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# **Tinkering Toward Transformation:**

A Look at Federal School Improvement Grant Implementation

**Sarah Yatsko, Robin Lake,  
Elizabeth Cooley Nelson,  
and Melissa Bowen**

March 2012

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## An Overview of the School Improvement Grant

First implemented in 2007 and dramatically redesigned in 2009, the U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grant (SIG) program is intended to dramatically increase student performance in the nation's worst-performing schools. The program identifies the bottom 5 percent of schools that receive federal Title I dollars and asks states to distribute funds, up to \$2 million per year for the first cohort, via competitive grants.<sup>1</sup> The money is supposed to go to the schools that demonstrate the greatest likelihood of achieving "turnaround," defined as whole-school redesign that results in dramatic cultural shifts with rapid increases in student achievement. To qualify for the grants, schools must meet the DOE's criteria as persistently failing, and districts must demonstrate that schools can successfully implement one of the four models provided by the DOE.<sup>2</sup>

1. *School Improvement Grants: Early Implementation Under Way, but Reforms Affected by Short Time Frames* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). Available at <http://www.gao.gov/assets/330/321780.pdf>.
2. "School Improvement Grants," U.S. Department of Education briefing, 2011. Available at [www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/090825sigv2.ppt](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/090825sigv2.ppt).

# INTRODUCTION

*“When a school continues to perform in the bottom 5 percent of the state and isn’t showing signs of progress or has graduation rates below 60 percent over a number of years, something dramatic needs to be done.”<sup>1</sup>*

—U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

In late 2009, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) announced that it would use money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to enable comprehensive overhauls of the nation’s persistently lowest-achieving schools. The first dramatic change came from the department itself: It increased the budget of the already established Title 1 School Improvement Grant (SIG) program from \$500 million to \$3.5 billion. The DOE then made the grants competitive, focused on the lowest-performing schools, and restricted the turnaround options for the schools that applied for the grants. In September 2010, 815 schools opened their doors as SIG schools. Seventeen of them were in Washington state.<sup>2</sup>

Although most of SIG funding is funneled directly to the struggling schools, school districts play a pivotal role in the process. They are responsible for determining which schools to include in an application, as well as completing and submitting the application to their state education agency. Districts also must oversee the grant and provide schools with guidance and support as they spend the money and implement their turnaround plans. Given the influence of the district in school turnaround work, surprisingly little attention has been paid to what districts can and should do to support the exhausting work they ask of schools undertaking a turnaround.<sup>3</sup> A limited number of studies have examined the nature and extent of district involvement in transforming low-performing schools. Those studies suggest that school turnaround is far more likely to succeed when district initiatives are coherent, focus on instruction, monitor progress with leading indicators of successful turnaround and provide schools with critical supports, such as guidance on the use of data and the flexibility to choose staff.<sup>4</sup>

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1. “Pennsylvania to Receive \$21.5 Million to Turn Around Its Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools,” U.S. Department of Education Press Release, May 26, 2011. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/pennsylvania-receive-215-million-turn-around-its-persistently-lowest-achieving-s>.

2. Washington state received SIG funding for 18 schools, including one closure. Data courtesy of U.S. Department of Education website: <http://data.ed.gov/grants/school-improvement-grants>.

3. Andrew Calkins, “School Turnaround: What It Is and Why We Need It (paper presented at American Enterprise Institute/Mass Insight Education & Research Institute Conference, “Turning Around the Nation’s Worst Schools,” Washington, DC, March 11, 2008).

4. Ken Leithwood, *Characteristics of High-Performing School Districts: A Review of Empirical Evidence* (Toronto, Canada: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 2008); V. Darleen Opfer et al., “The District Effect: Systemic Responses to High Stakes Accountability Policies in Six Southern States,” *American Journal of Education* 114, no. 2 (2007): 299-332; Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert, *Reforming Districts: How Districts Support School Reform* (Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2003).

*Despite the hard work of many district administrators, principals, and especially teachers, the majority of schools studied exhibit little evidence of the type of bold and transformative changes described by Secretary Duncan.*

This research looks at the early implementation of SIG awards in one state, Washington, to learn what kinds of school-level changes are underway, how they compare to the intent of the grants, and the role districts play in SIG implementation.

We find that School Improvement Grants, the revamped version of which was first administered in the 2010-11 school year, have inspired districts and schools in Washington state to approach the work on turnaround in ways that, with some exceptions, are only marginally different from past school improvement efforts. All the SIG schools have increased learning time and restructured teacher evaluations, some have changed instructional approaches or curriculum, and most, if not all, have added staff and increased and enhanced teacher professional development. However, despite the hard work on the part of many district administrators, principals, and especially teachers, the overwhelming majority of the schools studied so far exhibit little evidence of the type of bold and transformative changes described by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Just as concerning, the capacity of these districts to help schools radically rethink how they approach teaching and learning appears to be limited.

By avoiding the problems described in this report, those administering future School Improvement Grant programs and other grants targeted at the nation's lowest-performing schools could improve their chances of affecting dramatic, not incremental, improvement. We provide recommendations that recognize the different roles that federal, state, and local education agencies play in support of school turnaround work. The DOE should make it difficult to win SIG funding, implement more rigorous application requirements, give more planning time for program rollout, and ensure that states and districts are exposed to successful models. States must shift from a role where they simply manage compliance to one where they are turnaround partners, building pipelines of turnaround leaders and teachers, helping districts and schools identify lead partners to assist schools, communicating expected results, and providing the regulatory and policy support for districts that want more flexibility. Districts should create a turnaround office whose job it is to remove barriers to successful transformation, and take responsibility for schools implementing a well thought-out, comprehensive, evidence-based vision of change.



## Defining School Turnaround

For the purposes of this report, a “school turnaround” is defined as significant improvement in student academic outcomes within two years, in a school readied for the long-term process of continuing to raise and maintain achievement.<sup>1</sup>

The four School Improvement Grant turnaround models available to grant recipient schools are:

- **Transformation:** Replace the principal and institute comprehensive instructional reform.
- **Turnaround:** Replace the principal, release all teachers and rehire no more than 50 percent, and increase school-level flexibility.
- **Restart:** Close and reopen under an outside operator, such as a charter school operator or management organization.
- **Closure:** Close and allow students to attend higher-performing schools within reasonable proximity.

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1. Emily Pallin, *Evaluating School Turnaround* (Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education, 2010).

## METHODOLOGY

Between March and June 2011, a team of researchers from the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) conducted a field study of a select group of Washington state school districts that were awarded School Improvement Grants to improve student achievement in their schools.<sup>5</sup> This research focused on how districts supported work at SIG schools, as well as how school improvement strategies were unfolding in the early implementation phase of the grant. Interviews began approximately ten months after school recipients were announced and five months after implementation.

Researchers interviewed state department of education officials, teachers' union executives, district superintendents, and district officials who worked administering the grant or providing support to recipient schools. Researchers also visited nine of the seventeen SIG schools across the state, interviewing the principal, vice principal (if there was one), and two or three teachers at each school. A total of 44 one-hour interviews of school, district and state personnel were completed.

