



How Northwest Region states are supporting schools in need of improvement



Institute of Education Sciences
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Summary

How Northwest Region states are supporting schools in need of improvement

This descriptive study examines the systems of technical assistance and support that Northwest Region states implemented during 2005/06 for schools in need of improvement. It does not evaluate states' efforts or effectiveness. By illuminating key characteristics and differences among state systems, the intent is to stimulate a thoughtful analysis of what states can do and what issues they might address to move schools out of in need of improvement status.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act challenged states to accelerate student academic achievement so that 100 percent of public school students are proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. Building on the requirements of the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act, No Child Left Behind requires states to create an accountability system that tracks progress toward all students' proficiency in math and reading. To increase accountability, schools are required to make adequate yearly progress by meeting state-established proficiency levels set to rise incrementally to 100 percent by 2014.

Districts identify schools as in need of improvement if they fail to make adequate yearly progress on the state assessment for two or more consecutive years. A school ceases to be identified as in need of improvement when

it makes adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years. Districts are responsible for ensuring that schools in need of improvement under their jurisdiction receive technical assistance, and they have primary responsibility for supporting several requirements. States have overarching responsibility to ensure that schools receive the needed support to make adequate yearly progress.

Northwest Region states may be able to learn from implementation of No Child Left Behind's provisions for schools in need of improvement in the other states in the region, taking into account their unique contexts.

Evaluation reports from the first two years of Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program and follow-up interviews with principals in participating schools indicate that school improvement facilitators—retired or former administrators who come from outside the district and work at the school site to guide and support the staff in developing and implementing a school improvement plan over three years—reportedly had a positive effect on Washington's initial cohorts. Efforts in Montana and Oregon also point to early positive effects of assisting schools by employing external facilitators such as school support teams and distinguished educators—that is, teachers or principals who are knowledgeable

about research-based programs and instructional practices and may have experience with Title IA schoolwide projects, school reform, and methods for improving educational opportunities for low-performing students.

Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program requires the majority of faculty to participate in the program and makes specific suggestions for building "readiness," such as developing a schoolwide vision and teaching staff processes for productive meetings and reaching consensus. Washington's principals in School Improvement Assistance Program evaluations noted a more productive working relationship with the school when the school improvement facilitator's experience, expertise, and leadership style were aligned with the school's needs and context.

All Northwest Region states cited professional development as an important element of their statewide systems of support. Northwest Region states are convening school staff for conferences such as Alaska's annual No Child Left Behind Conference and Montana's High Priority Schools Institutes. Additionally, staff in schools throughout the states engage in school- or district-based professional development geared to their school improvement efforts.

Many schools require some level of continued assistance beyond the initial intensive support they receive from their districts or the state. In Washington the support lasts three years, but it often takes longer to turn a school around, according to respondents. As one Washington principal observed, "Don't leave us just when we get it. The support from the state should continue so that we can trust in the process and continue it."

As states and districts provide support for schools facing increasingly stringent No Child Left Behind requirements, common strategies are emerging, such as providing professional development for principals and assigning external facilitators such as distinguished educators or school support teams to provide consistent support. However, such challenges as large percentages of rural and remote schools, high numbers of non-English-speaking and special education students, and local control issues all preclude the emergence of one overarching best solution. At this time a better understanding of the critical success factors and conditions that optimize the improvement process is needed to assist policymakers as they develop their statewide systems of support.

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This descriptive study examines the systems of technical assistance and support that Northwest Region states implemented during 2005/06 for schools in need of improvement. It does not evaluate states' efforts or effectiveness in assisting schools in need of improvement.

OVERVIEW

By illuminating key characteristics and differences among state systems, the intent is to stimulate a thoughtful analysis of what states can do and what issues they might address to move schools out of in need of improvement status.

The No Child Left Behind Act challenged states to accelerate student academic achievement so that 100 percent of public school students are proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. Building on the requirements of the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act, No Child Left Behind requires states to create an accountability system that tracks progress toward all students' proficiency in math and reading. To increase accountability, schools are required to make adequate yearly progress by meeting state-established proficiency levels set to rise incrementally to 100 percent by 2014.

The act was intended to build a sense of urgency about students not meeting proficiency and called for multiple forms of support from states and districts. It charged state education agencies to establish systems "of intensive and sustained support and improvement" for Title I schools and districts that persistently do not make adequate yearly progress (see box 1 for details on identifying schools in need of improvement). To do this states must establish school support teams, designate and use distinguished teachers and principals, and devise additional approaches that draw on expertise from higher education, comprehensive regional assistance centers, and other entities as appropriate. Support must first occur in districts with schools that have not made adequate yearly progress for four or more years.

Certain aspects of the implementation of statewide support systems throughout the Northwest Region states may provide guidance to other states in the continuing efforts to develop systems of support, taking into account their unique contexts.

School improvement facilitators reportedly had a positive effect in Washington's initial School Improvement Assistance Program cohorts. Efforts in Montana and Oregon also point to early successes in assisting schools by employing external facilitators such as distinguished educators. Washington's principals in School Improvement Assistance Program evaluations noted a more productive working relationship with the school when the school improvement facilitator's experience, expertise,

BOX 1

Identifying schools in need of improvement

States identify schools as in need of improvement if they fail to make adequate yearly progress on the state assessment for two or more consecutive years. A school ceases to be identified as in need of improvement when it makes adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years. Districts are responsible for ensuring that schools in need of improvement under their jurisdiction receive

technical assistance, and they have primary responsibility for supporting the requirements outlined in the table. States have the overarching responsibility to ensure that schools receive the support they need to make adequate yearly progress. The table lists the requirements for schools in need of improvement as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act.

The requirements for schools that remain in need of improvement increase each subsequent year and have serious implications for school and

district resources. For example, in the first year of in need of improvement status (level 1), when a school has not made adequate yearly progress targets for two consecutive years, the school and district must notify parents, offer a choice for students to attend another school, and pay for transportation for students who do. They are also required to revise and implement a school improvement plan, provide professional development to staff with 10 percent of local school Title IA funds, and receive technical assistance from the district.

