

ISSUE BRIEF

www.centerforcsri.org

September 30 | 2009

EFFECTIVE USES OF FUNDING SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT

Background

Under the federal mandate of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, states are required to establish steadily increasing targets for student achievement in reading and mathematics that will demonstrate the academic success of all students, including the traditionally low-performing subgroups. Schools that do not meet these targets for two consecutive years are identified as in need of improvement and are required to make substantive change that will affect the quality of instruction for students and increase their achievement levels. According to federal guidelines, the more years that a school does not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) the more intensive are the interventions required for reform (NCLB, 2002).

The School Improvement Fund is authorized in §1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the NCLB Act, and in recent years Congress has provided steadily increasing appropriations for school improvement grants under that authority. While Title I funds are targeted widely to high-poverty schools and used to provide educational services to students who are educationally disadvantaged or at risk of failing to meet state standards, school improvement grants are designed to

provide additional, critical support to districts with the highest numbers of schools that face restructuring or are in corrective action.

States are required to provide 95 percent of the school improvement funds directly to the local educational agencies (LEAs) with the highest needs, as described above. These funds can be used for the purpose of (1) building state capacity to provide leadership in implementing effective school improvement strategies for LEAs and schools that have been identified for improvement, are in corrective action, or are in the restructuring process, and (2) providing resources to LEAs to support school improvement activities, including the development and implementation of effective school improvement plans. As a result of the growing number of schools in need of improvement and a greater than ever push to seek and scale up innovative techniques, the 2008 fiscal year appropriation dramatically increased the funding for this program. Nonetheless, schools continue to struggle with the decision of how best to use their funding to get positive, substantial results.

Recently, as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (AARA), U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced an additional \$3 billion in

Title I School Improvement Grants, in addition to the \$500 million available through the regular fiscal year (FY) 2009 appropriation. The funds are intended to turn around the nation's lowest performing schools by implementing robust and comprehensive reforms that ultimately will improve student outcomes dramatically. Secretary Duncan has explicitly called for these funds to be used to address the issues of high schools and to remedy what he has called "the dropout factories." Even though high schools have struggled with low academic performance for a long time, many districts have concentrated their Title I funds at the elementary level. In redefining the criteria for struggling schools to receive Title I school improvement funding, Secretary Duncan has proposed the following three tiers:

- Tier I—the state's lowest achieving 5 percent of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring, or the five lowest performing Title I schools, whichever number is greater
- Tier II—equally low-achieving secondary schools that are eligible for but do not receive Title I funds, especially extremely low-achieving high schools and their feeder middle schools
- Tier III—the remaining Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that are not Tier I schools in the state

America's K–12 educational system is at a crossroads. At a time when almost 14,000 schools are in some stage of improvement status, and schools are entering restructuring at a faster rate than they are exiting (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), there is an urgent need to find proven strategies to reform schools.

Recent Developments

A relentless drive is underway in the United States to make dramatic improvements

in public education so that all students can maximize their knowledge and skills and graduate from high school prepared to take on the challenges of college, the workforce, and life with success. Schools and districts continue to struggle with meeting these goals and attaining satisfactory accountability criteria set by their state education agencies. Many districts that have developed systemic and collaborative approaches to school improvement are experiencing substantial success. Largely, these district improvement efforts are funded by Title I formula and school improvement funds and concentrated on the low-performing schools at all grade levels. Many districts, however, are increasing their funding for high school improvement initiatives.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement undertook an examination of schools and districts in which thoughtful and well-articulated use of federal, state, and local funds has resulted in innovative and effective reform that can be replicated or adapted in other, similar sites. We reviewed research on district improvement efforts and conducted interviews with district personnel in nine districts across the United States to find practices that are effective in supporting school improvement. This Issue Brief summarizes the results of these interviews, discusses the emerging themes on district support of school improvement, and highlights some successful strategies being funded by Title I formula and school improvement funds for improvement and reform efforts. While none of the identified districts utilizes its school improvement funds specifically for its high school initiatives, it was quite evident from all the interviews that other funds were being utilized to implement school improvement initiatives at the high school level. During the past year, a few districts have started allocating Title I and school improvement funds to both their middle and

their high schools, but those cases are too new to determine success of the effort. All the districts interviewed made clear their reliance on Title I formula and school improvement funds to help them initiate and scale up successful practices, and all recommended that more of these funds be made available to further support their secondary reform efforts.

