New American Schools

Design-Based Assistance as a Cornerstone of a School Improvement Strategy

Thomas K. Glennan, Jr.

Few people outside of New American Schools know as much about the initiative as Thomas K. Glennan, Jr., whose research at the RAND Corporation has traced the progress of New American Schools (NAS) and provided insight into the effectiveness of design-based school reform. In this interview with NAS editors, Dr. Glennan explains how design-based assistance to schools works and suggests reasons why it might help schools become more successful in teaching all students to high standards.

Getting Better by Design

New American Schools

New American Schools (NAS) is a dynamic coalition of teachers, administrators, parents, community and business leaders, policy makers, and experts from around the country committed to improving achievement for all students by dramatically changing America's classrooms, schools, and school systems.

Unlike many reforms that are add-on programs or isolated projects, NAS designs aim to improve the whole school, from curricula and instruction to funding and community involvement.

Recognizing that one size doesn't fit all schools and communities, NAS offers a choice of different designs—blueprints—for helping all students achieve at high levels. (For information on each design, turn to the inside back cover.)

New American Schools has clear and consistent goals:

- Establish supportive and assistance-oriented school systems.
- Develop school and teacher capacity to teach all students to high academic standards.
- Spend resources wisely with an eye to student results.
- Build broad and deep community support for education improvement and excellence.
- Make America's public schools places where all students excel.

New American Schools is results-oriented.

In a short period of time, NAS has generated impressive results. In many schools using a NAS design:

- students are producing higher-quality work, achieving at higher levels, and showing improvement on standardized tests and other measures of performance;
- discipline problems are down and student attendance and engagement are up;
- both teacher enthusiasm and community involvement are on the rise; and
- student achievement is improving quicker than conventional wisdom suggests is possible.

New American Schools helps partner districts restructure.

To overcome traditional barriers to school excellence, NAS provides focused assistance to its district partners in five key areas:

- rethinking school finance, including investment funding and resource reallocation strategies;
- revamping professional development infrastructures to support whole-school transformation;
- setting high academic standards and linked assessments;
- giving schools authority to make decisions about curriculum, staff, and spending as well as holding them accountable for results; and
- engaging parents and the public in improvement efforts.

New American Schools believes in shared accountability.

The foundation of NAS is a strong partnership built on shared responsibility for results. Clearly defined roles link partners to one another and to results. All stakeholders in a NAS community—teachers, administrators, district leaders, parents, NAS Design Teams—are expected to take responsibility and to be held accountable for helping to improve student achievement.

NAS partners also commit to regular and rigorous assessment of their performance, resulting in the sound business practice of continuous improvement. The RAND Corporation is the independent evaluator of the New American Schools' effort.

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Q: Dr. Glennan, New American Schools is one of several school-reform initiatives being implemented in the United States today. What distinguishes the NAS effort from other well-known models?

A: The NAS initiative focuses on school-by-school change coupled with modifications in district policies that support this change. NAS believes that high-performing schools have a design, that most schools need assistance to implement a design, and that school jurisdictions must provide the incentives and support necessary for such schools to develop and survive. The distinctive feature of NAS's reform effort is this combination of intense concentration on school-level change, guided by designs, coupled with district-level changes needed to make this change possible and long-lasting.

Q: What do you mean by "design"?

A: A design is a comprehensive blueprint for a school—not simply unrelated pieces of theory and research, but a

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thoughtful package of strategies, methods, and practice. A design articulates a school's mission and goals. It guides the instructional program and shapes the selection of the staff and the work environment. It establishes expectations for behavior, performance, and accountability among students, teachers, and even parents. And it provides the criteria for regular self-evaluation that are essential for continuing improvement.

Q: Are NAS designs prescriptions for practice?

A: No, NAS designs are starting points for the development of effective schools, but they are not expected to serve as "cookie-cutter" specifications for schools. NAS includes eight different designs with significant differences among them. Most don't prescribe curriculum and instructional practice in detail, and only two have their own defined standards and assessments. While most propose principles concerning governance and organization, they do not narrowly specify a single right way to do things.

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The range of designs and their adaptability to individual school needs and interests is important. Our research, as well as that of others, shows that highly prescriptive designs for education programs are not only seldom sustained in schools where they're put into place, but also are rarely replicated in other settings. Viewing designs as guides for school development rather than prescriptions for specific practice seems more likely to lead to the school-level ownership necessary for success on a broad scale.

