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# America's Choice School Design: A Research-Based Model

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education

National Center on Education and the Economy

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## The Research Basis for the America's Choice School Design

The America's Choice comprehensive school reform design is based on a large and expanding body of evidence regarding the most effective ways to raise student achievement. Below is a representative summary of that research.

**1 Performance standards.** America's Choice sets challenging performance standards for students in the core academic subjects. As far back as the effective schools research of the 1970s and 1980s, high expectations for children's achievement has been considered one of the key ingredients of "effective" schools (Purkey and Smith, 1983). Recent findings from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) cemented the importance of standards as researchers concluded that the existence of common, high standards for student performance was strongly related to national achievement (Schmidt, 1999). Additionally, work in cognitive development reinforces this finding. More complex knowledge and problem solving skills require more sophisticated teaching strategies (Borko and Putnam, 1995), and this kind of teaching can be achieved through setting higher learning goals (Resnick and Klopfer, 1989).

**2 Curriculum materials.** America's Choice provides teachers with carefully developed and tested curriculum materials. It might appear to be simple common sense that programs which provide teachers with well-aligned instructional materials would have higher rates of implementation and stronger effects. However, many whole school reform designs do not provide such materials. Findings from evaluations of Success For All demonstrate the importance of good teaching materials (Slavin, 1998). Studies of program implementation have also noted the importance of good materials (Marsh and Odden, 1991). In addition, researchers have found that professional development organized around good instructional materials has more powerful effects on practice (CPRE, 1998; Cohen and Hill, 2000; Ball, 1994).

**3 Assessments.** America's Choice employs a balanced approach to assessment that utilizes multiple forms of assessment (portfolios, performance tasks, multiple-choice and extended written response items) and tightly links instruction and assessment with organizational decision-making (see #10). Researchers have long distinguished between norm-referenced (i.e., based on relative performance) and criterion referenced (performance compared to a fixed standard) assessment systems and noted the differential effects of these assessments on student motivation, teacher instruction and organizational decision-making (Taylor, 1994; Resnick, 1998). Reducing use of multiple-choice tests and adoption of a wider range of assessment indicators helps avoid the inequities and biases inherent in any single assessment measure (Garcia and Pearson, 1994; Supovitz and Brennan, 1997) and is more useful to teachers for instructional improvement (Darling-Hammond, 1991). Further, evidence suggests that assessments aligned with instructional goals and curriculum materials are more effective at improving educational quality (Popham, 1987).

**4 Literacy instruction.** America's Choice employs a complete approach to literacy that utilizes instructional approaches for reading and writing that are supported by research. During a two and a half hour daily block, there is a half hour of skills instruction (including phonics, grammar, spelling, and diction), a one hour reading workshop, and a one hour writing workshop. The workshops are designed to make sure students develop strong reading and writing skills in many different genres. During the block, there is whole class instruction as well as one-on-one and small-group teaching. The combination of these approaches has been shown to be the most effective approach to literacy instruction. The design includes classroom rituals and routines designed to cultivate effective teaching and learning (Black and William, 1998). This approach to literacy instruction is consistent with the comprehensive review of research conducted by the National Research Council. The NRC defines adequate reading instruction as that which helps children obtain meaning from print, understand the sounds of individual and groups of letters and the specifics of spelling-sound relationships, and understand the structure of words and the nature of the writing system (National Research Council, 1998). According to the NRC, a complete approach to literacy attends to oral language, the recognition of letters, phonemic awareness, decoding skills, comprehension, writing, spelling and grammar, and provides frequent opportunities to read and write.

**5 Cross-age tutoring.** The America's Choice ramp-up program features a cross-age teaching component in which older, low-performing students tutor younger children in reading and writing. Oral reading, writing projects, and language-based games and activities are all part of the experience. Research indicates that cross-age tutoring provides the older child with authentic reasons to practice and improve his or her reading performance (Haluska and Gillen, 1995; Juel, 1991). In addition, the tutoring experience has been shown to promote positive reading habits and attitudes, and to produce drop-offs in truancy and disruptive behavior (Caserta-Henry, 1996; Newell, 1996; Gaustad, 1992). Most importantly, the research clearly shows that tutors consistently make significant gains in achievement, especially in the case of those students who are far behind academically (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes and Moody, 1999; Cohen, Kulik and Kulik, 1982).

