

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

### **Key findings**

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

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

This special report by CEP describes findings about principal and teacher replacement drawn from two CEP studies of SIG implementation in school year 2010-11 and the fall and winter of 2011-12. The first study was a survey of state education officials in 46 responding states, including the District of Columbia, and the second consisted of in-depth case studies of state and local implementation in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan.

The following key findings highlight the main challenges and experiences of states, districts, and schools, including both SIG schools and comparable non-recipient schools, that have implemented principal and staff replacement as part of their efforts to improve achievement:

- **The majority of state officials surveyed viewed principal and teacher replacement as at least somewhat critical to improving student achievement in SIG-funded schools, although several said its importance varied from school to school.** In 25 of the 45 survey states with schools using the transformation model, respondents said that replacing the principal is, to a great extent or some extent, a key element in improving student achievement in SIG schools; another 16 respondents in these states said the extent to which principal replacement is key varies from school to school. In a large majority of the 29 survey states with turnaround schools, officials said that replacing principals (21 states) and replacing staff (22 states) is at least somewhat key. Although these survey views suggest state officials generally view principal and staff replacement as important to school reform, case studies indicate that accomplishing these strategies is no easy task.
- **Finding and keeping highly effective principals and teachers has been a major challenge for SIG schools in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan.** In all three states, interviewees reported difficulties in hiring replacements for principals or staff in SIG schools. This was particularly problematic in rural schools, although urban schools also faced challenges in attracting and retaining principals and teachers. Reasons mentioned include competition from schools perceived to have better working conditions or reputations, a lack of highly qualified candidates, or the unwillingness of candidates to take jobs in remote rural areas. States and school districts are trying various approaches to meet these challenges, such as using consultants to help with hiring or partnering with universities and groups like Teach for America.

- **Legal and union requirements and short funding timelines have posed obstacles to restaffing in some SIG schools.** Some state survey respondents and officials interviewed for CEP's case studies said that state law and union requirements have been a barrier to replacing ineffective teachers. Moreover, the compressed schedule for implementing SIG grants created considerable stress for school personnel charged with replacing principals and staff. Some schools had just a month or two to hire new staff before the start of the school year.
- **A minority of states surveyed are assisting SIG-funded districts and schools with principal and staff replacement.** Just 10 of the 46 states responding to CEP's survey reported providing assistance to SIG districts and schools in identifying and recruiting highly effective principals. Just 8 states reported providing assistance in identifying and recruiting teachers. This is probably because in many states these activities are traditionally local rather than state responsibilities.
- **Some officials interviewed would like to see more flexibility in the SIG principal and staff replacement requirements.** Michigan state officials proposed softening the requirement to replace principals in certain circumstances and requiring schools to keep the same principals throughout the three-year SIG grant period unless they do not meet certain performance criteria. Idaho interviewees would like rural schools to have greater flexibility in the meeting the principal and staff requirements.

## **Background on SIGs and the CEP studies**

The ARRA provided an extra \$3 billion for school improvement grants authorized by section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education. (Title I is the large federal program that provides assistance to low-income schools to improve achievement

for academically struggling students.) These ARRA funds supplemented the \$500 million previously provided for section 1003(g) SIGs for fiscal year 2009.

This major infusion of funding to improve schools was accompanied by significant new requirements laid out by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2009 and finalized in federal guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These requirements provided larger awards to a smaller subset of schools than did the previous section 1003(g) grants. In particular, SIG funds were targeted on the most “persistently lowest-achieving” schools within each state, typically the lowest 5%. In the first round of ARRA-funded SIG awards, 820 schools received average grants of more than \$2.5 million for school year 2010-11, the first year of implementation (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

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

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

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

### Box A. School improvement models

Federal guidance requires schools receiving section 1003(g) SIG funds to use one of the following school improvement models:

- **Transformation:** Implement all of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.
- **Turnaround:** Replace the principal and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes; rehire no more than 50% of the school staff; and implement strategies that provide increased learning time, among other requirements.
- **Restart.** Convert a school into one operated by a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
- **School closure:** Close a school and enroll its students in other schools in the district that are higher-achieving.

*Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2012.*

Researchers at CEP, which has been analyzing school improvement efforts for several years, conducted two studies to learn more about the experiences of states, districts, and schools in using SIG funds and implementing the revised SIG requirements, including principal and teacher replacement.

The first study (CEP, 2012a) drew on findings from a winter 2011-12 survey of state Title I directors—officials who typically play a major role in administering the SIG program. Responses were received from 45 states and the District of Columbia, which is counted as a state in the tallies in this report. The survey focused on these state officials' general perceptions of various SIG requirements, including principal and staff replacement, as well as on other aspects of the program.

The second study (CEP, 2012b) consisted of case studies of state, district, and school-level implementation of SIGs in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan—three geographically diverse states that are taking different approaches to school improvement. Findings, including

those about staff replacement, are based on interviews with 35 state and local officials and in-depth research on 11 low-achieving schools, including schools that received SIG funds and comparable low-performing schools that did not.

The full study reports, as well as additional information about research methods and analyses, are available on CEP's website at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).

The remainder of this report highlights the main findings and supporting evidence about principal and staff replacement from CEP's survey and case studies. Many of the challenges described below have been underscored in other research and media reports about SIG implementation (Klein, 2012; Lachlan-Haché, Naik, & Casserly, 2012; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011 & 2012).

**A majority of state officials surveyed viewed the principal and teacher replacement requirements as at least somewhat critical to improving achievement in SIG schools, although several said its importance varied from school to school.**

CEP's survey asked state Title I directors to indicate the extent to which replacing the principal or staff was a key element in improving student achievement in the majority of the state's schools using the transformation or turnaround model. Their responses are shown in **table 1**.

Officials in 25 of the 45 responding states with schools implementing the *transformation* model considered replacing the principal to be a key element in improving student achievement in SIG schools. In particular, respondents said this element was key to a great extent in 15 states and to some extent in 10 states. Respondents in another 16 states said the extent to which principal replacement is key varies from school to school, while just one respondent regarded it as not at all key.

**Table 1. Number of states reporting that replacing the principal or staff is a key element in improving student achievement in SIG schools using the transformation or turnaround model**

Extent to which replacement is a key element in a majority of the state's schools using model	<i>Transformation:</i> Replacing the principal	<i>Turnaround:</i> Replacing the principal	<i>Turnaround:</i> Replacing 50% of existing staff
To a great extent	15	15	13
To some extent	10	6	9
Extent varies from school to school	16	6	6
Not at all	1	0	0
Too soon to tell	3	2	1
<i>Total number of survey states with schools using model</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Total number of survey states with no schools using model</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>17</i>

Table reads: Among the 45 survey states with SIG schools implementing the transformation model, respondents in 15 states said that replacing the principal is, to a great extent, a key element in improving student achievement in a majority of the state's schools using this model. Officials in 16 of the 45 states said the degree to which principal replacement is key varies from school to school.

Title I directors in 21 of the 29 survey states with schools implementing the *turnaround* model viewed principal replacement as a key element in improving student achievement. Specifically, 15 responded that this was the case to a great extent and 6 said it was true some extent. Regarding the turnaround requirement to replace 50% of school staff, a similarly large majority (22) of respondents from states with turnaround schools said this was key, with 13 agreeing this was true to a great extent and 9 to some extent. Fewer respondents in states with turnaround schools said the importance of principal or staff replacement varies from school to school, and none described this strategy as not at all key.

Together these responses suggest that Title I directors generally view principal and staff replacement as necessary components of reforming schools, despite the implementation

problems described by state, district, and, school officials in the following sections of this report.

### **Finding and keeping highly effective principals and teachers has been a major challenge for SIG schools in Idaho, Maryland, and Michigan.**

Officials interviewed for case studies often characterized hiring good teachers and principals as their greatest challenge in implementing the SIGs requirements. In sparsely populated, rural Idaho, case study schools were especially hard pressed to attract staff, but schools in Maryland and Michigan also had problems finding well-qualified replacements. Case study schools faced competition for principals and staff from schools that were perceived to have better working conditions or better academic reputations, or were less remote.

