SCHOOL TURNAROUND GROUP

MASS INSIGHT EDUCATION

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS: TAKE 2

Lessons learned from Round 1

> " If we are to put an end to stubborn cycles of poverty and social failure, and put our country on track for long-term economic prosperity, we must address the needs of children who have long been ignored and marginalized in chronically low-achieving schools. **States and school districts have an opportunity to put unprecedented resources toward reforms** that would increase graduation rates, reduce dropout rates and improve teacher quality for all students, and particularly for children who most need good teaching in order to catch up. "

Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education
August 26, 2009

Last year, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan set forth an ambitious goal for our country — turn around 1,000 of our chronically failing schools per year over the next five years. To support this effort, the federal government has put up billions of dollars in funding, mostly in the form of Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG).

SIG, both in the level of its funding and the boldness of its requirements, is an unprecedented attempt to alter the fate of students in low-performing schools nationwide. There has never before been an opportunity to dedicate this much national energy and resources to the turnaround of failing schools.

While SIG may be a huge opportunity for dramatic improvement, it is also a huge opportunity to once again fail our students, families, and communities. Round 1 took place at breakneck speed, with states, districts, and schools "building the plane while flying it." With Round 2 SIG applications due over the next few months, states have an opportunity to build on both the mistakes and the successes of Round 1. This guide communicates some critical lessons learned, giving states a chance to do it right this time and offer hope for the millions of children who continue to languish in failing schools every day.

By Jennifer Shea and Meredith Liu

Acknowledgments

Publications at the School Turnaround Group

Our 2007 report *The Turnaround Challenge*, which was supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, made a significant contribution to the national debate on high-poverty schools. That report helped to shape the current emphasis on transformational change through significant investments of human capital and organizational capacity in persistently low achieving schools. The School Turnaround Group (STG) at Mass Insight continues to lead the field by developing a set of integrated tools to help states, districts and partner organizations "operationalize" *The Turnaround Challenge* and create proof-points for the "Partnership Zone" framework.

The STG collects and analyzes data from emerging practices across the country. We develop tools to help states and districts build systems, structures, and policies that will lead to dramatic improvement in their lowest-performing schools. Our research is based on an understanding of how policy drives practice and how practice is strengthened by building capacity and knowledge within local and state systems. Our free publications are available on our website: www.massinsight.org/stg/research

In addition to our collection of public tools and reports, we provide exclusive, customized reports to states that participate in our State Development Network (SDN). The SDN is a multi-state network of state education agency leaders who are committed to turning around low-performing schools by increasing state-level capacity and transforming the policy framework. Please contact us at turnaround@massinsight.org if your state is interested in joining this network.

Through the School Improvement Grant program, states have an unprecedented opportunity to turn around their lowest-performing schools
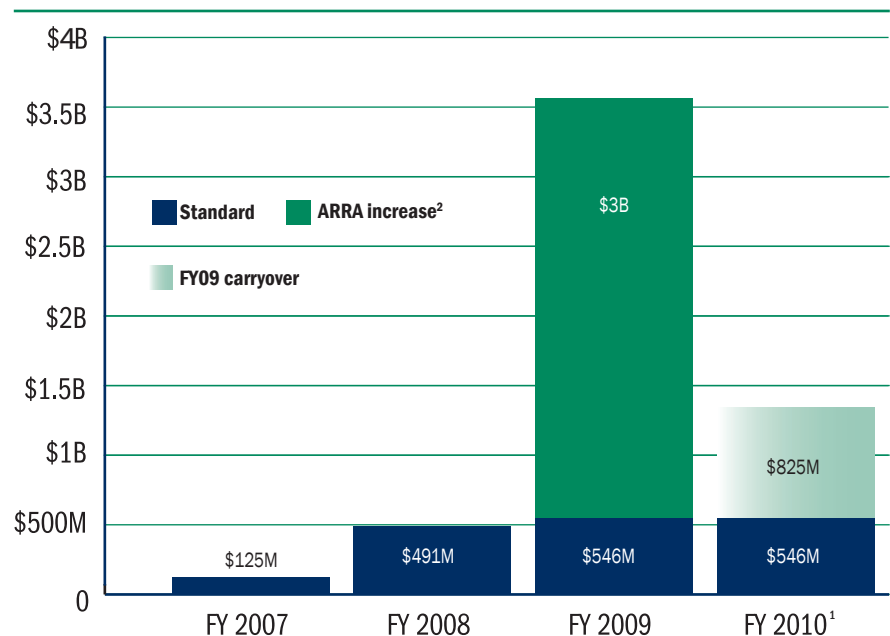
In December 2009, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) released a new set of priorities for the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. These requirements for intervention, which apply to the FY09 funding process (deemed "Round 1"), come in response to years of unsuccessful, light-touch school intervention strategies allowed under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. As thousands of schools continue to fail, a new approach is required.

While SIG is not new program, Round 1 is a game-changing shift in the nature of the program. By employing significant regulatory changes, SIG now serves as both a bold attack on the status quo and a bet that it is possible to make significant and sustainable improvements in low-performing schools. In particular, the federal guidance for FY09 stipulated a number of critical changes from the prior incarnation of the program that significantly increased its strength, including,

- **More focused impact:** Larger sums can be targeted at a smaller number of schools, which enables greater sustainability, scalability, and customization.

