

Moving Beyond Identification Assisting Schools in Improvement

A report in the series From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 5 of the No Child Left Behind Act

Moving Beyond Identification: Assisting Schools in Improvement

Summary of Key Findings

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires states to identify schools in need of improvement based primarily on student achievement on state tests. Once schools are identified, the law charges states and districts with assisting these schools in their efforts to improve. As states have scaled up their accountability programs over the past five years, much national attention has focused on testing and identifying schools. Less attention has been paid to what states and districts have done to assist identified schools and how effective this assistance has been.

In medicine, taking a person's temperature is only an indication of whether that person has a fever; it never results in spontaneously improving that person's health. Instead, to improve health, people typically need medicines, lifestyle changes, or other interventions. In education, administering a test and reporting the results will not spontaneously raise student achievement. For schools that do not meet state targets for adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state tests, a range of different interventions can provide the kind of assistance that is crucial to improvement.

For the past five years, the Center on Education Policy (CEP), an independent nonprofit organization, has been conducting a comprehensive study of the No Child Left Behind Act. This report—one in a series of CEP reports on year 5 of NCLB implementation—examines the kind of assistance that schools in improvement receive and how effective district and state officials believe that assistance to be. Findings are based on CEP's annual survey of 50 state departments of education; our nationally representative annual survey of districts, including 349 responding school districts; and 12 case studies of districts involving interviews with district and school officials. Our key findings include the following:

- ***The percentage of districts with schools in improvement has remained steady, with urban districts continuing to have the highest representation.*** Our district survey showed that in 2005-06 approximately 18% of districts had schools in improvement—a similar share to the 20% of districts that reported having schools in improvement in 2004-05. As in previous years, significantly more urban districts (47%) had schools in improvement than suburban (22%) or rural districts (11%).
- ***Reading First, curriculum alignment, and special grants to districts were rated effective by the largest percentage of states.*** States rated the four most frequently used state strategies as most effective for improving schools: professional development through Reading First (81% of the 48 states that responded to the survey item), Reading First curriculum and assessment materials (79% of 47 states), alignment of curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments (76% of 46 states), and special grants to districts to support school improvement (74% of 47 states).

- ***Districts rated their own policies as important contributors to increased student achievement but had mixed views of state and federal policies.*** A high percentage of districts (69% in reading and 71% in mathematics) rated their own policies for improving schools as “important” or “very important” factors in raising student achievement—much higher than the share of districts that rated state policies as important or very important (45% in reading and 35% in math). In reading, three policies authorized by NCLB were rated by more than half of districts as important or very important. Among districts with Reading First grants, 69% rated the Reading First assessment systems and 68% the Reading First instructional program as important or very important. Among districts with schools that had to write improvement plans, 64% rated these plans as important or very important. In math, no federal policy was rated as important or very important by a significantly larger proportion of districts. The federal requirements to offer choice and supplemental educational services were viewed by nearly all districts as not helpful in their efforts to raise achievement in either reading or math.
- ***Actions that NCLB requires or encourages districts to take with schools in improvement were viewed as helpful, but some districts lack funding.*** Actions that NCLB mandates or lists as options for schools in various stages of improvement—extending the school day, implementing new curricula, engaging in school improvement planning, and appointing outside experts to advise the school—were typically viewed by districts as effective. Many districts, however, said they lacked the capacity to take some of these actions. Among districts that reported a lack of capacity, 97% said lack of money kept them from extending the school day or year and 60% said lack of money kept them from entering into a contract with a private management company to operate the school.
- ***Many districts used additional strategies.*** Districts reported that the most effective strategies to assist schools identified for improvement included “increasing the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions” (97% used this strategy), “increasing the quality and/or quantity of teacher and principal professional development” (94%), and “improving the school planning process” (93%). Our case studies support these findings.
- ***Districts took a variety of actions to close gaps, but several districts called for revision of some subgroup policies.*** Many districts reported persistent gaps in achievement between traditionally high- and low-achieving subgroups of students. Both districts and states reported that gaps between students with and without disabilities were most difficult to close. Top strategies to close gaps included tutoring for low-performing subgroups, improving collaboration between special education teachers and regular classroom teachers, and training teachers to use specific methods to address the academic needs of low-performing subgroups. Still, officials in case study districts recommended changing federal policies for students with disabilities and English language learners.
- ***The 4% of Title I funds set aside for schools in improvement is not enough.*** NCLB requires states to set aside 4% of Title I funds for districts with schools in improvement. Due to a “hold harmless” provision in the law, however, means states are sometimes not able to set aside the full 4%. Two states reported having no funds at all to set aside for schools in improvement. Many states reported using state funds to address some of the goals of NCLB, but these state funds are uncertain, particularly in states with declining revenue. The majority of case study districts said there were things they would like to do to assist schools in improvement that they were not able to do because of lack of funds.

Recommendations

The Center on Education Policy offers the following three recommendations to improve assistance to schools in improvement. These recommendations grow out of what we have learned about school improvement not only from this year's study, but also from our previous four years of research on NCLB implementation.

- ***Provide funding for assistance to schools in improvement that is separate from the 4% set-aside.*** The 4% set-aside for assistance to schools in improvement underfunds this important initiative. Indeed, two states in our survey reported having no funds for schools in improvement. One approach would be for Congress to greatly increase appropriations for the school improvement program under section 1003(g) of the Title I law and to gradually reduce the percentage of funds set aside for state assistance. This would provide funds to meet the costs of school improvement without reducing or eliminating any increases in formula allocations that school districts receive for Title I, Part A. In addition, funding school improvement through this separate authority helps ensure that all states, even those with little or no increase in Title I funds, have funds for school improvement activities.
- ***Encourage a triage approach to assistance to schools in improvement.*** Our surveys and case study interviews showed that the needs of schools in improvement vary considerably, based on the number of years the school has been in improvement, the reasons the school was identified (which subgroups missed AYP targets in which subjects and grade levels), and the school's individual context. NCLB should be revised to encourage states and districts to group schools according to needs and provide differentiated assistance to schools based on these needs.
- ***Provide funds to enable outside entities to evaluate school improvement efforts.*** Our research showed that most states and districts were using improvement strategies that they believed to be effective; however, some district and state officials were uncertain of the effects of particular strategies. More research is needed to verify the effectiveness of these school improvement activities so that successful efforts can be replicated and less effective ones can be replaced. Districts and states do not appear to have the capacity to provide this kind of evaluation themselves. Congress should provide funding to enable districts and states to hire outside entities, such as universities or research organizations, to determine which efforts are effective at improving student achievement and to advise states and districts of changes needed to maximize improvement efforts.

Information Sources for This Report

As explained below, CEP's study of year 5 implementation of NCLB is based on a state survey, a school district survey, and case study interviews with district- and school-level officials in school districts. More information about sources and methodology for our surveys and case studies is available in the Methodology link accompanying this report on CEP's Web site at www.cep-dc.org.

STATE SURVEY

From fall 2006 through January 2007, all 50 states responded to CEP's detailed annual survey of state departments of education. However, some states did not complete every question or section, so the response rate varies by question. To maximize the likelihood that respondents would provide accurate information, we promised anonymity to individual states.

SCHOOL DISTRICT SURVEY

From November 2006 through February 2007, we surveyed a random sample of 491 nationally representative school districts stratified by district type, district size, and whether the district had schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under NCLB. This year's survey was a continuation of CEP's annual survey on NCLB implementation at the district level. Urban districts and districts with schools in improvement were oversampled to allow separate analyses based on these categories. A total of 349 districts responded to the survey for a response rate of 71%. To ensure that each kind of district sampled was adequately represented in our overall national calculations, the data was weighted during analysis. (For more information on the school district survey methodology, see the Methodology link at www.cep-dc.org).

SCHOOL DISTRICT CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS

From fall 2006 through January 2007, a CEP consultant and CEP staff conducted in-depth interviews on school improvement issues with district and school staff in 12 districts and 12 schools. Originally, case study districts and schools had been chosen for CEP's long-term study of NCLB to produce a mix of urban, rural, and suburban districts from all geographical regions of the country. A subset of 12 of these original districts was selected for this report on school improvement based on whether the districts had schools that were identified for improvement or that did not make AYP. **Table 1** lists the districts and schools studied for this report and provides other basic information about the districts, including the total number of schools in improvement.

Interviews with district and school staff members were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software. Material from these interviews is included throughout this report.

