Improving Student Achievement in High-Poverty Schools
Lessons from Washington state

Executive Summary

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The WEA represents over 82,000 active and retired educators who work in our state's public schools, community, technical and four-year colleges and universities. We believe every child has the right to a high-quality public education.

Executive Summary

In 2010, the United States Department of Education provided funding for three-year School Improvement Grants (SIG) to support the lowest-achieving 5 percent of Title I or Title I-eligible schools identified by each state based on state math and reading test scores and high-school graduation rates. In 2011, the Education Department funded another round of three-year SIG grants.

Twenty-eight Washington schools were awarded the grant: 18 in 2010 and 10 in 2011.

In December 2012, the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) released data showing that Washington's SIG schools were outperforming the nation's nearly 1,400 other SIG schools in math and reading achievement.

Specifically, 86 percent of Washington SIG schools showed gains in math after one year, while across the country 65 percent of SIG schools showed math improvements. Nationwide, 34 percent of the SIG schools showed a drop in math scores, while only 7 percent of Washington SIG schools showed a drop.

For reading scores, 70 percent of the Washington SIG schools improved versus 64 percent nationally. Fifteen percent of Washington state SIG schools showed a drop in reading scores compared to 37 percent across the country.

Over two years, Washington SIG schools were sustaining much of that improvement, with 88 percent of schools showing math score gains, and 12 percent dropping. In reading, 70 percent of the SIG schools had gains in reading scores and 18 percent showed loss.

The Washington Education Association (WEA) believes there is a combination of reasons for this success, most of which developed out of strong partnerships between a variety of education organizations, including the Education Department, OSPI, school districts, the National Education Association, WEA and its local associations.

This report summarizes key findings and reviews the steps taken in the development and implementation of the SIG grants. It concludes with recommendations for improving academic performance at high-needs schools.

WEA hosted listening sessions in the SIG schools throughout the three-year period to understand why educators in those buildings thought they were successful. Conditions that contributed to success include the following:

1. A transparent, inclusive, union/district/all-staff process from the outset regarding all aspects of the grant.

2. Staff were allowed to provide authentic input into specific components of the grant, such as extended student learning time or professional development.

3. Schools that retained the same principal throughout the grant program. Each change in principal resulted in a change in vision and loss of momentum.

4. Schools that had highly skilled principals, defined as people with strong communication, instructional and managerial skills, the ability to inspire trust and confidence, and a long-term commitment to working in high-needs schools.

5. Schools with a principal and district that buffered them from outside experts and vendors who offered their services and often had conflicting advice.

6. Schools that collaboratively decided to implement fewer but major changes, and then took the time to implement them thoughtfully.

7. Schools where people recognized that academic intervention only addressed part of the issue. Many schools used SIG funding for wraparound services such as social, emotional, health and other supports for students and their families.

8. Incorporated common planning time and professional learning time, allowing SIG educators to analyze data, adjust instruction, share strategies and learn together.

9. Allowed professional development topics to be staff-driven.

THE SIG Grant

As a condition of SIG funding, schools were required to adopt one of four federally defined school intervention models:

Closure — Close school and transfer students to higher-achieving schools.

Turnaround — Rehire no more than 50 percent of school staff; align instruction with state standards.

Transformation — Replace principals who have been on the job in that school for more than two years; make comprehensive changes affecting educators, instructional strategies, learning time and operations. This model was added to the SIG options after the NEA and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) worked with the Education Department to provide a more flexible implementation option.

Restart — Convert schools to charters, which was not possible in Washington state.

Twenty-three of Washington's 28 SIG schools used the Transformation model, four opted for Turnaround and one school took the Closure option.

The schools were awarded three-year grants ranging from $1,040,625 to $4,665,068. The district that chose the Closure model was awarded $217,252 to shut down the school and redistribute students. Funding was distributed over the three years in decreasing amounts: 40 percent in year one, 35 percent in year two and 25 percent in year three.

Of the 28 Washington SIG schools...

23 Transformation

4 Turnaround

1 Closure

WEA and SIG Grants

Demographic and Community Differences

OSPI data comparing SIG-eligible schools to statewide data revealed many demographic differences. SIG-eligible schools have a higher percentage of Native American, African-American and Hispanic students. Collectively, those schools have higher poverty rates, and nearly three times as many students who are non- or limited-English speakers.

WEA contracted with Washington State University to create community profiles for each school, including:

- Number of children with no health care coverage.
- Number of adults with less than a ninth-grade education.
- Proportion of adults whose first language is not English.
- Crime rate in the census blocks surrounding the school.
- Number of children being raised by grandparents or a single parent.
- History of the community's support for school levies.

These reports were shared with WEA leaders and school administrators to assist in the programming and delivery of SIG grant-related services.

Bargaining/Implementing the SIG Grant

WEA provided support for schools applying for the SIG grants because the grant requirements affect wages, hours and working conditions, all of which are bargained between the affected school districts and local associations.

This support included analyzing the grant specifications, sharing grant information with educators and the local associations, and assisting them in deciding whether to apply. WEA drafted and shared model bargaining language as part of application and encouraged local association leaders and staff to participate on the school district/community interview team.

WEA also set up an electronic clearinghouse of SIG bargaining language for all locals to share, creating a repository of success.

As a result of the listening sessions held in the SIG schools, WEA provided the following support to improve effectiveness:

1. A multiday training about cultural competency, working with English Language Learners (ELL) students and understanding wraparound services.

2. A three-day summit and networking event for educators responsible for delivering wraparound services (counselors, family/community liaisons, dropout prevention specialists, etc.).

