THE CORNERSTONE OF CHANGE:
LESSONS FROM A
SCHOOL REFORM INITIATIVE

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

In a recent opinion piece in *Teacher Magazine* (2007)*,* Ronald Wolk, founding editor of *Education Week* wrote, "being able to read proficiently is the crucial prerequisite to becoming educated." While hardly a groundbreaking observation, schools struggle to get their students to this basic benchmark, particularly those that serve poor and minority students. Recent *New York Times* coverage of the federal role in sanctioning specific reading programs is further evidence that concerns about literacy persist.

Throughout the 1990s, literacy experts fervently debated the best methods for teaching literacy skills. The ferocity of this debate was captured in its characterization as the "reading wars." Whole language advocates asserted that students should read real literature and write about real topics, while proponents of phonics argued for a focus on basic literacy skills, such as alphabet awareness, vocabulary, and decoding. In the broader educational arena, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994* set the nation on a path to establishing standards and focusing on student achievement. Advocates claimed that standards would provide critical benchmarks that would elevate the quality of instruction and promote better student learning. Literacy and math were viewed as foundational subjects that could be enhanced by the creation of such standards.

This was the context in which the Cornerstone Literacy Initiative began its work. Developed in 1999 with funding from the New York Institute for Special Education and under the leadership of Steve Prigohzy, the Cornerstone Literacy Initiative aims to improve student literacy by providing intensive professional development to teachers over the course of a four-year implementation period. The goal is to change instructional practice, school leadership and school culture with literacy as the vehicle. More broadly, Cornerstone is a non-prescriptive school-based reform initiative for low-performing, high-poverty elementary schools.

This paper draws lessons from Cornerstone's extensive experience in school reform. In the sections that follow, we describe Cornerstone's reform model and the population it serves. We then explore the ways the Cornerstone model has shifted to accommodate lessons from its work. To provide a national context for the Cornerstone Initiative, we explain the evolution of literacy instruction in the United States and the developing knowledge about how comprehensive school reform works. We end by describing how Cornerstone's experience contributes to what we know about improving literacy, student performance, and school reform.

WHAT IS CORNERSTONE? THEORY, MISSION AND GOALS

Cornerstone's explicit mission is to "ensure student literacy through professional development." Three stages are involved in this process: effective professional development, changes in teacher practices, and growth in student literacy.

Cornerstone's work is guided by social learning theories that emphasize the importance of social interaction and modeling in human growth and development. These social learning theories have implications for teachers and students alike. Coaches provide intensive, continuous professional development for teachers. Teachers work to construct real-world literacy opportunities for their students, while simultaneously teaching fundamental literacy skills. Students construct

understanding based on what teachers model, what they themselves practice, and by integrating their previous knowledge and experiences.

The Cornerstone Initiative looks beyond the implementation of its program to the institutionalization of continuous professional development and effective reform practices. Cornerstone schools are expected to become self-sustaining and are encouraged to plan for the eventual diminished support from Cornerstone. Some schools are eligible for additional funding to be applied toward the institutionalization of Cornerstone practices. These "foundation" schools continue to solidify Cornerstone practices within their own schools while mentoring other "partner" schools within their district.

