

Leveraging 50 States to Turn Around 5,000 Schools

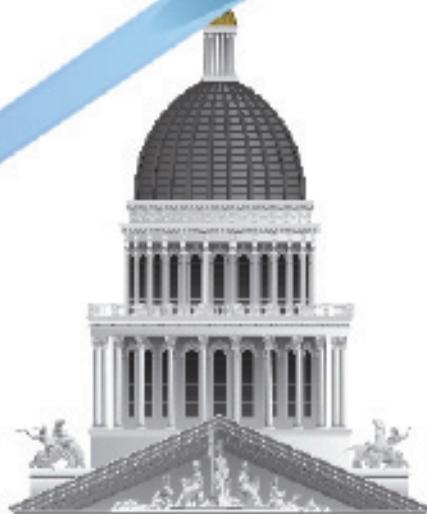
# Fulcrum *of* Change

Lauren Morando Rhim

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**School  
Improvement  
Grants**



Center on Innovation & Improvement

## **Center on Innovation & Improvement**

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**Fulcrum of Change**  
**Leveraging 50 States to Turn Around 5000 Schools**  
Lauren Morando Rhim & Sam Redding

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## Executive Summary

As unprecedented levels of resources flow to state departments of education to support dramatic change in persistently low-performing schools under the revised and expanded U.S. Department of Education’s School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, a variety of approaches to leveraging the dollars are emerging. State-level compliance with federal requirements is the floor, but of greater interest is the ceiling—state efforts to leverage the federal investment to drive dramatic and sustainable change efforts *in the lowest performing schools* in a coherent manner that does not simultaneously undermine support networks designed to benefit *all schools*. With the broader goal of culling lessons related to states playing a substantive role in dramatic school-improvement efforts, this monograph and practice guide examines the early implementation of the revised SIG program in select states to identify 1) how states are integrating the expanded grant program into existing school improvement efforts, and 2) emerging lessons for states interested in fully leveraging their roles to drive turnaround efforts relevant to the second round of SIG awards. The monograph examines nine states’ (Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Montana, Oklahoma, and Virginia) evolving approaches to supporting dramatic school improvement initiatives by allocating state resources, building district and school capacity to support change, and monitoring districts’ turnaround efforts. Following are highlights of our findings:

### *Integrating the Expanded SIG Program Into Existing School Improvement Efforts*

- ▲ Evolving state systems of support are, to varying degrees, providing a coherent structure to distribute technical assistance and support implementation of the SIG program.
- ▲ State education agencies (SEA) are working to leverage SIG regulations and dollars to drive district- and school-level dramatic change efforts.
- ▲ The rushed nature of the first round of SIGs hindered initial implementation efforts, but SEAs are applying emerging lessons to subsequent rounds of SIGs.

### *Emerging Lessons for States*

- ▲ Not all of the prescriptive reform models (e.g., turnaround, transformation, restart, and closure) are feasible in all states and often lack the nuance that defines successful SEA approaches to developing systems of support based on individual district and school context and need.
- ▲ Building district capacity is central to building and supporting dramatic, transformational school change efforts with the ultimate goal of improved instruction and outcomes for students.
- ▲ Improving a school board’s capacity may be a key leverage point, especially for small and rural school districts where district capacity is low.

### *Early Indicators of Positive Change*

- ▲ All nine SEAs have, to some degree, attempted to leverage their roles in distributing SIG dollars to extend the impact of the dollars. The roles they are taking are distinct to each state policy context and existing capacity, but there was clear recognition of the *opportunity* embedded in the SIG process for the SEA to influence district and school behavior as opposed to just being a conduit to disseminate grant dollars.
- ▲ The SIG program is perceived to have introduced a sense of urgency that was not present under previous reform paradigms.

- ▲ Initially educating districts and schools about the revised and expanded SIG program, and subsequently supporting their applications and intervention implementation, has required an increased level of communication—communication about procedures as well as more substantive issues—to cultivate buy-in of the SIG reforms.
- ▲ Grant dollars are driving increased and intentional use of data to inform practice.
- ▲ The expectations for dramatic change and quantity of dollars have driven SEAs and districts to engage new partners to access needed expertise.
- ▲ Emerging strategies for rural districts (e.g., extensive use of technology to deliver technical assistance and school board coaches) have promise to accelerate change in spite of unique challenges.

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**Introduction**



## Turning Around the Lowest 5%

In 2010, unprecedented levels of resources began to flow through state education agencies (SEAs) to support dramatic change in persistently low-performing schools under the expanded federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. These dollars sharply accelerated the evolution of SEAs work from primarily regulation development and compliance monitoring to provision of coherent systems of support and intervention able to significantly move the dial on student achievement advanced under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Consequently, state-level compliance—manifested in processing entitlements grants and monitoring compliance with federal requirements—became the floor rather than the ceiling, and states were charged with directing new and significantly larger competitive grant application processes. SEA’s have responded in a variety of strategic ways to leverage the dollars for the rapid and sustained improvement of the most persistently low-performing schools. At the same time, states have attempted to maintain their support for the improvement of other lagging districts and schools in the face of declining local resources.

The challenge for states is to leverage the federal investment to drive dramatic and sustainable change efforts in low-performing schools in a coherent manner that does not simultaneously undermine established support networks designed to benefit all schools. This requires a delicate balance in the allocation of the time and focus of SEA personnel. By building on existing state systems of support for school improvement, the expanded SIG program has the potential to serve as the fulcrum that enable states to leverage coherent and innovative approaches approaches to turn around the lowest performing schools while simultaneously building their overall capacity to provide quality schools for all students.

Driven by the broader goal of culling lessons related to states playing a substantive role in dramatic school-improvement efforts, this monograph and practice guide examines the early implementation of the revised SIG program in select states to identify 1) how states are integrating the expanded grant program into existing school improvement efforts, and 2) emerging lessons for states interested in fully leveraging their roles to drive turnaround efforts relevant to the future rounds of SIG awards. The monograph examines nine states’ initial approaches to supporting dramatic school improvement initiatives

by strategically allocating state resources, building district and school capacity to support change, and monitoring districts' turnaround efforts.

## Research Methodology

The following sections describe the research questions, samples, data sources, and limitations.

### Research Questions

The research was guided by four questions:

- ▲ How is the state education agency's role in dramatic improvement efforts changing?
- ▲ What practices are states implementing to leverage resources to drive change that has a positive impact on individual schools, classroom instruction, and students' academic outcomes?
- ▲ What challenges are states encountering when attempting to create a coherent system that supports dramatic improvement efforts?
- ▲ What lessons can be gleaned from the evolving role of state education agencies?

### Research Sample

We selected the sample states (i.e., AL, AK, ID, IL, LA, MI, MT, OK, VA) based on their participation in the Academy of Pacesetter States, an initiative to assist state education agency (SEA) personnel to build their systems of support.<sup>1</sup> The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as reauthorized under NCLB, requires states to create a "state-wide system of support" to support school improvement efforts. The Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII) created the Academy of Pacesetter States to assist a cohort of states to actively develop, improve, and assess their statewide systems of support.

The Pacesetter initiative began in spring 2009 with an intensive week-long team planning meeting followed up with a series of webinars during the school year to support the ongoing growth of the nine individual states' systems of support. The initiative wrapped up with a second week-long session during the summer of 2010. The Pacesetter initiative was launched prior to the U.S. Department of Education's expanding the SIG program, but it fostered a state-facilitated school improvement environment ripe to implement the broad goals of the SIG program. The Pacesetter initiative emphasizes the role of states in serving not only as distribution points for entitlement grants but as key players in creating opportunities, building capacity, and offering incentives for positive district and school change.

**Center on Innovation & Improvement:  
Academy of Pacesetter States Cohort 1**

|          |           |          |
|----------|-----------|----------|
| Alaska   | Arkansas  | Idaho    |
| Illinois | Louisiana | Michigan |
| Montana  | Oklahoma  | Virginia |

The Pacesetter initiative emphasizes the role of states in serving not only as distribution points for entitlement grants but as key players in creating opportunities, building capacity, and offering incentives for positive district and school change.

We limited this research to the nine states because we knew that while diverse in terms of their demographics and approaches to school improvement, the states had invested in an intentional effort to create state systems to support change, potentially a foundation that would prepare states to effectively leverage SIG dollars to support dramatic change efforts. The nine states are not representative of all states, but rather they are purposefully selected, information-rich cases. The nine states present a context to explore the potential role of SEAs given their preexisting commitment to develop coherent state systems to support district and school improvement efforts.

<sup>1</sup> For more details regarding the Pacesetter initiative, see: <http://www.centerii.org/academy/>

Building on the work initiated through the Pacesetters, we examined the manner in which the nine Pacesetter states approached distribution of the federal SIG dollars. The SIG program guidance outlines specific requirements that SEAs must meet, but states may also add additional requirements. Our analysis provides insight into the early implementation of SIG by these states, arguably particularly well-positioned to fully leverage the federal SIG dollars and reach their lowest-performing schools. The operational conditions these nine states had in place and expanded upon with the assistance of the SIG program provide insight into strategies that other states may want to emulate as they strive not only to help individual schools but, more broadly, create sustainable and scalable high quality statewide systems. (For a summary of the data, see Appendix A and B.)

### Data Collection

In conducting the study, we relied on two sources of data: documents and interviews. In each state we analyzed the federal SIG application<sup>2</sup> and other supporting documents referenced in the applications or in subsequent interviews (e.g., technical assistance tools developed to help districts prepare SIG applications, job descriptions, calls for proposals to select external partners, and monitoring tools). In each of the nine states we interviewed the individual, and in four states the team, identified as responsible for implementing the federal SIG program. The purpose of the interviews was to verify the information culled from the document review and to identify emerging lessons from the field. The interview protocol is included in Appendix C.

### Limitations

Data were collected between December 2010 and April 2011 and consequently reflect a preliminary examination of the first year of the expanded SIG program. Furthermore, the data collection was limited to state-level interviews and reflect the state, as opposed to district or school, perspective. Therefore, findings are preliminary and reflect a distinct perspective. Time and additional research will reveal the degree to which the findings regarding early implementation lead to meaningful change for districts, schools, and most importantly, students.

## Making Dramatic Change a National Priority

Tackling the challenge of improving public education has been a rallying cry of politicians for decades. Reflecting the key issues of the day and building on the work of their predecessors, President Kennedy vowed to desegregate schools, and President Johnson pledged to provide federal funds to help impoverished students. President Reagan's administration proffered

The lens we use to discuss the issues has evolved over time, as have the strategies, but the basic challenge for public education has remained the same: ***How do we provide a high quality education to all students regardless of their background, family circumstances, or area of residence so that they can become productive, self-reliant, and successful citizens?***

*A Nation at Risk*, a clarion call for reform of America's schools. More recently, President George H. Bush sought to establish standards; President Clinton pledged to set goals; and President George W. Bush committed to boost accountability for the performance of sub-groups of students.<sup>3</sup> Since 1979, each of the respective Secretaries of Education has devoted significant resources and political capital to advocating for legislation to ensure that all children have access to high-quality public schools. The lens we use to discuss

<sup>2</sup> To review individual state SIG applications see the U.S. Department of Education's website: State School Improvement Grant Applications: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/summary/index.html>

<sup>3</sup>For an extensive analysis of the evolution of federal education policy, see Cross, C. T., (2004). *Political education: National education policy comes of age*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

the issues has evolved over time, as have the strategies, but the basic challenge for public education has remained the same: How do we provide a high quality education to all

***“If we want to out-compete the world tomorrow, we need to out-educate the world today.”***

President Barack Obama, Nomination of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, December 16, 2008

students regardless of their background, family circumstances, or area of residence so that they can become productive, self-reliant, and successful citizens? In other words,

how do we untangle the predictive relationship between poverty and low performance?