3. Compiling community profiles of the area surrounding each SIG school for use in guiding program decisions.

4. Increasing WEA and local association support for SIG teachers to participate in National Board Certified Teacher training.

5. A variety of efforts to improve understanding by state and federal policymakers of the funding and policy supports needed in high-poverty schools.

6. Recognizing and validating SIG educators with personal letters from the WEA president, and hosting a ceremony for them at the 2013 WEA Representative Assembly.

SIG Educators Influence WEA: Changing WEA Policy Positions

WEA used its work and experiences to inform the organization's policy positions about high-poverty schools regarding wraparound services and community partnerships, closing the achievement gap, innovative schools and dropout prevention.

WEA, NEA and Priority Schools

The SIG grant provided opportunities for National Education Association (NEA) to leverage resources for its Priority Schools campaign, a program to improve underperforming schools. NEA designated seven schools in Washington as Priority Schools, more than in any other state.

The Priority Schools program focused on three subcategories of high-poverty schools:

- Schools with high Native American student populations

- High schools

- Urban schools

The Priority Schools designation added resources to support three goals:

- Supporting professional development, school visits, and local advocacy.

- Building organizational capacity with emphasis on developing leadership in collaboration with the superintendent, district, and local association.

- Engaging and involving the community and successfully communicating the successes of each school.

NEA provided a variety of resources to the Priority Schools. Some were targeted to individual schools, and some were provided across the board, including sponsoring attendance at an NEA Priority Schools Conference and connecting schools with First Book, which donated books to each school.

Other NEA support was more focused, depending upon local needs, including funding expansion of Cleveland High School's successful Data in a Day classroom observation program to include parents and students.

NEA also provided direct support to three schools in Marysville with a high population of Native American students. Key highlights of that work include:

- Marysville district administrators and principals were open and collaborative leaders who worked with union and school leaders throughout the process.

- The schools invested in people not programs. They embodied the notion that educators in the schools had the answers. As a result, several educators took the lead to redefine the professional practices required in their schools.

- The district applied lessons learned from the union-led efforts in the SIG schools to other schools.

Additionally, WEA/NEA funded two district-union bargaining teams to attend the Harvard University Collaborative Bargaining Conference. NEA and WEA collaborated on ways to showcase the activities and results at conferences, videos and publications.

Working with OSPI

OSPI and WEA worked closely together to plan and implement the grants. Cooperation existed on a number of levels. For example, OSPI determined it would be better to use SIG funds for fewer, more comprehensive programs, a decision supported by WEA.

OSPI conducted training for the SIG applicants, shared grant award information and included WEA staff in SIG trainings and workshops, reviews and compliance meetings. This allowed WEA to better assist locals with implementation.

The collaboration helped when interpretations of SIG requirements were needed or local problems arose, such as redefining how to spend merit pay or clarifying the purpose of independent "walkthroughs" to monitor the program.

During the first two years of the SIG operation, OSPI used a networking model to support and assist SIG schools, ensuring union participation in various aspects of the SIG implementation.

Recommendations

Washington, through its collaboration and partnerships to support these high-needs schools, has demonstrated success in raising student achievement. We in the Washington Education Association know it can be done. Here are our recommendations for how to build upon and continue success.

1. High-poverty schools need permanent, sustained and additional funding of resources to help students succeed, including extended student learning time, lower class sizes and wraparound services.

2. The elements of the School Improvement Grant that maximized student success are:

    a. Extended, structured student learning time.

    b. Reducing the adult-to-student ratio to provide academic intervention for struggling students.

    c. Providing wraparound student and family services to deal with the social, emotional and behavioral issues of students and their families.

    d. Providing sufficient time for school staff to participate in professional learning communities to analyze data, adjust instruction, make decisions and learn together with follow-up reflection, coaching and mentoring.

3. Every effort should be made to ensure that a long-term, high-quality principal is assigned to high-poverty schools to provide consistency. Leadership turnover caused some schools to lose traction with successful programs.

4. Professional development and training for staff providing wraparound services should be developed because these non-academic needs proved so important to achieving student success.

5. State data collection about schools should incorporate relevant information about the community surrounding the schools. Understanding more about factors outside the school that can affect student learning was useful in tailoring programs for individual schools.

6. Avoid overuse of consultants or consultants at the expense of teacher support in the classroom or professional learning community time for teachers to collaborate.

7. Educators in the school should be given the time and responsibility to assess and determine appropriate curriculum and materials. In some cases, schools were overwhelmed by vendors promising results, while the educators had little opportunity to make a thoughtful decision about what would work with their students.

8. Fund basic education for all high-poverty students. Don't use competitive grants. Competitive grants exclude some students, and many schools, particularly in smaller districts, do not have the expertise or staffing to complete comprehensive grant applications.

9. State and district attention and funding should be used to align the curriculum and behavioral expectations of feeder schools within a district. Struggling students need consistency, and educators need the time to work across schools and grade levels to align practices, implement and adjust.

10. Funded, quality, aligned, on-site preschool programs for high-poverty students are essential, allowing a consistent transition for students.

11. The on-time and extended graduation rates should be given equal credit in high-poverty, high school accountability calculations. Many high-poverty students need additional time to complete credits and graduation requirements and currently schools are penalized for not graduating students on time.

12. OSPI should implement quality control measures for the coaches, consultants and external assessment contractors it uses as support for its work with schools. Much like the teachers and principals in the schools who are annually evaluated, the agency's service providers should be annually evaluated for their effectiveness.

13. OSPI should require evidence of collaboration and transparency in its reviews of school plans, budget and progress.

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