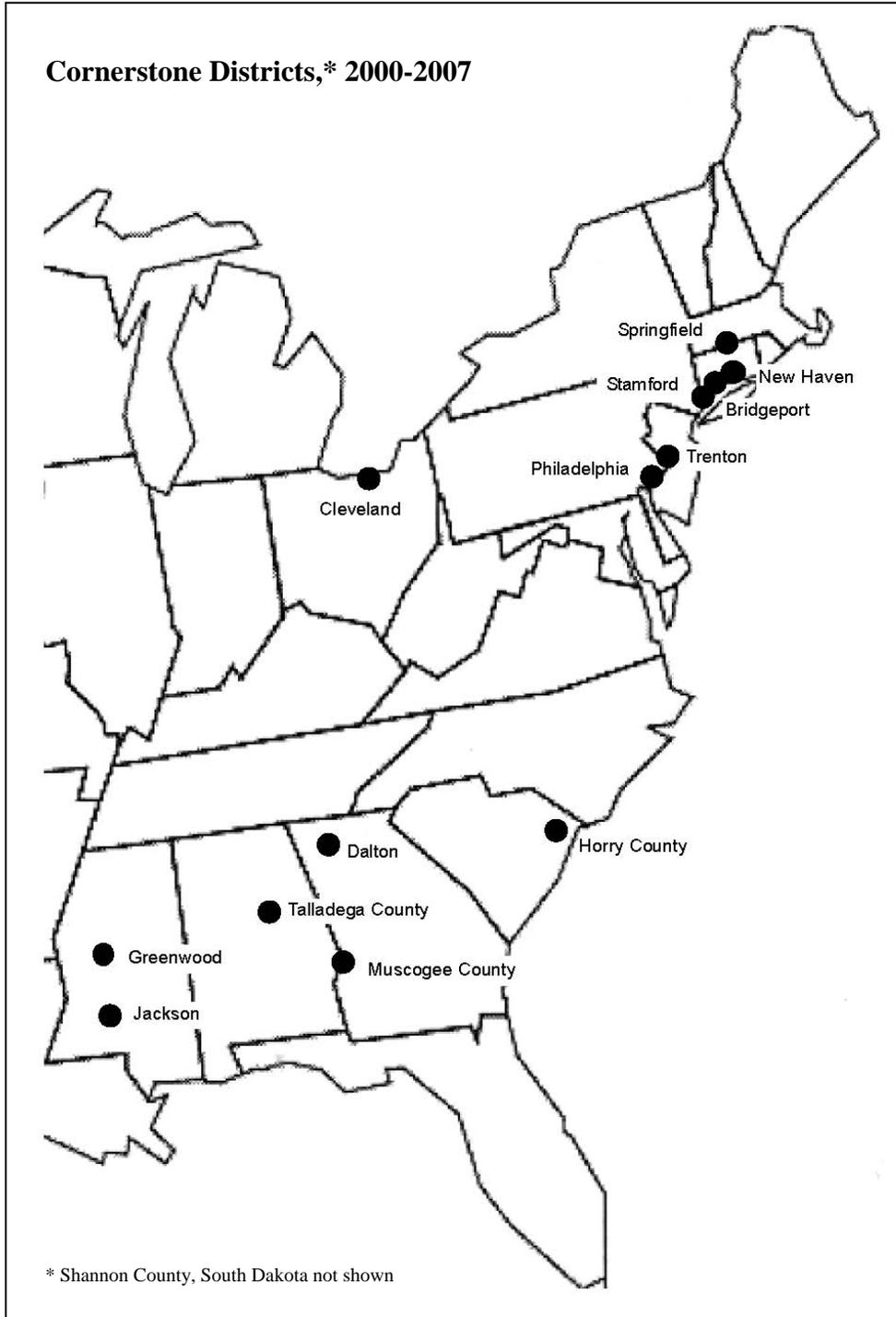### MIDDLE SIZED DISTRICTS WITH HIGH NEEDS STUDENTS

In the late 1990s, most school reform efforts targeted large, urban school districts. Cornerstone decided to take a different route, focusing its efforts mainly on modest- or middle-sized districts, both urban and rural, reflecting the belief that these districts are often overlooked, despite their struggles with poverty and high-needs students. Further, Cornerstone hoped that it might be able to effect change that could be sustained more easily in these smaller districts.

Current Cornerstone districts vary in size from small, rural Talladega County, Alabama, serving less than eight thousand students, to large, urban Jackson, Mississippi, serving more than 32,000 students. Cornerstone schools can be as small as 200 to as large as 900 students. That said, Cornerstone schools serve students that are predominantly poor and many serve predominantly minority students.

The first cohort of nine schools adopted Cornerstone in 2000-2001 in four districts—Cleveland, Ohio, Trenton, New Jersey, Jackson, Mississippi, and Talladega County, Alabama. Since then, Cornerstone has worked with 54 schools in 14 different school districts.

Cornerstone Program Components

- Two teachers within each school serve as literacy coaches.
- Coaches receive on-site professional assistance from Cornerstone staff and off-site support through annual professional development meetings.
- Professional learning for faculty, facilitated by the coaches, includes modeling classroom lessons, book study groups, and school-wide strategic planning and goal-setting activities.
- An annual school review, based on the British model of school inspection, is conducted.
- Support to administrators and districts include "literacy fellows" who support coaches, a "parent and community engagement associate" who works with parents and community, "leadership fellows" who support principals, and "district liaisons" who facilitate communication between the Cornerstone organization and district staff.
- Equipment and materials are provided, including laptops, videoconferencing equipment, and books.

Cornerstone Districts,* 2000-2007

Springfield

New Haven

Stamford

Bridgeport

Trenton

Philadelphia

Cleveland

Dalton

Horry County

Talladega County

Greenwood

Muscogee County

Jackson

* Shannon County, South Dakota not shown

CORNERSTONE AS A WORK IN PROGRESS

In addition to supporting the work at the local sites, Cornerstone continually adapts its practices to make them more effective. Elements of the model have changed in response to evaluation findings, the needs of teachers, students and schools, and Cornerstone's evolving understanding of what works and does not work in promoting school change.

Working with schools and districts

Initially, Cornerstone focused on school-based support as the catalyst for system-wide change. Cornerstone envisioned that successful implementation at the school level would prompt the district to extend the Initiative to additional schools. Thus, beyond initial administrative and financial support, little attention was paid to the district role in the early years of the reform.

As the Initiative evolved, however, Cornerstone realized that the district needed to be involved— especially if Cornerstone practices were to become institutionalized and expand. Indeed, without the active engagement of the district, the Cornerstone Initiative seemed destined to remain isolated in individual schools, or even lost once financial support ended. Thus, Cornerstone worked to engage districts through all stages of implementation.

> **How to Work with Districts**
>
> - District administrators are encouraged to attend school-based Cornerstone professional development activities, school reviews and regional meetings.
> - The district liaison—Cornerstone's point-person for all of its districts—is in frequent contact with district-level personnel.
> - Cornerstone representatives present the local successes of the Initiative to school boards and superintendents at least once a year.
> - Cornerstone's national and regional meetings include sessions devoted to helping district administrators in planning to sustain and spread the Initiative.

Changing roles and responsibilities within the organization

From the beginning, Cornerstone staff was assigned to support schools in particular domains (literacy, leadership, parent engagement). In the early years, however, staff often fulfilled multiple roles at once, for example, juggling both literacy and district relations. With the growth of the organization both in years and in the number of participating schools and districts, staff members are now more specialized in their work and are able to dedicate their energy to only one element of the reform, such as principal support.

Working with school leadership

In the early years of the Initiative, Cornerstone's support to principals was reactive and there was limited guidance about how to engage with school leadership.