Reflecting the urgent need to improve schools to prepare students to compete in a rapidly changing global economy, President Obama stressed the critical importance of education in his speech nominating Arne Duncan to be Secretary of Education when he said “if we want to out-compete the world tomorrow, we need to out-educate the world today” (December 16, 2008). In a speech to governors expressing his commitment to not only support public education but also to devote significant resources to turning around

***“Last year, there were about 5,000 schools in ‘restructuring’ under NCLB. These schools have failed to make adequate yearly progress for at least five years in a row. The children in these schools can’t wait for incremental reform. They need radical change right now—new leadership, new staff, and a whole new educational approach.”***

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, June 14, 2009, Speech to National Governor’s Association Education Summit

persistently low-performing schools, Secretary Duncan unequivocally stated that the lowest performing schools would be a priority for his administration. He called on states to take the lead in driving and supporting the difficult change

required when he stressed: “Last year, there were about 5,000 schools in ‘restructuring’ under NCLB. These schools have failed to make adequate yearly progress for at least five years in a row. The children in these schools can’t wait for incremental reform. They need radical change right now—new leadership, new staff, and a whole new educational approach” (June 14, 2009). Acknowledging the difficulty involved with dramatic change, in subsequent speeches Duncan implored educators to “show the courage to do the right things by kids” (February 11, 2011).

In crafting new programs (e.g., Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation Grants) and expanding existing programs (e.g., School Improvement Grants) developed by prior administrations, Secretary Duncan has prioritized turning around the lowest performing schools nationwide. Yet, the federal government’s role is largely limited to incentivizing

***“When a school continues to perform in the bottom 5% of the state and isn’t showing signs of progress or has graduation rates below 60% over a number of years, something dramatic needs to be done...Turning around our worst performing schools is difficult for everyone, but it is critical that we show the courage to do the right thing by kids.”***

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, February 11, 2011

specific actions through provision of grant dollars. The key players in driving and enabling meaningful change efforts are state legislatures, state departments of education, and local districts that craft education policy and allocate resources (Lusi, 1997;

Redding & Walberg, 2008; Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Consequently, meaningful efforts to drive dramatic change need to actively engage states in close collaboration with districts.



**Revised and Expanded  
SIG Program**



## **School Improvement Grants Round 1: 2009-2010**

Reflecting Secretary Duncan's pledge to turn around the lowest performing 5% of all public schools, the revised and expanded SIG program authorized by section 1003(g) of ESEA of 1965 (currently authorized as NCLB) targets substantial new resources to enable states and districts to tackle the challenge of persistently low-performing schools. In contrast to prior iterations, the revised SIG program introduces urgency to "dramatically transform school culture and increase student outcomes in each state's persistently low-achieving schools, including secondary schools, through robust and comprehensive reforms" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). While the 2009 allocation for SIGs had been \$5.5 million, in 2010 Congress appropriated \$545 million to states to sub-grant to their districts and schools for targeted improvement efforts. Congress added an additional \$3 billion in one-time American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) funds to the SIG program in 2010 for a three-year period to intensify efforts to turn around the most persistently low-achieving schools.

SIG funds are awarded by formula to states, which then make competitive grants to districts. With the additional funding in 2010, Congress made two significant changes to the SIG program: 1) it expanded the number of schools eligible to include schools that had not been identified for improvement under NCLB as described below, and 2) it raised the amount that a participating school could receive to a minimum of \$50,000 and a maximum of \$2 million per school per year (i.e., from \$150,000 to \$6 million per school over the three years of the grant).

Allocation of SIG dollars is prioritized according to a tiered categorization designed to include not only schools that have a history of weak academic performance on standardized assessment but also high schools struggling with problematic dropout rates. Also new in 2010, all grant recipients were required to implement one of four prescribed improvement models (see textbox on page 12).

In addition to identifying and prioritizing the respective Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III schools, the SEA must: establish criteria to evaluate the overall quality of LEA applications and LEA capacity to implement fully and effectively the required interventions. In a notable departure from prior distribution of federal school improvement grants, the new SIG program explicitly seeks to foster competition. Rather than simply meeting basic

### **Tiered Eligibility**

SIG regulations direct SEAs to identify low-performing schools according to tiers. States must prioritize districts serving the largest number of Tier I and II schools.

The USED defines the three tiers as follows:

- ▲ Tier I schools: Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that is among the lowest-achieving 5% of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in the state; or is a high school that has had a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) that is less than 60% over a number of years.
- ▲ Tier II schools: Any secondary school that is eligible for, but does not receive, Title I funds that is among the lowest-achieving 5% of secondary schools in the state that are eligible for, but do not receive, Title I funds; or is a high school that has had a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) that is less than 60% over a number of years.
- ▲ Tier III schools: Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that is not a Tier I school.

### **School Improvement Grant Models**

Schools applying for SIG funds must select and demonstrate capacity to implement one of the following federally defined intervention strategies:

- ▲ Turnaround Model: Replace the principal; screen existing school staff and rehire no more than half the teachers; adopt a new governance structure; and improve the school through curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies.
- ▲ Restart Model: Convert a school or close it and re-open it as a charter school or under an education management organization.
- ▲ School Closure: Close the school and send the students to higher-achieving schools in the district.
- ▲ Transformation Model: Replace the principal and improve the school through comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education. (2010). *Guidance on School Improvement Grants Under Section 1003 (g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*.

eligibility criteria, all districts are required to demonstrate capacity to implement one of four prescribed change models in schools targeted for improvement, and states are charged with selecting the strongest applicants. In awarding SIG grants, SEAs must assess a district's "capacity" by considering factors such as number of Tier I and II schools, availability and quality of management organizations prepared to support dramatic change efforts, principal and teacher talent pipeline, and in the case of the closure model, access/proximity to higher performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Historically, SEAs have limited their responsibility for administering federal programs to distributing funds, setting standards, and monitoring compliance. As pressure mounts for school districts to improve their lowest performing schools under NCLB and now the expanded SIG program, SEAs are playing a more substantive role in leading improvement efforts and developing coherent systems of support. To fulfill their role, SEAs are allowed to reserve up to 5% of their total SIG dollars for state level expenses associated

with implementing the grant (i.e., administration, evaluation, and technical assistance). As part of their state application for SIG dollars, SEA's are required to outline how they plan to allocate their 5% "reservation."

***Evidence from implementation of NCLB demonstrated that absent relatively prescriptive models, states and districts were hesitant, unwilling, or unable to implement dramatic change efforts in habitually low-performing schools (Center for Education Policy, 2009, 2010).***

The changes to the federal SIG program, and specifically the tiered categorization and prescribed turn-around models, raised concerns among states regarding the expanding role of the federal government. Yet, evidence from implementation of NCLB demonstrated that absent relatively prescriptive models, states and districts were hesitant, unwilling, or unable to implement dramatic change efforts in habitually low-performing schools (Center for Education Policy, 2009, 2010).

Our research on the implementation of the expanded SIG program revealed findings related to the grant application procedures, states' approaches to implementation, and early indications of progress. These details are outlined below, followed by a discussion of the implications looking forward to the next round of SIG funding being distributed.

### **SIG Round I: Grant Application Procedures**

#### **2009–2010 School Improvement Grant Facts-at-a-Glance**

**Goal for Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 SIG Funds:** Dramatically transform school culture and increase student outcomes in each state's persistently lowest-achieving schools, including secondary schools, through robust and comprehensive reforms.

**Details:**

- ▲ Total amount allocated to competition: \$3.5 billion
- ▲ Grants range from \$50,000 to \$2 million per year per school
- ▲ In 2009-2010, states identified 15,277 Tier I, II, and III schools: 16% of all schools
- ▲ Number of Tier I, II, and III schools in a state ranged from 28 (DE & SC) to 2720 (CA)
  - 100% of states (including DC, BIE, and Puerto Rico) received SIG awards in 2009-2010
  - 518 Tier I schools received awards
  - 312 Tier II schools received awards
  - 402 Tier III schools received awards

| <b>SIG Awardees Urbanicity</b> | <b>Grade Configurations*</b> | <b>Model Selection</b> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| 53% central city               | 32% elementary schools       | 74% transformation     |
| 24% urban fringe               | 22% middle schools           | 20% Turnaround         |
| 23% rural                      | 40% high schools             | 4% Restart             |
|                                | 5% other configuration       | 2% Closure             |

*\*Total does not add up to 100% due to rounding*

**Source:** Hurlburt, S., Le Floch, K.C., Therriault, S.B., and Cole, S. (2011). Baseline Analyses of SIG Applications and SIG-Eligible and SIG-Awarded Schools (NCEE 2011--4019). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

The first round of the revised and expanded SIG program ushered in unparalleled levels of funding explicitly reserved for the lowest-performing schools. The unique opportunity addressed the priorities reflected in the national dialogue regarding the moral imperative to provide high-quality public schools to all students. Nevertheless, it raised notable procedural challenges and required states to actively cultivate interest among districts and schools identified as eligible. These challenges contributed to the context in which the change efforts outlined in the applications were implemented.

### ***Procedural Challenges***

The first round of SIG was implemented in a very time-compressed manner. Final guidance was still being developed in January and February of 2010, yet states were required to conduct grant competitions and distribute funds in time for schools to fully implement their programs by fall of 2010. Consequently, most states developed draft applications and asked districts to start developing their plans while the state was still waiting for approval from the federal government for its SIG application. State level officials equated the process to “building a plane while it was flying.” The federal government’s efforts required states to devote significant time and resources to drafting and editing their application based on evolving federal guidelines and, in extreme cases, saw states being awarded the grant after the start of the school year and expecting districts to implement their plans immediately.

State officials from the nine states in our sample were universally frustrated with the first round of the SIG program. Frustrations were expressed related to process (i.e., late release of guidance, rushed deadlines, and unhelpful and trivial—as opposed to substantive—feedback on state applications) as well as more substantive issues that hindered grant application procedures (i.e., prescriptive nature of the transformation models and conflicts with existing change efforts that were showing progress such as supports provided via statewide systems of support). Proactive technical assistance provided directly by the USED as well as multiple forms of assistance provided by the Center on Innovation & Improvement (e.g., written materials, webinars, and needs assessment tools) for the USED were identified as helpful to states scrambling to inform local districts and individuals about the SIG program.

### ***Developing Interest to Apply***

Intermingled with concerns about the rushed nature of the grant application, SEA personnel in all nine states shared that some districts were reluctant to apply for the federal SIG dollars due to the requirement that they adopt a specific reform model. Encouraging districts to apply for the competitive grant raised political challenges because state officials needed to generate interest, knowing all the while they would not be able to award grants to all of the applicants.

To generate interest, state leaders reached out to district leaders to build buy-in about the need for dramatic change efforts and the potential impact of the expanded SIG program. Outreach consisted of in-person meetings and phone calls as well as extensive written material about the program. States reported that engaging their state superintendent bolstered their efforts to generate interest. Mandy Smoker-Broadus, Director of the Indian Education Division in the Montana Department of Instruction, attributed the progress they made in getting buy-in at the local level to communication and “our team and our superintendent explaining that the road we have been on is not working. Kids are not going to college or are dropping out. We made a strong moral plea.” Recalling their intentional efforts to cultivate interest in the program, Deb Halliday, Policy Advisor to the State Superintendent in Montana, said: “Our superintendent hit the road to

personally visit the schools and communities. We [communicated] high levels of support to get them to commit to the change. This involved our state level teachers' union going out on the road which was pretty phenomenal. We went to very remote parts of Montana to talk to teams about the unique approach, and the union was a big part of this because of the impact SIG would have on collective bargaining agreements and the new teacher evaluation systems. They were important partners. This resulted in a memorandum of understanding with the union and the school district to amend the agreement to allow for the changes."

