



Online Appendix—State Responses to Open-Ended Questions about the ARRA SIG Program

To accompany the Center on Education Policy report, *State Implementation and Perceptions of Title I School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act: One Year Later*

To learn more about states' experiences with implementing school improvement grants (SIGs) funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the Center on Education Policy (CEP) administered a survey to state Title I directors. (Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides federal funds to schools in low-income areas to educate academically struggling students.) These ARRA SIG funds are targeted on the "persistently lowest-achieving schools" within each state; these schools must implement one of four school improvement models outlined in U.S. Department of Education guidance.

The survey, which was conducted from November 2011 through early January 2012, focused on state processes for renewing the ARRA SIG grants made for school year 2010-11, state assistance to school districts and schools to implement the ARRA SIG reforms, and general perceptions of the ARRA SIG program. A total of 46 states responded, including the District of Columbia. Survey responses were kept confidential in order to encourage frank answers. The major findings from this survey are described in the 2012 CEP report, *State Implementation and Perceptions of Title I School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act: One Year Later*.

A last question in the survey asked respondents to share any additional thoughts about their state's experiences with the ARRA SIG program. This appendix shares excerpts from direct quotations from all the responses of state Title I directors to this open-ended question. Responses have been grouped into three categories: positive remarks, frustrations with ARRA SIG, and suggestions for improvement. (In the comments below, SEA stands for state educational agency, LEA stands for local educational agency, and USED stands for the U.S. Department of Education.)

Positive remarks about the ARRA SIG program

“All schools receiving ARRA SIG funding [in this state] experienced academic gains in student achievement.”

“The grant has allowed for a renewed focus on [this state’s] lowest achieving (and sometimes forgotten) schools. LEAs have taken greater ownership of these schools [in this state].”

“A different evaluation process was undertaken in our state with an oversight board responsible for the application, review and approval process as well as quarterly monitoring review and targeted technical assistance. The board was diverse in nature, with representation from turnaround principals, superintendents, higher ed professors, parenting professionals and others. This structure may be amended to align with the SEA new vision of school transformation.”

“The SIG process as a whole has been effective and a good experience. We are seeing change in our schools . . . with progress being made towards student achievement.”

“We’ve seen significant changes in some of the schools receiving the SIG funds. The school staff uses data more to drive decisions. Students are returning to these schools as a result of what is occurring in the school, i.e. extended school year, advanced placement courses.”

“SIG schools [in this state] have received an abundance of technical assistance from the SEA and through funding which has been made available to them through the [ARRA SIG] grant. These schools have benefited from extensive job-embedded professional development from national educators as well as a plethora of instructional resources. If [this state’s] ESEA Flexibility plan is approved, SIG schools will be considered ‘Priority’ schools and will continue to be served. The SEA will continue to provide the maximum amount of resources to the schools that are available. There is the possibility that some of the Priority (SIG) schools that have been persistently low-achieving may be taken over by the SEA in 2012-2013 but that is a decision that has not been confirmed at this point in time.”

“The current experience suggests that SIG schools will show great benefit over the duration of the grant period [in this state].”

“As a state, we feel that we are offering better technical assistance to all SIG schools during the 2011-12 year due to increase of staff at SEA dedicated to those schools.”

Frustrations with the ARRA SIG program

“Laws governing teacher seniority in terms of hiring practices severely limit the degree to which schools/districts can remove ineffective teachers [in this state].”

“. . . three years may not be enough time to change cultures and establish the necessary structures for sustainability in all cases [in this state].”

“One frustrating piece was the timeline that was used for the initial process. There was a very quick turnaround, with not much guidance for the first year.”

“Time to create a foundation to implement the ARRA SIG grant would have allowed states to create a system conducive to the change process. Not enough lead time [was] allowed to create the foundation, before starting on the school improvement process. Moving from a formula to a competitive system requires adjustments to the governance structure. Not having the right structures in place makes oversight difficult.”

“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.”

“I believe the process utilized for round 1 and 2 of the ARRA SIG grants was extremely onerous and misleading. Because the identification is directed at specific groups of schools, there are other schools that may actually have a lower level of performance, but are not supported through this process . . . It was also extremely negative having to identify a specific number of schools as [persistently low-achieving] and then not have the amount of funding necessary to support all [schools] identified. As for the intervention models, the requirements do not take into consideration the different needs of states. [This state] has many small, rural schools and districts. The option for turnaround, as outlined by the grant, is virtually impossible. We don't have charter schools and don't close schools, so the only option available is transformation. Our schools did not choose this model as an easy way out, as sometime suggested by USED, but as the only viable option. The other concern I have is that the extra requirements for the SEA administration of SIG came without consideration of SEA capacity for implementation. As a small state our Title I funding for administration is minimal. Additional activities regardless of how worthwhile increase the stress on our limited capacity. This is my fear with the flexibility waiver. In order to qualify we will actually need to create a system more comprehensive than what currently exists, but I don't see any additional administrative funding on the horizon. There are also many questions relative to the insertion of the evaluation process into this mix and the additional work (such as monitoring implementation of the evaluation process) that will create. Timing is everything. With the extraordinary efforts taking place to move

our systems to implementation of the Common Core it would have been nice to give schools, students and parents some breathing room as we prepare for an effective transition. It is an exciting time to be an educator but I have never worked so hard with so little!”

“Just awarding grants and monitoring implementation is not enough. Although a daunting task, direct state involvement and constant on-site presence is needed to get changes (and even then it is very difficult).”

“The SIG regulations miss the mark of what it takes to improve schools in a sustainable ongoing way. In LEAs with medium to strong leadership, the infusion of SIG funds can serve as a catalyst for dramatic improvement. However, there are many schools that are low-performing because of the context of poor leadership at the district level. 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. USED needs to gain a better understanding of rural improvement strategies.”

Suggestions for improvement

“The models are appropriate for the SIG schools; however, in order to implement the components of each model, a thorough understanding is needed by all members of the building staff . . . The pre-implementation activities for Cohort 2 were of benefit. Suggestion: Allow each LEA to allocate the funds in a graduated manner for more than 3 years in order to enable the schools to develop capacity to continue the practices once the grant ends.”

“Extending the length of the grant would make sense. It takes more than three years to truly implement strategies to turn around a school. Earlier grant approval [would] allow for earlier implementation—this was better for Round 2 than in Round 1.”

“LEAs selecting the closure model should be allowed to use SIG funds at receiving school(s).”

“SEA employees charged with administering the SIG need resources, training, and support to provide the participating LEAs/schools with the leadership they need to fully implement the chosen models.”

“The big question becomes, is this improvement work sustainable without the additional funding? . . . Perhaps responses to that question will help initiate or enhance the discussion around what ‘full funding’ for public education really means and how strategies to realign existing resources (federal, state and local) may become part of the long-term solution.”

“While working with schools that were in the first cohort we see some potential in having a fourth-year, no-cost extension to the grant monies. This would enable schools to maintain programs and positions found to be effective with existing funds with slight changes to their current budgets.”

“The SIG needs to address ALL layers of the system, including district level capacity for change. Until that happens, the SIG requirements will have only inconsistent bright spots, while other schools continue to perform lowly. Or, at best, there will be a bump in improvement, but sustainability will be questionable because of practices not being embedded into district-wide expectations, beliefs, and culture.”

“We’ve known for decades that infusion of funds does not improve a school, nor does a specific ‘model’ for improvement. Rather, schools and districts need to reculture themselves to think differently about what they do and how they do it. Extra funds help, but usually it doesn’t take extra funds to dramatically improve.”