Usage of Policies and Practices Promoted by Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants
Executive Summary

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION EVALUATION AND REGIONAL ASSISTANCE

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September 2015

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the Great Recession, the U.S. Congress passed, and President Barack Obama signed into law, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Pub. Law 111-5). At an estimated cost of $831 billion, this economic stimulus package sought to save and create jobs, provide temporary relief to those adversely affected by the recession, and invest in education, health, infrastructure, and renewable energy. Education received a total of $100 billion, including $7 billion for two of the Obama administration's signature grant programs: Race to the Top (RTT) and School Improvement Grants (SIG). RTT competitively awarded grants to states who agreed to implement a broad range of education policies and practices promoted by the program. SIG competitively awarded grants to the nation's lowest-performing schools who agreed to implement a comprehensive set of improvement practices promoted by the program. While RTT focused on state policies and SIG focused on school practices, both programs promoted related policies and practices, and included a particular emphasis on turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools.

Given the sizable investment in both of these related programs, it is of policy interest to know (1) if states and schools that received grants are actually using the policies and practices promoted by these two programs; (2) if their usage of these policies and practices differ from states and schools that did not receive grants; and (3) if receipt of these grants ultimately impacted student achievement. Unfortunately, comprehensive evidence on these three implementation and impact questions has been limited to date.

This report, part of the first large-scale evaluation of RTT and SIG, focuses on the first two questions and sets the table for a future report that will focus on the third question. RTT and SIG are complex programs that promote a broad range of policies and practices, some of which might be especially challenging to implement. Thus, this report's findings on the first question should be useful to both policymakers considering the future direction of the programs and to program support staff, since it identifies areas that states and schools have and have not yet addressed in the two programs. This report's findings on the second question can provide a useful policy context for impact findings in the future report. For example, if states and schools that received grants are similar to states and schools that did not receive grants in their usage of the policies and practices promoted by RTT and SIG, then it seems less likely that RTT and SIG would have a subsequent impact on student achievement.

Race to the Top

Four main findings, which are detailed in the first volume of this report, emerged for Race to the Top (all differences reported are statistically significant):

- **In five of the six major areas examined, *early* (Round 1 and 2) RTT states reported using more policies and practices promoted by RTT than non-RTT states in spring 2012.** The five areas were (1) improving state capacity to support school improvement efforts; (2) adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace; (3) building state data systems that measure student growth and inform instruction; (4) recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals; and (5) encouraging conditions in which charter schools can succeed. The two groups of states did not differ in the extent to which they reported using policies and practices in the area of turning around low-performing schools.

- **In one of the six major areas examined (teacher and principal certification and evaluation),** *later* **(Round 3) RTT states reported using more policies and practices promoted by RTT than non-RTT states in spring 2012.** The two groups of states did not differ in the extent to which they reported using policies and practices in the other five areas examined.

- **Across all states, usage of policies and practices promoted by RTT was highest in the state capacity and data systems areas and lowest in the teacher and principal certification and evaluation area.** In the state capacity and data systems areas, states reported using, on average, 66 and 68 percent of the RTT-promoted practices examined. In the teacher and principal certification and evaluation area, states reported using, on average, 24 percent of RTT-promoted practices examined.

- **There were no differences between RTT and non-RTT states in usage of English Language Learner (ELL)-focused policies and practices promoted by RTT.** Within each group of states (early RTT, later RTT, non-RTT), states with higher percentages of ELLs used more ELL-focused policies and practices than states with lower percentages of ELLs, but there were no differences in usage between states with higher and lower ELL/non-ELL achievement gaps.

School Improvement Grants

Three main findings, which are detailed in the second volume of this report, emerged for School Improvement Grants (all differences reported are statistically significant):

- **In all four areas examined, schools implementing a SIG-funded model reported using more practices promoted by SIG in spring 2012 than schools not implementing such models.** These results were found in four areas: (1) implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies, (2) developing and increasing teacher and principal effectiveness, (3) increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools, and (4) having operational flexibility and receiving support.

- **Across all schools (including those implementing a SIG-funded model and those not implementing one), usage of practices promoted by SIG was highest in the comprehensive instructional reform strategies area and lowest in the operational flexibility and support area.** In the comprehensive instructional reform strategies area, study schools reported using, on average, 90 percent of the SIG-promoted practices examined. In the operational flexibility and support area, study schools reported using, on average, 46 percent of the SIG-promoted practices examined.

- **There were no differences between schools implementing a SIG-funded model and schools not implementing one in usage of ELL-focused practices promoted by SIG.** Within each group of schools (those implementing a SIG-funded model and those not implementing one), schools with higher percentages of ELLs used more ELL-focused practices than schools with lower percentages of ELLs, but there were no differences in usage between schools with higher and lower ELL/non-ELL achievement gaps.