The state superintendents in Arkansas and Idaho were also actively engaged in recruiting eligible districts to apply for their SIG grants. Lisa Kinnaman of Boise State University and a member of the Idaho SIG team recalled: "Our state superintendent went around using a lot of political capital to talk to district superintendents about the Tier I designation. [He told them,] we will do whatever we have to do to work with you." Laura Bednar, Assistant Commissioner, Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), recalled that the commissioner was very involved with providing support to the seven eligible schools. The ADE leadership team "visited all of the schools and went to a board meeting in each of the districts. The commissioner's support at the board meetings really showed that this is a collaborative effort centered around improvement at all levels."

The high-level support focused on encouraging districts to apply was the first in multiple steps to build not just interest but buy-in and, if needed, district capacity to apply for the grant. Margaret MacKinnon, ESEA Administrator for the state of Alaska explained: "We had to do a lot of hand holding and encouraging. There was a lot of ambivalence about the matter. Districts say, 'yes, we need your help,' but on the other hand they don't agree on how the help needs to look." In some instances, the state had to deal with the political fallout from rejecting applications they had convinced districts and schools to invest significant staff time into developing.

### ***Building District Capacity to Apply***

SEAs provided varying levels of technical assistance to district applicants to help them prepare quality SIG applications and thereafter to implement the interventions outlined in their applications. Technical assistance for applicants was delivered in multiple formats (e.g., webinars, in-person meetings, live teleconferences) through timely distribution of relevant guidance and direct telephone as well as e-mail communications regarding procedures of the SIG grant (e.g., effective extension of the learning day, data-based decision making, contracting with external providers). All nine states reported developing their own materials to communicate about SIG opportunities but largely relied on technical assistance provided by the USED and the Center on Innovation & Improvement initially to inform potential applicants and thereafter to support successful applicants implementation of their SIG plans. When asked to characterize the type of technical assistance districts required, Cindy Koss, Assistant State Superintendent in Oklahoma, explained that "we had many conversations to move from a compliance mindset to a focus on improving teaching and learning." The conversations reportedly focused on introducing the grant procedures, explaining the four reform strategies, and emphasizing the sense of urgency central to the goals of the SIG for implementation of effective instructional strategies that improved student results.

Alaska prioritized distributing as much of the SIG grant as possible in the first year and provided intense technical assistance to three districts to strengthen their capacity and their application so that they could obtain the funds. The state used resources established through its system of support (e.g., instructional and content coaches) to deliver the technical assistance prior to and after grants were awarded. In Illinois, Michigan, and

Virginia, the state pre-vetted potential turnaround partners in order to help districts navigate state procurement laws and advance partnerships to build district capacity.

### **SIG Round I: Approach and Implementation**

Having made the decision to apply for a grant and navigate the application process, successful districts and their low-performing schools embarked upon the hard work of implementing dramatic transformation efforts. Implementation in the nine states was shaped by 1) the degree to which states opted to prescribe district efforts, 2) the particular turnaround models available in the states, 3) the status of the statewide system of support, 4) the involvement of intermediate agencies, 5) district and school capacity, 6) identified goals, and 7) means of state monitoring to ensure not just compliance but positive student outcomes.

#### ***Degree of Prescription by the State***

For the first round of the expanded federal SIG grant awards, the nine states in our sample approached implementation of the grants along a continuum from highly prescriptive to relatively unrestrictive or accommodating (see Table 1). The decisions regarding degree of prescription were based on 1) the capacity of the SEA to provide or access direct supports, 2) the capacity of districts with Tier I & II schools, and 3) general political will of the SEA.

On the more prescriptive end, Montana determined that, in large part due to challenges associated with staff turnover and district size, none of its districts had the capacity to implement the designated interventions. It asked districts to accept direct services from the state as a condition of being awarded a SIG grant. Recalling the reasoning behind their decision to provide direct services to schools, BJ Granberry of the Montana Department of Public Instruction explained that in developing their state system of support, “we had done some analyses and brought together division representatives. We were already starting down the road to integrate and make sure that we had a comprehensive system of services. We had to provide support that was thorough and comprehensive in nature. On the same track and at the same time, our SIG application was due, and we decided we wanted to administer it directly based on lack of district capacity. There was lots of turnover in the school districts. These factors led to a natural partnership.”

Illinois, Michigan, and Virginia required all applicants to select and hire a pre-vetted external partner to build capacity to implement the reforms. Reflecting on her state’s relatively prescriptive approach, Kathleen Smith, Director, Office of School Improvement in the Virginia Department of Education, explained that she sees her role as providing superintendents with “back up” to make the hard decisions: “We can say things that the superintendent can’t say. I tell superintendents all the time, if you need me to be the bad guy I don’t mind. This is my job.” In Virginia, the decision to require districts to partner with external providers was based on the belief that if the districts had the internal capacity to initiate a dramatic change they would have already done it.

At the other end of the prescriptiveness spectrum, the states of Arkansas and Louisiana did not add substantive additional requirements to the standard application criteria outlined in the SIG guidance. While providing significant support to their schools, they have not opted to prescribe particular approaches or services. In the middle of the continuum, the states of Alaska, Idaho, and Oklahoma are not providing direct services or dictating a particular approach (e.g., contract with an external provider) but are requiring SIG awardees to commit to a number of statewide capacity building initiatives (see Table 1: State SIG Characteristics) developed as part of the state’s established system of support.

Table 1: State SIG Characteristics

| Characteristic                                   | Alaska                | Arkansas                       | Idaho   | Illinois  | Louisiana        | Michigan  | Montana  | Oklahoma                 | Virginia  |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|------------------|---|----------|--------------------------|---|
| State charter school law                         | ✓                     | ✓                              | ✓   | ✓   | ✓                | ✓   |          | ✓                        | ✓   |
| State law permits state takeovers                | ✓                     | ✓                              |   | ✓   | ✓                | ✓   | ✓        | ✓                        |   |
| Degree of programmatic prescription <sup>a</sup> | Moderate              | Low                            | Moderate  | High  | Low              | High  | High     | Moderate                 | High  |
| Role of external lead partner in LEA SIG Plan    | Optional              | Optional/<br>pre-screened      | Optional  | Required/<br>pre-screened                       | Optional         | Required/<br>pre-screened                                       | Optional | Optional                 | Required/<br>pre-screened                           |
| LEA capacity building component                  | ✓                     | ✓                              | ✓   | ✓   | ✓                |   | ✓        | ✓                        | ✓   |
| Leadership capacity building component           | ✓                     | ✓                              | ✓   | ✓   | ✓                | ✓   | ✓        | ✓                        | ✓   |
| School board capacity building                   |                       |                                | ✓   |   |                  |   | ✓        |                          |   |
| Explicit integration into SEA system of support  | ✓                     |                                | ✓   |   |                  |   |          | ✓                        | ✓   |
| Change management tool                           | Indistar <sup>®</sup> | Indistar <sup>®</sup><br>ACSIP | Indistar <sup>®</sup>   | Indistar <sup>®</sup>                           | N/A              | N/A   | N/A      | Indistar <sup>®</sup>    | Indistar <sup>®</sup>                               |
| Intermediate agency/<br>partner engaged by state | Comprehensive Center  | Comprehensive Center           | Boise State University, Idaho State University, and University of Idaho | Regional service providers and Mass Insight Ed. | Mass Insight Ed. | Intermediate Districts, MI Assoc. of Intermediate School Admin. | SEA      | State Turn-around office | Virginia regional special education service centers |

|                       |                              |        |                                       |          |           |       |  |          |   |           |   |          |                         |         |  |          |  |          |                                      |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|----------|-----------|-------|--|----------|---|-----------|---|----------|-------------------------|---------|--|----------|--|----------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Characteristic</b> | Monitoring approach/<br>tool | Alaska | Mid-term<br>and end of<br>year report | Arkansas | Indistar® | Idaho | Indistar®,<br>onsite re-<br>views, fo-<br>cus visits,<br>quarterly<br>interviews,<br>integrated<br>feedback<br>from<br>support<br>projects | Illinois | Formative/<br>summative<br>evaluation<br>by external<br>evaluator | Louisiana | Quarterly<br>updates,<br>data<br>systems<br>analyzed<br>as needed,<br>onsite<br>reviews,<br>school site<br>visits | Michigan | Facilitator/<br>monitor | Montana | Onsite<br>reviews,<br>evalu-<br>ations,<br>monthly<br>and semi-<br>monthly<br>desk<br>reviews,<br>phone<br>interviews<br>to ensure<br>implement-<br>ing with<br>fidelity | Oklahoma | Indistar®,<br>SIG Imple-<br>mentation<br>meet-<br>ings, data<br>reviews,<br>quarterly<br>status re-<br>ports | Virginia | Quarterly<br>reporting,<br>Indistar® |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|----------|-----------|-------|--|----------|---|-----------|---|----------|-------------------------|---------|--|----------|--|----------|--------------------------------------|

<sup>a</sup>Categories of prescription based on degree to which state 1) added additional requirements to LEA applications or 2) opted to provide direct services to SIG eligible schools.

**Turnaround Approach: Turnaround, Transformation, Restart, or Closure?**

SIG guidance outlines four approaches to dramatically improve student outcomes, but not all four options are viable in all states. For instance, four of the nine states in our sample have state laws that explicitly forbid state takeover, and Montana does not have a charter school law. Transformation appears to be the least disruptive of the four options and with few exceptions, districts in all nine states selected the transformation model (see Table 2).

State personnel expressed frustration regarding the prescriptive nature of the models and the challenge of implementing any of the four models in rural settings. Echoing the sentiments of state-level officials in seven of our nine states, MacKinnon (Alaska) explained that “the models don’t really match our rural circumstances all that well.” Officials in multiple states with significant rural populations explained that it can be difficult to remove school leaders and staff who not only work but also live in the community, and once existing personnel are removed, it is challenging to recruit and retain new qualified staff given limited housing and broader opportunities. Granberry (Montana) noted that “the only viable model was the transformation model, but replacing the principal was a challenge due to loyalty to the long-term principals.” Small rural districts in which leaders fill multiple roles (superintendent and principal or principal and teacher) further complicate implementation of mandates that require replacement of the school leader.

Table 2: School Improvement Grant Overview

| State     | Total award per state (in millions of dollars) | Applications submitted | Tier I and Tier II Schools awarded | Turnaround | Transformation | Restart        | Closure |
|-----------|--|------------------------|------------------------------------|------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| Alaska    | 10.7   | 7                      | 7                                  |            | 6              | 1              |         |
| Arkansas  | 40.1   | 11                     | 7                                  |            | 7              |                |         |
| Idaho     | 12.6   | 12                     | 6                                  |            | 6              |                |         |
| Illinois  | 146.5  | 31                     | 10                                 | 4          | 4              | 1              | 1       |
| Louisiana | 67.6   | 118                    | 2 <sup>a</sup> (30)                | 3          | 20             | 9 <sup>b</sup> |         |
| Michigan  | 135.9  | 84                     | 28                                 | 5          | 23             |                |         |
| Montana   | 11.5   | 12                     | 6                                  |            | 6              |                |         |
| Oklahoma  | 39.0   | 19                     | 10                                 | 1          | 9              |                |         |
| Virginia  | 59.8   | 18                     | 18 <sup>c</sup> (41)               |            | 11             | 5              | 2       |

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education. (2010). <http://www.ed.gov/category/program/school-improvement-grants?page=>

<sup>a</sup>Louisiana funded 30 Tier III that were required to adopt one of the four SIG transformation models.