No Child Left Behind requirements for schools in need of improvement

School improvement status	Years of not making adequate yearly progress	Progressive requirements
Level 1 (first year of in need of improvement status)	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notify parents of the status of the school. • Offer parents choice of different school in district, not identified for improvement. • Provide transportation to school of choice. • Revise and implement school improvement plan. • Provide professional development to staff using 10 percent of Title IA funds. • Receive technical assistance from district.
Level 2 (second year of in need of improvement status)	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer supplemental educational services to low-income students in the school, to be selected by parents from among a choice of state-approved providers.
Corrective action (third year of in need of improvement status)	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least one of the following corrective actions: • Replace some of the school staff. • Institute and implement new curriculum, including professional development. • Decrease management authority of the school. • Appoint outside expert to provide technical assistance. • Extend school day or year. • Restructure the school.
Restructuring—planning (fourth year of in need of improvement status)	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reopen as charter school. • Replace all or most of the school staff. • Contract with an outside entity to operate the school. • Turn the school over to the state education agency. • Restructure the school's governance.
Restructuring—implementation (fifth year of in need of improvement status)	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the restructuring plan created during the previous planning year. • Provides required technical assistance from the district to implement the restructuring plan.

and leadership style were aligned with the school's needs and context.

Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program requires the majority of faculty to participate in the program and makes specific suggestions for building "readiness," such as developing a schoolwide vision and teaching staff processes for productive meetings and reaching consensus.

All Northwest Region states cited professional development as an important element of their statewide systems of support. Northwest Region states are convening school staff for conferences such as Alaska's annual No Child Left Behind Conference and Montana's High Priority Schools Institutes. Additionally, staff in schools throughout the states engage in school- or district-based professional development geared to their school improvement efforts.

Many schools require some level of continued assistance beyond the initial intensive support they receive from their districts or the state. In Washington the support lasts three years, but it often takes longer to turn a school around. As one Washington principal observed, "Don't leave us just when we get it. The support from the state should continue so that we can trust in the process and continue it."

As states and districts provide support for schools facing increasingly stringent No Child Left Behind requirements, common strategies are emerging, such as providing professional development for principals and assigning school support teams and distinguished educators to provide consistent support. However, such challenges as large percentages of rural and remote schools, high numbers of non-English-speaking and special education students, and local control issues all preclude the emergence of one overarching best solution. At this time a better understanding of the critical success factors and conditions that optimize the improvement process is needed to assist policymakers as they develop statewide systems of support.

STATE SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT HAS THREE COMPONENTS

To assist schools and districts that consistently do not make adequate yearly progress, under No Child Left Behind Sec. 1117 (a) (4) (A), statewide systems of support to schools in need of improvement are required to have three essential components: school support teams, distinguished educators, and additional approaches designed to increase opportunities for students to meet each state's challenging content standards.

School support teams—the key support system

No Child Left Behind designates school support teams as the priority component of each statewide system. These teams are composed of persons with knowledge about scientifically based research, teaching and learning practices, successful Title IA programs, school reform, and methods for improving educational opportunities for low-performing students. They analyze all facets of a school's operations and make recommendations for improvement through collaboration on the development, implementation, and monitoring of the required school improvement plan.

After working with a school in improvement for a year, the school support team is called on to recommend next steps that could include sustained school support team involvement or other actions by the district or state. By

operationalizing school support teams' definition and delineating their functions, No Child Left Behind has in effect described them as improvement interventions that are "systematic, intensive, and able to be sustained." In essence, these interventions are delivered onsite, in person, and consistently over a prolonged period of time.

A better understanding of the critical success factors and conditions that optimize the improvement process is needed to assist policymakers as they develop statewide systems of support

Distinguished educators—for choice for membership on school support teams

The law defines distinguished educators as teachers or principals who are knowledgeable about research-based programs and instructional practices and successful with Title IA schoolwide projects, school reform, and methods for improving educational opportunities for low-performing students. No Child Left Behind calls for distinguished educators to provide intensive and sustained assistance to schools farthest from meeting the state's student performance standards.

Whenever possible, distinguished educators are drawn from schools that have been especially successful in enabling children to meet or make outstanding progress toward meeting the state's student performance standards. Across the five Northwest Region states, primarily retired educators are recruited to participate on state school support teams and provide technical assistance to schools in need of improvement.

Additional approaches—ambiguously defined

The legislation ambiguously defines additional approaches, but they are demonstrated through actions most states are taking to keep districts and schools informed through extensive and ongoing communications about improvement, professional development designed to strengthen instructional weaknesses in core subjects, and mentoring and coaching for instructional leadership. With this provision the No Child Left Behind Act acknowledges that each state will

develop strategies for assisting schools and districts with their improvement status based on their own context, including past improvement efforts. It recognizes that states will design additional approaches congruent with a statewide technical assistance plan based on each state's priorities. For instance, states might provide technical assistance

directly or through collaboration with institutions of higher education, education service agencies, or other providers of scientifically based technical assistance.

School improvement plan

The use of school support teams, distinguished educators, and additional approaches is intended to support the development of school improvement plans to improve student achievement. Within three months of being identified as in need of improvement, a school must develop or revise its plan according to criteria laid out in Section 1116(3)(A) of No Child Left Behind. The plan is developed by a school improvement team comprising school staff, representatives from the district office, parents, and community members. The plan must include a description of research-based instructional strategies that will be implemented in the core instructional areas that caused improvement identification, annual measurable goals aimed at 100 percent reading and math proficiency by 2013/14, professional development and teacher mentoring, and parental involvement. In addition to guiding the efforts of schools in need of improvement, the plans support requests to state education agencies for additional Title IA funding allocated to states to target the areas that led to improvement identification.

The school improvement plan is required to specify “the responsibilities of the school, the local educational agency, and the state educational agency serving the school” during a two-year implementation period. The district approves each plan and ensures that the school receives ongoing technical assistance throughout implementation. Technical assistance may be provided by the district, state, or other educational entities such as education service agencies and organizations with experience in school reform. During each improvement year school improvement plans are revised and supported by districts and the state according to these requirements.

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STATE SUPPORT REQUIREMENTS ARE SOMEWHAT FLEXIBLE

As described, the type of support states are expected to provide is broadly specified in the No Child Left Behind legislation; each state is required to reserve 4 percent of its Title 1A allocation for improvement activities during the 2004–2007 fiscal years. States have some latitude in how they structure their assistance, whether directly to schools in need of improvement or through their districts. Although the type of support is the state’s decision, using a school support team or distinguished educator is specified by No Child Left Behind. It is also left to the state’s discretion if some type of support should go to schools that are poised to progress to corrective action if they do not make adequate yearly progress over the next two years.

