

Changing the School Climate Is the First Step to Reform in Many Schools with Federal Improvement Grants

Key findings

School Improvement Grants (SIGs) financed through the economic stimulus package are intended to spur dramatic change in persistently low-performing schools. Many state and local officials charged with implementing SIGs view the creation of a safe, orderly, collegial, and productive school climate as an essential step in raising student achievement, according to case studies by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at George Washington University. The importance of establishing a school climate conducive to learning has also been recognized by other studies of school reform and endorsed in federal SIG guidance.

This special CEP report highlights findings about the critical element of school climate from case studies of the first year and half of SIG implementation in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho. The information in the report is based on interviews with 35 state, district, and school officials in the three states and on in-depth reviews of six SIG-funded schools.

Key findings about school climate from the case study schools include the following:

- ***All six SIG-funded schools participating in CEP's case studies have taken steps to create a more positive school climate—often as an initial priority before implementing other reforms.*** In Maryland, for example, the State Department of Education, as well as SIG-funded districts and schools, provided services to address absenteeism, behavior, and other non-academic issues that affect student learning as a first step toward improvement.

- ***SIG-funded case study schools used a variety of specific strategies to improve school climate—from instituting school uniforms to increasing teacher collaboration.*** To improve student discipline and academic engagement, for example, case study schools hired behavior specialists or social workers, provided outreach through community coordinators, held student-led conferences with families and teachers, and established programs for parents. To strengthen staff collaboration and morale, SIG schools compensated teachers for their time in professional development, supported instructional coaching, and created teams to lead improvement and analyze data, among other strategies.
- ***Administrators and teachers most often cited improvements in school climate as their greatest success after the first year of implementing SIGs.*** Several interviewees in case study schools reported seeing clear improvements in student engagement, parent involvement, and staff collaboration and morale, as well as a stronger focus on academics in their school. Some officials reported that their success in improving school climate during the first year of SIG funding enabled them to sharpen the focus on curriculum and instructional reforms in the second year.

Background on SIGs and the role of school climate

The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) provided an extra \$3 billion for School Improvement Grants authorized by section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education. (Title I is the large federal program that provides assistance to low-income schools to improve achievement for academically struggling students.) These ARRA funds supplemented the \$500 million previously provided for section 1003(g) SIGs for fiscal year 2009.

This major infusion of funding to improve schools was accompanied by significant new requirements for section 1003(g) SIGs, laid out by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in

2009 and finalized later in federal guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a). These requirements provided larger awards to a smaller subset of schools than did the previous section 1003(g) grants. In particular, SIG funds were targeted on the most “persistently lowest-achieving” schools within each state, typically the lowest 5%. In the first round of ARRA-funded SIG awards, 820 schools received average grants of more than \$2.5 million for school year 2010-11, the first year of implementation (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The revised guidance also required SIG-funded schools to implement one of the four school improvement models described in **box A**—transformation, turnaround, restart, and closure. These models, as Secretary Duncan noted in a March 19 speech, “require schools to institute far-reaching changes to improve student learning” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b). The most popular of the four models by far is the transformation model, chosen by 74% of first-round grantees (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Box A. School improvement models

Federal guidance requires schools receiving section 1003(g) SIG funds to use one of the following school improvement models:

- **Transformation:** Implement all of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.
- **Turnaround:** Replace the principal and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes; rehire no more than 50% of the school staff; and implement strategies that provide increased learning time, among other requirements.
- **Restart:** Convert a school into one operated by a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
- **School closure:** Close a school and enroll its students in other schools in the district that are higher-achieving.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2012a.

Research has long documented a relationship between school climate and student learning (see, for example, a summary of such studies compiled by the Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010). A safe and orderly climate is a characteristic often shared by schools that show consistent gains in student achievement (Redding, 2006). A handbook on effective implementation of SIGs—developed as a resource for schools by the federally supported Center on Education and Innovation—emphasizes the importance of establishing a positive school climate for successful school reform (Perlman & Redding, 2011). This process includes developing positive relationships among students and between students and staff, and providing social, emotional, and behavioral supports that foster a safe, clean, collaborative, and productive environment in which students can learn.

Although none of the four SIG models explicitly requires schools to address issues of school climate, federal guidance notes that as part of implementing the transformation model, districts may partner with various organizations and agencies “to create safe school environments that meet students’ social, emotional, and health needs” and may implement “approaches to improve school climate and discipline, such as implementing a system of positive behavioral supports or taking steps to eliminate bullying and student harassment” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a, p. 40). The guidance also gives examples of services that districts might provide to create safe environments in SIG schools, including but not limited to safety programs, community stability programs to reduce student mobility rates, and family and community engagement programs.