In the interviews, researchers covered the following topics:

- The SIG application process
- Selection of models used for turnaround
- How specific turnaround plans were developed and decided upon
- SIG goals and accountability as communicated to schools by districts
- Supports districts provided (or failed to provide) to SIG schools
- General perceptions of the SIG program
- Impact to date of SIG funding

The districts included in the study were selected to represent rural, urban, and suburban areas and a variety of approaches to turnaround and were located in different regions of the state. Table 1 shows the average student achievement outcomes and student demographics for sampled schools for the 2009-10 school year (the year prior to the implementation of the SIG award).

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5. Names of the districts and schools studied are not revealed to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees.

**Table 1.** Average Student Populations in Sampled Schools (2009-10)

	<b>% Proficient in Reading<sup>*</sup></b>	<b>% Proficient in Math<sup>*</sup></b>	<b>% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch</b>	<b>% Black or Hispanic</b>	<b>% Special Education</b>	<b>% Transitional Bilingual</b>
<b>Overall</b>	42	20	81	65	12	23

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

<sup>\*</sup> In school's highest tested grade (5th, 8th, or 10th)

*In nearly every case, districts treated the SIG as they do other grant programs: as incremental additions to ongoing activities rather than a tool for completely reimagining what's possible for students.*

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The clear message from the DOE is that School Improvement Grants are intended to help districts make bold decisions in order to completely reinvent their schools. Many forces, however—including politics, fear of controversy, lack of knowledge, and the constraints of collective bargaining—have prevented districts from choosing controversial interventions for schools. In nearly every case, the districts studied treated the SIG as they do other grant programs: as incremental additions to ongoing activities, rather than as a tool for completely reimagining what's possible for students. Specifically, we found that:

At the district level:

- Tight timelines and rushed negotiations with unions limited what models were chosen, as well as how they were implemented.
- Districts' communications about how grants were awarded, how they would be implemented, and the goals and consequences for failure were often confusing and incomplete.
- District oversight focused on compliance with the formal grant terms, not support for school-level efforts and prodding to help overcome inertia.
- Federal materials strongly encouraged school-level autonomy, but districts rarely granted it.
- Districts were unable to articulate a theory of change for chronically poor-performing schools.

At the school level:

- Peripheral or “kitchen sink” improvement strategies were more prevalent than focused turnaround efforts.
- Changes in human resource policies to facilitate the removal of ineffective teachers were incremental and limited by cumbersome processes.
- The connection between the stated turnaround strategy and the actual use of SIG funds was often weak.

At the state level:

- Changes instituted by the state's department of education in how it supports districts and schools undertaking turnaround failed to have the intended impact on the ground.

## DISTRICT-LEVEL FINDINGS

### Tight timeline seriously compromised rollout and implementation

In December 2009, the DOE announced the SIG program and provided applications. Districts then had less than two months to negotiate with their unions, detail their district-wide and school-specific turnaround plans, and complete and submit the application.<sup>6</sup> The DOE revealed the award winners shortly before the end of the school year. This gave districts and schools only late spring and summer to prepare for dramatic changes.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the expedited timeline, districts could not engage in protracted, hard negotiations with local teachers' unions. The grant required that teachers' unions sign off on the SIG application. In all the districts we visited, union representatives reviewed applications and could object to elements of the district proposals. With the quick deadline looming, applications came to reflect the areas where the district and the union easily agreed. Districts officials believed there would not have been enough time to work out significant differences. As a result, districts selected less aggressive models and made only minor changes to human resource policies.

Both before and after the announcement of the 2009 changes to the SIG program, some school districts around the country have been cited for successfully supporting more meaningful school turnaround. They include Baltimore; Hartford, Conn.; and Charlotte-Mecklenburg. These districts and a handful of others have approached the immensely challenging work of school turnaround with wide buy-in from teachers and principals. They also have relied heavily on the available turnaround research, set up separate district turnaround offices, utilized outside providers for support, and devised solid and well-planned launches. Some districts, such as Hartford, have allowed a full year of planning prior to turnaround.<sup>8</sup>

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6. For the first round of grants, 73 percent of the schools nationwide chose to implement the transformation model, which, when compared with conversion to a charter school, complete restaffing, or closure, was easily determined the path of least resistance.

7. Jennifer Shea and Meredith Liu, *School Improvement Grants: Take 2* (Boston, MA: School Turnaround Group, Mass Insight Education, 2010).

8. Laura Pappano, *Inside School Turnarounds* (Boston, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2010); Mass Insight, "Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Achievement Zone: District Turnaround Strategy Profile" (Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education, 2009).

*This rush to apply and implement a plan meant districts were unable to take advantage of one of the largest advantages the grant provided: political cover.*

Districts in our study, on the other hand, did not see a fully developed and well-executed turnaround plan as an option. District administrators we interviewed lamented the lack of adequate time to devise comprehensive turnaround plans and fill the teacher and principal vacancies. A principal in one district and a SIG administrator in another used the same expression to describe SIG planning and implementation: “We are building the plane as we fly it.”

Due to the requirements of the grant, districts faced the unenviable position of having to hire for teaching positions that were likely hard to fill given the SIG schools’ longer days, history of low achievement, and high-poverty student body. They were also hiring for these positions well past traditional hiring cycles; most teachers, especially the most sought-out, had already accepted positions elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> District administrators described the entire process as extremely challenging, with one calling it a “nightmare.” In each district there was some acknowledgment that administrators had underestimated the amount of time necessary to fill vacancies the SIG awards created.

The human resource administrator in the rural district we visited described the tight timeline as especially challenging. Given the perceived limited supply of labor locally, the administrator believed his district could not have considered the turnaround model without a protracted block of time for hiring. He said that in his district, “It’s hard to get teachers. It’s hard to recruit here.” This was unfortunate, he said, because at least one school could have greatly benefited from a staff shake-up. As well, the district was reluctant to remove a significant number of teachers given that many had strong and longstanding personal connections to district administrators—as is common in smaller rural districts.

This rush to apply and implement a plan meant that districts were also unable to take advantage of one of the largest advantages the grant provided: political cover. District officials, and some principals, expressed an appreciation for the freedom to act boldly that came with the money. The grant, they asserted, provided leverage to pursue more meaningful teacher evaluations, extended learning time, and somewhat more relaxed procedures for removing staff members who lacked the skills and motivation to work in a struggling school. Two interviewees believed the political cover to act was worth more than the funds themselves. As one district SIG director put it, “If you’re ever gonna get somewhere, you’ve got to break down the union and rework things there. You gotta think

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9. Jessica Levin and Meredith Quinn, *Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms* (Brooklyn, NY: The New Teacher Project, 2003)..

about education differently. We cannot continue to do nine months of the year, 188 days, with challenging students. You're not gonna get to where you need to with that." The SIG award, this official said, "gave us cover to rework some things that I think have gotten out of control." In another district, an administrator said that the SIG award represents "the opportunity to do what you know needs to be done for kids of poverty. So the money just really signaled a change. I don't think all of the improvements have had to do with the money, but it was a signal of different things."

*One administrator said, "I don't think all of the improvements have had to do with the money, but it was a signal of different things."*

Yet overall, and perhaps due in part to the limited planning time, districts throughout Washington state opted for light interventions. Twenty districts in the state submitted applications for SIG funding, for a total of 47 schools. Just one district requested SIG funding to close a school, and only two districts (and for only three schools) proposed the more aggressive turnaround model. One district failed to indicate which model it had chosen, leaving in the application's template language of "select model here." All of the 18 remaining district applications, representing 43 of the 47 schools, proposed to exclusively implement the least aggressive model, transformation.