#### ***Idaho***

All of the SIG-funded schools in Idaho chose the transformation model, and all had to replace their principal. This is the only model appropriate for the majority of these schools, according to Steve Underwood, director of the Division of Student Achievement and School Improvement in the Idaho State Department of Education. The transformation model “has more flexibility” and “gets at systemwide change,” said Underwood, noting that the other three models pose significant challenges in Idaho. Rural districts, he explained, face problems in finding sufficient teachers to meet the replacement requirements of the turnaround model, have limited access to private management organizations that could implement the restart model, have difficulty meeting the timelines to become a charter school under the restart model, and have no other schools to which they could send students under the closure model.

Interviewees from the three case study schools in Idaho concurred that the requirements of the other models were not workable in Idaho’s rural setting. At Lakeside Elementary in

the Plummer-Worley District, the schools' remote location and the short timelines of the SIG grant process posed obstacles to replacing staff under the turnaround model or contracting with a charter company under the restart model, explained Superintendent Judi Sharrett. Closure was also not an option, she said, because the district has only one elementary school and few buildings large enough to house new schools.

Although the transformation model may be the only viable option, the principal replacement requirement brings its own set of challenges in Idaho. Replacing the principal is not appropriate for Idaho's rural schools, Underwood maintained, "because there are huge issues of human capital that are very difficult to address . . . [and] put some severe strains on our ability to really work with those schools." Although some schools might benefit from replacing the principal, he said, this is not very workable due to the schools' rural locations and limited availability of well-qualified candidates.

All three Idaho case study schools, including the one that did not receive SIG funds, mentioned challenges in hiring and retaining qualified teachers, instructional coaches, or other administrators. While interviewees at all three schools expressed concern that they might lose staff that had participated in important professional development, this concern is particularly pressing for the two rural schools, especially if the economy picks up and suburban and urban schools begin hiring more teachers. At rural Wilder Elementary in the Wilder School District, many teachers live elsewhere and commute long distances. "I think what's helped Wilder a lot in the last couple years is the economic downturn because new teachers can't get jobs in Boise and Meridian," said Mary Ann Cahill, a professor from Boise State University who works with Wilder Elementary. Although an economic upturn would be good for Wilder's families, it would also increase the employment options for teachers.

### ***Maryland***

According to state and local officials interviewed in Maryland, hiring and retaining highly effective teachers and administrators has been a major challenge in implementing the SIG

models in both Baltimore City and Prince George's County, a suburban district outside Washington, D.C.

"One of the bigger pieces to [school improvement] is finding the right people for these schools, and it's been our biggest challenge," said Beth Nolan, turnaround director in the Baltimore City Public Schools at the time of the CEP case study. "I think it's a challenge nationwide to find the really highly capable people." The Baltimore City district used SIG funds to hire a consultant to help find highly qualified staff for recipient schools. The district opened its schools fully staffed in the 2010-11 school year, Nolan said, but "fully staffing is one indicator; fully staffing with highly qualified people is another indicator."

Schools in Prince George's County that chose the turnaround model also had "an awfully difficult time" finding highly qualified staff, said Ed Ryans, the district's turnaround director. The difficulties were exacerbated by the short implementation timelines, an issue discussed later in this report. For the turnaround model to be successful, "we have to have the best people in front of children every day," Ryans said, adding that SIG schools should "be a priority when it comes to staffing." In the second round of SIG grants, the Prince George's district chose the restart model for more of its schools to avoid the staffing challenges associated with the turnaround model.

### ***Michigan***

Hiring and retaining high-quality teachers and principals also presented a challenge to all of the Michigan case study schools, according to interviewees. All SIG schools in Michigan had to replace their principals unless they had already done so recently, and many also had to replace staff as a requirement of their chosen improvement model.

Low-performing schools in the Saginaw School District, for example, had difficulty finding qualified staff, especially staff to work with high-needs students. "Most of the time, if a teacher could get, or an educator could get, a BMW versus a Pinto, even if the Pinto's free, a lot of people still are going to go with the BMW," observed Carlton Jenkins, the district's

superintendent. “[I]f there’s an opening in a suburban district, even if it’s a substitute offer, they may go for the BMW.” Saginaw’s location as an urban school surrounded by a rural area has compounded its problems attracting qualified teachers and instructional support personnel.

