Schools with Federal Improvement Grants Face Challenges in Replacing Principals and Teachers

Key findings

Several hundred of the nation’s lowest-performing schools have recently undergone major changes in leadership and teaching staff to comply with federal requirements for using school improvement grants (SIGs) financed by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). In particular, schools that receive stimulus-funded SIG awards must choose one of four improvement models aimed at turning around or closing chronically low-achieving schools. The two most popular models—“transformation” and “turnaround”—require schools to replace their principal, among other specific reforms. The turnaround model also requires schools to replace half or more of their teaching staff.

Although a SIG award brings substantial extra funding for school reform, it does not guarantee that districts and schools can find principals and teachers with the necessary expertise who are willing to work in the lowest-performing schools. Although many states and school districts are optimistic overall about the reforms being carried out with SIG money, replacing principals and staff is often their greatest challenge to implementation, according to recent research by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at George Washington University.

This special report by CEP describes findings about principal and teacher replacement drawn from two CEP studies of SIG implementation in school year 2010-11 and the fall and winter of 2011-12. The first study was a survey of state education officials in 46 responding states, including the District of Columbia, and the second consisted of in-depth case studies of state and local implementation in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan.
The following key findings highlight the main challenges and experiences of states, districts, and schools, including both SIG schools and comparable non-recipient schools, that have implemented principal and staff replacement as part of their efforts to improve achievement:

- **The majority of state officials surveyed viewed principal and teacher replacement as at least somewhat critical to improving student achievement in SIG-funded schools, although several said its importance varied from school to school.** In 25 of the 45 survey states with schools using the transformation model, respondents said that replacing the principal is, to a great extent or some extent, a key element in improving student achievement in SIG schools; another 16 respondents in these states said the extent to which principal replacement is key varies from school to school. In a large majority of the 29 survey states with turnaround schools, officials said that replacing principals (21 states) and replacing staff (22 states) is at least somewhat key. Although these survey views suggest state officials generally view principal and staff replacement as important to school reform, case studies indicate that accomplishing these strategies is no easy task.

- **Finding and keeping highly effective principals and teachers has been a major challenge for SIG schools in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan.** In all three states, interviewees reported difficulties in hiring replacements for principals or staff in SIG schools. This was particularly problematic in rural schools, although urban schools also faced challenges in attracting and retaining principals and teachers. Reasons mentioned include competition from schools perceived to have better working conditions or reputations, a lack of highly qualified candidates, or the unwillingness of candidates to take jobs in remote rural areas. States and school districts are trying various approaches to meet these challenges, such as using consultants to help with hiring or partnering with universities and groups like Teach for America.
• Legal and union requirements and short funding timelines have posed obstacles to restaffing in some SIG schools. Some state survey respondents and officials interviewed for CEP’s case studies said that state law and union requirements have been a barrier to replacing ineffective teachers. Moreover, the compressed schedule for implementing SIG grants created considerable stress for school personnel charged with replacing principals and staff. Some schools had just a month or two to hire new staff before the start of the school year.

• A minority of states surveyed are assisting SIG-funded districts and schools with principal and staff replacement. Just 10 of the 46 states responding to CEP’s survey reported providing assistance to SIG districts and schools in identifying and recruiting highly effective principals. Just 8 states reported providing assistance in identifying and recruiting teachers. This is probably because in many states these activities are traditionally local rather than state responsibilities.

• Some officials interviewed would like to see more flexibility in the SIG principal and staff replacement requirements. Michigan state officials proposed softening the requirement to replace principals in certain circumstances and requiring schools to keep the same principals throughout the three-year SIG grant period unless they do not meet certain performance criteria. Idaho interviewees would like rural schools to have greater flexibility in the meeting the principal and staff requirements.

Background on SIGs and the CEP studies

The ARRA provided an extra $3 billion for school improvement grants authorized by section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education. (Title I is the large federal program that provides assistance to low-income schools to improve achievement
for academically struggling students.) These ARRA funds supplemented the $500 million
previously provided for section 1003(g) SIGs for fiscal year 2009.

This major infusion of funding to improve schools was accompanied by significant new
requirements laid out by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2009 and finalized in
federal guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These requirements provided
larger awards to a smaller subset of schools than did the previous section 1003(g) grants.
In particular, SIG funds were targeted on the most “persistently lowest-achieving” schools
within each state, typically the lowest 5%. In the first round of ARRA-funded SIG awards,
820 schools received average grants of more than $2.5 million for school year 2010-11, the

The revised guidance also required SIG-funded schools to implement one of the four school
improvement models described in box A—transformation, turnaround, restart, and closure.

The most popular of the four models by far are transformation, chosen by 74% of first-
round grantees, and turnaround, chosen by 20% of grantees (U.S. Department of Education,
2011b). Both models require replacement of the school principal. The turnaround model
also requires SIG schools to screen all existing staff and rehire no more than 50%. Thus, in
the first round of SIG funding, more than 750 schools were required to replace principals
and/or staff.

In addition, while schools that select the restart model (4% of first-round grantees) are not
formally required to replace principals or staff, many do so as part of their conversion to a
charter or privately managed school.