Research on the District Role in School Improvement

Much of the recent research on district efforts to reform low-performing schools has been presented as case studies of districts. Often, these districts serve large numbers of students struggling to overcome socioeconomic, sociocultural, or linguistic factors. Some but not all of these districts are urban. Evidence suggests that successful districts employ a large repertoire of strategies to support systemwide success in student learning. In addition, comprehensive, strategic planning is critical: The impact of district strategies depends on their comprehensive use in a coordinated way (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). In addition, findings from Togneri and Anderson (2003) emphasize the importance of leadership—particularly, investing in instructional leadership at the building level.

When the results of district case studies since 1998 were reviewed and the findings were compared with the findings of studies in the early and mid-1990s, recurring themes emerged. The review points to the following kinds of district policies and strategies that have been effective in supporting school improvement and improving student learning outcomes (Anderson, 2003):

- Belief among district and school leadership that the district has the commitment and

capacity to attain high levels of student achievement

- Districtwide focus on student achievement and high-quality instruction
- Commitment to districtwide performance standards, curricula, and approaches to instruction
- Alignment of curriculum, materials, and assessments to performance standards
- Systemwide use of data to inform practice, hold school and district leaders accountable, and monitor progress
- Improvement strategies that are phased in over time
- Investment in the development of instructional leaders
- Districtwide, job-embedded, instructionally focused professional development
- District- and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community
- Positive board-district and district-school relations
- Active engagement with state framework and reform policy development—not just compliance

A 2004 study on factors affecting successful districtwide reform echoes many of the same themes. This study found that districtwide reform depends on a compelling vision for success and a sense of commitment and purpose among all stakeholders, investment in leadership and teaching capacity, ongoing organizational learning, and a culture of high expectations for teaching and learning (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). In addition to these themes, Fullan et al. (2004) identified three other components of successful districts: productive conflict, a situation in which stakeholders work in an environment where discussion, disagreement, and divergent ideas are honored and considered; use of external partners; and use of financial resources focused on teaching and learning. Notably, this study identified high schools as in need of additional attention in districtwide reform efforts.



The Center's Study and Findings

The Center embarked on a series of interviews to further the discussion on successful district supports for school improvement. The Center selected districts that were successfully improving their lowest performing schools. Our investigation found that these districts were using many of the strategies noted in the research.

A sample of school districts was selected through a three-step process. First, state department of education personnel were contacted for recommendations of districts that employ exemplary practices to support school improvement. Criteria for nomination included districts with a high number of schools in need of improvement that were implementing programs to move their schools toward meeting AYP goals. Ten states responded and nominated a total of 20 districts. The Center contacted the superintendents from all 20 districts, as well as 10 districts selected from the list of districts that had been awarded the Broad Prize for Urban Education. Of the 30 districts contacted, nine districts responded and were interviewed. These districts represent diverse geographic areas and settings.

Each district convened a group of district- and school-level leaders for a 60-minute, recorded telephone interview. The interview protocol consisted of questions related to six areas: resources, planning, professional development, programs, leadership, and parent and community involvement. In addition, data were gathered from each district's website, including demographic data and the number of schools identified as in need of improvement. Districts were asked to submit documents to further elucidate school improvement efforts. Documents included district improvement plans, state and district strategic planning frameworks,

and rubrics for evaluating various district improvement efforts.

Interview transcripts were coded to draw out common themes across the districts. Processes and strategies that were used in the various districts were identified and grouped into three themes: strategic planning; leadership development; and a focus on teaching and learning.

Common Themes in District Support of School Improvement

Theme 1: Strategic Planning

A common thread across the districts we interviewed was the strong foundation of a strategic plan or framework for school improvement planning. Some districts' improvement plans were driven by a state framework for improvement that included both a written structure and a set of criteria for holding districts accountable to the plan. Other districts operate with strategic plans developed at the local level. Strategic plans provide direction for where a district is going and how it plans to get there. They outline the vision, mission, values, goals, and strategies that are to be fostered and undertaken, and they demonstrate a strong alignment between the mission and the allocation of resources.