> **Critical roles for principals: Cornerstone's Leadership Curriculum**
>
> - Principals are actively engaged in professional development activities, learning alongside their teachers about literacy and Cornerstone practices.
> - Principals develop leadership capacity among staff.
> - Principals establish conditions for change by creating an open culture where experimentation is accepted, collaboration is required, and conversations about instruction are the norm.
> - Principals expand ownership of the reform by reaching above to district personnel, and below to teachers.

Cornerstone quickly learned that its mechanisms for principal support were inadequate, especially given the critical role of principals in shepherding reform. Thus, a leadership curriculum was developed —grounded in its own experience and research on school leadership—to guide its principal support. A new staff position was created—leadership fellow—whose sole responsibility is to work with principals.

Parent engagement

Initially, Cornerstone thought that working with parents would be critical to its reform start-up strategy. Despite the enthusiasm and energy devoted to parent and community involvement, Cornerstone's strategies have not been sufficient to drive schools to create innovative mechanisms and roles for parents and communities. Cornerstone continues to think about how it might work more effectively with schools regarding parent and community engagement in the future, but it has also found that parent involvement need not be the first element of reform to be implemented.

> **Cornerstone's Parent and Community Involvement Strategies**
>
> - Parent representatives from each school are encouraged to participate in Cornerstone training events and work as partners with school faculty on leadership teams.
> - The associate for parent and community engagement works directly with the parent representatives and school staff at all sites to develop their community and parent engagement activities.
> - A grant program provides an incentive for schools to develop new and innovative parent and community engagement mechanisms.

Prescriptiveness of reform

Cornerstone began as a non-prescriptive reform, under the assumption that this would facilitate buy-in and implementation. With only limited guidance, however, many schools were unable to integrate Cornerstone program elements into their practice. Buy-in and ownership did not, in and of themselves, ensure implementation.

Cornerstone now strikes a balance between prescription and flexibility by dictating structural elements of a school reform initiative (for example, using the coaching model or implementing reading groups to explore professional research literature), while allowing for adaptability in the substance of the reform (for example, schools create their own literacy action plans). The goal is to allow enough flexibility for site-specific implementation and to generate buy-in, while simultaneously providing sufficient structure to preserve the intent of the Initiative.

Literacy strategies

Cornerstone advocates the use of balanced literacy in the instruction of reading and writing. Its initial model emphasized reading comprehension and holistic elements of literacy instruction, following research that suggested students were deficient in these skills. In addition, the artistic, creative side of literacy comprehension was favored over the more mechanical approach Cornerstone perceived would be necessary for phonics instruction.

Cornerstone soon learned, however, that many students did not have command of fundamental literacy skills and teachers needed help getting them there. Without these basic skills, students

were not able to engage with rich literacy texts, as comprehension strategies suggested they should. In response, Cornerstone shifted the emphasis of its literacy program from comprehension to basic skills.

Changes to Cornerstone's Literacy Program

- Cornerstone reoriented its balanced literacy program to include time for the instruction of basic skills and it found creative ways to do this. Through its work with staff from England's National Literacy Strategy, Cornerstone redesigned its literacy block—ideally a two-hour period in which Cornerstone schools focus on literacy instruction—to ensure that some time during each block is dedicated to the instruction of basic literacy skills. During the remainder of the block, students engage in a variety of literacy activities, including large group work, small group work, reading, writing, revising, oral language, etc. As a literacy fellow describes the Cornerstone literacy block, "kids are hearing it, reading it, writing it, revising it and then reflecting on it."
- At the school level, Cornerstone provides support to help schools determine the appropriate basic-skills/comprehension balance for their students. Cornerstone literacy fellows work with school-level teams to translate data—from test scores to the Cornerstone School Review—into a literacy action plan.

Coaching

Cornerstone's model of professional development emphasizes coaching for teachers, but when Cornerstone began its work, it did not provide guidance to schools on the qualities of effective coaches. Many classroom teachers who were selected to become coaches were not able to work effectively with adults, despite their capability with children.

Cornerstone is now explicit about coaches' qualifications. Coaches need to have the confidence and leadership ability to work with peers and the principal, and they must have an understanding of (or at least a willingness to be trained in) the cognitive processes of adult learning.

Development of strategies for promoting sustainability

From the outset of the Initiative, Cornerstone looked beyond implementation to institutionalization. Initially, Cornerstone believed that

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What Do Cornerstone Coaches Actually *Do*?

- Coaches model everything for teachers, from classrooms design (e.g., the use of word walls), to differentiating instruction, to pursuing professional growth through reflection.
- Coaches conduct demonstration lessons that allow teachers to observe pedagogical ideas and instructional strategies in action. These lessons are often preceded by joint planning with teachers and followed by debriefing sessions.
- Coaches facilitate a range of group-based professional development activities, such as whole school professional development and grade-level meetings.
- Coaches conduct lesson studies in which teachers determine an area of instructional need through examination of school-based data, construct a relevant lesson, take turns implementing it, and have an opportunity to reflect on and restructure the lesson in between.
- Finally, team teaching, yet another venue for learning-by-doing, is an integral part of the Cornerstone coaching model.

practices and structures in schools that had completed four years of implementation would be adequately institutionalized to allow support to be withdrawn. As the first cohort neared the end of the funding period, however, it became clear that schools wanted and needed support to maintain the work within their own schools and to nurture the spread of the work to other schools.

Thus Cornerstone created an opportunity for continued, albeit diminished, support to schools that had completed the implementation process. "Foundation schools" continued to institutionalize Cornerstone practices and mentor schools new to the Initiative. In some districts, foundation schools serve as learning labs for new Cornerstone schools. In other districts, training in Cornerstone pedagogy is taken to the district level. Although some financial support is still available from Cornerstone, responsibility for coaching positions and other aspects of the work shift to the district during the foundation status years.

