

# How Did Schools Receiving School Improvement Grants Change?



## What We Learned From the Study of School Turnaround

What does it take to turn around a low-performing school? This question is on the minds of many education researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grant (SIG) program sought to address the challenge by providing states with funds to help local agencies improve student achievement in their lowest-performing schools. In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided a significant increase in funds and shifted the focus to these schools, requiring them to implement one of four prescriptive intervention models. Through the Study of School Turnaround, experts at American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Mathematica Policy Research set out to investigate changes in schools receiving SIG funds and what we could learn from the experiences of these schools.

### School Improvement Grant Intervention Models

1. **Turnaround model:** Replace the principal and no less than 50 percent of the staff, introduce significant instructional reforms, increase learning time, and provide the school sufficient operational flexibility (regarding staffing, time, and budgeting) and support (e.g., ongoing, intensive technical assistance).
2. **Restart model:** Reopen the school under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization (which must enroll, within the grades served, any former student who wants to attend the school).
3. **Transformation model:** Replace the principal, develop a teacher and leader evaluation system that takes student progress into account, introduce significant instructional reforms, increase learning time, and provide the school sufficient operational flexibility and support.
4. **School closure:** Close the school and reassign students to higher-achieving schools.

By increasing the level of funding, targeting resources to the persistently lowest-achieving schools, and requiring that schools adopt specific intervention models, the revamped SIG program aimed to catalyze more aggressive efforts to turn around student performance.

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## About the Study

The purpose of the Study of School Turnaround was to examine how a variety of low-performing schools approached the improvement process during the three years in which they received SIGs and how the grants contributed to this process. School turnaround experts from AIR conducted case studies in a small but diverse sample of 25 schools—with a detailed subsample of 12 of the 25—to examine the characteristics of the schools, the decisions and strategies that the schools undertook (and why), and the challenges they faced as they attempted to dramatically improve school performance from 2010–11 through 2012–13.

For more information on the Study of School Turnaround and to view the full reports, visit <http://www.air.org/project/study-school-turnaround>.

## Selected Findings From the Study

At the heart of a school's capacity to improve outcomes for students are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the staff responsible for teaching those students and leading the improvement processes. The study found that the majority of schools were trying to build human capital through leadership strategies, staffing decisions, professional learning, and engaging with external partners.



**School Leadership** A majority of the 25 case study schools (21 schools) replaced their principal at least once in the year before SIG (2009–10) or in Year 1 of SIG (2010–11). Two of the four SIG intervention models

(transformation and turnaround) required that the principal be replaced either in the first year of SIG or in the year prior to SIG. By Year 2 of SIG (2011–12), 9 of 25 schools had replaced their principal twice. Only three schools maintained the same principal during this three-year period.

**Of the 20 principals who were new to their schools in 2010–11 or 2011–12, half (10 principals) were described as an improvement over their predecessors by teachers, instructional coaches, school leadership teams, or parents.** Fourteen of the 20 new principals had between 5 and 10 years of experience as principals at other schools, in addition to longer-term experience as teachers and/or assistant principals in low-performing schools.



**Teacher Staffing Decisions** About half of the 25 case study schools (12 schools) replaced at least 50 percent of their teachers during the 2009–10, 2010–11, or 2011–12 school year. For nine of these schools, the changes were

made to comply with the requirements of the turnaround model being implemented; two schools did so as part of their new charter management organizations, and one school did so as part of the principal's school improvement plan. Respondents at seven of the 12 schools characterized the change in teachers as positive for the school, bringing new energy and improved morale.

**During the first two years of SIG, almost all 25 schools (24 schools) created new non-teaching positions.** The most common new positions were coaches (including instructional, technology, and data coaches) (14 schools), followed by additional school administrators (11 schools). Schools also added other nonteaching positions, such as parent or community liaisons to coordinate activities and build relationships with parents and community-based organizations, social workers to address specific student needs such as homelessness, and technology coordinators.

**In the second year of SIG, principals and district officials in about three fourths of the 25 schools (18 schools) reported that staff recruitment and/or retention challenges limited the school's ability to build a skilled and motivated staff.** Within these schools, principals and district officials most often (12 schools) attributed district-level conditions and policies to recruitment and retention challenges (such as layoffs, involuntary transfers, and hiring processes that limited teacher applicant pools). School-level challenges, such as a stressful school environment, poor school reputation, or long commute to school were reported less often (seven schools). Efforts to support schools' recruitment and retention of staff included advantages in the district hiring process (nine schools across seven districts), monetary bonuses (eight schools across four districts), and commuter benefits (two schools across two districts).