<sup>b</sup>Nine schools elected the restart option, six of these were already in the process of implementing a restart under the auspices of the Recovery School District, and three were new restarts.

<sup>c</sup>Virginia funded 41 Tier III and these schools received roughly \$500,000 to implement additional school improvement supports from the VA Dept. of Ed. One Tier III high school received \$1.1 million and implemented the transformation model.

In practice, many rural districts appear to be following an arguably liberal interpretation of the principal replacement requirement and are replacing them only if they have been in the position more than two years, overlooking language related to evidence of principal effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> Some rural districts are reportedly shifting titles but not actually altering the roles of adults working in the building.

None of the state officials interviewed were able to identify innovative or effective strategies to recruit highly skilled turnaround leaders to their remote rural communities. This is not to say that state officials did not think that there were some strong leaders currently in rural districts but that *recruiting new talent* or *leaders with distinct turnaround competencies* remains a challenge for which there are limited new solutions emerging. In recognition of the critical importance of leadership, all nine states reported incorporating some form of leadership coaching or training into their SIG program.

Aside from the aforementioned legal barriers, closure and restart also have limited viability in rural communities that frequently only have a single school and could not manage the logistics of a closure or attract providers to lead a restart. Emphasizing the practical limitations of restart in remote rural regions, an Idaho official explained, “we don’t have outside companies chomping at the bit to work in our state. We don’t have the population. We don’t even have hotels for them to stay in.”

### ***Expanding Overall State System of Support for All Schools***

The nine states in our sample proactively sought to develop their systems of support through their participation in the Academy of Pacesetter States. While some challenges were identified, all nine states see their state system of support as a building block for successful implementation of their SIG program. For instance, personnel and systems in place as a result of building the system of support were reportedly well positioned to support goals of the SIG program (for more detailed analyses of how three states have integrated their SIG grants into their systems of support, see Corbett, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). Koss (Oklahoma) noted, “the Pacesetter work gave us that comprehensive framework so that we had all of the pieces in a cohesive format that makes it easier to add or expand effective processes.”

For instance, integrating the SIG program into its existing system of support, Alaska explicitly reserved part of its SIG reserve funds to expand the existing statewide system of support for school improvement. The Arkansas application embeds the SIG application review and technical assistance work within the state’s system of support; in theory, this provides at least the opportunity to integrate the SIG work into existing reform efforts and simultaneously build the state’s technical capacity, which could benefit all schools, not just the schools identified under SIG. Smith (Virginia) explained that the SIG program has pushed her focus to districts—as opposed to individual schools—and the Pacesetter work equipped her to integrate the two programs: “We try to build their (district) capacity. This is how we made it fit. We moved from a school perspective to a district perspective. We have a cadre of division staff that can do this work. It would be very difficult absent the Pacesetter work. Last year’s Pacesetter work helped us think through the [options].”

<sup>4</sup> As outlined in subsequent supporting guidance related to the SIG program: “The flexibility in Section I.B.1 is not intended to protect the job of any recently hired principal in a Tier I or Tier II school. Rather, the flexibility provided is intended to permit an LEA to continue a previously implemented intervention aimed at turning around a low-achieving school that included hiring a new principal for that purpose. Accordingly, an LEA taking advantage of this flexibility should be able to demonstrate that: (1) the prior principal in the school at issue was replaced as part of a broader reform effort, and (2) the new principal has the experience and skills needed to implement successfully a turnaround, restart, or transformation model” (SIG Guidance, November 1, 2010, p. 47).

### Statewide Systems of Support

NCLB requires SEAs to provide technical assistance to schools identified as “in need of improvement” by reserving and allocating Title I, Part A funds for school improvement activities and creating and sustaining a “statewide system of support that provides technical assistance to schools (LEA and School Improvement: Non-Regulatory Guidance, Revised July 21, 2006). To meet this charge, states:

- ▲ Create school support teams,
- ▲ Designate and engage distinguished teachers and principals, and
- ▲ Develop additional TA approaches by tapping into external resources (e.g., colleges/universities, education service agencies, private providers of proven TA, and USED funded regional comprehensive centers and regional education laboratories) to assist districts.

The nine states in our sample developed key aspects of their systems of support through their participation in the Academy of Pacesetter States.

For more information and resources related to developing a high quality, coherent statewide system of support, see <http://centerii.org/>

While states reported that having an established state system of support provided the structure for them to disseminate and support implementation of the SIG, some felt a tension between SIG’s prescriptive nature and the diagnostic approach of their systems of support. For instance, state leaders identified the requirements of the SIG program (i.e., prescriptive change models based on rigid identification of schools absent differentiation based on specific needs) as antithetical to the statewide system of support they developed that emphasized a more nuanced approach to matching needs and intervention approaches.

Reflecting this sentiment, the Idaho team lamented that the SIG program had, “hijacked our state capacity. We have a good team, and we are proud of their knowledge and background. We were doing a good job, but our time has been hijacked to help our districts and schools meet the laundry lists of requirements to apply for the grants.” While acknowledging the value the SIG program has brought to their overall effort to build statewide capacity in Illinois, state personnel have wrestled with how to integrate external providers into the existing state system of support.

In Michigan, Mark Coscarella, Assistant Director, Office of Education Improvement and Innovation, characterized the relationship between the two programs as “frustrating” and explained that “working on the Pacesetter project, our statewide system of support was based on where the school was in terms of identification for support. Previously, schools received services based on stage of not making AYP, [and] specific stages led to specific supports (e.g., data coach). Eighteen months ago, we shifted to a needs-based approach because the word from the feds and CII was, this is a system that works. You want a system that diagnoses the problem and provides the right medicine, not just penicillin for all. We began the process, were moving forward, and we felt pretty good about how we were working with schools. It was a new paradigm; we were working *with* schools rather than *doing things to* them. We thought we were on a good path and in line with the feds. Along comes the SIG, and it goes in the opposite direction. With those 5% of schools, we are going to tell you what to do. It seems like mixed messages. I understand it is for the lowest 5%, but when you use the right tiers, we are not serving our lowest 5% due to the way the tiers are set up. This has been extremely frustrating, and it siphoned

off much of the money we used for our statewide system of support. We are having to realign and support the system with less funding.”

### **Intermediate Agencies and Other Partners**

Most of the sample states are enlisting external partners to support implementation of the SIG program. These relationships provide the states with access to distinct expertise identified as critical to driving dramatic change. Following are examples of states partnering with external agencies to implement the SIG grant:

- ▲ Alaska worked with the Alaska Comprehensive Center, a part of Southeast Regional Resource Center (SERRC), to develop their application and specifically the section related to teacher effectiveness.
- ▲ Idaho collaborates with the Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies at Boise State University and the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington to provide ongoing support to schools in improvement. Relationships with these two organizations were developed as a part of the state’s system of support (see Idaho textbox on page 24).
- ▲ Illinois contracted with Mass Insight Education to assist with the initial vetting of the external lead partners.
- ▲ Louisiana contracted with Mass Insight Education to develop their state turn-around office that is responsible for administering the SIG program.
- ▲ Virginia hired Corbett Consulting to actively support and track districts’ implementation of their SIG grants, including providing technical assistance workshops for school teams throughout the school year.
- ▲ The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) contracted with the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) to hire and manage SIG Facilitator Monitors who, according to the job description, are “responsible for working collaboratively with MAISA and MDE project staff to assist School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools to improve student achievement by successfully implementing their school reform plan.”

### **Building District Capacity**

Effective statewide systems of support include the district as a central player in the improvement of its schools. If a school or multiple schools in a district are low performing,

***“The largest share of the state-level funding will be used to expand the capacity of the State System of Support (SSOS) to provide on-site support and assistance to the LEAs and schools in greatest need in the state.”***

Alaska School Improvement Grant, p. 12

that fact is, in part, an indication that the district lacks capacity to make changes needed to improve the school(s). To help schools improve, districts must therefore

focus not only on the school but build their own capacity to support positive change at the school level. The SIG program requires SEAs to verify district capacity, but *building* internal district capacity is not an explicit priority of the program. Nevertheless, evidence from our sample of nine states indicates that states are leveraging the federal SIG dollars to create new and expand existing district improvement efforts in recognition that districts are key players to sustainable change efforts. The improvement efforts cluster around general district support, targeted support for school boards, and catalyzing relationships with external partners/providers.

## General District Support

Practitioners identified lack of district capacity as stemming from lack of political will, technical skill, or a combination of these factors. As already noted, the federal SIG program, and specifically the willingness of SEA leadership to commit resources and leverage political will, can influence district political will. State officials noted that while painful, identification as low-performing (e.g., Tier I, II, or III under SIG) can help school boards, school personnel, and community members see the problem; an important first step documented in the research literature on turnarounds as essential to building buy-in for tough changes (Public Impact, 2007).

Reflecting on the significant challenge of building both political will and technical skill to make dramatic change in school districts, Rayne Martin, Chief, Office of Innovation, Louisiana Department of Education, lamented, “How can the state effectively create environments that increase district staff will and skill to enact change? Our state has a reduction-in-force law that dictates that seniority be ‘a factor’ but not the predominant factor in layoffs. Yet, over time, the law has perpetuated a last-in first-out myth. Since the law does not require districts to implement last-in first-out layoffs the question becomes, how can the state support districts’ willingness and ability to implement something different than what has been historical practice? The state has to create awareness of the flexibility in the law and create supports and incentives for districts to break with traditional culture. Supports and incentives can include creation of communication materials, revision of local RIF policies, competitive grant opportunities, etc. Will and skill; we are trying to creatively address lack of will and capacity.”

As states strive to build district capacity to successfully apply for and then implement SIG, they must build political will *and* substantive skill to make difficult changes. As noted previously, one concrete step that multiple states in our sample took to build political will was to leverage the clout of the chief state school officer to directly communicate the need for change to low-performing districts, thereby providing local superintendents with political cover.

Reflecting the challenge of building buy-in to the notion of transformation at the district level, Smith (Virginia) shared: “My smaller districts are doing a better job than my larger districts. The larger the district, the more they want to return to the status quo. They don’t see transformation as transformation, they see it as status quo plus, and that is a huge difference. It is not status quo plus; it is throw out the old and bring in the new. In some cases, it is easier for the small districts to get the critical mass needed for the reform. It takes only three or four people if the superintendent is on board.” In part to keep reinforcing the will for change as well as the need to build technical capacity for change, Virginia has hired a consultant who is responsible for working closely with districts as they implement their SIG grants.

Confounding the will and skill challenge, states’ officials shared that administering a competitive grant competition while also attempting to fulfill a commitment to building district capacity raised a chicken-egg conundrum. While competition, in theory, generates strong applications and a degree of commitment to implement, it also potentially leaves behind districts that need the most external assistance. MacKinnon (Alaska) characterized the dilemma in the following manner: “It is very new to have the competitive process. It is one of those things that has pros and cons. Some districts that need the most help need help in just writing a grant.”