Of course, Cornerstone does not work in a vacuum. Indeed, it operates within the much-debated worlds of literacy instruction and school reform. The following section provides a context for Cornerstone's literacy work and its focus on whole school reform.

WHAT WE KNOW (AND DO NOT KNOW) ABOUT LITERACY
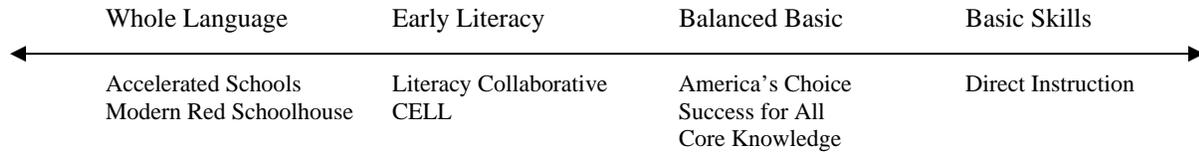
BALANCED LITERACY AND THE READING WARS

The conventional understanding of the evolution of literacy instruction in the United States focuses on the tension between a basic skills approach, which dominated in the 1960s and the 1970s, and a whole language approach, which was pervasive in the 1980s and 1990s. This tension, often referred to as the 'reading wars,' generated much debate about the merits of phonics-based and comprehension-focused literacy programs. The balanced literacy movement grew out of these debates.

Balanced literacy is a "philosophical orientation," which incorporates seemingly incongruous literacy strategies, such as skills-based and whole language instructional methods, and child-centered and teacher-directed approaches, into a single program for teaching literacy. Advocates of balanced literacy claim that the combination of multiple instructional strategies, rather than reliance on a single one, helps students develop the fluency necessary to become proficient readers and writers.

But balanced literacy is more than just a compromise between basic skills and whole language. In fact, Cynthia Coburn (2001a, 2001b, 2004) has identified four separate literacy movements—basic skills, whole language, early literacy, and balanced basic skills—that have contributed to current thinking about the teaching of reading and writing.

Although the differences in literacy instruction have narrowed, some remain. Moreover, the lack of consensus among teacher educators means there may be disagreement among teachers within a school about the best way to teach literacy. To make matters more confusing, there is valid research documenting the success of programs from each of the four traditions.

Below is a spectrum of where the most popular school reform literacy-based programs today fall with regard to the instructional influences on their program.

Whole Language	Early Literacy	Balanced Basic	Basic Skills
Accelerated Schools Modern Red Schoolhouse	Literacy Collaborative CELL	America's Choice Success for All Core Knowledge	Direct Instruction

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Four Literacy Movements

Basic Skills
The basic skills approach emerged in the 1960s, and replaced literacy techniques that focused on teaching students "sight words," with techniques that emphasized phonics (the decoding of the parts of words). The basic skills method includes sequenced skills instruction, early attention to phonics, close adherence to the textbook, reading groups, and worksheets. It promotes grouping children by ability into three reading groups. The teacher works with one reading group at a time while other students do seatwork at their desks.

Whole Language
The whole language approach rejected the basic skills definition of reading as a collection of sub-skills. Advocates of this method believe that teachers should focus on teaching comprehension strategies and the integration of reading with other aspects of language arts, such as writing, listening, and speaking. Whole language is perhaps best known for emphasizing literacy learning by engaging students with high quality children's literature, teaching skills in the context of that literature, and minimizing the teaching of phonics skills.

Early Literacy
The early literacy movement originated from the success of a first-grade intervention model known as Reading Recovery. The goals of the approach are to help students develop strategies for decoding *and* comprehension in order to facilitate their development into independent, self-monitoring readers. In contrast to whole language approaches, the explicit teaching of skills and strategies has a much higher profile in the early literacy approach. Early literacy joins whole language in moving away from the sequenced skills approach that is part of the basic skills model.

Balanced Basic Skills
The balanced basic skills approach focuses on processes of decoding rather than reading as comprehension, arguing that students cannot make meaning of text without decoding skills. These decoding skills are conceptualized differently than in a basic skills model. Balanced basic skills highlights phonemic awareness (hearing sounds in words) and sequenced skills instruction where the sequence is structured according to sounds rather than letters. Methods of instruction also differ from other literacy models. Balanced basic skills advocates direct instruction from teachers, which differs from basic skills' emphasis on worksheets. It also relies on textbook series that provide carefully scripted and sequenced lessons in line with principles of direct instruction.

CORNERSTONE IN CONTEXT

Cornerstone views itself as a comprehensive school reform with literacy as the vehicle for change. Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) is an approach to school improvement that attempts to foster change in all aspects of schooling (e.g., curriculum, instruction, organization, professional development, and parent involvement). CSR focuses on improving entire schools and is not limited to particular student populations, academic subjects, or instructional methods.[1]

There are currently more than 100 national CSR models serving elementary schools in the US. They represent a broad a range of philosophies and models of how to improve schools. For example, the School Development Program addresses the spectrum of students' health, social, emotional and academic needs. The Core Knowledge program, on the other hand, is built around a "common core" of knowledge for all

Cornerstone and the Nine Key Components of CSR

1) *Use research-based innovative strategies and methods.*
Cornerstone strategies and methods are developed by literacy experts who incorporate the latest literacy research into Cornerstone's model and trainings.

2) *Have a school-wide reform plan that enables students to meet state standards based on school needs assessments.*
Cornerstone schools use asset mapping to create a school-wide literacy action plan.

