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School & State Officials Give ARRA-Funded School Improvement Grants High Marks Overall, but Concerns Remain, New CEP Studies Find

Schools using grants to improve school climate, but face challenges in recruiting principals and teachers; non-grant schools see resource gaps

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Two reports released today by the Center on Education Policy provide new insight on the impact that the \$3 billion provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) for School Improvement Grants (SIGs) is having at the state and local levels.

The reports find overall that the federal aid, which seeks to improve the lowest-achieving schools, is helping these schools provide more intensive academic services and is building momentum for major reform. There is also concern about the prescriptiveness of some SIG requirements, particularly in rural areas, and a concern among some eligible but non-grant schools that say they are unable to provide the same resources and intensity of services that SIG schools are providing.

The first CEP report, *State Implementation and Perceptions of Title I School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act: One Year Later*, examines the first year of implementation of the SIGs awarded as part of ARRA. It is based on responses to a winter 2011-12 survey from state Title I directors in 45 states and the District of Columbia.

The second report, *Opportunities and Obstacles: Implementing Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho*, looks at SIG implementation in three geographically diverse states taking different approaches to school improvement. This report is based on interviews with 35 state and local officials and case studies of 11 low-achieving schools, including schools that received SIG awards and schools that were eligible to but did not.

Most participants in both studies expressed optimism that their SIG-funded efforts are on the right track, although some states voiced frustrations with aspects of the program. In the survey report, most responding state officials supported the program's major requirements, including the criteria for determining which schools are eligible for grants, the amount of funding provided for these schools to carry out reforms, and the competitive grant process.

Schools participating in the case studies were optimistic that they are on the right track toward improvement, and officials in schools with SIG awards cited progress in creating school climates that promote achievement. These SIG schools also share some approaches to improvement, including the use of instructional or behavioral coaches and extending learning time.

Maryland and Michigan officials, however, had more positive views about the appropriateness of the SIG requirements than officials in Idaho. “Maryland state and local officials were fairly satisfied with the SIG requirements,” said Jennifer McMurrer, CEP research associate and a co-author of the reports. “Not only is the state building on a strong existing foundation for school improvement, but it also got federal Race to the Top money, which has helped the state coordinate its school improvement efforts.”

Idaho officials questioned the appropriateness of the SIG requirements in a sparsely populated, rural state. “Idaho officials said several program requirements are less workable in a rural setting,” said Caitlin Scott, a CEP consultant and co-author of the case study report. “They believed that the criteria for identifying the lowest-performing schools didn’t always target the right schools and that it was very difficult for rural districts to replace staff, as required by some of the SIG school improvement models.”

Michigan officials would like to see SIG eligibility expanded so they can fund more low-achieving schools. Officials in both Idaho and Michigan suggested the program give more emphasis to the critical role of districts in supporting school improvement. Officials in these states also say that the services provided in schools that were eligible to but did not receive the ARRA SIG awards are less intensive because they have fewer specialized staff, technology, and other resources.

Participants in both studies voiced other SIG-related concerns. Finding and retaining staff in low-achieving schools was cited as a major challenge in the survey and case studies, particularly in schools implementing improvement models that require them to replace the principal or teachers. In both reports, officials also expressed concern about sustaining stimulus-funded school improvement initiatives after the SIG funds dry up.

States are providing various types of technical support and assistance to SIG-funded schools, the reports find. All three case study states assign state-level coaches or assistants to work with school leaders, require school progress reports, and coordinate networks of SIG grantees. But most states also face a staffing crunch in their state education agencies, making it difficult to meet the needs of all schools.

“Though the money appears to be helping, capacity, sustainability, and principals and staff recruitment remain very real concerns for these schools and districts,” said Shelby McIntosh, CEP research associate and co-author of both reports. “Based on feedback from state officials, allowing districts to allocate SIG funds to schools in amounts that changed over time over more than three years could help with these issues. We also see interest in greater federal and state support around recruitment and retention of principals and teachers in struggling schools.”

Both reports are available online at www.cep-dc.org.

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