

School Improvement Under No Child Left Behind

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All across the country, educators, parents, and state officials are concerned that too many schools are being classified as “in need of improvement” due to the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. These requirements mandate that states establish steadily increasing targets for student achievement and that schools progress toward meeting the long-term goal of proficiency in reading and math for all students by 2013-14. Those schools that do not meet state targets for two consecutive years are identified as “schools in need of improvement” (SINI) and are required to institute changes so that all students receive adequate and appropriate instruction to enable them to reach proficiency.

In addition to the apprehension that a growing number of schools will be labeled as “in need of improvement,” it is sometimes mistakenly believed that schools designated for improvement lose federal funds. Although these schools may lose funds for other reasons, the law does not say that schools lose money because of their status as a school in need of improvement. Indeed, NCLB provides additional resources in the form of a School Improvement Fund (SIF) to help these schools implement improvement strategies. Nationally, the SIF totaled \$493¹ million this school year, and an estimated \$514 million was allocated toward school improvement for 2005-06.

These fears about the labeling of schools and the loss of funding have overshadowed discussion of the law’s requirements for enabling those schools to make the improvements necessary to produce students who are proficient in reading and math. Who is responsible and what is being done to carry out school improvement? This paper from the Center for American Progress is likely the first examination of how states are implementing their role as providers of technical assistance and resources to schools in need of improvement.

Under NCLB, while local districts are the “first responders” for helping low-performing schools, states are charged with the critical role of providing the resources—both human and monetary—to districts and schools undertaking improvement efforts. Specifically, states are responsible for both providing a “statewide system of intensive and sustained support” to assist schools in implementing improvement strategies and for allocating 95 percent of the SIF directly to schools. (States retain 5 percent of the SIF to fund the statewide support efforts mentioned previously.) While NCLB provides some guidance in carrying out both of these duties, states have adopted a wide range of approaches.

To perform the first of these two functions, NCLB requires that state education departments establish school support teams that help schools design and implement their improvement plans. While some states have instituted school support teams, others say that the restriction that they use no more than 5 percent of their SIF to pay for state

¹ This includes school improvement funds for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and other non-state entities.

support systems leaves them without sufficient resources to do so. States have also opted to support school improvement efforts through the deployment of specialists, such as literacy coaches, English-language-learner professionals or others who can address schools' specific weaknesses. In many places, both human and financial resource constraints have meant that states operate largely regional systems of support.

Secondly, states are charged with allocating 95 percent of their SIF directly to schools. Because NCLB does not specify precisely how states should do this, they have adopted a variety of approaches to distributing the SIF. Some states have opted to provide schools undertaking improvement efforts with a flat per-school allotment, while others give schools in need of improvement different amounts based on how long they have been in improvement status or what percentage of the school's students are low-income. After receiving their improvement money, schools have some discretion in how they may use these funds. States, however, do exert some influence over how schools spend this money, and many states have cautioned schools that these funds should only be used for non-recurring expenses, such as coaching.

In both of these areas, states have been affected by the level of federal funding designated for school improvement. Some states are straining for money to support many SINI, while others have sizable funds available for school improvement and relatively few schools designated for improvement efforts. For example, the number of SINI increased by 10 in Minnesota between the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years, while the state's SIF declined. In Georgia, on the other hand, the SIF more than doubled between 2003-04 and 2004-05, yet 90 fewer schools were designated as needing improvement in 2004-05.

The amount of school improvement funds per school can vary widely from year to year depending on how states determine SINI. In the 2003-04 school year, Texas had nine SINI and \$20.3 million, or roughly \$2.26 million per SINI. The SIF doubled to \$44.4 million for the 2004-05 school year, totaling roughly \$225,524 for each of the 197 schools Texas designated as needing improvement in 2004-05. The seemingly excessive money from 2003-04, however, may not have helped the state next year when it had more SINI, because states can ordinarily carry over only 15 percent of Title I funds from one school year to the next.

Some of these state-by-state disparities are related to the method by which the size of the SIF is determined, both at the federal and state levels. NCLB requires states to designate for the SIF a federally specified portion of their Title I Part A funds, which the federal government allocates to states on the basis of estimates of the number of low-income children aged 5 to 17 in a school district. States were required to direct 2 percent of their Title I Part A funds toward school improvement in fiscal years 2002 and 2003, and 4 percent of those funds in 2004-07. However, Title I funding for each state may increase or decrease annually, depending on the overall level of federal funding for Title I and on the number of poor children in the state. Also, because "hold-harmless" provisions require that states provide a guaranteed baseline sum to districts before funding the SIF, it is possible that a state may have less money available for school improvement even as the

percentage of a state's Title I Part A funds slated for school improvement may have increased.

This examination of state practices in carrying out the school improvement provisions of NCLB has revealed a number of ways in which school improvement might be more effectively implemented.

- Build state capacity to implement a repertoire of approaches to school improvement. States need a wide range of potential options for assisting schools, instead of being prompted to rely on the single approach—school support teams—favored by NCLB. In addition, states need some discretion in using more than just the 5 percent of the SIF designated for state-level support in order to ensure that they have the resources to adequately help schools carry out their improvement strategies.
- Focus school improvement efforts beyond the school level. Under NCLB, districts and schools bear front-line responsibility for school improvement. However, schools may not currently be equipped to play this role. District-level initiatives, such as leadership development of principals and central office administrators, should be considered a legitimate school improvement expense.
- Ensure appropriate funding for school improvement efforts. Because of the current funding process and the differences in the standards used by states to identify schools in need of improvement, funding per SINI varies widely among states. Congress should appropriate funds every year for a separate school improvement authorization and direct the Secretary of Education to allocate that money proportionately to states whose school improvement fund has dipped below 4 percent of its Title I Part A setaside.
- Use school improvement funds more strategically. NCLB's accountability provisions, which require that schools report test scores in reading and math broken down by income, race, language and disability status, both identify long-struggling schools and shine the spotlight on specific areas within schools that need improvement. As such, the SIF should not be treated as just another discretionary grant program. Instead, additional resources, such as money designated under other programs for special education or English language learners, should be folded into school improvement grants. In addition, states should use the NCLB designations regarding school improvement status as a tool in identifying the communities in which these low-performing schools are located and focusing state assistance on those areas.
- Focus on effectiveness. In evaluating state education departments, federal program reviews should consider not only whether school improvement

mechanisms, such as school support teams, are in place, but also whether they are successful.

Strengthening the management of the school improvement process is the next major implementation challenge of NCLB. If properly implemented, these efforts will benefit thousands of students and teachers by helping turn low-performing schools into high-performing buildings.

I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is to ensure that all children are proficient in reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year. In order to accomplish this, states are required to set steadily rising performance targets in these areas. Schools that fall short of these targets for two consecutive years are designated as “schools in need of improvement” (SINI) and are required to institute changes so that all students receive adequate and appropriate instruction.

Many educators, parents, and state officials are concerned that too many schools are being classified as “in need of improvement” due to NCLB’s accountability requirements. In addition to the apprehension that a growing number of schools will be labeled as “in need of improvement,” it is sometimes mistakenly believed that schools designated for improvement lose federal funds. Although these schools may lose funds for other reasons, the law does not say that schools lose money because of their status as a school in need of improvement. Indeed, schools designated for improvement receive funds to help them institute positive changes. Additionally, at certain stages Title I money can be used for transportation for students whose parents have exercised the public school choice option or to pay for tutoring under the supplemental services provision.