3) *Provide ongoing, high quality professional development for staff.*
Cornerstone promotes continuous professional development through coaching, book studies, grade-level meetings, and lesson studies.

4) *Have measurable student goals and benchmarks for meeting those goals.*
Cornerstone schools create literacy action plans that establish goals for student learning.

5) *Maintain faculty, administrative, and staff support.*
Leadership fellows provide a range of support to principals.

6) *Nurture meaningful parent and community involvement*
Cornerstone encourages schools to involve parents in literacy activities.

7) *Use high quality external technical support.*
All Cornerstone literacy and leadership fellows have decades of experience as classroom teachers and/or building administrators. They support practitioners through site visits, video conferences, phone conferences and email, as well as semi-annual regional conferences and annual summer institutes.

8) *Include a plan for evaluating student achievement.*
Cornerstone trains teachers to use the Developmental Reading Assessment to assess students' progress and refine their teaching approaches accordingly.

9) *Identify other resources available and how they will be used to coordinate services to support and sustain reform.*
After four years of Cornerstone support, each school develops a foundation plan that outlines how a school will sustain Cornerstone practices once the funding ends.

children in various subject areas, including literature, history, science, mathematics, and the arts. The Coalition of Essential Schools attempts to create an educationally rich and supportive learning environment through adherence to nine philosophical principles. Success for All specifies a particular K-6 reading curriculum and a specific professional development sequence to teach it.

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[1] In 1997, Congress enacted the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program to identify best practices in the emerging CSR field. The CSRD offered additional financial support to schools that adopted school-wide reforms, and it outlined criteria that a successful CSR should meet.

Most CSRs have instructional change as the centerpiece of their programs because lessons from past school reform efforts indicated that changing student outcomes was dependent on changing what teachers do in the classroom. Some CSRs focus on changing instruction across all subjects (such as Core Knowledge and Direct Instruction), while others focus on specific subjects (Literacy Collaborative, Comprehensive Early Literacy Learning).

Cornerstone's focus on literacy fits within this framework. But simply creating a CSR framework does not, of its own accord, lead to successful reform. Indeed, recent research demonstrates that *how* elements of CSR are implemented in schools matters. For example, although Cornerstone works in fewer schools than some national CSRs, this narrower focus enables Cornerstone to offer targeted assistance that responds to the unique needs of participating districts and schools. Also, building relationships at multiple levels (at the coach level, the principal level, and the district level) over an extended number of years creates a web of support for its model. In the following pages, we discuss specific lessons Cornerstone has learned from its implementation of different elements of comprehensive school reform in greater detail.

IMPLEMENTING REFORM: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

How does research on school reform reflect actual on-the-ground experience? The literature speaks to the theory behind elements of reform, but is frustratingly silent on how to actually implement change. After more than six years working directly with schools and districts, Cornerstone has some insights to offer.

IT'S THE PRINCIPAL OF THE THING

Principals play an important role in facilitating school reform. Yet the wide range of principals' roles and responsibilities means that we need to identify exactly where their attention should be directed and help them to focus it there.

What the experts say

Principals are critical conduits of reform. As the bridge between the reform world and the daily realities of teachers, principals shape the reception of reform in their schools. As Cynthia Coburn's (2005) research on the process of school-level change suggested, principals' leadership style and ability to craft receptive school environments, can influence teacher acceptance of new policies.

Essentially, principals are stage setters. In a study of school leadership and the process of change, Douglas Reeves (2007) claimed that effective school leaders develop and maintain a collaborative organizational culture, which includes clear, inclusive processes for problem solving, decision-making, and professional growth. Reform-minded principals work with teachers to set school standards and create assessments to measure student learning toward school-wide goals. Gordon Cawelti (2004) suggested that principals should lead a process of

reflection in which teachers use student outcome data to enhance their practice. As school leaders, principals should nurture a school culture that supports a focus on student achievement.

Lessons from Cornerstone

Cornerstone's leadership curriculum, mentioned earlier, offers mechanisms, such as the leadership team, to help principals establish conditions for change. But Cornerstone has learned that these mechanisms do not, by virtue of their existence, build principals' leadership capacity.

For example, Cornerstone has found that principals need to learn how to truly share leadership responsibilities with their staff. Likewise, although principals may agree that they should take an active part in the professional development of their staff, many participate 'as they have time,' which is not very often. Finally, even though principals have a birds-eye view of their school's context, Cornerstone has learned that they often need help making the link between the realities of their schools and district, state, and national priorities.

To build principals' capacity, Leadership Fellows:

- attend school-based leadership team meetings and offer feedback and strategies for developing capacities among teachers,
- ensure that principals understand that their participation in—and subsequent understanding of—the professional growth of their staff is critical for establishing a strong link between literacy work and leadership, and
- help principals identify the intersection of the Cornerstone framework and standards, and then assist principals in communicating it to staff.

The bottom line: what works for working with principals

The principal's role must be that of a *hands-on instructional leader,* not merely a manager of people and resources. Cornerstone's Leadership Curriculum enhances principal capacity by encouraging principals to 1) participate in professional development that will enhance their knowledge of literacy instruction, 2) share leadership by engaging staff in genuine planning activities that then get implemented in the school, 3) link Cornerstone's program to state standards by working with teachers to physically chart the intersection between the two, and 4) be an advocate for reform inside and outside the school.

NO SCHOOL IS AN ISLAND

Districts can help facilitate reform, even when the reform effort targets school-level change. Conversely, without district support, school reform can languish.