This study reports on how the Northwest Region states have responded to the No Child Left Behind requirements to provide “systems of support” that are intensive and sustained, highlighting some of their contextual differences. The study describes the work and composition of school support teams, identifies the characteristics of distinguished educators, and includes a broad summary of the additional approaches being implemented within the Northwest Region

states (see box 2 for the sources of data used in this study).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature was conducted to identify the degree of need states are facing across the country and to document the kinds of technical assistance that states and districts have provided to schools in need of improvement. Specifically, the literature reviewed here focuses on how states are implementing their systems of support through school support teams and distinguished educators and how they are implementing additional approaches to assist schools and their districts.

When the No Child Left Behind Act was introduced in 2001, the U.S. Department of Education reported that a robust literature based on the most effective process for transforming schools did not yet exist. In *Reaching new heights: Turning around low-performing schools. A guide for governors* (Mazzeo & Berman, n.d.), there was some consensus that the process is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Instead, it suggested that the entire school community must become involved in school improvement to develop a plan that includes a comprehensive needs assessment, measurable

BOX 2

Data sources

Three main data sources were used to describe the characteristics of the support systems for schools in need of improvement in the five Northwest Region states:

- Web documents including templates, procedures, schedules, and reports from each state’s web site.
- Semistructured, open-ended, general topic interviews with state department of education leaders responsible for implementing No Child Left Behind school improvement efforts in each state.

- Supplemental documents related to state systems of support provided by those interviewed.

There were several limitations of the data used in the preparation of this report. First, state web sites do not contain complete or uniform information about state responsibilities for support to schools in need of improvement. In addition, some initiatives during the current 2006/07 school year were not yet posted. Second, state leaders who participated in interviews typically have overall responsibility for their state support systems; the investigators did not verify their responses by collecting any information from schools or districts that have been identified for improvement.

goals, careful implementation of improvement strategies, and ongoing assessment and feedback that fosters continuous improvement.

Increasing numbers of schools in need of improvement nationwide

Nationwide 8,446 schools and 1,624 districts that receive federal assistance were listed as in need of improvement (Archer 2006). No Child Left Behind

states that all schools and districts labeled in need of improvement are entitled to technical support from their states. According to Archer, “States are building their school improvement systems while each year more schools are being identified.”

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States vary in progress toward developing systems of support

States are at varied points on the path to creating systems of support for districts and schools to comply with the three main No Child Left Behind requirements of implementing school support teams, distinguished educators, and additional approaches to support schools in need of improvement. In *State systems of support profiles* (Gray-Adams, Klein, Petta, Webber, & Yudd, 2006) comparable state data were collected to highlight each state’s efforts to create a system of technical assistance and support for its schools in need of improvement. The researchers provide evidence that there is wide variation among responses to the same requirements. According to the profiles, some states have only just established strategies or are still working on developing them. Some states had much to report in response to a series of questions related to the requirement that they deploy school support teams, but more often responded the information was not yet available or described initiatives piloted only during this past year

Title I accountability systems and school improvement from 2001 to 2004 (Laguarda et al., 2006)

reported that 36 of 50 states provided school support teams to schools in need of improvement, 33 provided technical assistance to schools in need of improvement, 23 brokered support to schools in need of improvement through regional education service groups, and 14 conducted audits.

Focus of work by school support teams and distinguished educators

Archer (2006) described states’ efforts to support school and district improvement. An analysis of their activities suggested some clear trends. States are providing “heavy doses of help with improvement planning; emphasizing supporting schools in groups, or entire districts, instead of just individually; providing training in leadership and data analysis; and establishing tiered systems based on level of need.”

A report entitled *Reaching capacity: A blueprint for the state role in improving low performing schools and districts* (Rennie Center, 2005) offers examples of how states are responding to No Child Left Behind requirements. For example, the intervention programs and technical assistance provided to low-performing schools by the Massachusetts Department of Education at the time of the report included using consultants, liaisons, or brokers; relying on school assistance teams; giving special grants to support school improvement; and allowing low-performing schools access to the services of regional educational agencies and statewide professional development resources. Another example is North Carolina, which has a long-running school-level intervention program and uses school improvement assistance teams that focus explicitly on instruction. Team members are hired for their expertise in core academic subject areas and prior experience as teachers. They undergo a month-long training process to incorporate coaching, leadership, and organizational skills with their content and pedagogical knowledge. Each low-performing school is assigned a team with multiple members and each team works in that school for one year, with follow-up during the second year.

The Kansas Department of Education supports low-performing schools by offering the services of integrated support teams that provide technical assistance to districts, which in turn are charged with serving schools directly. The integrated support teams provide expertise in school improvement, special education, and state and federal programs and provide services that include assistance with data analysis and root cause analysis; facilitative coaching on the improvement process; systematic review of and guidance through a self-assessment continuum process; guidance on reading and math instruction; assistance in identifying appropriate strategies based on student data; coordination of best practice in professional development to support instructional strategies; and school and district action plan review and monitoring of plan implementation.

Focus of additional approaches

A conceptual model used by the Tennessee Department of Education to support its low-performing schools is linked to level of need. This three-tiered support framework, based on a model from the Council of Chief State School Officers, is applied as follows: Tier 1 emphasizes assistance around general topics, such as standards and assessment delivered through regional workshops, Tier 2 focuses on more targeted support for a school's specific area of need, such as professional development for the subject in which a school failed to make adequate yearly progress, and Tier 3 emphasizes intensive and ongoing support to a school in need of improvement provided by technical assistance or a school support team.

Brady (2003) describes 17 methods of intervention for school improvement and categorizes them to parallel the three broad levels of No Child Left Behind school improvement status. He regarded level I efforts such as technical assistance, improvement planning, and professional development as “mild interventions,” which he found to be widespread since the passage of No Child Left Behind. He

compared more “moderate” level II interventions such as increasing instructional time, reorganizing the school, implementing comprehensive school reform, and changing the principal with level III “strong” interventions like reconstitution, school takeover, closure, offering choice, and changing curriculum.

When states intervene

In *Wrestling the devil in the details: An early look at restructuring in California* researchers at the Center on Educational Policy (2006) examined approaches taken by 404 California schools that were in restructuring status in 2005–06. Researchers discovered that districts and schools were not simply picking an option from the No Child Left Behind list; instead, they were trying to find the right mix of changes required for their school improvement to succeed. In fact, 76 percent of the schools in restructuring status in California chose to undertake other approaches that included a combination of hiring full-time coaches to help teachers work together in new ways and appointing a leadership team to oversee all aspects of school operations. Researchers suggested that this was the first time many teachers and administrators had to openly face the issues that led to the sanctions. State and district officials reported that addressing root causes was more important than simply satisfying No Child Left Behind requirements.

