

# New Federal Funding for Your Low-Performing Schools

## Making Sense of the ARRA “Race to the Top” and “School Improvement Grant” Programs

### The misunderstood billions

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) provides more than \$100 billion dollars for education. For states and districts trying to improve chronically challenged schools in the face of recessionary shortfalls, ARRA funds can help solve huge problems. But confusion caused by the sheer complexity of ARRA programs can be a problem in itself.

An example is the much-publicized “Race to the Top” program. This \$4 billion competition attracted so much attention that until recently, little attention was paid to another program – the School Improvement Grants under Title I of the ESEA – that potentially provides more money for low-performing schools, sooner, with fewer strings attached.

Race to the Top (RTTT) is an ambitious program which will certainly provide impetus for educational change of many kinds. But educators need to bear in mind several points before allowing too many of their eggs to be put into the RTTT basket:

- Since RTTT is a competition between the states, funds are not guaranteed. Some states will receive no RTTT grant at all.

**The \$3.5 billion SIG program potentially provides more money for low-performing schools than Race to the Top.**

- The process of writing and judging state applications will take months. Fund release is currently scheduled for April 2010, but many previous ARRA funding schedules have been missed. What is certain is that the money will be allocated and arrive too late to rely on it for school year 2010–11.
- RTTT has many goals, of which low-performing schools is only one. In fact, only 50% of RTTT funds are earmarked for the “bottom 5%” of schools.
- Among all the factors that will determine whether your state receives an award, plans for challenged schools count only 10%.

Contrast the School Improvement Grant program (SIG), which has been so overshadowed by the RTTT competition that many educators have only recently become aware it exists:

- It provides almost as much money for schools as RTTT: \$3.5 billion.
- There is no competition; each state will receive its share.
- It is all aimed at low-performing schools.
- Since SIG is a continuation of an existing program, funds will be automatically allocated to states according to existing Title I formulas.
- Funds should start flowing by March or April, 2010.

**If your professional responsibilities include improving any low-performing schools, you should familiarize yourself with SIG in your planning for 2010 and beyond.**

## Races have winners and losers

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has made it clear from the start that “Race to the Top” is a competition between the states, intended to motivate certain types of changes. While announced as a \$4.35 billion program, it actually reserves \$350 million for development of new student data systems, leaving \$4 billion for awards to states. That money will be pro-rated by size of student population, so there is a limit to how much any given state can receive:

\$350-700 million	California, Texas, New York, Florida
\$200-400 million	Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey
\$150-250 million	Virginia, Arizona, Indiana, Washington, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Missouri, Maryland, Wisconsin
\$60-175 million	Minnesota, Colorado, Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, Puerto Rico, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Oregon, Connecticut, Utah, Mississippi, Iowa, Arkansas, Kansas, Nevada
\$20-75 million	New Mexico, Nebraska, Idaho, West Virginia, New Hampshire, Maine, Hawaii, Rhode Island, Montana, Delaware, South Dakota, Alaska, North Dakota, Vermont, Wyoming, District of Columbia

Source: Dept. of Education

Awards will be determined by scoring of states’ submissions to the competition, in descending order of states’ scores. If there are not enough appropriated funds to cover all states’

applications, some states will be left out. As ED Secretary Arne Duncan has publicly stated, “There will be a lot more losers than winners.”

**“There will be a lot more losers than winners [in RTTT].”**

– Arne Duncan

And plans for low-performing schools are low on the list of criteria determining success in RTTT. The rubrics for the RTTT competition weight many factors according to the following priorities:

Developing teachers and leaders	28%
Overall reform agenda	25%
Quality of standards and assessments	14%
General quality of application	11%
<b>Plan for low-performing schools</b>	<b>10%</b>
Quality of educational data systems	9%
Plan for improving STEM	3%

## \$3.5 billion for chronically struggling schools

In mid-2009, ED announced the addition of \$3 billion to the existing Title I School Improvement Grant program, bringing the total for school year 2010–11 to \$3.5 billion. Guidelines became final in January 2010. But in all the excitement over RTTT, the SIG program seemed to fly under most people’s radar.

The \$3.5 billion SIG funds are all earmarked for persistently low-performing schools – the “bottom 5%” of schools that are designated for improvement under NCLB but for various reasons have proven very hard to improve. States must allocate these funds to schools that fit the following criteria:

1. Bottom 5% of Title I-eligible schools currently in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring (may also include such schools not in improvement but similar based on low performance or previous lack of gains).
2. Secondary schools that are Title I eligible but not participating, with low performance equivalent to the “bottom 5%” schools, or graduation rate below 60%.
3. If SIG funds remain, any Title I-eligible school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring, or low-performing but not fitting criteria for Tiers 1 or 2.

