



As policymakers consider a reauthorized ESEA, let's try using what we know about federal policies for school improvement.

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What, if anything, can the federal government do to improve persistently low-performing schools and ensure that all students attend effective schools? Congressional efforts to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reveal deep differences on this central question. Many Congressional Republicans say the answer is to substantially reduce the federal role and increase state and local control of education, a philosophy embodied in the [Student Success Act](#) reported by the House education committee. Key Congressional Democrats [disagree](#), as do civil rights organizations, the Secretary of Education, and some business leaders; these groups emphasize the importance of maintaining federal protections and tracking achievement for disadvantaged students and providing targeted funding to high-poverty schools. Senate education committee leaders have introduced a bipartisan [bill](#) that would retain some federal requirements but give states more latitude in how they hold schools accountable. The bill would also pass responsibility to states and school districts to determine how to improve low-performing schools.

To inform this debate, policymakers of diverse viewpoints can look to a body of research conducted over the past 13 years by the Center on Education Policy. Since 2002, CEP has studied [implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act](#), particularly federal policies to [improve low-performing schools](#) and raise student achievement. This research includes state and local surveys, case studies, and analyses of [test score trends](#). Summarized below are the main lessons learned from this body of work about the federal role in school improvement. These are by no means the only lessons from this research; all of the study reports on NCLB and school improvement are available for free at www.cep-dc.org.

1. **Allow some flexibility in the use of school improvement funds.** School improvement is often a complex, iterative, and evolving process in which school and community context influences choices and implementation. Until very recently, the rules for federal School Improvement Grants (SIGs) required recipients to use funds to implement one of four specific reform models. But the one-size fits all approach did not work for many grantees participating in CEP's research, especially schools in rural areas. It will be important to build some flexibility into any federal role in assisting states and districts with improving schools.
2. **Recognize that even with a more flexible approach, some structure can be helpful in planning and implementing reforms.** The federal school reform models, though flawed, did provide a process and a structure that encouraged many low-performing schools to analyze data, consider how they were doing things, and determine how they might improve. For example, by virtue of having to respond to federal requirements to expand learning time, schools often ended up making better use of instructional time in the school day and finding more time for teacher development, planning, and collaboration.
3. **Provide dedicated funding for school and district reform.** Federal SIGs were often a welcome source of extra funding because they allowed district and school leaders to try new approaches for improving student learning. Typically, other funding streams received by district and schools were not realistic sources of support for school reform because they were already obligated for salaries and other expenses.
4. **Target a portion of federal dollars on improving the capacity of states and districts to help low-achieving schools.** Often state education agencies lack sufficient staff to provide technical assistance on school improvement, while many districts need to develop a cadre of professionals to fashion reform plans and to

identify academic, curricular, staffing, or other issues that affect school performance. Although money for improvement is needed at the school level, it's just as important that federal funds are available to build state and local staffing capacity and expertise to help struggling schools.

5. **Recognize that real change may take longer than a three- or five-year grant cycle.** There is a tendency among policymakers to declare a program or a policy a failure if it does not show immediate positive results. It takes time, however, to bring about systemic change and increase student achievement in schools that have been persistently underachieving. For example, many schools that received federal SIGs funds focused the first year or more of their grant on improving school safety, attendance, parent involvement, and other aspects of school climate, which they viewed as a necessary precondition to improving achievement.
6. **Sustain funding for improvement activities.** SIGs are provided for a limited number of years on the theory that local or state funds will gradually replace the federal dollars to sustain activities. CEP's research shows, however, that more often than not when the federal money goes away, so does the reform effort, no matter how promising.
7. **Study and report on school improvement efforts.** Although the U.S. Department of Education has released some data on the impact of SIGs, there is much more to be learned about the state, district, and school roles in planning and implementing school improvement. For example, which approaches worked and did not work for states and schools to improve student achievement? And what were the conditions that contributed to the successes and obstacles of these approaches? What is needed is a sustained, multi-tiered federally-financed approach to study school improvement efforts that are underway; this should include funds for localized, timely, and actionable research as well as larger federal data collection and analysis across multiple sites.

CEP's research points to the need for a balanced federal role in school improvement that reduces some requirements but still provides a degree of structure; that provides dedicated funding for schools, districts, and states to carry out their respective responsibilities; and that allows for sustained support over a sufficient period of time.

Thoughtful policymaking requires attention to lessons from the past, continued attention to emerging information in the present, and a candid discussion of how the past and present can inform the future. We hope that the House and Senate will take into consideration the valuable research done by CEP and other groups when crafting an ESEA policy on the federal role in improving low-performing schools.