- **Increased discretion over recipients:** The new requirements provide substantial latitude for states to establish the manner in which funds are distributed.

- **Recognition of underperforming school needs:** Schools now receive the comprehensive supports they require rather than light-touch programs and services.

- **No "other" option:** Removing the infamous "other major restructuring" option that provided a "path of least resistance" under NCLB-mandated restructuring was a big step toward forcing more substantive changes. The four options required under SIG are not perfect, but on paper they require dramatic action. There are still ways for states and districts to skirt dramatic change, however. Even without the "other" option, we must be vigilant in policing nebulous strategies that don't lead to real change (see "Failed Strategies" box on page 4 for examples of how this option was used).

In conjunction with the adoption of stronger requirements, the size of the SIG funding pool was vastly expanded. In Round 1, over $3.5 billion in SIG funds were allocated to states, representing a massive increase from previous years of the program (see graph below).

Graph 1: Total funding for School Improvement Grant Program

Legend: Standard | ARRA increase[2] | FY09 carryover

	FY 2007	FY 2008	FY 2009	FY 2010[1]
ARRA increase			$3B	
FY09 carryover				$825M
Standard	$125M	$491M	$546M	$546M

[1]USED estimates that an additional $825M is available in FY09 SIG carryover funds. Note that all FY10 funds are estimated.
[2]ARRA is an abbreviation for the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.
Source: U.S. Department of Education

Persistently Lowest Achieving (PLA) Schools

States are responsible for identifying and publicly reporting their lowest performing schools. These schools form the eligibility list for SIG funds, arranged in tiers that determine level of priority. Tier I schools are the highest priority.

Tier I schools

Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that—

- Is among the lowest-achieving 5% of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in the state or the 5 lowest-achieving such schools (whichever number of schools is greater); or
- Is a high school that has had a graduation rate below 60% over a number of years.

Tier II schools

Any secondary school that is eligible for, but does not receive, Title I, Part A funds that—

- Is among the lowest-achieving 5% of secondary schools or the 5 lowest-achieving secondary schools in the state that are eligible for, but do not receive, Title I funds; or
- Is a high school that has had a graduation rate that is below 60% over a number of years.

Tier III Schools

- Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that is not a Tier I school.

SIG 101: The Basics
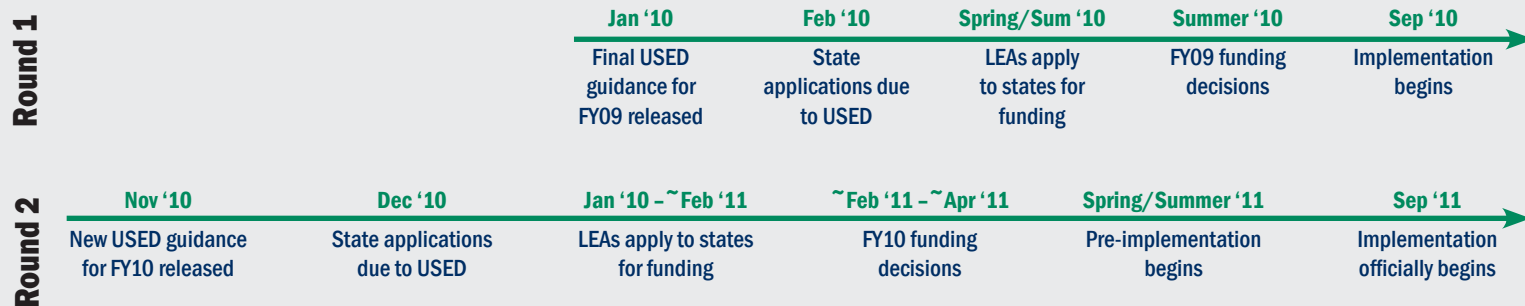
School Improvement Grants, under section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), are intended to substantially raise the achievement of students in the lowest performing schools. Specifically, SIG funds are targeted at Title I schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. The goal is for those schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP).

In order to receive funds, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must adopt one of four intervention options for their chronically lowest-performing schools: turnaround, restart, closure, or transformation (see box below for further detail on the intervention requirements).

Each state must submit an application to the USED that identifies a list of its persistently low-achieving schools (see explanation at left for how states develop this list). In turn, LEAs may apply to the state for funding for each of their eligible schools. Each school requires a separate plan that must identify an intervention model, a strategy to ensure it is implemented, and a detailed budget describing how the requested funds will be spent. LEAs must also provide implementation assurances, including establishing annual performance and implementation goals for each school.

SIG Timeline

In Round 1, most districts had only a few months to respond to the new SIG requirements and implement corresponding turnaround strategies, including making major staffing changes. In Round 2, participants will have the benefit of their first round experience as well as a few extra months to prepare.

Round 1			Jan '10	Feb '10	Spring/Sum '10	Summer '10	Sep '10

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			Final USED guidance for FY09 released	State applications due to USED	LEAs apply to states for funding	FY09 funding decisions	Implementation begins
Round 2	Nov '10	Dec '10	Jan '10 – ~Feb '11	~Feb '11 – ~Apr '11	Spring/Summer '11	Sep '11
	New USED guidance for FY10 released	State applications due to USED	LEAs apply to states for funding	FY10 funding decisions	Pre-implementation begins	Implementation officially begins

SIG is not aimed at every school but prioritizes those most in need, specifically the bottom 5% of Title I schools in improvement status. The hope is that these schools will become models of successful intervention strategies that can be scaled across the country.

