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FEATURE ARTICLE

School Improvement Grants for High Schools: Trends in Wisconsin and Illinois

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SIG Overview

SIGs target schools that are persistently low achieving. SIGs have provided \$3.4 billion funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act through increased appropriations for individual schools. To receive SIG funding, states are required to identify a pool of SIG-eligible schools consisting of Title I schools that are in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring and schools that do not receive Title I funds but are similarly low achieving. States must then divide the pool into three tiers. Tier I and II schools are persistently low achieving and either fall in the bottom 5 percent based on academic performance or have graduation rates below 60 percent. Tier III schools are the remainder of Title I schools in the SIG-eligible pool. When allocating funds, states must prioritize tier I and II schools but may also fund tier III schools in high-need districts.

Though SIGs are designed to fund struggling schools at all grade levels, numerous states have made high schools a priority. A total of 589 schools serving high school grades—about half the total number of school grantees—have received funds so far. This emphasis on high school is even stronger in the Great Lakes West region. One hundred percent of Illinois' grantees serve high school grades. Similarly, 100 percent of Wisconsin's tier I and II grantees serve high school grades. Wisconsin has also elected to serve 35 tier III schools, 10 of which are high schools. This article provides a snapshot of the current SIG efforts related to high schools in the Great Lakes West region.

SIG Model Requirements

To receive SIG funds, tier I or II schools must select and implement one of four school reform models: closure, restart, transformation, or turnaround. The closure model includes closing the school and enrolling students in higher-performing schools within the district. The restart model mandates that a school closes and reopens under the management of a charter school operator, a charter school management organization, or an education management organization. Any student who attended the previous school must be admitted to the newly opened alternative. The transformation model focuses on developing teacher and leader effectiveness, implementing comprehensive instructional programs using student achievement data, providing extended learning time, and creating community-oriented supports. Similarly, the turnaround model includes comprehensive instructional reform and the use of increased learning time and community-oriented supports; further, it requires the replacement of 50 percent of the previously employed teaching staff and the adoption of a new governance structure for the school. The restart, transformation, and turnaround models all require

replacement of the principal unless that position had been filled in the past two years as part of another reform effort.

Seventy-six percent of schools that have received SIG funds have elected to implement the transformation model. High schools in both Wisconsin and Illinois have elected to implement a more diverse range of models. Forty-five percent of high schools in Wisconsin are implementing the transformation model, with 18 percent implementing the restart model, and 36 percent closing. Fifty percent of high schools in Illinois are implementing the transformation model, with 40 percent implementing the turnaround model, and 10 percent implementing the restart model.

Though the transformation and turnaround models differ in their staffing requirements, there is considerable overlap between the two. The requirements of these models belong to four distinct categories: developing and increasing school staff effectiveness, comprehensive instructional reform strategies, increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools, and providing operational flexibility and sustained support. Though schools and LEAs must implement a plan fulfilling each requirement to receive funding, SIG applications often give emphasis to specific requirements based on individual school and district needs.

State Needs and Goals

Although all model requirements must be fulfilled, schools across the country have placed emphasis on prioritizing SIG funds to meet school needs. Common school needs that have emerged in Illinois include collecting and using data to differentiate instruction, creating rigorous evaluations of teachers and leaders based on student achievement, and providing support for ELLs and students with disabilities. All Illinois SIG awardees plan to target funds toward improving student academic performance in mathematics and ELA. Additionally, awardees in Chicago will put funds toward efforts to increase graduation rates.

Because all awarded schools in Wisconsin are from Milwaukee Public Schools, their SIG efforts have been organized around common needs in addition to common goals. All schools are working toward common student performance goals on mathematics and ELA assessments. Additionally, schools have set goals to limit the number of disciplinary incidents and absences among students as well as absences among teachers. Finally, similar to Illinois, Wisconsin schools have also prioritized making data-driven decisions and increasing graduation rates by setting a goal to establish a balanced assessment system that includes early warning indicators.

