



THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

EMBARGOED RELEASE: 12:01 a.m. EDT, July 11, 2012

CONTACT: Ali Diallo, 301-656-0348 or Ali@thehatchergroup.com

Special Report: SIG Schools Face Challenges in Restaffing

Increasing learning time also proves challenging in some schools, though improved school climate may be unheralded impact of SIG funds

WASHINGTON, D.C. – July 11, 2012 – For many low-performing schools in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan that were awarded federal school improvement grants (SIGs), replacing teachers and principals has proven to be the greatest challenge to implementation. Some SIG schools have also struggled to increase learning time for students, although others report fewer problems with this strategy. But one bright spot for several SIG schools in these states is that school climates appear to be getting better.

These are among the findings in a series of special reports by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at The George Washington University. The reports focus on how SIG schools are addressing three major issues: staffing challenges that result from principal and teacher replacement requirements, extended learning time requirements, and school climate issues.

Each report explores one of these issues in depth and comes amid a flurry of speculation about the effectiveness of the SIG program. Data was collected in the fall and winter of 2011-12, a critical midpoint for implementing three-year SIG awards funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

“The CEP reports offer important findings for policymakers and the public to consider as schools continue to do this work,” said Maria Ferguson, Executive Director of the CEP. “The findings are especially relevant as policymakers debate a possible fifth school improvement model under SIG, an idea recently passed as part of the Senate Appropriations Committee spending bill.”

The reports’ findings draw on survey data from 46 responding states (including D.C.) and case study research in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan. As part of these studies, which were summarized in two earlier CEP reports, state and local education leaders provided feedback about challenges of implementing SIGs and their influence on the direction of school reform.

The first of the three special reports, *Schools with Federal School Improvement Grants Face Challenges in Replacing Principals and Teachers*, looks at SIG-related staffing requirements. The two most popular school improvement models, transformation and turnaround, require major staffing changes, and finding and retaining effective principals and teachers was often the greatest challenge to SIG implementation in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan and in some of the states surveyed. Officials in rural, suburban and urban areas in case study states cited various reasons why restaffing presented major challenges in all types of low-performing schools.

“Recruiting the right principals and teachers was challenging across all of the case study schools but was especially difficult in Idaho’s rural schools, where staffing is already a huge obstacle,” said Jennifer McMurrer, senior research associate and author of the CEP studies. Still, the majority of the 46 state survey respondents said that replacing teachers and principals was an important element of improving student achievement in SIG schools.

Legal and union requirements and a short funding timeline made it difficult for some of the schools studied to find and hire the best teachers and principals and remove ineffective staff. Despite this, only a minority of the states surveyed reported that they were providing assistance or resources to schools and districts to help ease the challenges of staff replacement.

The second report in the CEP series, *Increased Learning Time Under Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants: High Hopes, Varied Implementation*, highlights another challenge to implementation. All 46 states surveyed reported that at least some of their SIG schools are implementing an improvement model that requires increased learning time. A majority of state respondents agreed this strategy is a key element in improving student achievement, although some said its importance varied from school to school. But it may be too early to judge the overall effectiveness of this policy, according to survey and interview responses. Increased learning time is being implemented differently across schools and states, the CEP researchers found. For example, case study schools in Maryland really target their extra time on students with the greatest need, while those in Michigan for the most part extend the school day for all students.

Despite these challenges, the SIG program has already had a positive impact in many schools, as evidenced by the third report, *Changing the School Climate Is the First Step to Reform in Many Schools with Federal Improvement Grants*. All of the SIG-funded case study schools in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho are taking steps to improve school climate among students, staff, or both—often as a first priority for reform. Examples of strategies include:

- Improving safety and discipline;
- Building a sense of community among students and staff; and
- Establishing a shared vision among teachers, parents, and students centered on student achievement.

As a result, the success most frequently cited by SIG-funded case study schools during the first year of implementation was an improved school climate, as demonstrated by a safer and more orderly environment, increased student motivation to learn, and greater staff collaboration and morale. Some schools also reported gains in student achievement, but several said it is too soon to tell. “Although Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has announced some positive achievement findings for SIG-funded schools, at this point the unseen impact may be the improved environments for learning that SIG funds have helped create,” commented McMurrer.

The three special reports are available for free at www.cep-dc.org. For further information, contact Ali Diallo at 301-656-0348 or Ali@thehatchergroup.com.

Based in Washington, D.C., at the George Washington University’s Graduate School of Education and Human Development, 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. The Center does not represent any special interests.