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

More High Schools Benefitting from School Improvement Grants, States Report in New CEP Analysis of Recovery Act Program

Transformation model is most popular intervention in participating low-performing schools

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Feb. 23, 2011 – Changes in requirements for the federal School Improvement Grant program are having the intended effect of channeling more resources to low-performing high schools, according to a report released Wednesday on the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program by the Center on Education Policy (CEP).

CEP's analysis – which is based on anonymous results from two state surveys – also found that while states are using the funds to expand technical assistance to low-performing schools, some respondents reported that the SIG program could be better targeted to help schools in the most need of assistance.

The report, *Early State Implementation of Title I School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act*, provides new details on how states are spending \$3.5 billion in School Improvement Grants as part of the federal Title I program, which provides assistance to schools to improve the achievement of low-performing students. The bulk of the school improvement funds were appropriated as part of the \$100 billion for education in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

“The federal stimulus package provided states with more federal funding to help low-performing high schools than ever before,” said Jack Jennings, the president and CEO of the Center on Education Policy. “The majority of state Title I directors found the school improvement funding to be adequate, at least for the present, and federal guidance for the program to be helpful. But it remains to be seen whether the grants will have the intended effect of changing school culture and raising achievement.”

Forty-two states and the District of Columbia (which is counted as a state in the report's tallies) responded to the first survey, which asked state deputy superintendents about broad ARRA implementation, including SIGs. This survey found that 28 states had awarded their entire federal stimulus SIG funding to districts by last fall, while nine states had awarded some and two states had awarded none. Also, 20 states reported that three-quarters of eligible schools applied for grants and 22 states said that at least three-quarters of applying schools received or will get SIG funds.

Respondents also reported on which of the four federally approved school-turnaround models are most popular. Those options are: transformation, turnaround, restart, or school

closure. States said that schools favored the transformation model an average of 74 percent of the time. This model requires schools to replace principals and improve teacher and leader effectiveness, reform instruction, increase learning time, and provide greater flexibility in how the schools operate. The second most popular option was the turnaround model, which states said was used by schools an average of 16 percent of the time. These schools replace principals, rehire up to half of their staff, and give leaders flexibility to implement comprehensive change.

“School Improvement Grants are critical because they provide the extra funding that is needed to help struggling schools raise achievement,” said Jennings. “But there may be room to improve the program. Some state officials told us in the survey that the four intervention models are too restrictive and not appropriate for all eligible schools.”

Forty-five states and the District of Columbia responded to the second survey, which asked Title I directors specifically about implementation of School Improvement Grants. The survey found that the proportion of high schools served with SIGs has increased in 31 states while the proportion of elementary schools served has stayed the same or decreased in 38 states. Twenty-nine states said that ARRA funding for the grants is adequate to allow districts to provide interventions necessary to improve schools. And while 23 states said that schools most in need of assistance are being identified “to the right extent,” another 22 states said this is happening only “to some extent.”

State Title I directors also shed light on the types of assistance they plan to provide to districts that receive SIG funds. All 46 states plan to provide technical support to districts receiving the grants, including providing information about best practices for low-performing schools (39 states), guidance on selecting school intervention models (34 states), and professional development for school leadership (32). Less popular forms of assistance include help in identifying and recruiting teachers (nine states) and providing instructional materials (seven states).

“The School Improvement Grants are helping states refine and tailor assistance to districts. The hope is that these new strategies will accelerate school improvement efforts,” Jennings said.

The full report is available online 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.