Together, the findings suggest that it is *possible* RTT and SIG influenced the use of these promoted policies and practices in RTT states and in schools implementing SIG-funded models. It is also *possible* that RTT and SIG had no influence. For example, RTT grants were awarded

based partly on states' prior progress and success in creating conditions conducive to education policy, and in fact some differences in usage of policies and practices promoted by RTT existed prior to states' receipt of RTT grants. Similarly for SIG, most districts in the study reported taking schools' prior academic achievement and ongoing improvement efforts into account in their applications. Some of the differences in usage of policies and practices promoted by SIG may have thus pre-dated SIG. Even though we are not able to determine the cause of differences in usage, it is still of value to policymakers to know where states and schools stand with their usage. These findings will also provide valuable policy context for interpreting the impact findings on student achievement that will appear in a future report.

STUDY OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES USED BY RTT STATES AND NON-RTT STATES

Background

The first three rounds of the RTT grant competition sought to encourage states to implement a range of policies and practices designed to affect all levels of the education system, with the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes.[1] The six topic areas described in the RTT application criteria were (1) improving state capacity to support school improvement efforts; (2) adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace; (3) building state data systems that measure student growth and inform school staff about how they can improve instruction; (4) recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals; (5) turning around low-performing schools; and (6) encouraging conditions in which charter schools can succeed. The RTT objectives in each topic area and the subtopics within each topic for which we had state interview data are detailed in Exhibit ES.1. The RTT grants were awarded to states that both demonstrated a solid record of reform and presented strong plans in their RTT applications for furthering policies in these areas. The Race to the Top Executive Summary (available at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf) summarizes the program's priorities and theory of action.

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[1] Additional rounds of the RTT program focused on improving early learning and development programs for young children and supporting district-developed plans to improve student achievement. Those rounds were not a focus of this study.

Exhibit ES.1. RTT Objectives and Subtopics Addressed by State Interview Questions, by Topic Area

Improving state capacity to support school improvement efforts
Articulating the state's education reform agenda and local education agencies' participation in it[a]
Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain the proposed plans
Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps[b,c]
Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace
Developing and adopting common standards[c]
Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments[c]
Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments
Building state data systems that measure student growth and inform instruction
Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system
Accessing state data and using it to inform key stakeholders
Using data to improve instruction
Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals
Providing high-quality pathways to certification for aspiring teachers and principals[c]
Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance[c]
Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals[c]
Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs[c]
Providing effective support to teachers and principals[b,c]
Turning around low-performing schools
Authority to intervene in the lowest-achieving schools and local education agencies[c]
Turning around the lowest-achieving schools
Encouraging conditions in which charter schools can succeed
Eliminating restrictions on charter school creation and enrollment[c]
Refining authorization and monitoring processes

Source: RTT application; interviews with state administrators in spring 2012.

ELL = English language learner.

[a] Regular school districts are the most common type of local education agency.

[b] The number of questions included in the state interview was purposefully limited to reduce the time it took to complete the interview. We worked with the Institute of Education Sciences and the RTT Program Office to assess their priorities for the types of questions to include. The interview did not include any questions about this objective.

[c] The interview did not include any questions about this objective for ELLs.

Across the first three rounds of competition, 46 states and the District of Columbia applied for RTT grants, and 19 applicants received grants.[2] The Round 1 awards were made in March 2010, Round 2 awards in August 2010, and Round 3 awards in December 2011. The 12 states selected in the first two rounds received awards ranging from $75 million to $700 million.[3] In the third round, which was open only to the nine finalists from the second round, awards were made to 7 states. Since these awards were smaller (ranging from $17 million to $43 million), the

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[2] Alaska, North Dakota, Texas, and Vermont did not apply for RTT grants in any round.

[3] States' award amounts varied based on their share of the nation's school-age population and the budget they proposed in their application for accomplishing the specific plans they proposed.

U.S. Department of Education (ED) only required these states to focus on a portion of the policies described in their Round 2 applications.

Research Questions and Study Design

The portion of this report focused on RTT was guided by the following research questions:

- Are RTT states using the educational policies and practices promoted by RTT, and how does that compare to the usage of those policies and practices by non-RTT states?

- Does usage of these policies and practices include a focus on ELLs, and does that focus on ELLs vary between RTT and non-RTT states? Does usage of these ELL-focused educational policies and practices vary by the percentage of students who are ELLs or the ELL/non-ELL student achievement gap?

The general theory of action for RTT is that policy changes at the state level represent the first step in the process of changing the education system and that the ultimate goal is improving student outcomes. Changes will most likely occur at the state level before occurring at other levels, such as districts, schools, and classrooms. The state interviews, which took place roughly 25 months after Round 1 grants were received, 20 months after Round 2 grants were received, and 4 months after Round 3 grants were received, were thus designed to capture information about this first step in the overall policy process. The RTT study design is summarized in the box below.

RTT Study Design

Comparison design. We used a comparison design in which we compared RTT states to non-RTT states for volume 1 of this report, "Usage of Policies and Practices Promoted by Race to the Top."