State education agency leaders from the Northwest Region states who spoke with the authors for this report also shared that even with No Child Left Behind as a lever, they are interested in pursuing strategies and processes that most effectively support schools in need of improvement and their districts based on their own state's needs over and above simply complying with the law.

The huge geographic scale of the Northwest Region and the rich cultural diversity of its students are key to understanding the challenges states face in responding to schools in need of improvement

STATES HAVE A VARIETY OF SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT

The huge geographic scale of the Northwest Region and the rich cultural diversity of its students are key to understanding the challenges states face in responding to schools in need of improvement.

Table 1 highlights the magnitude of the responsibility each Northwest Region state and its districts face (see box 1) at each year for schools in need of improvement.

Alaska covers an area twice the size of Texas but has only one person per square mile. More than one-third of Alaska's 132,970 public school students are in the Anchorage School District, and another third are concentrated in the next four largest districts. The final third—almost 40,000 students—are in 48 districts that cover the extraordinary vastness of the state. Many of the schools in these districts are accessible only by airplane or boat. More than 60 percent of the Alaska Native/American Indian students are in the 48 smallest districts. They make up more than half the enrollment in these mostly small and remote districts. Migratory subsistence is a common way of life for Alaska Natives in the remote regions. In Alaska 77 percent of the Title I schools in need of improvement are in nonmetro rural areas, as designated by National Center for Education Statistics

local code 7 “rural,” while 53 percent of all Alaska schools are in nonmetro rural areas.

With only 17 people residing within an average square mile, half of Idaho's 256,084 public school students are in the 10 largest districts, each having 5,000 or more students. These larger districts include four at the center of the Boise metropolitan area. The other half of Idaho's students are scattered in 104 smaller districts across the intensively farmed Snake River Valley Plain in the south and the mountainous regions in the north, center, and southeast of the state. Hispanic students now make up more than 10 percent of statewide enrollment and 23 districts have Hispanic enrollment rates of 25 percent or more. American Indian students make up less than 2 percent of Idaho's public school enrollment. In Idaho 23 percent of the Title I schools in need of improvement are in nonmetro rural areas, while 27 percent of all Idaho schools are in nonmetro rural areas.

Montana is another low-population density state, with only six residents per square mile. Montana has no large metropolitan areas. Only a quarter of its fewer than 150,000 public school students reside in its three largest districts. Montana's strong ethic of local control has resulted in many more school districts than any other state in the region. It has 336 administrative districts, only 29 of which have more than 1,000 students. More than 1 in 10 of Montana's public school students is

TABLE 1

Number of Title IA schools in need of improvement in Northwest Region states, years 1–5, by state, fall 2006

State	Title IA schools	Level 1 (first year)	Level 2 (second year)	Corrective action (third year)	Restructuring (fourth year)	Restructuring (fifth year)	Title IA schools in need of improvement
Alaska	275	9	11	30	30	11	91
Idaho	367	77	9	12	0	0	98
Montana	664	5	11	4	1	31	52
Oregon	595	20	14	10	0	1	45
Washington	948	49	13	27	4	8	101

Note: See box 1 for a description of school improvement phases and requirements.

Source: School improvement lists from state education agencies.

American Indian, and 13 districts have American Indian enrollment rates greater than 90 percent. In Montana 79 percent of the Title I schools in need of improvement are in nonmetro rural areas, while 66 percent of all Montana schools are in nonmetro rural areas.

Oregon has more residents than Alaska, Idaho, and Montana combined, but it has only 38 residents per square mile. Like Idaho and Alaska, it is dominated by a single large metropolitan area and has vast sparsely populated and remote areas. Three-quarters of Oregon's 552,332 public school students are concentrated in the Portland metropolitan and Willamette Valley regions. More than one in eight Oregon students is Hispanic, and they are concentrated within 19 of the state's 198 districts. These districts are mostly in the especially productive agricultural areas of the Willamette Valley and eastern Oregon. In Oregon 9 percent of the Title I schools in need of improvement are in nonmetro rural areas, while 18 percent of all Oregon schools are in nonmetro rural areas.

Washington has a population almost as large as the other four Northwest states combined. It also has the smallest land area, with a population density of 93 people per square mile. Almost half of Washington's 1,020,005 public school students reside in the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area. Fully one-third are in the remaining metropolitan areas of the state. The remaining 20 percent of Washington's students are scattered in remote sections of the state. There is racial and ethnic diversity, with 12 percent Hispanic, 8 percent Asian, 6 percent black, and 3 percent American Indian/Alaska Native enrollment. Thirty-eight of Washington's 296 districts are classified as "majority minority." In Washington 5 percent of the Title I schools in need of improvement are in nonmetro rural areas, while 12 percent of all Washington schools are in nonmetro rural areas.

Given these demographic and geographical differences, it makes sense to have a school support team or distinguished educator work on a weekly basis with a school in need of improvement in

Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, where distances do not prohibit this type of support. But for Alaska, and many schools in Montana, this is not feasible because of isolated rural and remote conditions, transportation difficulties and, in some cases, lack of lodging. School improvement strategies geared toward large American Indian populations are crucial in Montana; 11 percent of its public school population fits this designation, and the majority of its reservation schools are in restructuring status. By contrast, less than 3 percent of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington's public school populations are American Indian. Accordingly, Montana's scholastic reviews conducted by school support teams include an examination of American Indian, culturally relevant factors of school curriculum and instruction. For Idaho, Oregon, and Washington the achievement of students in the limited English proficient subgroup becomes a more pressing issue because there are more students in this population subgroup. (See appendix A for additional demographic data.)

Table 2 displays the 2006 components of the Northwest Region states' systems of support. This support is classified into three categories: school support teams, distinguished educators, and additional approaches to support schools in need of improvement, with professional development and leadership development subcategories. Table 2 is followed by a state-by-state description of response to the major No Child Left Behind requirements for creating a state system of "intensive and sustained" support.