Challenges in attracting high-quality staff were also apparent in some low-performing Michigan schools that did not receive SIGs. Many of these non-recipient schools had already spent several years in school improvement under NCLB, which made it more difficult to recruit staff. Moreover, they did not have the benefit of substantial SIG funding to help implement their improvement plans. Detroit’s Law Academy, a non-recipient school, faced challenges in recruiting and retaining strong staff members but lacked the funds necessary to improve staffing deficiencies, according to Principal Jeffrey Nelson. “We simply do not have enough teachers to do what we need to do to move forward and be successful with our school improvement plan,” Nelson said. Additional funding would be needed to solve the problem, he explained.

### **State Survey Responses**

The problem of attracting replacement staff is not limited to case study states, as illustrated by the following responses to an open-ended question in CEP’s state survey:

*Regarding the Turnaround Model, [which is] dependent upon availability of high-performing teachers and leaders, securing a 50% change-out in staff and a high-performing school leader may be difficult to accomplish.*

*Because the SIG models came out of a clearly urban mindset, it places unnecessary limitations on rural environments—for example, replacing a principal. We can improve the principal, or improve the district leadership to the point that they recognize that the principal needs to be replaced, so replacement is not necessary as an automatic requirement. Also, the replacement of 50% of a teaching workforce in a*

*rural, and especially remote, setting is practically impossible. [The U.S. Department of Education] needs to gain a better understanding of rural improvement strategies.*

## **Legal and union requirements have posed obstacles to restaffing in some SIG schools.**

In addition to finding the right teachers for the job, removing the wrong teachers has also been challenging in some schools, according to state survey respondents and case study interviewees. One state survey respondent commented that “laws governing teacher seniority in terms of hiring practices severely limit the degree to which schools/districts can remove ineffective teachers [in this state].”

Lacey Robinson, co-principal of Gholson Middle School in Prince George’s County, Maryland, said “it would have been really nice to have a union person who could come and talk to us [about removing staff].” For example, in the first year of SIG funding, she had a teacher who incessantly called in sick, one who was removed for inappropriate behavior, and one who just did not show up to teach class. It would have helped to “have a union person . . . saying to me, ‘This is how we get rid of this person.’”

Ironically, state and district budget cuts helped to make it easier for some schools to replace staff. To cope with budget reductions, Gholson Middle School had to eliminate nine positions. Co-principals Robinson and Ebony Cross used this situation to remove their less effective teachers. (See **box B** for more information about the school’s co-principalship.) The teachers who were let go were told that “if this [isn’t] the place for you . . . we will assist you in going somewhere else,” Robinson said. But when it came to hiring the right teachers, budget problems complicated Gholson’s efforts. The co-principals organized a “turnaround fair” where they spent “a Saturday and three days [at the school] until 11 p.m. going through applications and resumes,” Robinson explained, but they could not hire a single person due to issues related to the budget and unions.

### **Box B. A Co-principalship at Gholson Middle School, Prince George’s County, Maryland**

In an attempt to maximize Gholson Middle School’s capacity to implement the turnaround model, the Prince George’s County Public Schools and the Maryland State Department of Education approved a proposal by Lacey Robinson and Ebony Cross to serve as co-principals of the school. The two women met in a principal training program known as New Leaders for New Schools. Under dual leadership, “you can essentially . . . effect change a little faster,” said Robinson in an interview for CEP’s case studies.

Robinson and Cross split the leadership responsibilities and support each other at Gholson. Robinson is responsible for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and for issues such as attendance, grading, and reporting. Cross is responsible for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students and for budgeting. They work together on personnel issues. The two principals try to “stay in [their] lanes but that it is not always easy to do,” said Robinson. When a student, teacher, or community member comes to one of the principals with a problem, they expect a solution regardless of whose “lane” the problem falls in. “At the end of the day,” explained Robinson, “if there’s an issue . . . whoever’s on deck has to [resolve] the issue.” The key to successful dual leadership, she added, is good communication and “trying to keep each other abreast on what’s going on in the building.”