Given the aggressive timeline (see above), most states struggled through the Round 1 grant process. While the bulk of ARRA funding was allocated in Round 1, over $1 billion dollars in funding is still available for Round 2 (through the FY10 allocation and carryover funds from FY09). States, districts, and schools have a responsibility to ensure that this round of funding delivers even greater impact.

The Four Intervention Models

The SIG guidelines align with the Race to the Top guidelines, including the necessity of using one of four turnaround models for each Persistently Lowest Achieving school:

1. Turnaround: Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the staff; grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility to implement a comprehensive reform strategy

2. Restart: Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process

3. School Closure: Close the school and enroll students in other, higher achieving schools within reasonable proximity

4. Transformation: Implement each of the following strategies:
- Replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness
- Institute comprehensive instructional reforms
- Extend learning time and create community-oriented schools
- Provide operational flexibility and sustained support

LESSONS LEARNED

The following pages present key lessons for states as they embark on Round 2 of our country's boldest attempt to fix schools. The findings in this document are based on our broad observations from the field, interviews with state leaders, and in-depth experience working directly with states across the country.

1   **FUND ONLY THE BOLD AND TRULY DIFFERENT**

2   **MAKE SIG THE INTRA-STATE RACE TO THE TOP**

3   **THINK BIG (FOR SUBGRANT SIZE)**

4   **RELENTLESSLY ENFORCE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

5   **ENCOURAGE DISTRICTS TO USE PARTNERS IN BOLD AND INNOVATIVE WAYS**

6   **PUSH LEAs TO IMPLEMENT A COHERENT, DISTRICT-LEVEL STRATEGY**

7   **INTEGRATE AND SIMPLIFY**

8   **COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE**

Lesson 1

Failed strategies for school improvement

The School Turnaround Group has studied failed school improvement efforts for over a decade; the following are common light-touch improvement efforts that have led to little to no change in our schools:

1. Layering overlapping school partner organizations
2. Requiring multiple, inconsistent improvement plans
3. Sending in external improvement teams without building an ongoing relationship with the school
4. Creating additional categorical funding streams that restrict budget flexibility
5. Providing limited mentoring/coaching from retired administrators and teachers
6. Creating large "School Improvement" offices with inadequate authority and accountability
7. Relying solely on school choice or Supplemental Educational Services (SES) for schools not meeting AYP

For more information, see the STG's longer publication on failed strategies: http://www.massinsight.org/publications/stg-resources/123/

1. Fund only the bold and truly different

SIG is explicitly designed to fund schools and districts willing to transition from the light-touch efforts of the past to bold new strategies that will drastically improve student achievement. This funding cannot go to schools that will implement the same strategies that allowed them to fail in the first place. As one state leader we spoke to succinctly noted, "Don't reward schools for doing the same thing."

In Round 1, the problem in many states was not that reviewers avoided funding dramatic applications, but rather that they had few such applications to choose from. The overwhelming majority of LEAs opted for the Transformation model. While Transformation can be a bold reform, it is also the model under which one can do the least. We read many applications that demonstrated a narrow interpretation of the federal intervention requirements. While rigorous, the USED requirements are still meant to be the minimum – not the gold standard.

Regardless of the model chosen, many applications avoided promising tactics that are either technically or politically challenging and focused on more light-touch improvement approaches. While these strategies may be a piece of the puzzle, history has shown that they alone will not lead to dramatic change (see box at left on "Failed Strategies"). The most successful turnarounds have instituted ground-breaking changes, for instance, ridding schools of ineffective teachers, eliminating compliance burdens, effectively utilizing Lead Partners (see definition on page 5), and restructuring the district to provide prioritized support to SIG schools.

One common weakness across applications was a failure to address the restrictions imposed by existing collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). A stringent CBA can severely limit the strength of the Transformation model's requirements (e.g., making it difficult to extend learning time in a meaningful way and build a teacher evaluation system that removes poor teachers) and make adoption of the Restart or Turnaround models all but impossible. LEAs that are serious about reform will likely need to pursue some form of modified collective bargaining conditions, at least for schools that receive SIG.

While states do need to employ a review process that prioritizes the boldest plans, they must also proactively create a strong applicant pool by communicating their objectives with eligible LEAs early and often (see Lesson 8). States must be crystal clear both in asserting that LEAs will not be funded unless they take on dramatic reform and then explaining what they mean by dramatic. One communication method is the development and dissemination of an application review rubric that explicitly articulates how applications will be scored. This rubric is a simple and transparent tool to convey which actions and strategies are deserving of SIG funds. Remember that SIG represents a significant paradigm shift for many districts and schools; they will need help embracing it.

