Still waiting for fix for SIG grants

Schools still waiting for guidance from feds

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By Kathryn Baron

The first day of school is just over two weeks away in San Francisco Unified School District and they still don’t know whether they’ll get their second year of funding under the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. That’s the program that awards up to $2 million per year to the lowest-achieving, highest-poverty schools.

Nine of the district’s ten SIG schools were cited by the State Department of Education for not meeting all the requirements for renewal of their grants. (The tenth SIG school was shut down). Two weeks ago, the State Board of Education (SBE) voted not to distribute year 2 grants to schools that aren’t in full compliance. The question is, compliance with what?

“We are in conversation with the state to clarify what we can do about corrective action,” said Gentle Blythe, the district’s communication director. “In most cases it was a question of not being clear on what the state was expecting.”

San Francisco is hardly alone in scratching its head. “I’m communicating with other school districts and none of them has received information on anything,” said Nader Delnavaz, who oversees SIG grants in Los Angeles Unified School District.

That pretty much sums up what the state is saying about the U.S. Department of Education (ED). “The standards that are emerging from Washington are a little difficult to understand,” said Fred Tempes, in what many schools would consider more than a bit of an understatement. Tempes directs WestEd’s California Comprehensive Assistance Center, which has a contract with the State Department of Education to help with implementation and monitoring of SIG grants.

A moving target

From “Guidance on School Improvement Grants” June 29, 2010, U.S. Department of Education (click image to enlarge)
At the heart of the confusion is what the U.S. Department of Education (ED) means by increased learning time. Schools that opted for the transformation* or turnaround** reform models in the SIG program (85 of the 90 in California), are required to provide additional instruction in core subjects. Sounds simple enough. But in a variation of an adage, if something seems too simple, it probably isn’t.

San Francisco thought it meant extra instructional time for students who scored below or far below basic on the California standards tests. Nope, it must be for all students. Other districts proposed Saturday school and summer school. Nope, it has to be built into the regular academic year calendar. Oakland Unified’s SIG schools extended the day to 5 o’clock three days a week and 4 o’clock one day a week, and contracted with Citizen Schools to provide academic and homework support, tutoring and an apprenticeship program. Nope, not quite right according to the state.

Kilian Betlach, assistant principal of Elmhurst Community Prep Middle School in Oakland, says he was surprised to be listed as out of compliance, especially since his school’s approved SIG application was very specific about how they planned to meet the increased learning time.

“What’s unclear to me is where is that decision coming from? Is it that the state received feedback from the federal government that they want to see something different? Is it that the state gained greater clarity over this?” wondered Betlach.

That’s one of the key issues being raised by the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) in a two-page memo sent Wednesday to the State Department of Education. “We’re questioning the ability to implement what appears to be this moving-target definition of extended learning time,” said Sherry Griffith, ACSA’s legislative advocate.

Waiting on ED

State Department of Education officials share the frustration. They’ve been trying to pin down ED on a working definition of extended time since before the state board meeting two weeks ago.

“They are very eager to get this answer and get it out to districts; they completely understand the urgency and they’re working on it as best they can,” said Sue Burr, executive director of the State Board of Education.

The latest back and forth between the state and U.S. departments of education has focused on the nitty-gritty details and nuances. California’s education code makes it difficult to implement some of the federal requirements, said WestEd’s Tempes. There are limitations to the kind of support that paraprofessionals can provide, and extending the day for credentialed teachers requires collective bargaining.

There’s also the question of what’s meant by extended learning time: 30 minutes a day? 60 minutes? Two hours? Federal education officials say the answer should be research based and site studies indicating a minimum of 300 hours a school year, but the findings aren’t consistent. “What the research says is there is no right amount of time, it depends on how you use the time,” said Tempes.

At a meeting he attended yesterday morning with state education officials, Tempes said it appeared that an agreement with ED was near – possibly even by the afternoon. There was no word from Washington, however, so now they’re hoping for something today or tomorrow – hope being the operative word.

* Transformation Model: The LEA implements a series of required school improvement strategies, including replacing the principal who led the school prior to implementation of the transformation model, and increasing instructional time.

** Turnaround Model: The school district or charter school (LEA) undertakes a series of major school improvement actions, including replacing the principal and rehiring no more than 50 percent of the school’s staff; adopting a new governance
structure; and implementing an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next, as well as aligned with California's adopted content standards.

(descriptions from EdSource and Strategic Education Services)

Tagged as: Los Angeles Unified, San Francisco Unified, School Improvement Grants