The remainder of this report discusses the main themes from CEP’s case studies of state and local SIG implementation in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho. Although the original case studies included both SIG-funded schools and comparable low-performing schools that did not receive awards, this report focuses only on the six SIG-funded case study schools (two in each state). This is because the non-recipient case study schools reported fewer problems with school climate than the SIG schools.

The research, which was conducted during the fall and winter of 2011-12, focused on activities carried out during school year 2010-11 (the first year of SIG funding) and the first

half of 2011-12. The case studies examined various aspects of SIG implementation in addition to school climate, and the broader findings from this research are summarized in the report *Opportunities and Obstacles: Implementing Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho* (CEP, 2012). Additional information about case study research methods and analyses, along with the full study report, is available on CEP's website (www.cep-dc.org).

The next section of the report highlights findings across all three case study states. Subsequent sections describe findings and supporting information about school climate from each of the three states.

Across all three states studied, SIG-funded case study schools are taking steps to build a more positive school climate. Several officials pointed to improvements in climate as an early sign their schools are moving in the right direction.

Officials in all six SIG-funded case study schools in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho reported taking steps to improve school climate—often as a first priority for reform. Strategies to create a more positive climate included efforts to improve safety, discipline, and student engagement; build a sense of community among students and staff; and establish a shared vision centered on student achievement among teachers, parents, and students. Several of the services being provided were similar to those highlighted in U.S. Department of Education guidance. Many interviewees characterized this focus on school climate as an integral part of their reform efforts.

As a result of this focus, principals and staff in most case study schools reported seeing improvements in school climate, such as stronger staff collaboration and increased student motivation. Indeed, officials in SIG-funded case study schools most often cited an improved

school climate as their greatest success during the first year of SIG implementation. Some schools also reported gains in student achievement, but several said it was too soon to tell.

Maryland case study schools focus on climate first.

This focus on school climate was especially pronounced in Maryland at the state and district levels, as well as across the SIG case study schools. Mozelle Mickens, a Title I and school improvement specialist with the State Department of Education, explained that although Maryland's SIG schools are located in high-poverty areas, the four improvement models do not really address how poverty impacts student learning. She and other state officials agreed that schools must understand how poverty affects student achievement and then take action to put services in place that will improve students' overall well-being.

Therefore, Maryland is approaching school reform by providing services, including school-level social workers, that go well beyond students' academic needs. The state has hired a coordinator of student services to make sure that service providers for SIG schools are coordinating with each other and have the right training. The state has also hired a specialist to track student absenteeism related to physical and mental health issues. Maryland has used part of its Race to the Top funds to hire behavior specialists, who help manage student behavior with positive intervention strategies, to work in SIG schools. (Race to the Top is an ARRA-funded competitive grant program which aims to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform, including turning around low-performing schools.) Although the end goal in Maryland is to improve student achievement, the state is attempting to "be holistic in terms of how [they] work in helping the students" to achieve, said Mickens.

Gholson Middle School in the Prince George's County Public Schools

During the first year of the SIG program, the suburban Prince George's County district outside Washington, D.C., "really had to focus heavily on climate in each of the [SIG] schools

because we had new principals and new staff,” said Ed Ryans, the district’s turnaround director. In school year 2011-12, the second year of the SIG award, the climate was more positive in all of the SIG schools—“that’s a success,” Ryans added. Even with their primary focus on school climate, SIG schools have also made small gains in student achievement, he said.

Prior to receiving a SIG, school climate was one of the biggest obstacles at Gholson Middle School in Prince George’s County, according to Principal Lacey Robinson. The school had 1,000 suspensions in a single year, and many students were suspended repeatedly. School enrollment was on the decline. When she and Ebony Cross took over as co-principals, the school had “graffiti, rat feces, mice infestations, bug infestations . . . you couldn’t tell it was a new building,” Robinson said. Many students experienced not just behavior problems in school, but also conflicts with the law both in and out of school. The previous principals “could not [get] their hands around the climate and the culture,” she said, and the school “became a thorn to the community—became a thorn, I would say, to the district.”