Table 1. School District Case Study Interviews

School District Name, <i>School Name</i> Where Applicable, & State	District Type	Number of Schools in Improvement 2006-07
Bayonne City School District, New Jersey <i>Lincoln Community School</i>	Urban, preK-12	4 of 12
Bloomfield School District, New Mexico	Rural, K-12	3 of 7
Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts	Urban, K-12	67 of 167
Calhoun County School District, Alabama	Rural & suburban, K-12	4 of 16
Chicago Public Schools, Illinois <i>Carson Elementary</i> <i>Pope Elementary</i>	Urban, K-12	343 of 581
Cleveland Municipal School District, Ohio	Urban, preK-12	66 of 102
Colorado Springs School District 11, Colorado	Urban, K-12	3 of 65 (includes charter schools)
Escondido Union School District, California	Suburban, K-8	7 of 11
Fayetteville Public Schools, Arkansas	Small city, K-12	1 of 14
Joint School District No. 2–Meridian, Idaho <i>Linder Elementary</i> <i>Meridian Elementary</i>	Suburban, K-12	7 of 43
Oakland Unified School District, California <i>Cox Elementary</i> <i>New Highland Elementary</i> <i>Sobrante Park Elementary</i> <i>Whittier Elementary</i>	Urban, K-12	52 of 90 (not including charters)
Tigard-Tualatin School District, Oregon <i>Fowler Middle School</i> <i>Metzger Elementary School</i> <i>Tualatin High School</i>	Suburban, K-12	0 of 16 (5 would be in improvement if the middle and high schools schools received Title I funds)

Source: Center on Education Policy, *Case Studies, 2006-07*.

Percentages of Districts with Schools in Improvement

Since NCLB's inception, CEP has tracked the percentage of districts with schools in improvement and has asked several questions about student achievement. Our district survey asked districts to indicate whether they had schools in improvement and what stages of improvement these schools were in. Both our state and district surveys also asked officials to indicate whether student achievement was improving, declining, or staying the same, based on state tests.

PERCENTAGE STEADY DESPITE RISING ACHIEVEMENT

For 2005-06, 18% of surveyed districts reported having at least one Title I school in improvement. CEP's annual district surveys show this percentage has remained stable. For example, in 2004-05, our survey showed that 20% of schools had at least one school in improvement. This finding has been corroborated by other researchers. According to a separate national tally developed by *Education Week*, 2,399 districts had at least one school in improvement in 2004-05 (Archer, 2006). This amounts to about 20% of districts nationally.

Although the number of schools in improvement has remained steady, most of the districts we surveyed (64%) reported that student achievement on state tests used for NCLB in 2005-06 improved in reading compared to achievement on the same tests in 2004-05. In math, 54% of districts said achievement improved. Our state survey showed similar results: Improvement was reported by 25 states in reading and 27 in math. Districts with and without schools in improvement did not differ significantly in their reports of changes in achievement in reading and math. These district views are corroborated by CEP's rigorous study of trends in achievement, which concluded that in most states with three or more years of comparable test data, state test scores in reading and math have gone up since 2002, the year NCLB was enacted (CEP, 2007c). The full report on achievement, *Answering the Question That Matters Most: Has Student Achievement Increased Since No Child Left Behind?*, is available at www.cep-dc.org, as are the other CEP reports referred to below.

Why doesn't this reported increase in student achievement on state tests correspond with fewer schools in improvement? As discussed in CEP's report on year 4 of NCLB implementation, a number of factors contribute to both increases and decreases in the number of schools in improvement (CEP, 2006b). Reasons for decreases include the following:

- Schools exiting improvement because achievement has met or exceeded AYP targets for two consecutive years
- Changes in instructional practices, which may improve student achievement
- Federal rule changes and changes to state accountability plans in virtually all states, which have made it easier for schools to make AYP
- Safe harbor rules and confidence intervals, which sometimes mean a school can make AYP with only minimal gains in the percentage proficient over the previous year

At the same time, other factors make it more difficult for schools to make AYP. These include the following:

- Gradual increases in AYP targets en route to 100% of students reaching proficiency by 2014, which mean that even schools with rising test scores may fall short of rising targets
- Increases in the number of grades tested, which mean that at many schools student subgroups have become large enough to be counted and may prevent the school from making AYP

These factors vary widely by state, since each state has its own accountability system, perhaps explaining the wide variety in each state's number of schools in improvement. At present, however, these factors appear to balance out one another across the nation and result in a steady percentage of districts with schools in improvement nationally.

URBAN DISTRICTS STILL OVERREPRESENTED

In 2005-06, as in the three previous years, a significantly greater share of urban districts (47%) had Title I schools in improvement than suburban (22%) or rural (11%) districts. This does not necessarily indicate that urban schools are not improving; in fact, urban districts reported overall increases on state tests and on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Casserly, 2007).

Our finding about higher proportions of urban districts with schools in improvement is consistent with other research on schools identified for improvement (Padilla et al., 2006) and with research on urban schools (Casserly, 2007). One reason a greater proportion of urban districts report having identified schools may be that these districts typically have more subgroups that must meet AYP targets. This overrepresentation of urban districts is shown in **table 2**.

Table 2. Percentage of Districts with at Least One Title I School in Improvement in 2005-06, by Type of District

Improvement Stage	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Total
Improvement (year 1 or 2)	42%	20%	9%	16%
Corrective action	28%	9%	2%	7%
Restructuring planning	11%	3%	0%	2%
Restructuring implementation	9%	4%	1%	3%

Table reads: Forty-two percent of urban districts, compared with 20% of suburban districts and 9% of rural districts, reported having a least one school in year 1 or 2 of school improvement in 2005-06.

Note: Percentages differ slightly but not significantly from CEP's 2006 report, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act*, due to state and district corrections in achievement data and a slight variation in the sampled districts.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, *District Survey*, item 1A (tables SI-2A, SI-2B, SI-2C, SI-2D).

Table 2 also shows the percentage of districts with schools in each stage of improvement. While 18% of districts had at least one school in any stage of improvement, a single district could have schools in more than one of the stages: improvement (first or second year after being identified), corrective action, restructuring planning, and restructuring implementation. This information is included in table 2. For example, a district with at least one school in the first year of improvement and one school in corrective action would be included in the percentages in both the first and second rows of table 2. Therefore, the sum of the total percentages shown in the last column exceeds 18%.

State Assistance to Districts with Schools in Improvement

NCLB charges states with monitoring and providing technical assistance to districts with schools in improvement, corrective action, and restructuring. Technical assistance typically involves a number of strategies aimed at raising student achievement in these schools. We asked states about their capacity to provide monitoring and technical assistance and about the frequency with which they used particular strategies for improvement.

STATE CAPACITY TO MONITOR AND PROVIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Less than a third of states reported being able to monitor and provide technical assistance to a great extent to districts with schools in improvement. (See **table 3**.)

Table 3. Number of States Able to Monitor and Provide Technical Assistance to Districts with Schools Identified for Improvement, 2006

	To a Great Extent	Somewhat	Minimally	Not at All
Monitoring	14	28	6	1
Providing technical assistance	11	31	8	0

Table reads: In 2006, 14 states reported that they had the capacity to monitor to a great extent districts with schools in improvement.

Source: Center on Education Policy, December 2006, State Survey, items 11 and 12.

We asked states to rate the extent to which a number of factors challenged their capacity to provide monitoring and technical assistance. In regard to monitoring districts with schools in improvement, 43 states said insufficient staff numbers challenged their capacity to monitor, while 39 said inadequate federal funds challenged their capacity. In regard to providing technical assistance, 45 said insufficient staff numbers challenged their capacity to provide assistance while 41 said inadequate federal funds challenged their capacity. More information about state capacity is contained in CEP's report, *Educational Architects: Do State Education Agencies Have the Tools Necessary to Implement NCLB?*

FREQUENTLY USED STATE STRATEGIES

Strategies most frequently used by states to raise student achievement have not changed substantially since 2004-05. Special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts and alignment of curriculum and instruction with standards and assessments were the strategies reported to be used by the largest number of states. Professional development through Reading First remained the strategy reported by the third largest number of states. Reports of all states for all strategies are shown in **table 4**.

Table 4. Number of States Using Various Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Identified Schools, 2005-06

Strategy	To a Great Extent	Moderately	Minimally	Not at All	Don't Know
Special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts	25	15	8	2	
Curriculum and instruction aligned with standards and/or assessments	23	16	7	1	3
Professional development through Reading First	21	21	7	1	
School support teams	21	15	9	5	
Curriculum and assessment materials through Reading First	19	21	9	1	
Before- or after-school, weekend, or summer programs	10	16	8	13	3
Mentor or coach for the principal (e.g., distinguished principals)	9	13	8	19	1
Educational or management consultants	8	17	16	6	3
Distinguished teachers	6	12	13	17	2
Additional full-time school-based staff to support teacher development	4	7	7	29	3

Table reads: Twenty-five states reported that they used special grants to districts to raise student achievement in schools identified for NCLB improvement.

Note: Responses are ranked according to the number of states reporting that a strategy was being used to a great extent.

Source: Center on Education Policy, December 2006, State Survey, item 15.

We also asked states whether they used state education agency staff, regional assistance center staff, private contractors, or others to implement the strategies in table 4. States reported using a mix of staff from these sources, as shown in **table 5**.

