

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: STATE MONITORING AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Because of differences in the size of Colorado’s districts (in terms of numbers of schools and students and level of resources across the state), there is great variation in the ability of districts to support their lowest performing schools. To support Colorado districts in their school turnaround efforts, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) uses a performance management strategy that provides monitoring and technical assistance directly to SIG schools. The strategy includes the use of performance managers, informal monitoring and technical assistance visits to schools, formal monitoring visits to schools, and annual grant renewal meetings.

THE STRATEGY: Informal and Formal Monitoring and Technical Assistance Visits to Schools

CDE integrates technical assistance with monitoring to facilitate trust and open conversations and to provide ongoing feedback to schools.

The components of the CDE strategy are:

- Engagement of state-level performance managers to work with districts and schools
- Informal monthly visits to schools, in which performance managers monitor schools’ progress and provide technical assistance
- Formal monitoring site visits, in which performance managers interview stakeholders and review school documentation
- Annual meetings, which are used to determine school grant renewals

Performance Managers. CDE employs five performance managers who are responsible for monitoring schools and districts and for providing technical assistance. Performance managers serve as “critical friends,” working with school leaders to review data, support implementation of school strategies, and document activities. For most school visits, performance managers meet with the school leadership team—including the principal, vice principal, coaches, and teachers—to:

- Review district quarterly assessment data or data from school-conducted assessments.
- Set goals about the teaching practices needed for improvement and desired outcomes.

Colorado Department of Education at a Glance

Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11
Enrollment: 854,265
Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 41%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 56% White, 32% Hispanic, 5% Black, 3% Asian, 3% Other, <1% American Indian
English Learners: 12%
Students With Disabilities: 10%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Colorado

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	17	Elementary	14
Turnaround	6	Middle	6
Restart	1	High	4
Closure	0	Other	0

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- Set goals about changes to implement within one month or by the next monitoring visit.
- Discuss resources needed to support teachers in implementing new practices.

Performance managers have experience in school leadership roles (e.g., superintendent, principal, coach) and must apply for the position. In order for CDE to get a sense of applicants' technical knowledge and interpersonal skills (key attributes needed for the role), applicants conduct data analyses and develop writing samples during the multistep interview process. After the hiring, CDE assigns performance managers to districts based on geography and ability to travel as well as their past history with districts. The performance managers are trained for the role in a local university program that focuses on leadership for school turnaround efforts.

Informal Monthly Monitoring. Performance managers visit Colorado schools approximately monthly for a half to a full day, depending on the needs of the school.¹ For a subset of Colorado schools that are in the early stages of developing monitoring processes, performance managers visit schools several times a week and then decrease the frequency of visits as the schools' systems are developed. During these visits, performance managers meet with the school leadership team and conduct a building walk-through using a protocol tailored to the specific needs of the school. The monitoring protocol asks performance managers to list the school's key improvement strategies, as noted on the schools' Unified Improvement Plan (UIP),² and then provide open-ended descriptive evidence about the implementation of these strategies at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year.

One school's quarterly data indicating that students' narrative writing was not improving illustrates the role of informal monthly monitoring. To support the school, the performance manager and school leadership team identified *teacher modeling of the writing process* as an instructional strategy that was not being used effectively. The group set a goal to improve teacher modeling of the writing process, such that the practice would be in 90 percent of classrooms within 30 days. During that time, the school's writing coach supported teachers. The principal used state grant funds to set aside time for teacher training. Then, the next month, the performance manager returned to the school, conducted classroom walk-throughs, and discussed with the school leadership team the extent to which there had been improvement in this area.

As another example, when the leadership team of a K–8 school examined students' periodic assessment data, they did not see desired outcomes in reading and mathematics for a subset of students. The school leadership team and performance manager questioned whether they could potentially leverage extended learning time more effectively. The school contracts with an external organization to provide extended learning time before school, in which the organization offers a reading and mathematics intervention. The team set a 30-day goal to provide training for the external organization's staff about how to structure lessons. The team conducted walk-throughs to check whether the external organization's members implemented the new specific strategies. According to the performance manager, periodic assessment data improved by the next visit. To build on this work, the school planned to use reading and mathematics content specialists to provide instruction during the extended-day time the following year.

