

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: BUILDING DISTRICT CAPACITY THROUGH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Recognizing that the causes of low student achievement in a state's lowest performing districts and schools can vary, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) customizes the type and intensity of technical assistance provided to districts based on the level of need among the districts' schools. VDOE uses a tiered, differentiated technical assistance strategy to provide support to all districts that are struggling to turn around their lowest performing schools.

## THE STRATEGY: Differentiated Technical Assistance for Districts With Low-Performing Schools

In Virginia, each district receives differentiated support based on the number and type of low-performing schools that the district serves. VDOE uses a combination of qualified external intermediary partners (called *lead turnaround partners*), training, and tailored support to districts with low-performing schools and also customizes support based on the specific needs of the district.

Technical assistance is layered into three levels of support:

- Moderate-intensity support to districts with one or more low-performing or focus schools<sup>1</sup>
- High-intensity support to districts with one or more of the lowest performing or priority schools (including SIG Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools)<sup>2</sup>
- Highest intensity support to the six districts with the largest number of focus and priority schools in the state

Each level of support builds on the prior level. For example, districts with priority schools receiving high-intensity support also receive all of the available technical assistance for moderate-intensity support districts with focus schools.

**Moderate-Intensity Support to Districts With Focus Schools.** The moderate-intensity support that VDOE provides is part of a proactive effort to direct technical assistance to districts with focus schools to prevent those schools from slipping into the priority school designation.

In the 2013–14 school year, 90 of the state's 134 districts (67 percent) had one or more focus schools. To support districts with focus schools, VDOE does the following:

### Virginia Public Schools at a Glance

**Start of SIG Implementation:** 2010–11

**Enrollment:** 1,257,883

**Free or Reduced-Price Lunch:** 38%

**Racial/Ethnic Composition:** 54% White, 24% Black, 12% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 4% Other, <1% American Indian

**English Learners:** 7%

**Students With Disabilities:** 13%

### Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Virginia

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	18	Elementary	8
Turnaround	0	Middle	8
Restart	5	High	8
Closure	2	Other	1

This profile was prepared by American Institutes for Research under contract to the U.S. Department of Education (Department), Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, in consultation with the Office of School Turnaround in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. This series of profiles is based on telephone interviews with the selected sites and does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department. The Department has not independently verified the content of these profiles and does not guarantee accuracy or completeness. Not all of the activities described in the profiles are funded through SIG, and the inclusion of the information in these profiles is not intended to reflect a determination by the Department that any activity, product, program, intervention, model, or service mentioned may be supported with SIG funds. The Department has not determined that the practices in these profiles are effective and does not endorse or recommend any organization, product, or program mentioned in these profiles or any views expressed in these profiles; the practices described herein are provided merely for informational purposes. [October 2014]

- Requires each district to create a district leadership team and follow specific procedures with its focus schools.
- Provides guidance and support to the district leadership team through a state liaison.
- Requires each district leadership team to convene a monthly meeting with each of the district’s focus schools.
- Requires the state liaison to conduct ongoing interviews with the district leadership team to determine the progress of implementation and arrange technical assistance.
- Tailors state liaison training and districtwide professional development, based on data gathered through surveys and interviews with district administrators, school leaders, and teachers.

*District Leadership Teams.* VDOE requires each district with one or more focus schools to create a leadership team with a minimum of three district-office staff members. Each team also must include a high-level instructional leader (such as an associate superintendent or director of instruction) as well as central office administrators who have responsibility for special education services and English Learners.

*State Liaisons.* VDOE has 35 state liaisons working with one or more focus-school district leadership teams. Districts pay for the liaison with *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I, Part A* funds. Most state liaisons work with two to three districts, although they can operate in a single site if the district is large and has many focus schools. The state appoints retired superintendents or other former instructional leaders to fill these positions.<sup>3</sup>

VDOE expects its state liaisons to participate in monthly leadership team meetings,<sup>4</sup> conduct monthly or more frequent classroom observations with the district team and/or building principals, assist in the district’s planning and professional development for principals and teachers, analyze student performance data for instructional decisions, and share information at liaison support team meetings.

