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The Role of State Departments of Education in Comprehensive School Reform

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Benchmark

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By Edmund T. Hamann and Brett Lane

States have the legal responsibility and authority to provide public education for their citizens. How each state fulfills its responsibility varies. Whether state education agencies (SEAs) are supporting school reform efforts, providing technical assistance, defining and controlling educational content, or assessing the outcomes of education, it is generally agreed that SEAs are there to assure that districts and schools are providing quality opportunities to children, and in a manner that meets the standards the state has set for achievement. With that in mind, this article addresses some of the specific ways SEAs set out to accomplish these goals. Having worked with dozens of CSR implementing schools and CSR implementation staff at several SEAs, Edmund T. Hamann and Brett Lane detail the initiation and early management of the federal CSR program by the Maine and Puerto Rico Departments of Education. Both Hamann and Lane are research and evaluation specialists at the Education Alliance at Brown University.

Introduction

The roles of state education agencies (SEAs) in relation to comprehensive school reform (CSR) are multiple, under-scrutinized, and

perhaps even contradictory—as promoter, manager, initiator, intermediary, fiduciary agent, and more. Yet we know that both through the federal Obey-Porter Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program and through other mechanisms (e.g., New Jersey's *Abbott v. Burke* litigation) that SEAs have substantive roles in how "the third wave of reform" (Desimone, 2002, p. 434)—the comprehensive school reform movement—plays out. This movement, which is both more popular and more criticized than ever before (Berends, et al., 2001; Sack, 2002; Viadero, 2001), asserts that whole schools should be units of change and that school change plans should articulate how all students and staff are to be targets of and participants in the multiple integrated steps for improvement. Keeping SEAs' multiple roles in mind, we need to explicitly examine SEA involvement with CSR so we are positioned to know if/how SEA activities affect school-level implementation of CSR.

There is a welcome and growing literature about how educational policies are interpreted and changed at the school level (e.g., Coburn, 2001; Cuban, 1998; Hill, 2001; Irvine & Larson, 2001; Young, 1999) or even district level (Spillane, 1998), but we have not found corresponding research focusing at the SEA level, with the important exception of two books about or partially about Kentucky (Lusi, 1997; Whitford & Jones [Eds.] 2000). Yet research by Datnow and colleagues (Datnow, et al. 2002; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Yonezawa & Datnow, 1999) shows irrefutably that the fate of CSR implementation in terms of both sustainability and impact is directly tied to the alignment of CSR models with district and state policy. It follows that SEA efforts that impede or promote alignment matter when it comes to the viability and sustainability of CSR.

The text that follows looks most closely at the initiation and early management of the federal CSR program by the Maine and Puerto Rico Departments of Education (MEDOE and PRDOE), which we have studied ethnographically in some detail (Hamann, et al. 2001; Hamann & Lane, 2002; in press). It is also informed by our applied research and technical assistance with the CSR programs in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. Three rationales have led us to look particularly closely at the examples of Maine and Puerto Rico— expediency, illustrative potential, and generalizability. Since 1999, under the rubric of the federal Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory contract, we have been applied researchers studying and supporting the implementation of Obey-Porter in New York, Puerto Rico, and all six New England states. From the expediently assembled group of eight cases we knew well, we selected Maine and Puerto Rico because both stand out as SEAs that have made a number of customizations of the original federal Obey-Porter CSR template. Consistent with Stake's (1995) description of an *instrumental case study*, both cases here were selected for the way they could illustrate an issue: adaptation of CSR policy at the SEA level. By selecting Maine and Puerto Rico we selected two jurisdictions that are very distinct from each other, differing linguistically and culturally and in their educational histories and reliance on federal resources for school support. Thus, juxtaposing Maine and Puerto Rico matches the logic of what Patton (1990, p. 172) calls "maximum variation sampling." If commonalities emerge from analysis of these explicitly different cases, then such commonalities are likely to pertain elsewhere. Those interested in a further explanation of our methodology are directed to Hamann and Lane (in press).

