School Improvement Grants: Failures in Design and Implementation

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced a new approach to dealing with the nation's persistently lowest-achieving schools. The program used $3.5 billion from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to expand the Title I School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. SIG required states to identify the bottom 5 percent of schools that receive federal Title I dollars and distribute up to $2 million to support improvement.

The SIG program was a federal policy and the funds came with strings attached: participating schools were required to implement one of four federally sanctioned turnaround strategies. The prescribed approach to the program reflected federal policymakers' concerns that states leverage evidence-based approaches to make deep, transformational changes to how schools operate.

But good intentions, even those backed by mountains of money and evidence, are rarely enough to translate a policy into practice. While a handful of schools and districts used the program to effectively support school improvement, the vast majority ended up no better off as a result of the program.

Why did a policy rooted in evidence, embraced by policymakers, and supported with federal dollars end with so little to show for the effort? The failure of SIG to achieve its ambitious goals had its roots in the limits of policy as a tool for spurring school improvement, problems with "evidence-based" policymaking, and weaknesses in the design and implementation of the program.

There and Back Again: The Origins of the School Improvement Grant Program

Improving schools, especially those that serve large numbers of disadvantaged students,

has long been a focus of federal education policy. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), America's signature education law, was passed during Johnson's "War on Poverty" and established the federal government's role in providing financial support to improve low-income children's access to a quality education. But, the ESEA regulated who could benefit, not whether the programs generated improvement in the schools or students it targeted.[1] Studies of the law's core program, Title I, found the impact of ESEA on disadvantaged students was mostly "piecemeal," resulting in remedial instruction in core subjects and largely "uncoordinated" with other educational programs.[2]

These problems helped to shift the focus of federal school improvement programs towards more integrative efforts. In 1998, Congress authorized the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRDP), which sought to support the development and dissemination of comprehensive and evidence-based school improvement models. Like SIG, the program offered three years of seed funding to Title I schools to support adoption and implementation of an improvement plan. More than 10 percent of all Title I schools (about 6,000) participated in the program. But results were mixed, with just a handful of models showing any evidence of impact on student achievement.[3]

The mixed results of CSRDP did not extinguish federal policymakers attention to school improvement and later reauthorizations of ESEA sought to put "teeth" behind federal school improvement efforts. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) required all states to establish standards for student learning in core subjects, track students' progress towards those standards, and sanction schools that failed to improve. Schools designated "in need of improvement" were required to offer students supplementary education services (SES) and public school choice, and were at risk of takeover, charter conversion, and closure, though few

states ever exercised these options.[4]

The law also established the School Improvement Fund (SIF), the precursor to the SIG program, to help schools adopt and implement effective improvement strategies and provided states nearly $500 million to support local improvement efforts.[5] The fund offered schools that failed to reach accountability targets short-term (less than three years) grants to support necessary investments, such as a new curriculum or professional development. State education agencies were required to help schools design and implement their improvement plans.

Like CSRDP, NCLB embraced an evidence-based agenda for school improvement. The law itself referenced "scientifically-based research" more than a 100 times and required all programs funded under Title I, including SIF, to be based on research that met rigorous scientific standards.[6] Schools deemed in need of improvement were encouraged to embrace a "what works" approach, using data to identify problems, put in place proven curriculum and professional development, and reallocate funds towards more effective programs.

While evaluations of NCLB's accountability provisions suggest the law improved student achievement, especially for low-income children and children of color, the school improvement program was largely deemed ineffective.[7] Like the initiatives that preceded it, many schools advanced disjointed school improvement plans and failed to address systemic issues around staffing and resource allocation. [8] The most radical restructuring options, such as closure, staff replacement, or chartering, were rarely pursued. States and districts, which were charged with offering oversight and assistance, more often than not lacked the capacity to provide effective support.[9] By 2009, over 13,000 American schools were under some form of improvement

status.[*] Of those in restructuring between 2006 and 2009, just 12 percent (503 schools) improved enough to exit.

Engineering "Dramatic" Action on Turnaround

"When a school continues to perform in the bottom 5 percent of the state and isn't showing signs of progress…something dramatic needs to be done."