Alaska's school support teams conduct instructional audits in elementary, middle, and secondary schools in need of improvement and include retired superintendents, principals, distinguished educators, and district curriculum specialists

Alaska

School support teams and distinguished educators. Alaska's school support teams were established in fall 2006 with the sole function of conducting instructional audits in elementary, middle,

TABLE 2

Overview of state systems of support in 2006

State	School support teams	Distinguished educators	Additional approaches to support schools in need of improvement	
			Professional development	Leadership development
Alaska	School support team conducts instructional audit for eight elementary, middle, and high school restructuring schools in need of improvement within districts in improvement status.	Retired principals, superintendents, and curriculum coordinators serve as distinguished educators on school support teams.	Alaska reading course, electronic formative reading, and math assessments for students, No Child Left Behind Conference focused on formative assessment.	Principal coaching project; key elements being extended to restructuring status schools that received instructional audits.
Idaho	School support teams conduct Principal Academy of Leadership Instructional Review and Surveys of Enacted Curriculum for middle school schools in need of improvement; follow-up monthly coaching for principals; and ongoing support from distinguished educators.	Distinguished Educators serve on School Support Teams to conduct Instructional Reviews. DE provides monthly coaching for principals.	Idaho Reading Academies for Title IA teachers and paraeducators; Idaho Math Academies to be implemented 2006/07. Instructional coaching is being developed for teachers.	Principal Academy of Leadership focusing on Instructional Review and Surveys of Enacted Curriculum. Follow-up monthly coaching for principals from distinguished educators.
Montana	School support team conducts scholastic review for elementary, middle, and high school level restructuring schools and districts.	Distinguished educators participate on school support teams. Schools receive regularly scheduled follow-up by team leader.	High priority schools institutes in core curricular areas with follow-up.	Montana Mentor Project for all principals in districts in improvement; Two Call to Greatness Symposia for principals, superintendents, and board chairs.
Oregon	School support team structure incorporates partnerships with education service districts, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, and state education agencies staff. Schools in need of improvement agree to use school improvement funds to work with regional school improvement coordinators.	Distinguished educators serve in elementary, middle, and high school-level schools in need of improvement as regional school improvement coordinators and work with these schools one day a week.	Training for school teams in need of improvement has focused on building trust in schools and leadership for school improvement. Summer Literacy and Leadership Institutes for school teams.	Professional development for principals of schools in need of improvement scheduled for two days during the 2006/07 school year.
Washington	School support team conducts educational audit in elementary, middle, and high schools. Audit data are used to create and implement school improvement plan.	School improvement facilitator works with school approximately 1.5 days a week for three years. Distinguished educators participate on audit teams or as school improvement facilitators.	Summer institutes and winter conference that emphasize core curricular content improvement, accountability, and assessment strategies; extensive professional development for school improvement facilitators, and for school teams related to their stage of planning or implementation.	New principal mentoring project in collaboration with Association of Washington School Principals. School improvement facilitator serves as a leadership mentor to principal and school improvement teams during three-year school improvement period.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data described in box 2.

and secondary schools in need of improvement. Alaska's team members include retired superintendents, principals, distinguished educators, and district curriculum specialists. They participated in six days of training and conducted instructional audits for eight schools in restructuring implementation status within three districts that have also been identified as districts in need of improvement. (The state education agency chose to support a very small group of districts in need of improvement that had not demonstrated any movement toward improvement.) During 2006/07 the teams conducted one- to two-day site visits to collect data from classroom observations, document reviews, interviews, and focus group discussions with staff and students. Data were collected across six domains: curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, school learning environment, and leadership. Teams made dichotomous ratings of "meets" or "does not meet" and created a report for each school that was submitted to the Alaska Department of Education.

The state used the reports to write improvement plans for the districts to guide their support to these schools. The Alaska Department of Education is actively involved in providing follow-up technical assistance in leadership and professional development, as requested by the districts.

Additional approaches: professional development and principal leadership. The state sponsors an annual No Child Left Behind conference that is open to participants from any school within the state, but features sessions for schools in need of improvement. An Alaska Reading Course, developed by a group of nationally recognized reading experts, was developed for use in a distance learning format. The course will be required of all teachers in order to requalify for state teaching certification. At the same time, the state is implementing a project that allows teachers to administer formative student reading and math assessments electronically. Assessments are tied to state grade level expectations, and teachers will be able to access instant feedback on students' performance to

standards. A voluntary principal coaching project serves 75 principals in collaboration with the University of Alaska and school districts; Alaska is in the process of expanding the key elements of the project to meet the needs of principals in schools in restructuring status.

Idaho

School support teams and distinguished educators. Idaho's school support teams assist with a "Principal Academy of Leadership," a three-year project aimed at empowering principals in schools in need of improvement to create high-performing instructional environments so that all students can achieve reading, math, and science proficiency. Principals from 24 Title I middle schools in need of improvement participated during 2006/07, the second year of the Principal Academy of Leadership implementation. This project specifically targeted middle schools because so many were Title I and having difficult making adequate yearly progress.

School support teams are composed of state department staff, active and retired distinguished educators, and representatives of educational service consortia and institutions of higher education. Each year, the school support team receives eight days of team training. The teams focus primarily on classroom instruction in core subject areas of reading, math, and science. They conduct annual instructional reviews of every core class in operation in schools in need of improvement. Distinguished educator members of the school support team are "on call" to provide follow-up support to principals in the implementation of school improvement plans; they also check in regularly with the schools to ascertain progress in improving instructional practice across the school.

Idaho school support teams focus primarily on classroom instruction in core subject areas of reading, math, and science and conduct annual instructional reviews of every core class in operation in schools in need of improvement

Additional approaches: professional development and principal leadership. An instructional coaching framework for all schools, including those in need of improvement, is under development as a collaboration between Boise State University and the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. The Idaho Department of Education initiated this project based on success with job-embedded professional development provided by coaches in its Reading First implementation. The instructional coaching framework emphasizes assisting teachers with content knowledge and instruction, formative assessment, and classroom behavior. The coaching framework encourages schools in need of improvement to consider the option of job-embedded professional development to improve achievement.

Montana

School support teams and distinguished educators. School support teams are composed of six to seven educators, including state education agency staff and other teachers and administrators, including those who fit the description of distinguished educators. Montana's school support teams conducted scholastic reviews in 33 schools across all grade spans that were in restructuring status during 2006/07.

The four-day scholastic review examined each school's academic performance, learning environment, and organizational efficiency based on effective schools research. Representatives of the National Indian School Boards Association worked with state staff to use materials from the

Leadership Beyond the Seventh Generation: Creating Sacred Places for Children project (Creating Sacred Places Project Team, 2003) to design and embed culturally relevant factors in the onsite review process. The scholastic review includes recommendations for kinds and levels of support needed to implement school improvement plans.

