

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

## What Does It Mean for Me?

By L. David van Broekhuizen and Jackie Burniske

**S**chool improvement, comprehensive school reform, school renewal, school change – most educators have probably encountered these terms in the teachers' lounge or at an after-school faculty meeting. But what do these terms have to do with the everyday life of a classroom teacher?

Definitions of school reform are as varied as the models being put into effect across the nation. Comprehensive school

reform guides the implementation of a system that enables all students to meet challenging academic content and performance goals. It is both a program and a process. Principals, teachers, other school staff, district specialists, and families and communities collaboratively work toward improving classroom instruction and school management.

The process includes aligning curriculum, standards, and assessment, and enhancing other aspects of a school community with the ultimate goal of raising student achievement. The approach is systemic and holistic, not a fragmented set of educational programs that focus on only one or two parts of the educational experience. For a more detailed description, see "Components of a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program" (below).

As a teacher, you might be asked to be part of a team tasked with aligning grade 1 content standards with your school's curriculum and literature series. As a principal, you might convene a task force that would identify professional development priorities for the school and then plan out appropriate activi-

Photo: Jean Olopai



▷ Although the process is complex, the goal of school improvement is simple: to increase student learning.

### Online School Improvement Resources

A number of websites provide valuable resources and tools for learning more about comprehensive school reform. A good place to start is the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) at [www.goodschools.gwu.edu](http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu). NCCSR is a partnership between George Washington University, the Council for Basic Education, and the Institute for Educational Leadership.

On their website, NCCSR offers a database of articles and reports as well as answers to frequently asked questions; a guide and tools for assisting schools as they plan, implement, and evaluate CSR; a catalog of 60 school reform models; a publications center with an email and print newsletter, research briefs, and other publications; contact information; and links to Internet resources that include federal agencies, foundations, policy and research centers, regional educational laboratories, and more. You can easily subscribe to their free newsletters by going to the "Subscribe" section.

For additional helpful online resources, see "Find It Online," p. 22.

### Components of a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program

To qualify for CSR funding, schools must implement a school improvement program designed to effect school-wide change and help all students meet high standards. Such a program

- Employs proven methods and strategies based on scientifically based research
- Integrates a comprehensive design with aligned components
- Provides ongoing, high-quality professional development for teachers and staff
- Includes measurable goals and benchmarks for student achievement
- Is supported within the school by teachers, administrators and staff
- Provides support for teachers, administrators and staff
- Provides for meaningful parent and community involvement in planning, implementing and evaluating school improvement activities
- Uses high-quality external technical support and assistance from an external partner with experience and expertise in schoolwide reform and improvement
- Plans for the evaluation of strategies for the implementation of school reforms and for student results achieved, annually
- Identifies resources to support and sustain the school's comprehensive reform effort
- Has been found to significantly improve the academic achievement of students or demonstrates strong evidence that it will improve the academic achievement of students

*Reprinted from the U.S. Department of Education website at [www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/2pager.html](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/2pager.html).*



ties for the year. Both of these examples could be components of a greater comprehensive school reform model. But it is the coordination, alignment, and integration of these efforts into one unified plan that constitutes school improvement.

If your school has been identified as needing “corrective action” or has not made adequate yearly progress for several consecutive years, it is most likely either searching for a comprehensive school reform model or already in the planning or implementation phase. Models that you might be familiar with include America’s Choice, Core Knowledge, Direct Instruction, and Success for All.

Articles in this issue of Pacific Educator approach the topic of school improvement from a variety of different angles. For stories about schools that have been successful in involving

major stakeholders in the school improvement process, see “School Improvement in CNMI” (below) and “Planning for Success” (p. 19). For an article on the importance of teacher preparedness, see “Content Knowledge” (p. 16); for one on professional collaboration, see “Winning the Game” (p. 10).

There is still much to be learned about school improvement and how best to plan and implement programs and processes. No matter how you approach the issue, however, the goal remains the same: to improve student learning.

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## Learning Team Sparks School Improvement in CNMI

By Jean Olopai

“TLT meets on Thursdays.” Fortunately, this isn’t said with a groan! TLT stands for the Tottot Learning Team.

For the last three years, Dandan Elementary School (DES) in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) has worked with PREL to achieve school improvement in the area of early reading literacy. The challenge may have been a bit easier to meet because at DES we were faced with new students, new staff, and a new administration. We were able to begin fresh. Old ideas were merged with new outlooks, and everyone started off on the same foot.

Initially meetings were held with the administration to gather materials, identify those who needed to be involved, and set meeting times. This process led to the birth of the Tottot Learning Team. The team is a cross section of grade level teachers, teacher aides, and administrators.

At their first meeting, the group decided to choose a name to distinguish themselves from other groups being formed at the school. The team decided that since they represented all aspects of the school and community, they should be named after the school mascot, the Tottot – a beautiful, indigenous bird of the Marianas. From that day forward the Tottot Learning Team was referred to as TLT.

The TLT is the guiding force behind school improvement at DES. All members made a commitment to set aside time for meetings with CNMI PREL Service Center staff members Jean Olopai and Evelyn Ooka. The only attendance problem the team has encountered is that more staff keep joining.

The TLT began by calling in the community to help develop together a school improvement plan. Next, we tackled the school vision. All of the team members could identify a vision – “It’s on the poster on our wall” – but no one knew what it was. After some honest discussion, we realized that the vision had been borrowed from another school and “tweaked” in order to reach a proposal deadline when the school first opened. We decided that we wanted one of our own.

Questions started to emerge. How are the students doing? What’s working? What needs to be changed? Everyone had answers to these questions, but could they back it up with facts or statistics? No. We needed a profile. This involved finding the information, charting it, and writing narratives. Analyzing student performance came later.

As the information continued to come in, we were able to set a goal: improving reading in the lower grades. “What’s next?” we asked. Action plans. With the help of PREL staff, the team brainstormed. The action plans were completed during the second year of the school improvement process.

At the end of the 2002-2003 school year, the TLT celebrated their accomplishments with food and fun. Certificates were awarded to each TLT member to acknowledge the time they invested. But the greatest reward came with the 2003 spring assessment, which indicated that both short-term and long-term goals for the lower grades had been met!

“TLT meets on Thursdays” – and it isn’t said with a groan! Teachers can see that their hard work has resulted in increased student learning, and that’s what school improvement is all about.



### Dandan Elementary School Vision

The DES learning community is committed to enhance life long skills through academic success, social responsibility and physical well being.