*Monthly Meetings With Focus Schools.* District leadership teams convene monthly meetings with each of their focus schools. These meetings are led by their state liaisons, who use a state-developed protocol. Teams address three overarching questions:

- How do you determine which interventions to use for students in need of assistance?
- What programs do you have in place to assist those students?
- How do you know if the interventions are working, and how do you modify them to have the desired impact?

Every month, state liaisons review the last question to ensure that districts and schools are monitoring the interventions, correcting for any problems in implementation, and addressing other issues. The state liaisons also work with district teams to analyze and model the use of data. The district teams are expected to do similar exercises with each of their schools in their own separate monthly meetings. State liaisons report back to the state monthly on each school’s progress.<sup>5</sup>

*Ongoing Interviews to Determine Implementation Progress and Needed Technical Assistance.* In addition to their work with the focus schools, state liaisons also guide their district leadership teams through interviews designed to determine the progress of implementation. Questions focus on student achievement data—including subgroup trends, evaluations of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the reading and mathematics programs, and whether there have been revisions to the district improvement plan. The state liaisons use the gathered data and apply this information to the VDOE Office of School Improvement’s Change Map.<sup>6</sup> Together, the liaisons and the district leadership team are able use the data to examine district practices in continuous improvement, system organization, strategic planning, leadership, curriculum, instructional practices and services, professional development, and student support services.

State liaisons use interview data and the Change Map process to identify needs and arrange technical assistance for the district and its school(s). For example, one liaison discovered that a focus district had no way to measure the reading growth in its schools and asked the state to help.

*Training and Professional Development.* State liaisons are trained by faculty and staff through a program developed by a state college for school and district turnaround coaches. The liaisons meet monthly to discuss problems that they are confronting in their practice and to receive updates on new state policies or tools (e.g., new state assessments). VDOE and the state college determine the content of the training after reviewing the reports that focus schools and priority schools compile monthly and submit electronically to the state.

VDOE also uses this information to determine common needs for professional development and assistance among its districts. For example, VDOE learned that many districts were struggling to help new teachers develop classroom management skills. The state's Office of School Improvement worked with the University of California and a Virginia expert on teaching and learning to create a set of Web-based instructional materials for teachers. Districts now train groups of veteran teachers on how to use these materials to train novice teachers.

**High-Intensity Support to Districts With Priority Schools.** Districts with greater numbers of SIG and priority schools receive targeted support. VDOE requires these districts to select a prequalified lead turnaround partner. In addition, high-intensity support districts are required to participate in a VDOE training that guides districts in managing relationships with partners and provides information about key turnaround strategies.

*Lead Turnaround Partners.* To help districts and schools select among the growing number of intermediary organizations that facilitate school turnaround through coaching and programs, VDOE identifies and preapproves organizations that demonstrate expertise on implementing the SIG intervention models (turnaround, transformation, and restart) in low-performing schools. VDOE further culls the field of lead turnaround partners by identifying organizations that demonstrate a willingness to adapt their strategies to Virginia's school turnaround guidance and improvement policies. For example, lead turnaround partners must show evidence of understanding the state's Standards of Learning and its school accreditation program, both of which are significant levers for improvement in the state.

VDOE selects lead turnaround partners that have experience conducting similar work either in Virginia or other states. It also requires partners to provide evidence that their past work has resulted in gains in student achievement. Districts are not required to select a lead turnaround partner from the list, but VDOE offers the list as a quality assurance measure for those districts that may be uncertain about or unaccustomed to selecting a partner. Because the partners are prequalified, the procurement process is significantly easier than the typical lengthy procurement process. The qualification criteria for lead turnaround partners are rigorous. In the first year of prequalifying lead turnaround partners, VDOE selected only four lead turnaround partners from approximately 150 intermediary organizations.

Districts with priority schools select a lead turnaround partner based on an identified district need. For example, a district that is struggling with finding school leaders who have the skills to turn around a school may select a lead turnaround partner to work directly with its SIG schools and build the skills of school principals.