### **How Tight Timelines Prevented Bold Action in One District**

Early in the application process, one local teachers' union leader said, the union signaled to its district an early interest in implementing the more aggressive turnaround model. However, because of a lack of time to negotiate details with the district, the union quickly fell back to the safer position of supporting transformation only. The district agreed and submitted a successful application using the transformation model. With more negotiating time and with some push from the district, the union leader believed the teachers would have agreed to pursue the more aggressive model.

## **District communication often confusing and incomplete**

To some extent, all districts in our study exacerbated the timeline problem with poor communications and inadequate planning. Announcements of SIG awards came at the very end of the school year, creating uncertainty as to whether the principal and/or teachers would be replaced. Teachers at more than two-thirds of the schools we visited did not know if they would be able to keep their current positions for the following school year until early to mid-summer—and even later in some cases. Facing uncertainty, or to comply with the

*In two districts we studied, teachers at SIG schools were not invited to provide input during the turnaround planning phase of the application.*

grant requirements, many teachers left SIG schools.<sup>10</sup> One teacher we interviewed assumed she was jobless and packed up her belongings on the last day of school, yet there were two SIG principals fighting to have her on staff the next year.

According to the teachers we interviewed, poor communication by the district was not limited to the announcement of the SIG award. In two districts we studied, teachers at SIG schools were not invited to provide input during the turnaround planning phase of the application. Most of these teachers did not even know the district had applied for the SIG award until receipt of the grant was announced. Teachers across schools described feeling anxious, given the uncertainty around who would lead their schools, what the turnaround plan would entail, and whether they would even teach there in the first place.

The districts in our study also failed to communicate their expectations of the grant. Some teachers repeated for us rumors that the school would close and that they would be fired if scores did not rise. Other schools were left to make their own determination as to what characterized a successful turnaround. Despite the DOE's emphasis on data collection and use in measuring turnaround progress or success, districts were either not well-versed in how to track progress or failed to communicate it to schools, or both.

Some schools did their best with what they had. One school converted a small room into a life-sized chart of student progress, covering the walls from floor to ceiling with sticky notes with student names and scores. Clearly lots of time and effort went into its creation, and the principal believed it would help keep teachers focused. However, the schoolwide goals—whether teachers were supposed to focus on improving math scores, or on helping English language learners, or something else—were unclear. A teacher at one school was asked how she and her colleagues knew whether the changes at the school were working. She responded, “It’s just a feeling.”

### **How One Teacher Described the SIG Announcement**

“We didn’t know we got the SIG grant until the very end of the year. So first we were told the principal was leaving, which caused a lot of feelings. We had no clue about anything. [When finally told about the SIG grant], the way [the district] went about it was not good, in that hordes of people came through with clipboards basically telling us all the things we were doing wrong. It was really—the whole thing was really awful.”

10. There was wide variation among schools in terms of the numbers of teachers that were asked to or chose to leave. In one school, just one teaching position was vacant; in another, more than half of all teaching positions needed to be filled.



## District oversight mirrors past efforts

As school district bureaucracies have evolved over time and the federal government has introduced new sources of external funding, district central offices have grown more fractured, with various departments controlling different aspects of school oversight and support.<sup>11</sup> Research from the nonprofit Mass Insight Education has shown that treating departments as silos is particularly problematic for districts hoping to turn around chronically failing schools.<sup>12</sup> Resources exist to help districts organize themselves effectively to facilitate turnaround, but the districts we studied did not appear to follow their suggested best practices.

Mass Insight, for example, has made materials available publicly that include detailed descriptions of what its research has shown to be essential elements, for districts, of successful turnaround strategies. Mass Insight has also produced a toolkit that can guide a district through implementation, including step-by-step instructions on how to monitor a school's turnaround progress.

As well, recognizing that most districts would not have a coherent plan for improving instruction, the DOE contracted with the Center on Innovation and Improvement to create the "Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants." The 210-page handbook is a compilation of the most current research-based practices for districts undertaking a school turnaround. This document, provided to all SIG districts, was never once referenced in interviews.

The first chapter of the handbook suggests that smooth coordination between multiple district departments, including facilities, curriculum and instruction, and human resources, is critical for school-level transformation.<sup>13</sup> Both the DOE and Mass Insight recommend the creation of a district turnaround office as the most efficient way to accomplish this goal.

School districts in our study have not structured the work of supporting school turnaround in a way that aligns with Mass Insight's and the SIG implementation

*Districts did not successfully recruit for the recommended turnaround expertise and in several cases used SIG dollars to give a position to someone whose job otherwise would have been lost.*

11. Joseph G. Weeres, "The organizational structure of urban educational systems: bureaucratic practices in mass societies," in Stanley William Rothstein, ed., *Handbook of Schooling in Urban America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993); Brian Rowan, "Instructional management in historical perspective: Evidence on differentiation in school districts," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1982): 43-59; Karl E. Weick, "Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21, no.1. (1976): 1-19.

12. Mass Insight, "The District Turnaround Office: A comprehensive support structure for struggling schools" (Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education, 2010).

13. *The Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants* was developed by the Content Centers of the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive Centers network. The handbook provides practical information, suggestions, and resources to states, districts, and schools implementing Title I School Improvement Grants. Available at <http://www.centerii.org/handbook/>.

*SIG directors spent a great deal of their time on administrative oversight.*

handbook's detailed descriptions of what the turnaround office should look like. Against the reports' recommendations, the districts in our study acted conservatively when it came to how their staffs would support SIG schools. District officials we interviewed had not created an internal turnaround office with the recommended direct lines to power—both because they didn't know how to do this and because they were reluctant to restructure staff under a temporary grant.

In one district, SIG schools continued to answer to the same district supervisor as they had in the past, but they also reported to the SIG director. Each SIG principal in this district expressed some confusion around what issues were to be reported to which director. The default was to simply duplicate their reporting, which took twice as long. As one principal put it, "There are multiple people to answer to and to do paperwork for and reports to make. It takes more time to report to all those folks."

Although no district we studied created a district turnaround office, all did spend SIG money on a new administrative position to oversee the grant implementation. However, principals expressed doubts that their new district contacts had the necessary expertise to support their work. One principal said that district turnaround positions were filled with people who do not actually provide the support that principals need. "The district doesn't have the vision of what school improvement is supposed to be about," the principal said.

The bottom line is that districts did not successfully recruit for the recommended turnaround expertise and in several cases used SIG dollars to give a position to someone whose job otherwise would have been lost. Individuals hired in SIG director roles in our sample districts included a principal who was removed from a chronically failing school to comply with the requirement of the SIG. In two districts, the designated SIG administrators were longstanding district administrators who assumed SIG responsibilities as part of their preexisting jobs. Instead of using SIG funding to make changes that could be sustained over time, these districts reasoned that hiring internally would allow the staff members to simply shift back to their prior job responsibilities at the end of the grant.

Though the SIG implementation handbook provided to districts specifically advises that "the turnaround office function as the lead entity driving dramatic school improvement efforts, rather than simply a compliance monitor," SIG directors spent a great deal of their time on administrative oversight. One principal bemoaned that the district support

person's primary concern was whether or not he filled out forms correctly and on time. Interviews with SIG administrators confirmed this focus on compliance. When asked to list job responsibilities, SIG directors' answers included:

- Negotiating nuances of the special union contract for the SIG schools
- Ensuring that required SIG documentation was correctly filled out and submitted
- Seeing that purchase order requests were fulfilled
- Fielding calls from building principals about grant compliance

The amount of time SIG district officials reported dealing with human resource issues was, for some, staggering. One SIG director spent 20 hours a week helping to negotiate the teacher evaluation tool, the staff contract, timesheets, and how pay is allocated. "I would never have guessed that would take that much time," the director said. "I would rather have more time to be in the schools."