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE): "Conditions for Funding"

To ensure bold action, ISBE identified a set of requirements for funding in addition to those outlined by the USED for each intervention model. To receive funding, LEAs had to explicitly address how they would fulfill each of the following 12 conditions:

1. Extended time
2. Improved transitions from middle to high school
3. Operational flexibility for school leaders
4. New governance structure at the LEA
5. Use of a Lead Partner
6. Improved hiring practices
7. Adoption of teacher/principal evaluation
8. High quality professional development
9. Improved family and community outreach
10. Monitoring for implementation
11. Effective, appropriate budget
12. Coherence of overall SIG plan
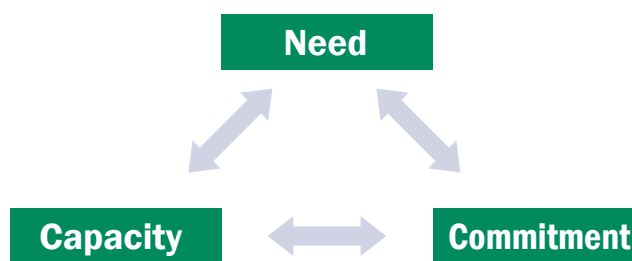
Source: Illinois State Board of Education

"Breaking the cycle of failure in a school that has become a drop-out factory requires an 'extreme reset.'"

Tim Cawley, Academy for Urban School Leadership, as quoted in the *New York Times* August 9, 2010

Funding decisions: A balancing act

To receive funds, schools must prove that they have the need for additional resources, the political will to adopt difficult changes, and the technical ability to actually implement the chosen intervention model. In order for states to achieve maximum impact of these grants, SIG funding decisions must balance these sometimes competing criteria.

Need

Capacity ↔ **Commitment**

Which schools are in the most NEED of services?
Example criteria:
- High poverty student population
- Low student achievement (e.g., low math/literacy proficiency, high dropout rate, low graduation rate):
  — Aggregate achievement
  — Low subgroup achievement/large achievement gaps
  — Stagnant or declining performance
- Limited local resources to improve performance

Note: Need is largely determined prior to the application process by how states use the above criteria to identify schools as Tier I, II, or III. We strongly encourage states to create a list that represents the most needy, rather than the most politically acceptable, schools. States may also choose to use measures of need in the application process as well.

Which LEAs/schools have demonstrated that they have or can develop enough CAPACITY to successfully implement the selected interventions?
Example criteria:
- Sufficient pool of effective teachers and leaders
- District-level structures and services to provide support
- Availability and quality of partners
- Prior success in implementing dramatic reforms
- Access and proximity to higher performing schools (for the closure model)

Which LEAs/schools have demonstrated the greatest COMMITMENT to make and stick to tough changes?
Example criteria:
- History of innovative and challenging reform efforts
- Leadership with record of making politically difficult decisions
- Willingness to own and reflect on past failures
- Adoption of bold policies and strategies prior to application approval
- Buy-in from critical stakeholders

2. Make SIG the intra-state Race to the Top
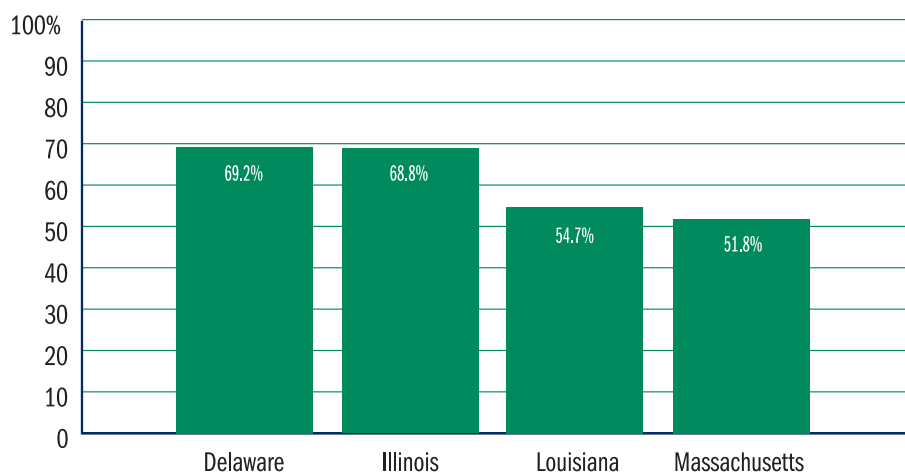
States should only be funding the most aggressive strategies. As highlighted in Lesson 1, SIG funding is not a given for low-performing schools – it is for those that are willing to move further, faster. States can incentivize district behavior by treating SIG as a competition, turning the program into an intra-state Race to the Top (RTTT). Before the Round 1 RTTT applications were even submitted, nearly half of the states had passed education reform laws to increase their chances of winning. If done well, stirring a competitive spirit among districts could yield similarly positive results for SIG.

In addition to audacity, applicants should be evaluated on their thoughtfulness in designing a strategy that will achieve real results in a school. The four intervention models are only a starting point; LEAs must not only identify the appropriate model but also determine how it will be adapted to the particular local environment. Schools cannot be expected to succeed with a plan that is merely a boilerplate version of one of the intervention models. In Round 1, too many LEAs submitted nearly identical applications for multiple schools, suggesting that little thought went into the particular strengths and weaknesses of each campus. It is important that LEAs perform a local diagnostic for every eligible school and then build a customized plan that is responsive to those findings.

Competition yields winners and losers. Implicit in Lessons 1 and 2 is that schools and districts that cannot or will not make the leap should not receive funding. It takes enormous political courage to hold back funding from some of our most under-resourced schools, particularly in this economic environment. However, states must not be afraid to withhold funds from schools where it will be misspent on marginal improvement efforts or budget backfills, and instead invest in schools that are willing and able to take up the challenge. Graph 2, below, illustrates how some states were willing to stay tough on holding back funds. This is not free money. If schools and districts want it, they'll need to prove they can use it to drive significant reforms.