Sample. The sample for the RTT evaluation included 49 states and the District of Columbia.

Data on educational policies and practices. In spring 2012, to collect information on the extent to which states were using the educational policies and practices promoted by RTT, we conducted structured telephone interviews with representatives from the state education agencies in 49 states and the District of Columbia. The interviews covered six main topic areas: (1) state capacity to support education reforms, (2) state data systems, (3) standards and assessments, (4) teacher and principal certification and evaluation, (5) school turnaround, and (6) charter schools. Interviews were organized into modules (one per topic area). Typically, we interviewed different respondents for each module. Respondents were chosen based on which state administrators were most knowledgeable about each topic area. Each question received only one response per state. The response rate for the state interviews was 98 percent (Texas did not participate in the interviews). To facilitate the study's comparisons between RTT states and states that did not receive RTT grants, question wording was the same for both groups of states. The interviews conducted in spring 2012 collected data not only on policies and practices in the current school year (2011–2012) but also baseline data about particular policies and practices in the year before the announcement and implementation of RTT (2007–2008).

Analysis. To examine how the usage of educational policies and practices promoted by RTT compares between RTT states and non-RTT states, we conducted two types of comparisons: (1) early RTT states (Round 1 and 2) with non-RTT states and (2) later RTT states (Round 3) with non-RTT states. We distinguish between early and later RTT states to account for differences in the grants' timing, funding levels, and scope between these groups of RTT states. To summarize the large amount of data collected, we identified state interview questions that aligned with the policies and practices that RTT sought to affect. We determined the number of these policies and practices that each state reported using and then calculated the average number of policies and practices for early RTT states, later RTT states, and non-RTT states. We then tested whether differences between each of the RTT groups and the non-RTT group in the average number of policies and practices reported were statistically significant. Because the goal of this analysis was to provide descriptive information about the actual levels of policies and practices used by RTT and non-RTT states in spring 2012, the results were reported as raw (that is, unadjusted) means; they were not regression-adjusted to account for any pre-existing differences between RTT and non-RTT states.

RTT States and Non-RTT States Differed Somewhat at Baseline

Interpreting the differences between RTT and non-RTT states in spring 2012 requires understanding the characteristics of these two groups of states at baseline (prior to the awarding of RTT grants). The RTT program sought to reward states that not only proposed strong reform plans but that also had a solid record of reform, so it is not surprising that the groups of states differed in the following baseline characteristics:

- **Relative to non-RTT states, early RTT states had used more of some RTT-promoted policies and practices before the grants were awarded.** Early RTT states received higher scores from grant application reviewers than non-RTT states that applied for RTT on the portions of the RTT application focused on preexisting state policy conditions (218 versus 173 points) and early RTT states reported using more of the policies and practices aligned with the RTT program at baseline (2007–2008) than non-RTT states in the teacher and principal certification and evaluation area (not shown).[4]

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[4] When developing the interview protocol, we included baseline questions for particular policies and practices based on ED guidance about those in which it had interest in assessing change. We have baseline data for three of

- **Relative to non-RTT states, later RTT states had used more of some RTT-promoted policies and practices before the grants were awarded.** Later RTT states received higher scores from grant application reviewers than non-RTT states that applied for RTT on the portions of the RTT application focused on preexisting state policy conditions (205 versus 173 points), and later RTT states reported using more policies and practices aligned with the RTT program at baseline (2007–2008) than non-RTT states in the areas of teacher and principal certification and evaluation, and school turnaround (not shown).

In Five of the Six Areas Examined, Early RTT States Reported Using More Policies and Practices Promoted by RTT Than Non-RTT States in Spring 2012

In spring 2012, early RTT states, on average, reported using statistically significantly more policies and practices than non-RTT states in the following five areas (Figure ES.1)[5]:

- State capacity (7.5 of 10 policies and practices reported by early RTT states compared to 6.2 for non-RTT states)

- Standards and assessments (5.9 of 10 policies and practices reported by early RTT states compared to 4.0 for non-RTT states)

- Data systems (6.3 of 8 policies and practices reported by early RTT states compared to 5.1 for non-RTT states)

- Teacher and principal certification and evaluation (13.6 of 39 policies and practices reported by early RTT states compared to 7.4 for non-RTT states)

- Charter schools (2.4 of 4 policies and practices reported by early RTT states compared to 1.5 for non-RTT states)

(continued)

the six areas examined: (1) teacher and principal certification and evaluation, (2) school turnaround, and (3) charter schools.

   [5] Chapter IV of the RTT volume of the report contains results for the individual policies and practices within each of these areas.