What the experts say

Districts act as intermediaries. Beyond their explicit role of providing support to schools, districts are uniquely primed to facilitate communication among schools, as well as between schools and the community. Edys Quellman and co-authors (1995) found that districts manage forces and conditions outside the schools' control, such as teachers' unions, and that districts

often act as filters of state and federal policy, digesting information for schools and interpreting mandates.

This intermediary function of districts has significant implications for the implementation of school reform. Districts can help schools place external mandates—state standards, for example—in the context of a reform. District managers who are knowledgeable about the reform can provide schools with waivers from mandated programs that might conflict with the reform. Diane Massell and Margaret Goertz (1999), as well as Joseph Murphy and Phillip Hallinger (1986, 1988), suggested that such school empowerment is a key strategy for supporting instructional change.

Lessons from Cornerstone's experience

Cornerstone learned that it needs *active* district-level leadership and support that go beyond mere approval, for the work to proceed. Hands-on knowledge of the reform helps districts mobilize the necessary fiscal and human resources and address appropriate mandates to facilitate implementation.

For example, in locales where district personnel are actively engaged in Cornerstone, some schools are given leeway in fulfilling curriculum mandates, and others are exempt—at least for a period—from implementing the state literacy program. In some instances, personnel hiring and transfer decisions are made with the reform in mind; when some schools faced turnover in the roles of principals and coaches, districts that embraced the reform considered the Cornerstone context when determining who would be the best person for the job. One district offered financial support to sustain the two-coach model in Cornerstone schools, even though it had adopted a one-coach model for the rest of its schools.

However, districts vary in their capacity to support reform. Districts that had limited experience with elements of the Cornerstone reform, such as balanced literacy, school-based coaching, or using student data to make instructional decisions, had difficulty supporting Cornerstone schools. As a result, Cornerstone changed its expansion criteria. In selecting new districts in which to implement the reform, Cornerstone now considers district size, commitments to other literacy programs, history of and experience with reform, and district capacity for change.

The bottom line: what works for working with districts

School districts are critical at *every stage* of the game because they play an important role in facilitating the implementation of reform and ultimately in providing support for institutionalization. Cornerstone involves districts by 1) creating opportunities—such as school walkthroughs and sessions at Cornerstone's annual meetings—for district participation, 2) having a liaison who is responsible for working with districts, and 3) making annual presentations to school boards.

WHAT DOES PARENT ENGAGEMENT REALLY MEAN?

While parents clearly play an important role in their children's education and educational success, there is little consensus on ways that schools should engage parents and what would be the outcome of such engagement.

What the experts say

In a study of parent involvement, Joyce Epstein (2001) declared that the importance of parent involvement constitutes a basic belief, and that "no topic about school improvement has created more rhetoric" (p.3). But which practices are important, how to obtain high levels of involvement—even the link between parent involvement and increased student outcomes—is still a matter of debate.

Joyce Epstein documented several parental roles, such as engaging parents in home learning activities, including homework; involving parents in the school as volunteers and audiences; and including parents on school-based councils. Eva Gold and Elaine Simon (2004) argued that recent reform efforts have expanded the notion of parent involvement, shifting from parents as *supporters* of teachers' work to parents as *active resources* for classrooms and schools.

Finally, research about the relationship between parent involvement and increased student outcomes is mixed; Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp (2002) and Chad Nye and colleagues (2006) pointed to mounting evidence that parent involvement is linked to positive student outcomes including achievement gains. Others, such as Doreen Mattingly and co-authors (2002), concluded that despite the enthusiasm for, and investment in, parent programs, claims regarding student achievement are weak.

Lessons from Cornerstone's experience

Cornerstone learned that parent engagement is hard to accomplish. Some schools have been able to engage parents in critical school issues; in these schools, parent engagement is intertwined with planning towards, and implementation of, literacy improvement goals. Most schools, however, have continued to pursue traditional avenues, focusing their efforts on getting parents into the building, or enlisting parents to read more books at home.

Cornerstone learned that support for parent involvement needs to be integrated within other reform elements, and in the beginning, it erred in keeping parent involvement separate. For example, parent engagement grants are allocated independently of other fiscal aid from Cornerstone. Support for parent involvement remains separate from other training and technical assistance; parent representatives have little contact with Cornerstone staff other than the associate for parent and community engagement. At professional development retreats, parent representatives attend training sessions with coaches and administrators, but coaches and administrators participate in few parent-focused sessions. Finally, as one Cornerstone staff member said, "Special grants do not—by themselves—drive innovative thinking about parent and community engagement." These dynamics contribute to the sense within schools of parent engagement as separate and ancillary to improving literacy instruction.

The bottom line: what might work for working with parents

Cornerstone's experience suggests that in order for parent involvement to move beyond ancillary activities, such as attending events and helping with homework, school leaders must integrate parent roles in substantive elements of teaching and learning. Likewise, reform efforts that seek to foster parent involvement must integrate parents into all elements of the reform.

GIVE US DIRECTION (BUT GIVE US FLEXIBILITY TOO)

Reforms need to provide enough structure to guide implementation, while also allowing for flexibility to adapt to local contexts and generate buy-in.

What the experts say

Some research suggests that more prescriptive, externally designed school reform initiatives are faster and easier to implement than homegrown ones. In a study of comprehensive school reform models, Laura Desimone (2002) concluded that this is because external reforms often come with a roadmap for implementation. Research on policy implementation suggests that the more specific the policy, the more likely teachers are to implement it. Susan Bodily (1996) and John Nunnery (1998) confirmed this finding and suggested that teachers simply lack sufficient time and resources to develop their own implementation plans, regardless of their affinity for a particular reform.