Table 5. Number of States Using Various Types of Providers to Help Schools Implement Improvement Strategies

	State Education Agency Staff	State Regional Assistance Centers	Private Contractors	Other	Don't Know	N/A: Strategy Not Used by the State
Aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments	39	14	15	4	1	
Offering professional development through Reading First	38	12	13	3		2
Providing curriculum and assessment materials through Reading First	37	10	8	4	2	1
Offering special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts	37	6	7	1	1	3
Providing school support teams	31	19	20	6		4
Providing distinguished teachers	18	7	11	4	3	9
Providing mentor or coach for the principal	15	8	15	8		14
Providing before- or after-school, weekend, or summer programs	15	2	7	9	2	13
Hiring educational or management consultants	14	14	23	4		6
Hiring additional full-time school-based staff to support teacher development	5	1	4	4	2	25

Table reads: Thirty-nine states reported that they used state education agency staff to assist schools in improvement in aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments.

Note: Responses are ranked according to the number of states reporting that a strategy was implemented by state education agency staff.

Source: Center on Education Policy, December 2006, State Survey, item 17.

Perceptions of Effectiveness of State Strategies

The aim of NCLB is to raise student achievement; therefore, it is important to consider how state and federal supports affect districts with schools in improvement. Due to the variety in state testing programs, CEP was not able, nor did we set out, to do a statistical analysis correlating types of assistance with test score changes. In the absence of this type of data, CEP asked practitioners how effective they perceived these strategies to be. Our surveys are anonymous, and thus eliminate some motivation to inflate the effectiveness of assistance. In addition, we examined multiple sources of data in order to increase accuracy—the district survey, the state survey, and case study interviews. It is important to note, however, that a relatively small number of states said they monitored extensively, so state perceptions about effectiveness are likely to be based on incomplete information.

STATE PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR OWN STRATEGIES

We asked states which strategies were most effective in raising achievement in schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. More states rated the strategies of offering professional development through Reading First and providing Reading First curriculum and assessment materials as very effective or moderately effective in 2006 than in 2005, when just 31 and 29 states respectively rated these strategies as very or moderately effective. More than two-thirds of the states also reported that aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments, making special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts, and using school support teams were very or moderately effective, as shown in **table 6**. The five strategies seen as very or moderately effective by more than two-thirds of the states were also the strategies that more states reported using to raise student achievement.

It is important to note that between 19% and 39% of states reported they did not know how effective these strategies were. This is consistent with our finding that states have limited capacity to monitor districts with schools in improvement, and thus to determine whether or not these strategies are effective. As one state official noted on the survey, “We do not have adequate data to determine most effective intervention strategies.”

Table 6. Number of States Using Strategies and Percentages of States Rating the Effectiveness of These Strategies

Strategy	Total Number of States Using Strategy	Percentage Rating Strategy As Very or Moderately Effectively	Percentage Rating Strategy as Minimally Effective	Percentage Reporting Don't Know
Offering professional development through Reading First	48	81%	0%	19%
Providing curriculum and assessment materials through Reading First	47	79%	2%	19%
Offering special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts	47	74%	6%	19%
Aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments	46	76%	2%	22%
Providing school support teams	43	67%	9%	23%
Providing educational or management consultants	41	61%	10%	29%
Providing mentor or coach for the principal (e.g., distinguished principals)	32	66%	13%	22%
Providing before- or after-school, weekend, or summer programs	31	65%	10%	26%
Providing distinguished teachers	31	42%	19%	39%
Hiring additional full-time school-based staff to support teacher development	24	63%	4%	33%

Table reads: Of 48 states reporting offering professional development through Reading First to raise student achievement in schools identified for improvement, 81% reported it was very or moderately effective.

Note: Responses are ranked according to the number of states reporting that a strategy was used.

Source: Center on Education Policy, December 2006, State Survey, item 18.

DISTRICT PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF STATE AND FEDERAL STRATEGIES

We asked districts that reported improved student achievement on state tests used for NCLB to rate how important a number of programs and requirements were to increasing student achievement in all schools. Districts were about evenly split on the importance of state policies in reading, but in math the number of districts reporting that state policies were either not at all or somewhat important was significantly higher than the number reporting that these policies were important or very important, as shown in **table 7**. There were no significant differences in responses to these items between districts with and without schools in improvement.

In reading, the following four programs or requirements were rated important or very important by more than half of the districts: school district policies and programs unrelated to NCLB, NCLB's Reading First assessment systems, NCLB's Reading First instructional

program, and NCLB's requirement to develop school improvement plans. In math, only school district policies and programs were rated as important or very important by a significantly larger proportion of districts.

Our case studies supported these findings. In the five districts in which interviewees talked about the effectiveness of Reading First, all of the interviewees said that the program helped raise student achievement.¹ More information about Reading First will be available in future CEP reports.

Table 7. Percentage of Districts Reporting That Programs and Requirements Were Important in Increasing Student Achievement, 2006

Program or Requirement	Reading		Math	
	Important/ Very Important	Not at All/ Somewhat Important	Important/ Very Important	Not at All/ Somewhat Important
School district policies and programs unrelated to NCLB	69%	31%	71%	29%
NCLB's Reading First assessment systems ¹	69%	31%	N/A	N/A
NCLB's Reading First instructional program ¹	68%	32%	N/A	N/A
NCLB's requirement to develop school improvement plans ²	64%	36%	54%	46%
NCLB's requirements for programs to be grounded in scientifically based research	50%	50%	45%	55%
State policies and programs unrelated to NCLB	45%	55%	35%	65%
NCLB's adequate yearly progress requirements	44%	56%	48%	52%
NCLB's highly qualified teachers requirements	30%	70%	32%	68%
Student demographic changes	19%	81%	17%	83%
NCLB's supplemental educational services requirements	7%	93%	8%	92%
NCLB's public school choice requirements	5%	95%	6%	94%

Table reads: In reading in 2006, 69% of districts reported school district policies and programs unrelated to NCLB were important or very important factors in increased student achievement, while in math 71% reported school district policies and programs unrelated to NCLB were important or very important factors in increased student achievement.

Note: Responses are ranked according the percentage of districts reporting that a factor was an important or very important cause of increased student achievement in reading.

¹ Only responses from districts that have a Reading First grant are included.

² Only districts with schools in improvement are included, because only these districts are required to assist schools in improvement with writing school improvement plans.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, items 11 and 14 (tables SA-2, SA-2C, SA-4).

¹ These districts include Boston Public Schools; Chicago City Schools; Colorado Springs School District 11; Escondido Union School District in California; and Oakland Unified School District in California.

Interviewees in four case study districts specifically talked about their official school improvement plans: Bloomfield School District in New Mexico, Boston Public Schools, Colorado Springs School District 11, and Calhoun County School District in Alabama. Of the school improvement plans in Calhoun, Deputy Superintendent Bobby Burns said, “Additional academic indicators are being addressed in school improvement plans. So I feel [NCLB] is being successful by us, focusing on the area [needing improvement].”

All 12 case study districts also mentioned the positive effect of school planning in general. For example, all examined data frequently in order to plan instruction and academic interventions. Some, however, viewed this planning as good practice rather than just an NCLB initiative. “NCLB, the state report card, those types of things aren’t what makes me collect information and analyze how we’re progressing,” said Ted Feller, principal of Fowler Middle Schools in Tigard-Tualatin School District in Oregon. “That’s what you should do as a professional.”

In our survey, the vast majority of districts reported that NCLB’s requirement for tutoring services (known as supplemental educational services, or SES), and NCLB’s public school choice requirements were either not at all or somewhat important. In our interview protocol, we did not ask interviewees from case study districts directly about SES and choice. None offered their views of the effectiveness of choice. Several interviewees volunteered negative views of SES, and none offered positive views of SES. For example, Pat Peterson, Title I coordinator of Escondido Union School District in California said, “We’re going to spend over \$770,000 on [SES] . . . There’s nothing research-based that says tutoring kids for 16 hours is going to do much. And yet that’s what we’re getting for our per-student allocation. So that’s money coming out of the budgets of our schools that need some systemic changes.”

District Assistance to Schools in Improvement

NCLB mandates that districts take a variety of actions with schools in improvement. In addition, districts typically use a variety of strategies aimed at improving achievement in these schools—for example, improving school planning processes or using data to inform decision making. In the course of CEP’s annual NCLB studies, it has also emerged that changes in instructional time and actions to address the achievement gap are common in districts with schools in improvement. The following sections show the results of our investigation of all these types of district assistance to schools in improvement.

MANDATED ACTIONS

NCLB mandates that particular actions be taken with all schools identified for improvement. These actions are providing training for staff in effective use of curriculum and instructional strategies and joint school improvement planning between the school and the district. Our survey asked districts if they were taking these actions with schools. Responses indicate that virtually all districts are taking these actions: 98% and 92% respectively. Furthermore, virtually all reported these actions were very effective or somewhat effective in helping Title I-identified schools improve, and virtually all reported the district had the capacity to take these actions.

Our case studies confirmed these findings. As described in a previous section, all case study districts reported that they engaged in planning. In regard to professional development, all of these districts also described professional development as an integral part of improving instruction. For example, in Bloomfield, each teacher has a personal professional development plan that is aligned with the school’s improvement plan.