Figure ES.1. States' Reported Usage of Policies and Practices Promoted by RTT, by Topic Area, Spring 2012
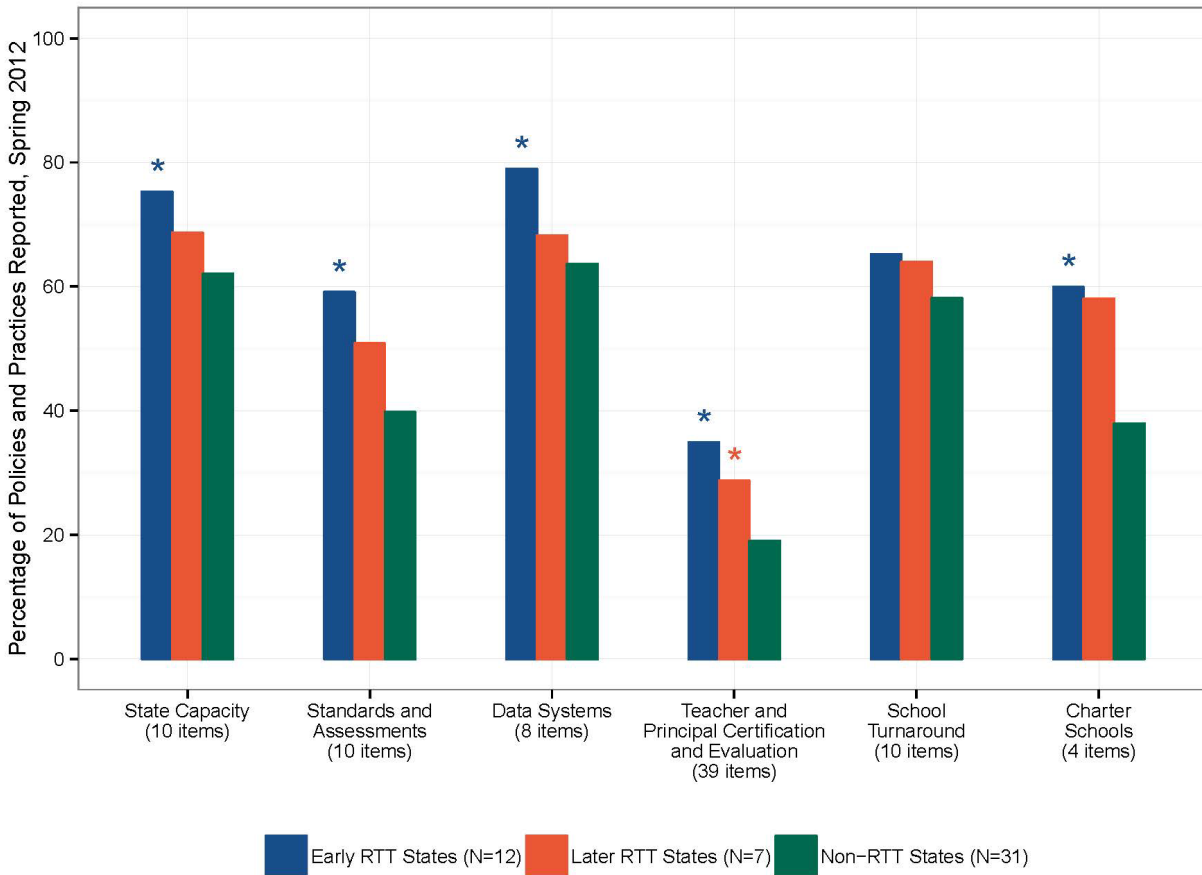
Source: Interviews with state administrators in spring 2012.

Note: Chapter IV of the RTT volume of the report contains results for the individual policies and practices within each topic area. The total number of policies and practices differs by topic area. This figure reads as follows (using the first bar on the left as an example): early RTT states reported using 75 percent of the policies and practices in the state capacity area, or 7.5 out of 10 policies and practices examined in that area.

* Significantly different from non-RTT states at the 0.05 level, two-tailed test.

The only area in which the differences between early states and non-RTT states were not statistically significant was school turnaround. The magnitude of these significant differences was about one or two practices for all but one area (teacher and principal certification and evaluation) where the difference was larger (about six practices). Therefore, although these differences were statistically significant, they may not all be substantively important.

As mentioned above, we have evidence that some of these differences predated award of the RTT grants. In the teacher and principal certification and evaluation area, for example, early RTT states not only reported using more of the policies and practices promoted by RTT than non-RTT states in spring 2012, but a similar pattern emerged for the 2007–2008 school year, before the RTT grants were awarded. In fact, among the three areas on which we collected baseline data on a subset of the policies and practices (teacher and principal certification and evaluation, school turnaround, and charter schools), we found a statistically significant difference between early RTT and non-RTT states prior to the RTT program in 2007–2008 for one area (teacher and principal certification and evaluation). This preexisting difference suggests that

RTT grants were awarded to states that were already using some of the promoted policies and practices rather than RTT awards *causing* the usage of those policies and practices. For three areas (state capacity, standards and assessments, data systems), we do not have information on usage of policies and practices prior to the awarding of RTT grants. Therefore, we cannot determine if the observed differences between early RTT states and non-RTT states in these areas predated receipt of the RTT grant.