Montana’s prescriptive approach to SIG reflects their assessment that their districts with SIG schools lacked capacity. To build capacity, Montana hired and assigned teams to districts to enable, drive, and support school-level change. Idaho is devoting part of its

SIG SEA reserve funds to support district capacity building efforts initiated under their state system of support (see Idaho textbox below). The Idaho team explicitly sought to focus its SIG energies on district-level capacity but met with resistance from the federal government concerned that the work was not focused enough on schools. Stressing their primary focus on district work, the team from Idaho recalled: “We know from experience that you have to build district capacity. We identified a way to identify district needs and then tried to put that into our first application for SIG, and this is what the [US Dept of Education] did not approve.” The Idaho team characterized the shift away from the district as “backpedalling” from the model they had developed as part of their system of support. Lamenting the shift, the Idaho team explained, “We had some districts where it was obvious that the district is the issue, but we are now focusing more on the schools.”

### **Idaho School Improvement Efforts Supported With State-Level SIG Funds**

Based on its statewide system of support, Idaho has developed a multi-tiered approach to building district capacity.

#### ***Focus Visits***

Using Title I-A school improvement funds, the Idaho Department of Education (IDE) builds district capacity through “focus visits:” research-based analyses of schools. Prior to the visit, a team comprised of state personnel and contractors from the Boise State University’s (BSU) Center for School Improvement and Policy Studies conduct a complete analysis of both student achievement (gap analysis) and perceptual data. Onsite, they conduct observations of all classrooms (using an adapted version of CII’s *Patterns of Practice*) and interview at least half the instructional staff using a standard response protocol. They also conduct focus groups with students, teachers, parents, and non-instructional staff, in each of the schools within the LEA. Based on the triangulation of data collected from the various sources, they make recommendations to the district on the areas of strength and areas for improvement.

#### ***Idaho Building Capacity Project (IBC)***

IBC provides scaffolded support by distinguished educators for three years to both under-achieving schools and their local district leaders. In the first year, the school and the central office receive the services of a trained, distinguished educator for 30 visits (averaging 8-10 hours per week); in the second year the support decreases to an average of 15-20 hours a month, and in year three, 8-10 hours a month, with the focus on sustainability.

#### ***Training for School Board Members***

In recognition of the critical role of school boards in rural states with a strong history of local control, the SEA partnered with the Idaho School Boards Association to implement the Lighthouse Inquiry Project to train board members. The SEA is now in the research and development phase for delivering larger scale support and training to school board trustees related to systems improvement.

(Idaho School Improvement, continued)

### ***Idaho Superintendents' Network***

In an effort to support the professional practice of superintendents as the primary instructional leader and in light of the challenges associated with its largely rural demographic, in 2009, the SDE created the Idaho Superintendents' Network. The superintendents meet periodically during the academic year. The meetings are facilitated by the state's Deputy Superintendent over the division of Student Achievement and School Improvement, in partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership (University of Washington) and are based on their research (funded through a grant from the Wallace Foundation) of the impact of central office staff on quality instruction.

**Source:** Idaho Department of Education Application for School Improvement Funds, 2010, p. 77.

### **Targeted School Board Support**

Working within broader federal and state education statutes, local school boards develop and implement policies that shape how school systems operate. Ideally, school boards represent their communities and safeguard the interests of students as well as taxpayers. Yet, local school boards are generally comprised of elected or appointed citizens with little or no experience in education. Idaho and Montana incorporated efforts to intentionally build school board capacity into their SIG programs.

Building on research conducted in Iowa documenting the correlation between effective school boards and student achievement, Idaho trains school boards using the Lighthouse Project framework.<sup>5</sup> The framework focuses on training board members to communicate a sense of urgency, focus on improvement, create conditions for district and school success, track progress, develop effective policies, and cultivate leaders (Delegardelle, 2008; Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007).

To build board capacity in districts with SIG schools, Montana has hired coaches to work directly with school boards (see Montana textbox on page 27). The coaches provide boards with guidance related to running effective meetings and maintaining a productive relationship with the superintendent as well as more technical issues such as using data to inform policy. Nancy Coleman, the Montana SIG Director and a school board coach, explained, "I have seen a dramatic switch, from the board agendas and level of involvement, that is positive and is making huge academic changes. I have heard board reports about kids getting into trouble and the interventions they are getting. I have seen a huge switch from boards just talking about sports to talking about academics and following policies and procedures. They see that they set the tone for everything." Reflecting on the potent impact of concentrating on building school board capacity, Deb Halliday from Montana explained, "We had been hearing for years and years that the board is the decision maker and they need to set the right tone. We heard cries from across the state that they were the biggest problem but also could be the heart of the solution."

Providing school board coaches could be valuable to suburban and urban communities as well as rural. However, given the smaller populations and, consequently, smaller pool from which to attract school board members, effective board training has the potential to be particularly potent in rural school districts.

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the Iowa Lighthouse Project, see: [http://www.schoolboardresearch.org/section/projects\\_services/lighthouse](http://www.schoolboardresearch.org/section/projects_services/lighthouse)

## Support for Relationships with External Providers and Partners

Three states—Illinois, Michigan, and Virginia—required all SIG grantees to contract with an external provider. In light of the time it takes to process contracts and the anticipated abbreviated nature of the SIG process, all three states released calls for proposals and vetted potential providers prior to final approval of the state SIG application. In all three instances, the SEAs required districts to identify external providers to work with their respective SIG schools due to concern that given past failure to implement substantive change, the district and the school needed additional assistance to successfully fulfill the goals of the SIG program. For instance, providers bring track records of using data to make decisions regarding instruction or plans to maximize the value of extended learning time. Coscarella (Michigan) explained, “We thought that if schools could do it by themselves, they would have already done it. They needed external assistance and support. The work is extremely challenging, and the SIG requirements are complicated.”

In these three states, the SEAs identified a pool of preapproved providers and, in turn, the LEAs and individual schools selected their partners and negotiated contracts or memoranda of understanding (MOUs) outlining the details of the partnership. The contracts or MOUs outlined varying degrees of autonomy, but in general the relationships are collaborative partnerships with the external providers having limited decision-making authority in the schools. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has pushed districts to extend autonomy and authority (e.g., hiring, school calendar and day planning, professional development, and student behavior issues) to external partners, and at least one provider (e.g., Academy for Urban School Leadership in Chicago) required autonomy as a precondition of the partnership. In contrast to relationships that would typically be seen in incremental improvement efforts, where a district might hire an outside vendor to provide professional development or develop curricula, ISBE Division Administrator for Innovation and Improvement, Monique Chism, stressed, “This is beyond professional development. They are expected to be there on a daily basis, supply an appropriate number of people at the site, and to also help with district-level functions, not just school level but also district level.”

Six-months into the school year, all three states reported that the relationship between individual schools and their external partners ranged from excellent to abysmal. Conflicts were generally attributed to lack of clear expectations and communication between the partners. When partnering with an external provider, Chism (Illinois) noted: “It is really important to identify the roles and determine where the buck stops.” In instances where the relationship with external partners is functioning well, not only were the roles and responsibilities clearly articulated, but also district and school personnel clearly understood the value added by the provider.

### ***Ambitious and Concrete Goals: Turnaround Versus Continuous Improvement***

The revised and expanded SIG program aims to focus resources and infuse urgency in order to rapidly transform the lowest performing schools. In contrast to prior federal efforts that focused on more incremental improvement, the explicit goal of SIG is to dramatically change schools *for the students currently enrolled*; not for students who may enroll in three to five years. In fact, early discussion regarding the next round of SIG has included discussion of changing the name of the program from “improvement” to “turnaround” to signify that the schools eligible to receive the grants need dramatic change efforts, not “tinkering.”

The focus on rapid change signals a mindset change that is easily overlooked as both policymakers and practitioners simply replace the word “improvement” with “turnaround” as if the two words are synonymous, when in fact they are not. The term

“improvement” or “continuous improvement” connotes an incremental as opposed to dramatic change effort. The implication has substantive importance as states work to communicate a sense of urgency related to turning around the lowest performing schools.

### **Montana School Board Coaches**

School board members develop local school policy and, consequently, are positioned to advance or impede dramatic change efforts. In recognition of school boards’ influence on dramatic change efforts and the practical reality that many board members have little if any training about how to fulfill their responsibilities, the state of Montana created a position to build school board capacity: School Board Coaches. The coaches are part of the state-directed, school improvement teams that work intensely with the state’s four Tier I SIG schools, all of which are located on Native American reservations. The coaches attend all of the board meetings to provide resources to the board and provide direct training to individual members to build their capacity to collectively provide strong leadership to and develop sound policy for the district.

School board coach Stevie Schmitz explained that there is a strong correlation between low-performing schools and ineffective leadership at the board level. Colleague Nancy Coleman noted that absent training, “many school boards rely on gossip and supposition as opposed to data. We need to make sure they are fully informed about the implications of their decisions.” Concentrating technical assistance at the board level to build its collective leadership skills has the potential to provide long-term benefits to the schools, especially rural schools where board members frequently serve multiple terms.

In recruiting the coaches, the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) sought individuals with experience serving on school boards, knowledge of the community where they would work, and strong communication skills. OPI assigned the coaches to the districts. In recognition of the fact that boards and district personnel deeply committed to local control might resist external assistance, the coaches devoted significant time at the beginning of the year to building rapport with the boards they were hired to coach. Reflecting on the delicate balance of respecting local control while fulfilling her responsibility to push dramatic turnaround, Schmitz explained: “We will do our best work if we always concentrate on what is best for kids. Sometimes we don’t get along, but we need to put our history aside. This is hard work, and we have a timeline. Each child we serve only has one first grade.” Specific tasks that the board coaches are tackling are: functioning as a board, managing healthy conflict, and altering the collective bargaining agreement to support the changes embedded in school transformation (e.g., teacher evaluations).

Indicators of success for the board coaches include: meetings in compliance with open meeting laws, focused agendas, efficient meetings (e.g., two hours rather than six hours), appropriate relationships with the superintendent, prioritization of academics, and basing decisions on data.

(Montana School Board Coaches, continued)

### ***The Details***

Montana School Board Coach Responsibilities:

- ▲ Work with OPI, the School District Trustees and Staff to develop and support activities as they relate to the School Improvement Grant guidelines;
- ▲ Conduct initial assessment of Board needs through one-on-one interviews with each Trustee;
- ▲ Identify activities and structures to increase Trustee engagement in increasing student achievement;
- ▲ Attend monthly board meetings and assist with development and implementation of board agendas;
- ▲ Participate in OPI and/or school- or district–led professional development opportunities as mutually agreed by all partners; and
- ▲ Report to OPI staff on a regular basis, no less than twice monthly.

**School Board Coach Qualifications and Skills:** Experience serving on a school board, preferably as board chair, and ability to communicate effectively and deal with conflict.

**Estimated Hours/Month:** 10-20 per month with more in the initial planning stages

**Compensation:** Comparable to mid-level central office administrator

**Source:** Montana Department of Public Instruction. Personal communications with Nancy Coleman, March 21, 2011 and Stevie Schmitz, March 16, 2011.

The rhetoric related to turning around persistently low-performing schools emphasizes the expectations that the changes will benefit the students currently enrolled in the schools. Frequently presented as a moral imperative or characterized as this generation's "civil rights" issue, accelerating the pace of change is a core goal of the revised SIG program. Our examination of the state SIG applications revealed varying levels of apparent awareness of the notion that turnaround is not synonymous with continuous improvement. For instance, some state applications present a clear statement of expectations for turnaround that separates the efforts from less intense improvement using words such as "rapid improvement" and "rigorous, achievable goals." This is in contrast to other state applications that a) did not mention rate of improvement sought, or b) used "turnaround" and "improvement" interchangeably. While these phrases are only as powerful as the actions they trigger, they do have symbolic value in terms of communicating expectations from the state to the districts and the districts to schools. The absence of a sense of urgency in state SIG applications may undermine efforts to generate political will and buy-in for the changes necessary to drive dramatic transformations.