--Arne Duncan, former U.S. Secretary of Education

The shortcomings of previous federal efforts to support school improvement invited a new approach. Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a reform firebrand who came to the Obama administration via Chicago Public Schools where he was formerly CEO under Mayor Richard Daly, was eager to use the fledgling school improvement fund to engineer dramatic actions in persistently low-achieving schools. Duncan's opportunity came in 2009 when ED announced a new program that would invest more than $3 billion from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to expand the offerings of the Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG) program.

The newly revamped SIG program represented the nation's largest investment in school improvement ever, expanding the previous program by more than seven-fold. Participating schools would receive approximately $2 million per year for up to three years. But the funds came with strings attached. While state education agencies and districts were offered additional flexibility for identifying low-performing schools for intervention, the funds were made contingent on implementing one of four prescribed turnaround models, detailed below.

[*] This includes schools in need of improvement (fail to make AYP over 2 years), corrective action (fail to make AYP over 4 years), or restructuring (fail to make AYP after 5 years). See US Department of Education, "School Improvement Grants," accessed May 8, 2017, https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/090825sigv2.ppt.

The limits on state and district discretion over turnaround options were not accidental. Recognizing that upwards of 80 percent of schools identified for restructuring under NCLB chose the amorphous "other" option, the administration wanted a change. As the program regulations describe:

> After nearly a decade of broad state and local discretion in implementing, with little success, the school improvement provisions of ESEA, the department believes, for the purpose of this program, it is appropriate and necessary to limit that discretion and require the use of a carefully developed set of school intervention models in the nation's lowest achieving schools.[10]

States awarded funds to schools on a competitive basis, though the rigor of their application processes varied substantially. Fourteen hundred schools ultimately participated, each receiving on average more than $2.5 million dollars to support turnaround. Participating schools had higher poverty rates than the nation as a whole and were more likely to be located in urban areas (see Table 1).[11]

Table 1. Characteristics of Schools Participating in the SIG Program

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	All schools
Total funding (thousands)	$1,883,919	$1,322,451	$419,866	n/a
# of Schools	775	471	153	102,890
Funding/School (thousands)	$2,512	$2,875	$2,800	n/a
% of Students FRL-eligible	79%	75%	80%	52%

School Level				
Primary	27%	31%	40%	55%
Middle	18%	20%	28%	17%
High School	47%	42%	30%	21%
Locale				
Urban	56%	54%	61%	27%
Suburban	18%	20%	22%	32%
Town	14%	8%	9%	7%
Rural	18%	16%	10%	28%
Source: U.S. Department of Education, School Improvement Grants, National Summary, 2015, https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/data/school-impro-grants-nat-sum-sy1213.pdf.				

By design, the turnaround program required districts to put in place contentious changes to schools. The least dramatic option ("transformation") required schools to replace the principal and adopt a comprehensive school improvement plan, which included a teacher evaluation system (a controversial reform in its own right), increased learning time, and job-embedded professional development. The turnaround option went farther, requiring schools to replace the principal and upward of half of the teaching staff. Finally, schools could be closed or converted into a charter school under the program.

Did SIG Work?

Judging the effectiveness of a given program is never a straightforward task. Public policies aim to achieve both substantive and political ends and can find success in some places and for some goals while missing others.

SIG articulated a very clear, if ambitious, set of aims. Substantively, Obama Administration officials sought significant improvement in the nation's lowest achieving schools. As Arne Duncan said in a 2009 speech announcing the program, "We want transformation, not tinkering."[12] But the administration also had political aims in mind as well. By design, SIG sought to boost states' and districts' commitment to undertaking bold actions that otherwise would languish. As Duncan told an audience at Jeremiah E. Burke High School, a SIG recipient in Boston, "[The grants] were about creating conditions for change…which unleashed the pent-up energy and ideas of educators and political leaders across the nation."[13]

Did SIG Achieve Its Substantive Aims?

Like the school improvement initiatives that preceded it, the SIG program posted disappointing results on student achievement. Table 2 reports impact estimates on English Language Arts (ELA) and math student achievement in standard deviation units for six rigorous evaluations of the program. Of the five state evaluations of the program, just two reported any positive impacts on student achievement – California and Massachusetts – and in the case of California, those effects were quite modest given the costs of the program.[†] For comparisons sake, the Tennessee class size initiative, which reduced class sizes of between 22 to 26 students per class down to 13 to 17 students per class, found effects on the order of 0.11 standard deviation units in reading and 0.22 standard deviation units in math.[14]

[†] Cost-effectiveness is always relative. Dee suggests that the program was cost-effective in California when compared to class-size reduction, which is among the most expensive improvement strategies available. But, compared to less expensive (and less complicated) reforms, such as new high quality textbooks, the results look considerably less impressive.