**6 Mathematics instruction.** The America's Choice mathematics program is designed to enable US students to master essential arithmetical skills in elementary school, and be empowered to learn the foundations of advanced mathematics by the end of Grade 8 just as their counterparts in top-achieving countries. The America's Choice curriculum has two critical components: a four-year sequence of mathematics courses designed to ramp up students from elementary school and prepare them to study a sequence of advanced mathematics courses that might begin with Algebra II and culminate in Calculus, and rituals and routines designed to cultivate effective teaching and learning of mathematics (Black and William, 1998; Stigler and Hiebert, 1999). The America's Choice mathematics program is based on the findings of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), studies of teaching in Japan (e.g., Stigler and Hiebert, 1999), and recent analyses of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data (Kenny and Silver, 1997). The TIMSS analysis shows that our students fall further behind their counterparts in Europe and Asia as they spend more time in school (Schmidt, et al, 1997). Analysis of NAEP data shows that "students learn what they have the opportunity to learn." The NAEP and TIMSS data provide sharply contrasting views of 'opportunity to learn' in the U.S. and in top-achieving countries in Europe and Asia. While US eighth graders are demonstrating on NAEP that they can—add three-digit numbers with regrouping, complete a long division problem, round a decimal number to the nearest whole number and find the percentage equivalent of a given number—the TIMSS analysis shows that their counterparts in Europe and Asia are demonstrating that they can handle—Equations and Formulae, Congruence and Similarity, Proportionality and Geometry.

**7 Student citizenship.** America's Choice provides teachers with instructional routines that increase on-task behavior and assists schools with the development and implementation of a sound discipline code. The effective schools research has demonstrated the importance of providing a safe and orderly school environment (Edmonds, 1979; Newman, F.M. and Welhage, G.G., 1995; Walberg, 1984). Good behavior in and out of the classroom is linked to better academic performance. When there are fewer disruptions in the classroom, there is more time spent on task (Tomlinson and Walberg, 1986; Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1993).

**8 Professional community.** America's Choice works to build such professional communities by focusing on standards, organizing schools in teams and houses, supporting collective review of student work and providing shared professional development experiences. School effectiveness is enhanced when schools have strong professional communities. These are characterized by a clear sense of shared purpose for all student learning, collaborative activity to improve instruction and learning, and shared responsibility for outcomes. The level of professional community has strong effects on student achievement (Newman and Welhage, 1995).

**9 Safety nets.** America's Choice offers multiple safety nets for students including tutoring, an extended school day and access to community programs. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of providing support services for students. Various supports have been shown to increase time on task, raise student motivation and counter the negative effects of television and peers. Summer school (Heyns, 1978), tutoring, extended day programs and access to social services (Bryk et. al., 2000) have all been shown to have positive effects on achievement.

**10 Stronger teacher/student relationships.** America's Choice uses class teachers and houses to strengthen relationships between students and teachers. Researchers have cited several advantages to assigning students so that teachers stay with the same students over multiple years. Academic benefits include teachers gaining extra teaching time due to familiarity with students (Ratzki, 1988); increased teacher knowledge about a child's intellectual strengths and weaknesses (Jacoby, 1994); and improved job satisfaction for teachers (Burke, 1996). Social advantages consist of reduced student apprehension (Hanson, 1995); longer-term relationships between students as well as between teachers and students, which result in an emotional and intellectual climate that encourages thinking, risk-taking and involvement (Marzano, 1992); and a stronger sense of community and family among parents, students and teachers (Checkley, 1995).

**11 Leadership focused on results.** America's Choice supports development of a school leadership team that is focused on improving instruction, makes decisions based on data and builds professional community. School leadership has long been recognized as a key element for educational success and virtually every review of the literature on educational effectiveness cites leadership as a critical element of school reform (Purkey and Smith, 1983; Marsh and LeFever, 1997). More recent research on school management stresses both a broader systems emphasis of management as well as a focus in instructional improvement aimed at student achievement. For example, Spillane (1999) writes about the importance of "taking leadership practice in a school as the unit of analysis, rather than the individual leader." His distributed theory of leadership focuses on "how leadership is distributed among both positional and informal leaders. Rather than seeing leadership practice as solely a function of an individual's ability, skill, charisma and cognition, we argue that it is best understood as practice distributed among colleagues." Elmore (2000) documents the reforms of District 2 in New York City and attributes much of their success to the construction of a reform system relentlessly focused on instructional improvement with the purpose of increasing student achievement.