In addition, schools placed in corrective action and restructuring must choose at least one reform from a list of options. The options for schools in corrective action and percentages of districts that reported taking these actions are shown in **table 8**. These corrective actions were also taken with schools in improvement both before and after the corrective action year. One of our case study districts shed more light on this phenomenon. Chicago Public School officials said the actions listed as corrective actually took more than a year to implement. Peter Ballard, the district's director of accountability explained:

[Corrective action is] a frustrating element of the law because corrective action calls for, among other things, curricular changes. But you have one year to make those curricular changes work or you're in the restructuring planning year. I don't think anyone would argue that that's enough time to see things turn around like that.

Perhaps due to the complexity of these actions, many districts start early and continue beyond the corrective action year.

Table 8. Percentage of Districts Taking Corrective Actions with Title I Schools in Various Stages of Improvement, 2005-06

Action Taken	Total Any Stage	Schools Identified for Improvement	Schools in Corrective Action	Schools Planning for Restructuring	Schools in Restructuring
Implementing a new research-based curriculum/instructional program	65%	60%	68%	73%	72%
Appointing an outside expert to advise the school	54%	43%	63%	70%	57%
Extending the school day or year	25%	23%	17%	18%	23%
Restructuring the internal organization of the school	12%	5%	9%	16%	32%
Decreasing management authority at the school level	9%	7%	3%	30%	34%
Replacing school staff who are relevant to the failure to make AYP	6%	2%	9%	14%	4%

Table reads: In 2005-06, 68% of districts with schools identified for corrective action reported that they took the action of implementing a new research-based curriculum/instructional program.

Note: Responses are ranked from the most commonly used strategy to the least commonly used by districts with schools in any stage of improvement.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 2 (table SI-3).

The possible actions under restructuring were not frequently taken in schools in restructuring, as shown in **table 9**. One might surmise that schools were not fulfilling their obligations under NCLB; however, this might be false. In our survey, we did not include the “any other major restructuring of the school’s governance that produces fundamental reform” option under NCLB. Our studies of restructuring show that this “any other” option has proved popular in Michigan, California, and Maryland (CEP 2004, 2005, 2006d, 2006e, 2007a, 2007b). **Box A** gives a summary of CEP’s findings about restructuring.

Table 9. Percentage of Districts Taking Restructuring Actions with Title I Schools in Various Stages of Improvement, 2005-06

Action Taken	Total Any Stage	Schools Identified for Improvement	Schools in Corrective Action	Schools Planning for Restructuring	Schools in Restructuring
Reassigning or demoting a principal	6%	2%	7%	17%	17%
Replacing all or most of the school staff	3%	<1%	5%	0%	3%
Appointing a governance board for the school	2%	2%	4%	0%	1%
Reopening the school as a public charter school	<1%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Entering into a contract with a private management company to operate the school	<1%	0%	0%	0%	1%

Table reads: In 2005-06, 17% of districts with schools planning for restructuring reported that they took the action of reassigning or demoting a principal.

Note: Responses are ranked from the most commonly used strategy to the least commonly used by districts with schools in any stage of improvement.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 2 (table SI-3).

Box A. An Early Look at Restructuring in Three States

For the past two years, CEP has conducted a series of analyses of school restructuring in selected states. CEP chose to focus its restructuring reports on California, Maryland, and Michigan because they began implementing test-based accountability systems and calculating AYP under the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) of 1994, the federal law that preceded NCLB. As a result, these three states had schools reach the restructuring phase of NCLB as early as 2003-04—sooner than most other states. As more states see more and more schools enter restructuring, they can learn from the experiences of these states in the vanguard. Several key points emerged from our analysis.

- **Multiple strategies are needed.** In all three states no single restructuring option guaranteed that a school met AYP targets. Instead, successful schools employed a variety of strategies. For example, in Michigan our analysis of state AYP data showed that schools reporting they implemented five or more restructuring strategies over the past two years were significantly more likely to exit restructuring in 2006-07 than schools using fewer strategies. All of the restructuring schools that made AYP in 2005-06 had implemented five or more strategies over the past two years, compared with only 49% of those implementing four or fewer options.

Box A. (continued)

- **Schools use strategies beyond NCLB’s restructuring options.** School-based staff in all three states said federal restructuring options were not the key to improving student achievement. Instead, school and state-based initiatives were seen as essential to transforming schools.
 - **In California**, all case study schools reported increasing staff collaboration and using data to inform instruction. For example, all have instituted some type of teacher team-planning time. In addition, all have added coaches for teachers or principals; these coaches model effective work, observe staff, and provide suggestions for improvement. Furthermore, all case study schools have changed their schedules to allow more time for interventions for struggling students.
 - **In Maryland**, according to all case study schools, teachers used data to inform instructional decisions and target instructional supports to students who needed extra help. Additional financial resources, which mainly come through the state-funded School Improvement Grants program, provided the transformative power for schools in restructuring, district and school officials said.
 - **In Michigan**, all case study schools and districts reported using data to make instructional decisions, increasing teacher collaboration, and sharing decision making at the school rather than relying on the principal alone.
- **State contexts matter.** California, Maryland, and Michigan have different approaches to restructuring. California provides technical assistance to districts aimed at helping districts make good restructuring choices, but the state stops short of making suggestions about which federal options are best. Given this hands-off approach, most districts (89%) chose the “any other” option in 2005-06. Maryland districts may also choose any of the federal options; however, in 2005-06 Maryland limited the federal “any other” option to very specific strategies, such as appointing a turnaround specialist. Of the three states, Michigan has elaborated the most on the federal options, allowing schools to choose 18 strategies that fall within the federal options. In 2005-06, state officials said they guided some districts toward appointing a turnaround specialist, which 72% of schools reported using.
- **NCLB is silent on what happens after restructuring.** All three states had schools in years 6 and 7 of school improvement in 2006-07. This means that these schools restructured under NCLB but continue to fail to meet AYP targets. The federal law is silent on what to do when remedies under NCLB have failed to result in adequate progress. Maryland and Michigan have both begun state initiatives to monitor and assist these schools that continue to struggle. California state officials said the state did not plan additional initiatives specifically aimed at schools in years 6 and 7 of improvement because they believed schools might need more time for the effects of restructuring to come to fruition.

Sources: Center on Education Policy, (2006e, 2007a, 2007b).

More than a third of districts reported they lacked the capacity to take some of the actions proposed for schools in restructuring and corrective action. These actions are listed in **table 10** along with reasons districts said they lacked capacity. Responses did not vary by district size or type, with one exception. Significantly more medium-sized districts (60%) and small districts (58%) than very large districts (4%) reported lacking the capacity to reopen a school as a public charter. Other actions were not included in the table because the percentage of districts lacking the capacity to implement them was too small for analysis.

We did not ask districts to rate the effectiveness of these strategies. Our studies of restructuring in Michigan and California shed more light on this issue (CEP 2004, 2005, 2006d, 2006e,

Table 10. Percentage of Districts Reporting Lack of Capacity to Take Actions with Identified Schools and Reasons Why, 2005-06

Action	Percentage Lacking Capacity	Reason for Lack of Capacity*			
		Time	Money	Staff	Expertise
Replacing <i>all or most</i> of the school staff	50%	21%	50%	61%	19%
Entering into a contract with a private management company to operate the school	50%	20%	60%	13%	36%
Reopening the school as a public charter school	46%	18%	42%	16%	42%
Extending the school day or year	45%	41%	97%	56%	5%
Replacing school staff <i>relevant to the failure to make AYP</i>	35%	23%	36%	65%	26%

Table reads: In 2005-06, 50% of districts with schools identified for improvement reported they lacked the capacity to replace all or most of the staff. Among these districts, 21% said time was the reason for the lack of capacity, 50% said money was the reason, 61% said staff was the reason, and 19% said expertise was the reason.

Note: Actions in the left column are ranked from the largest percentage of districts lacking the capacity to take the particular action.

*The percentages in these columns represent a percentage of the districts in the preceding column that reported a lack of capacity, rather than a percentage of all districts responding to the survey question.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 4 (table SI-5A and 5B).

2007a, 2007b). In both states, multiple strategies tailored to the schools' needs appeared to be more effective than single strategies.

FREQUENTLY USED DISTRICT STRATEGIES

From a list of common district strategies to improve schools, districts with schools in improvement were asked to indicate on our survey whether they used the strategy with schools in need of improvement and at what grade level they used the strategy.

Most Common Overall Strategies

As in previous years, frequently used strategies included increasing the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions (97%), increasing the quality and quantity of teacher and principal professional development (94%), improving the school planning process (93%), and aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and assessments (92%). Percentages of districts using these and other improvement strategies are shown in **table 11**.