Robinson believes the co-principalship has proved successful at Gholson and that neither she nor Cross would have been nearly as successful in implementing the SIG turnaround efforts alone.

### **Tight SIG implementation timelines created problems in restaffing schools.**

The short time between the notification about SIG awards and the start of the school year also hindered efforts to replace principals and staff in some schools, case study interviewees explained. “When you get a grant approved two months before you’re supposed to fully implement, it doesn’t really give school systems enough time to develop their own proposal and then to find the staff to work in the schools that are most effective,” said Maria Lamb, director of the Program Improvement and Family Support branch at the Maryland State Department of Education.

At Commodore John Rodgers Elementary School in the Baltimore City Public Schools, the short time frame “really limited the amount of success [the school] could have in the first or second year,” particularly when it came to staffing, said Principal Marc Martin. After the

school chose the restart model, all of its teachers were asked to reapply for their positions—a step Martin felt was essential to changing the school culture. Only three teachers were rehired. Martin said that he would “never recommend going into a turnaround situation with 11 first-year teachers” but that this was his best option when faced with hiring 50 new staff members in a matter of months. “[T]hose 11 first-year teachers were remarkably better than the staff that was in place,” he explained.

At Gholson Middle School in Prince George’s County, Maryland, timelines made the restaffing process “mind-boggling,” according to Principal Robinson. She and Cross were hired as co-principals in the first year of SIG funding and had only one month to fill half of the teaching positions and hire new administrators prior to the first day of school. At that point in the summer, Robinson emphasized, “anybody that’s trying to get a job or trying to get a good position [had] already been placed.” Robinson said that she and Cross complained to the state that they had been given the staff who were left over and had been asked to turn around a school without the personnel who could help do that.

Robinson and Cross tried some innovative approaches to staffing their school, with mixed results. At the last minute, they reached out to a local university with a summer program for people pursuing science and math education as a second career. They thought they would “rather take [their] chances with new teachers than [with] someone that is kind of stuck in a rut,” Robinson said. In hindsight, she reflected, she would “never recommend that to anybody” because turnaround schools need a “balance of both [new and experienced teachers].” The whole process was a “very kamikaze way of trying to staff a building,” Robinson concluded. The principals have had success, however, with educators from Teach for America. They also approached their experienced teachers to ask for referrals and recommendations for potential additional staff members.

Replacing the principal within a short time frame was also a challenge at Idaho’s Lakeside Elementary. “The grant gave us no time and had no respect for timelines or legal obligations and notifications,” said Superintendent Sharrett. “We were lucky the way it worked out. It could have put us in court for a long time.”

### **Some of the schools studied had high turnover in leadership or staff.**

Because they are among the lowest-performing schools in their states, some SIG case study schools have gone through multiple changes in principals and/or staff. This has also occurred in some case study schools that did not receive SIG awards. This staffing and leadership churn can disrupt momentum on reforms and make it even more difficult to attract effective teachers and leaders, the case studies suggest.

Detroit's Phoenix Elementary-Middle School, for example, has had a revolving door for principals. Norma Hernandez was appointed principal of this SIG school. After she took unexpected medical leave during the early months of 2011, administrator Shalonda Byas stepped in as acting principal for the duration of school year 2010-11. Because of her work in that capacity, Byas was promoted to the position of principal at nearby Farwell Middle School, also a SIG school, and Christopher Sandoval took over as principal of Phoenix. However, Sandoval has since resigned, and Alexander Cintron has now taken on the role of principal at Phoenix. The school has also had difficulty hiring instructional coaches funded through its SIG grant.

"A few places might have been better off if they had not had to change and go through a stop-start motion" of replacing a principal after they had already done so a year or two earlier, said Linda Forward, the Director of the Office of Education Improvement and Innovation at the Michigan Department of Education.

Principal turnover was also a persistent problem at Gholson Middle School in Prince George's County, Maryland. Before the SIG award, the school had seven principals in roughly nine years, according to Lacey Robinson, the current co-principal. "There was a change of the guard [almost] every single year," she said, and this affected the school's climate and academic status.