Team leaders from the scholastic reviews provide ongoing support through follow-up visits and calls to schools to monitor the implementation of the plans. Montana's scholastic review process is also intended for districts that are identified as in need of improvement. Each effectiveness correlate includes a rubric to assess a district's performance on the indicator.

Additional approaches: professional development and principal leadership. Montana's High Priority Schools Institutes are designed to meet the professional development needs of all Montana schools, including schools in need of improvement. The institutes provide professional development through regional workshops in core curricular subjects that are followed up with ongoing communication and some onsite services to ensure learning strategies are implemented. The institutes maintain a targeted curricular focus for one year at a time.

Superintendents, school board chairpersons, and principals from schools identified for restructuring were invited to attend "Call to Greatness" Symposia in October and February of the 2006/07 school year to review school and district data that led to improvement identification. An overall goal of the symposia is to broaden stakeholder commitment and participation in improving schools so that achievement improves for all groups and school board members are engaged in creating and maintaining strong improvement policies.

Oregon

School support teams and distinguished educators. The Oregon Department of Education developed and piloted a school support team project during the 2005/06 school year. It is a collaborative effort between the state, participating districts, education service districts, and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Regional school improvement coordinators are matched with schools in need of improvement in a two-year project to assist in planning and implementation of school improvement efforts. The regional school improvement coordinator cadre is composed of

Montana's High Priority Schools Institutes provide professional development through regional workshops in core curricular subjects that are followed up with ongoing communication and some onsite services to ensure learning strategies are implemented

distinguished educators and other highly experienced education professionals, including superintendents, principals, curriculum specialists, and state department of education program specialists. They are recruited and trained to serve as external facilitators to school principals and other staff during the school improvement process. They receive six days of training throughout the school year and attend monthly networking and professional development sessions.

The regional school improvement coordinators are typically onsite for one day a week during the school's two-year participation in the project. The project grew from 9 to 23 participating schools during the 2006/07 school year, with 18 regional school improvement coordinators now working as external facilitators across all grade spans in schools that range from school improvement level 1 (first year of in need of improvement status) to restructuring—planning (fourth year of in need of improvement status). Only 23 schools were included because No Child Left Behind states that the priority for state education agency support is for schools in corrective action and beyond. In this project some schools are not in improvement status, such as high schools or feeder-pattern schools.

Additional approaches: professional development and principal leadership. Each year the Oregon State Superintendent of Public Instruction sponsors a statewide Summer Literacy and Leadership Institute for all state schools, including schools in need of improvement. During the August 2006 institute more than 800 participants attended sessions ranging from identifying root causes of the achievement gap to best practices and research-based review of student work. A follow-up session for school teams that attended is scheduled for early 2007. Each school year principals and teams of staff from participating schools in need of improvement attend two daylong professional development sessions that focus on leadership development as part of their project participation. Participation is voluntary, and districts and schools agree to participate once they reach a certain improvement designation.

Washington

School support teams and distinguished educators. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction began its assistance to schools in need of improvement simultaneously with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Its three-year School Improvement Assistance Program is available to level I schools in need of improvement whose staff are ready and willing to participate in all aspects of the program. Each participating school is assigned a school improvement facilitator—a retired or former administrator (who often qualifies as a distinguished educator) who comes from improved schools outside the district. The facilitator contracts with the district to work approximately one and a half days a week at the school site to guide and support the staff in developing and implementing their school improvement plan. The facilitator works with the school for three years, even if the school makes adequate yearly progress within that timeframe. See appendix B for an in-depth case study of Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program.

The state's school support teams and distinguished educators conduct audit team visits at all participating elementary, middle, and secondary schools in the School Improvement Assistance Program. Audit team members receive two days of training each year and conduct a comprehensive review of strengths and challenges with specific feedback for the school improvement plan. A formal report is presented to the school's staff by the audit team leader to provide staff an opportunity to identify priorities for improvement.

Additional approaches: professional development and principal leadership. The state offers annual regional summer institutes and a statewide conference in January for all schools, with an emphasis

Washington's three-year School Improvement Assistance Program is available to level I schools in need of improvement whose staff are ready and willing to participate in all aspects of the program

on improvement in core content areas, accountability requirements, leadership, and assessment. Schools in need of improvement that participate in the School Improvement Assistance Program attend training two to three times a year and receive additional funding for professional development and collaborative planning around their improvement goals. New principals in schools participating in the program can participate in a mentoring project that involves collaboration between the state and the Association of Washington School Principals.

Consistent elements of support across the states

All five states have extensive infrastructures for communicating No Child Left Behind requirements for accountability, standards-based testing, reporting annual adequate yearly progress, and school improvement planning procedures. They have developed an array of web-based communication tools to support district efforts to assist schools in need of improvement. State education agency web sites post templates for districts to use to notify parents of in need of improvement status and explain school choice options and related transportation opportunities and to support school improvement planning and the improvement activities. Also, states approve and identify

suitable supplemental educational services providers that parents of income-eligible students may access for tutoring services during school improvement level 2 years and beyond.

Professional development and principal leadership initiatives are the two most common and consistent elements of the “additional approaches” within statewide support systems provided by the Northwest Region states. States are conducting statewide or regional conferences and in most cases providing follow-up, with a primary focus on the core content areas of reading and mathematics—the

subjects for which schools are currently being identified for not making adequate yearly progress.

Each state has engaged in efforts focused on principals, including coaching, mentoring, and leadership development, for example, Alaska’s Principal Coaching Project, Idaho’s Principal Academy of Leadership, Montana’s “Call to Greatness” Symposia, Oregon’s focus on principals with regional school improvement coordinators, and Washington’s support to principals through training with school improvement facilitators and mentoring opportunities with the Association of Washington School Principals. It is notable that Washington, Montana, and Alaska are extending their coaching and mentoring projects to the superintendents of districts identified for improvement.

School support team audits and reviews

School support teams in each state are implementing (or are considering implementing) audit processes with somewhat different focuses. For instance, the audits in Idaho are essentially middle school instructional reviews that provide data collection and analysis of classroom instruction in core subjects, coupled with teacher self-reports, to inform principal leadership of the instructional improvement process and to identify specific instructional strategies to be emphasized in school improvement plans. In Montana and Washington the audits provide an in-depth focus on multiple facets of a school’s operations including leadership, assessment practices, content-specific curriculum, instruction and alignment, supportive learning environments, parent and community involvement, and cultural responsiveness.