Q: Why is design-based, schoolwide restructuring likely to be effective?

A: For me, the most persuasive reason is that it is likely to produce schools with coherent, schoolwide programs that are understood and agreed to by students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. Such schools seem likely to be clear about their goals, knowledgeable about where they are failing to achieve those goals and where they are succeeding, and resourceful in improving performance.

These qualities were hinted at early in RAND's research. In the first year of the demonstration and testing of the NAS designs, RAND teams visited schools to interview teachers and principals to learn what progress had been made. In discussing the benefits of working with the Design Teams, principals and teachers often reported that:

- The design provided a vision for what the school should be and thus gave purpose and direction to the entire reform effort.
- Because the restructuring dealt with the school as a whole, there was less divisiveness than is often associated with reforms that focus on only a few classrooms or a single subject area.
- The professional development offered by the Design Team was shaped by and aligned with the design's vision, and it

was directly tied to students achieving higher standards.

- The reform had been pushed forward by demanding timelines imposed by the Design Team and NAS.

While these observations were based on early experience during the testing of the designs, and the progress observed might have been partially attributable to additional resources made available to the schools during the test, I find the teachers' and principals' testimony very persuasive.

Q: NAS says that design-based assistance is its principal product. What do they mean?

A: When NAS began, it emphasized the development and testing of designs. As RAND and NAS staff visited the field, it became clear that designs alone were not enough to help most schools transform themselves. Important parts of the changes accomplished were due to the assistance and professional development the Design Teams were providing. My colleague, Susan Bodilly, has argued that the capacity to deliver such assistance was a critical part of the NAS program and coined the term *design-based assistance* to describe these activities.

While the phrase may be new, the concept is not. Many organizations have provided assistance in the context of a design for an individual program, such as a math or reading reform program. Several organizations, for example, the Accelerated Schools Project or the Comer School Development Program, have provided assistance in the context of a concept of the school as a whole. The distinguishing feature of the NAS effort is that NAS has consciously set out to provide a diverse set of design-based assistance options from which schools can choose and has made investments in Design Teams to allow them to develop instructional materials, assistance organizations, manuals, and other materials intended to help schools understand and use designs.

Q: So NAS Design Teams are the centerpiece of the NAS school improvement strategy. How do they begin their work?

A: Because each Design Team has a distinctive design and strategy for providing design-based assistance, the first step is to provide schools and school districts with high-quality information concerning both the designs and the Design Teams. This information is intended to help school communities make an informed choice about which design best meets their needs and which team will be most able to help them achieve their student performance goals. This information is particularly important because implementing a design is a three- to five-year process requiring substantial investment by the school and district.

Conveying the extent of these requirements has proved to be one of the most difficult tasks the Teams and NAS have faced because the activity is largely without precedent. Principals, teachers,

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and district staff have not normally chosen designs and associated assistance that entail substantial staff time and financial investments over a period of years. For their part, the Design Teams had been used to working with a small number of hand-picked schools. School staffs have had to learn how to decide which design and Design Team best meet their needs. Design Teams, in turn, needed to learn how to present information about themselves and to work with schools to help them understand the consequences of adopting a design.

"School staffs have had to learn how to decide which design and Design Team best meet their needs. Design Teams, in turn, needed to learn how to present information about themselves and to work with schools to help them understand the consequences of adopting a design. . . . Once some schools in a district have begun implementing designs, other schools can investigate a design by visiting and talking with the staff of those schools. Actually visiting an implementing school seems to be the best way to convey what it means to adopt and implement a particular design."

NAS and its partner districts and states have tried a variety of strategies. Some have held fairs where the Design Teams have described their designs and implementation strategies to interested representatives from schools. Others have distributed information to schools and then brought Design Teams to the district to follow up with interested schools. Once some schools in a district have begun implementing designs, other schools can investigate a design by visiting and talking with the staff of those schools. Actually visiting an implementing school seems to be the best way to convey what it means to adopt and implement a particular design.

After a school chooses a design, the next steps vary according to Design Team. Some rapidly begin to help schools implement portions of their design. Typically these are designs that include concrete curricular materials and some specified instructional methods. Others focus on helping schools do self-assessments that permit them (with the assistance of the Design Team) to establish benchmarks for their implementation of the design. Still others begin with week-long retreats that allow all faculty in a school to develop an understanding of the design's goals and principles and the process the Design Team expects them to use to implement the principles and meet the goals. Intensive summer retreats also allow school faculty to begin to develop plans for implementing the design. An important issue in a school's choice of designs should be which of these strategies is most consistent with the school's existing capabilities and readiness for reform.