### **Anatomy of a District Turnaround Office<sup>1</sup>**

- Holds turnaround schools accountable for progress
- Works independently from other district departments
- Has high-priority status in a district
- Has a direct line of communication to superintendent
- Creates flexible operating conditions for schools, allowing for quick changes
- Has power to free up schools from burdensome paperwork
- Is closely involved in day-to-day work at turnaround schools

1. Mass Insight, "The District Turnaround Office."

## **School-level autonomy missing in action**

The SIG handbook strongly encourages districts to grant principals the freedom to make changes they believe will improve teaching and learning: "Capacity and incentive without opportunity create a formula for frustration and discouragement. The 2009 SIG program adds to these two levers of change an important third one—opportunity for change. Simply put, this means getting out of people's way so they can make decisions, take actions, and assume responsibility for what they do."

*Three principals asserted that they had to fight the district to take steps they saw as essential to improving instruction.*

*The districts that received SIG funds did not have a coherent plan for school improvement strategies.*

Three principals interviewed for this study asserted that they had to fight the district to take steps they saw as essential to improving instruction. One school tried to use SIG funding to implement a project-based learning model that the principal and teachers believed was a better fit for their students. Instead of providing supports, district officials prohibited the change, citing their own lack of knowledge of the model. The school was so convinced of the model's fit that they used SIG money to bring district administrators on a tour of a school across the state that had shown great strides working with a similar population of high-risk students. While the tour successfully convinced the district, it left the school with fewer SIG dollars and time to implement the change. At another school, the principal was denied a request to change curriculum, and the district only acquiesced after he collected research and provided data showing the limitations of the district-chosen curriculum for his school's population.

One district in our sample granted its SIG schools a higher level of autonomy than other district schools. But while those SIG principals had more freedom to innovate, the interventions they implemented were no bolder than those in other districts we studied. Although these principals described an increased level of independence as compared to pre-SIG, they also felt that the district failed to pair the freedoms with the support they needed to succeed. School leaders lamented how personal connections to district staff was still the key to get operations support and "fast-track" approval of requests. Although principals did not complain or even make mention of it, administrators in this district also failed to provide schools with guidance on how to use data to track progress or monitor how changes in instruction had impacted learning.

## **Lack of district-driven theory of change**

The districts that received SIG funds did not have a coherent plan for school improvement strategies. With only a few exceptions, the principals we interviewed were keenly aware of this lack of district instructional vision and understood its impact on their own ability to raise scores. We asked one principal who had a proven track record for successfully turning around failing schools how he approached the work. He answered, "We're addressing oral language development. This is an idea that people have talked about for ten years here, but no one's implemented it." Along with that strategy, the school was addressing its discipline policy and instituting a culture of no excuses and high expectations. "We have a plan, and that's the problem," he said. "The problem is that the district doesn't have this vision of what school improvement is."

In another district there was no coherent plan, as well as no guidance, on what the goals for SIG schools would be or how principals might know if what they were doing was working. In this district's central office, there was widespread skepticism of the broader principles behind the grant, including the use of standardized testing to gauge performance. When one school leader asked how schools would be monitored for performance, the district SIG contact answered her question with his own: "What do you want us to measure?" The district strategy was to hire "great leaders" and to work on the evaluation metrics later. School leaders in this district spoke in vague terms about academic results. One principal asserted that her school's formative assessments were not indicative of student performance on state tests, and she could not predict, nor seemed particularly concerned with, whether standardized test scores would improve. The focus here was on academic inputs, such as a doubling of the time spent on English and math instruction. The emphasis was on academic changes—unlike at schools where principals turn to peripheral turnaround strategies, such as organic gardens and drama classes—just not on the quantitative results of those changes.

*SIG administrators resorted to a strategy of replacing the principal with one they believed could singlehandedly turn the school around.*

It is not surprising that SIG districts did not have a plan for supporting school turnaround. There is still little research on how a district can support this work in schools.<sup>14</sup> SIG administrators in each district we studied resorted to a strategy of replacing the principal with one they believed could singlehandedly turn the school around. In two of the schools we visited, it appeared as though they had hired a true turnaround principal. In both cases, these principals had a documented history of dramatically raising student achievement over two or three years. Teaching staffs described a dramatic change in school culture, and by year's end test scores in these new SIG schools had also risen. When we asked a 30-year veteran teacher at one of these schools to compare the school climate under old and new leadership, she replied, "Night and day. Total night and total day. I keep telling people that weren't here last year, 'You have no idea the changes that have occurred.' It's like a new school."

District administrators and school principals commonly described feeling "overwhelmed" and at a loss as to what steps they needed to take to effectively support and implement a school turnaround. The SIG handbook encourages districts to consider the use of external providers to take on various aspects of the school turnaround support work. Examples from the handbook of how external providers could be used include:

- To conduct school quality reviews or needs assessments
- To recruit, select, and train individuals to serve as instructional coaches in schools

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14. "Not enough research has been done in improving schools in serious difficulty to produce a definitive model for improvement for these schools." Kenneth Leithwood and Alma Harris, *Leading School Turnaround: How Successful Leaders Transform Low-Performing Schools* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010) 13.

identified for intervention or improve programs for students with disabilities

- To coordinate targeted assistance to a cluster of lowest-performing schools
- To develop a pipeline of skilled school turnaround leaders

However, districts in our study rarely used SIG funding to hire outside partners or contractors to assist them. Instead, districts chose to undertake the work internally. The few exceptions include a district that used an outside agency to help recruit and screen turnaround principals. Unfortunately, many of the finalists the contractor provided failed to meet basic criteria for the position, and several other candidates were either in legal trouble or had recently been fired from chronically poor-performing schools. The state's department of education spent SIG money to hire a consulting company to recommend which schools should be included in the SIG application, as well as which models should be chosen. This outside contractor also monitored the SIG grantees and compiled periodic reports. The districts were already well aware which schools needed aggressive intervention, but at least one district admitted that having an outside provider make this decision could provide political cover. If communities questioned why one school was chosen over another, the district could point the finger elsewhere.

### **One SIG Director's Request for Help**

A school district SIG director we interviewed warmly introduced himself, stated that he was looking forward to our interview, then wondered if he could ask us a question before we began. His question answered several of ours. Did we have any information that we could provide him on how to successfully turn around a failing school? He went on to explain that he was at a loss as to how to do this.

## SCHOOL-LEVEL FINDINGS

### Heavier reliance on less effective approaches to turnaround

There was also evidence at the school level of districts' failure to consistently support turnaround work. Some school principals shared the fears of their district administrators: that the work was overwhelming and they were uncertain where or how to begin. Other principals expressed confidence in their work but were unable to articulate a plan, goals, or how they were going to monitor progress. The approaches schools employed to manage turnaround fell in to three broad categories. Nearly one-third of the schools studied were trying the “everything but the kitchen sink” approach: doing everything they could think of, hoping something would work. Nearly one-half of schools layered new interventions onto preexisting strategies yet were unable to articulate a connection between those approaches and the data. Less than one-third of schools we studied took an approach that resembled ones suggested by the turnaround research literature: tying interventions to specific areas where students struggled and refusing to tolerate excuses for student failure. These “laser-focus” schools were led by newly hired principals with a proven school improvement track record who paid close attention to data and school climate.