The Case of Maine

For Maine, like for several small states nearby (e.g., New Hampshire and Vermont), there were preliminary reasons to be skeptical of Obey-Porter when it

was first being promoted in 1998. Given that implementation had certain fixed costs for SEAs—e.g., drafting an implementation plan for the U.S. Department of Education, drafting a request for proposal (RFP) for schools, soliciting and then reviewing schools' applications, and then overseeing implementation—the modest amount of available funds for MEDOE (5% of the total allocation, i.e., less than $30,000) and for schools ($565,500 to be divided 11 ways) was not necessarily worth the effort. Yet Maine embraced the program after making two key adaptations to federal policy—(1) restricting its grant awards to high schools and (2) attaching its award process to the state-drafted *Promising Futures* initiative. As a further adaptation the newly created Center for Inquiry in Secondary Education (CISE), an atypically autonomous small program within MEDOE, was then appointed to manage the program, rather than the Title I office. CISE employed key personnel, who both reconciled CSR with other state policies and cultivated personalized trusting relationships with school-based implementers that made CISE personnel facilitators in the school-level implementation process. This also set up the culturally welcome prospect of the lateral exchange of procedural knowledge whereby practitioners at different schools helped each other with implementation.

Adaptation using Promising Futures
Just as the federal government was rolling out Obey-Porter, an *ad hoc* committee assembled by MEDOE was publishing *Promising Futures* (Maine Commission on Secondary Education, 1998), a new framework for improving high schooling within the state. *Promising Futures* had been drafted at the impetus of Maine's commissioner who was troubled by the state's comparative record on the NAEP—Maine was well ahead of average at the elementary level, somewhat ahead at the middle school level, but only middle of the pack in high school. *Promising Futures* was crafted by a team of more

than 20 Maine educators (based in high schools, district offices, institutes of higher education, and at MEDOE) and recommended implementation of six core principles and fifteen core practices. When it was released, it was announced as an invitation for change. However, with the important exception of charging CISE with promoting it, few resources were available to support its implementation.

It was in this context that MEDOE realized that federal CSR funds might be used as carrots to encourage Maine high schools' embrace of *Promising Futures*. In 1998, MEDOE administrators successfully requested federal waivers to restrict Maine's CSR competition to high schools, to attach parts of *Promising Futures* to the request-for-proposals distributed to schools, and to deemphasize Title I status (but not need) as a criterion for making awards because very few Maine high schools were Title I schools. Once the waivers were granted, CSR was no longer just a small new federal program with a lot of procedural details; instead, it was a means to realize a locally articulated high school reform agenda around which there had been much recent mobilization.

With CSR formally linked to *Promising Futures*, it was easily argued (within MEDOE) that the newly created CISE should coordinate CSR implementation. The link to CISE meant that these SEA-based educators could contribute as a team to the coordination of CSR implementation, even if only one CISE staff person was formally designated as CSR Coordinator and supported by federal CSR funds. As a CISE-based educator observed to us in May 2002, "If we had to revert to relying on the 5% [SEA-level CSR] allocation, we'd only be doing compliance and checklist activities, no leading." Instead, the state's investment in CISE meant CSR was coordinated by a team, with the ratio of SEA-staff to implementing schools as low as 1:4.

This low ratio mattered for several reasons, notably the way it allowed MEDOE personnel to frequently visit and interact with personnel at CSR schools where they shared strategies and cultivated sufficiently personal trusting relationships that some awkward state-level policy requirements could be successfully negotiated. For example, pursuant to Maine law requiring a highly detailed annual "Rider A" contract for allocations of more than $25,000, each CSR school each year has had to complete a Rider A, a document that doubled as a work plan and grant proposal update. The CSR coordinator and other CISE staff used the Rider A requirement to position themselves sympathetically with school staff. Instead of being the 'heavies' demanding compliance with *Promising Futures*, they were able to represent themselves as advocates and assistants who could help with a burdensome bureaucratic procedure (i.e., Rider A) that they could not change.

