

The Education Innovator

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America's Choice Lifts Students to Reach the Achievement Bar

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“Raise the bar!” “Close the gap!” These enthusiastic exclamations may sound like new-age workout instructions, but to teachers in the era of No Child Left Behind, they are familiar educational objectives. And they are achievable, thanks to over a decade of research that has delivered promising school improvement models. The America's Choice School Design is one such approach. Developed by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), a Washington, DC-based nonprofit organization, America's Choice has produced significant improvements in the schools where it has been implemented, helping to close the achievement gap and lifting more students to high standards.

The America's Choice program is based on the idea that teaching to explicit standards is the best strategy for helping disadvantaged and low-performing students. The program is a comprehensive K–12 school improvement model that aligns standards, instruction, and assessments, and it provides teachers with research-based teaching strategies and methods for helping students who lag behind their peers. The program puts systems in place to immediately spot students who are having trouble and gives

them extra attention. It also provides a plan at the secondary level to construct learning environments of no more than 400 students, so that students do not get lost in the crowd.

The program uses student achievement data to inform instruction. It has a tool that enables its schools to gather, store, collect, display, and analyze student performance data consistent with No Child Left Behind, so that teachers and principals can easily determine which students and schools are not making adequate yearly progress.

The program reinforces reading, writing, and math skills for students who need help. At each America's Choice school, two trained teachers serve as literacy coaches to ensure that the program's reading and writing skills block is implemented effectively. Math is taught for at least one hour a day, and struggling students get an additional 45 minutes of daily instruction (often after school) as part of an America's Choice “safety net” program. For students who need help with reading, the program has a course called Ramp-Up to Advanced Literacy, which is a year-long, double-period program designed to bring students lacking literacy skills up to grade level.



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America's Choice also provides professional development and training for teachers and principals. Academic coaches in the schools assist teachers and consult with regional America's Choice staff members who provide further guidance.

Once a school or district has decided that America's Choice is the path it wants to follow for comprehensive school reform, participation can occur in different ways. For example, in Duval County (FL) a county of 155,000 students, Superintendent John Fryer was the driving force in the implementation of the America's Choice School Design in over 60 schools, where he required an 80 percent school staff vote to implement the design.

In some places, individual schools select the program, while in Mississippi, for example, the state department of education did a national search of comprehensive school improvement programs and recommended America's Choice for the schools in need of improvement. As a result, 40 schools in Mississippi adopted the program last year.

The program supports rigorous evaluations as a key to its success. For this reason, NCEE contracted with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) to evaluate the program. CPRE has produced a series of reports that look at the impact and implementation of the program, and the evidence is encouraging.

In 1998, six schools in Rochester (NY) were among the nation's first group of schools to adopt the America's Choice school improvement program. By 2003, over half of Rochester's 52 schools had done so. CPRE researchers compared the test scores of students in America's Choice schools to those in the city's other schools, and found that:

- America's Choice students outperformed their peers by an average of 17 percent a year in reading in grades 4–8, and an average of 26 percent a year in math.
- The minority gap between African American and Hispanic students and white students decreased in America's Choice schools.
- The program was “particularly powerful” for the city's lowest performing students: the bottom 25 percent of students in America's Choice schools gained significantly more than did the lowest performing students in non-America's Choice schools.
- The longer students attended America's Choice schools, the more likely they were to meet New York State standards.

Other research has found similar results. A study of 232 school reform models conducted by the University of Wisconsin — Madison and Johns Hopkins University found that the effect size for America's Choice schools was nearly triple that of the



average school reform model. On average, an America's Choice student at the 50th percentile would have moved to the 60th percentile on standardized tests in a single year.

So far, America's Choice has partnered with over 650 schools, including charter schools, in 16 states. America's Choice has been the largest grantee of New American Schools and is being included in the American Institutes for Research's (AIR) forthcoming taxonomy of comprehensive school improvement programs.

America's Choice schools are funded by state and local governments, as well as Title I funds under No Child Left Behind. The U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive School Reform Program has also funded the America's Choice School Design.