#### Three Approaches to School Turnaround

- **Kitchen Sink:** Piling new interventions on top of existing ones without a coherent strategy
- **Scattershot:** Using random and often peripheral interventions without a connection to a school's specific needs or a theory as to how they will foster academic improvement
- **Laser Focus:** Using and regularly monitoring highly strategic interventions that data have shown are connected to and can impact the particular set of challenges facing the school's students and teachers

*Principals struggled to effectively focus the energy and investment made by their teachers.*

*This lack of focus left teachers rowing hard but in too many different directions.*

### *Kitchen Sink*

The kitchen-sink approach—throwing as many interventions as possible at a school—has been described by researchers studying turnaround as a sign of an ineffective school.<sup>15</sup> These schools attempt to manage a myriad of competing intervention strategies, with hopes that one or some combination of them will raise achievement levels. One school in our study introduced team-teaching, project-based instruction, and a new STEM curriculum in the course of one school year. Teachers at kitchen-sink schools tended to report a particularly heavy workload; they began the year energized, but when we interviewed them midyear they were questioning how long they could keep it up. One teacher described the constantly changing strategies as “crazy.” A teacher at another kitchen-sink school said, “If we wanted change and wanted to really, really save our class, we had to come in on Saturdays unpaid. God, I’m here forever. We are here forever helping kids. The expectation—it feels like a 24-hour-a-day job.” Teachers in these schools worked hard, their leaders were respected and strong, their plans were audacious. But their efforts lacked coherence. Principals struggled to effectively focus the energy and investment made by their teachers. This lack of focus left teachers rowing hard but in too many different directions.

### *Scattershot*

Nearly one-half of schools took the also-common scattershot, or peripheral, approach to turnaround.<sup>16</sup> Motivations for which strategies would be chosen varied from school to school. One school, lacking a unifying theory or strategy of how to improve student learning, simply used a series of grant opportunities and personal preferences to determine interventions. There was usually an understanding that any given intervention had produced results elsewhere, yet educators could show little, if any, evidence of a connection to academic challenges for their particular population. As one principal of a scattershot school stated, “We’ve had a lot of new programs coming in here. [The reading curriculum] was new for us this year, and that was something that we wanted to do because other schools were having success with it.” In another school, decisions of how SIG money was to be spent were in the hands of a “design team” composed of staff, community members, and parents. When asked what this group decided, the principal answered, “Overwhelmingly, parents in this community and teachers wanted an arts program here. They felt that movement, music, drama, those kinds of things are different ways where kids can express their learning outside of paper and books, which I totally agree.”

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15. Such schools are also referred to as “Christmas tree schools.” See Penny Bender Sebring and Anthony S. Bryk, *School Leadership and the Bottom Line in Chicago* (Chicago, IL: The Consortium on Chicago School Research, February 2000). Available at [http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub\\_id=102](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=102).

16. Leithwood and Harris, *Leading School Turnaround*.



## *Laser Focus*

The smallest group of schools was characterized by a laser focus on improving the schoolwide culture and expectations. The primary concern of these principals was to attack beliefs and behaviors and analyze data, rather than focus on a specific curriculum or set of programs. In the laser-focus schools, the principals believed that a radical shift in building culture was a crucial starting point for their efforts. They began by ensuring that all staff and students bought into the idea that students would learn and that the responsibility to ensure that they did so fell on teachers. This approach is supported by research, which has shown that successful school turnaround is often marked by a leader's ability to institute a culture of high expectations for student learning.<sup>17</sup> This schoolwide no-excuses culture was evident in less than one-third of schools we visited—all led by new principals who had a documented record of significantly turning around struggling schools. Culture shifts in these schools stood out when compared to others in our sample—especially those characterized by persistently low expectations. In one scattershot school, a teacher wondered how test scores could go up given that there had been no change in the student population. Laser-focus principals quickly squelched such sentiments.

The principals in laser-focus schools paid extremely close attention to data and tailored interventions to fit student needs. This is also supported by research on successful turnarounds. Failing schools are not all alike, so interventions to turn them around need to address the specific conditions that are causing the failure.<sup>18</sup> These school leaders crafted plans based on various data points, including benchmark testing, attendance, student engagement in class, and frequency of discipline complaints. Inviting help from capable teachers, principals monitored progress and made changes when the data indicated performance was stagnant or falling. As one newly appointed principal described the approach, “Here in this building we taught kids forever in a system that did not respond to their needs, and we always got the same result: no improvement. So now we think we’ve targeted the problem and now we’re monitoring how we’ve implemented it and what the results are. I think that too often we want to make sure that what we read in a book is implemented, as opposed to [focusing on] the results of what we’ve done.”

*The primary concern of laser-focus principals was to attack beliefs and behaviors and analyze data, rather than focus on a specific curriculum or set of programs.*

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17. Angela Eilers and Armando Camacho, “School Culture Change in the Making: Leadership Factors that Matter,” *Urban Education* 42, no. 6 (November 2007).

18. Andy Hargreaves, “Distinction and disgust: The emotional politics of school failure,” *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 7, no. 1 (2004) 27-41.

### How One Principal Challenged Staff Attitudes

“[Some teachers here prior to the SIG award] had reasons why kids don’t succeed. It was the language thing, the poverty thing, and they said, ‘We work hard and we’re great to these kids, but they just can’t do it because of whatever reasons.’ So when someone comes in and says, ‘Listen, those are no longer going to be the excuses that we have,’ then what people want to do is they want to get out, because that’s been comfortable for them. At our first staff meeting the teachers who had been here last year were all standing up defending all their work that they had done, and I finally stopped the meeting. I said, ‘Not one more person has to defend the fact that you’re a failing school. You need to know something. I’m far enough along in my career where I don’t listen to this bullshit. I know you’re probably hard-working people, but you’re doing the wrong work, and that’s why I’m here. We’re gonna start doing the right work.’”

*Nearly every district official asserted that the flexibility around placement and removal of teachers in SIG schools was one of the most promising leverage points the grant provided.*

### Missed opportunities to make staffing changes

Research has demonstrated that an aggressive human resource approach to finding the right talent to teach in and lead a struggling school is central to a successful turnaround strategy.<sup>19</sup> On the DOE’s list of six essential elements to a successful turnaround is “a relentless focus on hiring and staff development as part of an overall ‘people strategy’ to ensure the best possible teaching force.” Because of tight timelines as well as districts’ failure to prioritize this work, SIG schools’ personnel moves were either chaotic or nonexistent.

The turnaround model required districts to remove the entire staff and then rehire no more than 50 percent of teachers. Even the less aggressive transformation model required staffing changes, such as the replacement of a principal if he or she had led the school for more than two years. Nearly every district official asserted that the flexibility around placement and removal of teachers in SIG schools was one of the most promising leverage points the grant provided. Two districts we studied instituted special union contract modifications for SIG schools, including allowing teachers to transfer out of their position at SIG schools.

