The Center for Reform of School Systems
K-12 Educational Services

The Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS) has been working with school districts, large and small, across the country for over a decade. CRSS has become a major resource for districts on school district improvement. In addition to a long history of training district governance teams to focus on how to improve student achievement, CRSS offers expertise and objective analysis for district-wide improvement.

The District Improvement Initiative is a system-wide school district assessment and restructuring service designed to assist under-performing school districts achieve significant, sustainable improvements in student performance, effective and efficient system operations, and community support. These services are also useful during superintendent leadership transitions to provide baseline assessments and actionable data for leaders.

Whether the district is in transition or in need of mid-stream improvement, the request for assistance can come in one of three ways. The first type of request could come from a sitting or incoming superintendent asking for assistance. A second method of subscription would be through a request from a school board or the state school board association. A third area is a request for services from the state education agency.

The District Improvement Initiative (DII) has up to three phases: an audit, a performance improvement plan, and execution support.

The District Improvement Initiative work can include part or all of the following:

A. Academic audit
B. Operational audit
C. Governance audit
D. Financial audit
E. Consulting services for specific areas, departments, or personnel

I. Audit Phase: Results from the analysis will provide a clear, objective, fact-based assessment of the district’s current environment, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

II. Performance Improvement Plan Phase: Grounded in the audit, CRSS’s experts will develop a Performance Improvement Plan that maps the district’s path to either full recovery and enhanced student performance or marked improvement in specific areas of district operations. The Performance Improvement Plan often entails re-engineering the district’s operational and instructional processes and practices and redeploying and/or retraining district personnel. In addition, the plan may include a strategic abandonment assessment process to allow the staff to rationally discontinue activities and expenditures that are no longer key priorities. Each Plan will also include feedback evaluation components to be used over time for progress monitoring.

III. Execution Phase: The hardest part of any renewal effort is turning improvement plans into action. To ensure successful execution, improvement strategies are best supported with a change management plan and ongoing guidance. A change management plan will detail the communication strategies, buy-in strategies, timelines, and ownership assignments. Keeping up the change process along with the current workload is often too much for district staff without ongoing outside support throughout the execution process. CRSS guidance can continue throughout the execution phase until district leadership is assured that the Performance Improvement Plan has taken root.
The Center for Reform of School Systems
Academic Audit

Are you unsatisfied with your district’s academic performance?
Are your math, reading and/or science test scores too low?
Are you concerned about your dropout rate or your attendance rate?
Have you been working hard on fixing these problems but getting nowhere?

Odds are that your interventions – though well designed and honestly applied – are not addressing the real causes of your problems. Until these root causes are properly identified and addressed, no amount of effort or intervention will make the situation better.

No matter how good the cure is, it won’t improve the underperformance unless it is the right cure for the problem. Just as you would want your doctor to carefully and accurately diagnose the cause of a pain you are suffering before beginning treatment, you need a precise diagnosis of your academic problem before you start treating it. Simply guessing what is wrong won’t do. You need to know with certainty.

1. An Academic Audit is a thorough and detailed analysis of the academic condition of a district conducted by experienced school instructional experts and designed to determine exactly what is causing the poor performance. CRSS’s experts bring “fresh eyes” to the problem, noting details that are often not seen clearly by those accustomed to looking at the situation day after day. After the wide-ranging analysis, the CRSS team will issue a well-documented and thorough report to district officials that will identify the root causes of the problems and provide district officials with a roadmap to academic excellence.

The Comprehensive Academic Audit will look for the presence and quality of some or all of the following:
• Effectiveness of academic programs and instructional practices
• Student achievement levels and graduation rates disaggregated
• Measures and progress reporting tools
• Assessment processes, tools, and reporting/communications
• Data quality/use and accountability
• Quality of teacher instruction, satisfaction, and professional development
• Academic leader professional development and satisfaction
• Teacher staffing and administrative patterns and costs
• Use of strategic abandonment to prioritize or eliminate programs
• Use of innovative technology
• Use of evaluation instruments

The key to CRSS’s Academic Audit is its team – individuals who have strong records of success, wide and deep knowledge of academic areas, and a strong desire to prove that school systems can provide world-class academic services for America’s children. Team members include former superintendents, former chief academic officers, and former assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction.

