



*Key Findings from Two Reports on
Federal School Improvement Grants by
the Center on Education Policy*

**Opportunities and Obstacles: Implementing
Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants in
Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho**

AND

**State Implementation and Perceptions of Title I
School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act:
One Year Later**

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The passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), also known as the economic stimulus package, provided an extra \$3 billion for school improvement grants (SIGs) under section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Along with this funding increase, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance that changed the requirements for using ARRA SIGs and other section 1003(g) funds. Researchers at the Center on Education Policy conducted two studies to learn more about states' experiences in using this unprecedented infusion of ARRA SIG funding and implementing the revised SIG requirements.

The first study, *Opportunities and Obstacles: Implementing Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho*, uses case study research to examine state, district, and school-level implementation of the ARRA SIG program in three geographically diverse states that are taking different approaches to school improvement. Findings are based on interviews with 35 state and local officials and in-depth research on 11 low-achieving schools, including schools that received ARRA SIG funds and those that did not.

The second study, *State Implementation and Perceptions of Title I School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act: One Year Later*, draws on findings from a winter 2011-12 survey of state Title I directors; 45 states and the District of Columbia responded. The survey focused on general perceptions of the ARRA SIG program, state assistance to schools, and state processes for renewing ARRA SIG grants made in school year 2010-11 for a second year.

This summary highlights findings that are supported across both studies, as well as important findings unique to each study.

Both Opportunities and Obstacles: Implementing Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho and State Implementation and Perceptions of Title I School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act: One Year Later can be downloaded free-of-charge from the CEP Web site (www.cep-dc.org).

Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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Key Findings Across Both Studies

- **Participants in both studies expressed optimism about certain aspects of the ARRA SIG program.** In the case study report, officials in both ARRA SIG schools and non-recipient schools seemed optimistic that they are on the right track toward improvement and cited particular progress in creating a school climate conducive to student achievement. Respondents to the state survey generally agreed that the major SIG requirements are appropriate and effective, including the criteria for determining which schools are eligible for funds, the competitive grant process, and the amount of funding provided to grantees to carry out reforms. However, the case study report highlights some dissatisfaction with these requirements in the rural state of Idaho.
- **Participants in both studies raised concerns about certain aspects of the ARRA SIG program.** For example, state and school-level officials interviewed for the case study report, as well as some state survey respondents, were worried about sustaining school improvement initiatives after the ARRA SIG funding ends. Short timelines for implementing the school reform models presented a challenge for many participants in both studies. Several states surveyed wanted to extend the duration of the school improvement grants beyond the current three-year time frame.
- **Participants in the case study report, as well as some state survey respondents, said their schools faced significant challenges in replacing teachers and principals, as required by some of the SIG school improvement models.** Most of the ARRA SIG-funded schools in the case studies had difficulties finding and retaining teachers and principals. This was a major challenge in Idaho’s rural setting.
- **Both studies provided evidence that low-performing schools across the country are using some similar approaches to school improvement, although with varying levels of intensity, and are somewhat optimistic about these approaches.** The case study

report found that ARRA SIG-funded schools are implementing similar improvement strategies, including a focus on school climate, the use of instructional or behavioral coaches, and extended learning time for students. (As noted below, non-recipient schools are also doing some of these same things but with less intensity or in a scaled-back way.) According to the state survey report, the transformation model of school improvement—which involves replacing the principal and undertaking three other specific reforms—remains the most popular model being implemented in ARRA SIG-funded schools in the responding states. As shown in the table below, a majority of the states with schools implementing the transformation model said it was effective in improving student achievement. A majority of the states with schools implementing the turnaround model—which requires replacing the principal and at least half of the school staff—also indicated this model is effective to some extent.

- **Participants in both studies cited the importance of state assistance to districts and schools that are implementing ARRA SIG reforms.** All of the states responding to the survey reported providing technical support to ARRA SIG-funded schools and their districts, and most are providing other types of assistance, as shown in the table on the next page. According to the case study report, common types of state assistance to ARRA SIG schools and districts include assigning state-level coaches to work with school leaders and teachers, requiring school progress reports, and coordinating networks of SIG grantees. But most states responding to the survey reported having too few state education agency staff and too little staff time to assist all ARRA SIG schools. Despite these challenges, most of the survey states said that during the second year of implementation, they plan to maintain the same level of state assistance to ARRA SIG schools that they provided during the first year, and many plan to offer additional types of assistance. In the case study report, most of the ARRA SIG-funded schools are making use of state technical assistance.