Research also suggests that prescription should vary within elements of a reform. For example, prescription may be beneficial in design and structure, but the ability to respond to unique school contexts is important in implementation. In two separate studies, both Brent Keltner (1998) and Laura Desimone (2002) contended that flexibility is essential to securing teacher buy-in, which, in turn, is vital for the successful implementation of a reform.

But does "being easier to implement" result in better student performance? In an analysis of multiple school reform models, Geoffrey Borman and colleagues (2003) found that the programs with the most evidence of successfully raising test scores are more prescriptive. They are also quick to point out that some studies of non-prescriptive programs also show increased test scores—but that the research base is not yet deep enough to be conclusive.

Lessons from Cornerstone's experience

Cornerstone has eased off its initial aversion to prescription and has learned to provide schools with an overarching framework for implementing its model, while still allowing for local variation within program elements. Without some guidance for implementation, the integrity of the model is threatened.

Cornerstone has also learned that the balance between prescription and flexibility is not static. As state curriculum frameworks and standards have become more detailed and directly tied to high stakes assessments in recent years, teachers have, in turn, demanded specific strategies to

teach specific content. But despite this "prescriptive" policy environment, schools continue to have different strengths and weaknesses and therefore different needs. The continuous, classroom-based nature of Cornerstone's professional development allows support to be tailored to each school's unique circumstances. In this way, the Cornerstone model remains grounded in the specific needs of teachers and students, and in its own vision of reform.

The bottom line: what works for implementing reform

Cornerstone's method of *prescribing structure while maintaining flexibility* in implementation addresses the tension between the adaptability needed to generate buy-in and the prescription needed to ensure fidelity of implementation. Cornerstone's experience suggests that reforms that lean towards greater prescription may actually fare better; in the early stages of its work, when Cornerstone was less prescriptive, it found that elements of its model were eroded during implementation.

WHERE IS THE BALANCE IN BALANCED LITERACY?

Although many experts advocate the use of balanced literacy, there is still debate about what this approach should look like.

What the experts say

Research suggests that a balanced approach to literacy instruction can be particularly effective in improving the literacy capacity of students at risk of academic failure. A study of the Austin Independent School District's balanced literacy program (2001), which was designed to help students in need of extra literacy support, found dramatic improvement in students' literacy capabilities after participating in the program for just one year. Barbara Taylor and colleagues (2000) also found that effective teachers of at-risk students used a balanced approach to literacy instruction.

Indeed, well-known school reform initiatives such as America's Choice, Comprehensive Early Literacy Learning, and Success for All advocate a balanced approach to literacy instruction. This method has become more pervasive in the past several years. As part of its major reform effort in 2003, the New York City Department of Education adopted balanced literacy for all of its schools.

Despite the popularity of balanced literacy programs, Bruce Frey and co-authors (2005) suggested that there is no agreement on the "optimal amount of time to spend on literacy activities or the best balance of activities for balanced literacy" (p. 279).

Lessons from Cornerstone's experience

As noted earlier, Cornerstone's initial balanced literacy model emphasized comprehension. Cornerstone quickly learned that this focus was misguided—many students were lacking in fundamental literacy skills, which left them unable to engage in comprehension work. As one Cornerstone administrator said, "If you can't decode words, you can't read them."

Although Cornerstone is now convinced that literacy instruction needs to ensure attention to basic skills, it is wary of prescribing the exact balance between phonics and comprehension. Cornerstone has come to believe that student need should dictate the exact structure of the balanced literacy balance.

The bottom line: what works for literacy instruction

Where literacy is concerned, balance does not necessarily mean *equal,* it means *appropriate*. But how is the appropriate balance determined? Cornerstone advocates the use of data-based decision-making, that is, school staff carefully look at student data to identify their students' strengths and weaknesses and then craft a literacy program accordingly. As one Cornerstone administrator says, "We work within (schools') realities." The exact balance of balanced literacy needs to be grounded in student need, as identified through data.

CLASSROOM-BASED COACHING PROVIDES CRITICAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Coaching is a popular method of professional development. But unless it is done right, by accounting for school-specific contexts, as one example, it can be a waste of time and resources.

What the experts say

Barbara Neufeld and Dana Roper (2003) found that coaching promotes teacher reflection on instructional practice, collaboration with colleagues, and on-going, sustained support that is relevant to teachers' daily work. After an extensive study of coaching in four major US cities, including Boston and San Diego, Neufeld and Roper concluded that effective coaching encourages continuous learning and reflective practice, which can enhance the capacity of teachers to attend to the multiple dimensions of literacy learning.

Despite its increasing popularity, however, there is little empirical evidence that coaching actually improves student achievement. Indeed, some research suggests that coaching "done wrong" can be a huge waste of time and money. For example, Kris Gutierrez and co-authors (2001) and Simon Veenman and colleagues (2001) found that coaching does not automatically result in improved—or even substantively changed—teacher practice. Without appropriate support and infrastructure, Alexander Russo (2004) suggested that coaching could become one more disappointing reform if it is not implemented well.

Lessons from Cornerstone's experience

Cornerstone promotes the use of classroom-based coaches from the same school as the teachers who are being coached. Cornerstone advocates a two coach model—two teachers are given release time to work with other teachers in their own school, so as to spread the responsibilities of the position, and to ensure expertise at different grade levels. Because coaches are 'local,' their knowledge of instruction is directly relevant to the teachers' work. The result is professional development tailored to the specific context of the school setting and demographics.