**Teacher Professional Learning** More teachers in case study schools reported participating in professional learning on math, literacy, and data use than in professional learning on English language learner instruction, special education, or classroom management.

On average, surveyed teachers in nearly two thirds of the 25 case study schools (15 schools) reported spending a larger proportion of their hours in job-embedded professional learning activities than in more traditional activities. In both high schools and elementary schools, the most common professional learning topics were math and literacy instructional strategies and data use. In 17 of 21 schools with sufficient data, most teachers reported learning and changing their practice after participating in professional learning on math, English language arts, or data use.



**District and External Support** Case study schools reported receiving support from their district

(22 of 22 schools)<sup>1</sup> and external support provider(s) (22 of 25 schools), but in some cases, respondents described shortcomings in their district or external support. Respondents in 10 of 22 schools with sufficient data perceived their district's support efforts to be useful to their school's improvement efforts.

## Did the Case Study Schools Experience Change Under SIG?

**Most of our case study schools appeared to make positive changes to their organizational capacity, and most respondents in these schools reported improvement over the course of SIG.** We cannot determine whether these apparent changes were because of SIG, and we cannot verify that these apparent changes also led to changes in actual student achievement. However, we can say that most respondents in most of our schools perceived their schools as having made positive changes during the course of SIG. In several schools, respondents described their improvements in strong language—for example by explaining that prior to SIG:

There was really nothing going on in classrooms. Kids were running in the hallways [and] using profanity. It just wasn't a school. Now we are a school. It's a school where you see learning. It's a school where there's a feeling of safety. . . . It went from a warehouse of children to a school.

Thus, although we cannot conclude that the various SIG interventions and supports precipitated the positive changes described in these schools, most respondents concluded that their schools were better off at the end of SIG, at least in some respects.

**Nevertheless, some schools did not appear to change much under SIG.** For example, respondents in one school described SIG as a “business-as-usual” approach, and this school showed no demonstrable change in organizational capacity over the course of SIG.

**Leadership appears to matter.** This is a recurrent finding in studies of school improvement, and our study was no exception. Among our sample, schools in which respondents described improvements were more likely to be led by principals that reportedly demonstrated strategic leadership, including having a theory of action for school improvement. Schools in which higher percentages of teacher survey respondents reported improvement also had higher-rated principals with regard to transformational leadership (principals who can motivate and engage their staff) and instructional leadership (principals who are knowledgeable about instructional issues).

As important as strong leaders appear to be, identifying, recruiting, and retaining the most skilled principals in chronically low-performing schools is a persistent challenge. In many cases, mandating principal replacement in SIG schools appears to have brought stronger leaders to schools that needed a change in leadership. At the same time, we observed a continued pattern of frequent leadership turnover in several of our case study schools—a pattern that reportedly undercut the schools' progress. When school leaders depart—particularly strong, well-regarded ones that are credited with improvements—the sustainability of school improvement efforts may be threatened.

<sup>1</sup> The three restart schools in the core sample were excluded from these analyses because they are managed by education management organizations or charter management organizations.

## Sustainability of the Improvement Process

**School change is fragile.** Although the SIG award was a temporary infusion of funds, the aim was ultimately to help set schools on a path of improvement that would continue beyond the course of the grant. However, the Study of School Turnaround found that lasting improvements may be elusive.

Among the 12 schools that the study followed for all three years of SIG, AIR researchers reported the following findings:

- Nine of the 12 schools expressed concern about losing staff; respondents in two of the 12 schools explicitly linked sustainability concerns to an impending change in school leadership.
- Two of the 12 schools appeared to have strong prospects for sustainability, six schools appeared to have mixed prospects, and the remaining four schools appeared to have weak prospects for sustainability, according to teacher survey responses and site visit data.
- Among the risk factors described by respondents, nearly all were associated with human capital—particularly the anticipated loss of teachers, principals, or other key staff. District policies, especially those related to the placement and retention of teachers, appeared to underlie some of these risk factors.

## Conclusion

The school change process is complex, and crafting policy that acknowledges this complexity while compelling change has challenged policymakers for decades. Low-performing schools are not blank slates on which new interventions and individuals can be imposed and assumed to stimulate better outcomes for students. These new policies are inserted into a complex policy context, history, and set of assumptions about each school. Still, our study provides evidence that these chronically low-performing schools can change in some respects, at least in the short term, with a great many efforts to build human capital. To sustain these changes, however, it seems that an equally great effort may be needed to retain any hard-won improvements.



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