In One of the Six Areas Examined, Teacher and Principal Certification and Evaluation, Later RTT States Reported Using More Policies and Practices Promoted by RTT Than Non-RTT States in Spring 2012

In spring 2012, later RTT states, on average, reported using statistically significantly more policies and practices than non-RTT states in one of six areas promoted by RTT (the area of teacher and principal certification and evaluation) (Figure ES.1).[6] Later RTT states reported using 11.2 of 39 policies and practices in this area, compared to 7.4 for non-RTT states. The magnitude of this difference was just under 4 practices. As with the early RTT states, baseline data suggest that the groups differed somewhat in the teacher and principal certification and evaluation area before RTT grants were awarded. In particular, we found a statistically significant difference between later RTT and non-RTT states in this area prior to the RTT program in 2007–2008.

Across All States, Usage of Policies and Practices Promoted by RTT Was Highest in the State Capacity and Data Systems Areas and Lowest in the Teacher and Principal Certification and Evaluation Area

The highest levels of usage of RTT-promoted policies and practices were reported in the areas of state capacity and data systems. In those two areas, states reported using, on average, 66 and 68 percent of the RTT-promoted practices examined (not shown). The lowest levels of usage of RTT-promoted policies and practices were observed in the teacher and principal certification and evaluation area. In that area, states reported using, on average, 24 percent of the RTT-promoted practices examined (not shown). When focusing on usage of *individual* policies and practices, the highest levels of usage were found for (1) having a state longitudinal data system (SLDS), and (2) having a process to identify teacher shortage areas, with average values of 0.94 (not shown).[7] Six of the seven individual policies and practices with the lowest levels of usage were concentrated in the area of teacher and principal certification and evaluation (for example: (1) requiring teacher evaluations to inform decisions about career advancement, and (2) conducting analyses of effectiveness based on student achievement growth to determine whether there has been a shift in the distribution of effective principals), and the seventh was giving

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[6] Because Round 3 grants were narrower in scope, not all later RTT states focused on every area targeted by RTT. In addition, less time had elapsed between receipt of RTT awards and our spring 2012 interviews for the later RTT states than for the early RTT states. Because of these reasons and the smaller sample size (7 later RTT states, as opposed to 12 early RTT states), statistically significant differences are less likely to be found between later RTT states and non-RTT states than between early RTT states and non-RTT states.

[7] For each policy or practice in the RTT application criteria for which we identified one or more relevant interview questions, we constructed a variable ranging from zero to one using those questions. To calculate the average value of a policy or practice, we averaged that variable across all states. For example, if half the states used a particular practice (meaning they had a value of 1) and the other half of states did not use that practice (meaning they had a value of 0), the average value for that practice would be 0.5.

priority to schools that address the needs of ELLs when considering applications for new charter schools; each had an average value of 0.02 (not shown).

There Were No Differences Between RTT and Non-RTT States in Usage of ELL-Focused Policies and Practices Promoted by RTT

Early RTT states, later RTT states, and non-RTT states reported using, on average, about half of the 12 ELL-focused policies and practices aligned with the RTT application criteria (6.3, 6.1, 5.6) (not shown). Within each of these three groups, states with higher percentages of ELLs used more ELL-focused policies and practices than states with lower percentages of ELLs, but there were no differences in usage of ELL-focused policies and practices between states with higher and lower ELL/non-ELL achievement gaps (not shown).

RTT Conclusions

The average number of RTT-promoted policies and practices in use in spring 2012 was significantly higher in early RTT states than non-RTT states in all but one of the six areas examined (school turnaround) and was significantly higher in later RTT states than non-RTT states in just one area (teacher and principal certification and evaluation). These findings suggest that the RTT program *may* have influenced the usage of policies and practices promoted by the programs in RTT states. However, one cannot conclude that the RTT program *caused* these observed differences. Other factors could explain the differences. In particular, some differences in usage of policies and practices promoted by RTT existed prior to states' receipt of RTT grants. In addition, later RTT states had their grants for a short period of time as of spring 2012 (Round 3 grants were awarded in December 2011). Because these types of policies can take time to implement, a future report, based on spring 2013 data, will examine usage of policies and practices promoted by RTT one year later.

STUDY OF PRACTICES USED IN SCHOOLS IMPLEMENTING A SIG-FUNDED INTERVENTION MODEL COMPARED WITH SCHOOLS NOT IMPLEMENTING SUCH A MODEL

Background

The SIG program aims to support the implementation of school intervention models in low-performing schools. Although SIG was first authorized in 2001, this evaluation focuses on SIG awards granted in 2010, when roughly $3.5 billion in SIG awards were made to 50 states and the District of Columbia, $3 billion of which came from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The four turnaround models and requirements for those models were the same under Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants. States identified the low-performing schools eligible for SIG based on criteria specified by ED and then held competitions for local education agencies seeking funding to help turn around eligible schools.