Other new contract flexibilities for SIG schools included the adoption of a new teacher evaluation rubric, freedom from “forced” teacher placements (which is normally the case for

19. Rebecca Herman et al., “Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing schools: A practice guide” (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Available at [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround\\_pg\\_04181.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf).

all district schools), and an expedited path for removing ineffective teachers. However, many of these advances were hindered right from the start. For example, the teacher evaluation system proposed the use of student achievement data, but the state was so far behind in providing guidance to districts on how to do this that its implementation was delayed. Before the end of the first year of the grant, the local teachers' union in one district had already placed limits on hiring flexibility. What's more, even with enhanced contract flexibility, it was still extremely time-consuming for principals to remove ineffective teachers; at times they decided that other leadership priorities took precedence over moving out a teacher. For a variety of reasons, SIG schools within the same district varied markedly in the extent to which they took advantage of these policies. At the start of the school year, one principal expressed interest in changing seven staff members, but by the end of the school year that principal had completed none of the required paperwork, making those staff changes impossible.

In the rare cases where a principal went through the streamlined but still burdensome process of removing a teacher, that teacher was placed elsewhere within the district. In some districts, teachers were removed from one SIG school only to be placed in another SIG school. The principals of these schools were left to compete over, and even steal, teachers they wanted from the other SIG schools.

With only one exception, SIG districts in Washington state failed to protect their schools against "last in, first out" (LIFO) seniority provisions, in which teacher layoffs are based entirely on experience. This was crucial at the time of our study because of widespread budget cuts leading to teacher layoffs. In the few cases where SIG schools did hire new staff, the teachers tended to be new to the profession or from out of state with low levels of seniority. LIFO put these schools in a particularly vulnerable position: Should layoffs become necessary, they may find that their carefully selected staffs are suddenly gutted and replaced with teachers with more seniority who did not choose to work in a SIG school.<sup>20</sup>

SIG districts were no more aggressive in how they approached principal positions. The selection of a skilled school principal with a track record of turning a school around is one of the most, if not the most, critical elements of school turnaround work.<sup>21</sup> Yet district officials we interviewed did not describe any efforts to assess turnaround capacity of principals, and in only one case did a district in our sample hire a principal from outside the district. Administrators found this principal through a nationwide search after no one applied within the district.

*With only one exception, SIG districts in Washington state failed to protect their schools against "last in, first out" (LIFO) seniority provisions.*

20. Robin Lake, Michael DeArmond, and Cristina Sepe, "Will Seniority-Based Layoffs Undermine School Improvement Efforts in Washington State?" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2011).

21. Public Impact, "School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success" (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, June 2008).

*SIG districts and schools missed a critical opportunity to use new hiring flexibility to recruit successful principals and teachers to the neediest schools in the state.*

*SIG money seemed to be considered an “extra” rather than seed money for a new long-term strategy.*

SIG rules require that principals be replaced only if they have led a school for two years or more. In the districts we visited, administrators only removed principals if it was required by the grant. If a principal had been in a school less than two years—which was the case for nearly half of the principals we interviewed—it was a given that he or she would remain in their position and would implement the SIG award. When the grant did require removing and replacing a principal, districts commonly filled these positions with principals who had previously worked in other failing schools within the district, including a principal removed from one SIG school and hired to lead another. All principals removed from SIG schools were reassigned to jobs elsewhere in the district.

In all, SIG districts and schools missed a critical opportunity to use new hiring flexibility to recruit successful principals and teachers to the neediest schools in the state. Most districts made minimal staffing changes and looked only within the district labor pool.

## **SIG funds viewed as an add-on; not sustainable**

SIG funding provided a significant budget boon. In one district, the budgets of SIG schools increased by 15 to 20 percent, and we have no reason to think it is different for other schools in our study. In nearly every school we visited, SIG money seemed to be considered an “extra” rather than as seed money for a new long-term strategy. For the most part, districts and schools put money toward additional programs, professional development, and instructional time.

According to their SIG proposals, schools planned to use nearly 90 cents of every SIG dollar for additional administrators and teachers to provide student behavioral support, electives, and lower class sizes; extra staff time for the extended day; and teacher time for professional development. In some cases, SIG money paid for physical education coaches and art teachers who were not mentioned in turnaround plans. Sometimes the money was used to pay for staff who were otherwise going to be laid off due to budget cuts, whether their positions were connected to a turnaround strategy or not. Other school-level costs included instructional supplies (such as interactive whiteboards), consultants, travel to conferences, and intramural sports.

The principals were glad to have the money but said that the work could be done without it. In the two schools with well-designed and tailored turnaround plans, principals said that increased flexibility to hire and fire staff was by far the more important element of the SIG grant.

No school appeared to have a strategy for paying for the extra staff, extended days, and other expenditures once the SIG funds run out in three years. One principal said he did not care about sustainability, and that he will just have to find some way for the school board to pay if the turnaround works. Another principal assumed that smaller classes would result in higher performance, which would then attract more families and funding to pay for the additional staffing costs associated with class-size reduction. Most principals were simply punting the sustainability issue to a later date.

Both districts and schools were hesitant to use funds in any way that could be seen as running afoul of the federal “supplement not supplant” rules, which require that Title I funds be spent on resources that otherwise would not have been provided through state and local funds. Schools were unclear as to when it was appropriate to use SIG funds to add positions, especially in core areas. Some districts thought SIG directors would be prohibited from providing general help to SIG schools that would normally be provided by other central office staff. For fear of violating rules of other federal programs, schools and districts chose to err on the side of caution. As a result, significant funds were still unspent at the time of our interviews. Districts were far more concerned with the consequences of improperly spent funds than the consequences of unsuccessful turnaround efforts.

The first-year awards for SIG schools in Washington state ranged from \$450,000 to \$1.6 million.<sup>22</sup> The amounts districts requested were not obviously related to school size, grade levels, or location. Awards matched the proposed budget amounts, often to the penny. The turnaround schools received larger awards than transformation schools, for the most part, which make sense given the more intensive change model.

*Districts were far more concerned with the consequences of improperly spent funds than the consequences of unsuccessful turnaround efforts.*

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22. A school closure model received approximately \$95,000 in SIG funds.

*According to district officials, state officials guided them in much the same way as the districts guided the schools: with a primary focus on compliance.*

## STATE-LEVEL FINDINGS

### **Sweeping changes at the state level failed to have the intended impact on turnaround work**

District applications for SIG awards were presented to state education agencies, which reviewed them and chose the ones that would be passed along to the DOE. All SIG funding flows first to the state, and the DOE made it clear that states had the power to leverage SIG money to ensure real changes—including making the grants competitive within the state. Some states, such as Illinois and Louisiana, have taken full advantage of this leverage to pressure districts to take aggressive action.<sup>23</sup> These states took steps to ensure dollars were well spent by setting outcome goals and spelling out consequences for failing to meet them. Grant processes in these states were much more competitive, and dollars were reserved for schools and districts that had well-developed and bold plans. These states also provided guidance and supports, including helping develop turnaround principal and teacher pipelines, assisting with the use of data, and providing templates for school improvement plans.

