

InFOCUS

Mariesa Herrmann, Lisa Dragoset, and Susanne James-Burdumy

Are Low-Performing Schools Adopting Practices Promoted by School Improvement Grants?

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The federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program aims to improve student achievement by promoting the implementation of four school intervention models: transformation, turnaround, restart, and closure. Research has shown that low-performing schools adopt some practices promoted by the models, but little is known about how schools combine these practices. New findings from Mathematica's multi-year evaluation of SIG for the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, shed light on which individual SIG practices (and what combinations of practices) low-performing schools adopted. Future research will examine the impact of the SIG models—and the relationship between practices and outcomes—in low-performing schools.

Turning around our nation's low-performing schools is a national policy priority. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 allocated \$3 billion to the U.S. Department of Education's SIG program, in addition to the \$546 million already appropriated for SIG that year. SIG promotes four intervention models, each with specific improvement practices:

1. **Transformation.** Replace the school principal, develop an evaluation system for teachers and principals that incorporates student progress, institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time, create community-oriented schools, and provide operational flexibility (in areas such as hiring, length of school day, and budget) and sustained support.
2. **Turnaround.** Replace the school principal, rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff, institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time, create community-oriented schools, and provide operational flexibility and sustained support.
3. **Restart.** Convert the school into a charter or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, charter management organization, or education management organization selected through a rigorous review process.
4. **Closure.** Close the school and enroll its students in higher-achieving schools in the district.

Schools reported adopting more than half of 32 practices examined



3 Most Commonly Adopted Practices



1) Using data to inform and differentiate instruction



2) Increasing technology access for teachers or using computer-assisted instruction



3) Providing ongoing professional development in which teachers work collaboratively or that school leaders facilitate

KEY FINDINGS

- Schools adopted more than half of the improvement practices examined (20 of 32), on average.
- No school adopted all practices required by the transformation or turnaround models.
- The three most commonly adopted practices (see box) were each adopted by over 96 percent of schools.
- For half of the practices examined, schools implementing a SIG model were more likely than schools not implementing one to adopt that practice.
- Almost every school adopted a unique combination of practices, but some practices, such as the three most commonly adopted ones listed above, were much more likely to be included in these combinations.

Examining the combinations of practices used by low-performing schools may help illuminate why some schools might successfully turn around and others might not. The findings from this brief may be relevant for educators and state administrators thinking about how to combine improvement practices in their jurisdictions.

ABOUT THE BRIEF

The data in this brief came from surveys of school administrators conducted in spring 2013. The sample included 480 low-performing schools, located in 60 districts from 22 states. Each state and district included a mix of low-performing schools that were either implementing a SIG model or not. The sample was purposively selected to support estimation of the impact of SIG on student outcomes; a future report will present these findings. Although these results do not necessarily apply to low-performing schools nationwide, they are nonetheless important because they add to the limited knowledge base about the improvement practices adopted by low-performing schools.

To view the full brief, “Are Low-Performing Schools Adopting Practices Promoted by School Improvement Grants,” please visit Mathematica’s website www.mathematica-mpr.com or the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences website: <http://ies.ed.gov/>.

