



EMBARGOED RELEASE:
Thursday, November 3, 2011, 12:01 a.m. EDT

CONTACT: Libby May, (301) 656-0348
libby@thehatchergroup.com

School Districts Differ about Effectiveness of Federal Grants To Improve Lowest-Performing Schools

Half of Eligible Districts Feel Three-Year Turn-Around Goal Not Long Enough

WASHINGTON, D.C.—(Nov. 3, 2011)— About 12 percent of the nation’s school districts received economic stimulus funding to improve persistently low-achieving schools, according to a new report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP). Districts’ views about the effectiveness of key program elements often differed, however, depending on whether their schools were eligible for these grants, CEP found.

The report, which is based on a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of school districts in the late winter and early spring of this year, describes school districts’ early experiences in implementing School Improvement Grants funded by the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

According to the survey, higher proportions of eligible than of ineligible districts agreed that new federal requirements for identifying eligible schools, concentrating funds on a select group of schools, and using external contractors are effective. For example, more than half (58 percent) of eligible districts agreed that concentrating funds on a small number of low-achieving schools is an effective way to improve these schools, compared with just 16 percent of ineligible districts. By contrast, larger proportions of ineligible than of eligible districts were unsure about the effectiveness of this and other requirements.

“This lack of consensus may reflect dissatisfaction, skepticism, or the lack of implementation experience among districts that were not eligible for funds,” said Diane Stark Renter, CEP’s director of national programs and co-author of the report. “It may also indicate that turning around low-performing schools is a longer-term task, and more time is needed for the program to show its value.”

Half of the districts that were eligible for stimulus-funded School Improvement Grants disagreed that the three-year federal grant period was an appropriate amount of time to improve the lowest-achieving schools, the survey found. In addition, half of the districts with schools that actually received grants said it was too soon to tell about the results of the four federally required school reform models.

“Overall, the differences in responses between eligible and ineligible districts illustrate the challenge of maintaining broad support for a highly targeted program,” said Nancy Kober, CEP consultant and co-author of the report. “The future of School Improvement Grants will depend not only on the program’s results, but also on whether policymakers and the public recognize it’s in the national interest to focus on the very lowest-achieving schools.”

The report, *Federal Efforts to Improve the Lowest-Achieving Schools: District Views on School Improvement Grant Requirements*, can be accessed free of charge at www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 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. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.