Table 11. Percentage of Districts Using Various Strategies to Improve Identified Schools, 2005-06

Improvement Strategy	Percentage of Districts Using the Strategy		
	Total	Elementary	High School
Increasing the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions	97%	97%	70%
Increasing the quality and/or quantity of teacher and principal professional development	94%	97%	63%
Improving the school planning process	93%	98%	64%
Aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments	92%		
Providing extra or more intensive academic instruction to low-achieving students	89%	85%	50%
Providing before- or after-school, weekend, or summer programs of academic instruction	88%	85%	58%
Using research to inform decisions about improvement strategies	87%	90%	55%
Implementing a new curriculum or instructional program	70%		
Increasing instructional time in reading	69%	72%	34%
Restructuring the school day to teach core content areas in greater depth	65%	63%	28%
Increasing instructional time in math	64%		
Increasing district monitoring and oversight	62%		
Changing how students are grouped for instruction	59%	61%	28%
Reallocating resources to support school improvement	56%		
Providing assistance through school support teams	51%		
Providing assistance through distinguished teachers and/or instructional coaches	49%	48%	21%
Providing additional staff to support teacher development	43%		
Hiring additional teachers to reduce class size	41%	37%	11%
Providing an educational or management consultant	36%		
Implementing a school reform model	33%		
Requiring classroom instruction in test-taking skills	29%		
Providing a mentor or coach for principals	28%		

Table reads: In 2005-06, 97% of districts with schools identified for improvement reported that to improve these schools, they increased the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions.

Note: Responses are ranked from the most commonly used strategy to the least commonly used.

Note: Elementary and high school percentages are given only when there are significant differences between the percentage of districts using the strategy in elementary schools and the percentage of districts using the strategy in high schools.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 5 (table SI-6A).

Differences by Grade Level and District Type

For 11 of these 22 strategies, significantly more districts reported using the strategies in elementary schools in improvement than in high schools in improvement. These differences may be due in part to districts having more elementary schools in improvement than high schools. The difference might also be due to the fact that schedules are typically less flexible in high schools, where students have different teachers for each subject. In addition, elementary schools may be in a better position to implement some of these strategies, such as increasing time in reading, because elementary schools typically teach basic skills like reading as separate subjects, while high schools do not. Districts reported the rest of the strategies were used in elementary, middle, and high schools with similar frequency.

Our analysis also showed some variation by district type. Significantly more urban districts (82%) reported “increasing district monitoring and oversight” than rural districts (39%). Reasons for this difference are unclear, but may be due either to schools being too spread out in rural areas to allow for monitoring or to greater administrative capacity in urban schools.

CHANGE IN TIME SPENT ON PARTICULAR SUBJECTS

The amount of time devoted to particular subjects since NCLB was enacted has received recent media attention (e.g., Cavanagh, 2006; Manzo, 2006, Schemo, 2007). As noted previously, more districts with schools in improvement increased instructional time in reading in elementary schools (72% of these districts) than in high schools (34%) in 2005-06, as shown in table 11. To learn more about changes in instructional time, CEP asked all districts, with and without schools in improvement, to report the amount of time spent on particular subjects as well as changes in instructional time since NCLB.

Overall Findings

As in other studies (Stullich et al., 2006), we found differences in the amount of time spent on particular subjects between districts with and without schools in improvement. Differences were most striking at the elementary level. This report describes changes in the amount of time spent on particular subjects in districts with schools in improvement versus those without. These and other changes in instructional time are described in detail in the CEP report, *Choice, Changes, and Challenges: How NCLB Is Shaping Curriculum and Instruction*.

The vast majority of surveyed districts reported that the overall length of the school day has stayed the same at all levels since NCLB was enacted, revealing no differences between districts with schools in improvement and those without. This means that increases in reading and math in districts with schools in improvement may have come at the expense of other subjects.

Our survey shows that in elementary schools, more districts with schools in improvement decreased the amount of time spent on social studies, science, and art and music than districts without schools in improvement. At the middle school level, however, the reported decreases in subjects we asked about were not statistically different based on whether or not a district had schools in improvement. It is possible that the rigidity of class schedules at the middle school level prohibited decreases of time dedicated to specific content areas; therefore, the decreases may have occurred in a non-content specific area that we did not ask about, such as library time or advisory periods. This was true in the Fayetteville, Arkansas, Public Schools. “At junior high and up they’re giving up

an elective to select math lab as one of their daily classes,” said Kristen Scanlon, director of federal programs.

In addition, some districts may have integrated reading and math into other subject areas. Interviewees from a few case study districts (Bloomfield, Escondido Union, and Fayetteville) discussed integrating subjects in order to increase time in a subject that needs more emphasis. Linelle Sharrard, director of curriculum and instruction in Bloomfield, explained, “We do a lot of the subject integration. Social studies and science are taught through the reading block and the math block. We are trying to make content connections through integration, because time is our most precious resource.”

At the Elementary Level

Districts with schools in improvement reported spending significantly more time on English language arts (568 minutes per week on average) than districts without schools in improvement (483 minutes per week). A significantly larger proportion of districts with schools in improvement reported increasing time in reading and decreasing time since 2002 in social studies, science, and art and music than did districts without schools in improvement. (See **table 12**.) In math there was no significant difference between districts with and without schools in improvement. In about half of both types of districts, time in math either increased or stayed the same. Very few districts decreased time in math. Some districts, however, said they did not know whether instructional time in these subjects had changed, as explained in **box B**. Furthermore, among districts increasing time in reading, the average number of minutes per week was significantly larger (183 minutes) for districts with schools in improvement than for districts without (122 minutes).

Table 12. Percentage of Districts Reporting Changes in Instructional Time Since NCLB in Elementary School Subjects

Subject Area	No Schools in Improvement			At Least One School in Improvement		
	Time Increased	Time Decreased	Time Stayed the Same	Time Increased	Time Decreased	Time Stayed the Same
Reading/language arts	52%*	0%	48%*	77%*	0%	23%*
Math	41%	2%	57%	56%	3%	41%
Social studies	2%	31%*	67%*	2%	51%*	47%*
Science	9%	23%*	68%	5%	43%*	52%
Art and music	6%	12%*	82%	3%	30%*	67%

Table reads: At the elementary level, 31% of districts without schools in improvement reported decreasing time in social studies, while a significantly larger percentage of districts with least one school in improvement (51%) reported decreasing time in social studies.

* Differences between districts with schools in improvement and districts without schools in improvement are statistically significant.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 19 (table 2D).

Box B. Some District Respondents Did Not Know Whether Instructional Time Had Changed

Some district survey respondents said they did not know whether time in particular subjects had changed. The percentages of districts responding “don’t know” ranged from 3% to 7% at the elementary level by subject, and from 6% to 18% at the middle school level by subject. The percentage of districts responding “don’t know” at the high school level was 7% for all subjects. Differences between districts with schools in improvement and those without were not significant.

The reasons district officials responded “don’t know” are unclear. Possibilities include the following:

- The district does not collect this information.
- Schedules vary so much by school that it is impossible to determine time changes.
- The individual responding to the survey was not employed by the district before 2002, and therefore was unaware of policies prior to NCLB.
- The individual responding to the survey was uninformed about changes in general.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey.

At the Middle School Level

There were no significant differences in the amount of time districts with and without schools in improvement spent on different subjects in middle schools. Still, a significantly larger proportion of districts with schools in improvement reported increasing time in reading and math than did districts without schools in improvement. Conversely, a significantly smaller proportion of districts with schools in improvement reported that time in reading and math stayed the same. (See **table 13.**) Some districts, however, said they did not know whether or not instructional time in these subjects had changed. For more information, see box B.

As discussed previously, at the middle school level, the reported changes in other subjects we asked about were not statistically different based on whether or not a district had schools in improvement.

Table 13. Percentage of Districts Reporting Changes in Instructional Time in Various Middle School Subjects

Subject Area	No School in Improvement			At Least One School in Improvement		
	Time Increased	Time Decreased	Time Stayed the Same	Time Increased	Time Decreased	Time Stayed the Same
English language arts	20%*	2%	79%*	39%*	3%	57%*
Math	16%*	2%	83%*	34%*	2%	64%*

Table reads: At the middle school level, 20% of districts without schools identified for improvement reported increasing time in English language arts, while a significantly larger percentage of districts with schools in improvement (39%) reported increasing time in this subject.

* Differences between districts with schools in improvement and districts without schools in improvement are statistically significant.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 21 (table IT-5D).

At the High School Level

There were no significant differences in the average number of semesters of course work required in particular subjects based on whether districts had schools in improvement. Districts with and without schools in improvement required eight semesters of English language arts, six of math, six of social studies, and five of science. Some districts, however, said they did not know whether instructional time in these subjects had changed. (See box B.) There were no significant differences between districts with schools in improvement and districts without in whether districts required low-achieving students to take additional courses. In English language arts and in math, 27% of districts both with and without schools in improvement had this requirement. In social studies, 5% had the requirement, and in science 7%.