High teacher turnover has been an ongoing problem in some case study schools. Beth Nolan, former turnaround director in the Baltimore City Public Schools, considered it a “major accomplishment” when the district started the 2011-12 school year fully staffed, although the district continues to face problems finding and keeping highly qualified teachers.

The two Idaho SIG schools participating in the case studies raised a related concern about the stability of their staffing—namely, whether they can continue to pay for SIG-supported instructional coaches and other special administrators after SIG funding ends. District and school officials at Lakeside Elementary, for example, were unsure whether the school could retain its instructional coaches once the grant runs out. Although Superintendent Sharrett of the Plummer-Worley district plans to use state and/or tribal funds to keep the instructional coaches, she admitted that these funding sources are unpredictable “and you can’t really count on it.”

### **A minority of states surveyed are assisting SIG-funded districts and schools with principal and staff replacement.**

Despite the problems described above, most states do not provide assistance to districts to identify and recruit principals and staff as part of their SIG-related assistance, CEP’s survey results suggest. Although federal guidance requires states to offer technical assistance on school-level implementation of SIGs, just 10 of the 46 states responding to the survey reported providing assistance to districts specifically aimed at identifying and recruiting highly effective principals. Just 8 states reported providing assistance to help districts identify and recruit teachers. This is likely because hiring principals and staff has traditionally been a local rather than a state responsibility in many states.

In response to an open-ended survey question, a few states specified the types of assistance they were providing to help with principal and teacher recruitment. One state reported

developing a pipeline of turnaround leaders for SIG schools under its Race to the Top initiative. (Race to the Top is an ARRA-funded competitive grant program which aims to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform, including turning around low-performing schools.) A few other states reported partnering with consulting firms like Public Impact to help districts recruit principals or with teacher recruitment organizations like Teach for American and the Teacher Advancement Program.

### **Some officials interviewed would like to see more flexibility in the SIG principal and staff replacement requirements.**

State officials in Michigan would like to modify the requirement to replace a school's principal in certain circumstances. The Michigan Department of Education applied for but did not receive a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education to address this issue. The state requested that the principal of a school that received a SIG grant could remain in place in some situations—for example, if the principal had been hired within the last two years but was not brought in specifically for reform purposes or the principal had been hired more than two years ago but there is evidence that student achievement is improving.

Michigan officials would also like see a requirement to keep the same principal in a SIG school throughout the three-year grant period unless there are compelling reasons to make a change based on some sort of performance criteria. Linda Forward of the Michigan Department of Education noted that three SIG schools had replaced the principal again after completing the first year of the grant, although she was unsure why this had happened and had not been aware of any problem with the principals. In any case, Michigan state officials would like districts to give principals in SIG schools time to put reforms in place. “What [the state education department] would like to see is a situation where that building remains stable for those three years unless there is some overriding, overpowering reason to make a change in staff or in the leadership,” Forward said.

Idaho officials would also like to see more flexibility in the principal and staff replacement requirements to address the special needs of rural schools, according to Steve Underwood of the Idaho State Department of Education.

## **Policy implications**

Even with the additional funding attached to SIG awards, interviewees in recipient schools uniformly cited attracting and retaining staff as a challenge to their school improvement efforts. Having the grant with all of its enhanced resources did not allay worries that staff would leave for jobs in more convenient locations and in schools perceived to be better places to work. Staff stability was also identified as a challenge in schools that did not get grants.

The staffing challenges faced by most of the case study schools suggest a need for greater state and federal support and strategies to improve the recruitment and retention of principals and teachers and attract personnel to struggling schools. The problems cited above also point to a need for greater flexibility in the staff replacement requirements of the transformation and turnaround models to address unique situations, such as schools in rural areas where it is not feasible to replace half the staff.

The short time frame between grant award notifications and expected implementation, as well as the legal and union requirements related to firing and rehiring staff, have also created major challenges for districts and schools. The coordinated assistance and involvement of state education agencies, school districts, and local unions might help ease some of these tensions and complications. Policymakers should consider these types of challenges as they design federal programs and provide technical assistance and monitoring.

In this same vein, good teachers are difficult to find, recruit, and retain. Policymakers need to continue to focus on creating and nurturing pipelines for educators that meet the unique needs of low-achieving schools in both urban and rural communities.

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