and particularly for the school district: *How can communication among all stakeholder groups be more direct and transparent, to share successes and plan how to constructively overcome frustrations?*

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[4] Coburn, C.E. (2003). Rethinking scale. Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. Educational researcher, 32, 3-12.

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