Benefits of Adaptation
Maine's departure from the federal blueprint by linking CSR, *Promising Futures*, and CISE created an exploitable similarity between all of Maine's CSR schools and an impetus for the lateral exchange of information regarding best practices. There were two common routes for this lateral exchange between Maine CSR schools—exchange through intermediaries like CISE staff and direct exchange between educators from different schools either at regional professional development activities or through direct visits to each others' schools. CISE staff created formal and *de facto* policies that enabled both. Formally, they arranged several meetings annually for CSR schools (including those that had finished their three years of funding), scheduled day-long visits to CSR schools, and gathered detailed written renderings about implementing schools' experiences. These efforts permitted CISE staff to learn much about the particular struggles and successes of given schools and to use such learning to enhance their procedural knowledge about high

school improvement which they could subsequently share. As of 2004, the implementation of *Promising Futures* by way of CSR funding has been undertaken by 33 of Maine's 140 public high schools. This effort has also drawn national interest. In 2003, the Gates Foundation contributed $10 million to Maine's Mitchell Institute to support additional high schools' implementation of *Promising Futures*.

Despite the implementation's momentum, as of 2004 the record of improved student outcomes at *Promising Futures* schools on the Maine Education Assessment (MEA) was inconsistent. Perhaps, as policy implementation scholar Milbrey McLaughlin (1987) would suggest, it was too early to look at this kind of measure. In 2002 an educator at one of the first CSR/*Promising Futures* high schools explained that appropriate measurement of his school's successes or struggles could only begin with the Class of 2004 as that class was the first at his school to experience changed practices in each of their years at high school. By that standard and excluding a tiny rural school whose sample size of test takers is too small for meaningful year-to-year comparison, of Maine's other 10 first *Promising Futures*/CSR schools, 9 showed improvement in writing as measured by percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard in that topic. Seven showed improvement in science (and one matched its baseline score). But only three improved in math and only one improved in reading (while one matched its baseline). Each of these schools had begun implementation in 1999-2000 and all but two had changed principals at least once since then.

The Case of Puerto Rico
Three key adaptations marked PRDOE's response to CSR in 1998: (1) the insistence on finding island-originating school reform models that could be available to CSR-funded schools, (2) the solicitation and screening of the 17 comprehensive school reform models named in the Obey-Porter legislation

to see if they should be made available to Puerto CSR applicant schools, and (3) the welcoming of decidedly non-comprehensive models that responded to the educational priorities of Puerto Rico's Secretary of Education and that could be incorporated into a school's Title I Schoolwide plan. The first two of these were incorporated into PRDOE's response to CSR from the very beginning. The third, which ultimately supported broad implementation of Lightspan, Computer Curriculum Consultants, and even the Puerto Rico Science Systemic Initiative (PRSSI) as CSR models, came later, after PRDOE's first plan for CSR implementation had been turned down by the U.S. Department of Education.

Adaptation using Five Reform Models
When PRDOE officials first began planning for CSR implementation in the winter of 1998, they had already determined to identify at least one island-developed, research-grounded, whole-school reform model that could be included on the list of externally developed CSR models that those applying for CSR funds could promise to implement. It was unclear to us where this insistence came from. Perhaps it represented a familiarity with recent research (e.g., Stringfield et al. 1998) that noted that none of the popular CSR models at that time had been designed for and tested on Spanish-speaking students (which practically all Puerto Rican students are). Under this rationale a model of proven effectiveness on the island would be preferable. Perhaps it reflected Puerto Rico's historic ambivalence toward mainland originating educational policies and programs (Epstein, 1970; Nieto 2000). Puerto Rico is atypically reliant on federal support for its K-12 educational program—in 1998-99, 27.7% of K-12 education spending in Puerto Rico was federal, almost four times more than the national average of 7.1% (Johnson, 2001)—but also has been cautious regarding how much mainland culture it wants to import. In this light, even one island-originating option would mean CSR would not as readily by

viewed as an imposition from the mainland. In its successful CSR implementation plan submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in late 1998, PRDOE named one island-developed model on its short list of approved CSR models. That fifteen of Puerto Rico's first seventy-five CSR schools opted for that model—the Puerto Rico State Systemic Initiative (PRSSI)—suggests the wisdom of PRDOE's strategy. Island-developed models were an option many schools wanted.