When Robinson and Cross began implementing SIG reforms, they started with school climate and the “remarketing and rebranding of Gholson,” said Robinson. All students are referred to as “scholars.” They wear uniforms, which the principals refer to as “paycheck attire,” that include ties and black shoes to emphasize unity and a feeling of community. Students are told to abide by the saying, “Everyone works harder to get smarter.” Robinson described her first day of school and the weeks that followed at Gholson in this way:

I lined every single child up, and we looked at every single child walking into this building, and they had to be in full uniform compliance. And we literally—every single child—we spoke to right before they entered the building. And we did that for a week straight. I shut instruction down and did all climate for a week and a half. [We would ask], ‘What does a Gholson scholar do? How do they walk? How do they talk? What do they say? How do we look out for each other? What is the creed? . . . [I]t was literally . . . trying to change the mindset [of the school].

Robinson said the change in school climate has been the “biggest success” of the reforms at her school, one that would “absolutely not” have been possible without SIG funding. At the beginning of the second year of this funding, she was “blown away” because the school climate was “completely different,” she noted. Students at Gholson are beginning to understand that “somebody believes in them, somebody will not give up on them, and that they have a future.”

Building on their early successes in improving school climate, principals in SIG schools in Prince George’s County are now able to “push that instructional program that [they] weren’t able to push 100%” in the first year of SIG, according to Ryans. For the second year of the grant period, principals set goals to monitor the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; improve instructional practices through observation and evaluation of teachers; and regularly integrate appropriate assessments into daily classroom instruction.

At Gholson Middle, SIG funds also support a community office that includes bilingual staff, a community outreach specialist, a full-time social worker, and a partnership with an external provider, the Mid-Atlantic Consortium. Community outreach assistance from Mid-Atlantic has been crucial to the school’s turnaround efforts, Robinson explained. Principals “cannot turn a school around without a community outreach program; there’s no way,” she added.

The Mid-Atlantic Consortium works with Gholson Middle and other SIG schools in the Prince George’s district to reach out to parents and the rest of the community in a variety of ways. “Community outreach people will call parents one-on-one,” said Robinson, adding that parents are in and out of the school all day long, often headed to the school’s community room. Each month, Gholson holds what Robinson called a “Parent University.” Mid-Atlantic has helped organize classes through this “university” in computer literacy, Spanish for both English and Spanish-speaking parents, advice for communicating with teenagers, and awareness of signs of bullying. In addition, Gholson funded a three-day summer camp in 2011 for incoming 7th graders and their parents. During this “bridge program,” parents learned more about how the school planned to communicate with them.

Ryans, the district turnaround director, agreed that the relationship with the Mid-Atlantic Consortium has been positive and effective.

John Rodgers Elementary School in the Baltimore City Public Schools

In the Baltimore City Public Schools, SIG funds helped to pay for additional school staff who provide targeted interventions for at-risk students in SIG schools, according to Beth Nolan, the district's former turnaround director. In addition, Nolan said, Baltimore City schools have used SIG funds for enrichment activities to “engage [students] in the learning process because . . . in many of these schools, students aren't engaged in school, and it's partially because they don't have a connection to their school, so we're trying to build those connections.” Students who are engaged in school tend to have fewer discipline problems and contribute to a more positive learning environment for themselves and their peers, she added.

Nolan also cited changes in school climate as one of the “quick wins” experienced by SIG schools in her district in the first year of funding. Principals made real gains “in terms of getting a true vision and mission established at [their] schools,” she said. In SIG schools, the mission and vision are evident not only from “artifacts on the walls and the things you hear in the classrooms, but . . . a student or teacher or . . . any other staff member [would] be able to tell you what they were trying to do there”—something Nolan believes is essential to the improvement process.

Marc Martin, principal of Commodore John Rodgers Elementary School in Baltimore City, gave examples of steps the school has taken, in addition to replacing most of its staff, to change the school's climate. Rather than holding teacher-led report card nights, for example, the school holds student-led conferences three times a year, during which students present their learning to their families. In addition, students are grouped into grade-level communities and teams that meet once a week. The entire school is focused on one mission, Martin explained: “Commodore to College: 100% for 100%.”

Michigan case study schools focus on staff collaboration.

All Michigan school and district interviewees expressed a general optimism that they were on the right track for school improvement. As in Maryland, the success most frequently cited was improvement in school climate, including greater staff collaboration. Several interviewees noted that an improved climate had a trickle-down effect that inspired greater student motivation to learn.