Table 2. SIG posts disappointing results in most evaluations		
Study Focus	Student Achievement Effects	Source
CA	~.10 in pooled math & ELA[‡]	Dee 2012
MA	0.22 in math, 0.22 in ELA	LiCalsi et al., 2015
MI	-0.01 in math, -0.01 in ELA	Rice et al., 2014
NC	0.04 in math, 0.01 in ELA	Henry & Guthrie 2015
TX	-0.02 in math, -0.07 in ELA[§]	Dickey-Griffith 2013
National	0.01 in math, 0.03 in ELA	Dragoset et al., 2017
Source: Author review of selected evaluations of the SIG program. Only evaluations that used rigorous, quasi-experimental designs were included.		

In early 2017, Mathematica released its long awaited national evaluation of the program, which was commissioned by the Obama Administration.[15] The report found that schools that received grants through the program were no more likely to post significant improvement in math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment.

[‡] Dee estimates the impact of SIG on achievement using a school API scores, which pool achievement data across grades and subjects. He reports a "back of the envelope" estimate of the reforms on student achievement (rather than school API) at 0.10 standard deviation units, assuming that school-level standard deviation effects overstates the student-level impact by a factor of 2.6 to 3.2.

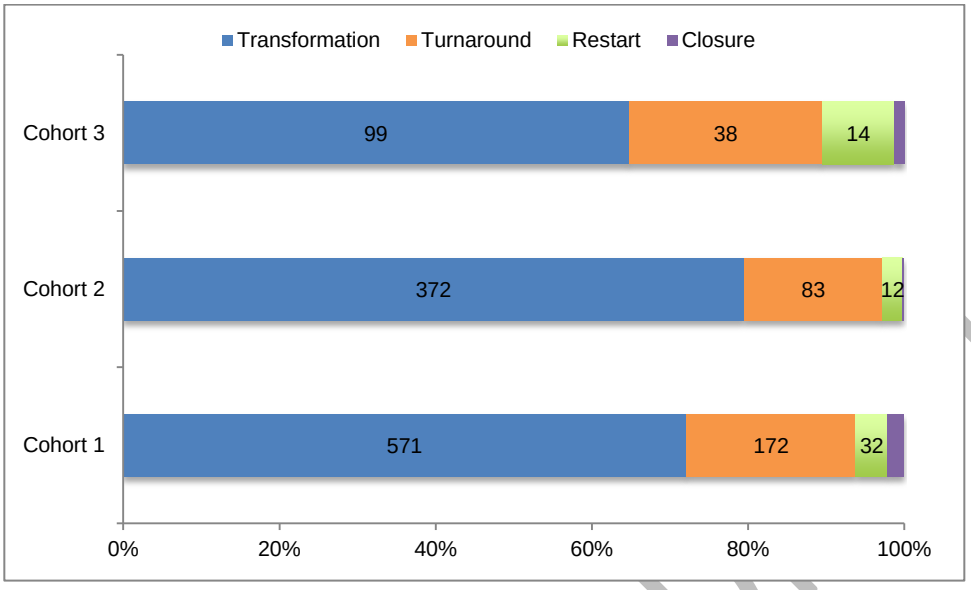
[§] Dickey-Griffith reports separate effects for every grade-subject pair. Table 2 reports the average effect across all grades for math and ELA.

All of these evaluations face their own methodological limits and average effects can disguise variability within and across schools. Indeed, ED was quick to point to the double-digit gains in achievement that some schools posted after receiving the grants as well as select evaluations of the program that showed more positive results in particular states. But given the scale of the program -- $3.5 billion in the first year alone -- the results fell far short of what the program's designers and its supporters had sought.

Did SIG Achieve Its Political Aims?

One way to judge whether SIG achieved its political aims is to assess the extent participating schools and districts leveraged more disruptive turnaround models, which required politically difficult changes to how schools were staffed, managed, and organized. Figure 1 presents data on the rate at which schools opted-in to each of the four turnaround models. As was true with NCLB's restructuring program that came before it, the vast majority of schools turned to the least disruptive option offered under the SIG program. Across the three years of the program, 75 percent of participating schools chose the transformation option. Another 20 percent of schools chose the turnaround option, which required dismissal of half of a school's teaching staff and only 78 out of almost 1,400 schools chose either restart or closure (4 percent).