PRDOE was not only trying to promote/allow island-developed models, however. In February 1998, a telephone poll of 16 of the 17 providers named in the Obey-Porter legislation indicated that just six were interested/willing to operate in Puerto Rico. Others claimed that the high costs of operating in Puerto Rico (which requires expensive plane tickets for mainland-based providers) and/or their lack of materials in Spanish and lack of Spanish-speaking professional developers kept them from being interested at the time. Four of those six models chose to present at an April 1998 model fair for potential CSR schools and three of the four were later named on the menu of model choices developed for CSR applicant schools by PRDOE and approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

PRDOE's initial response to CSR had been, in concurrence with federal guidance, to try to identify externally-developed whole school change models. Later in 1998, PRDOE began to consider models that were not comprehensive on their own, but that could be incorporated into existing comprehensive plans, like a Title I Schoolwide plan. As in Maine, this led to an explicit alignment of CSR strategies and SEA-approved reform plans. In 1998, Puerto Rico's Secretary of Education had disseminated an island-wide reform strategy that, among other things, emphasized technology education and improvement in English instruction to support the goal of graduating "bilingual citizens." The fifth (of five) models on the menu that PRDOE requested

applicant schools to select from was Lightspan. Lightspan was not one of the 17 models named in the original Obey-Porter legislation, but it did later appear in the Catalog of School Reform Models, produced jointly by the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), in the sub-category Reading/Language Arts (from which it was more recently removed). Lightspan responded overtly to several of the PRDOE Secretary's goals to promote English acquisition and the integration of technology.

In 1999, when the first round of 75 CSRD schools was selected in Puerto Rico, 49 opted for Lightspan. Eight opted for another technologically oriented model developed by Computer Curriculum Consultants (which had not been mentioned in the accepted plan). Fifteen selected PRSSI (which has a math and science emphasis), and three opted for Expeditionary Learning/ Outward Bound. Roots and Wings and Accelerated Schools, though named as choices in PRDOE's U.S. Department of Education-approved implementation plan, were not selected by any schools.

Puerto Rico's response to CSR is related to its educational history. One needs to look back to the 1940s to find major changes in Puerto Rican K-12 schooling policy. However, in the last decade of the century, substantial reform laws were passed three times: in 1990, 1993, and 1999. The 1993 reform (based on *La Ley Orgánico 18 del 1993*) required decentralization of school administration. Almost immediately thereafter, the 1994 ESEA, the Improving America's Schools Act, meant that many of Puerto Rico's schools were eligible to become "Title I Schoolwide." Because of Title I requirements, Puerto Rico's principals gained site-based management responsibilities, and were also asked to organize and be responsible for whole-school reform.

Benefits of Adaptation

CSR became a tool to support the reconciliation of Puerto Rico's own 1993 educational restructuring and the 1994 ESEA. The 1993 change in Puerto Rican education law came with few new resources for professional development or other means to assist the transition to a new form of school governance, and it offered little to help schools with the task of aligning their work with Puerto Rico's newly articulated education standards. Thus, when CSR applications were first solicited in Puerto Rico in 1998, the $50,000+ per year made available was welcome at schools that lacked many other obvious means for obtaining additional resources. CSR meant there were chances to accelerate the enactment of already drafted school improvement plans, to plug gaps in existing implementation, and to continue the work of aligning with standards and island-wide educational priorities. CSR was not a major stimulus for whole-school change, but nor did it need to be. Instead, in locally responsive ways, it became a vehicle to further realize plans already underway.

The Real World of SEA Practice: Implications for Scale-up, Sustainability, and Effectiveness

Four contextual points about SEA implementation of CSR emerge from the cases just reviewed. First, as McLaughlin (1987) and Levinson and Sutton (2001) would predict, when SEA staff act as education policy intermediaries (i.e., between federal policy and local practice), they also act as policy adapters and thereby become co-authors of the ultimate policy that becomes practice. Indeed, SEA personnel can so substantially adapt a federal policy that, in cases like those sketched here—with Maine using CSR to support the creation of a network of *Promising Futures* high schools and Puerto Rico using CSR mostly to support the implementation of

curriculum reform priorities and island-originating reforms—SEA personnel as "policy co-initiators" may be an aptly descriptive label.