A major, but thus far little noticed, feature of this federal law is its provisions for improving schools and districts that have fallen short of the annual performance targets established by each state. Under NCLB, front-line responsibility for student achievement and school improvement belongs at the local level. When a school falls short of the annual targets in reading and mathematics, teachers, principals and central office administrators must work to improve the conditions which caused the school to miss its targets. They use data to diagnose areas of weakness and strength; to engage staff in professional development; to ensure the alignment of the curriculum with state standards; and to work with parents to become more involved in their children’s education.

States, on the other hand, play a critical role in supporting and monitoring these school-level improvement efforts. Under NCLB, states have two fundamental responsibilities. First, each state must create and sustain a statewide network of support that provides technical assistance and expertise to schools that have been identified for improvement. Second, states are responsible for allocating to local districts and schools the money the law has designated for school improvement.

Under NCLB, states must set aside a specified portion of the federal funds they receive to form a School Improvement Fund (SIF) and administer that fund to support both state-level and school-level efforts aimed at helping those schools that have been identified as “in need of improvement.” States were required to direct 2 percent of their Title I Part A funds toward school improvement in fiscal years 2002 and 2003, and 4 percent of those funds in 2004-07. The specially designated SIF included \$493 million nationwide in the 2004-05 school year and an estimated \$514 million for 2005-06. To perform their school improvement responsibilities, state departments of education reserve 5 percent of the SIF,

and they allocate the remaining 95 percent to schools and districts undertaking improvement activities.

This paper examines the state role in implementing NCLB's provisions for school improvement. The Center for American Progress undertook this study to find answers to four questions about the state role in implementing school improvement strategies under NCLB.

1. How are states implementing the federal requirements for establishing a statewide system of school support?
2. How are school improvement funds being used by states, districts, and schools?
3. Do individual states have sufficient school improvement resources to meet the needs of increasing numbers of schools and districts?
4. What do state officials think of the law's mechanisms for allocating school improvement funds?

This is a limited study, but it is a beginning. For all the papers and conferences that have been held on accountability and adequate yearly progress, very little attention has been paid by the education and policy community to whether NCLB is effective in the school improvement arena.

There is some urgency for raising these issues in the fourth year of the law's roll-out. An increasing number of schools nationwide are moving into SINI status. In the 2002-03 school year, 6,079 schools nationwide (or 12 percent of all schools that receive Title I funds) were identified for school improvement.² As of the 2004-05 school year, approximately 11,000 schools are in the SINI category.³ Entire school districts can also be classified as districts in need of improvement, although accurate data on this category is currently unavailable. Some state and local officials have expressed concern that a majority, if not all, of their schools will be considered in need of improvement under present accountability rules, as the goal of 100 percent proficiency approaches.

It seems prudent to make an early examination of the experience states are having with the statutory mechanisms and resources that NCLB created to provide assistance to schools and districts in need of improvement. This is by no means a comprehensive study, as it is based on limited information from 19 states.⁴ As one would expect in

² "Schools In Improvement 2002-03 School Year," *Title I Monitor* 9, no. 7 (July 2004): pp. 22-23. Data come from Consolidated State Performance Reports, Fall 2003. Several states reported incomplete data.

³ L. Olson, "Taking Root," *Education Week* 24, no. 15 (2004): p. S6

⁴The following states were selected for this study: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. Of these states, Arkansas, Kentucky, Michigan,

America's highly decentralized education system, states have had varying experiences. Indeed, the Center chose a purposeful but non-random sample of states to represent differences: states with rising versus declining Title I appropriations based on counts of poor students; states with small as opposed to large percentages of SINI; states at various distances from the 100 percent proficiency target for reading and math by 2013-14; and states that represent a range of geographic regions within the United States. Based on responses to a questionnaire from six states and research on state education department websites, this paper is a beginning attempt to compile information about how school improvement is being implemented at the state level.

Nationwide, the numbers of schools in school improvement status have grown, as shown in Figure 1. However, the pattern is uneven, with some states, such as Georgia, Indiana, Vermont, and Arizona, posting a decline in SINI from the 2003-04 school year to the 2004-05 school year, and many others showing increasing numbers of SINI. Figure 1 also shows the number of dollars states *should* have received from the School Improvement Fund in each of three years, if states had fully allocated the required 2 percent or 4 percent portion of their Title I Part A funds toward school improvement. However, ten states⁵ received smaller Title I Part A funding in 2004-05 than in 2003-04, due to decreases in these states in the estimates of low-income children aged 5 to 17, upon which Title I funding is based. As a result of this and hold-harmless provisions that ensure that districts receive a baseline level of Title I Part A funds before the SIF is fully funded, the SIF in these states may be smaller than shown in Figure 1.

Minnesota, New Jersey, and Ohio responded to a short questionnaire. The Center is grateful to these states for their participation.

⁵ The ten states that had smaller Title I Part A allocations in 2004-5 than in 2003-4 were: Kansas (-5.82 percent), Maine (-5.5 percent), Massachusetts (-10.0 percent), Michigan (-1.01 percent), Minnesota (-10.45 percent), Missouri (-4.87 percent), New Hampshire (-1.58 percent), New Jersey (-2.04 percent), North Dakota (-0.24 percent), and Pennsylvania (-1.30 percent).