Districts' plans in Maryland are clearly tied to the Maryland Bridge to Excellence framework, and those in Ohio to the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP). In Ohio, the state plan provides support for scaling up successful models of outstanding schools in districts. Both the Bridge to Excellence and the OIP provide a structure for developing and evaluating districts plans. Personnel from two districts in Ohio, Lima City Schools and Ashtabula Area City Schools, spoke about the value of using the OIP to guide their district improvement

efforts. In these districts, the improvement plans were largely centered on scaling up the success of one or two high-need schools that had shown exceptional success with student achievement. In Baltimore County, staff members praised their superintendent's Blueprint for Progress (built on the Bridge to Excellence framework) for its high level of focus on student learning. They noted that the eight performance goals of the plan are tightly aligned to the state's framework and serve as the foundation for the system's improvement efforts. In New Jersey, the districts were framing their improvement efforts around the Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement program initiated by the state department of education, which provides criteria for state evaluation of district improvement efforts. Long Beach Unified School District in California has developed its strategic plans based on criteria mandated by the state of California.

In Lima City, the district team talked extensively about the success of Freedom Elementary School, rated as Continuous Improvement by the state in August 2009. In four years (2004–2008), Freedom had moved from an Ohio state ranking of Academic Emergency to Effective. The principal at Freedom implemented a comprehensive system of improvement based on the OIP. Using this site as a model, the district decided to scale up the practices to that of other schools in the district. In discussing the transition at Freedom Elementary, the former principal said, "It's paying attention to academics; it's paying attention to behavioral needs; it's involving the community; it's sharing your leadership; it's being transparent with your data; and it's making it a group effort." The principal who oversaw the Freedom Elementary improvement effort was transferred to a district middle school and is working closely with district personnel to implement this model in other schools.

Lima City's district leadership team was quick to emphasize the value of having the OIP as a framework. The standardized expectations and the requirement for monitoring and continuous improvement help focus both the district efforts and the individual school efforts. Improvement plans—whether at the district or the school level—must mirror the OIP. Karel Oxley, Lima City superintendent, told us that the implementation of the OIP led to the district's nomination by the state as an exemplary district.

Theme 2: Leadership Development

Almost universally accepted in the profession is the idea that strong leadership for school improvement is essential to its success. Although the issues related to leadership can be controversial and certainly multifaceted, districts must identify effective leadership characteristics and work to ensure that their schools are being led by exemplary administrators. Who are exemplary leaders, and how can districts shore up their leadership capacity?

Experts agree that leaders inspire and motivate; they stand for something and, most important, have a clear vision. School districts must have a clear vision for teaching and learning, and they must recruit and retain leaders who can provide the structure, goals, and strategies that support the vision (Hallinger & Heck, 2009). This requires a well-planned, deliberate process for the development of new leaders while providing ongoing support for the current ones.

Leadership emerged as a common theme among the districts we interviewed. We found that strong central office leadership was always paired with collaboration between district and school leadership and that collaborative leadership was the norm. Teams of district and school administrators, teachers, and community members were driving the improvement efforts in schools. These

teams consisted of district personnel, school principals, instructional coaches, support personnel, and teachers.

We also found that districts experiencing steady growth are using school improvement funds to provide resources for ongoing professional development of instructional leaders, including school principals, district support personnel, and teacher leaders. The Lima City Schools Leadership Academy and the Essex County Summer Leadership Academy for principals in Virginia reinforce the emphasis on the school leaders' role in instruction. School districts in Jersey City, New Jersey; Anne Arundel, Maryland; and Lower Cape May, New Jersey, provide professional development for school administrators and teachers on strategies for shared leadership. Leadership training and support often are provided by external consultants and experts who are paid from federal school improvement funds.

In Jersey City Schools, the superintendent reorganized the district-level leadership to support schools that were failing. Administrative coaches, who report directly to the superintendent, were hired to work with principals. The goal is collaborative ownership and leadership designed to break down barriers and create structures that encourage development of shared vision, goals, and practices. Coaches are each responsible for three to four schools, where they develop a personalized network of support for the instructional programs and operations. The coaches are in the schools every day working alongside the principals to create a structure and organization that is efficient and effective and to maximize supports. District- and school-level leadership are interwoven. No separation exists; both have an important say in the decision-making process.