In the early years of NAS operations, some schools and districts have chosen to go slowly, focusing on planning. A few, particularly high schools, have implemented a design in a part of the school or at specific grade levels with the expectation of expanding to the whole school over a period of years.

We do not yet know the effects of these varied ways of initiating the implementation of a design. I personally feel that better results are likely if the whole school is involved from the beginning and if there are clear expectations concerning how the design will be implemented in the school over time. Experience will help us understand this issue better.

Our research is very clear on one point about initiation, however. Individual schools must clearly choose and commit to a design. Schools that feel the design was

chosen by their district and pushed on them without their full concurrence find ways to evade implementing the design.

Q: Can you give some examples of Design Teams in action?

A: Sure. Audrey Cohen College helps create schools that infuse students with a sense of the purposes for which they are acquiring knowledge and skills. Its Design Team assistance focuses on implementing a curriculum framework that helps teachers organize their lessons around the purposes. Its initial training activities help teachers use these frameworks to develop lesson plans as well as help their students develop meaningful projects that use this purpose-centered knowledge. An important part of the initial training is working with teachers to help them identify community resources that can be tapped by their students in carrying out their projects.

The National Alliance's vision focuses heavily on school operations, helping schools continually examine student performance using rich and demanding standards. It provides schools with training in analyzing current student performance and school improvement planning. It engages teachers in training to help them develop curriculum matched to the school district's standards. In addition to analyzing performance data and devising strategies for improving results, the Alliance's work marshals school, district, and community support and resources.

Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound envisions education as a series of intellectual, geographic, and social expeditions. An important element of its activities is the use of mini-sabbaticals during which teachers develop the content of such expeditions for their students and critique one another's expedition plans. In addition to helping teachers create these interdisciplinary learning expeditions, the Design Team emphasizes principles that have been important to Outward Bound's long-standing mission—community, mutual dependence, and reflection. In some schools, teachers go on Outward Bound expeditions to develop a deeper appreciation of these principles.

Q: How do Design Teams decide where to focus their priorities?

A: To some degree, the character and timing of the assistance depend on the vision inherent in the design. Teams such as ATLAS and Modern Red Schoolhouse believe that school-level governance is paramount. Their work, therefore, starts there. On the other hand, Roots and Wings and Audrey Cohen College focus on curriculum and instruction. Roots and Wings begins with the school's reading program and moves quickly to change classroom practices, dealing with school governance issues only as they arise. In contrast, the National Alliance begins by working with school leaders to develop their ability to analyze performance against standards and

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to build a system for improving performance. An important component of the Alliance's support involves creating district or state "field teams" organized around the Alliance's five design components.

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As the Design Teams have gained experience, I have the sense that they are adjusting their activities to reflect the initial capabilities of schools with which they work. For example, if a school already has an effective site-level council, a Design Team that has a governance component is likely to adjust its assistance to enhance the functioning of the existing council rather than creating a new one that emulates the specifics originally envisioned in the design.

Q: How do schools judge their progress in implementing a design?

A: NAS has encouraged all of the Design Teams to develop benchmarks that will help schools measure their progress. Roots and Wings, for example, provides checklists of behaviors concerning teaching and learning it expects to see in classrooms. Its facilitators give detailed feedback to schools. On the other hand, Co-NECT and Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound have frameworks for benchmarks that individual schools tailor and elaborate to suit their needs. Both of these Teams help schools understand their progress against the benchmarks through "critical friends" visits: staff working in other schools using the design visit a school, provide constructive peer assessment, and offer suggestions for improvement. While "recipient" school staffs with whom we have talked are nearly unanimous in their praise for this assistance, the visitors also find this a very useful form of professional development.

Q: So the Design Teams provide professional development?

A: Absolutely. Design-based assistance is, at its heart, a comprehensive strategy to provide quality professional development for teachers. It seeks to overcome many of the problems that critics have raised with what too often passes for professional development today—one-shot, isolated, "one-size-fits-all" seminars that teachers attend alone with no follow-up evaluation of how (or whether) they put the information they gathered into practice in the classroom.

NAS Design Teams offer entire school staffs the opportunity to receive professional development assistance that is tied directly to the goals and philosophies of the design. Coaching provided by Design Team staff or by teachers from other schools using the design, provides teachers the feedback and follow-up they need to translate knowledge into practice.

