

Education Week: Letters to the Editor

RE: Reform Programs Backed by Research Find Fewer Takers (April 21, 2004)

I note with interest the waning adoptions for the school improvement programs endorsed by the Catalog of School Reform Models, which is published by the federally funded Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. In addition to the reasons given in the article, I would suggest another.

The selection process itself leaves out many exemplary programs that cannot compete with the “big boys” in the Catalog who have benefited over the years from the “hefty grant program” that the article mentions. For example, we have been trying for years to get our very successful Project CHILD program included in the Catalog. This model is widely used throughout Florida, with growing adoptions in Kentucky and Georgia. We have 15 years of solid data from multiple sites to show that CHILD students excel in reading, writing, and mathematics.

However, to meet the criteria for inclusion in the Catalog, a program must have been adopted schoolwide in at least 40 schools in at least 10 states. This criterion creates an insurmountable barrier for successful programs developed and managed by local LEA’s or non-profits. It’s the classic “Catch 22.” How can your model be adopted nationally without a presence in the Catalog? How can non-profits compete with commercial vendors and their huge marketing budgets?

I hope the Feds will consider bringing back the old NDN (National Diffusion Network) approach that identified successful local programs, and then provided funding for the developers to market and disseminate their models. Otherwise, districts are left with the choice of adopting the few comprehensive models approved in the Catalog, purchasing commercial programs, or striking out on their own to re-invent the wheel.

Sarah M. Butzin
Executive Director, Institute for School Innovation
Tallahassee, FL