For the 2010 SIG competition, ED required states to categorize eligible schools into three eligibility tiers based on the school's level (elementary or secondary), Title I status,[8] and

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[8] Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families. A

achievement or graduation rate. These tiers helped prioritize the distribution of SIG at the local level and determined the practices to be used for school turnaround. In general, SIG eligibility Tiers I and II included schools with the lowest and most persistent achievement problems in each state.

ED required that each SIG-awarded school under Tier I or Tier II implement one of four school intervention models. These models featured specific practices:

- **Transformation.** This model requires schools to replace the principal, adopt a teacher and principal evaluation system that accounts for student achievement growth as a significant factor, adopt a new governance structure, institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time, create community-oriented schools, and have operational flexibility.

- **Turnaround.** This model requires schools to replace the principal, replace at least 50 percent of the school staff, institute comprehensive instructional reforms, increase learning time, create community-oriented schools, and have operational flexibility.

- **Restart.** This model requires schools to convert to a charter school or close and reopen under the management of a charter management organization or education management organization.

- **School closure.** This model requires districts to close schools and enroll their students in higher-achieving schools within the district.

The practices laid out for the transformation and turnaround intervention models can be grouped into four broad areas set forth in the SIG application criteria: (1) implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies, (2) developing and increasing teacher and principal effectiveness, (3) increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools, and (4) having operational flexibility and receiving support.[9] The SIG objectives in each topic area and the subtopics within each topic for which we had school administrator survey questions are detailed in Exhibit ES.2.

Research Questions and Study Design

The portion of this report focused on SIG was guided by the following research questions:

- Are SIG-funded intervention model schools using the improvement practices promoted by the four SIG intervention models, and how does that compare to the usage of those practices by schools not implementing a SIG-funded intervention model?

- Does usage of these practices include a focus on ELLs and does that focus on ELLs vary between schools implementing a SIG-funded intervention model and schools not implementing one? Does usage of these ELL-focused improvement practices vary by

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(continued)

school receiving Title I funds that fails to meet adequate yearly progress targets can be assigned a Title I status of "in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring."

[9] Detailed information about reform practices for the other two intervention models (restart and closure) was not provided in the SIG application.

the percentage of students who are ELLs or the ELL/non-ELL student achievement gap?

Exhibit ES.2. SIG Objectives and Subtopics Addressed by School Administrator Survey Questions, by Topic Area

Implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies
Using data to identify and implement an instructional program[b]
Promoting the continuous use of student data
Conducting periodic reviews to ensure that the curriculum is being implemented with fidelity[a,b]
Implementing a new school model (such as a themed academy)[a,b]
Providing supports and professional development to staff to assist ELLs and students with disabilities
Using and integrating technology-based supports[b]
Tailoring strategies for secondary schools[b]
Developing and increasing teacher and principal effectiveness
Using rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems[b]
Identifying and rewarding effective teachers and principals and removing ineffective ones[b]
Providing high-quality, job-embedded professional development or supports[b]
Implementing strategies to recruit, place, and retain staff
Increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools
Increasing learning time[b]
Engaging families and communities and providing a safe school environment that meets students' social, emotional, and health needs
Having operational flexibility and receiving support
Having operational flexibility[b]
Receiving technical assistance and support

Source: SIG application; surveys of school administrators in spring 2012.

ELL = English language learner.

[a] The number of questions included in the school administrator survey was purposefully limited to reduce the time it took to complete the survey. We worked with the Institute of Education Sciences and the SIG Program Office to assess their priorities for the types of questions to include. The survey did not include any questions about this objective.

[b] The survey did not include any questions about this objective for ELLs.

The SIG study design is summarized in the box below.

SIG Study Design

Comparison design. For the analyses conducted in volume two of this report, "Usage of Practices Promoted by School Improvement Grants," we used a comparison design in which we compared schools implementing a SIG-funded model to similar schools in the same districts not implementing such a model.

Sample. The sample for the SIG evaluation includes approximately 470 schools located in approximately 60 districts and 22 states. The SIG sample was not randomly selected, rather schools were purposively selected to support the estimation of impacts of SIG-funded models on student outcomes which will be presented in a future report. Thirty-five percent of all schools implementing a SIG-funded model in 2011–2012 are in the sample. Because the SIG sample was not randomly selected, it should not be assumed that the SIG implementation findings presented in this report necessarily generalize to schools nationwide.

Data on school improvement practices. In spring 2012, to collect information on the extent to which schools were using the improvement practices promoted by SIG, we conducted structured web surveys of roughly 290 administrators of schools implementing a SIG-funded model and 180 administrators of similar schools in the same districts that were not implementing a SIG-funded model. The survey was sent to school principals, with instructions indicating that they should consult with other school staff if needed. The response rate for the school surveys was 87 percent.