Figure 1. Schools in Need of Improvement and School Improvement Funds⁶

	School Improvement Funds 2002-03 (\$)	School Improvement Funds 2003-04 (\$)	SINI 2003-04	School Improvement Funds 2004-05 (\$)	SINI 2004-05
ALABAMA	3,098,776	3,547,249	47	7,483,324	83
ALASKA	595,030	608,626	66	1,300,085	179
ARIZONA	3,464,934	3,757,205	220	9,195,321	184
ARKANSAS	1,944,747	2,120,039	272	4,748,694	305
CALIFORNIA	28,976,679	32,993,949	1200	70,621,505	1610
COLORADO	1,927,695	2,082,306	80	4,587,639	129
CONNECTICUT	2,082,530	2,131,150	14	4,363,407	134
DELAWARE	553,476	612,751	12	1,288,982	43
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	697,405	898,248	15	1,974,887	79
FLORIDA	9,530,402	10,476,697	45	22,988,961	965
GEORGIA	6,266,621	6,866,933	503	15,277,633	413
HAWAII	673,432	721,890	84	1,731,763	138
IDAHO	655,906	797,513	43	1,663,701	71
ILLINOIS	8,613,584	9,575,864	581	20,930,099	694
INDIANA	3,053,386	3,130,816	97	6,697,248	77
IOWA	1,259,113	1,259,113	11	2,587,382	66
KANSAS*	1,462,779	1,740,938	30	3,279,819	21
KENTUCKY	3,042,913	3,259,141	25	6,848,958	130
LOUISIANA	4,262,684	5,123,509	68	10,704,032	75
MAINE*	758,843	956,338	10	1,806,402	50
MARYLAND	3,079,674	3,079,674	102	6,549,541	247
MASSACHUSETTS*	4,412,925	5,201,011	196	9,361,574	381
MICHIGAN*	8,415,991	8,415,991	216	16,663,468	450
MINNESOTA*	2,259,292	2,354,567	38	4,217,110	48
MISSISSIPPI	2,608,624	3,144,316	7	6,429,208	71
MISSOURI*	3,274,870	3,897,734	30	7,416,661	132
MONTANA	685,881	809,177	34	1,621,083	40
NEBRASKA	752,801	935,397	6	1,929,677	46
NEVADA	813,819	1,064,326	26	2,560,285	122
NEW HAMPSHIRE*	537,484	594,669	6	1,170,569	71
NEW JERSEY*	5,140,444	5,440,655	250	10,657,365	520
NEW MEXICO	1,643,860	2,065,475	120	4,588,693	124
NEW YORK	20,553,975	23,695,036	528	49,678,176	713
NORTH CAROLINA	4,288,454	5,239,605	36	10,850,265	160
NORTH DAKOTA*	530,599	606,588	23	1,210,262	21
OHIO	6,822,152	7,996,424	191	16,003,109	429
OKLAHOMA	2,452,576	2,569,090	51	5,642,400	146
OREGON	1,886,777	2,306,341	7	5,259,911	328
PENNSYLVANIA*	7,992,008	8,766,740	289	17,308,174	333
RHODE ISLAND	685,002	863,104	24	1,830,931	39
SOUTH CAROLINA	2,847,270	3,157,544	90	6,618,271	208
SOUTH DAKOTA	548,101	640,015	32	1,384,093	106
TENNESSEE	3,049,602	3,713,894	61	7,989,074	165
TEXAS	17,255,165	20,369,357	9	44,428,220	197
UTAH	873,027	916,188	6	2,031,204	16
VERMONT	447,631	540,100	39	1,116,769	28
VIRGINIA	3,486,936	3,642,211	44	7,823,542	460
WASHINGTON	2,853,979	3,143,335	51	6,827,188	156
WEST VIRGINIA	1,620,661	1,883,356	32	3,793,122	37
WISCONSIN	2,994,932	3,034,936	68	6,427,030	51
WYOMING	479,121	579,296	0	1,191,520	15

⁶ Sources: *Education Week*, December 8, 2004, p. S 6, or state departments of education. School

The first half of this paper explains states' obligations under the law for establishing and sustaining a statewide school support system and allocating school improvement money to local schools and districts. It further provides examples of what a few states are doing in these areas.

The second half explains the source of the SIF at the federal level and outlines the factors that influence the amount of money states have or will receive in the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years. It explains how school improvement resources are spent in schools to enable them to meet their accountability targets. It also describes what kind of technical assistance and resources are available to help schools that consistently perform below state accountability targets.

The paper concludes with some observations about what this project has revealed about school improvement activities under the law. The way the law structures school improvement and the evidence about implementation raise serious doubts as to whether low-performing schools will get the help they need to ensure that all children achieve their state's proficiency standard in reading and mathematics.

It should be understood that under NCLB, school improvement requirements and resources apply only to schools (including charter schools) and school systems that receive federal Title I funds. Title I money is targeted at schools with relatively high concentrations of low-income students. While the law applies accountability rules to all public schools and school systems in the states, school improvement applies only to Title I schools that have missed state accountability targets.⁷ In addition, as many as half the states have their own school improvement rules and dollars that operate under state law. There is sometimes overlap between the state and federal school improvement systems.

Improvement Fund dollars are derived by taking the percentage appropriate for the year from each state's Title I Part A allocation, as posted by the Budget Service, U.S. Department of Education, as of November 1, 2004.

*Schools in need of improvement (SINI) are listed in the school year in which they were in that status, not in the year in which they were so identified. For example, Arizona had 220 SINI in the 2003-04 school year based on the identification in the 2002-03 school year. There are no data tabulated for SINI in the 2002-03 school year. All states identify Title I schools that are in need of improvement, but some identify non-Title I schools as well. The numbers of SINI reported in the table could be all schools, or just Title I schools. For example, Nebraska reports 46 schools in need of improvement in 2004-05, but nine are Title I schools and 37 are non-Title I schools.

*The amounts for states shown above total \$471 million. Funds in addition to these were allocated to American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other non-states, to bring the total SIF for 2004-05 to \$493 million.

*The actual SIF in the ten states marked with asterisks may be smaller than the amount shown above, due to a decrease in the Title I Part A allocations in those states, as well as hold-harmless provisions which ensure that districts receive a baseline level of Title I Part A funds before the SIF is fully funded.

⁷ Improvement requirements apply alike to school districts that lag in meeting state accountability targets. But that is a new and major subject in itself and must be reserved for another inquiry.

How these two parallel systems operate is a subject for another study. This study deals exclusively with the federal requirements for school improvement.

II. THE STATES' ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The states' role in school improvement begins with the annual identification of those schools that have met, and have not met, the state's accountability targets in reading and mathematics.⁸ Schools are identified as in need of improvement if they have fallen short of state performance targets for at least two consecutive years. After two years in "needs improvement" status, those schools that do not meet state targets in the third year are designated for "corrective action." Finally, schools that do not meet state standards after two years of "corrective action" are identified for "restructuring." Each phase requires schools, districts, and ultimately state education agencies to take increasingly stringent measures to ensure that Title I schools are providing the instructional program essential for students to attain the state's proficiency standard in both mathematics and reading. Schools are removed from any phase of school improvement after they have achieved the state's accountability targets for two consecutive years.

States are required to make the schools' status known before the start of the school year. Timely announcement is critical for school improvement, because it sets in motion a legally mandated process by which plans are made for instituting school reforms, parents are notified of the availability of school choice or supplemental tutoring options, and funding is allocated to support both of these efforts. In many states, however, the announcement comes well into the school year. This delay virtually precludes the development and approval of a thoughtful school improvement plan for the year underway. Funds to carry out the plan are disbursed even later in the school year. As Ohio officials noted, "The timing difficulty seems to be the major district barrier to the appropriate expenditure of funds for school improvement."

Once schools are identified for improvement, what is the states' responsibility? To assist those schools classified in any phase of improvement, state education agencies must (1) create and sustain a statewide system of support that provides technical assistance; and (2) reserve and allocate specially the SIF designated under Title I Part A. States may use up to 5 percent of their SIF to carry out the former, and the remaining funds go toward the latter.

The Statewide System of School Support

NCLB mandates that each state "shall establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for local educational agencies and schools receiving [Title I] funds, in order to increase the opportunity for all students...to meet the state's academic...achievement standards." The architects of NCLB envisioned that this statewide system should consist of: (1) school support teams; (2) distinguished principals and teachers; and (3) collaboration with federally-funded regional technical assistance centers, higher education institutions, private providers of scientifically-based technical assistance, and other sources of expertise. The statute expresses a clear preference for school support teams.

⁸ The targets are set by the state separately for mathematics and reading. They apply equally to the entire school and to subgroups of students. From 2002, the targets move progressively higher until the school year 2013-14, when the law calls for all students to meet their state's standard of proficiency in the two subjects.