Second, it seems clear that even when SEAs take on policy intermediary roles, they retain a great amount of policy shaping power. Though Maine had to request a waiver for its chosen CSR policy and though Puerto Rico had to submit its CSR plan a second time in 1998 before getting federal approval, in both cases CSR as implemented showed a substantial SEA imprint.

Third, we should note that when SEA-based educators were faced with an externally initiated policy, they reconciled that new policy with existing salient policies and they understood the new policy through the lenses of the policies with which they are already involved. Thus, Maine's Rider A requirement and Puerto Rico's *Ley Orgánico 18 del 1993* were both relevant to implementation in the respective jurisdictions and became part of the reconciled CSR policy as practiced in each place. Commissioners' priorities for high school reform or further incorporation of English and technology use became pieces of CSR. These adaptations do not mean that the premises of federal policy were rejected, but rather that much of the policy *as implemented* was not of federal origin.

Fourth, it seems SEA-level policy adaptation is inevitable and consistent with constructivist theories of learning (Datnow, et al., 2002). Real people with real professional and personal experiences attended meetings and read federal CSR guidance to try to figure out what they were supposed to do. But these same individuals were not blank slates, they endeavored to understand CSR in relation to other problem diagnoses and strategies that were part of both their formal job descriptions and their senses of what should be. When state-drafted priorities were inserted, CSR policy within that state became endowed with the problem diagnoses and strategies that were already salient to SEA officials. In Maine, when CSR became the vehicle for systemic promotion of *Promising Futures*, it became something different than the Obey-Porter originators had envisioned. To the Maine educators, CSR took on more familiar dimensions and was easier to subscribe to. Similarly, in Puerto Rico where the idea that CSRD would initiate comprehensive reform was viewed unenthusiastically (as evidenced by the low number of schools that opted for whole-school reform models as compared to models that offered more targeted assistance), the adapted idea that CSR could support the consolidation and continuation of change processes initiated by the 1993 *Ley Organico 18*, the 1994 ESEA, and the PRDOE secretary's articulation of various priorities, made CSR welcome.

Conclusion

Ultimately, sustainability, scaling-up, and effectiveness are three of the most pressing challenges for CSR (Datnow, et al, 2002; Coburn, 2003; Fink, 2000), but the case studies we have presented were not designed to measure how much MEDOE and PRDOE activities related to CSR affected these dimensions. Rather our goal was to use ethnographic methods to tackle an antecedent step, to illustrate how SEAs change CSR as they mediate between the levels of federal policy and school-level implementation. Still, we think our research frames some hypotheses about sustainability, scaling-up, and effectiveness that other research efforts could test.

Coburn (2003) notes how important implementer buy-in to new strategies and practices is to both quality and endurance of their implementation. Both Maine and Puerto Rico's alignment of CSR with locally relevant problem diagnoses made their CSR policies more responsive to needs that locally were deemed salient and made them part of longer-term change processes. Maine's CSR high schools, like all CSR schools, may only have received three years of Obey-Porter funding but MEDOE's

embrace of *Promising Futures* still pertains in the years following the end of funding. Similarly, Puerto Rico's CSR schools may only have received three years of funding, but funding that was a catalyst in the much longer quests (1) to enact the plans articulated in their Title I Schoolwide/site-based management plans and (2) to respond to the priorities of promoting bilingualism and technological literacy.

Regarding effectiveness, as Lusi notes, SEAs "have little control and no proximity" to the sites they are trying to change (1997, p. 11). It is hard to claim that what an SEA did or did not do in relation to CSR directly was a reason for a change in a school's or a state's student outcomes because so many other salient variables might have been involved. With the inconclusive outcomes at Maine's first cohort of Promising Futures/CSR high schools noted, an indirect case can be made, nonetheless. Both Maine and Puerto Rico enabled whole school change processes to be more broadly and deeply implemented within their jurisdictions. If CSR implementation can improve a school, as the thorough research review by Borman, et al. (2003) suggests, then successful implementation of whole-school change should be superior to shallow implementation. Following this premise, state strategies that enable and sustain implementation should be credited as enabling and sustaining improvement.

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