Analysis. To summarize the large amount of school survey data collected, we identified questions that aligned with the practices SIG sought to affect. We determined the number of these practices that each school reported using and then calculated the average number of practices for both sets of schools—those implementing SIG-funded models and those not doing so. We then tested whether differences between the two groups in the average number of practices reported were statistically significant. Because the goal of this analysis was to provide descriptive information about the actual levels of practices used by schools implementing a SIG-funded model in 2011–2012 and schools not implementing one, the results were reported as raw (that is, unadjusted) means; they were not regression-adjusted to account for any pre-existing differences between these two groups of schools.

At Baseline, the Study's SIG-Funded Model Schools Were Generally Similar to Study Schools That Were Not Implementing Such Models, But They Were Not Representative of All U.S. Schools Implementing These Models

Interpreting the differences between schools implementing SIG-funded models and schools not implementing these models in spring 2012 requires understanding the characteristics of these two groups of schools at baseline (during the 2009–2010 school year, which was prior to SIG funding receipt).

- **The two groups of study schools generally had similar characteristics prior to the receipt of the 2010 SIG awards.**[10] Out of five characteristics examined—race/ethnicity, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, Title I eligibility, location, and school level (elementary, middle, high school)—schools implementing a SIG-funded model and schools not implementing such a model differed by a statistically significant margin on one characteristic. Compared to schools not implementing a SIG-funded model, schools that were implementing such models had a statistically significantly higher percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch at baseline (84 percent versus 80 percent) (not shown).

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[10] The baseline characteristics examined came from the Common Core of Data. To limit respondent burden, the school administrator survey focused primarily on practices being used in the schools in spring 2012.

- **Study schools implementing a SIG-funded model were generally not representative of all U.S. schools implementing such models.** The schools in our study that were implementing SIG-funded models were more disadvantaged and more likely to be in an urban area than U.S. schools nationally that were implementing such models. In particular, study schools implementing a SIG-funded model were more likely than U.S. schools nationally implementing such models to be eligible for Title I (95 percent versus 89 percent) and were more likely to be located in an urban area (87 percent versus 59 percent) (not shown). Because the SIG sample is not representative of schools nationwide, readers should use caution when interpreting the results.

In All Four Areas Examined, Schools Implementing a SIG-Funded Model Reported Using More Practices Promoted by SIG in Spring 2012 Than Schools Not Implementing Such Models

In spring 2012, schools implementing a SIG-funded model reported using more practices promoted by SIG, on average, than schools not implementing such models, in the following areas (Figure ES.2)[11]:

- Implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies (7.3 of 8 practices reported by SIG-funded model schools compared to 7.0 for schools not implementing such models)

- Developing and increasing teacher and principal effectiveness (11.1 of 20 practices reported by SIG-funded model schools compared to 9.6 for schools not implementing such models)

- Increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools (3.9 of 5 practices reported by SIG-funded model schools compared to 3.2 for schools not implementing such models)

- Having operational flexibility and receiving support (1.0 of 2 practices reported by SIG-funded model schools compared to 0.8 for schools not implementing such models)

The magnitude of these differences was less than one practice for three areas and less than two practices for one area. Therefore, although these differences are statistically significant, they may not be substantively important. As noted above, because the SIG sample was not randomly selected, it should not be assumed that these findings necessarily generalize to schools nationwide.

Usage of Practices Promoted by SIG Was Highest in the Comprehensive Instructional Reform Strategies Area and Lowest in the Operational Flexibility and Support Area

The highest level of usage of SIG-promoted practices was observed in the area of comprehensive instructional reform strategies. In that area, study schools reported using, on average, 90 percent of the SIG-promoted practices examined (not shown). The lowest level of usage of SIG-promoted practices was observed in the area of operational flexibility and support.

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[11] Chapter IV of the SIG volume of the report contains results for the individual practices within each of these areas.

Study schools reported using, on average, 46 percent of the SIG-promoted practices examined in that area (not shown). When focusing on usage of *individual* practices, the highest level of usage was for using benchmark or interim assessments at least once per year, with an average value of 0.99 (not shown).[12] The individual practice with the lowest level of usage was using teacher evaluation results to inform decisions about compensation, with an average value of 0.15 (not shown).