### ***Monitoring: Compliance and Outcomes***

SIG grants are for three years, but states are authorized to withhold funds if districts do not meet the goals articulated in their application. With clear consequences for failure to meet goals, effective monitoring is an essential component of the SIG program. State approaches to monitoring the district's progress toward meeting SIG goals range from basic reporting of progress relative to goals to intensive collaborative monitoring conducted during weekly visits to SIG schools conducted by a "facilitator/monitor" (see Table 1).

As required by the grant, all nine states have committed to create systems to monitor district and school progress toward meeting goals outlined in the LEA application. Four of the nine states are using the Center on Innovation & Improvement's Indistar<sup>®</sup> system<sup>6</sup> to track progress accompanied by regular visits to the schools. Following are four examples of state SIG monitoring approaches:

- ▲ Idaho collects and reports data according to goals outlined in the LEA SIG grant application and audits the schools to assess degree of change in school-level practice using tools developed by the Center on Innovation & Improvement.
- ▲ Michigan deploys “facilitator/monitors” to track implementation of SIG plans. In recognition that they cannot always get enough timely outcome data, the monitors examine outcomes (e.g., standardized assessments) as well as process data (e.g., are they providing professional development?; did they purchase white boards?; have they purchased and implemented the supplemental reading program?). Similar to the approach some states are using to provide services, Michigan is differentiating their monitoring according to districts’ needs and capacity; because of limited capacity, some districts need more monitoring. Coscarella explained that Michigan’s monitors meet with central office personnel from two districts monthly to monitor progress and “to ask the hard questions: ‘Are you doing what you said you would do?’ We look for evidence that things are being done.” He reflected that absent monitoring, schools and districts “would not have as much of a sense of urgency. The schools know that we are watching, and they know that the funding will be removed which leads to a great sense of urgency.” In addition, in 2010 the Michigan state legislature passed a new law that permits the state to take over persistently low-performing schools. This new and expanded “stick” is seen as a significant incentive to motivate changes in behavior.
- ▲ Oklahoma has created a SIG advisory board that is charged with reviewing individual district goals, fidelity of implementation, and annual progress. The advisory board is comprised of representatives from the standing Committee of Practitioners (COP), various departments within the OSDE, and School Support Team Leaders.
- ▲ Louisiana is explicitly striving to avoid compliance-based monitoring in exchange for a more nuanced analysis of outcomes. Martin explained: “I am vehemently opposed to compliance as a body of work. Part of why we don’t have an evaluation plan is that we have not figured out a non-compliance based approach. Due to intense support through facilitation for [SIG] round two, we are developing a deep knowledge of capacity in the districts and what their plans are going to look like.”

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<sup>6</sup> The Indistar<sup>®</sup> system was created and is managed by the Academic Development Institute’s Center on Innovation and Improvement. It is a web-based system implemented by a state education agency, district, or charter school organization for use with district and/or school improvement teams to inform, coach, sustain, track, and report improvement activities. Similar to a global positioning system (GPS), Indistar<sup>®</sup> tells you where you are and helps you get to where you want to be—every child learning and every school improving. Indistar<sup>®</sup> is stocked with indicators of evidence-based practices at the district, school, and classroom levels to improve student learning. The system is customizable, so that the client (e.g., SEA, LEA, or charter organization) can populate or enhance the system with its own indicators of effective practice. The system also accommodates rubrics for assessment of the indicators. For more information about Indistar<sup>®</sup>, see: <http://www.indistar.org>

## Early Indicators of Positive Change

Less than a year after the new and expanded SIG grants reached schools, it is premature to substantively assess the impact of the dollars. Yet, while expressing some frustrations with the specifics of the expanded SIG program, state officials also identified early indicators that positive change is occurring. The leading indicators emerging relate to state capacity to improve districts and schools, an increased sense of urgency embedded in the reforms, coherent communication, use of data, new partnerships, and strategies specific to rural districts.

### **Michigan's (MDE) Tiered Approach to Monitoring for Positive Change that Reaches Classrooms**

MDE plans to implement a tiered approach to monitoring that includes all Tier I and Tier II schools participating in a school network and frequent site visits by MDE facilitator/monitors in addition to multi-indicator data reporting.

#### ***Participation in a School Network***

The concept of school turnaround at scale is new for the State of Michigan. As such, MDE proposes to implement a facilitated peer accountability network of Tier I and Tier II schools (except those selecting closure), which would include school teams, district representatives, and external provider leaders. The network would engage in the following key activities in small or large group settings 4-6 times per year:

- ▲ Establishing common processes and benchmarks for performance reporting across all schools,
- ▲ Providing critical feedback across schools on practices and performance,
- ▲ Gathering and sharing data on successful practices,
- ▲ Identifying challenges and resource gaps in MI,
- ▲ Providing research, best practices, and access to national experts on key areas of reform, and
- ▲ Providing feedback to MDE on how to improve supports to low-performing schools.

#### ***Facilitator/Monitor Visits***

Each Tier I and Tier II school will receive weekly facilitator/monitor visits. Facilitators/monitors will evaluate local progress and provide guidance in meeting the student achievement goals and the selected intervention model. Site visits will decrease in frequency as progress on meeting the goals continues; however, all Tier I and Tier II schools will continue to receive at least a monthly facilitator/monitor visit for the duration of the grant.

A decrease in school site visits will be predicated on: the direct observations and evaluation of the facilitator/monitor, and progress as documented on quarterly reports. Schools that are demonstrating excellence or innovation in implementing their intervention model will be asked to share their methodology, experiences, and approaches both regionally and statewide with other LEAs.

Facilitator/monitors will work with LEAs to submit annual reports to the SEA detailing the LEA's efforts and progress in implementing the selected intervention model and providing the required data on leading indicators and goals.

(Michigan, continued)

**Indicators of progress to be reported:**

- ▲ An increase in the number of minutes within the school year,
- ▲ An increase in student participation rate on state assessments in reading/language arts and in mathematics, by student subgroup,
- ▲ A decrease in the dropout rate,
- ▲ An increase in the student attendance rate,
- ▲ An increase in the number and percentage of students completing advanced coursework (e.g., AP/IB), early-college high schools, or dual enrollment classes,
- ▲ A decrease in discipline incidents,
- ▲ A decrease in truancy,
- ▲ A distribution of teachers by performance level on LEA's teacher evaluation system, and
- ▲ A steady or increasing rate of teacher attendance.

**Source:** Michigan Department of Education. (2010). SIG application, p. 12. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/summary/miapp.pdf>

**State Capacity to Improve Districts and Schools**

All nine states have, to some degree, attempted to leverage their role in distributing SIG dollars to extend the impact of the dollars. The role they are taking is distinct to each state policy context and existing capacity, but there is clear recognition of the *opportunity* embedded in the SIG process for the state to influence district and school behavior as opposed to just being a conduit to disseminate grant dollars. As states shift to administering the second round of the expanded SIG program, they are applying the lessons from the first round to improve their practice for the second. Coscarella (Michigan) captured this sentiment when he noted, "We have learned a lot about low-performing schools and the research and how hard it is. We have also learned a lot about what states can do at the state level to encourage rapid improvement; our state law has helped with that. Our external provider application and the way we dealt with that is good, and I think we nailed it. I am satisfied with how hard we have tried to support the schools rather than only mandate change."

The team from Montana described the mindset shift under the expanded SIG program as follows: "Title I regulations changed, and SIG emerged, and we rallied around the opportunity. In our minds, Title I had been giving districts funding, and they were not demonstrating the capacity or the urgency to make changes—big, hard, large-scale changes that need to happen. Under the direction of our superintendent, we really challenged ourselves to think about how our SEA could be very involved with the SIG process. We did not want to continue the bad habits in these schools."

In Louisiana, due to concerns about capacity, the state limited its role in the first round, but for the second round of SIG funding, Louisiana is mounting a much more intentional effort to build state and district capacity to implement the program within its Office of Innovation (see Louisiana textbox page 28). The state has trained field staff to work with districts to support the goals of the program.

## **Sense of Urgency**

The SIG program is perceived to have introduced a sense of urgency that was not present under previous reform paradigms. Bednar (Arkansas) reflected: “The criteria in the grant, specifically with regards to timelines and expectations, is overwhelming to schools—our role is to offer ongoing support and technical assistance and help keep the focus on the outcomes.” MacKinnon (Alaska) shared that the SIG program “gave us an opportunity to work with schools on a different level so that we were working to make it a whole school reform and tie people together.”

Coscarella (Michigan) explained that the sense of urgency has translated to changes in behavior: “Schools have gone through the stages of grieving and now see that this is an opportunity to help kids, provide professional development for teachers, and give teachers time to plan together. Now teachers are afforded more time, which is a big bonus that will help with student achievement.” In states where takeover is an option, an explicit understanding that schools will be held accountable if they don’t improve bolsters the urgency introduced by the SIG program.

Reflecting the research on the importance of “early wins” to advance turnaround efforts, the team from Montana noted, “Once our schools have experienced higher levels of success, it is harder to go back. You may slip, but you have experienced the positive change, and you are not willing to go back. We see that districts are becoming more functional, and instruction is engaging.” The Montana team also noted, “the positive changes counter any protests.” Halliday (Montana) recalled that a board member had shared with her that while change is hard, “my son is coming home with homework for the first time and working hard, and there is no way we are pulling out [of the SIG program].”

### **Louisiana Office of Innovation**

Historically, like other state education agencies, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has functioned primarily as a regulatory agency, focused more on ensuring compliance of rules and regulations than on supporting schools and districts. The Innovation Office, in conjunction with the three Critical Goal Offices, was created to change this dynamic. As the hub of the School Turnaround and Human Capital and District Support Offices at the Louisiana Department of Education, Innovation Office personnel are tasked with working closely with districts to ensure that the right policies and practices are in place to dramatically increase student achievement. Personnel in the office will work closely with the Goal Offices to build overarching district capacity to operate efficiently and effectively with the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes.

#### ***Leadership***

The Office of Innovation is led by a Chief, supported by a Deputy Director, and includes the School Turnaround Office, the Human Capital Office, and District Support Officers.

#### ***District Support Office (DSO)***

Vision: Build state and LEA capacity in the areas of human capital, school turnaround, instructional improvement, and organizational excellence to improve student academic achievement.

Mission: Provide districts with differentiated supports and services from LDOE in order to develop long-term capacity to improve student achievement. Ensure that the capacity of all districts is continuously assessed, interventions identified, and appropriate services and supports delivered.

(Louisiana Office of Innovation, continued)

**Theory of Action:** The DSO assesses and identifies district capacity gaps, particularly related to districts' will, skill, and academic needs and partners with HCO, STO, Goal, Support Offices, key stakeholders, and external parties to drive adaptive reform planning and implementation and coordinates delivery of solutions, services, and supports to build local and state capacity to drive student achievement.

### ***Human Capital Office (HCO)***

**Vision:** An effective teacher in every classroom and an effective educational leader in every school in Louisiana.

**Mission:** Develop and deploy a rigorous and comprehensive approach, tools, and resources to improve educator effectiveness.

**Theory of Action:** The Human Capital Office accomplishes its mission by:

- Creating policies that support educator effectiveness;
- Creating rigorous and replicable tools to support educator effectiveness;
- Supporting and providing services to districts to expand effective human capital practices;
- Gathering, analyzing, and disseminating educator effectiveness data to drive human capital office resource allocation and priorities.

### ***School Turnaround Office (STO)***

**Vision:** Build state and local capacity to turnaround persistently low-achieving schools in Louisiana to prevent the need for state intervention.