Figure 1. Most Schools Choose Least Disruptive Turnaround Model[**]



Another metric by which to judge the success of the program in boosting state and district leaders' commitment to the administration's preferred reforms is to assess the extent to which participating schools adopted key practices articulated in the SIG program. As reported in Mathematica's national evaluation of the program, here again the initiative failed to deliver its intended results.

Schools implementing a SIG-funded turnaround model reported using 22.8 of the 35 practices examines while non-participating schools implemented 20.3 practices. But, the practices most common among SIG and non-SIG schools alike were already common prior to implementation of the program, such as using data to inform instruction, interim assessments, and providing support and professional development to educators. SIG-promoted practices that are less common and often more contentious, such as providing operational flexibility to turnaround schools and using student achievement in teacher evaluations, had far less uptake

[**] Figure reports number of schools participating in each of the four turnaround models by cohort between 2010-2011 and 2012-2013. Source: U.S. Department of Education, School Improvement Grants, National Summary, 2015.

among SIG schools, with less than half reporting use of the practice. As Yatsko and colleagues wrote in a 2011 evaluation of the program, most schools and districts failed to engage in the "bold and transformative changes" described by Duncan.[16]

Perhaps as consequentially, SIG generated significant backlash among Democratic and Republican lawmakers as well as educators and administrators. Carlos García, the superintendent of San Francisco Unified School District, openly worried that the program would reduce opportunities for innovation and disincentivize teachers and principals to take on the challenging work at low-achieving schools.[17] Others voiced their concerns that the departments' prescriptions were based more on a "hunch" than any evidence that the required models actually work as improvement strategies.[18] In 2010, less than one year into implementation of the program, Representative George Miller (D-California), Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, worried that the turnaround requirements were shortsighted. As he said, "You can…say you're going to turn around a school, you can reconstitute a school, you can close a school [but] it won't matter if you don't have [certain] ingredients in place…[including] collaboration, buy-in from the community, the empowering and the professional development of teachers."

By 2015, policy retrenchment was on display as Congress worked to reauthorize ESEA through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Under the new law, states gained substantial flexibility over school improvement and ED was explicitly barred from dictating specific turnaround strategies, marking a return to the state and local discretion that dominated school improvement before NCLB.

What Went Wrong

Public programs can fail on essentially two grounds: design and implementation. Programs that fail on the basis of design do not achieve their intended impacts because they were poorly constructed in the first place. The program, for example, may not target the right problem, people, or organizations, fail to specify goals or provide incentives, or invest sufficient resources. In contrast, failures stemming from poor implementation are caused by the behavior of those charged with translating public policies into specific actions. This includes federal, state, and local administrators as well as private organizations and citizens whose cooperation is required for the program to be successful. Implementation failures can stem from coordination problems, inadequate organizational capacity, and unresolved political conflicts. Complex programs, which require substantial coordination across administrative agencies and levels of government, are especially vulnerable to implementation problems.

As detailed below, SIG encountered failures in both its design and implementation. The program's emphasis on staff replacement as the crux of its improvement strategy did not always work as intended, causing unnecessary disruption and harm, not improvement in some cases. The program also failed on implementation, as many states, districts, and schools lacked the will and capacity to effectively oversee and implement reforms embraced by the program.

Design Failure

SIG relied upon a quite simple theory of change: low-achieving schools are staffed by teachers and leaders who are inadequately prepared or committed to turn around; replacing staff will create the conditions to improve outcomes for students. This reflected a widely held belief in reform circles that teachers are the most important factor in whether students learn, that school

leaders are critical to building staff commitment to improvement, and that low-achieving schools were largely staffed by ineffective teachers and leaders.[††] In Secretary Duncan's time as CEO in Chicago, he designed and implemented a similar turnaround program that reopened schools under new leadership and staff. As he remarked on those reforms in a 2009 interview, "I was convinced that because students were performing at such…low levels that we, educators, were part of the problem."[19] But, this design assumed that existing staff were ineffective and that more effective replacements could be found. These "zones of wishful thinking" became the critical failings in the program's design and undermined its effectiveness.[20]

The impact of principal replacement is critical to evaluating the efficacy of SIG's design. While researchers and observers agree that an effective principal is essential for turnaround, less is known about whether replacement is the most effective way to build principal capacity and whether other types of professional support can transform a marginally effective principal into a great principal.