Figure ES.2. Study Schools' Usage of Practices Promoted by SIG, by Topic Area, Spring 2012
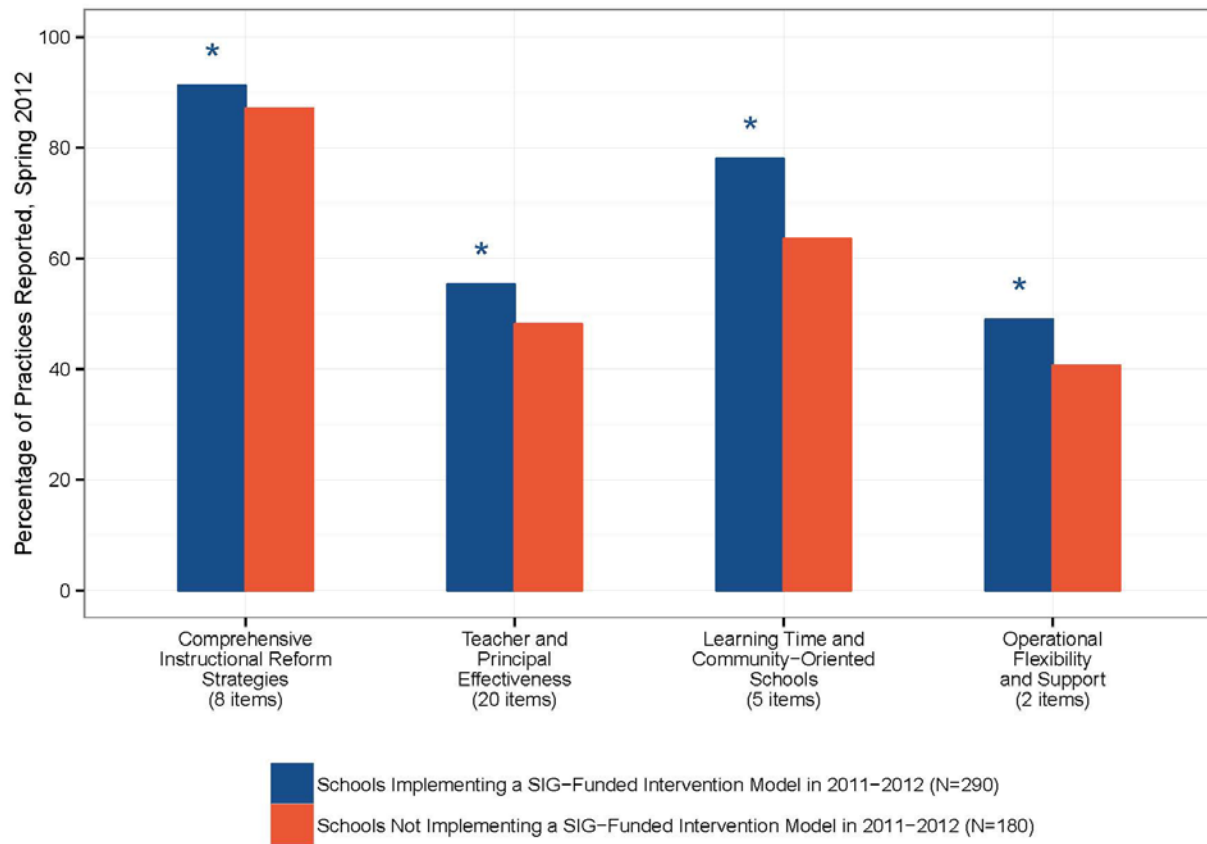
Source: Surveys of school administrators in spring 2012.

Note: Chapter IV of the SIG volume of the report contains results for the individual practices within each topic area. The total number of practices differs by topic area. This figure reads as follows (using the first bar on the left as an example): schools implementing a SIG-funded intervention model reported using 91 percent of the practices in the comprehensive instructional reform strategies area, or 7.3 out of 8 practices examined in that area.

* Significantly different from schools not implementing a SIG-funded intervention model in 2011–2012 at the 0.05 level, two-tailed test.

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[12] For each practice in the SIG application criteria for which we identified one or more relevant survey questions, we constructed a variable ranging from zero to one using those questions. To calculate the average value of a practice, we averaged that variable across all study schools. For example, if half the schools used a particular practice (meaning they had a value of 1) and the other half of schools did not use that practice (meaning they had a value of 0), the average value for that practice would be 0.5.

There Were No Differences Between Schools Implementing a SIG-Funded Model and Schools Not Implementing One in Usage of ELL-Focused Practices Promoted by SIG

Schools implementing a SIG-funded model and schools not implementing one both reported using an average of 2.9 of the 6 ELL-focused practices aligned with the SIG application criteria (not shown). Within each of these two groups, schools with higher percentages of ELLs used more ELL-focused practices than schools with lower percentages of ELLs, but there were no differences between schools with higher and lower ELL/non-ELL achievement gaps (not shown).

SIG Conclusions

In all areas examined, usage of practices promoted by SIG in spring 2012 was higher in schools implementing a SIG-funded model than in schools not implementing such a model. These findings suggest that the SIG program *may* have influenced the usage of practices promoted by the program in schools implementing a SIG-funded model. However, one cannot conclude that the SIG program *caused* the observed differences in practices. As noted above, the findings should be interpreted with caution because the SIG sample was not randomly selected and is not representative of schools nationwide. Because the types of school improvement practices promoted by SIG can take time to implement, a future report based on spring 2013 data will examine usage of SIG-promoted practices one year later.