SIG is a rolling process; schools that fail to earn funds in a given round still have the opportunity to apply in subsequent rounds. This makes it even more critical that states hold the line on application quality. States that set and maintain high standards will reap the benefits over time as LEAs will realize that they need to improve the quality of their applications in order to receive funding. Furthermore, these standards will allow states to provide political cover to district leaders who seek to implement bold reforms but face resistance from other parties.

Graph 2: Percentage of FY09 SIG funds held back by each state

State	Percentage
Delaware	69.2%
Illinois	68.8%
Louisiana	54.7%
Massachusetts	51.8%

Source: Various State Education Agencies

Making it easier to hold back funds

States can employ creative options to maintain a high standard for funding decisions while also providing support to districts in need. Some states (e.g., Illinois and Colorado) are providing targeted technical assistance to LEAs that failed to win Round 1 grants. Other states are using smaller, planning year grants to give districts the time and start-up funding to prepare to win SIG grants in future rounds. For example, in Massachusetts, Title I 1003(a) funds are being used as capacity-building "bridge grants" to prepare non-SIG winning districts to win later grants. These grants are only for districts that have proven a commitment to dramatic reform.

"We are focused on quality, not quantity."
Ann Whalen, Special Assistant to Secretary Duncan, as quoted in *EdWeek*
April 19, 2010

Lessons 3 & 4

3. Think big (for subgrant size)

It is expensive to turn around chronically failing schools. States committed to doing something big must provide big dollars to eligible schools -- at least $750K per year to launch an effective and sustainable turnaround effort. Smaller grants are more likely to be used to fill budget gaps or add light-touch programs, services, and consultants that will yield limited, if any, increases in student achievement, particularly over the long-term.

Historically, SIG grants were limited to $500K per year and the total funding pool had to be stretched across all eligible schools, which further limited grant sizes. However, under the new SIG requirements states do not have to fund all schools and have the option of offering up to $2M per school per year, over three years, to winners. States should use this opportunity to award substantial subgrants -- in fact, states should be wary of applicants who request trivial amounts.

In addition to providing larger grants, states should also provide proportionately more funding to LEAs that commit to taking on the most dramatic interventions. This includes making larger awards to schools opting into the more politically difficult Turnaround or Restart models. LEAs willing to make more substantial changes deserve the resources to make those changes stick.

4. Relentlessly enforce accountability for student achievement

With a hefty pool of funding and the fate of thousands of students at stake, states must be serious about monitoring SIG recipients and ensuring that they are delivering on their promises of performance. This includes not being afraid to wield the stick if recipients fall short on not only implementation milestones but also student achievement goals. If schools are not meeting benchmarks, states can and must take action by requiring LEAs to select a new intervention model or to lose their funding altogether. Unfortunately, many schools and districts have become all too comfortable receiving money without being held accountable for how it is spent. SIG should not be another such program.

After setting up a rigorous accountability system to manage this process, states must clearly delineate what is required of schools and districts, including reporting responsibilities and consequences for inadequate performance. For example, Louisiana and Colorado both codified a set of explicit responsibilities and requirements in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to be signed by both state and district staff. LEAs that accept SIG funding must recognize that they are responsible for translating that funding into student achievement.

To enforce accountability for performance, states must require that LEAs set and track progress against benchmarks that demonstrate student achievement, either directly or indirectly. USED has reinforced this message by requiring that LEAs track nine leading indicators, which will demonstrate if schools are off-track to meet ultimate achievement goals. States should also track a broader set of indicators that are more directly linked to achievement. While many states are struggling with this process, some promising practices are emerging (see example at right). The goal of tracking leading indicators is not to create more compliance reporting, but rather to streamline it and ensure that the focus stays on students.

Massachusetts' Three Year Student Achievement Criteria

Massachusetts drives a focus on, and accountability for, student achievement by requiring SIG applicants to submit annual goals in three measurable areas:

1. Increase a state-specific, composite performance index over three years;

2. Decrease the percentage of students scoring Warning /Failing on the state test over three years;

3. Achieve and maintain typical, student growth h(using a state-defined measure).

A Measurable Annual Goals working group is a cross-agency team formed to evaluate and provide guidance on these goals using analytical tools. To win funding, LEAs must submit sufficiently "ambitious but attainable" benchmarks in these three goal areas. The team uses data on historical performance of comparable schools to determine quantitative definitions of ambitious and attainable for each school. The SEA's decision to renew a grant is, in part, determined by progress towards these student achievement goals.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education staff and website

A note on setting benchmarks

In addition to serving a compliance purpose, setting and tracking progress against goals fulfills an informational need. If a school is not meeting its benchmarks, there may be a flaw in implementation or in the strategy itself. Indicator data can allow the state or district to intervene before a reform gets too far off track. However, one place where Round 1 participants struggled was in setting the benchmarks to which they would be held accountable. Benchmarks must be ambitious yet attainable. Some applicants set goals that would have demonstrated only marginal improvement, while others set goals that were aggressive bordering on impossible. Setting benchmarks is difficult due to a lack of research and consensus supporting what level of growth is possible and/or probable. While there is no magic number or equation, states can still provide guidance to LEAs around both processes to set benchmarks as well as examples of good targets. States can also offer to review benchmarks prior to application submission.