School Support Teams

NCLB says that these teams should include some or all of the following: highly qualified or distinguished principals and teachers; pupil services personnel; parents; higher education representatives; representatives of federal regional assistance centers; outside consultants; and others who are similarly knowledgeable and experienced. The law also spells out the duties of the school support teams. They must:

- review and analyze all aspects of a school’s operation and make recommendations for improvement;
- collaborate with school staff and parents to design and implement a school improvement plan;
- monitor the implementation of the plan and request extra assistance from the district or state as needed; and
- provide feedback at least twice a year to the district and state regarding the effectiveness of personnel and the presence of outstanding teachers and principals.

Title I officials from the U.S. Department of Education’s Student Achievement and School Accountability Office take the position that school support teams are mandatory. In fact, Maine was cited during a program review for not having school support teams.⁹ But others interpret the statute to give states the option to deploy this form of assistance.¹⁰ In practice, not all states have support teams, and some state Title I directors have argued that the limitation that only 5 percent of school improvement funds go toward statewide efforts means that they lack the resources to field school support teams.

To require states to have school support teams of the character and with the duties prescribed in the legislation does not clarify what a statewide system of “intensive and sustained” support might look like. States have created a variety of structures, with many of them in existence prior to the enactment of NCLB. A program review of Michigan conducted by the U.S. Department of Education concluded that the state’s reliance on intermediate school districts did not constitute a statewide system of schools support.¹¹ This finding was vigorously disputed by state officials who noted that “there are no

⁹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Student Achievement and School Accountability, *Monitoring Report, Maine Department of Education*, May 4-7, 2004, p. 7.

¹⁰ “Title I Directors Get Answers on School Improvement Questions,” *Title I Monitor* 9, no. 9 (September 2004), p. 3.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Student Achievement and School Accountability, *Monitoring Report, Michigan Department of Education review*, June 7-10, 2004, p. 10.

specific regulations from USDOE on how or with whom technical assistance will be implemented.”¹²

In addition to the school support teams, the accountability requirements of NCLB have stimulated other kinds of technical assistance tailored to a school’s specific areas of weakness. The law’s requirement to report publicly achievement and accountability status disaggregated by subject and by student subgroup shines the spotlight on those areas where schools need help. Increasingly, therefore, states and districts are employing individuals with specific expertise, such as literacy or mathematics coaches, English-language-learners professionals, or school restructuring specialists. Arizona and Virginia provide examples of support for school improvement that do not involve school support teams.

The Arizona Department of Education selects external facilitators based on state qualifications and requires districts to contract with the facilitator(s) of their choice to work on implementing school improvement plans. These NCLB external facilitators are recruited, approved and trained by the state. The individuals selected run the gamut from staff members of federally-supported technical assistance centers, to private companies in the education reform business, to solo practitioners. They possess a wide range of skills related to effective school improvement planning and implementation. Some facilitators have been approved specifically to work in schools with a significant percentage of English language learners.

Virginia Governor Mark Warner initiated a pilot program, the Turnaround Specialists, to serve the most consistently low-performing Title I schools.¹³ For assignment as the principal of a low-performing school in the 2004-05 school year, ten licensed school administrators with a track record of overcoming adversity in schools were trained and credentialed as Turnaround Specialists. They will serve for a minimum of three years under a memorandum of understanding with the local school system that defines their goals, responsibilities and measures of success. Training is provided, including management, finance, accounting, and restructuring practices that it is hoped will bring about a successful transformation for the school. The Curry School of Education and the Darden School of Business Administration at the University of Virginia jointly offer a program that leads to a professional credential as a school Turnaround Specialist.¹⁴

Several states target districts rather than schools in order to build capacity locally to improve low-performing schools. Ohio has district coaches who help design specific services for school systems, including formulating high-quality professional development plans, implementing standards-based instructional practices, and demonstrating the use of data to analyze the effectiveness of improvement practices. A district coach, for example,

¹² Response to Title I Monitoring Report from Jeremy M. Hughes, Ph.D., Chief Academic Officer/Deputy Superintendent, Michigan Department of Education, September 13, 2004, p. 2.

¹³ www.governor.virginia.gov/initiatives/Ed4Life/

¹⁴ www.darden.virginia.edu/VDOE

might help a district ameliorate the high teacher attrition rate that has made it difficult for some schools to achieve state targets in reading and math.

Other State Support Structures

States have established various structures to serve as statewide networks of sustained support within which school support teams and specialists of various kinds operate. A state's geographical size may dictate the arrangement it establishes. Maryland, for example, with 24 school systems, has four school support specialists on the staff of the Maryland Department of Education, plus some external specialists. Kentucky's system consists of existing state and local staff plus a small cadre of district support facilitators who perform the function of school support teams. In Arizona, the state education agency essentially functions as the statewide system, assigning employees responsibilities for certain schools in certain regions of the state and employing NCLB external facilitators to work directly with schools. In Arkansas, the state department of education has established technical assistance teams that are assigned to each school identified as being in need of improvement. Their efforts are supplemented by a cadre of instructional specialists in reading and mathematics. Arkansas spends its 5 percent setaside money on professional development for its state network of school support.

Larger or more sparsely populated states have created regional networks or centers that are funded by the state to provide services for disabled students and for pre-school, computers and technology, and vocational/occupational programs. Often these regional outposts of state education agencies existed before NCLB or its predecessor. These may be free-standing entities created by state law, such as those in California, New York, Arkansas, and Michigan.

California's Statewide System of School Support was created to fulfill NCLB's mandates. It operates on a regional basis, including county offices, local school districts, federal Comprehensive Assistance Centers, and the California Department of Education. The state's 58 county offices of education are organized into 11 regions, which are funded to operate the school support teams. One county office of education in each of the 11 regional systems of district and school support is designated as the fiscal agent and applies to the California Department of Education for a grant to support the work of the entire region. California's strategy is to provide assistance directly to districts, not to individual schools. The rationale is that direct school-level assistance would not be feasible in a state with almost 9,000 schools overall and 1,610 schools in need of improvement in the 2004-05 school year. In addition, federal law places primary responsibility for improving schools on the districts in which they are located.

New York State's 5 percent reservation goes in part to support 10 Regional School Support Centers that work with the lowest performing schools in their respective regions. (Nine centers serve upstate districts and the tenth serves New York City.) The state's school improvement setaside money is allocated among the regions based on their share of Title I schools (those with 40 percent or more of their students receiving free and reduced price meals) in operation or in planning. Federal disability funds from IDEA and the Comprehensive School Reform Program also contribute support to the regional

structure. Their work is assisted by the staff of the New York State Department of Education.

Either directly or through regional extensions, state education departments are responsible for training, coordinating, and supervising personnel who provide technical assistance to schools. For example, Michigan's state staff works with intermediate districts, local district and school staff, Comprehensive School Reform providers, school coaches, and literacy and math/science specialists to ensure that the appropriate assistance is provided to schools. The Michigan Department of Education sends consultants to do on-site diagnostic reviews of schools designated for corrective action. It also provides materials and training about school improvement for the state's highest-need schools under a state-funded initiative.

The recent reorganization of the Ohio Department of Education includes a new field services unit that provides technical assistance to districts with the lowest achieving schools. This unit recruits, selects, and trains instructional coaches. And the state is restructuring its regional service centers in order to provide a comprehensive umbrella for overseeing all the various school improvement initiatives that are being undertaken.