Anne Arundel County Public Schools has a similar leadership support structure. The

Achievement Steering Committee for each school in improvement, Year 2 and beyond, has two main purposes: (1) to make decisions for the school based on its unique needs and (2) to provide additional support for building leadership capacity. The members of the committee—composed of central office executive staff in areas such as human resources, food services, facilities, school performance, support services, technology, public information, equity assurance, and curriculum and instruction—meet with the school-based leadership team at scheduled times to evaluate the success of various initiatives and make collaborative, school-specific decisions. This approach is one way in which the central office attends to the needs of each school.

District team members from Lima City spoke passionately about their efforts to implement shared leadership. Building trust and collaboration are two of the district's key goals in developing leadership capacity among the central office, school-level administrators, and teachers. The leadership academy in Lima City is designed to "grow their own" leaders. According to district representatives, this type of leadership capacity building has been successful because it supports the development of leadership among district teachers, giving them a voice in decision making and building their confidence. The principal who oversaw the Freedom Elementary improvement effort spoke to us about how she had implemented collaborative leadership. She emphasized how using data had led to shared leadership—between principal and teachers and even students. "They [the teachers] brought me their data.... If there was a lack of progress, we talked about that and what we could do.... It got to the point where they didn't wait for monthly meetings; the teachers began to do it on their own." The principal went on to discuss the students' reaction when she proposed to reduce the collection of reading data from

every week to every other week. A group of fourth-grade students objected. “We like the data. We want to know exactly what we’re doing!” was the cry of the students.

Theme 3: Focus on Teaching and Learning

Not surprisingly, the third common factor among the districts was the relentless focus on effective teaching and student learning. We found that successful districts were providing financial, programmatic, and personnel resources for instructional programs along with rigorous curricula and teacher professional development. Common strategies included instructional support in the form of additional personnel, job-embedded professional development, and tiered supports and interventions (for both academic and social/behavioral needs).

Typically, the districts operate from a strategic plan that outlines a set of priorities to inform the type of resources they provide to schools to improve teaching and learning. They allocate resources strategically to ensure that they support the areas of identified need. In addition, measures of success are in place to identify the impact on teaching and learning. The districts we interviewed are carefully and continuously monitoring and evaluating the implementation of all programs at the school and district levels, and, in some cases, state education agencies are participating in the evaluation process.

Providing support personnel to help teachers meet the needs of all students was nearly universal among the nine districts we interviewed. Anne Arundel County Public Schools has lowered class size and provided additional administrators, psychologists, pupil personnel workers, and other specialists for its schools that have entered restructuring. All these personnel are strategically placed and have a well-defined set of responsibilities and

accountabilities. Essex County Schools, Jersey City Public Schools, the Ohio districts, and Long Beach Unified School District are using instructional coaches in the schools to facilitate and support improved instruction. In Long Beach Unified, the leadership team noted that the coaches help teachers transfer the skills they learn in professional development courses directly to the classroom.

Professional development for teachers was another common strategy for school improvement. Professional development drives the school improvement efforts in Long Beach Unified through collaboration with California State University–Long Beach (CSULB). Long Beach Unified’s teacher training program accepts a large number of preservice teaching interns from CSULB, and the district and the university have worked together closely to design a teacher education curriculum that meets the rigorous standards set by Long Beach Unified. In addition, all new teachers at Long Beach Unified are inducted through a required professional development course that emphasizes the district’s model of aligned curriculum, rigor, and differentiated instruction.

Lima City Schools, Ashtabula Area City Schools, and Long Beach Unified use instructional coaches or outside consultants to provide teachers with feedback, formal professional development, and job-embedded coaching. Ashtabula has a team of consultants who work with teachers specifically on balanced literacy and curriculum alignment. In Jersey City, the entire staff of one reconstituted school was required to be involved in professional development for effective instruction. In Ann Arundel County, the district has implemented a theme approach to delivering curriculum as a strategy for high school improvement, whereby each high school has the flexibility to select its own theme. For example, one high school has adopted homeland security as its theme. This same theme trickles down

to the feeder middle and elementary schools, allowing for commonalities and consistency across curricular content. This enhancement of curriculum has been accompanied by professional development for all teachers in the feeder pattern.