Phoenix Elementary-Middle School in the Detroit Public Schools

Markita Hall, interim director for school improvement for the Detroit Public Schools, identified three primary elements of Phoenix Elementary-Middle's SIG plans: building a culture of collaboration among faculty members, extending learning time, and utilizing a new external provider, Teachscape. Prior to receiving a SIG award, the school had struggled to find time to coordinate strategies at the school level. Now, Hall said, Phoenix has developed Instructional Learning Teams whose primary function is to use data to make instructional decisions. Shalonda Byas, who was Phoenix's acting principal for the majority of school year 2010-11, explained that the school's SIG plans, which specifically call for the development of different committees of teachers, have encouraged collaboration among faculty members. These structural changes mean that teachers are working together to formulate and implement action plans that address issues within the school and make decisions about research-based strategies that improve classroom practices. So, at Phoenix Elementary-Middle, improvements in school climate are evidenced by structural changes among the staff.

In addition, Teachscape instituted a peer and individual reflection model at Phoenix that requires teachers to videotape and review classroom lessons, discuss the practices and strategies displayed, and determine what they might do to improve the quality of teaching. Hall noted this model was a better fit with the new culture of collaboration at Phoenix.

Indeed, both Hall and Byas said this culture of collaboration is the greatest success thus far of SIG funding at Phoenix. All of the formal collaboration required by the SIG plan “called for staff to have to work together and bring their expertise to the table,” said Byas. These structural changes have prompted “staff to come up with action plans and then begin implementation and then assess and monitor and then show growth. It completely kept people focused.”

Arthur Hill High School in the Saginaw School District

In the Saginaw school district, Superintendent Carlton Jenkins and school leaders have focused on empowering and supporting teachers to foster collaboration and reflective practice, Jenkins said. This process, he explained, has affected the learning environment for students and helped change the culture in SIG schools—and even across the district. For example, with the influx of SIG funds, Arthur Hill High School has been able to compensate teachers for their time in professional development, which has helped to encourage teacher buy-in and enthusiasm, according to Sharon Richardson, the school’s professional development coordinator. This, in turn, has contributed to a cultural shift among both teachers and students and has built a schoolwide sense of momentum toward improvement.

Arthur Hill High School used SIG funds to hire a “SIG team” to coordinate its improvement strategies. The team includes, among others, a “SIG coach” to lead the charge, as well as coaches for math, literacy, professional development, technology, positive behavior, and data (this last position was not yet filled at the time of the CEP study). The SIG team at Arthur Hill has been essential in creating what Principal Nathaniel McClain calls a “more responsive culture.” With the support offered to instructors by SIG-funded coaches and with the SIG-required practice of regular assessments, staff work as a team to stay organized and focused on school improvement, he said.

Idaho case study schools focus on staff morale and student engagement.

Both of the SIG-funded case study schools in Idaho have taken steps to change their climate as part of their school improvement efforts, and both report that staff morale and student engagement are better as a result.

Lakeside Elementary School in the Plummer-Worley Joint School District

The Plummer-Worley district used part of its SIG award to fund new district-level support positions, including a community coordinator who provides outreach to parents and assistance in improving school climate. “I call it building a bigger boat,” said Superintendent Judi Sharrett.

At Lakeside Elementary, interviewees agreed that SIG funding has brought big changes to the school. Although there had been ongoing efforts to improve curriculum and climate prior to the SIG award, this effort lacked resources and focus. Leisa Anderson, the Lakeside instructional coach, described how SIG funding changed things:

Before the grant, our school improvement efforts seemed very disorganized. When we had turnover of principals or administration, they would come in with their own ideas and try to implement them, but it didn't always feel like we were headed in the right direction. Now we know where we're headed. We're clear on that picture. It's just provided us that foundation and the framework that we needed. We were lacking that before.

Although Lakeside students made some achievement gains on state tests last year, the primary success mentioned by all interviewees at the school was an improved school climate, as evidenced by more engaged students and better staff collaboration. “Kids are more engaged,” Anderson said. “And I think changing our curriculum has helped that process. We're very intentional, and I think that's the biggest key.” Lakeside Principal Monique English called SIG “the backbone of our school improvement” and said it provided

the resources staff needed to be more successful and work as a team. “I just think we made huge gains last year. The building feels like it made a 180-degree turn, compared to how it felt last year. That’s exciting.”

Jefferson Middle School in the Caldwell School District

At Jefferson Middle in the Caldwell district, the first success mentioned by interviewees was increased student achievement. But a contributor to these increases, in their view, was the improved school climate. “If a kid loves school, that student’s achievement is going to go up,” said Principal Moss Strong. To motivate students to participate in instructional remediation and improve their performance on key assessments, the school instituted a variety of incentives. Students who reach individually set goals on benchmark assessments earn plastic wrist bands and can attend extracurricular events like dances. They can also enter drawings for larger incentives, many of which are donated by local businesses and community members. “Kids will work so hard for the smallest things,” Strong remarked.

