

Overview and Rationale for School Review

For schools joining Cornerstone, the changes they are being asked to make may seem formidable, and some teachers may find it hard to adopt its basic beliefs without some misgivings. Yet the expectation is that, by the end of four years, each school will have grown accustomed not only to the beliefs, but also to the practices that make them real; and the hope is that each will then have the confidence and experience of success that enable them to help other schools wishing to walk the same road.

There is no doubt that many teachers feel that they have been thrown in at the deep end in this process, and there is some truth in that. To begin with, some of the most enthusiastic and dedicated teachers feel confused, and that may be due to some extent to the idea that there has to be some tangible, even dramatic, change of course with demonstrable results before the first external review takes place early in their very first year and before they have fully understood what is expected of them.

Both schools and reviewers have been learning during the first four years of Cornerstone. One of the things they have learned is that by far the most important attribute of a Cornerstone school is its ability to get an objective view of itself and to have the means of responding to what it sees. It is not that they have already mastered one or more of the techniques specific to Cornerstone.

The questions that external reviewers try to answer are the same in all years (see Unit 2.10). Though in the first year they are intended to find schools' potential, or how far the school's practice is supportive of Cornerstone, they provide the measure of development over the four years. Schools therefore need to be applying these questions to themselves all the time, and that is the best preparation for an external review.

Schools that have developed this habit of self-appraisal, allied with planning to deal with the shortcomings it may reveal, are in the strongest position to do justice to themselves in an external review.

Year One

The first review provides a baseline assessment of the school's current position and what it needs to do to advance as a Cornerstone school. This review will be an important future reference point showing what the school has progressed from.

Year Two

The second year review provides a record of how the school has started to establish itself as a Cornerstone school, as well as suggesting further steps it needs to take to consolidate this.

Year Three

For the third year of review, the format is somewhat different. In some ways, the year three review will be more demanding because the onus on evaluation passes from the reviewers to the schools themselves, who will be asked to give considerable thought before the review team arrives to the progress they have made and the areas they need to focus upon next. The role of the reviewers will be to validate or challenge the school's self-review on the basis of the evidence presented to them. We have always tried to make the reviews a collaborative experience, but the extent of this collaboration will be greatly increased in year three.

The reviewers' overview report, published in July 2001, included the following recommendation:

Self-review is the most powerful tool for continuing improvement, and should be encouraged in schools where there are effective leaders and teachers of literacy. Good self-review will complement the annual external reviews.

The accompanying commentary suggested that:

Self-review is gaining ground in Cornerstone schools through the asset mapping process, when it is conscientiously done. No one knows more about a school's strengths and weaknesses than those who work there. As the number of schools in the Cornerstone initiative grows, the current format for review will cease to be a viable possibility. A short visit by an external review team to validate the school's self-review might be the next step. Cornerstone should consider ways in which external reviews might complement school review in the future.

The format for year three reviews closely picks up on the recommendation. The timeline for these reviews:

Four weeks before the review: The school is sent a self-review form to be completed along with evidence to justify their answers. Cornerstone staff may assist the school in completing the statement and selecting classes to be observed. This form is available on Cornerstone's website: <http://www.cornerstoneliteracy.org>

Two weeks before the review: The completed statement and schedule for the review are sent to Mary Jean Whitelaw for distribution to the review team members.

One week before the review: The completed questionnaires, together with the schedule and the year two review report, are sent to the members of the review team.

For Cornerstone colleagues who participate on the review teams, we believe you will gain new insights into the important process of school self-review along with the excellent professional experience that being a reviewer offers.

Year Four

The fourth year self-evaluation differs substantially from the third year self-evaluation. To begin with, there are few direct questions to answer. Instead, you are invited to record your judgments about how your school has moved during the time since the year three (Y3) self-evaluation and the external school review. The choice of emphasis in this self-evaluation is up to the school.

Although this form is far less detailed, responding to it demands just as much attention as the Y3 self-evaluation. You will need to be discriminating and objective in order to produce a document that accurately reflects the picture as you see it; this document will serve as the broad agenda for the work of the visiting review team. It is important that the document be candid and the assessments be based on evidence.

The form is divided into four sections. The first relates to the recommendations that were made in the report from last year's school review. The second section addresses your own self-evaluation in year three. As you deal with the first two sections, you will need these earlier documents. The review team members will also have them. The third section looks to the future and the question of whether or not your school might be able to serve as a foundation school to promote the work of Cornerstone in your area. Finally, in the fourth section, we ask you to provide a brief overview of a presentation you will do while the review team is visiting. For this section, you might imagine what you would present if you were introducing Cornerstone to another school.