2. The Performance Improvement Plan will include specifics for how to address deficiencies found in the Audit.

3. Execution support will track, support, and shepherd the Performance Improvement Plan as it is put into place. Executive support will include a change management plan and continued coaching and support to ensure execution of the approved plan.
Armed with the Academic Audit and Performance Improvement Plan and Execution support, school district officials can design interventions that go to the heart of the problems and provide the very best chances for academic recovery. Every community deserves a great school district. CRSS is there to help your community and your district do their best work.
The Center for Reform of School Systems  
Organizational Audit

Are you spending too many resources on facilities and they are still not repaired properly?  
Do you spend more per mile to transport your students than neighboring districts?  
Are there hundreds of complaints about payroll every pay period?  
Are you spending instructional dollars to support your food service program?  
Do your technology dollars support instruction?  
Do your students and teachers feel safe at school?

School districts are like cities. They provide an enormous array of services. These services support the core mission of teaching and learning and can either enhance that mission or hinder it. Schools cannot do their best work if teachers aren’t paid on time, if the buses don’t deliver children to school promptly, if the food needed to fuel academic work is draining instructional dollars, if students struggle to use outdated instructional technology, and if the buildings are too cold or hot.

Operational effectiveness and efficiency is critical to creating a high-performing district. Yet all too often, the operational functions of the district are both a distraction from the core mission and a financial drain on the district. Usually school systems leave operational leadership to former educators who have the heart but lack the expertise needed to drive improvements.

CRSS has experienced team members who have dramatically improved school district operational performance with fewer dollars and at a better quality. The generous funding of years past is no longer the reality for the future in education. School districts are going to need to get more productivity with less funding for a very long time.

CRSS is prepared to help school systems dramatically improve district operations, for the benefit of schools and children. An Organizational Audit could include some or all of the following:

A. Facilities maintenance  
B. Facilities construction  
C. Food services  
D. Security  
E. Technology  
F. Human resources  
G. Transportation  
H. Grants management

1. An Audit will use CRSS team experts to conduct a full analysis of the performance of each targeted department, looking at metrics for performance and making comparisons with similarly sized organizations. In addition, the team will examine organizational structures, staffing ratios, and customer satisfaction and the use of strategic abandonment to prioritize or eliminate programs.

2. The Performance Improvement Plan will include specifics for how to address deficiencies found in the Audit. “Fresh eyes” along with operational expertise are effective improvement tools for school districts and their in-house service providers.

3. Execution support will track, support, and shepherd the Performance Improvement Plan as it is put into place. Executive support will include a change management plan and continued coaching and support to ensure execution of the approved plan.
Do you trust the revenue and expenditure projections you are given?  
Have there been serious budget shortfalls in recent years?  
Are you over-spending for insurance and workers’ compensation claims?  
Is the budget process simply a process of adding new expenditures each year or doing across-the-board cuts without rethinking current spending priorities?

The public will tolerate many flaws in their governments. Financial mistakes are the exceptions. There is no forgiveness for financial malfeasance. Yet often, school leaders lack the expertise to understand deeply the financial condition of the school system.

During a time of transition, new leaders need to know the current financial condition, the out-year risks, the inefficient business practices in place, and the potential solutions to all these challenges. A new superintendent’s inaugural financial audit is a wise decision to set a baseline for performance and to uncover issues that need resolution. Boards of Education may also want such a financial audit during a transition period.

1. An Audit will have CRSS and its team of experts conduct an assessment that includes examination of the following areas of finance looking for inefficiencies, assumptions for future risk and revenue, and best practices of high performing school district finance divisions:
   A. Minding the money – financial reporting and internal controls  
      a. Budget  
      b. Accounts Payable  
      c. Payroll  
      d. Procurement  
      e. Risk Management  
      f. Treasury  
      g. Accounting  
      h. Workers’ Compensation  
   B. Following the money – revenue forecasting and expenditure planning  
   C. Verifying the money – external audits and internal audits

2. **The Performance Improvement Plan** will include specifics for how to address deficiencies found in the Audit.

3. **Execution** support will track, support and shepherd the Performance Improvement Plan as it is put into place. Executive support will include a change management plan and continued coaching and support to ensure execution of the approved plan.
Is the Board of Education accused of being either a rubber stamp or a micromanaging board?

Are board committees draining board member and staff time and energy?

Does the board have core beliefs and commitments, theories of action, and reform policies to turn those beliefs into action?

Does the board understand how to oversee management without becoming management?

CRSS’s Governance Audit is a comprehensive assessment of the best practices of the district’s governance team (defined as the full school board and superintendent).

School boards have enormous power to set policies that will either transform their district for high achievement or keep them perpetually committed to too slow a rate of student achievement improvement.