The reports from these audits are used by each school in need of improvement’s school improvement team as it works collaboratively to develop and implement a school improvement plan. In Alaska the audit process provides information focused on six domains: curriculum, assessment, instruction, professional development, school learning environment, and leadership. Reports from these audits are for the state to use in developing

All five Northwest Region states have extensive infrastructures for communicating No Child Left Behind requirements for accountability, standards-based testing, reporting annual adequate yearly progress, and school improvement planning procedures

district improvement plans, so that districts can better assist schools in restructuring status.

Longevity of school support team activities

School support teams have different histories across the five states. Idaho's school support teams have been working within the Principal Leadership Academy for two years; Montana and Oregon's teams were piloted in 2005/06 and are in full implementation this year; Alaska's instructional audit teams began audits during the fall of the 2006/07 school year. Washington began implementing educational audit teams during 2002, so the current process represents an evolution over time.

The No Child Left Behind Act recognizes that states will design additional approaches based on

each state's priorities and, according to the *LEA and Non-Regulatory Guidance* (U.S. Department of Education 2006), "A State may add more elements to its statewide support and improvement system that are congruent with a statewide technical assistance plan." Washington state offers an example of an early implementation of a statewide system of sustained and intensive support for schools in need of improvement. Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program has provided support to schools in need of improvement, including a focus on school staffs' readiness to benefit from school improvement planning, and implementing onsite school improvement facilitators for three years. An in-depth examination of Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program follows with background information, key implementation factors, a discussion of quantitative outcomes, and references to data tables in the appendixes.

APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR NORTHWEST REGION PUBLIC SCHOOLS

TABLE A1

Student characteristics for public schools in the Northwest Region states in 2004/05

Characteristic	Alaska	Idaho	Montana	Oregon	Washington
Number enrolled	132,970	256,084	146,705	552,322	1,020,005
Share of students in Title I eligible schools (percent)	36.0	67.3	79.5	—	52.0
Share of students who are limited English proficient (percent)	16.9	9.0	7.0	12.5	7.4
Share of students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch (percent)	28.6	38.6	33.7	41.9	36.1

— is not available.

Source: NCES 2007-309, *Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Students, School Districts, Revenues, and Expenditures: School Year 2004-05 and Fiscal Year 2004*. E.D. TAB. November 2006. Tables 1, 2, 3.

TABLE A2

School and district characteristics for schools in the Northwest Region states in 2004/05

Characteristic	Alaska	Idaho	Montana	Oregon	Washington
Number of regular districts	54	114	436	198	296
Number of public schools having membership	497	662	852	1,208	2,203
Number of public charter schools	21	19	na	39	na
Current spending per pupil	\$10,116	\$6,168	\$7,825	\$7,615	\$7,391
Pupils per teacher	17.1	17.9	14.3	20.1	19.2
Number of full-time equivalent teachers	7,756	14,269	10,224	27,431	53,125

na is not applicable.

Source: *Digest of Education Statistics 2006*. July 2007/ Table 85, page 125.

TABLE A3

Racial/ethnic background of students in public schools in Northwest Region states in 2004/05 (percent)

Race/ethnicity	Alaska	Idaho	Montana	Oregon	Washington
White	58.3	83.5	84.5	75.4	70.7
Black	4.6	1.0	0.8	3.3	5.7
Hispanic	4.1	12.4	2.3	14.5	12.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	6.7	1.5	1.1	4.6	8.0
American Indian/Alaska Native	26.3	1.6	11.3	2.3	2.7

Source: NCES 2007-309, *Overview of Public Elementary and Secondary Students, School Districts, Revenues, and Expenditures: School Year 2004-05 and Fiscal Year 2004*. E.D. TAB November 2006. Table 3.

APPENDIX B

CASE STUDY: WASHINGTON'S SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Washington's state system of support began in 1993 with the formation of the Commission on Student Learning. This commission developed the state standards, oversaw the development of the state assessment, and began designing the accountability support system. When it sunsetted in 1999, it was replaced by the Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission charged with creating an accountability system and a structure for helping failing schools meet the adequate yearly progress requirement under the Improving America's Schools Act. The commissioners investigated approaches undertaken by other states and were especially influenced by the Kentucky program, which included school audits and distinguished educators linked to underperforming schools.

In 2001 a sweeping school improvement support bill was introduced in the state legislature; though much of it did not pass, a small piece—\$800,000 for a state-funded focused assistance program—survived. Simultaneously, No Child Left Behind provided Title I funds for states to allocate to districts with schools in need of improvement. This combination of funding gave Washington the resources to begin providing intensive support to schools with its School Improvement Assistance Program.

Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program incorporates the required components of a statewide system of sustained support—school support teams and distinguished educators along with additional approaches of professional development and leadership development for principals. These components include:

- *School support teams.* Teams of approximately five retired and former educators who conduct educational audits at the beginning of each school's participation in the program write a collaborative report based on a comprehensive review of the school.

- *Distinguished educators.* Each participating school is assigned a school improvement facilitator who works with the school for three years, even if the school makes adequate yearly progress within that timeframe.

Additional approaches include:

- *Assessment of readiness to benefit.* A survey is used to determine readiness to participate in the School Improvement Assistance Program. Decisions regarding professional development are made based on staff readiness.
- *Professional development for staff.* Participating schools attend a training session two to three times a year and receive additional funding for professional development and collaborative planning around their improvement goals.
- *Leadership development for principals.* Principals may receive leadership training and mentoring through a partnership with the Association of Washington School Principals.

Key implementation factors

In October 2001 the Washington Department of Education invited 48 schools to apply to participate in cohort I of the state's School Improvement Assistance Program. The schools were primarily school improvement level I (first-year school in need of improvement) status because according to requirements in the Improving America's Schools Act, they had not made adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years in the same subject area. Of those 48 schools, 38 submitted an application and 25 were selected to participate in the program. The schools participating as cohort I for 2001–04 consisted of 9 elementary and 16 junior high or middle schools. They received an educational audit and support over three years from a school improvement facilitator. The remaining 13 schools participated as cohort II for 2002–05, and consisted of six elementary and seven secondary schools. New cohorts have been added each year since.