Another arrangement found in some states is parallel systems of school support, one under state law and the other under federal law. New Jersey organizes school support teams that target Title I schools in corrective action under NCLB with school improvement responsibilities and support for high poverty districts (known as *Abbott* districts) covered by the state's school finance suit.¹⁵ Kentucky has established a system of technical assistance for schools identified by the state's biennial accountability system. Schools identified under this system have one set of supports. School systems that operate schools identified annually by federal accountability requirements receive the assistance of district support facilitators whose tasks are to build capacity at the district level so that local educators can enable their schools to achieve proficiency targets. These facilitators are hired with Title I school improvement funds. In some cases, schools can be identified under and receive support from both improvement structures.

Managing the School Improvement Fund

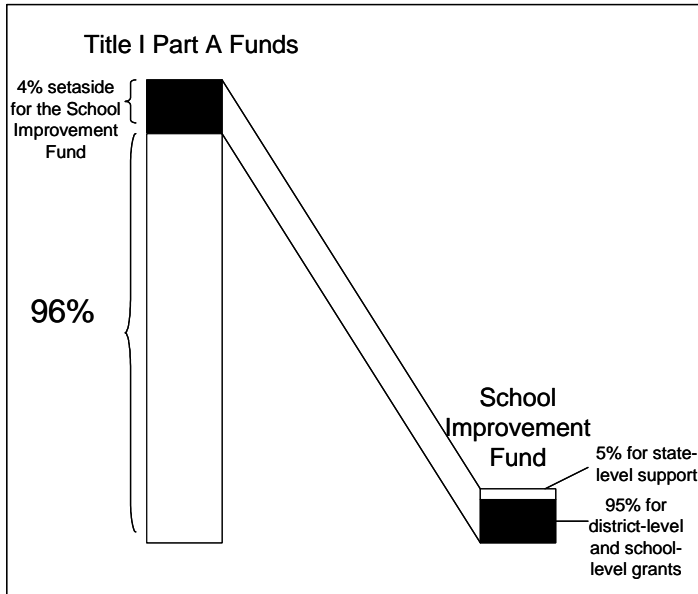
The second explicit federal requirement of states is that they reserve a specified portion of their Title I Part A funds, which the federal government allocates on the basis of census estimates of the number of low-income children between the ages of 5 and 17, to channel toward a School Improvement Fund (SIF) for use in helping schools to remedy the conditions that caused them to fall short of state targets, and that they allocate the SIF toward state and local efforts. NCLB funnels 2 percent of each state's Title I Part A funds toward the SIF in fiscal years 2002 and 2003 and 4 percent in fiscal years 2004 to 2007. (See Figure 2.)

States reserve 5 percent of the SIF to support the operation of their statewide systems of school support previously discussed. In allocating the remaining 95 percent of the SIF,

¹⁵ For a discussion of *Abbott v. Burke*, see page 23.

states are required to give priority to districts that have the lowest achieving schools. Districts must demonstrate the greatest need for assistance and the strongest commitment to ensuring that funds will be used so that their lowest achieving schools will meet state goals.

Figure 2. School Improvement Fund (2004-05)



Most states examined for this study have adopted a formula for determining the amount of a school improvement grant that factors in the length of time a school has been in improvement status. Schools and/or their districts are invited to apply for these grants. Schools must revamp their existing school improvement plan and specify how school improvement money will be used to execute the plan. They submit a budget and the state is supposed to maintain some record of how funds were spent. States operate this as they do any other federal subgrant award. Some examples used by states follow.

Outside of New York City, the state of New York allocates to districts a flat amount that depends on the number of years the school has been in improvement (\$65,000 for improvement years 1 and 2), corrective action (\$75,000 for years 1 and 2), or restructuring (\$85,000 for the planning year and for restructuring). Local school district officials have discretion to reallocate funds to another school. For example, the district may redirect funds if the originally designated school is already receiving a multi-year school improvement grant from another source.

North Carolina allots money to school districts based on the number of SINI, plus a per-child amount based on the enrollment at Title I SINI. The base amount ranges from \$15,000 for a district with one SINI to \$60,000 for a district that has ten SINI.

Michigan only uses school improvement money in schools in the corrective action or restructuring phases. The total school improvement grant to a district depends on the number of schools in those two stages. A district with three or fewer such schools gets

\$45,000 per school, while a district with 10 or more such schools gets \$25,000 per school. The rationale behind the lower per-school allocation for those districts that have more schools in the second and third stages of improvement status is that districts with more schools can achieve economies of scale unavailable to districts with fewer schools.

New Jersey divides the total number of dollars available by the total number of students receiving free and reduced price lunches in all schools in improvement in the state. Each school then receives a pro rata share of that amount.

Georgia allocates a base amount to each school depending on the number of years it has been in “needs improvement” status, as noted in Figure 3. It then supplements that grant based on school enrollment. A 650-pupil elementary school in Georgia in its first year as a SINI would be eligible for a grant of \$15,000. The grant amount would increase to \$22,000 if it fell short of its accountability targets the next year. Priority awards go to schools that have been in improvement for four or more years.

Figure 3. Georgia Title I School Improvement Grants (2004-05)

Years in Needs Improvement	Base Amount Per Grant	Enrollment Supplement per 601-1,000 Students	Additional Enrollment Supplement per >1,000 students
NI 1	\$ 10,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 10,000
NI 2 & 3	\$ 17,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 10,000
NI 4,5,6,7	\$ 75,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 10,000

While this clear-cut, per-school allotment appears to operate in many states under review, other policy choices and interpretations of the NCLB are at work. Consider two contrasting examples, Georgia and Arkansas. Georgia’s school improvement allocation more than doubled from 2003-04 to 2004-05 at the same time that its number of schools in improvement declined from 503 to 413. Georgia decided to award improvement grants to all schools in any stage of improvement in 2004-05. On the other hand, Arkansas’ total Title I school improvement award also more than doubled, although not as much as Georgia’s. The number of its schools in improvement rose modestly from 272 in school year 2003-04 to 305 in year 2004-05. But of the 305 schools, only 20 percent had been on the list of schools in need of improvement for more than two years. Reading the law to permit funding only to schools that have been in improvement longest, the state designated 39 schools as eligible to apply for school improvement funding. Other schools more recently designated in need of improvement received some assistance from state sources.

Ohio has another strategy for managing school improvement funds. It ranks Title I schools identified for improvement based on the amount by which the school fell short of the state’s performance standards in reading and in math. To that number, it adds the school’s concentration of poverty, expressed as a percentage. The sum of those two

numbers translates into a certain number of points, which form the ranking. This approach considers how far a school is from the state's performance standard, not just how long it has been a SINI, and it recognizes the research demonstrating that high concentrations of poverty can have an adverse impact on students' ability to achieve at high levels. To receive funds, both the district and the school must agree to a set of assurances outlining expectations that accompany the receipt and use of the money.

III. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FUNDING AND SPENDING

The following section outlines how the amount of money each state receives for its SIF is determined at the national level, and showcases some examples of how those funds are being used by local districts and schools.