Several of the districts we interviewed have instituted tiered support systems in their schools in improvement. These systems provide support for students with social/emotional/behavioral needs as well as academic needs. Lima City's district staff members spoke specifically about their use of data to identify various students' needs and the tiered systems of intervention to mitigate behavioral and academic concerns of struggling students. Long Beach Unified emphasized the use of differentiated instruction within the classroom by all teachers as well as the additional supports the district provides for struggling students. Specifically, Long Beach Unified has increased both the number of counselors in the middle schools and the intensity of the counselors' involvement with students. Counselors check in regularly with students who may be at risk for failure, track their progress, and maintain a close relationship with their families.

Underlying all of the district efforts to improve teaching and learning in their schools was the pervasive use of data to drive instruction. For every district we interviewed, systematic and continuous collection and analysis of data to drive their school improvements was foundational.

Improvement Strategies for High Schools

Although the three themes—strategic planning, leadership development, and focus on teaching and learning—were consistent across Grades K–12 in district improvement efforts, specific high schools supports

were mentioned by each district. Districts are utilizing small learning communities, expanding their International Baccalaureate programs, utilizing whole-school instructional programs, hosting summer bridge programs, hiring additional intervention staff, and building strong community partnerships. Consistently across the districts, we found that high schools are engaged in strong initiatives for their ninth-grade students, an effort strongly supported by the research.

A majority of the districts we interviewed revealed that the schools most in need of improvement and receiving the most intensive services were the middle schools. When we inquired about their high school programs, however, several districts freely discussed a variety of initiatives they are undertaking, including some that have moved schools out of improvement status. Two strategies were noted by the interviewees as particularly effective: summer bridge programs and ninth-grade academies. Both are designed to help bridge the gap between middle and high schools.

Many of the districts are supporting their incoming ninth graders with well-designed summer programs tailored to making the transition to high school as seamless as possible. Districts such as Anne Arundel and Lima City set aside funds for their high schools to host a two- to four-week program in which high school teachers and their incoming students have an opportunity to meet and develop positive relationships before the start of school. Although academic support is an important component of summer bridge programs, these district programs are designed to address students' social and emotional well-being during the transition period. The interviewees spoke of their attempts to target those students experiencing behavioral and academic difficulty in eighth grade whose success in high school would

benefit from close, positive relationships with their high school teachers.

Keeping the focus on ninth-grade students, several of the districts are providing special programs throughout the ninth-grade year and beyond. Research on high school shows that ninth grade can be an especially volatile time for males. District personnel in Anne Arundel County Public Schools spoke about their middle college program. Through a partnership with Sojourner-Douglass College, ninth-grade males needing additional academic support are transported by bus to the campus for individual tutoring, small-group instruction, and introduction to college life. Although this is a new program, the district staff reported positive anecdotal data from both teachers and students in the program. This, they believe, is money well spent in helping students stay in school and graduate.

Another example of an initiative for ninth graders is the Closing The Achievement Gap (CTAG) program in Lima City. Funded through a state grant, CTAG identifies underperforming ninth-grade males for a special program to help them successfully complete high school and receive their diplomas. The district also participates in another state grant designed to develop cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy among high school teachers in the district. District leadership oversees the

program, which provides model lessons and coaching to teachers on strategies that are compatible with the students' needs and learning styles. The initiative is part of the larger whole-school reform effort that is taking place in the district.

Conclusion

Our interviews with districts that are providing exemplary support for their struggling schools brought up a number of strategies that are supported in the research literature on district improvement efforts. Research-based strategies in strategic planning, effective and collaborative leadership, and effective teaching for student learning are being practiced at all levels (K–12) in these districts, and their schools are experiencing improvement for all students. Inevitably, schools will continue to face challenges; they succeed at meeting challenges when stakeholders come together to support a common vision of achievement for all students. The systemic collaboration of district and school personnel was emphasized in all the interviews conducted by The Center. An unyielding commitment to maximizing the collective strength of school-based and district-level leadership is a necessary factor in success. These strategies will continue to hold merit while additional investments currently are made in school improvement.



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Administered by Learning Point Associates in partnership with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), under contract with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education.



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