Reform Governance® involves governing for change, a process quite different from conventional governance. The governance audit will evaluate the presence and effectiveness of the following reform governance practices:

- A vision and core beliefs and commitments to improve student achievement
- A board-adopted theory of action to improve curriculum and instruction
- Reform policies to support the core beliefs and commitments and selected theory of action
- A plan for superintendent evaluation and board self-evaluation
- Policies and procedures related to management oversight and constituent services
- An efficient and effective approach to board meetings and committee meetings with the focus on student achievement
- A plan for dealing with governance team transitions and increasing civic capacity
- A data dashboard
- Effective communications of the board’s goals, plans, and policies to the community to build public understanding and support
- The board’s active participation in policy development and assurances that its reform priorities are codified in policy
- The board’s diligence in monitoring the implementation of its policies to determine whether or not they are achieving their intended objectives
- The board’s practice of making decisions based on relevant research and data
- Collaborative relationships ensuring that board members treat each other, the superintendent and staff, and members of the public with respect
- Board cohesiveness and trust with the superintendent
- The board’s willingness to hear diverse community opinions
- The board members’ understanding that their role is to govern, not manage, and the superintendent’s understanding of his/her management responsibility
- The board’s adoption of a fiscally responsible budget based on the district’s vision and goals and the regular monitoring of the fiscal and academic health of the district
- Use of strategic abandonment to prioritize or eliminate programs

1. An Audit by CRSS will assess the current condition of the governance team and their processes for governing.

2. The Performance Improvement Plan will include specifics for how to address deficiencies found in the Audit.
3. **Execution** support will track, support, and shepherd the Performance Improvement Plan as it is put into place. Executive support will include a change management plan and continued coaching and support to ensure execution of the approved plan.
The hardest part of any renewal effort is ensuring that action plans are executed. All change is best supported with a change management plan and continuing support. Keeping up the change process along with the current workload is often too much for district staff without ongoing outside support during the implementation process. CRSS expertise can be ongoing throughout the implementation phase until district leadership is assured that the action plan has taken root.

A K-12 district CRSS expert will oversee the development and management of a Change Management Plan for a major transformation effort. This expert will stay with the district over an agreed-upon period of time to continue to guide the change through the execution process. The CRSS change manager should have an internal district champion appointed to provide inside authority, credibility, and support. The partnership will help ensure completion of the plan and a successful change.
Districts often need periodic support for tasks for which the district lacks the expertise or experience. The CRSS team includes experts in the following areas:

- **Strategic Plan Development**: Every productive organization has a long-term plan for improvement. School districts benefit from a well-thought-out plan of action and efficient use of resources with assigned timelines and responsibilities. CRSS's experts will not only help develop an effective 3-5 year action plan, but also help districts convert the plan into action so that it doesn't become just another beautifully bound document left to gather dust on the bookshelves.

- **Executive Coaching**: Similar to the services offered to corporate CEOs, the CRSS executive coaching service is offered to key district leaders: superintendents, senior staff, and board presidents. The coach can assist with thinking through difficult district problems and challenges and developing strategies to address them.

- **Governance Capacity Building**: Regular governance is one thing, governing for reform and improvement is quite another. CRSS faculty can help school boards develop powerful school reform policies and create better systems and practices for providing effective management oversight.

- **Outsourcing Support**: Outsourcing non-educational parts of the district operations (such as maintenance, food service, custodial services, grounds, etc.) can be a powerful way to save money and enhance productivity, but only if it is done right. Otherwise, it can be just another headache. CRSS's outsourcing experts can provide schools and school districts with the expertise they need to level the negotiation table and make the most of the outsourcing strategy.

- **Curriculum Restructuring and Alignment**: A school district’s curriculum is second only to teacher quality in its importance as a determinant of student performance. Absent a properly aligned, high-quality curriculum, a district has little chance of producing high-quality student performance. CRSS's experts can help school districts better manage their core business – teaching and learning – in order to dramatically improve their student achievement results.

- **Content Area Expertise Support**: CRSS can provide school districts with experts in all of the important subject areas: reading, math, special education, etc., as well as state and national regulatory areas.

- **Educational Technology**: Effective use of instructional technology, management technology, and operational technology can greatly enhance school district performance. Few school districts have the level of technological expertise within their staffing to achieve optimum technological support. CRSS’s experts are the district’s partners in dealing with very complex but critically important parts of district operations.

- **Civic Capacity Development**: School districts cannot succeed absent viable community support. Viable community support is achieved and maintained only through a district’s effective use of strategies and programs designed to involve the community appropriately. CRSS experts use techniques and strategies developed to achieve optimum community support for the school district.

- **Charter Schools**: CRSS has a cadre of charter school experts with extensive experience in establishing, restructuring, and operating high-quality charter schools. CRSS can provide in-depth assistance to districts that are grappling with problems associated with charter school operations.