Given the intensive intervention that research shows is required to improve chronically struggling schools, the SIG guidelines assume that each designated school will require at least \$500,000 in additional annual funding for at least three years, up to as much as \$2,000,000. Based on the research about what it takes to turn around struggling schools, it is important to resist the temptation to spread the money around too thinly. Instead, districts should focus enough resources on chosen schools to get the job done.

**District leaders must move quickly to plan for and use SIG funding, and to make sure they allocate enough money per school to get the job done.**

Awards by states to districts (LEAs) are to take into account the allocation criteria listed above, the quality

of the district plans for improving these schools, and the district's capacity to implement. State applications, including the specific schools that will be funded in 2010–11, were to have been submitted to ED in February, with money starting to flow in time for improvement initiatives to be effective in the 2010–11 school year. Given that tight schedule, it is incumbent upon district leaders to make and act upon their plans quickly.

If your responsibilities are at the district level, and your district includes any schools that are candidates for SIG funding in your state, the following section provides some guidance as to how your improvement plan should be structured.

## Selecting a SIG model for funding

SIG guidelines prescribe only four models that qualify for School Improvement Grants.

1. “Turnaround”: Dismiss at least 50% of school staff, including the principal, and bring in new staff to implement a new instructional plan and schedule.
2. “Closure”: Close the school and transfer students to other schools.
3. “Restart”: Close the school and reopen it under management of a charter or educational management organization (EMO).
4. “Transformation”: Substantially change school schedule, curriculum, and procedures under a new principal, with emphasis on increased academic learning time, improved teacher effectiveness, and increased professional support.

## Advantages of the “transformation” model

Of the four models, “transformation” is likely to be the least disruptive and most promising in most cases. Research and recent experience have shown that mass changes in personnel and school closings generally do not improve student outcomes.

As to “restarting” under charter or other outside management, the results have been mixed. In fact, heavy emphasis on

**The “transformation” model is likely to be least disruptive and most promising.**

charters in the initial RTTT criteria was revised substantially in the final draft, recognizing that it is what happens in the school that makes the difference.

The transformational model, however, cannot be looked at as an “easy solution.” Fundamental changes must take place in order to produce different and long-lasting results. The exacting criteria for transformational models laid out in the SIG guidelines reflect this reality.

## The SetPoint™ sustainable transformation program

One example of a transformational program that meets and exceeds SIG requirements is the SetPoint program. SetPoint is a research-based program for transforming struggling schools into successful learning environments, through a combination of intensive on-site staff coaching, advanced classroom technology, curriculum and schedule adjustments, and regular use of student data to personalize instruction. Over an implementation period of about three years, SetPoint builds the capacity to sustain the improvement through fundamental changes of procedures in both school and district.

In a SetPoint school, every educator from principal to teacher receives regular on-site mentoring for the duration of the transformation process. Even district staff and board members participate. A detailed Memorandum of Understanding between the district and the consortium spells out expectations for support of change. Detailed rubrics guide every aspect of the improvement, following Five Essential Practices modeled on effective schools research. These rubrics reflect the rigor of the program, which requires fundamental change all the way to the school board level to guarantee that the struggling school will struggle no longer.

The uniqueness of the SetPoint sustained transformational model is embodied in its ten principles of implementation, which are outlined on the following page.

## About the SetPoint consortium

The SetPoint consortium consists of JBHM Education Group, noted specialists in changing low-performing schools, and Renaissance Learning, the world's leading provider of computer-based K–12 assessment technology. Together, these organizations have more than 30 years of success helping thousands of schools across the country improve student achievement.

### Ten principles of the SetPoint program.

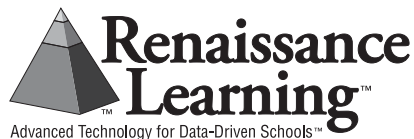
- 1. Extensive on-site mentoring** of district and school board personnel.
- 2. Continuous on-site, job-embedded mentoring** of school leadership.
- 3. Continuous on-site, job-embedded mentoring** of all instructional staff.
- 4. Detailed rubrics of the Five Essential Practices**, used daily to mold performance from the boardroom to the classroom.
- 5. The most highly-rated and advanced technology** for frequent achievement monitoring and formative assessment.
- 6. Increased Academic Learning Time** in all areas, especially reading, math, and writing.
- 7. Increased time for daily practice** of acquired skills.
- 8. Wireless-networked laptops for all students**, built specially for school use, for universal access to practice and formative assessment.
- 9. Continuous reporting** to all stakeholders, via reports and web.
- 10. Implementation of the RTI approach** to efficient delivery of differentiated instruction, practice, and remediation.

**For more information about SIG funding and on the SetPoint program and the research behind it, call (866) 505-2459 or email [info@setpointschools.com](mailto:info@setpointschools.com).**

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#### MEMBERS OF THE SETPOINT™ CONSORTIUM

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