Case studies of implementation suggest that principal replacement did not always have its intended effects. While some schools' teachers reported benefiting from the infusion of new leadership, others struggled to adjust, citing lack of trust and adjustment to different leadership styles.[21] Many participating schools had already gone through multiple changes in principals and teachers over the years. The additional turnover that resulted from the program disrupted

[††] Interestingly, the Institute for Education Sciences found in an October 2016 report that the differences in the effectiveness of teachers of high- and low-income students is small and changing the distribution of teachers between low- and high-income students is unlikely to reduce the achievement gap. See US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, *Do Low-Income Students Have Equal Access to Effective Teachers? Evidence from 26 Districts*, by Eric Isenberg, Jeffery Max, Philip Gleason, Matthew Johnson, Jonah Deutsch, and Michael Hansen, NCEE 2017-4007, October 2016, accessed May 8, 2017, https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20174008/pdf/20174007.pdf.

improvement initiatives already in place and made it even more difficult to attract effective teachers and leaders. As one administrator reported, "A few places might have been better off if they had not had to change and go through a stop-start motion."[22]

Perhaps more consequentially, the program's theory of change ran up against the reality that many districts lacked access to enough effective principals and teachers to serve as replacements. Much has been written about the human capital challenges facing Title I schools but SIG did little to address the substantial barriers districts face recruiting more effective teachers and principals. With effective replacements in short supply, the program often did little more than "rearrange the deck chairs", with principals literally swapping out positions for new ones in other low-achieving, Title I schools in an effort to be in compliance with the requirements.

Rural districts, which made up about one-fifth of the turnaround program, already faced shortages on qualified staff and SIG's replacement requirements added to their difficulty. As George Welsh, superintendent of a 600-student district in Colorado noted, "We didn't think that just firing half of our teachers and hiring whatever was available out there was necessarily going to be a higher quality option than what we currently have."[23] In North Carolina, evaluators found that the program resulted in an increase in the number of inexperienced principals working in participating schools.[24] Dickey-Griffith's (2013) evaluation of SIG in Texas finds that the program had larger negative impacts on rural schools compared to their urban peers, likely reflecting the human capital challenges many rural districts face.[25]

SIG may have suffered from a "cart before the horse" problem. It rightly targeted principal and teacher quality in low-achieving schools but made little provision for expanding the number of proven professionals capable of assuming these roles. As Caitlin Scott, a

researcher at the Center on Education Policy noted, "The money doesn't create new people. The problem of staffing a hard-to-staff school is more complicated, and we haven't really solved that problem yet."[26]

These observations call into question a frequent refrain that SIG failed to achieve its goals because states and districts were not ambitious enough and more frequently than not chose the least disruptive turnaround model. In the absence of established educator pipelines and high quality operators waiting to be tapped, staff dismissals and charter conversions are unlikely to deliver better results.

Implementation Failure

Like many ambitious federal programs, SIG was characterized by a complex implementation apparatus, which required states, districts, schools, and, in many cases, contractors, to take on significant roles. These types of implementation structures are especially vulnerable to problems, given variability in actors' capacity and commitment to implement the program.

For their part, states were charged with evaluating district's applications for funds, overseeing implementation, and making grant renewal decisions. With few exceptions, states' oversight of the program was weak at every point in the process. On evaluation of proposals for funds, ED encouraged states to evaluate districts' ability to implement their proposed turnaround plans. But many states ran non-competitive grant programs, providing funds to all eligible schools that applied.[27] These lapses in oversight continued when it came to supervising implementation of schools' turnaround plans and making evidence-based renewal decisions. The vast majority of schools faced no consequences for failing to follow through with planned efforts

to expand learning time or hire new staff and renewal decisions were not based on schools' achievement of annual goals.[28] GAO noted that many states lacked capacity to effectively support implementation of the program, including inadequate staff devoted to monitoring and insufficient expertise in effective turnaround strategies.