When implemented effectively (which requires a joint effort by schools, Design Teams, and districts), NAS professional development involves giving teachers time

to plan collaboratively, to participate in professional networks, and to work together in engaging all students in the process of achieving higher standards. Although most teacher networking currently takes place at national conferences and via on-line discussions, the most important networking activities may ultimately be established within an individual school district or in compact geographic regions as more and more schools participate.

Q: While more coherent and effective professional development is obviously a potential advantage of design-based assistance, do you see other advantages?

A: I think I have already suggested some other potential advantages. They include having a clearly delineated design for the school, support from trainers experienced with the design, and access to helpful colleagues in like-minded schools. I think a jurisdiction might also reap several additional benefits when design-based assistance is an effective focal point of its reform effort. For example:

- The pressure to choose among concrete, competing designs might actually help schools converge more rapidly on a vision for themselves than if they were left to their own devices.
- The clear focus provided by the design might help school faculties discontinue unnecessary or ineffective programs that are peripheral to the design and redirect those resources to develop more coherent instructional programs.
- Intense, total immersion in a guided school transformation may result in more complete and lasting changes in the school.
- Coupling assistance with the design may lead to implementing a new, more effective and efficient use of professional development resources than is the case in the current system.
- Schools with clear and widely agreed-to designs and an association with a highly regarded outside group might have more ability to sustain their performance through changes in personnel leadership and district environments that inevitably occur.

It is important to note that these are conjectures on my part. RAND's field work has provided hints that some of these benefits have been seen in some school sites, but a broader understanding of them awaits further evaluation.

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Q: You have just cited important potential advantages of using design-based assistance. Are there disadvantages that you see in using such a strategy?

A: Calculation of advantages and disadvantages requires a point of view. From the perspective of many personnel in a typical school system, design-based assistance's biggest disadvantage is that for the most

COMPARISON OF WHOLE-SCHOOL DESIGN-BASED ASSISTANCE WITH TRADITIONAL MEANS OF SCHOOL REFORM

Q: What distinguishes design-based assistance from traditional means of school reform?

A: Many school reform initiatives, while well-intentioned, are piecemeal attempts to raise student achievement and end up tinkering at the edges of the problem. The distinguishing feature in NAS efforts is that assistance is keyed to the vision inherent in the design. In the NAS designs, that vision takes many forms.

The differences between school-level reform using design-based assistance and more traditional forms of assistance are shown at the right. The left column lists a number of the ingredients of school reform such as developing a school vision, acquiring technical assistance, and identifying the means of gauging progress. The middle column suggests the manner in which design-based assistance deals with those ingredients. The last column attempts to broadly characterize the more traditional approaches to school reform. There is, of course, no standard pattern of school reform, so the last column should be taken as suggestive only.

Elements of Reform
Development of a school vision
Focus of reform effort
Duration of reform effort
Sources of technical assistance
Source of curricular materials
Strategy for sequencing assistance
Conception of professional development
Organization of staff
Measurement of progress of reform

School-Level Reform Using Design-Based Assistance	School-Level Reform Under More Traditional Conditions
Starting point is choice of a design. Design evolves through implementation. High standards for all required.	Not required.
Unifying the entire school. Seeks to create team with shared responsibility for high outcomes.	Fragmented. Usually subject matter—or grade-specific—sometimes governance, such as site-based management.
Intense initial effort lasting 2–3 years, but reform is continuing process.	No set time.
Initial assistance largely from Design Team. Long term assistance from sources deemed most effective by school.	No set pattern. Frequently provided by school district or local teachers' college. Training sometimes provided by program vendors.
Varies. Some Design Teams provide detailed materials, others offer frameworks for curriculum development, others use commercially available materials.	Varies according to development of school program. Sometimes shaped by textbook adoption procedures.
Strategy for sequencing implementation actions is explicit. Design Teams have different approaches.	None.
Professional development is integral to design. Implementation of design results in professional development. Network of like schools is key source of expertise.	Tends to be responsibility of individual staff member. Often dependent on district staff development policies.
Integral to design. Some transitional roles defined. School revises organization and staffing structure to meet its goals.	Tends to be function of district rules. Divided along disciplinary or programmatic lines.
Benchmarks established by Design Team or by school with Design Team guidance.	Not usually explicit.