We did not ask districts directly whether changes in instructional time were effective. A few case study districts did talk about this, and views were mixed. For example, some believed the emphasis on math and reading was effective at the elementary school level. Wes Ramsey, principal of Linder Elementary in Joint School District No. 2 in Meridian, Idaho, noted:

I'm not saying these are the two most important subjects, but without reading and without math all the other subjects are going to be pretty hard. [It's hard] to be able to learn in science and social studies if you can't read a book.

Others were concerned about loss of time in other subjects. “That’s a huge complaint,” said Pat Peterson, Title I coordinator of Escondido Union School District. “Our teachers definitely teach math and reading,” he said, “but science and social studies—there is just not time in the day, sometimes, for that. And that’s an issue.”

District Actions to Address the Achievement Gap

In addition to raising student achievement and improving schools in general, NCLB is aimed at closing gaps in achievement between traditionally higher and lower scoring subgroups of students, such as white and African American students. The subgroups counted for NCLB typically include African American, Asian, Latino, Native American, and white students, as well as students with disabilities, English language learners, and low-income students.

EXISTENCE OF GAPS

In our district survey, we asked districts to indicate which of several specific subgroups showed achievement gaps based on the 2005-06 state assessment used for NCLB. Districts could also report that they did not know if there was an achievement gap or that the subgroup had too few students to allow calculating the gap under NCLB. Among those districts that have subgroups of students large enough to count for NCLB accountability, persistent gaps were reported for most subgroups, with the exception of Asian students and Native American students, as shown in **table 14**.

Gaps between students with disabilities and those without were rated most difficult to close. *The National Assessment of Title I: Interim Report* affirms this perception (Stullich et al, 2006). The report shows that when schools did not make AYP based on only one subgroup, that subgroup was typically students with disabilities.

Table 14. Percentage of Districts Reporting Achievement Gaps by Subgroup and Difficulties in Closing Achievement Gaps

	Math				Reading			
	Is there a gap?		DK/NA group too small	Which gap is most challenging to close?	Is there a gap?		DK/NA group too small	Which gap is most challenging to close?
	Yes	No			Yes	No		
African American/ white	22%	13%	63%	5%	21%	14%	65%	5%
Asian/white	4%	22%	74%	0%	3%	22%	75%	0%
Latino/white	26%	17%	57%	3%	29%	14%	57%	4%
Native American/ white	9%	13%	78%	1%	9%	13%	79%	1%
ELL/non-ELL	29%	14%	57%	10%	31%	11%	58%	12%
Students with disabilities/without	76%	7%	16%	71%	78%	6%	16%	69%
Low-income/ not low-income	53%	33%	14%	10%	54%	32%	13%	9%

Table reads: Twenty-six percent of school districts reported an achievement gap between white and Latino students. Three percent reported that this is the most challenging gap to close.

Note: DK means “don’t know” and NA means “not applicable.” ELL refers to English language learners.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, items 16 and 17 (table SA-8B, SA-9, SA-5B, SA-6).

State reports of achievement gaps were very similar. More than half of the states CEP surveyed reported achievement gaps for all subgroups except white and Asian students in both reading and math. In addition, about half of states surveyed said the gap between students with disabilities and those without was most difficult to close. More detailed information about student achievement gaps can be found in CEP’s report, *Answering the Question That Matters Most*.

ACTIONS TO ADDRESS GAPS IN READING AND MATH

In districts reporting achievement gaps in reading and math, officials said they were taking a variety of actions to address those gaps. In both reading and math, the three actions reported by the largest percentage of districts were focusing tutoring instruction for low-performing subgroups of students, improving collaboration between special education and regular classroom teachers, and training teachers in specific methods to address the academic needs of low-performing subgroups of students. For a complete list, see **table 15**.

There were no significant differences by district type in the percentage of districts reporting various actions, with one exception. In reading, significantly more urban districts (43%) than rural districts (20%) reported revising or fine-tuning procedures for identifying students for English language learning services. There were no significant differences based on whether or not a district had schools in improvement.

Table 15. Percentage of Districts Taking Various Actions to Reduce Achievement Gaps, 2005-06

	Reading	Math
Focusing tutoring instruction for low-performing subgroups of students	73%	67%
Improving collaboration between special education teachers and regular classroom teachers	66%	59%
Training teachers to use specific methods to address the academic needs of low-performing subgroups of students	66%	60%
Developing special programs designed to address the particular academic needs of low-performing subgroups of students	60%	45%
Increasing instructional time during the regular school day in core subjects for low-performing subgroups of students	58%	52%
Revising/fine-tuning procedures for identifying students for special education services	52%	48%
Focusing parent involvement outreach efforts on parents of children in low-performing subgroups	45%	39%
Changing how students are grouped for instruction	40%	29%
Providing teacher professional development on racial and cultural issues related to the learning needs of low-performing subgroups of students	36%	36%
Revising/fine-tuning procedures for identifying students for English language learning services	29%	25%
Collaborating with community organizations to provide special services for low-performing subgroups of students	25%	20%

Table reads: In 2005-06, 73% of districts with achievement gaps in reading reported that they addressed these gaps by focusing tutoring instruction for low-performing subgroups of students.

Note: Responses are ranked from the most commonly taken action in reading to the least commonly taken.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 16A (table SA-7).

Case study districts that had gaps in student achievement typically reported working to close those gaps; however, several district and school officials said they believed state and federal policies for students with disabilities and English language learners were unreasonable. For example, at Carson Elementary in Chicago—a predominately Latino school that has received national recognition for its work with English language learners²—the principal said that moving ELLs out of the ELL subgroup two years after they reach minimum proficiency in English penalizes schools for doing a good job. Carson principal Kathleen Mayer argued:

Once you're an ELL, you're always an ELL, because Spanish or Chinese or Polish, in this town, is your first language, and you're always going to be learning English. Those students who are doing very well, exceeding, in our school were probably at one time our bilingual students. So schools should get credit for that.

² Carson was featured as an “exemplary school” in a 2003 study by the nonprofit group Design for Change and was profiled in *Portraits of Success*, a 2000 joint study of effective bilingual programs by the National Association for Bilingual Education and the Northeast and Island Regional Education Laboratory.

Several case study districts also had complaints about NCLB's requirement that only a small percentage of students can be tested using alternative assessments and standards, regardless of the percentage of students with disabilities in a district that actually needs to be assessed this way. In the Cleveland Municipal School District, district officials said they were allowed to give 2.8% of students alternative assessments, but this was not enough, according to Craig Cotner, chief academic officer for the Cleveland district:

We have more than 2.8% of kids who are severely mentally impaired. [This policy] is penalizing many of our schools and many urban areas that just have high concentrations of special education students.

In addition to allowing alternative assessments for all students who need them, a few case study districts suggested focusing on individual student growth rather than the percentage proficient. Linda Clark, superintendent of schools in Meridian, Idaho, explained:

When you focus on growth, proficiency takes care of itself, eventually. It just takes some kids more time. We have special education kids who are three and four grade levels behind, at-risk kids, kids in alternative education settings, and students with very limited English proficiency. Their growth is far more important to look at [than their proficiency]. We want to be accountable, but we need to be accountable for the right thing, and that's not proficiency. Our goal is to ensure that every student demonstrates academic growth every year.

Perceived Effectiveness of District Actions and Strategies

We asked districts to rate the effectiveness or success of both NCLB-mandated actions and frequently used strategies to assist schools in improvement. These ratings are based on the participant's perceptions, not on an independent analysis of data. More research is needed to know the exact effect of these actions and strategies, but district officials' perceptions provide an important window into how these actions and strategies are accepted and viewed by the individuals responsible for implementing them.

DISTRICT ACTIONS

We asked districts to rate the effectiveness of a collection of NCLB-mandated strategies that districts may choose to use with their schools in improvement. But because the percentage of districts using some of these strategies was low, responses for just five actions could be analyzed. These actions are listed in **table 16**.

The strategies districts used with schools in improvement were rated as very or somewhat effective by most districts. In fact, significantly larger percentages of districts rated these actions as "very effective" and "somewhat effective" than rated them "minimally effective" and "not at all effective," with one exception—"appointing an outside expert to advise the school." The absence of statistically significant differences in districts' reports of the effectiveness of outside experts may be due to the small sample size. Our case studies affirm this supposition.

One case study district official talked directly about hiring an outside expert as a strategy for a school in corrective action. "The sanctions can be pretty unpleasant for schools that go on corrective action," said Holly Brilliant, director of Title I in Colorado Springs School District 11. "Out of those, the one that I felt was going to be the least punitive to the building and ultimately the most helpful was the sanction of an outside consultant."

Table 16. Percentage of Districts Reporting Effectiveness of Strategies Required by NCLB for Schools in Improvement, 2005-06

Improvement Strategy	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Minimally Effective	Not at All Effective
Extending the school day or year*	53%	44%	2%	0
Providing training for staff in effective use of curriculum and instructional strategies*	51%	46%	3%	0
Joint school improvement planning between the school and the district*	42%	49%	9%	0
Implementing a new research-based curriculum/instructional program*	40%	58%	2%	0
Appointing an outside expert to advise the school	39%	39%	22%	0

Table reads: In 2005-06, 53% of the districts that extended the school day or year reported this strategy was very effective, 44% reported it was somewhat effective, 2% reported it was minimally effective, and none reported it was not at all effective.