State SIG Activities

The needs and goals identified are based on SIG requirements that are common for all schools receiving funds. Additionally, NHSC, Great Lakes East, and Great Lakes West have outlined four SIG priorities that are high school specific and essential to maximizing educational attainment for all high school students. The priorities are as follows: ensuring college and career readiness; preventing dropouts and increasing graduation rates; meeting the needs of each high school student (social and emotional learning, personalization, and data-driven differentiation); and organizing for high school change (time, structures, staffing, and operations). Both Illinois and Wisconsin are already working to support district and school efforts in these priority areas.

Illinois has established the Center for School Improvement to oversee reform efforts implemented as part of SIGs. Its role is to support schools in implementing systemic and structural changes that will lead to sustainable improvement. The center focuses on meeting the needs of each student through data-driven decision making. In addition to the Center for School Improvement, Illinois selected a list of lead external providers and required that each SIG school partner with one of the organizations on the list. Though the organizations represented have a diverse range of foci, provider priorities include implementing early warning systems in an effort to reduce dropouts, supporting families and other stakeholders to develop postsecondary potential for students, collecting and reviewing data to target interventions for special populations, and implementing organizational structures that foster high school improvement. The diverse range of lead partners shows that Illinois is emphasizing the identified high school improvement priorities, while allowing each school to select a lead partner that will fit the school's individual needs.

Wisconsin's decision to target SIG funds for high schools ensures that state technical assistance will also focus on high school-specific school improvement priorities within SIGs. When crafting its state application, Wisconsin analyzed its student achievement data and found that, although elementary and middle school performance data have been trending upward over the past five years, high school scores have remained stagnant. For that reason, Wisconsin elected to apply a weight to high schools when determining its list of persistently low-achieving schools. Now that schools have been awarded funds, DPI is providing technical assistance by providing an intervention implementation consultant to each school. The consultants work with each school to analyze data and ensure the school is on track to achieve its specific SIG priorities.

College and Career Readiness

The support and technical assistance provided by the Illinois and Wisconsin SEAs are being used to implement many activities that are aligned with the high school-specific school improvement priorities identified by NHSC. For example, every SIG school in Illinois will be implementing a program or intervention to promote college and career readiness among students. These interventions range from aligning core courses with college-readiness standards to more comprehensive college and career preparatory programs. All Chicago Public Schools grantees have or will hire a career development facilitator or a college and career coach to revitalize their programs and provide college and financial aid advice, career internship opportunities, and job referral networks. Thornton School District SIG schools are tracking students into upper grade houses based on career aspirations, incorporating job-specific mathematics and reading skills into coursework.

Wisconsin schools will use SIG requirements to increase learning time and build community-oriented schools to target college and career readiness. All Milwaukee SIG high schools are implementing an optional zero hour, or before-school period, to allow for advisory, college, and career counseling. Additionally, each school is making a targeted effort to engage the families of incoming freshmen. The schools and the district are working with these families to ensure that they understand the credit attainment necessary for college and career readiness.

Preventing Dropouts and Increasing Graduation Rates

In addition to ensuring college and career readiness, Wisconsin and Illinois SIG schools are also working to target the lowest performing students, prevent dropouts, and increase graduation rates. Both Illinois and Wisconsin schools are using strategies to prevent dropouts, while simultaneously putting forth efforts to help get struggling students back on track. Both Milwaukee Public Schools and the SIG grantee in Peoria, Illinois, are implementing an early warning system to identify students who are at risk for dropout. Additionally, SIG schools in both Illinois and Wisconsin are offering students who are behind academically an opportunity for content and credit recovery. Options for content and credit recovery include a zero hour before school begins, a summer academy for 10th graders who are behind in reading and/or mathematics, and an online lab with teacher support for virtual credit recovery courses.

Meeting the Needs of Each High School Student

Not surprisingly, meeting the needs of each high school student is a priority for every SIG high school in both Illinois and Wisconsin. Illinois SIG schools are using several interventions to meet students' academic needs, including RTI, new technology to implement balanced assessment systems, data to differentiate instruction, and parent academies to help families learn the content needed to support the academic pursuits of their students. Illinois SIG schools are also using a variety of strategies to target student behavior and social and emotional needs. Many SIG high schools in Chicago are using SIG funds to appoint restorative justice deans who are developing new policies and procedures to address school discipline. Schools in Peoria and the DePue School District are implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to support schoolwide student behavior. Other SIG districts, such as the Egyptian School District, are targeting high-risk students. Each Egyptian Senior High School student who has been identified as having discipline or attendance issues has or will receive a home visit to customize a plan to get the student on track.