For more information on setting benchmarks, including examples, see the STG's evaluation toolkit: http://www.massinsight.org/stg/research/additionalresearch/evaluation-toolkit/

New capacity for turnaround: The Lead Partner

The Lead Partner is an organization, or unit of a central office, on a performance contract with the district or state to turn around district public schools.

The Lead Partner is defined by four key responsibilities:

- **Provides comprehensive services:** Provides core academic and student support services directly or by aligning the services of other program and support partners to build internal capacity within the school(s) and by extension, the district

- **Takes accountability for student achievement:** Signs a 3-5 year performance contract with the district or state to make gains in student achievement at one school or an intentional cluster of schools where systems and programs will be aligned

- **Receives authority over key elements of the school:** Assumes authority for decision making on school staffing, as well as time, money and program; in particular, the Lead Partner hires a new principal or approves the current one and supports the principal in hiring and replacing teachers as needed

- **Maintains an embedded presence at the school:** Is fully engaged in the daily operations of the school (i.e., presence in the school five days a week)

5. Encourage districts to use partners in bold and innovative ways

While success stories exist, it takes an extraordinary principal to successfully manage the turnaround of a chronically failing school alone. The needs of these schools are simply too great for one person. It is challenging to find such a leader for one school, let alone the large number of schools that USED is targeting. To fill this capacity gap, states can encourage the use of Lead Partners -- organizations, or internal units of a central office, on contract with the district or state to turn around schools. While partners have been unsuccessfully utilized in many school improvement efforts, Lead Partners offer a new type of support. Unlike the partners of the past, Lead Partners receive significant autonomy over school design and operations and in exchange are held accountable for gains in student achievement. These charter-like conditions are combined with the scale benefits of a district, capturing the best of both worlds.

Lead Partners can and should be used to great effect under the Turnaround, Restart, and Transformation models. However, Round 1 demonstrated that LEAs require additional support in attracting, selecting, and using Lead Partners. The following methods can improve the process required to place effective Lead Partners:

Awareness: Because the role is fairly new, many LEAs have a hard time understanding the concept of a Lead Partner. States can provide more information on what the Lead Partner is and what benefits it conveys, including by using examples of successful partnerships. The STG publication *School Turnaround Models* (found at http://www.massinsight.org/publications/stg-resources/112/) highlights four examples of effective Lead Partners).

Selection: There are many potential partners and most LEAs don't have the time or expertise to find the best ones. Some states, including Illinois and Colorado, put out Request for Proposals (RFPs) in order to pre-approve a list of partners, making the vetting process easier for districts. States also can provide support in matching these qualified partners to schools and districts.

Execution: If a district manages to identify an effective Lead Partner with a solid record of turning around schools, that still might not be enough. In a number of places, LEAs fell short in securing agreements that enable organizations to fulfill the key responsibilities of a Lead Partner (see box below). States also can provide resources to districts to ameliorate this problem, such as a template Memorandum of Understanding to guide the relationship between the Lead Partner and district.

In addition to encouraging the use of Lead Partners, states can also stimulate a marketplace of effective supporting partners who can provide expertise in a specific function (e.g., data-driven instruction, staffing support, curriculum development). However, states should play a role in managing the quality of the provider market and in ensuring that LEAs don't overload on partnerships, thus causing alignment and coordinations problems.

Lead Partners in Illinois

Regardless of the intervention model selected, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) required all SIG applicants to identify a Lead Partner to play a major role in the turnaround of the school. In anticipation of this requirement, ISBE completed an RFP process to develop a state-approved list of Lead Partners prior to the release of its sub-grant application. In addition to requiring that LEAs name one of these Lead Partners on the application, reviewers considered the proposed use of the Lead Partner as a key factor in grant decisions, favoring applications where the Lead Partner was granted significantly more autonomy, accountability, and responsibility.

6. Push LEAs to implement a coherent, district-level strategy

The USED regulations hold LEAs responsible for selecting schools from the PLA list to apply for SIG and then submitting subgrant applications for those schools. However, many districts submitted largely independent, school-level strategies and failed to describe how the district would also transform itself in order to support these schools. Schools that have failed to improve for multiple years do not have the capacity to do this alone; the district must be a key player.

District reform is crucial not only for the early success of the SIG recipients but also to ensure that these efforts are sustained and scaled up over time. SIG is a finite funding stream: schools receive this infusion of cash over a maximum of three years. In order for schools to maintain and increase gains after the grant period, the district must build capacity to manage and support these and other low-performing schools in the long run.

States should require that the LEA SIG application explicitly discuss the role of the district in supporting the schools receiving SIG funds and ideally would also discuss the district's more comprehensive plans to support low-performing schools. The strength of this district application, as well as its alignment with the school applications, should be given significant weight in funding decisions.