As mentioned earlier, each state's SIF stems from a portion of that state's Title I Part A funds, which are typically allocated in basic grants to thousands of school districts across the country. The major features of the formula used in determining how much a state receives in Title I Part A funds are census estimates of the number of poor children living in each Title I eligible school district, adjusted to account for each state's average per-pupil expenditure, and the amount of money appropriated by Congress.

Since 1994, the congressionally-mandated formula for allocating Title I funds has used updated census poverty estimates so that money is shifted more quickly to school systems with increasing numbers of low-income students.¹⁶ These updates use food stamp recipients, tax returns, and other indices of children's income status in order to estimate the number of poor children in area school districts. Thus, Title I allocations can be influenced by economic trends in the state, region, or the whole nation. While districts that serve a growing number of low-income students are likely to receive additional Title I funds, school districts may experience a reduction, or at least no growth, in Title I funds if their census estimates decline or stagnate or if appropriations do not rise enough to cover the loss. Because each state's SIF is derived from Title I Part A allocations, these factors affecting Title I allocations also impact the amount of money different states have available for school improvement efforts.

School Improvement Funding 2004-05

This is exactly what happened for the 2004-05 school year. Even though Congress increased overall Title I funding by 5.59 percent, population shifts and a reduction in the number of low-income children left 10 states and 7,365 school districts with less funding than in the previous year. This overall loss of Title I Part A allocations in these ten states¹⁷ happened at the same time that the percentage of these funds required to be set aside for school improvement increased from 2 percent to 4 percent.

The dollar amounts for the SIF for the 2004-05 school year shown in Figure 1 are what the law *should* have yielded if states had been able to allocate the full 4 percent of their Title I funds toward school improvement. However, the combination of increasing the setaside from 2 percent to 4 percent and the new census estimates has reduced the amount of school improvement dollars in some states because the law also says that allocations to

¹⁶ In 1994, Congress required census figures to be updated every other year. In 2003, Congress changed this to annual updates for use in Title I allocations. Still, there is a four-year lag. The 2004-05 allocations are based on 2000 data.

¹⁷ The ten states that lost Title I Part A allocations in 2004-05 were: Kansas (-5.82 percent), Maine (-5.5 percent), Massachusetts (-10.0 percent), Michigan (-1.01 percent), Minnesota (-10.45 percent), Missouri (-4.87 percent), New Hampshire (-1.58 percent), New Jersey (-2.04 percent), North Dakota (-0.24 percent), and Pennsylvania (-1.30 percent).

districts must be made before school improvement dollars are set aside. A school system's regular Title I allocation cannot be trimmed below the previous year's amount due to the school improvement setaside. So, for example, a state that received less Title I money in 2004-05 than in 2003-04 would ensure that each district receives at least as much money as last year before allocating 4 percent of Title I funds toward school improvement. However, after making the district allocations, there might not be enough left to fully fund the SIF at 4 percent of all Title I funds.

The fact that the allocation of Title I funds to states is tied to the number of low-income children in a state and is not linked to the number of schools in improvement status means that, over time, a state can have more SIFI and still lose money for school improvement, as illustrated by Minnesota, one of the 10 states that experienced a drop in its Title I Part A funding. Because the number of poor children aged 5-17 fell between the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years, the state's overall Title I allocation declined by almost 11 percent between 2003-04 and 2004-05. Its school improvement resources were reduced to \$628,335 from the \$4.2 million that the law *would* have yielded if the full 4 percent of Title I Part A had gone toward the school improvement fund. The Minnesota Department of Education used Title I reallocated funds carried over from the 2003-04 school year in an attempt to preserve the maximum amount possible of its shrinking SIF appropriations. In the end, during the period in which the setaside requirements for school improvement funds increased from 2 percent of all Title I Part A funds to 4 percent of such funds, this state saw its school improvement funds drop.

The reverse can also happen, as the case of Georgia shows. This state's overall Title I allocation increased almost 11 percent in this same time frame. Its school improvement fund more than doubled, yet 90 fewer schools were designated as needing improvement in 2004-05.

School Improvement Funding 2005-06

The Omnibus Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2005, which provides funds for the 2005-06 school year, did not improve the picture for school improvement resources. Title I Part A funding for the 2005-06 school year increased by \$397 million, or 3.2 percent over the previous year.

In addition to and separate from the Title I Part A allocations, the Senate appropriations bill that contained \$100 million in additional resources for school improvement did not survive conference with the House of Representatives. This \$100 million came from a line item authorizing the Secretary of Education to make grants to states, which in turn would make subgrants to districts for school improvement. That authorization contained in NCLB passed in early 2002 but has never been funded.

Another potential source of school improvement money used by some states is the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program. Initiated by congressional appropriators in 1998 and made permanent by NCLB, this program enables states to make grants in sufficient size and scope to fund the initial start-up costs for the implementation of a complete overhaul of a school's instructional program. The minimum size of a CSR grant

is \$50,000. The impetus behind this was to launch whole school reform models developed through national education programs.

Congress cut CSR funding by 12 percent, rescuing it from the total obliteration proposed by the administration. Language in the appropriations act strongly advises states to use their 4 percent setaside to support implementation of CSR models “that have been shown through scientifically-based research to be effective and that are supported by organizations capable of assisting multiple schools and districts.” Congress’ one other action on Title I school improvement for fiscal year 2005 was to include (among more than one thousand earmarks) \$18 million for the Pennsylvania Department of Education. With these funds, the Commonwealth proposes to improve the management and operation of school districts; assist with curriculum development; provide after-school, summer and weekend programs; provide professional development to teachers; and to purchase and make effective use of instructional technology and equipment.

Impact of Funding on States’ Capacity To Aid Low-Performing Schools

The vicissitudes of congressional appropriations, interacting with the law’s mandates, create uncertainty about available funds and the states’ capacity to provide a statewide system of “intensive and sustained support” for low-performing schools, according to state officials responsible for school improvement. Title I directors or state accountability directors would like to see a steady and increasing supply of funds for school improvement, particularly as they anticipate higher state accountability targets classifying more and more schools as SINI. In addition, some say they find it difficult to mount a statewide system of sustained and intense assistance within the constraint of using only 5 percent of the funds NCLB provides for school improvement. This is how Michigan’s director of school improvement characterized the dilemma faced in many states:

We know from research that you cannot sustain coaching/mentoring work with more than 2-3...schools at one time. Even if we went with three schools, we’re looking at our 100 coaches at a minimum of 100 days half time....Of course, not all technical assistance needs to be that individualized, but if we are talking about real change, it takes human effort. We have worked very hard at building statewide capacity for training coaches who can then be hired by identified schools and be paid out of their [school improvement] funds....Given Michigan’s financial situation and our inability to use more than 5 percent [of school improvement funds for state-level efforts], we anticipate that by fiscal year 2006-07 we will need to significantly reduce our technical assistance to the increasing number of schools—and now districts—not making [adequate yearly progress].

In addition to advocating for higher levels of appropriations, state officials made three suggestions: 1) Congress should appropriate money under the authorized budget line item, the same vehicle that the Senate used to vote for the \$100 million for the 2005-06 school year, which ultimately did not become law; 2) States should receive funds for school improvement based at least partially on the number of schools designated as needing improvement, not just by their fluctuating setaside from Title I Part A; 3) There

should be some consideration and flexibility in interpretation of the 5 percent limitation on expenditures for the state support system.