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part it cannot be used on a broad scale in a district unless the district is willing to make significant changes in many of its policies. Design-based assistance is not a strategy for making marginal changes in schooling that can be accomplished without disturbing anything outside the school.

Of course, this same quality of design-based assistance may be seen as a promising advantage by those inside and outside the system who have spent years trying to change that system and believe that a non-marginal effort is exactly what is needed.

Reform strategies using design-based assistance require financial resources, may require changes in the union contract, and cannot be implemented without extensive engagement of parents, community leaders, and elected officials.

Q: One major frustration in the school reform movement is scale. Can design-based assistance make a dent in the problem? Is it enough to dramatically improve all schools?

A: I think design-based assistance can make an important dent in the problem. But by itself it surely is not enough to dramatically improve all schools.

Design-based assistance is NAS's proposal for increasing the number of excellent schools beyond the comparatively few schools in virtually every district that are already excellent. These schools are most often the product of successful leaders who focus a school's effort in ways very much like what the Design Teams try to do. They tend to be treated as exceptional schools in their districts, entitled by their performance to exceptional treatment. They possess levels of autonomy not granted to other schools in their districts.

In about ten places, NAS's design-based assistance is reaching significant numbers of schools beyond those that are already excellent. By and large, the schools its Design Teams are assisting are not exceptional; they are generally average schools within their districts. Most do not initially have qualities that would lead traditional districts to grant them the unusual autonomy normally possessed by exceptional schools.

If they are not granted a degree of autonomy, as the exceptional schools have been, these schools are unlikely to be able to make and sustain reforms, even with effective design-based assistance. If they lack the authority over budget and personnel to make the changes required by the design, the designs will not be implemented. If new curricular and instructional mandates of the central office or the state are imposed on a school that has worked hard to transform itself in accordance with a design, schools and faculties will understandably become discouraged and return to business as before. If the resources needed for the difficult process of transformation are not made available, most schools and their staffs will be unwilling to make the extraordinary personal commitments needed to transform themselves. If professional development policies are not keyed to the needs of schools and

school-level professionals as they pursue reform, they will have less incentive to participate in that reform. If high expectations for student and school performance do not infuse all operations of a school district, it is unlikely that large numbers of individual schools will have such high expectations for themselves. Design-based assistance can be an effective component of reform, but it is far from a sufficient strategy for reform without these kinds of accompanying support.

In pursuing a scale-up strategy that engaged districts as partners, NAS recognized these realities—although I do not think it recognized just how difficult the system-level reforms would be. In the past two years, NAS has worked with districts to help them improve professional development policies, increase various forms of autonomy for schools, and find the resources necessary for using design-based assistance. It has continued to encourage its partner districts to make the changes needed to allow design-based assistance to be effective, and it has worked to help other jurisdictions interested in design-based assistance understand the policies necessary for success.

But while these systemic changes are critical, I continue to feel that NAS's lasting contribution to school reform will be its focus on the transformation of individual schools. While policy makers might prefer sweeping policies that seem to affect and shape all schools, any parent who has collaborated with a school in the education of his or her child understands that the teachers and staff in that school ultimately shape that child's education. To change the way in which that child is educated, those teachers must acquire the skills and develop the vision to guide that change.

Effective change is seldom a matter of following mandates or prescriptions but rather of patient and sustained work to develop and refine better practices and integrate them across an entire school. NAS designs coupled with design-based assistance are intended to help teachers and schools successfully navigate this process.

To reaffirm what I said at the beginning of the interview, school systems that share a belief that nurturing such school-by-school improvement is an essential component of system improvement must seek to shape their systemwide policies to promote and sustain such school-level activities. Neither school-level nor systemwide change alone can be effective on a large scale. ◆

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Papers in this series include . . .

- Design-Based Assistance as a Cornerstone of a School Improvement Strategy
- How to Create and Manage a Decentralized Education System
- How to Rethink School Budgets to Support School Transformation
- How to Rebuild a Local Professional Development Infrastructure
- How to Make the Link Between Standards, Assessments, and Real Student Achievement
- How to Create Incentives for Design-Based Schools
- How to Engage Educators, Parents, and the Community in Design-Based School Change

Accompanying this series are New American Schools Action Tools

To help you implement the ideas and suggestions recommended in the Getting Better by Design "How-To" series, New American Schools is creating hands-on Action Tools that complement and expand the use of the research papers. As they become available, each tool will be posted on the NAS web site, www.naschools.org.

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Education Commission of the States

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