**Mission:** Produce significant gains in student achievement within three years such that no school is in jeopardy of state takeover. Prepare the LEA and impacted schools for the longer process of transforming into a high-performance organization.

**Theory of Action:** The School Turnaround Office accomplishes its mission by building both district and school capacity to support low-performing schools through:

- Technical assistance;
- Best practice collection and dissemination;
- Aligning and leveraging other internal SEA efforts;
- Advocating and securing necessary resources;
- Creating strong LEA/STO relationships;
- Providing direct programming aligned to the frameworks and offering incentives.

**Source:** Personal communication with Rayne Martin, June 25, 2011; Louisiana Department of Education: <http://www.doe.state.la.us/offices/innovation/>

## **Communication from the Top**

Initially educating districts and schools about the revised and expanded SIG program, and subsequently supporting their applications and intervention implementation, has required an increased level of communication about procedures as well as more substantive issues to cultivate buy-in of the SIG reforms. In particular, state personnel spoke about a notable increase in direct communication by the chief state school officer regarding turning around low-performing schools. The Montana team identified the state superintendent's commitment of her personal and professional credibility as having a "very profound" impact. Halliday explained that Montana districts are deeply committed to local control, and "several schools had never been visited by a state superintendent, and her visits were very relevant to building support."

In Arkansas, the commissioner made a point of attending school board meetings associated with each of the seven schools awarded SIG grants. Assistant Commissioner Bednar explained, "We were not there to provide a program but to help them understand that we are going to support and work together with them to maximize our opportunities to turn around these chronically underperforming schools. We used the opportunity to discuss the fact that while this is an unprecedented amount of money, we all know that money alone is not going to solve these issues. We also visited about the importance of leadership at all levels and the fact that while the focus must stay on transforming the culture of our schools, we understand this doesn't happen overnight; yet, we have a very short window of opportunity to make this happen, and it is imperative that we all work together."

Communication from the top was also identified as important at the local level. Describing one district superintendent that has been particularly proactive about communication, Chism (Illinois) recalled that the superintendent "has done a phenomenal job with community outreach to let the community know what is going on with the changes. She has a newsletter every two weeks. She has been very transparent about the problem and the solutions." Given the potential impact of the SIG grants, communication to stakeholders was identified as an indication of the state's or district's commitment to change, an important early indicator that change was required and possible.

## **Use of Data to Inform Practice**

Intentional use of data was a recurring theme in all nine states. Officials spoke about new strategies to use data to inform practice and reflected on the value of using data to cultivate buy-in for difficult changes. In Virginia, Smith explained that she is pushing districts to use data for their decisions: "I have given them the data, and I tell them, 'here are the students who have failed. Tell me what you are doing with the kids.' The focus is not on a subgroup, but the kids who are at risk of failing. They are beginning to look at data."

Oklahoma has introduced a data review process to examine benchmark data from the districts relative to identified state standards, teachers' and students' attendance data, behavior data, professional development implementation data, parent involvement data, and professional learning community data. Schools and districts analyze data and discuss observations and trends and then develop hypotheses related to meaningful changes in instruction. Koss (Oklahoma) noted, "Districts loved the data reviews. We identify three stages of data use to inform the implementation of the Oklahoma Nine Essential Elements. We gather, analyze, and determine what changes in instruction are needed based on the data. Teachers and administrators are having substantive, candid conversations about data and applying it to decisions regarding instruction, classroom assessment, and school culture. This process holds promise to lead to changes that differentiate instruction that will translate to improved outcomes for students."

## **New Partnerships**

The expectations for dramatic change and quantity of dollars have driven states and districts to engage new partners to access needed expertise. As noted earlier in the report, the partnerships range from new relationships with external for-profit providers to engagements with local colleges and universities to bring in coaches to support implementation to nonprofit tutoring organizations to businesses with a vested interest in supporting schools. For instance, Bednar (Arkansas) explained, “We have business leaders and other stakeholders willing to get involved and help support the opportunities provided to our schools through the (SIG) grants. We are proud to be working with outside providers and partners such as higher education, early childhood, PTA, Arkansas School Boards Association, Arkansas Association of Education Administrators, the Arkansas Education Association, and others to have meaningful conversations around the shift occurring in education at all levels. With the simultaneous move to Common Core State Standards and the opportunity to improve our lowest performing schools through these (SIG) grants, the possibilities to work together around these issues are endless.”

## **Strategies for Rural Districts**

Turning around low-performing schools requires that districts make significant changes driven by a laser-sharp focus on improving instruction. While the core aspect of improving outcomes is the same for all schools, the process of making the changes in rural communities can be particularly daunting. Yet, practices emerging in the nine states reveal strategies that other rural districts may find helpful. To varying degrees, the nine states in this sample are using technology to distribute technical assistance to remote regions. For instance, states distributed SIG technical assistance webinars to districts in lieu of, and in addition to, more time-consuming and costly in-person meetings. They also utilize virtual meeting software programs to hold synchronous meetings with school leaders in remote areas.

Coaching school boards, a component of the SIG program in Idaho and Montana, is delivering early positive returns as a strategy to leverage expertise and build capacity in a high-impact manner. By coaching school board members, states build buy-in for the difficult changes required to transform low-performing schools and build the boards’ capacity to initiate and support the change. While all school boards may benefit from additional training, rural school boards in particular, drawing from exponentially smaller populations and required to navigate potentially far closer relationships with school district personnel, stand to benefit from training that will build their capacity to function effectively, focus on academics, and make sound long-term decisions.

## **Remaining Questions**

Our research documented the early implementation of the SIG program from the perspective of state-level administrators charged with directing the grant in their respective states and based on an analysis of state SIG applications. Due to the limited scope of our inquiry, our findings present an early preview of the potential impact of the SIG program but arguably raise more questions than give answers. Questions to be further explored in future research include but are not limited to:

- ▲ Are the turnaround approaches having the desired impact on low-performing schools (i.e., dramatic improvement in outcomes for students)?
- ▲ To what extent are states implementing the SIG program with fidelity (e.g., providing high-quality support as outlined in their state application, administering competitive SIG application reviews, holding districts accountable for outcomes)?

- ▲ To what extent are districts and schools implementing turnaround models with fidelity?
- ▲ What aspects of the individual turnaround models appear to be having the greatest impact on student outcomes?
- ▲ What strategies are emerging as particularly effective, or conversely ineffective, for low-performing schools that have historically been difficult to improve (e.g., large urban high schools and small rural schools)?



**Conclusions and  
Recommendations**



## Looking Forward

Drawing on interviews with SEA officials, this monograph describes how nine states are working to effectively integrate targeted efforts and substantial resources to dramatically improve a subset of schools while simultaneously maintaining broader efforts to improve all schools within an established state system of support. States have struggled with procedural as well as more substantial challenges associated with implementing federal mandates in a time-compressed manner in districts and schools with deep commitments to local control. The ideal of local control is laudable and a core part of American democracy, but it raises significant problems when local control has resulted, in some cases, in generations of children having limited access to quality educational opportunities. In order to continue to provide high-quality support to all schools while simultaneously prioritizing persistently low-performing schools, we propose that states will need to commit to develop coherent and differentiated systems and address the human capital challenge. These two challenges are intimately related to one another but separated here for the purpose of introducing specific strategies to address these urgent needs.

### Developing Coherent Systems

Under reauthorizations of ESEA, most notably NCLB and the recent expansion of the federal SIG program, state education agencies are migrating from acting as funnels for funding and enforcers of regulation to fulcrums of dramatic improvement, although responsibility for assuring compliance has not gone away. Increasingly, states are striving to bring coherence to disparate funding streams and programs, matching resources with operational need, and validating regulatory compliance with a sharper eye on effectiveness.

Building a strong system of support requires pruning away ineffective programs, policies, and regulations as much as creating effective initiatives to spur district and school improvement. As states and districts have adopted a systems approach to school improvement, they have realized the necessity of restructuring their own offices, establishing and aligning relationships with external partners, and streamlining the coordination of the various personnel, departments, and organizations that form the system of support. Striving for coherence and clarity of purpose is one prime factor in improving the

system of support, and achieving efficiencies is another. Because the state's resources are finite, services to schools must be carefully matched to the specific operational deficiencies they are intended to remediate. The more the state is able to build the capacity and desire of districts to support their schools' improvement, the more efficiently the state can allocate its own resources, especially its personnel. One way for the state to build district capacity is to work alongside district staff to assist one or more schools in need of substantial improvement, thus modeling improvement strategies while engaging the district in the process—a step toward greater district responsibility for the performance of its schools.

Random acts of technical assistance, scattered programs and projects, and loose affiliations with external partners are being replaced by more intentional systems of support. Examination of student learning data is being balanced with careful scrutiny of the district's or school's operational effectiveness, including the daily practices of adults that impact student outcomes.

While the transformation of state education agencies from regulatory/compliance bureaucracies to more agile and proactive catalysts for school improvement has succeeded in lifting the floor of performance for many districts and schools, states continue to struggle with pockets of low performance often located in communities with weak or poorly organized capacities for change. The standard approach to improvement—diagnosing operational effectiveness and providing supports to address gaps—is insufficient in these situations. States are challenged to simultaneously:

- ▲ Strengthen the foundational system of education, including the supply of human capital and strong accountability, planning, and data systems;
- ▲ Provide incentives and opportunity for districts and schools to drive their own continuous improvement, innovate, and get results;
- ▲ Efficiently diagnose and remediate specific deficiencies in districts and schools making inadequate progress; and
- ▲ Rid the state of the pockets of chronic low performance.

In leading the charge to turn around chronically low-performing schools, states must not relent in building the systemic capacity for continuous improvement or be detoured from perfecting their methods for determining and addressing specific local needs for districts and schools that are on a steady improvement trajectory. To do otherwise will only contribute to the number of schools that drift downward toward candidacy for turnaround.

The ultimate goal in a coherent state or district system of support for school improvement—in particular for rapid transformation—is for the people attached to a school to drive its continuous improvement for the sake of their own children and students. When that does not happen, intervention by the state and/or district may be necessary to ensure that students are well served. The result of the intervention, however, must be both improved student performance and changed operational conditions and practice that enable the people closest to the students to sustain and build upon the intervention's successes. All of this requires a coherent, differentiated, and responsive system that includes the state, the district, the school, and organizational partners and that encourages innovation and responsibility at each level.

Well-designed and competently managed statewide systems of support are now strengthening the state climate for school improvement by: providing incentives (positive and negative) for districts and schools to take the reins in their own improvement; removing regulatory barriers to local ingenuity and encouraging innovation; enhancing

the supply of high-quality leaders and teachers, especially for hard-to-staff districts and schools; and providing sophisticated planning and data systems as tools for improvement. As these measures improve the capacity of the education system throughout the state, the rising tide is gently lifting most boats. To elevate the trajectory of improvement in particular districts and schools, however, states are learning to more efficiently manage their school improvement resources by diagnosing operational effectiveness (professional practice) and providing supports to address gaps (see textbox on page 43).

### **Addressing the Human Capital Challenge**

Schools succeed or fail based largely on the collective skills of the professionals working in the schools and in the broader district and state systems focused on supporting the schools. Implementing dramatic change requires significant attention to the adults working in schools and the district central offices charged with supporting the schools (i.e., leaders, teachers, and coaches).