In contrast to what these state authorities advocate, it appears that other states have too much money. In the 2003-04 school year, Texas had nine SINI and \$20.3 million, or roughly \$2.26 million per SINI. The SIF doubled to \$44.4 million for the 2004-05 school year, totaling roughly \$225,524 for each of the 197 schools Texas designated as needing improvement in 2004-05. The seemingly excessive money from 2003-04, however, may not have helped the state next year when it had more SINI, because states can ordinarily carry over only 15 percent of Title I funds from one school year to the next.

How Schools Use Improvement Money

As previously noted, federal law establishes a sequence of interventions with schools that have not met their state's accountability targets for two consecutive years. For each stage, the statute spells out both mandatory and suggested remedies for putting a school back on track, or, as it is known in the business, "getting off the list." School improvement funds must be used for expenditures directly associated with the required improvement steps at each stage. The grants supported by school improvement funds are short-term, uncertain, and modest, ranging from \$15,000 to \$85,000 for one year. Even a grant renewable for a second year may not be the same amount.

Federal school improvement money is not intended to pay for major investments in low-performing schools. The kinds of remedies called for in the corrective action or restructuring stages should be the responsibility of state and local governments. Consequently, school improvement grants can only cover non-recurrent costs that do not extend beyond a year. Georgia cautions local officials not to incur personnel costs because the grant covers only one year. That state also urges limited expenditures for computers and related hardware and places an outright prohibition on capital expenses, including building renovations or the purchase of vehicles. The money must be spent on expenses connected with implementing the improvement strategies. Non-recurrent costs are principally for personnel who engage in professional development; the support of a coach, facilitator, or consultant who may work with the school a day or two per week; staff *per diem* for work on the school improvement plan; and indirect costs for the central office that manages the grants are also built into the budget.

Schools In Improvement

Creating or revising a school improvement plan is the basic requirement for all stages of improvement. The law is quite specific in detailing nine components of the plan, and federal officials take these plans seriously. Federal program reviews frequently inspect plans and call attention to missing items. Plans must be tailored to individual schools and must be reviewed and approved by district officials. Although central office personnel in school systems have the primary responsibility for school improvement, state departments of education do exert leverage over the process by approving or rejecting a school's proposed budget for its Title I school improvement dollars. States can also stipulate how money can be spent. Arizona, for example, requires schools to use the state-certified external facilitators. Other states use coaches, or an external advisor, or

members of the school support teams who assist a school in working through its plan. The amount of time these advisors or the school support team members spend through the school year with the school on its plan varies by state policy and available improvement money. It could be as little as a day and a half per month throughout the year. Such an investment could be very superficial.

NCLB prescribes three major tasks associated with building the capacity of a school in the first two years of improvement to meet or exceed the state's accountability goals:

1. teaching school staff how to use data and samples of student work to identify and resolve instructional problems;
2. helping schools choose effective instructional strategies; and
3. providing guidance on analyzing and revising a school's total budget (including its normal Title I allocation) so that resources are used more effectively and in line with achievement objectives.

The expectation is that the school improvement grant pays for costs associated with these activities. District and state educators share legal responsibility for monitoring implementation of the plan, a cost that may also be covered by school improvement resources. Some states examined for this study administer the school improvement funds just as they would any other discretionary grant for which local districts must apply. There is a written budget and follow up accounting for how money was spent.

Corrective Action

Schools are classified for corrective action when they have been in school improvement for two consecutive years and are unable to meet state accountability targets in the succeeding third year. (Such schools have by now fallen short of state accountability standards for *four* consecutive years—two years before being classified as SINI and two years in that category.) In this stage, districts and states intervene more decisively in a school's operation. The law actually provides a list of suggested interventions, one of which must be taken. The list comprises actions that are common to some state improvement policies: more professional development; instituting a new curriculum; more instructional time; a new staff; reduced management authority for the principal; reorganized internal school operations; or the appointment of an outside advisor.

A school improvement grant will be sufficient to pay for some time of an outside advisor, teacher stipends for attending meetings, perhaps some supplementary reading materials, and related expenses of the district office. But some of these actions necessitate more resources than the kind of formulaic grant that states typically employ. In other cases, these interventions might occur as a result of district-wide reforms, such as the adoption of a new math curriculum and text book series in all schools at a certain grade level. In that event, those changes would be paid for by the regular program for all schools, and a

Title I school could pay for extra professional development with 10 percent of its normal Title I allocation plus its school improvement grant.

In all likelihood, the most potent intervention is the specter of restructuring on the horizon. A school that has been struggling for four years is unlikely to make up that lost ground in one year, in which case it goes directly into the final phase. Moreover, a school that has lagged so long may have already gone through the same corrective action measures NCLB calls for as a result of local or state policy. Corrective action is only a way station to the third stage under NCLB. After one more year of missing the state's proficiency standards in reading and math, the school goes into restructuring. If, on the other hand, it does achieve the standards, it must achieve the standards for a second consecutive year before it is "off the list."

Restructuring

The third stage of school improvement under the NCLB rubric is actually spread over two years. Restructuring Year 1 is planning for restructuring. Restructuring Year 2 is implementing the plan. By Year 1, a school has been in school improvement for six years or more (i.e. two years of not meeting standards prior to being designated as needing improvement, two years in needs improvement status, and two years in corrective action). The remedies called for in NCLB are considered the most severe, helping to give the law its reputation for being punitive toward schools. But the label of restructuring can be a useful tool for making necessary changes. This phase of school improvement calls for remedies, one of which must be 1) replacing the entire staff; 2) contracting the school out to private management; 3) turning the school over to the state; or 4) reopening the school as a charter school.

Federal lawmakers did not invent these measures of corrective action and restructuring. The language comes directly from prior reauthorizations of Title I (the Improving America's Schools Act) and from the practices of cities and states. Urban school systems across the country have applied these same measures of restructuring to their persistently low-performing schools for at least a decade with various results.¹⁸

The improvement of the most depressed, under-financed and under-performing schools in New Jersey occurred outside the ambit of any federal improvement mandates. Infusions of state money ordered by the New Jersey Supreme Court in *Abbott v. Burke*¹⁹ have raised per-pupil spending in the 30 poorest urban districts to \$13,000, almost what the richest districts spend. These resources have bought for students in these districts education benefits that were heretofore available only in wealthy school systems. They included preschool and full-day kindergarten programs, reduced class size, social service

¹⁸ Heinrich Mintrop and Tina Trujillo, *Corrective Action in Low-Performing Schools: Lessons for NCLB Implementation from State and District Strategies in First-Generation Accountability Systems* (Los Angeles: National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), University of California at Los Angeles, December 2004), pp. 8-12. Available at <http://cresst96.cse.ucla.edu/reports/r641.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Abbott v. Burke*, 177 N.J. 596, 832 A.2d 906, July 2003. See also www.edlawcenter.org.

programs, enhanced security, whole-school reform models, and major facilities renovation. *Abbott* districts have something to show with their improved gains on the state's Grade 4 language arts tests, even though students in these districts still are far below New Jersey's proficiency standard.²⁰ Nearly 120 schools, including 21 in Newark that are covered by the *Abbott* orders, have been placed in corrective action because they have fallen short for four straight years. State and local officials criticized the NCLB for imposing severe sanctions while providing only limited funding.²¹ The state department of education will deploy its teams to conduct reviews in these schools and make recommendations for change.