Districts were key intermediaries in the program, making principal appointments and shaping schools' operational flexibility, hiring and dismissal practices, and access to effective support. But many districts struggled to instigate and support evidence-based turnaround strategies. Schools ran up against rules that prevented them from expanding learning time or implementing a teacher evaluation system. Others were short-changed by collective bargaining provisions that left them vulnerable to "last-in, first-out" teacher dismissals and less strategic approaches to teacher hiring.[29]

SIG encouraged districts to provide schools with greater operational flexibility to implement a turnaround plan but many districts never delivered on this component. School principals reported having to "fight the district to take steps they saw as essential to improving instruction."[30] According to Mathematica's evaluation of the program, less than one-third of surveyed schools gained increased operational flexibility.

While schools were affected by the implementation challenges at the state and district level, they also struggled in other ways. As Yatsko and colleagues reported in their study of SIG implementation in Washington, many schools approached turnaround with an "everything but the kitchen sink" approach while others simply layered new interventions onto preexisting strategies with little understanding of how the pieces added up.[31] These challenges might have been avoided had states and districts advanced more effective oversight and support.

All of these challenges were exacerbated by the short time-line on the program. SIG was advanced as part of a broader national initiative to prop up state and local economies in the face of the recession and schools had just three years to design and implement their turnaround plans, including the expenditure of all awarded funds. As a result, state, district, and school administrators lacked the luxury of time to plan. Instead they were, in the words of one district staffer, "building the plane as we fly it." Districts, which already faced challenges staffing high poverty/low-achievement schools, were often forced to hire principals and teachers well after normal hiring cycles.[32] As the National Education Association reported, the lag between when states received federal funds and when they officially named schools to be awarded grants left some schools scrambling to put in place their turnaround plans just weeks before school started.[33]

Many states and districts, recognizing limits on their capacity to provide effective support as well as the rapid timeline, turned to the private sector to address gaps. Among states that tracked funds going to outside groups, the average was 25 percent of awarded dollars.[34] In Colorado, consultants won a 35 percent share of the $26.6 million awarded to the state between 2010 and 2012, which went to purchase instructional coaches for teachers, leadership coaches for principals, analysts to review data, and professional development for school staff.[35]

But in many cases, private sector providers of turnaround supports proved to be no better than their public counterparts. In a review of privately-managed turnaround services, Coby Meyer finds that just 15 percent of all providers vetted by states claimed their services were evidence-based and less than 5 percent had a proven record of improving student outcomes (student achievement but also attendance, graduation rates, and drop out rates).[36] A *Denver Post* analysis of spending in Colorado districts identified questionable purchases, including $267,000

for two leadership coaches to work with 6 principals and $32,000 for airline tickets for instructional coaches to visit schools. In one high profile and expensive failure, outcomes got worse in five of the six schools taken over by New York City–based Global Partnership Schools in Pueblo, Colorado.[37] A GAO report found "inconsistent review of contractors" and a general lack of accountability for results.[38]

These implementation challenges reveal what Pressman and Wildavsky termed "the complexity of joint action." Big initiatives often hinge on getting many people to work together on a common problem but this proves incredibly challenging in practice, even when programs initially enjoy strong political support and access to resources.

Lessons from the School Improvement Grant Program

The results of SIG added to the legacy of previous failed federal efforts to support and scale effective turnaround strategies. Some interpreted SIG's poor showing as evidence that turnaround is a futile endeavor. But this is the wrong conclusion to draw from SIG.

After all, some schools improved as a result of the program, just as many others did not. And in states where implementation capacity was high, talent pipelines well developed, and district leadership in place, the program bore greater fruit. The impacts of SIG on student achievement in Massachusetts rivaled the results attained by the state's widely lauded, high performing charter schools, which face few of the same regulatory and operational challenges of traditional public schools.

The results, instead, point to the difficulty of bringing complex initiatives to scale. In the United States, the provision of education is primarily a local function, subject to variability in local leadership, politics, and economics. SIG sought to improve conditions in over 1,400

schools spread across hundreds of districts, each of which possessed unique challenges, assets, and vulnerabilities. Designing a policy that "works" under these circumstances is exceedingly difficult.

While the challenge of designing an effective program for 1,400 low-achieving schools is enough on its own, SIG also relied upon a multi-layered implementation structure that is equally as vulnerable to problems. Creating an effective school hinges as much or more on human relationships and buy-in as it does on particular programs.[39] This work cannot be done via "remote control," as is required when initiatives are advanced from Congress and state legislatures. As Frederick Hess and Linda Darling-Hammond commented in 2011, "Under our system, dictates from Congress turn into gobbledygook as they travel from the Education Department to state education agencies and then to local school districts."[40] .