**12 On-site technical assistance.** America's Choice provides schools with on-site technical assistance and develops a collaborative relationship with each school by developing a leadership team who works closely with America's Choice staff. The latter also conduct semi-annual implementation checks to provide feedback to the school on its progress. External assistance has been found to play a critical role in the effective implementation of new programs. External agencies can be effective at stimulating and supporting school efforts to improve curriculum and instruction (Bodilly, 1998; McLaughlin, 1991). The success of such efforts depends on the relationship between the external agent and the setting. The more frequent the interaction, the more the external agent understands the setting, and the more support there is for adaptation of reforms to meet local needs and contingencies, the more likely programs will be implemented (Crandall and associates, 1982).

**13 High quality professional development.** America's Choice provides teachers and administrators with hands-on, ongoing professional development designed to support implementation and foster continued learning. These experiences are based on the national consensus about the characteristics of high quality, effective professional development. There is general agreement about the critical components of effective professional development. First, professional development must help teachers connect their work with specific standards for student performance (Hawley and Valli, 1999; National Research Council, 1996). Second, professional development must be both intensive and sustained (Hawley and Valli, 1999; Smylie, Bilcer, Greenberg and Harris, 1998). Third, staff development must engage teachers in concrete tasks and be based on their experiences with students (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995). Staff development which is isolated from teachers' ongoing classroom duties seldom has much impact on teaching practices or student achievement (Zigarmi, Betz and Jennings, 1977). Fourth, professional development should be focused on subject-matter knowledge and teachers' content skills (Cohen and Hill, 2000; Kennedy, 1998). Kennedy (1998) concluded that "programs that focus on subject matter knowledge and on student learning of particular subject matter are likely to have larger positive effects on student learning than are programs that focus on teaching behaviors." Finally, professional development strategies must be connected to other aspects of school change (Corcoran and Goertz, 1995; O'Day and Smith, 1993). One of the most persistent findings from school improvement research is the intimate relationship between staff development and school improvement. As Fullan (1991) states, "staff development cannot be separated from school development."

**14 Community/family outreach.** America's Choice requires that schools appoint a family coordinator and draws on lessons of the nation's most successful outreach program (the National Network of Partnership 2000 Schools at Johns Hopkins University) to strengthen parent involvement. Researchers have long acknowledged the strong link between parent involvement and children's success in school. Studies have found relationships between parent involvement and student achievement, student attendance, self-esteem and school behavior (Epstein, 1996; Lareau, 1989; Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1993). Strengthening parent involvement appears to be an effective strategy for improving performance. Nevertheless, parent involvement in most schools remains minimal.

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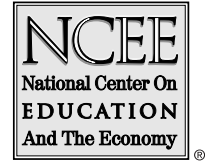
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# The National Center's Program: An Overview

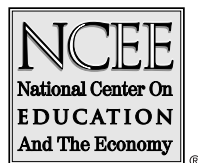
Since 1987, the National Center on Education and the Economy has been developing policies, tools, professional development and technical assistance to support states and communities determined to get their students to high, internationally benchmarked academic and occupational standards. The NCEE is the manager of New Standards<sup>®</sup>, which produced academic performance standards and matching assessments for the schools. America's Choice<sup>®</sup> is a comprehensive program that includes the tools, professional development and technical assistance needed by schools and districts to implement standards-based reform. The National Center's Workforce Development Program provides assistance to states and communities interested in building comprehensive, standards-based school-to-work, job training and labor market systems.



## America's Choice<sup>®</sup>

The America's Choice School Design was developed with a clear goal in mind — to make sure all students leave high school qualified to do college-level work without remediation. This comprehensive, standards-based design covers all the grades from kindergarten through high school. The design builds on extensive research in the United States and abroad: related to standards; assessment; curriculum and instruction; planning, leadership and organization; and parent and community involvement. Originally known as the National Alliance for Restructuring Education (NARE), the design was named in the federal Obey-Porter legislation as an example of the kind of comprehensive school improvement program the legislation was designed to support. Over the last 12 years, significant funding has been provided by the New American Schools Development Corporation (NAS), the Pew Charitable Trusts, the MacArthur Foundation, the Noyce Foundation and the US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).





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