A recent report on states' implementation of SIG funding lists Washington state as the seventh most selective of the 27 states for which the authors had data. District applications were submitted on behalf of ten percent of Washington's 480 eligible schools. Of those 48 applications, the state awarded SIG funding to only 38 percent or 18 schools.<sup>24</sup> However, from the perspective of the school districts in Washington that were awarded SIG funding, the state's expertise was only slightly ahead of their own. As one district SIG administrator put it, state officials "were trying to stay one millimeter ahead of us, because things were changing from the feds all the time. So they would give us guidance, and then it would change or get tweaked a little bit. So they were just struggling to interpret the legislation themselves, and trying to keep the communication open to everybody. Now what was missing in all that, and that I think would have been helpful for us, and so we just had to be resourceful on our own, but to guide us to places where some really good reform had gone on. Because here was another challenge: They're wanting us to think innovatively and outside the box, like, in two weeks."

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23. Melissa Lazarin, *Competing for School Improvement Dollars: State Grant-Making Strategies* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2012).

24. *Ibid.*

According to district officials, state officials guided them in much the same way as the districts guided the schools: with a primary focus on compliance. The state helped districts ensure that applications contained the necessary information and data. Yet when it came to encouraging or supporting innovation, the state left that up to districts, which were in the dark.

This isn't how state officials described their role to us. Our final interviews for this research project were with state officials. Based on what district administrators told us, we expected state officials to tell similar stories about concerns around grant compliance. However, these interviewees described bold changes. The department had opened a state-level school turnaround office, they said, and markedly shifted its approach to supporting school turnaround. Officials described their new role as the provider of resources and expertise around human resources, professional development, and use of data. Perhaps time will tell, but as of this writing, districts we visited still viewed the supports from the state as mainly focused on and driven by compliance.

*When viewed against the standard for a successful turnaround set by the DOE, it is clear that most SIG schools in Washington state are making only marginal changes, similar to ones made in the past. This is despite the tremendous financial investment in both dollars and principal and teacher time.*

## CONCLUSION

### **Despite hard work and some signs of improvement, changes remain incremental, not bold**

In all the SIG schools we visited, it was clear that many good things were underway and that the majority of staff took their charge to improve the schools very seriously. Indeed, some SIG schools were able to draw teachers who were excited to work in a school undertaking significant change. Principals and teachers were often working extremely hard, and many schools reported that parent satisfaction was up. At one school, a new inclusion model for special education students—a complete shift from how they had previously been treated there—was touted as highly successful. In another school, teachers were much more willing to videotape, and receive feedback on, their classroom lessons. Teachers in many schools talked about how different their buildings felt this year. Morale was higher in some cases, despite the added challenges, and many teachers reported they were collaborating more. All of the SIG schools we visited had reworked their schedules to increase the amount of time students spent on math and humanities. It was common for teachers and principals to express pride over what they'd been able to accomplish so far. A report completed by the Baker Evaluation Research Consulting Group (BERC) confirms this finding.<sup>25</sup> BERC was contracted by Washington state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to conduct an "Assessment of Progress" in the state's seventeen SIG schools. BERC consultants found that SIG funding helped schools focus and improve professional development of and communication between teachers. However, the report also describes a failure to make early progress on what are arguably the most important aspects of school turnaround—"Rigorous Teaching and Learning" and "Instruction."

An examination of 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 standardized test scores in Washington state shows that not one of the schools in our sample outpaced the state in terms of growth for reading and math in every grade tested. When comparing test results of the SIG schools we visited to the scores in their home districts, slightly more than half the schools were outpaced by their district's averages in one or more grades for reading and math. All of the "laser focus" schools showed growth in test scores that was either on par with or exceeded their district averages in all grades and subjects tested.

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25. "Assessment of Progress in MERIT Schools - Synthesis Report," Prepared by The BERC Group Under Contract for District and School Improvement and Accountability, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia, Washington, June 2011.



Compared to where these schools had been prior to the implementation of the grant, it appeared as though several had made progress in both school culture and learning. However, when viewed against the standard for a successful turnaround set by the DOE, it is clear that most SIG schools in Washington state are making only marginal changes, similar to ones made in the past. This is despite the tremendous financial investment in both dollars (\$900,000 per year per school, on average<sup>26</sup>) and principal and teacher time. By and large, the schools were not creating targeted, schoolwide strategies to improve instruction and attack a culture of low expectations.

*District personnel generally failed to provide strong guidance, support, and oversight to ensure dramatic change in student learning.*

The lack of school-level change is not surprising, given that district personnel generally failed to provide strong guidance, support, and oversight to ensure dramatic change in student learning. Districts made almost no effort to invest in new capacities to support low-performing schools, generally failed to recruit principals with turnaround expertise, had no theory of action about the kinds of schools they wanted to see, and made little effort to hold schools accountable.

Experience has shown us that bold and dramatic changes are necessary to turn around our nation's lowest-performing schools. This was the intention of the School Improvement Grants and the vision of the DOE for SIG schools. One year in, it is clear that the expectations have not been met. Many principals and teachers are more than willing to put in the necessary time and effort to improve schools. Unfortunately, Washington state districts so far have failed to take full advantage of these efforts.

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26. "Schools Selected for Federal Improvement Grants Released," Press Release, State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, April 27, 2010. Available at <http://www.k12.wa.us/Communications/PressReleases2010/SchoolImprovementGrants.aspx>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Future School Improvement Grant program guidelines and other grants targeted at the nation's lowest-performing schools could avoid the problems described in this report and make it much more likely that turnaround resources support dramatic, not incremental, improvement. The following recommendations recognize the different roles that federal, state, and local education agencies play in support of school turnaround work.

### Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Education

- *Eliminate the transformation option or the requirement for union signoff on turnarounds.*

The vast majority of districts in Washington state and across the country elected the transformation option. This was not because districts and principals believed that keeping the majority of staff in place was a better option for students. Indeed, principals stated that the ability to choose their entire staffs would have moved them farther forward than perhaps any other aspect of the grant. Having staff members that are not on board with reforms, or who lack the capacity to implement them, can stymie even the most innovative principal.

When asked why they selected transformation, district leaders often ran down the list of four federal options, stating why each of the others was not feasible. Transformation was their fallback, rather than a strategic choice in the best interest of students. Most frequently, district leaders said local teachers' unions would only sign off on transformation. If transformation were eliminated as an option, unions would be forced to choose between one of the bolder models in order to receive SIG dollars.

Alternately, or additionally, the next SIG competition could simply eliminate the requirement for union sign-off, allowing district leaders to choose bolder models as often as necessary to improve student achievement in their lowest-performing schools.

*Principals said the ability to choose their entire staffs would have moved them farther forward than perhaps any other aspect of the grant.*

*For district leaders, transformation was the fallback, rather than a strategic choice in the best interest of students.*

- *Create special SIG requirements for rural districts.*

In rural districts, a turnaround model may be unfeasible, as rural labor markets can make it difficult to attract enough skilled teachers to replace half the staff of a school. In recognition of this reality, the DOE could make the transformation option available only to districts in rural areas but require SIG proposals to specify how districts will dramatically increase teacher quality, either through national recruitment efforts, intensive staff development and evaluation, or distance learning (for example, blended learning models).

- *Make it difficult to win SIG funding.*

To encourage bold and strategic proposals, SIG funds should be awarded based on the strength and feasibility of district reform plans. In some cases, district and school personnel were unaware that SIG was a competitive grant, believing that it was simply additional federal funding based on need. While the program should certainly be targeted towards the most needy schools, likelihood of success—rather than need—should be the basis of the award. To ensure funding goes to the most promising applicants, a point system might be used to score applications (as was done in the federal Race to the Top program). Schools would gain points for more aggressive reform ideas, and only those earning a minimum number of points would qualify for grants.