#### ***Leadership Pipeline***

Effective leadership is central to school transformation, with the exception of the closure option, ensuring that a skilled administrator is in place or selecting a skilled leader to initiate and manage the dramatic change effort; this is the secret ingredient to the proverbial change sauce. While skilled teachers have the most direct impact on students, a faculty cannot be effective in any sustainable way absent strong leadership. Yet, with a few exceptions, the states in our sample are not investing in developing intentional leadership pipelines or rigorous selection processes that could benefit all of their schools. Rather, this critical and challenging responsibility appears to be relegated to local districts.

Confounding the leadership pipeline challenge are questions about the precise nature of the problem—what Martin (Louisiana) characterized as a question of lack of talent or lack of cultivation. That is, is there a shortage of skilled leaders capable of turning around low-performing schools, or has public education as a sector failed to adequately cultivate and recruit the right leaders? With the explicit goal of determining the root cause of the problem, Martin has supported the development of Louisiana’s school turnaround leadership program designed to recruit and train skilled leaders to take the helm of the state’s lowest performing schools.

#### ***Teacher Pipeline***

Decades of research have demonstrated that teachers have the greatest influence on student outcomes. Improving teacher quality is the primary means to improve outcomes for students. While the SIG program requires states to make certain that districts are committed to recruiting, evaluating, and retaining effective teachers, our investigation did not reveal any particularly noteworthy or innovative approaches to address this issue. Rather, the guidance and resultant SIG applications appear to communicate that districts will just try harder to recruit effective staff. Looking forward, states are well positioned to play a leadership role in creating rigorous teacher pipelines that feed exceptional teachers into high-priority schools. For instance, rather than requiring individual districts to develop pipelines, states can work with state certification boards and institutions of higher education to adjust professional standards to align with needs, recruit exceptional candidates into education, provide candidates with rigorous preparation, and then offer incentives to encourage exemplary teachers to work in priority schools. States can also alter policies that serve as disincentives to potential and new teachers, for instance onerous credentialing procedures and last-in/first-out policies that don’t differentiate teachers according to skill or student outcomes.

### ***Coaches: Balancing Skills and Expectations***

Eight of the nine states in our sample are engaging “coaches” in some capacity to implement the goals of the SIG program. Most of the states have devoted resources to instructional coaches, and a few have hired leadership and school board coaches. Yet, it is unclear whether coaches have the skills required to fulfill the ambitious expectations placed upon them. Coaches are typically retired teachers or administrators (Laba, 2011). However, while there is not a research base regarding school improvement coach selection practices, anecdotal evidence indicates that coaches are generally hired with relatively little rigor or subsequent oversight and accountability. Given the incredible responsibility and corresponding expectations assigned to the coaches, there appears to be a critical disconnect in how they are selected and evaluated.

Looking forward to implementation of Round II of SIG and future school improvement efforts, stakeholders at all levels need to make certain that instructional and leadership coaches are prepared to fulfill the huge expectations placed upon their shoulders. These efforts should entail rigorous selection criteria and evaluation systems as well as commensurate authority and compensation reflective of their responsibilities. Coaching is a potential means to leverage expertise across multiple schools, but the success of this strategy depends on the quality of the coaches hired and the degree to which they can be held accountable for their contribution to turnaround efforts.

## **Promising State Practices to Maximize Impact of SIG Grants**

### **Create Opportunities**

- Integrate SIG into existing state support systems to avoid constructing new bureaucracy (e.g., requiring priority schools to submit standard improvement plans AND transformation/turnaround/restart plans)
- Identify and remove systemic barriers to change (e.g., state policies that limit district and school decision-making authority, teacher and administrator credentialing processes)
- Commit resources to identify innovative strategies to cultivate intentional human capital pipeline(s) (e.g., selective statewide programs to prepare and recruit district- and school-level leadership, instructional personnel, and coaches)
- Incubate high-quality partners and recruit intermediate agencies to partner with districts seeking outside expertise to build capacity
- Conduct rigorous recruitment and selection of external partners and subsequently negotiate clear and detailed contracts that include steps districts can take to decrease barriers to dramatic change

### **Build Capacity**

- Ensure all change efforts are grounded on a deep commitment to improve instruction
- Assess district capacity to determine appropriate level of state prescription related to turnaround strategy and differentiate accordingly (e.g., less local capacity = more state prescription and more capacity = less prescription)
- Develop intentional strategy to fully leverage SIG resources to benefit priority schools immediately, and simultaneously build broader capacity for all schools long term (i.e., align system of support and SIG resources)
- Develop strategies and tools to build school board capacity, particularly in rural areas
- Provide support while maintaining ambitious goals and meaningful accountability for outcomes (i.e., acknowledging challenges does not mean lowering expectations and accepting less than dramatic change)
- Develop statewide instructional and leadership coach programs that use rigorous selection criteria, focused training, and explicit accountability for outcomes

### **Offer Incentives**

- Craft an intentional communication strategy reflecting executive-level support of transformation initiatives and benefits of achieving goals (e.g., less prescriptive strategies and less monitoring)
- Infuse greater intentionality into state resource allocation decisions to make certain that allocation of people, time, and money prioritizes dramatic change efforts that improve instruction and student learning (e.g., develop and sustain rigorous SIG application review process and ensure dollars are only awarded to districts that demonstrate will and skill to drive dramatic change)
- Examine all change efforts relative to their potential impact on students—prioritize and incentivize those with the greatest potential impact







## Appendix A

Table A1: Emerging Lessons, Strategies and Innovations

| Strategy/Innovation Identified by State Informants   | Alaska | Arkansas | Idaho | Illinois | Louisiana | Michigan | Montana | Oklahoma | Virginia |
|--|--------|----------|-------|----------|-----------|----------|---------|----------|----------|
| <i>Application</i>   |        |          |       |          |           |          |         |          |          |
| Explicit leadership regarding SIG from chief state school officer (e.g., site visits to SIG districts/schools)   | ✓      | ✓        | ✓     |          |           | ✓        | ✓       |          |          |
| In-person meeting to encourage applicants  |        | ✓        | ✓     | ✓        |           | ✓        | ✓       |          |          |
| In-person meeting regarding selecting external partners  |        |          |       | ✓        |           | ✓        |         | ✓        | ✓        |
| <i>Implementation</i>  |        |          |       |          |           |          |         |          |          |
| Data facilitators assigned to districts  |        |          |       |          | ✓         | ✓        |         | ✓        |          |
| Differentiated state support based on district capacity  | ✓      | ✓        | ✓     |          | ✓         | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        |          |
| External lead partners required as condition of grant award  |        | ✓        |       | ✓        |           | ✓        |         | ✓        | ✓        |
| Preliminary meeting with all grantees outlining expectations   |        |          | ✓     | ✓        |           | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |
| Intentionally leveraging potential of the SEA to move the reform agenda (i.e., require direct services, require specific capacity-building strategies, state law related to takeovers) | ✓      | ✓        | ✓     | ✓        | ✓         | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |
| SEA-hired monitors work directly with schools  |        |          |       | ✓        | ✓         | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |
| School board coaches/training  |        | ✓        | ✓     |          |           |          | ✓       |          |          |
| School improvement coaches   | ✓      |          | ✓     | ✓        | ✓         |          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |
| Summer institute for districts, schools, and external providers  |        |          |       |          |           |          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |
| Streamline supports and reporting  | ✓      |          | ✓     | ✓        | ✓         |          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |

## Appendix B

Table B1: School Improvement Grant Implementation Challenges

| Challenges Identified by State Informants  |        |          |       |          |           |          |         |          |          |  |
|--|--------|----------|-------|----------|-----------|----------|---------|----------|----------|--|
|  | Alaska | Arkansas | Idaho | Illinois | Louisiana | Michigan | Montana | Oklahoma | Virginia |  |
| Building district capacity   | ✓      | ✓        | ✓     | ✓        | ✓         | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |  |
| Navigating collective bargaining agreements  |        |          |       |          |           |          | ✓       |          | ✓        |  |
| Overcoming community resistance  |        |          | ✓     |          |           |          | ✓       |          | ✓        |  |
| Disconnect between LEA application and school-level understanding of model   |        |          |       |          |           |          |         |          | ✓        |  |
| Generating district buy-in   | ✓      |          | ✓     | ✓        | ✓         | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |  |
| Allocating inadequate funds  |        |          |       |          |           | ✓        |         |          |          |  |
| Meeting prescriptive <i>state</i> requirements   |        |          |       |          | ✓         | ✓        |         |          | ✓        |  |
| Addressing rural school issues (e.g., staff replacement, principal is leader of multiple schools or is also the superintendent, community resistance to replacing the principal, neither closure nor restart are viable options) | ✓      |          | ✓     | ✓        |           | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |  |
| Managing district and school personnel turnover  | ✓      |          |       |          |           |          |         |          |          |  |
| Cultivating school personnel buy-in  |        |          |       | ✓        |           | ✓        |         | ✓        | ✓        |  |
| Developing SEA capacity to support implementation of SIG intervention models   |        |          |       |          | ✓         |          |         |          |          |  |
| Identifying quality external providers given shortage of organizations with experience   |        |          |       |          |           |          |         |          | ✓        |  |
| Coping with shortage of skilled principals   | ✓      |          | ✓     | ✓        | ✓         | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |  |
| Navigating SIG grant requirements out of alignment with structures/procedures developed as part of statewide system of support   |        |          | ✓     | ✓        |           | ✓        |         |          |          |  |
| Managing timing of multiple applications due at once (i.e., state stabilizations, Race to the Top, SIG)  |        |          |       |          | ✓         | ✓        |         |          |          |  |
| Accommodating timing of state SIG application approval/distribution of dollars   | ✓      | ✓        | ✓     | ✓        |           | ✓        | ✓       | ✓        | ✓        |  |

## Appendix C:

### Data Collection Instrument State Role

#### *State Official Protocol*

- ▲ Please tell me your title and role related to your state's system of support and administering the federal SIG program in your state.
- ▲ What, if any, technical assistance did your state offer to districts as they prepared their applications?
- ▲ What, if any, technical assistance are you offering to districts and schools awarded SIG dollars?
- ▲ Are lead partners playing a role in your state? If yes, please tell me what role they are playing and the SEA's relationship with them. Probe:
  - Selection?
  - Technical Assistance?
  - Contracting?
  - Monitoring/accountability?
- ▲ What, if any, plans have you developed to monitor/evaluate progress toward meeting SIG goals?
- ▲ You have shared with me your approach to distributing SIG dollars to support school turnaround efforts. How is this approach different from prior dramatic improvement efforts? Probe:
  - Integration into existing statewide system of support?
  - Rigor of application?
  - Degree of prescriptive change model?
  - Degree of technical assistance provided to district or school?
  - Monitoring/accountability?
- ▲ You are now 4-6 months into implementing the goals of the SIG program in your state; aside from managing the grant, is the state taking any additional steps to leverage resources to support the change efforts? Probe:
  - Innovative practices?
  - Reallocation of resources?
  - Breaking down silos?
  - Shifting expectations of SEA personnel?
  - Developing human capital pipeline?
- ▲ What, if any, challenges have you (the SEA) encountered when attempting to fulfill the goals of the federal SIG program?
- ▲ What lessons can be gleaned from the evolving role of the SEA in focused improvement efforts?
- ▲ What is one thing you (the SEA) really got right in the SIG process, something that you think is an exemplary practice?

- ^ What, if any, challenges have the SIG districts and schools encountered?
- ^ What seems to be working best for the districts and schools?
- ^ How has the SEA's administration of the SIG project affected the SEA's improvement work with other districts and schools (i.e., the statewide system of support)?
- ^ In closing, thank you for your time. As part of the paper, I plan to develop a profile of your state's approach to managing the federal SIG program. Would you be willing to review the profile prior to publication to verify that I have captured the approach correctly?

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