

# InFOCUS

## Examining Turnaround Efforts Funded by School Improvement Grants

### 1. TURNAROUND.

Replace the school principal; rehire no more than 50 percent of school staff; and grant the new principal flexibility in areas such as hiring, length of the school day, and the school budget.

### 2. RESTART.

Convert the school into a charter or close and reopen the school under a charter school operator, charter management organization, or education management organization.

### 3. CLOSURE.

Close the school and enroll students in higher-achieving schools within the same district.

### 4. TRANSFORMATION.

Replace the school principal, take steps to increase the effectiveness of teachers and principals, institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time, create community-oriented schools, and provide operational flexibility.

A growing focus on turning around the nation's struggling schools has led the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to invest heavily in grants to states, including the School Improvement Grant (SIG) and Race to the Top (RTT) programs. To better understand the implementation and impact of these programs, ED's Institute of Education Sciences is conducting a large-scale evaluation of RTT and SIG. As part of this study, Mathematica Policy Research collected and compared data from low-performing schools that implemented one of four SIG-funded intervention models with data from similar schools that did not. We present findings from these comparisons in "Operational Authority, Support, and Monitoring of School Turnaround," the first in a series of briefs from the evaluation of RTT and SIG.

Although these results do not necessarily apply to SIG schools nationwide, they are nonetheless important because they add to the limited knowledge base about how SIG-funded turnaround efforts are conducted. At the core of these efforts are four intervention models that emphasize different strategies for turning around schools (see Sidebar).

"Operational Authority, Support, and Monitoring of School Turnaround" examines the use of three inter-related levers for school improvement: (1) school operational authority or responsibility for decision making, (2) state and district support for turnaround, and (3) state monitoring of turnaround efforts. SIG principles emphasize that school leaders should have the autonomy to make decisions on matters such as staffing, calendars, and budgeting while being supported and monitored by states and districts to ensure progress. This brief examines school practices related to these three levers and highlights the similarities and differences between schools implementing a SIG-funded intervention model and similar comparison schools not implementing such models.

### KEY FINDINGS

In almost all operational areas examined, less than half of both groups of schools reported having primary responsibility. Budgeting was the most common area in which schools implementing and not implementing a SIG-funded intervention model reported having operational authority (55 percent and 54 percent).



- Schools implementing a SIG-funded intervention model were no more likely than schools not implementing such a model to report having primary responsibility, except in two areas: setting professional development requirements (53 percent versus 39 percent) and determining the length of the school day (19 percent versus 12 percent).
- In the other seven operational areas examined, less than half of the schools in both groups reported having primary responsibility in areas such as student discipline policies (38 percent and 35 percent), staffing (37 percent and 46 percent), assessment policies (25 percent and 21 percent), and curriculum (18 percent and 16 percent).

**Most states, districts, and schools reported providing or receiving some type of turnaround support. According to states, the most common turnaround supports they provided involved helping schools develop improvement plans (20 of the 21 states interviewed) and identify effective improvement strategies (19 of the 21 states interviewed).**

- Schools implementing a SIG-funded intervention model were no more likely than schools not implementing such a model to report receiving support in 9 of 12 areas examined, including working with parents, planning school improvements, and recruiting or retaining teachers.
- The three exceptions were identifying turnaround strategies (82 percent versus 65 percent), identifying and supporting effective instructional leaders (61 percent versus 51 percent), and supporting data use (71 percent versus 40 percent).

**Most states reported that monitoring involved site visits and analysis of student data and most reported that monitoring was also used for formative purposes.**

- State monitoring took the form of analyzing student data (21 states), and conducting site visits (20 states); to a lesser extent, it involved having discussions with parents or the community (16 states) and surveying school staff (12 states).



- Most states also reported that monitoring was used for formative purposes such as assessing implementation fidelity (14 states) and identifying additional supports for schools (14 states).
- State-level monitoring may help to inform states when stronger action is needed, such as taking over failing schools (which 11 states reported having the authority to do) and placing struggling schools in a special district focused on school improvement (which 5 states reported having the authority to do).

## ABOUT THE STUDY

The findings from this study are based on spring 2012 survey responses from 450 school administrators in 60 districts across 22 states, as well as interviews with administrators in the 60 districts and 21 of the 22 states. These data supplement the research base on school turnaround by providing descriptive information on the use of three levers for improvement in a purposive sample of states, districts, and schools.

To view the full brief, “Operational Authority, Support, and Monitoring of School Turnaround,” please visit Mathematica’s website [www.mathematica-mpr.com](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com) or the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences website: <http://ies.ed.gov/>.

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