Number of states with various perceptions about the effectiveness of the ARRA SIG-required models in improving achievement in recipient schools

Improvement model	Number of survey states with schools using model	Degree of effectiveness				Number of survey states with no schools using model
		To a great extent or some extent	Not at all	Varies from school to school	Too soon to tell	
Transformation	45	26	0	9	10	1
Turnaround	29	18	0	6	5	17
Restart	12	4	1	3	4	34
Closure	14	4	1	4	5	32

Table reads: Of the 45 survey states which reported that one or more of their schools were using the transformation model, 26 said this model was effective in improving achievement in these schools to a great extent or some extent. Nine states responded that the effectiveness of the transformation model varies from school to school, and 10 said it was too soon to tell about the model’s effectiveness. In one state the question was not applicable because no schools were using the transformation model.

Additional Key Findings from the Case Study Report

- **Case study schools with ARRA SIG awards are undertaking more intensive improvement strategies than non-recipient schools, especially in Idaho and Michigan.** ARRA SIG schools studied in Michigan and Idaho had more specialized staff, such as instructional coaches, and more materials and technologies to support their improvement strategies than non-recipient schools, which had fewer or none of these extra resources. In Michigan, for example, ARRA SIG schools hired multiple coaches to provide on-site observations and professional development for teachers, while non-recipient schools made do with similar but less intensive options such as using classroom teachers who doubled as coaches. In Idaho, the two ARRA SIG schools studied had sufficient resources to fully implement their improvement plans, while the non-recipient school had to scale back

Number of states providing various types of assistance to ARRA SIG districts and schools

	Number of states (out of 46 respondents)
Technical support	46
Increased monitoring and data review for round 1 ARRA SIG participating schools	40
Information on best practices for low-performing schools	35
Guidance on selecting school intervention models	33
Professional development for principals and/or other administrators in participating schools	31
Guidance on finding and selecting external providers	24
Professional development for teachers in round 1 ARRA SIG participating schools	20
Increased monitoring and data review across the school district	17
Professional development for other school staff in round 1 ARRA SIG participating schools	17
List of state-approved external providers	14
Technology-based instructional materials (hardware, instructional software, etc.)	11
Training for external providers	11
Assistance to districts in identifying and recruiting highly effective principals	10
Instructional materials (curriculum, textbooks, etc.)	9
Assistance to districts in identifying and recruiting highly effective teachers	8
Other	5
None	0

Table reads: All 46 survey respondents indicated that their state education agency provided technical support to districts awarded round 1 ARRA SIG grants.

elements of its plan and rely on fewer special staff. Non-recipient schools in Maryland also had fewer instructional coaches than ARRA SIG schools, although the principals of these non-recipient schools said their schools had less need for these specialized resources because they have fewer problems with school climate.

- **State officials interviewed in all three states emphasized the importance of helping districts develop their capacity to support schools in implementing ARRA SIG reforms.** State officials in Michigan and Idaho would like to see more explicit provisions for district capacity-building in the federal ARRA SIG program, while Maryland officials said the current federal framework gives them sufficient room to expand on their prior efforts to build districts' capacity to assist low-performing schools.
- **State and local officials cited other challenges with implementing ARRA SIGs, in addition to staffing challenges, and several suggested changes in federal requirements.** In urban districts, for example, schools noted challenges in dealing with central office bureaucracy. The greatest demands for changes in federal requirements came from Idaho, where interviewees noted that several requirements, such as the criteria for identifying and funding schools, the improvement models, and the staff replacement requirements, are inappropriate for rural schools. State and local interviewees in Michigan suggested broadening the eligibility criteria to encompass more low-achieving schools and funding schools for a longer time period. Maryland state and local interviewees were generally satisfied, although some would like to see a greater emphasis on non-academic services that affect student achievement in poor schools.

Additional Key Findings from the State Survey Report

- **Thirty-five of the 46 states (including D.C.) that responded to the survey said their state renewed all of the ARRA SIGs made in school year 2010-11 for a second year of funding for school year 2011-12.** Most of these states said they renewed these grants because all the receiving schools met the renewal criteria. Further, although a slight majority (26) of the responding states did not fund all tier 1 and 2 applicants in the first round of grant competition, 17 of these 26 states awarded ARRA SIG funds in the second round (school year 2011-12) to at least some of the applicants that were not funded in the first round.
- **Most states (32) reported that external service providers played a role in the implementation of the ARRA SIG program during the first year of funding.** These providers include institutions of higher education, regional technical assistance providers, and other nonprofit and for-profit organizations that assist districts and ARRA SIG schools with implementing their school improvement models. Respondents had mixed views, however, about whether contracting with these external entities is an effective way to improve these low-achieving schools.