The remedies, or as some call them, "sanctions," are controversial because they are considered impracticable. In Michigan, for example, putting a school under state control is not considered a realistic option because the small state education agency lacks the capacity to operate schools.²² Replacing staff is similarly regarded as impractical in financially troubled districts that are laying off teachers. Instead of using those options, Michigan's Division of School Improvement has invested heavily in developing the coaching/mentoring model for use in schools in either corrective action or restructuring.

NCLB's three-stage, yearly-driven school improvement process with mandates to pick at least one intervention from a list may appear rigid and mechanistic on the surface. But states do have some leeway to be creative by adapting to local circumstances. And local school officials can use the designation of restructuring to bring about positive change. A case study of the Willow Run School District in Michigan exemplifies this. The district's only middle school had made adequate yearly progress once in five years. The building was going to be replaced by a new facility as part of the district's building program. The superintendent took the opportunity to replace the staff through retirements, transfers, and new hires. The Title I improvement grant covered some expenses in connection with planning the changes. General funds covered the major expenses of teacher retirement packages and training for the new staff. In the view of Superintendent Douglas Beiut, "I don't look at any of this stuff as negative. In fact, we used NCLB as a kind of lever."²³ The ammunition NCLB gives local administrators to make difficult changes may be worth more than the value of a school improvement grant.

²⁰ Catherine Gewertz, "A Level Playing Field," *Education Week* 24, no. 17 (January 2005), pp. 40-48.

²¹ John Mooney, "Sanctioned Schools List Improves, But A Fourth of State Facilities Don't Measure Up To No Child Left Behind," *Star-Ledger*, September 30, 2004. Available at www.nj.com.

²² Many states do operate schools such as special schools for disabled children and for youngsters gifted in music or science or art.

²³ Caitlin Scott, *Make Overs, Facelifts, or Reconstructive Surgery—An Early Look at NCLB School Restructuring in Michigan* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, November 2004).

IV. CONCLUSION

The Center for American Progress' limited examination of the role of the states in school improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act has produced at least preliminary answers to the four questions the project asked.

- We know that state systems of support for schools in need of improvement are mostly regional in focus, and that state departments of education are presumably responsible for ensuring that the statewide effort is coordinated and coherent.
- We have gained some insight into whether or not the chief mechanism for school improvement—the school support team—is appropriate and whether the statutory priorities are the right ones. It would be important to gain the perspective of local school systems on these issues in order to have a more complete picture.
- We know how some states allocate money to districts and that school improvement funds cover only non-recurrent costs. State officials say they need flexibility or authorization to use more than 5 percent of the School Improvement Fund, particularly as the need grows for more personnel to assist more SINI.
- We discovered a mismatch between the number of schools in improvement and the dollars available to help them perform at a higher level. The Department of Education should monitor this phenomenon and find out what states with surplus school improvement money have done with these funds.

It is troubling that the federal government is sending conflicting signals about priorities for school improvement, with the Department of Education emphasizing school support teams and congressional appropriators stressing whole school reform models. In a larger perspective, the whole approach to improving the performance of low-achieving schools, as embodied in NCLB, does not seem to be equal to the task. However, having all Title I schools in improvement status—what people refer to as “the train wreck”—is not inevitable. But it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy unless changes are made at all levels. Recommended changes include the following:

1. Build state capacity. The one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement does not fit all. States need a repertoire of approaches. They need to diagnose schools' problems and issues before recommending or prescribing possible remedies. To do this, states need to build capacity. They cannot continue to rely on the same cadre of “distinguished principals and teachers” to work with other schools when they are needed back in their home districts. It is likely an uncontested assertion that no state in the nation has, at the present time, the capacity to provide on its own a diversified approach that will enable most, or virtually all, Title I schools to meet the standard of proficiency by the 2013-14 school year.

The shortcomings in states' capacity are not just a question of money, although expecting to operate a statewide system of *intense* and *sustained* support on 5 percent of the school improvement money is unrealistic. It is also a matter of developing the knowledge and the people that could provide an effective system that replicates successes. To build that capacity, state and federal officials could look to a model now in NCLB. States have responsibilities for recruiting and approving providers of supplemental services for tutoring of eligible children. They identify providers through an RFP (request for proposals) process. They certify the providers as qualified and monitor their performance. Applying this model to school improvement process, schools and districts would contract with state-approved providers, unless they could demonstrate that an alternative is equally or better suited to address their needs. The states' regional entities and intermediate or county units would have to compete with other providers, including federal comprehensive research centers, whole school model providers, and various other providers.

2. Focus beyond schools. Focusing school improvement efforts and money on schools alone is likely to miss some sources of schools' problems. The responsibility for supporting classroom teachers and principals extends to the community, the district's central office and school board, and the state. As one director of school improvement wrote, "Classroom teachers must be supported by knowledgeable leaders who can assist in guiding classroom practice, the selection of materials, and the use of data to increase student achievement." Under NCLB, districts are supposed to be "first responders" to schools that need improvement, but they may not be equipped to do so. As another respondent said, "There are significant differences between districts in their capacity to provide effective leadership for determining the most effective use of resources provided to support school improvement." Leadership development of principals and central office administrators should be considered a legitimate school improvement expense.
3. Ensure appropriate funding for school improvement efforts. Because of the current funding process and the differences in the standards used by states to identify schools in need of improvement, funding per SINI varies widely between states. Congress should appropriate funds every year for a separate school improvement authorization and direct the Secretary of Education to allocate that money proportionately to states whose school improvement fund has dipped below 4 percent of its Title I Part A setaside.
4. Use school improvement funds more strategically. States need to be more strategic in how they develop capacity and use money. The School Improvement Fund should not be treated as just another discretionary grant program. Other resources, such as special education money under IDEA and funds from Title III of NCLB for English language learners, should be folded into school improvement grants. More than that, the identification of long struggling schools required by NCLB can be used to focus state assistance on the communities in which these schools are located. In Michigan, for example, the list of schools in

need of improvement—high priority schools—is used by the Family Independence Agency to establish Family Resource Centers. So far, centers have been set up in 20 of those schools, providing transportation, child protection, housing and other state services for families.

5. Focus attention on effectiveness. The U.S. Department of Education needs to pay attention to the issue of effectiveness. When the department’s Office of Student Achievement and School Accountability conducts program reviews in state departments of education, it should ask not only whether school support teams are in place but also whether they are successful. Is getting schools “off the list” an adequate standard for judging the effectiveness of school improvement efforts? What should be the standard? Some states told us that they were evaluating their work in school improvement but had no results to share yet.

Providing high-quality assistance to schools in need of improvement is the next major challenge in implementing NCLB. It will require harnessing the experience and resources that have been brought to bear under state programs, under federal mandates, and by institutions and agencies in the reform community. By developing a substantial foundation of knowledge and putting our most informed efforts into practice, this country can enable schools to erase the label “in need of improvement” and to move all their students to standards of proficiency in reading and mathematics.