- *Give more lead-time for program rollout.*

The process of applying for the first round of SIGs was frenzied at all levels. States had to digest federal requirements, provide them to districts, and hire contractors to evaluate all eligible schools. Districts, in turn, had only months to decide whether to apply, help design the plans for schools, prepare necessary documentation, negotiate with local unions, and staff schools. Plans for reform often fell victim to this timeline, as districts were unable to appoint principals early enough for them to design their own schools' improvement plans. Future rounds of SIG and similar competitive grants should allow for, and even encourage, a planning year to allow schools to thoughtfully craft turnaround plans and staff their schools early on, rather than scrambling for late hires.

Some school districts have approached non-SIG-funded turnaround work in two phases: a planning phase and an implementation phase. (The successful ones are also beginning to see a need for a maintenance phase.) The DOE could take a page out of the book of these districts and require a planning phase, which would allow districts to set up systems of analysis, staffing changes, and plans that could be tailored to the specific needs of each school.

*While the program should certainly be targeted towards the most needy schools, likelihood of success—rather than need—should be the basis of the award.*

- *Attack the knowledge gap.*

If districts can be expected to guide schools in bold reform, they must draw from effective examples or firsthand experience. Instead, most districts seemed to be flying blind, with no district official and few principals having seen successful exemplars of the programs they were attempting to implement. Few interviewees had even read the federal guidance documents, and none had tapped into the knowledge provided by leaders in this area, such as Mass Insight's School Turnaround Group. Yet some districts and schools expressed frustration and in some cases were truly at a loss about how to leverage the grant money for deep and sustained improvement.

To better guide change, states must ensure that district and school officials are exposed to successful models and examples both within and outside of the state. States should draw from districts that have successfully implemented turnarounds and from successful charter and charter management organization schools.<sup>27</sup> Rather than insisting that SIG funds be used for implementation only, the DOE could create planning grants to pay for district and school leaders to visit high-performing schools, hire consultants from high-performing schools, or to pay for thoughtful planning time and school incubation.

A few nonprofit organizations and universities across the country—including Mass Insight, Public Impact, and University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program—have emerged as resources for districts as they try to figure out how to best support turnaround work. Work is needed to ensure that the knowledge these groups are generating reaches those who need it most.

- *Create rigorous application requirements.*

The SIG applications in Washington state outlined vague promises. One district, for example, said it would create a “detailed school-level monitoring and accountability plan and a detailed improvement plan, specifying tactics for each of the strategies outlined”—but didn't actually have those plans in place. The DOE should require districts to draft those accountability plans and tactics as part of the application. The SIG application should require districts to create working documents that can be used in school implementation—documents that allow districts and principals to start the work the day they are notified of the award, such as teacher professional development plans tailored to a research-based school model, curriculum maps that connect

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27. Exemplars for successful turnaround can be found in Hartford, Conn.; New Orleans; New York City; Chicago; and Hamilton County, Tenn. CMOs worth a look include Aspire Public Schools in California and Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia. See “School Improvement Grants: Examples of Successful Efforts,” August 26, 2009. Available at <http://www.w2.ed.gov/programs/sif/examples.html>.

lessons and content between subjects and grades, and a letter to parents from the principal that explains the new school model. Several notable districts, including New York City and Denver, have had a successful track record using this application method to open new schools.

## Recommendations for States

- *Shift from compliance manager to turnaround partner.*

Because districts are taking on a wholly new endeavor, state education agencies must reorient their role from compliance managers to turnaround partners. States are typically not organized to manage statewide turnaround strategies, yet they have a crucial role to play in creating incentives for groundbreaking change, providing both technical support and acting as knowledge managers, and holding districts accountable.<sup>28</sup>

- *Create a strong statewide turnaround infrastructure.*

States need to realize that although SIG is a federal program, it cannot be successful if states do not take an active leadership role in its implementation. If turnarounds are to work, states need to resist the notion that they are simply enforcing compliance with federal requirements. Instead, as Mass Insight has argued, states need to provide visible leadership by creating a state-level turnaround office, identifying schools with the strongest need and ability to improve, identifying partners to assist schools, building a pipeline of turnaround leaders and teachers, providing regulatory and policy support for districts that want more flexibility, and creating a mechanism to scale up successful interventions.<sup>29</sup>

- *Communicate why schools are undergoing transformation and what results are expected.*

A critical function in supporting turnaround at the state level is communicating to schools and to the public why turnarounds are needed, how schools are being selected, and what the expected results are. In one district, school and even district staff did not agree that the state had identified the lowest-performing schools. This mistrust colored how seriously they took their turnaround charge. States should communicate the reason for their ranking and

*State education agencies must reorient their role from compliance managers to turnaround partners.*

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28. Mass Insight, *State Turnaround Office: The foundation of a statewide school turnaround strategy* (Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education, 2010).

29. Ibid.

*To support effective school-level decision-making, create a turnaround office whose job it is to remove all barriers to successful transformation and to exempt turnaround schools from district-wide programs that do not fit the schools' needs.*

recommend that districts with schools that just missed the mark implement similar reform strategies. One teacher said, “[Our school] wasn’t even on the first two cuts of the state list,” implying they weren’t really one of the worse schools in the state. Equally troublesome, school and district leaders were unclear about how much improvement in student learning was expected, how it would be measured, and what the consequence would be for failing to achieve those results.

- *Offer incentives and clear consequences to drive transformational change.*

Other states announced that districts that chose more aggressive models would be given a larger share of the SIG dollars. New York also withheld SIG funding as a way to pressure districts to expedite the rollout of a union-negotiated teacher evaluation.

- *Play an active role in cultivating the provider marketplace.*

Justin Cohen, the president of Mass Insight’s School Turnaround Group, said, “School turnaround is a unique set of competencies, and most districts alone do not have those competencies.” In Washington, as in many other states, there are few or no providers with the capacity to step in and help. While some states have lamented this and thrown up their hands, others have realized that they have some power to create the marketplace they need. These states have worked to cultivate providers either from the ground up or as new school turnaround wings of preexisting high-quality organizations.

## **Recommendation for Districts**

- *Ensure successful principals don’t have to be rule-breakers.*

One district took a risk and selected a high-performing principal who was known to break the rules. The principal was constantly challenging the district on the way things were done and asking for waivers and exemptions. As a result, district officials constantly had to rethink how operational supports were provided to schools, ranging from busing to consultant contracts to lunch services. They appreciated the opportunity to shift their thinking from “This is how the system operates” to “What makes change easier for schools?”

To support effective school-level decision-making, create a turnaround office whose job it is to remove all barriers to successful transformation and to exempt turnaround schools from district-wide programs that do not fit the schools’ needs.

- *Do due diligence to ensure that turnaround plans are bold and worthwhile.*

Research and practice now point a clear path toward the characteristics of highly effective schools and strategies for adopting those practices. There is no need for teachers and students to have to waste their time on school turnaround efforts that don't employ those strategies. Districts need to take responsibility, then, for ensuring that all turnaround efforts under their watch have a well thought-out, comprehensive, and evidence-based vision of change. At least a year before the start of a turnaround, district staff should go on learning tours, preferably out of state, to visit a mix of high-performing schools—district schools, charter schools, turnarounds—and see firsthand what kinds of bold, transformative learning can occur and what kinds of effort it takes on the part of schools and districts.

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