Wisconsin SIG schools have elected to use many similar strategies. Like many Illinois grantees, Milwaukee SIG schools are implementing RTI and PBIS. All SIG schools have altered their schedules, using 90-minute block periods to provide double doses of reading and mathematics. Additionally, the district is providing supports to target at-risk students and other subgroups. A literacy program will be implemented at all schools to address the needs of students with disabilities and students who are not on grade level, and professional development will be provided to help teachers provide support to ELLs. Lastly, students identified as needing intensive social and emotional support will be paired with a violence free zone youth advisor in an effort to help meet their needs.

Organizing for High School Change

Finally, SIG requirements necessitate that the organizational structure of all SIG high schools will be altered to some extent. All schools implementing the transformation and turnaround models have modified their schedules in an effort to meet SIG requirements for increased learning time. Similarly, all SIG schools must change at least some aspects of staffing in an effort to comply with SIG requirements for developing and increasing school staff effectiveness. Illinois SIG schools are meeting the increased learning time requirements in several ways, ranging from implementing block scheduling and extending class periods to replacing homeroom with a period of targeted academic interventions.

Illinois SIG school staffing policies center on professional development and evaluation. Chicago schools will provide increased time for staff collaboration during the day, while other districts, such as the Egyptian School District, will allot afterschool and summer hours for professional development. Evaluation systems will be changed to incorporate student growth measures into teacher and administrator evaluations, and one Chicago high school will hire an extra administrator to focus on staff evaluations.

Wisconsin SIG schools will address increased learning time requirements through optional extended day and mandatory Saturday academies to focus on mathematics and literacy skills for 9th- and 10th-grade students. Wisconsin will also address staffing issues. Milwaukee schools have developed a memorandum of understanding with the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association to expedite the removal of teachers who are judged to be ineffective. To inform this process, Milwaukee administrators will evaluate teachers three times a year on a "readiness to change" measure that will help evaluate teachers' willingness to be a part of an innovative school improvement process.

Technical Assistance Opportunities

The work being done in Wisconsin and Illinois demonstrates the diverse practices and strategies that are being implemented as a part of SIG models. In recognition of the work that has been accomplished this year and will be implemented in the years to come, the Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, in partnership with Great Lakes East and Great Lakes West, will host a series of regional capacity-building conferences in support of SEAs, LEAs, and schools implementing SIGs.

Because high school improvement is an important priority in the Midwest region, NHSC will partner with Great Lakes West and Great Lakes East to host the Midwest conference on May 18–19, 2011, which will focus on high school SIG grantees. The conference is designed to help increase the knowledge base about implementing research- and evidence-based practices through sessions on organizing for high school change, optimizing teaching and learning, developing and supporting effective high school teachers and leaders, and implementing high school improvement priorities. The conference will also provide opportunities for schools, districts, and states to build relationships and work together as state teams. Similarly, time will be provided for breakout sessions to allow SIG leaders to meet with others who have similar roles within their states, districts, or schools to share diverse perspectives and promising practices. Finally, the conference will offer an opportunity for interested states and districts to become engaged in continuing, in-depth technical assistance to help implement and sustain promising practices after the conference is over.

As the first year of SIG implementation winds down, we are eager to discover the lessons learned and the progress made toward the identified high school improvement priorities, and we hope that these conferences are the first of many opportunities for SIG participants to network and share. Lessons learned in the first year of SIGs should prove valuable to both first round grantees and those who will be receiving funds over the summer as a part of the second round. It will be interesting to see how year two is altered by the lessons learned in year one. As SIG interventions are implemented over the next 2.5 years, it will be beneficial to SIG schools and non-SIG schools alike to share the promising practices for high school improvement that emerge.