This case study builds on the findings gleaned from the evaluation reports for cohort I (Baker, et al., 2004) and cohort II (Leffler, 2005) with follow-up interviews conducted with the principals and school improvement facilitators from the schools in both cohorts. These two cohorts were the only ones that had completed the program at the time of this study. There were limitations related to the evaluation data and reports of Washington's School Improvement Assistance Program. The two program evaluations, conducted by two different entities, focused on different evaluation questions, which made direct comparisons of the two cohort programs difficult. Because investigators initially focused on the factors that helped schools successfully move out of in need of improvement status and because of study constraints, only the principals and school improvement facilitators from schools no longer in need of improvement were interviewed. This strategy proved to be a limitation and might have created a bias. Of the 24 schools in cohort I, 54 percent were successful in moving out of in need of improvement status, as were 46 percent of the 13 schools in cohort II. All the school improvement facilitators and principals in these 37 schools were contacted for this study, and 11 principals and 14 school improvement facilitators were interviewed.

Interviews with state education agency leaders provided evidence that the experience with these first two cohorts informed subsequent changes in the School Improvement Assistance Program. When describing efforts to provide assistance to the initial cohorts during their school improvement process, state staff acknowledged that they “were building the airplane while trying to fly it.”

Components of the program mentioned in evaluations and interviews as particularly valuable to the improvement process are described below. Those components are the role of the school improvement facilitators, educational audits, readiness to benefit, professional development, and sustainability of improvement efforts.

The role of the school improvement facilitator.

School improvement facilitators, who may also be

designated as distinguished educators, are highly experienced in improving student performance. In preparation for work with the first two cohorts, school improvement facilitators received professional development that included one full day of training in the summer or early fall, attendance at all informational meetings and professional development sessions for participating schools, and three to four loosely structured networking meetings during the year. These meetings covered the “nuts and bolts” of the school improvement planning process and provided updates on the School Improvement Assistance Program. With each successive cohort, the state education agency reported that it continues to refine and enhance the school improvement facilitator preparation process, extending the number of days and content of the training.

In making facilitator assignments at the beginning of the school's participation in School Improvement Assistance Program, the state education agency considers school needs, principal characteristics, and the strengths of each facilitator to optimize the match and maximize working relationships. Because facilitators are usually retired educators, they have the time to work with up to two schools, spending one and a half days or more per week working with each over the course of three years. The facilitators serve in a coordinating role for the educational audit conducted by the school support team during the first two months of program participation. The audit report provides key data for school staff and the school improvement team as they create their school improvement plan.

Both cohort evaluation reports described the role of the school improvement facilitator in positive terms, lauding them for the value they brought to the schools. Follow-up interviews with principals for this study confirmed this perspective and provided substantial reflections on the facilitator's value. In the words of interviewed principals, “The school improvement facilitator gave unbiased, impartial, and substantial feedback that we could use to enhance the work we were doing,” “. . . was

a coordinator who truly understood best practices and whom the staff trusted to act in their best interests,” “. . . I can't say enough about the way we were able to use the facilitator who empowered and helped us to accomplish what we needed to do. . .”

Educational audits. In Washington, several schools reported using the initial audit process to their advantage. One principal summed up the audit process by saying, “The audit team coming in and turning over every rock was very laborious, but worthwhile in the end,” and “the expertise and openness of the audit team was invaluable to forming our improvement plan. Sometimes the truth hurt, and we had to swallow it.” As reported in interviews with school improvement facilitators and principals, the initial focus on existing conditions—both strengths and challenges—stimulated staff to look and think about underlying causes for failure with students. The audits appeared to increase readiness of staff to engage in self-reflection.

Readiness to benefit. Each school was asked to assess its own readiness to benefit from the school improvement planning process. However, schools were cautioned that assessing readiness is not a one-time event but an ongoing endeavor in the process of continuous improvement. According to a principal interviewed for this study, “It is the conversation and thinking about the process that builds the readiness and capacity for staff to make the kind of changes in instructional practice that truly affect student outcomes.”

Principals and school improvement facilitators interviewed for this study said that several factors were indicators of willingness to change and readiness to benefit from the School Improvement Assistance Program:

- Staff expressed high levels of buy-in to the school improvement process.
- Prior or simultaneous school improvement experience and efforts, such as comprehensive

school reform models, Reading First, and Math Helping Corps.

- Willingness to examine their own teaching practices.
- Involvement and support from the district.

Professional development. School leaders identified summer institutes, a winter conference, and the Title I improvement funding for other supportive professional development opportunities as significant success factors. They reported that when professional development was conducted onsite, when professional development was aligned with school improvement goals, and when teachers were provided training in research-based and immediately applicable instructional practices, there were positive learning effects in the classroom.

Professional development was also conducted with building administrators. Principals reported on the value of networking with other leaders of schools in need of improvement during state-sponsored training within cohort groups. This helped alleviate the feelings of being “out there all alone.” They were also coached and mentored throughout the challenging work of turning around their underperforming schools by the school improvement facilitator. Additionally, some principals had formal mentoring relationships through the Association of Washington School Principals.

Although professional development was mentioned frequently in both evaluation reports and follow-up interviews, there were poor records of the frequency and exact content of the professional development activities each school determined it needed, in addition to the professional development provided by the state as part of school participation in the School Improvement Assistance Program. For example, some schools hired reading or math instructional coaches. Witnessed in the evaluations and in follow-up interviews, professional development—most notably quantity—made a difference in the perception of School Improvement Assistance Program participants.

Sustainability of improvement efforts. When asked specifically about sustainability, principals and school improvement facilitators in interviews considered the ongoing role of the school improvement team, comprising members of the school community, to be important. Some schools use their team to update goals and action steps and to monitor the implementation of their school improvement plan. Continued commitment to having a representative school improvement team was cited as key to continued success.

The school's improvement facilitator was seen to be effective in creating continuity and trust in the process during sometimes difficult transitions. At the end of their participation in the School Improvement Assistance Program, several schools either found funds to continue working with their facilitator or reported sadness that they were unable to continue that relationship.

To sustain improvement gains, schools reported needing some level of follow-up funding to support

ongoing professional development and release time for teacher collaboration. All interviewees agreed that sustainability is not an easy charge. One principal summarized the sustainability conversation with, "The greatest challenge is to sustain the belief that the process will work and that goals will be accomplished" and the understanding that "school improvement never ends."

Quantitative outcomes for School Improvement Assistance Program schools

Considering achievement outcomes for those schools engaged in the improvement process is the ultimate program evaluation goal; however, only the first two of six cohorts had completed the program at the time of this study. It is still too early in the School Improvement Assistance Program intervention to draw conclusions about its overall success and no conclusions can be drawn about its effectiveness at this time. There is simply no way to know how these schools would have performed if they had not participated in the program.

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