Note: Responses are ranked from the largest percentage of districts rating the action as very effective.

* The percentages of districts rating these actions as “very effective” and “somewhat effective” were significantly larger than those rating the actions as “minimally effective” and “not at all effective.”

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 3 (table SI-4A).

When the definition of an outside expert was extended to include coaches, 10 of the 12 case study districts said that outside experts or coaches were highly effective.³ This is evident in the following quotation from Ellen O’Connor, assistant superintendent of schools for curriculum and instruction, in Bayonne City School District in New Jersey:

[The coach] has been very successful. [Teachers] love her. And she not only provides the in-service training in a workshop setting, now she’s going into the classroom and observing them teach. This is different than a supervisor’s evaluation. She gives them support and encouragement. She’s modeling lessons. If we could afford more, we would have them in every grade level in every school.

In addition, in the Fayetteville Public Schools, district officials said they were attempting to get coaches especially for secondary teachers needing help teaching reading; however, the district had not yet been able to find funding for this. If we had asked on our survey about coaches in addition to outside experts, we might have found significant differences between districts rating the action as “very effective,” “somewhat effective,” or “minimally effective.”

³ These districts included Bayonne City (New Jersey), Bloomfield (New Mexico), Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Escondido (California), Meridian (Idaho), Oakland, and Tigard-Tualatin (Oregon).

DISTRICT STRATEGIES

In addition to asking districts to report the effectiveness of actions mandated by law, we asked districts to rate the effectiveness of common strategies to improve schools. In last year's survey (CEP, 2006b), we found that the frequency with which districts used strategies mirrored districts' perception of the effectiveness of those strategies. In other words, when a large percentage of districts reported they used a strategy to help improve schools, a similarly large percentage also reported that strategy was successful "somewhat" or "to a great extent" as opposed to "minimally" or "not at all." This year, we examined this issue more deeply, asking districts about strategy use and effectiveness in elementary and secondary schools separately. Perhaps as a result of this deeper analysis, this year's findings are somewhat different.

Elementary School

At the elementary level, strategies districts reported were most successful were not always those that were used most frequently, as seen in **table 17**. For example, "improving the planning process" was used by 98% of districts in elementary schools, but the percentage of districts saying this strategy was successful "to a great extent" or "somewhat" was not significantly larger than the percentage saying the strategy was "minimally" or "not at all" successful. It is unclear why strategies that were perceived as being successful "somewhat" or "to a great extent" by a large proportion of districts were not those used by the largest percentage of districts. It may be that some strategies are easy to implement but do not have a large impact, while other strategies are more difficult or costly to implement but have a larger impact.

Table 17. Percentage of Districts Reporting Use and Success of Improvement Strategies in Elementary Schools, 2005-06

Improvement Strategy	Districts Reporting Strategy Used	Successfulness According to Districts That Used the Strategy		
		Great Extent/Somewhat	Minimally/Not at All	Don't Know
Improving the school planning process	98%	66%	26%	8%
Increasing the quality and quantity of teacher and principal professional development	97%	83%	7%	10%
Increasing the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions	97%	86%	9%	5%
Using research to inform decisions about improvement strategies	90%	87%	10%	3%
Aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments	90%	83%	8%	8%
Providing before- or after-school, weekend, or summer programs	85%	78%	14%	7%
Providing extra or more intensive instruction to low-achieving students	85%	92%	5%	3%

Table 17. (continued)

Improvement Strategy	Districts Reporting Strategy Used	Successfulness According to Districts That Used the Strategy		
		Great Extent/ Somewhat	Minimally/ Not at All	Don't Know
Increasing instructional time in reading	72%	89%	3%	9%
Implementing a new curriculum or instructional program	66%	75%	17%	7%
Increasing district monitoring and oversight	64%	66%	26%	8%
Restructuring the school day to teach core content areas in greater depth	63%	84%	9%	7%
Changing how students are grouped for instruction	61%	68%	10%	22%
Increasing instructional time in math	60%	81%	9%	10%
Providing assistance through school support teams	55%	59%	29%	12%
Reallocating resources to support school improvement	50%	66%	8%	26%
Providing assistance through distinguished teachers from other districts or from within the district	48%	70%	19%	10%
Providing additional staff to support teacher development	42%	63%	21%	16%
Providing an educational or management consultant	37%	57%	22%	22%
Hiring additional teachers to reduce class size	37%	76%	15%	8%
Implementing a school reform model	28%	66%	19%	15%
Requiring classroom instruction in test-taking skills	26%	44%	29%	28%
Providing a mentor or coach for principals	24%	66%	9%	25%

Table reads: In 2005-06, 97% of districts reported increasing the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions in order to raise student achievement. Among these districts, 86% said this strategy was successful “somewhat” or “to a great extent,” while 9% said it was “minimally” or “not at all” successful and 5% did not know the effect of the strategy.

Source: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, items 5 and 6 (tables SI-6A and 7).

The ratings do not, however, tell us anything about how useful the strategy would be in the districts that did not adopt it. It may simply be that certain strategies are useful in some contexts but not others. For example, maybe the 60% of districts that reported increasing time in math are the districts that were most in need of extra math instruction, so they found it useful, whereas the other 40% did not need this and would not have found it useful even if they had taken this approach.

Another study of NCLB found that the use of individual improvement strategies had little effect on whether a school would exit improvement (Padilla et al., 2006). Therefore, it seems important to emphasize that any single strategy may be unlikely to dramatically raise student achievement alone. As CEP has found in studies of schools in restructuring (2005, 2007b), multiple strategies may be necessary to raise student achievement.

In table 17, it is also important to note that many districts said they did not know whether a strategy was successful. Strategies used by less than 63% of districts in particular had “don’t know” responses of 10% or greater, with the exception of “hiring additional teachers to reduce class size.” More monitoring of these strategies may be needed.

Middle and High School

We asked districts to list the strategies they felt were used most often and were successful in raising student achievement in Title I middle or high schools identified for improvement. The following three strategies were listed most frequently:

- Increasing the use of student achievement data to inform instruction and other decisions
- Aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments
- Increasing the quality and/or quantity of teacher and principal professional development

These same strategies were among the four that districts most frequently reported using in middle and high schools when asked to indicate whether they used the strategies listed in table 17 in secondary schools. Unlike elementary schools, in middle and high schools there was no gap between which strategies most districts reported using and which strategies most districts reported were successful. The method of asking the question on our survey, however, differed for elementary and secondary schools, in that we asked districts to rate the effectiveness of each strategy in elementary schools but to list strategies they felt were most often used and most successful in raising student achievement in secondary schools. This issue deserves further exploration.

INSIGHTS FROM CASE STUDIES ABOUT IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

The strategies our case study districts used to assist schools in improvement were similar to those rated highly in our survey. For example, all 12 case study districts said they used data to make decisions and aligned curriculum to assessments and standards.

Strategies Preceding NCLB

Sometimes these improvement strategies were in place before NCLB. “We had already started some standards work [before NCLB], but I would say that it really zoomed along once NCLB came in,” noted Sid Smith, director of curriculum and instruction for the Boston Public Schools. District officials in Bloomfield (New Mexico), Chicago, and Meridian (Idaho) also emphasized that district reforms in aligning curriculum to standards and using data preceded NCLB.

Districtwide Strategies

In interviewing district officials, we also discovered that many school improvement strategies were used districtwide rather than just in schools identified under NCLB. For example, the Chicago school district has implemented changes that increased district monitoring and oversight in all schools, not just in schools in improvement. In the past, Chicago had six regions, each overseen by just one regional education officer who typically worked with more than 100 schools. Now Chicago has area instructional officers who oversee only 20 to 45 schools. These area instructional officers have long-term relationships with schools, rather than simply overseeing schools once they have been identified for improvement.

Conclusions Tentative on Effects of Strategies

Our case study districts were typically enthusiastic about all the strategies they were using to assist schools in improvement. When asked specifically if this assistance was raising student achievement, district and school officials were more tentative. Kristen Scanlon, director of federal programs and assessments in Fayetteville said:

We really hope it's going to have a positive impact, and we feel that it is based on needs identified by our formative assessments. But it's a big gain that we need to make in order for [our schools] to get off of the school improvement list. And I'm not sure if it's going to have a quick enough effect to totally get them off.

Another case study district noted that it was difficult to determine which strategies were most effective because the strategies were being implemented simultaneously. “We know we’re improving. But it’s really hard to separate [the strategies]. Was it the coaches or the facilitators? Was it the principal coaches or was it the content experts?” observed Pat Peterson, Title I coordinator of Escondido Union. More funds for monitoring and evaluating strategies may be needed.

Funding of School Improvement

States and districts have several means of funding assistance to schools in improvement. Since 1965, federal Title I funds have been aimed at helping schools with significant proportions of low-income students. These funds, however, were typically already allocated to particular uses before NCLB began identifying schools for improvement and charging states and districts with assisting these schools.