*Turnaround Training.* To help districts manage the lead turnaround partners and to help the partners understand their Virginia schools and districts, VDOE relies on an education consulting firm that is familiar with the Virginia school turnaround efforts.<sup>7</sup> The consultants facilitate meetings and training of both districts and partners. VDOE currently has several consultants and ensures that each district has a consultant who supports district staff. The designated VDOE education consultant meets with a priority school's leadership team and its district central office staff five times per year. Trainings focus on topics such as how to work with lead turnaround partner organizations and hold them accountable. Training groups are organized by the number of years that each school has been in

priority status or received SIG funding—with first-year SIG schools, second-year SIG schools, and third-year SIG schools each in their own grouping. Training strategies are selected based on observations made by VDOE’s Office of School Improvement staff of areas in which districts with SIG schools continually struggle. VDOE training strategies include:

- *Lead Turnaround Partner and District Training.* Training is provided to both lead turnaround partners and their districts. Partners receive guidance on ways to engage with their schools, including how to work with schools that are not implementing the lead turnaround partner’s recommendations. Separately, districts receive detailed guidance on how to engage and set expectations for lead turnaround partners, which relieves districts of the burden of this work and allows them to focus on turning around their priority schools.
- *Instructional Improvement.* Focusing on instruction, a VDOE consultant provides professional development that targets improving the core instructional programs as well as teacher recruitment, effectiveness, and evaluation. The goal of this training is to help district staff learn about and use research and evidence.

**Highest Intensity Supports for the State’s Neediest Districts.** Finally, the most intensive support is offered to the state’s districts with the highest number of priority schools—and the longest history of low performance. Each of these districts receives individualized support in addition to the assistance provided by the district support team, state liaisons, and lead turnaround partners. For example, three of the highest intensity support districts have more than one priority school and a history of low student achievement. In these three districts, VDOE assigns a full-time facilitator who offers direct, customized support.

One district, for example, has had an ongoing struggle to support its priority and SIG schools. In this instance, VDOE determined the best course of action to be increasing the skills of current district staff and then identified a current district staff member to receive direct coaching that can be passed on to other staff. This individual participates in quarterly meetings, webinars, and one-on-one consulting sessions focused on strategies for school improvement and progress monitoring.

In instances when these districts have common needs, VDOE provides technical assistance to groups of districts. For example, two districts have struggled with unstable district leadership and have greater numbers of priority schools. In addition, several of their schools have lost or are at risk of losing state accreditation. For these two districts, VDOE hired a full-time chief academic officer to improve the stability and consistency of district leadership. The chief academic officer maintains daily contact with the priority schools in the districts and visits each school three to four times each week, providing job-embedded professional development to help district staff with academic guidance and oversight.

For the six largest districts in the state, which receive the highest intensity support, VDOE identified a problem with the districts not sufficiently directing resources to target and support their lowest performing schools. In response, VDOE added additional supports and now hosts separate meetings with each of these six districts. Four members from Virginia’s Office of School Improvement, the division liaison, and the district leadership team have a 30-minute Web-based meeting every month. The state liaison guides the conversation in discussions of district problems and potential solutions.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Gaining the trust of district leaders and developing honest, open communication between the district and VDOE has been VDOE’s key challenge. Requiring the six large districts to meet with state officials frequently and directly has led those districts to more open discussions of their problems and better exploration of solutions. For similar reasons, VDOE is working to build direct relationships with the SIG school principals. For example, one agency staff member meets with these principals in casual settings—without district central office administrators—to encourage them to

discuss their concerns and challenges honestly. To allay fears of reprisal from a district supervisor, principals are assured confidentiality.

VDOE also sees its current approach as more efficient and effective than previous efforts. In earlier years, the state would select topics for training in advance without knowing how many districts needed it or would attend.

## CONCLUSION

Using a tiered system of support that builds in intensity and individualization as determined by the level of need, VDOE is directing support to districts with the state’s lowest performing (priority and focus) schools. The tiered system of support allows VDOE to allocate its scarce resources based on these needs. Through this tiered support, VDOE builds relationships with its struggling districts. In addition, VDOE increases its understanding of the needs of struggling districts and uses this information to improve its efforts to support districts and their lowest performing schools.

## SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: State at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); and SIG school data are from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>.

---

## IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

<sup>1</sup> Virginia’s focus schools are Title I schools that are not successful in narrowing the “proficiency gap” (in terms of students’ state assessment outcomes) among subgroups of students in reading and mathematics. Ten percent of Virginia’s Title I schools are identified as focus schools. Any school with a proficiency-gap group of students who are not meeting established state assessment expectations may be designated as a focus school. Any Title I school with one or more proficiency-gap groups failing to meet the 95 percent participation rate on state assessments in reading and/or mathematics also may be designated as a focus school. The proficiency-gap groups identified by VDOE are:

- *Proficiency-Gap Group 1:* Students with disabilities, English Learners, and economically disadvantaged students, regardless of race/ ethnicity
- *Proficiency-Gap Group 2:* African-American students, not of Hispanic origin, including those also counted in Proficiency-Gap Group 1
- *Proficiency-Gap Group 3:* Hispanic students, of one or more races, including those also counted in Proficiency-Gap Group 1

<sup>2</sup> VDOE priority schools are identified based on overall student performance in reading and mathematics, including graduation rates for high schools. Five percent of Virginia’s Title I schools are identified as priority schools. Title I schools may be identified by one or more of four established criteria:

- *Criterion 1:* Schools receiving SIG funds under *ESEA* Section 1003(g) in federal fiscal year (FY) 2009 (Cohort 1) or FY 2010 (Cohort 2) and identified and served as a SIG Tier 1 or Tier 2 school
- *Criterion 2:* Title I high schools with a federal graduation indicator of 60 percent or less for two or more of the most recent consecutive years
- *Criterion 3:* Title I schools in the bottom 5 percent of performance based on the “all students” performance in reading and/or mathematics
- *Criterion 4:* Title I schools failing to meet the 95 percent participation rate on state assessments in reading and/or mathematics for three consecutive years

---

## IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS (continued)

<sup>3</sup> VDOE assigns state liaisons to specific sites based on their background and the expertise that districts need. For example, a state liaison with a strong background in reading improvement was assigned to a small district that lacked reading capacity. Similarly, for large urban or rural districts, VDOE seeks to match state liaisons that have experience in similar locations. VDOE believes that district staff are more receptive to state liaisons who understand their specific district situation.

<sup>4</sup> State liaisons may meet more often if the districts are large or have numerous focus schools.

<sup>5</sup> These reports also become ways to ensure that state liaisons maintain strong connections to their site. VDOE dismissed two state liaisons when their reports revealed they had little knowledge of their schools' improvement plans and strategies.

<sup>6</sup> The Change Map is part of a process to build the capacity of state education agencies to support districts in the change process. This tool was developed by Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC), a federally funded technical assistance center. According to ARCC (2012, p. 2):

Change Maps identify the desired change and address the capacity needed to implement the change. Once a Change Map is designed around the organizational vision and identified outcome targets, the map can be used to provide technical assistance in designing and implementing organization change initiatives at two levels. At a comprehensive level, a Change Map can be used to organize, prioritize, and identify the individual change activities or strands embedded in a large initiative. At the individual project level, a Change Map can be designed and implemented for a singular change initiative; or, in the case of a large complex initiative, separate change components can be identified and implemented as individual sub-initiatives, each with its own Change Map to guide the work.

### Reference

Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center. (2012). *Change maps and the Virginia Department of Education: A journey of utilization*. Charlestown, WV: Author. Retrieved from [http://sites.edvantia.org/pdta/pdf/ARCCVignette\\_VAChangeMaps\\_2012.pdf](http://sites.edvantia.org/pdta/pdf/ARCCVignette_VAChangeMaps_2012.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> VDOE selected an education consulting organization to provide training to the districts and lead turnaround partners. The organization is familiar with the state context and policies and has experience with national organizations conducting research and assistance on turnaround (e.g., Mass Insight Education and the Center on Innovation and Improvement).