Coaching requires a reorientation for the entire school staff, and school administrators must be prepared to help staff accept a new way of working. For example, teachers must be willing to accept guidance from a colleague, sometimes one who is their junior, and must adjust to new ways of thinking—and talking—about their work. Coaches themselves must adjust to a new role; they must consider the needs of multiple groups within the school and must be trained to think outside their classroom. Awareness of these potential problems can help school administrators craft a coaching model that will work best for their school.

The bottom line: what works for coaching

School-based coaches are effective in helping change teaching practice according to research and Cornerstone experience. Activities such as *modeling, demonstrations and team teaching* provide hands-on support that helps teachers enhance their literacy practice and facilitate the integration of new literacy strategies into their instruction. Coaches must have support—instructional, technical and personal—from strong principals to be able to complete their mission.

GOOD SCORES COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT

It takes several years before the effects of reform are translated into improved tests scores.

What the experts say

Test scores are often used to measure the effectiveness of a reform. But experts agree that the translation of reform elements—such as professional development or school-wide planning—into changes in teacher practice and, from there, into changes in student outcomes, occurs in incremental stages. How long does it take for a reform to result in test score changes?

Schools need sustained support in the form of resources and professional development for several years in order for school reform to have an impact on student achievement. As an example, Robert Bifulco and co-authors (2005) reported that the effects of the Most Effective Schools (MES) program on student reading scores "increase with student exposure" but only in schools in which MES trainers remained (p. 67). This suggests that sustained support was a main contributor to increased test scores in these schools.

It is also important to recognize that the impacts of the reform process occur incrementally; schools where the reform is sustained for longer periods of time are often the ones in which the

achievement benefits are most apparent. In their study of the School Development Program in New York City, Robert Bifulco and colleagues (2002) showed that reform does not result in increased academic performance until the third year of program implementation. Combining findings from multiple studies, Geoffrey Borman and co-authors (2003) found that each year of implementation of a comprehensive school reform is associated with increases in achievement, with the largest occurring in the fifth, sixth, and seventh years of implementation. In a study of the School Development Program, Thomas Cook and colleagues (2002) discovered that program impacts were apparent anywhere from the fourth to sixth year of implementation.

Lessons from Cornerstone's experience

Cornerstone finds it takes time to influence test scores. For example, Table 1 shows that Cornerstone schools experienced a loss in average standardized test scores in two out of three subjects in the short-run, between 2005 and 2006, while non-participating schools in these same districts experienced a gain.[2]

Table 1. Short-term changes, 2005 - 2006

	Cornerstone schools	Non-Cornerstone schools	Difference
Reading	-0.035	0.009	-0.044
Language	0.011	-0.013	0.024
Writing	-0.153	0.012	-0.165

Table 2. Longer term changes, first year - 2006

	Cornerstone schools	Non-Cornerstone schools	Difference
Reading	0.039	-0.004	0.043
Language	0.081	-0.016	0.097
Writing	0.047	0.004	0.043

Longer-run changes in scores paint a different picture. Table 2 shows that Cornerstone schools experienced a *gain* in all three subjects between the *first year of implementation* of the reform and 2006, while non-participating schools in these same districts saw a loss in reading and language and a smaller gain in writing.

The bottom line: what works for assessing impact

Patience is a virtue. Cornerstone's experience, like that of other reforms, is that it takes anywhere from *three to six years* to see changes in student outcomes.

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[2] Tables 1 and 2 present changes in Z scores in the six districts that are not in their first year of Cornerstone implementation. Language and writing tests are administered in two districts each only.

CONCLUSION

The realities of reform implementation are often more complex than the research indicates. Cornerstone's experience yields important insights into what real reform actually looks like. Key findings are:

- **Principals must be *hands-on instructional leaders*** not merely managers of people and resources. Principals must 1) participate in professional development to enhance their knowledge of literacy instruction, 2) share leadership by engaging staff in genuine planning activities, 3) make explicit connections between the reform and state standards for staff, and 4) be an advocate for reform inside and outside the school.

- **School districts are critical at *every stage* of the game** because they facilitate the implementation of the reform and ultimately provide support for institutionalization. Reformers must create strategic opportunities for district staff to learn about the work and communicate regularly with district staff and school boards.

- **Prescribing structure while maintaining flexibility in implementation** addresses the tension between the adaptability needed to generate buy-in, and the prescription needed to ensure fidelity of implementation.

- **Balance in literacy instruction** must be determined by students' needs, as identified through data on student weaknesses and strengths.

- **School-based coaches are effective in helping change teaching practice** by providing hands-on classroom-level support to teachers. But coaches must have support—instructional, technical and personal—from strong principals to be able to complete their mission.

- **Assessing impact takes time**. It takes from *three to six years* to see changes in student outcomes.

At this stage in the Initiative, as cohorts of Cornerstone schools reach the end of their grant period, conversations about sustaining the work take center stage. Cornerstone has been deliberate about crafting a process for sustaining its program. Its foundation model, encouragement of partnerships among schools, and engagement of district leadership all facilitate continuity of program elements. But it is Cornerstone's reach into the classroom, and its intensive work with teachers, that lays a critical foundation for sustained change. Indeed, research suggests that changes in teacher practice are crucial for effective, lasting reform and that the only way to improve student achievement is by improving the instruction they receive. Cornerstone's model of continuous professional development, especially its emphasis on modeling and reflection, promotes real, sustained changes in instructional practice. This, coupled with structural supports at the school and district levels, promises to facilitate the institutionalization of Cornerstone's reform.

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