These student incentives, along with a focus on learning, less transition time between classes, and more adult supervision, have all contributed to the improved culture at Jefferson Middle, interviewees said. Teacher Mary Rita Yamamoto described the change in the school’s climate in this way:

Our discipline has gone from horrible to great. Principal Strong is just a natural at it. The kids turned on a dime. They were tired of the old school climate. Our kids weren’t happy. They weren’t smiling. As soon as this stronger leader came in, the kids’ shoulders went down. They were smiling, happy, and relaxed. It was a huge change, and the kids were ready for it, and they wanted it.

Staff morale is also up at Jefferson, interviewees said. “I think [the Jefferson staff] hit it hard last year,” said Sherawn Reberry, the district’s director of federal programs. “They understood how they had been defined as a school, and they really wanted to work hard to change. I just think the teachers did an excellent job of stepping up to the plate, asking

questions, doing what they needed to do, and focusing on students' learning. I really see the staff has come together.”

Jefferson has also used SIG funds to provide incentives to teachers. For example, teachers can earn document cameras and mimeo pads (similar to iPads) for completing training and meeting criteria for professional development—awards that help them become more proficient with new technology. In addition, teachers were given bonuses for increasing student achievement in school year 2010-11.

Policy implications

In their first year of implementing SIGs, schools participating in CEP's case studies took strong steps to improve school climate as a way to spur dramatic changes in performance. These schools used a variety of approaches to build a more positive climate, including hiring positive behavior specialists, providing social work services and other student supports, establishing community outreach programs and partnerships with external providers, and providing professional development to improve staff collaboration and morale. Interviewees in all of the SIG case study schools emphasized that their climate has improved and that this demonstrates their schools are moving in the right direction.

These case study findings suggest that using gains in students' test scores as the primary gauge of the effectiveness of SIGs focuses too narrowly on just one element of success and ignores important improvements in school climate among recipient schools. Over the last 50 years, a multitude of researchers and policymakers have pointed to the role school climate plays on overall school improvement strategies. The findings from these case studies suggest that federal and state policymakers should factor in improvements in school climate when evaluating the overall impact of these grants, making decisions about future funding, drafting legislation, and designing school improvement programs.

References

- Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2010, January). School climate research summary. *School Climate Brief 1*(1). Retrieved from http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/SCBrief_v1n1_Jan2010.pdf
- Center on Education Policy. (2012). *Opportunities and obstacles: Implementing stimulus-funded school improvement grants in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Perlman, C. L., & Redding, S. (Ed.) (2011). *Handbook on effective implementation of school improvement grants*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. Retrieved from [http://www.centerii.org/handbook/Resources/Handbook on Effective Implementation of School Improvement Grants.pdf](http://www.centerii.org/handbook/Resources/Handbook%20on%20Effective%20Implementation%20of%20School%20Improvement%20Grants.pdf)
- Redding, S. (2006). *The mega system: Deciding. Learning. Connecting. A handbook for continuous improvement within a community of the school*. Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.centerii.org/>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2011). *Baseline analyses of SIG applications and SIG-eligible and SIG-awarded schools*. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20114019/exhibits/exhibit_18.asp
- U.S. Department of Education. (2012a, March 1). *Guidance on fiscal year 2010 school improvement grants under section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/legislation.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2012b, March 19). Working in the nation's lowest-performing schools: A progress report. Remarks by Secretary Duncan to the 2nd annual Building a Grad Nation summit. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/working-nations-lowest-performing-schools-progress-report>

Credits and acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Jennifer McMurrer, CEP senior research associate. Nancy Kober, a CEP consultant, edited the report. Diane Stark Rentner, CEP deputy director; Shelby McIntosh, CEP research associate; and Caitlin Scott, CEP consultant, provided advice and assistance.

Based in Washington, D.C., at the George Washington University's Graduate School of Education and Human Development and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

The Center on Education Policy receives nearly all of its funding from charitable foundations. We are grateful to the Hewlett Foundation for funding this project and to the Phi Delta Kappa International Foundation for providing the Center with general support funding that assisted us in this endeavor. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the Center.

© Center on Education Policy, July 2012

Center on Education Policy
Graduate School of Education and Human Development
The George Washington University
2140 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 103
Washington, D.C. 20037
Ph: 202-822-8065
Fax: 202-994-8859
E-mail: cep-dc@cep-dc.org
Web: www.cep-dc.org