States, districts, and schools were not equally well prepared to design, implement, and oversee ambitious changes to staffing and school organization. Those that turned to the private sector for help often found it, but high priced consultants and school improvement providers rarely were adequately positioned to deliver improved student outcomes. And even when schools successfully implemented the ambitious changes the Obama Administration sought, the new practices did not always have their intended effects, as teachers struggled with leadership turnover and faced anxiety over the status of their jobs.

The challenge of scaling effective turnaround strategies is aptly captured by what Richard Elmore called the "noble lie" of public administration. Elmore argued that policymakers are unable to directly influence program implementation and their efforts to do so, by prescribing permissible actions, are often ineffective because educators and administrators possess significant discretion and are constrained by countervailing organizational and political realities.

Policymakers can require educators and administrators to take particular actions but they cannot ensure they approach their work with thoughtfulness, creativity, and effort.

Amidst these challenges, some commentators have suggested that turnaround is an impossible job and that policymakers should abandon this work and instead focus on creating new schools, which face little of the organizational "stickiness" that traditional public schools do. But like turnaround, new schools rely on people and organizations that federal (or state) policymakers do not control directly and who may or may not fulfill the roles that policymakers have asked them to do.

While the problems facing low-achieving schools are resistant to resolution via policy "engineering", that doesn't mean they cannot be resolved or that policymakers can't lend their support to improvement. What would a more thoughtful approach to school improvement look like?

A path forward starts with recognizing the limited leverage that policymakers have over how schools are staffed, organized, and managed. Short of interventions that empower state administrators to takeover schools and districts, policymakers do not have the power to alter the conditions that enable turnarounds to find success. They also rarely possess knowledge of schools' unique assets and liabilities as well as political and economic conditions that shape what strategies will find community support. This makes prescriptive approaches to turnaround unlikely to find success at scale.

But policymakers can lend their support in other ways. They can collect and share data on how schools are doing, identify and share best practices across schools and districts, vet consultants and other providers of supports, and inspire new approaches to turnaround via grant competitions. They can ensure that districts possess the motivation and flexibility to seek new

solutions, via state accountability systems and regulatory waivers. Policymakers can also act on school improvement in indirect ways, by supporting the development of new pipelines for educators, increasing spending on K-12 education, and offering or brokering high quality curriculum and other supports.[‡‡] State and federal policymakers do some of these things to one degree or another. But for the most part, these are uncoordinated efforts, often layered onto other programs with competing purposes.

These findings also have implications for researchers and the role of evidence in the design of new programs and policies. Researchers have long known that effective programs hinge on implementation and that variability in local contexts can make "what works" difficult to define with any degree of reliability. But the belief that evidence can be used definitively to design effective programs at scale remains deeply engrained in both policy and research circles.

An evidence-based approach to school improvement isn't as simple as picking the "right" policy or program; it requires understanding whether initiatives have a chance of success in a particular context, given existing leadership, capacity, and political dynamics, and adapting the approach to deal with on-the-ground realities. An appreciation of these factors goes well beyond what policy analysts consider when they talk about "implementation" in education research.

Researchers should do more to examine not just whether programs are implemented with fidelity but how effects vary across different organizational, political, and economic circumstances. While policy analysts like to discuss "point estimates," which describe the average effect of this or that, the real story in program evaluation rests in the variation.

[‡‡] A fee-for-service arrangement for these kinds of supports would also ensure that states are providing services that are desired and well-received.

Conclusion

SIG represented the most ambitious effort yet to improve outcomes for students in persistently low-achieving schools. The program sought to build on the failed initiatives that preceded it, demanding bolder reforms and more intensive effort in exchange for the largest investment in school improvement ever undertaken. While the program's failure to achieve its ambitious goals is a disappointment to many, the results provide some of the best evidence yet about how policymakers can (and cannot) support school improvement.

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[1] "Is It Helping Poor Children? Title I of ESEA," *Washington Research Project* and the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, December 1969, accessed May 8, 2017, http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED036600.pdf.

[2] Kathryn M. Doherty, *Early Implementation of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service, 2000).

[3] Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, "CSRQ Center Report on Middle and High School Comprehensive Reform Models," *American Institutes for Research*, October 2006, accessed May 8, 2017, http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/MSHS_2006_Report_Final_Full_Version_10-03-06_0.pdf.

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