To directly fund assistance to schools in improvement, NCLB requires states to set aside 4% of the total amount of Title I, Part A funds allocated to districts within the state. Of this 4% set-aside, 95% is to be used directly for school improvement by local educational agencies (LEAs), which can include districts, schools, or regional assistance centers. The remaining 5% can be used by the state to support districts and schools in improvement.

The law also contains a “hold harmless provision,” which states that if a district’s funding would actually decrease due to the set-aside, the state must not take the full amount. As a result, some states are not able to set aside the full 4%. In addition to federal funds, states can use state funds and other sources of outside funding, such as grants from private foundations, to assist schools in improvement.

ALLOCATION OF 4% SET-ASIDE

An open-ended question on our state survey provided initial descriptive information about how the 4% set-aside has been used. Of the 49 states that answered the question, 5 responses were not detailed enough to be included in the analysis, and 2 said they did not have funds to set aside due to overall reductions in Title I funding.

Among the 42 states that provided detailed information, about half said some or all of the set-aside funding went to schools, a little more than a third said some or all of the funding went to districts, about a tenth said funding went to both schools and districts, and more than a tenth said some or all funding went to regional assistance centers. Four states said funding went exclusively to regional assistance centers.

When states reported that funds went to schools, most often they said all schools in improvement received funds. Our case studies showed that the amount of this funding varied widely. For example, Cleveland Municipal Schools received \$50,000 per school in improvement, while Bloomfield schools received \$12,000 to \$20,000 per school, depending on their student population. When states reported funds went to districts, most often states applied a formula to determine how much funding the districts got. These formulas were often said to be based on the number of schools in improvement, the phases of improvement schools were in, and poverty rates. The funds could be earmarked for activities at the school or district level.

Plans for Local Use of Additional Funds

Most states did not specify whether districts, schools, or regional assistance centers had to have any specific plans for the additional funds from the 4% set-aside, although schools identified for improvement under NCLB must have school improvement plans. Of those that did require specific plans for the additional funds, responses showed some variety.

Some states said that districts and schools must have detailed plans for the funds and that these plans must be developed with the assistance of the state or an outside consultant. Others said districts’ and schools’ state-approved school improvement plans were sufficient to show how the funds would be used. The following response to CEP’s state survey question came from a state that required detailed and extensively monitored plans:

[Our state] provides funding for three years in an intensive intervention, [an] eight-step process to support improvement and build sustainability. An initial educational audit, provided by an independent team of education professionals, informs the school of the current strengths and concerns. Team training is provided with assignment of an on-site facilitator. Year one culminates with the development or updating of a School Improvement Plan and a three-party Performance Agreement outlining the duties of the state, district, and school in the overall improvement effort. Years two and three involve implementation of the plan and efforts to ensure sustainability once the grant is completed.

In contrast to this multiple-step approach, some states said schools’ improvement plans were sufficient once they were approved by the state.

State Use of Additional Funds

All states may retain 5% of the 4% set-aside for state activities supporting schools in improvement. In their response to our open-ended question about the use of the 4% set-aside, most states reported retaining these funds, although a few reported sending 100% of the set-aside to schools, districts, or regional assistance centers. Use of funds reserved for the state varied. Many said funds were used for school support teams or distinguished educators, although the roles of these entities were not uniform.

For example, one state official said, “Funding is used to support Distinguished Educators who work directly with site support team members and schools to develop required two-year improvement plans,” indicating the primary role of support teams was planning.

Another state reported support teams were for ongoing technical assistance. This state official said, “School Support Teams provide technical assistance to schools. The School Support Team leaders are retired educators who coordinate site visits and reporting to schools.”

Other uses of the 5% for the state included general responses such as “technical assistance” and “professional development,” as well as responses that were very specific to state initiatives. For example, one state official explained the use of the set-aside as follows:

[Our state] uses the set-aside to support schools in a tiered approach. The third tier is comprised of statewide training of Coaches, Principal Academies for High-Priority Schools, Comprehensive School Audits for schools in Phases 6 & 7, and all other statewide activities that are related to a comprehensive, coherent approach to school improvement.

In addition to providing support directly through the state department of education, about 10% of responding states said they used funds to partner with an outside organization to provide services to schools. For example, one state contracts with the Student Achievement Institute and Learning Points Associates, both nonprofit organizations that focus on raising student achievement, to provide direct technical assistance to schools.

Two states said they were retaining more than 5% for state use. One state is taking this approach:

Approximately 50% of the funds are distributed to districts to support schools identified as in need of improvement. Superintendents have signed a memorandum of agreement to consolidate the remaining funds to support the statewide initiative to provide professional development and onsite technical assistance in data-driven decision making; implementation of grade- and content-level data teams; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to standards; and research-based effective teaching strategies.

The other state using this approach described it as follows:

Five percent of these funds is allotted to the [state] to staff the school improvement unit. An agreement with the affected LEAs allows the state to support its state system of school support with an additional 5% of these funds to provide professional development and technical assistance to affected schools and districts.

For more information on the 4% set-aside see CEP’s reports, *A Shell Game: Federal Funds to Improve Schools* (CEP, 2006a), and *Title I Funds—Who’s Gaining and Who’s Losing: School Year 2006-07 Update* (CEP, 2006c).

ADDITIONS TO FEDERAL FUNDING

In addition to the 4% set-aside to assist schools and districts in improvement, many states reported using state funds for these activities. We asked states how they funded eight particular interventions for schools in improvement. All but 10 states reported using state funds for at least one of the strategies. The following five strategies were supported by some state funds (either a combination of state and federal funds or by state funds alone) in more than 50% of states that used the strategy and knew how it was funded:

- Alignment of curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments
- Mentor or coach for the principal (e.g., distinguished principals)
- Additional full-time school-based staff to support teacher development
- Before-or after-school, weekend, or summer programs
- Distinguished teachers

The following three strategies were supported by federal funds alone in at least 50% of the states that reported using the strategy and knew how it was funded:

- School support teams
- Special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts
- Educational or management consultants

Our survey shows that many states have had to supplement federal funds with state funds in order to assist schools in improvement.

INSUFFICIENT FUNDS IN CASE STUDY DISTRICTS

The majority of case study districts said there were things they would like to do to assist schools in improvement that they were not able to do because of lack of funds. Strategies mentioned by at least three schools or districts included the following:

- Hiring additional coaches, curriculum specialists, or content experts (Bayonne, Boston, Carson Elementary in Chicago, Calhoun County, Escondido Union, and Fayetteville)
- Purchasing or updating technology within schools (Bloomfield, Escondido Union, Fayetteville, and Tualatin High School in Tigard-Tualatin)
- Increasing or replacing instructional materials and supplies (Boston, Carson Elementary in Chicago, and Linder Elementary in Meridian)

Some districts indicated that a lack of funding was a serious problem. In Bloomfield Public Schools, for example, the state required increases in teacher salaries, but state funding falls short of the needs of some districts, so more than 98% of Bloomfield's budget now goes to staffing. In these tight-budget times, Bloomfield officials said it was very difficult to meet the new demands of NCLB. "Legislators say, 'Well, there's plenty of funding.' But what they don't realize is that the time and the paper and the data requirements have increased," noted Linelle Sharrard, director of curriculum and instruction in Bloomfield.

Even in case study districts with increased funding, some funding issues are still apparent. For example, in Tigard-Tualatin School District in Oregon, the district had more revenue than expected. “For the first time in years, instead of cutting the budget we were able to establish new, sustainable budget line items for textbooks and technology,” explained Susan Stark Haydon, director of community relations. Yet even in a time of a budget surplus, the district’s needs outstripped revenues. Stark Haydon said the district was not able to hire enough teachers to roll back class size increases made during budget-deficit years.

High school classes are particularly crowded in Tigard-Tualatin. “If we had better funding from the state, we would certainly put money into reducing class sizes, which are running 30 to 33 at the average,” said Jeff Smith, principal of Tualatin High School in Tigard-Tualatin.

School-level officials in Tigard-Tualatin added other items to the district wish list. At Metzger Elementary, Literacy Specialist Gail Wilkinson said, “We’re still struggling with funds for interventions for writing and math, because Title I focuses on reading, and our district focuses on reading.”

Conclusion

Assistance to schools in improvement is at the heart of improving schools under NCLB. Studies such as CEP’s that examine the views of district and schools officials, as well as studies focusing on grassroots efforts to improve schools (Dingerson, Brown, & Beam, 2004), show that considerable effort is being devoted to assisting schools in need of improvement. The data from CEP’s surveys and case studies point to specific challenges to assisting these schools. The findings from our studies of NCLB over the past five years have led us to suggest possible solutions to these challenges. These include increasing funding for states to provide technical assistance to schools in improvement, allowing a triage approach to helping schools in improvement, and making funds available to enable states and districts to hire outside entities to evaluate the effectiveness of approaches to assisting schools in improvement.

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