District leaders should answer the following questions in their district-level plans:

How will I restructure the district to best support low-performing schools?	What supports will I offer to low-performing schools?	How can I create better conditions for low-performing schools?
LEAs should consider reorganizing to provide turnaround support, namely building a District Turnaround Office (DTO) -- an independent unit within an LEA charged with managing and coordinating the implementation of the district's turnaround initiatives. The DTO must have clear accountability for the SIG-receiving schools. Districts with multiple schools should also address how they plan to cluster schools for additional benefits.	Districts should determine how to provide targeted technical assistance to schools in turnaround. This support should include utilizing data to identify strengths and weaknesses and then providing differentiated levels of support. In addition to offering turnaround specific expertise, districts should provide enhanced resources to their most needy schools, including prioritized access to district central office services.	Districts should consider how to provide more flexible operating conditions to schools. School leaders and/or Lead Partners should be allotted maximum autonomy over people, time, money, and program (in exchange for increased accountability). Schools should also be waived out of certain planning processes and reporting requirements that will complicate and conflict with existing plans (see Lesson 7).

7. Integrate and simplify

District and school officials, particularly those who serve low-performing schools, are frequently overburdened by plans, reports, and monitoring requirements that can be time consuming to fulfill and even be at odds with each other. SIG should not exacerbate this problem, rather it should serve as an opportunity to streamline and minimize these reporting and compliance burdens. Where possible, states should offer waivers for SIG-receiving schools that eliminate additional planning and reporting requirements, or at least make clear how these various requirements align. In addition to alleviating administrative headaches, this will mitigate the existence of conflicting strategies. SIG isn't *a* plan, it's *the* plan for school improvement. States can help make SIG a single, clear, cohesive strategy for school and district leaders to follow.

Example: In Colorado, the state aligned its SIG needs assessment to the existing state-sponsored diagnostic, giving schools one comprehensive process to follow. Colorado, as well as Delaware, is also piloting a single, unified school improvement plan for districts that satisfies multiple accountability requirements.

8. Communicate, communicate, communicate

Communication may be the single greatest success factor for SIG. In fact, each of the above lessons is dependent upon a successful communication strategy. States must be responsible for communicating early, often, and to a wide variety of audiences, including administrators, teachers, parents, and community members.

Prior to the submission of applications, states must get out ahead of common questions: What is SIG? Who is eligible? How do you win grants? A number of states reported that some of their Tier I and Tier II schools did not even apply for funds, and if they did, many of their applications were extremely poor. Communication efforts ensure that schools and districts have the opportunity to put forth the best applications possible.

What to expect: Frequently asked questions

When parents and community members are introduced to SIG, they will inevitably have questions. States should equip LEAs to answer the following:

- Why am I just learning that my child is in a failing school?
- Will my school be closed?
- Will my child's teachers be fired?
- How will this be different from all of the other reforms my school has seen?
- How long will it take to fix my school?
- What will happen to my school, and my child, if this strategy doesn't work?
- What say do I have in the reform of my school?
- What can I do to help?

Critical communication strategies

While a number of the following strategies must take place at the district and school level, the state can provide guidance and resources to support those local efforts.

- **Change the perception of turnaround.** Years of light-touch improvement strategies and marginal results demonstrate that many of our failing schools are terrified of change. Districts and schools must understand that to have a real chance of increasing student achievement in these schools, bold and sometimes painful changes are required. SIG must be seen as an opportunity rather than a punishment. This paradigm shift will not happen overnight; states and their partners must invest in building understanding.

- **Be transparent about purpose, process, and outcomes.** To avoid confusion and perceptions of unfairness, states should overcommunicate with stakeholders about the objectives of the program, the process to identify PLA schools, and how funding decisions will be made.

- **Provide resources to applicants on how to select and implement each of the four intervention models.** These models are new and few districts will have familiarity with how to successfully design an application, let alone implement it. States should build or acquire their own expertise in turnaround, and then provide a variety of practical resources to districts and schools, such as consultant time, webinars, toolkits, and sample applications.

- **Build buy-in for school improvement strategies before their adoption.** Because of the dramatic nature of these efforts, it is important for LEAs to gain buy-in from a wide group of stakeholders, including parents. Round 1 winners that failed to consult with key constituencies are now facing resistance, even legal action, as they try to execute their plans. While this work is difficult and time-consuming, the implementation will go much more smoothly if this foundation is created in advance, particularly with a number of key groups:

    Parents and community members. It can be devastating for families and communities to learn that their local school is in the bottom 5% of performance statewide and that it may face a dramatic intervention such as removal of staff or even closure. However if the benefits of SIG are effectively communicated, communities will not simply tolerate these bold strategies but will actually stand up and demand them.

    Teachers' unions. Each of the four intervention strategies carries significant implications for unions, ranging from increasing the length of the school day to outright removal of staff. LEAs should begin discussions with unions as early as possible to optimize the chances of a collaborative solution.

    Intra-agency staff. As turnaround cross cuts most, if not all, SEA offices, SIG staff at the SEA should conduct an intra-agency communication effort, aimed at offices that directly touch low-performing schools and districts. States should leverage every event and point of contact possible to get the word out about SIG and to maximize coordination within the state agency.

- **Communication should continue after funding decisions.** States must continue to communicate what the implementation of these strategies will mean and the consequences of failure after awards are made. For example, Illinois held an in-person meeting with all winners, including district staff, school leadership, and union representatives, to set common expectations and share information about next steps.

A NOTE ON IMPLEMENTATION

The preceding lessons share guiding principles for states to consider when designing their Round 2 SIG programs. Below, we also share some tactical advice for navigating the process itself -- from designing the application to providing support for the SIG winners during the implementation phase.

The advice below, and throughout this document, describes the environment necessary for SIG to be optimally successful. The challenge for states is actually implementing these recommendations. At present, many, if not all, SEAs lack the capacity to execute SIG effectively and support LEAs in this dramatically different work. SEAs need to increase their capacity both by developing school turnaround expertise and by reorganizing to better support turnaround efforts at the district and school levels. States can begin by building a State Turnaround Office (STO), a unit of the SEA endowed with significant authority that will provide tailored support and accountability to schools in turnaround. Delaware, Louisiana, and New York are all currently in the process of developing an STO.

1. The Application

Provide space to summarize the overall plan: In addition to asking how each intervention model's requirements will be met, applications should also ask LEAs to explain the overall theory of change for each school and the district at large. This summary should demonstrate that the LEA is not simply checking boxes but has developed a cohesive and comprehensive reform strategy.

Focus on sustainability: Applications should require an explanation of how gains will be sustained after the SIG funds disappear and award points to LEAs that spend SIG money on building capacity, rather than just one-off programs and services. Sustainability should also be evaluated by how applicants design their budgets to avoid or manage a funding cliff after year 3.

Ask about capacity to implement: To win funds, LEAs must demonstrate that they have capacity to implement their ambitious plans. Applications should ask for evidence of existing capacity as well as detailed plans for building new capacity at the school and district levels.

Reward buy-in: Applications should require evidence that LEAs have garnered school-level buy-in from key stakeholders. Buy-in will significantly increase the chances of implementing the plan with fidelity.

Consider process as well as outcome: Similarly, applications should reward evidence of a thoughtful and engaged planning process. Preparing the application should be a community-building process, not a grant-writing exercise.

2. The Review Process

Invest time in training reviewers: Reviewers must be thoroughly trained in using the application rubric and calibrating scores against a defined standard. In Round 1, many states spent an enormous amount of time cleaning up inter-rater reliability issues that could have been mitigated on the front end.

Use a manageable number of reviewers: States that used a large number of reviewers experienced logistical difficulty and suffered additional inter-rater reliability problems.

Group reviewers into teams: Break reviewers into teams and have each team review the same set of applications and then jointly come to a ranking consensus (Colorado, Delaware, and Indiana did this in Round 1).

Review district application components together: School plans from the same district should be reviewed together, by the same reviewers, to better understand the cohesiveness of the district strategy. While each school plan should still be evaluated on its own merits, the district's ability to support any and all of its schools should be considered.

Collect additional data: As it can be easy to pass off a superficially good application, states can benefit from collecting additional information after submission. Some states used a post-application interview process (e.g., Delaware, Nevada, Colorado, Massachusetts), while Maryland treated the initial application as a first draft, providing comments to applicants and allowing them to submit a second draft.

3. The Follow-up

The best laid plans are worthless without proper implementation. SIG applications must receive the necessary follow-up to ensure that the agreed upon plan is implemented and the intended results are achieved. The following strategies support this goal.

Set the right tone about implementation: States can set high expectations about implementation upfront, starting with a strong post-application process (e.g., using an explicit MOU and a rigorous budget negotiation process).

Monitor for both compliance and need: If capacity permits, institute quarterly monitoring of a select set of implementation and impact indicators. Make monitoring efforts simple, data-driven, and action-oriented. Data is used for compliance and to inform states where efforts are working and where support is required.

Provide responsive and targeted support: States should invest in ensuring that the early roll out is successful. When schools are off track to meet performance or implementation goals, states should deploy support quickly and if necessary, course correct.

Evaluate and improve: There is no exact blueprint for turnaround, but SIG is an opportunity to learn more about what works. States must be responsible for studying these efforts and sharing lessons with a broader audience. This includes building communities of practice among low-performing schools and districts. For example, in Colorado, grantees must come together four times a year to share promising practices and hold each other accountable for follow through.

The funding and political will behind SIG has put a laser-like focus where few wanted to look before – our neediest schools and students. We have a distinct window of opportunity to prove that schools can indeed be turned around, and all children can received the excellent education they deserve.

As states reflect on lessons learned from the pilot round of this program, so should the USED. While Round 2 will proceed under largely the same regulations as Round 1, we hope the USED will continue to solicit feedback from the education community on how to refine future iterations of the SIG program.

SCHOOL TURNAROUND GROUP

MASS INSIGHT EDUCATION

Turnaround is

a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that:

a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years;

and

b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization

Note: The STG's definition of turnaround is distinct from the USED's intervention model sharing the same name.

About the School Turnaround Group

The School Turnaround Group is a division of Mass Insight Education, an independent non-profit that organizes public and private entities to significantly improve student achievement, with a focus on closing achievement gaps.

Our work is guided by two convictions: that change at scale depends on the integration of research, policy, and practice; and that only dramatic and comprehensive change in high-poverty schools will produce significant gains. We seek to dramatically improve, at scale, student achievement in our country's lowest-performing schools by fundamentally transforming the state and local systems that manage and serve these schools.

We focus on several core activities, including developing cutting-edge research and toolkits, advancing policies and practices that support our mission, and most critically, working directly with states and districts in designing and implementing bold reform strategies. Our national "Partnership Zone Initiative" seeks to establish turnaround zones in districts across the country to serve as proof-points for these school turnaround and district redesign strategies.

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