Formal Monitoring Site Visits. In the second year of the three-year grant cycle, performance managers conduct two- to three-day formal monitoring site visits at each SIG school. The performance manager interviews the district improvement team and the school leadership team using the U.S. Department of Education's Student Achievement and School Accountability (SASA) protocol. This SASA protocol includes interview questions³ as well as an instructional guide for reviewing school documentation.

The performance managers, along with a Title I representative, use the SASA protocol to review the documentation that schools provide. These data—including the UIP—are stored in Colorado's online Tracker system,⁴ which allows documents to be accessed⁵ throughout the year. The 2014–15 UIP⁶ summarizes schools' achievement data trends for each of four performance indicators (academic achievement, academic growth, academic growth gaps, and

postsecondary and workforce readiness); compares data to federal and state targets; describes priority performance challenges; and identifies root causes of these challenges.

As part of the formal monitoring process, CDE reviews the documentation stored in the Tracker system for every school to ensure consistency and provides the school with written feedback.

Annual Renewal Meetings. Beginning in April, CDE asks schools to review their progress through a self-assessment tool that schools update throughout the year. This self-assessment tool outlines the indicators used in monitoring the implementation of SIG. The tool serves two purposes: (1) it enables local education agencies (LEAs) and schools to track their progress in implementing SIG, and (2) it provides LEAs and schools with likely interview questions used by CDE and the U.S. Department of Education for formal monitoring. In June, CDE issues a “pre-renewal” decision to inform schools about their standing for grant renewal. Formal decisions are not made until test data are available in late summer. Schools receive this pre-renewal decision first in a face-to-face conversation or phone call and then in writing.

After test data are available, a performance manager meets with a district supervisor, school leader, and Title I representative from each school. Together, they review a school’s UIP documentation to confirm that the school meets the requirements needed for grant renewal. During this meeting, the group discusses the UIP along with topics such as school progress observed during informal visits, school strengths and challenges for the year, and school and district outcomes.

At the end of the process, CDE issues a decision to renew, renew contingent on changes, or not renew the grant. In “renew contingent on changes” decisions, CDE informs schools that their grant is contingent on taking certain actions. If the school does not comply, the grant may be terminated. In cases where a school does not meet requirements, CDE meets with district and school stakeholders to discuss how to support the school.⁷ After the first year of the SIG grant, renewal decisions focus primarily on whether the school is implementing improvement strategies; renewal after the second year of the grant focuses on student outcomes as well as implementation.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Challenges arising in CDE’s monitoring and performance management efforts include balancing the expectation of consistency with meeting the unique needs of schools and districts with different capacities, building comfortable relationships with school stakeholders, and hiring the “right” people. Colorado has a diverse group of schools and districts with varying existing capacities, which makes finding the right balance of consistency and differentiated support challenging. To facilitate trust and open communication between state and school staff, CDE performance managers work to maintain a fluid relationship between formal and informal monitoring. Performance managers are regularly present in schools. This availability provides opportunities for ongoing open dialogue, which often leads to increased trust. Hiring the right people to be performance managers also is challenging because the job requires a complex set of skills that are difficult to measure in a set of interviews. To address this challenge, CDE rebranded the employment opportunity to ensure that applicants fully understand that the position requires individuals who can be adaptive and responsive to the needs of Colorado schools. CDE aims to hire people who are looking for this type of hands-on, relationship-focused work and have the needed competencies. As a result, CDE is moving to more experiential interviews, where applicants have the opportunity to walk through schools, engage with district officials, and demonstrate their abilities to assess schools and districts.

CONCLUSION

CDE informally and formally monitors low-performing schools and provides differentiated technical assistance to districts and schools. The foundation of this strategy is the role of performance managers who serve as “critical friends” to SIG schools, providing informal and formal monitoring and technical assistance to schools as they

implement reforms. With these strategies, CDE is supporting its high-need schools while also ensuring that SIG-awarded schools make productive and lawful use of their SIG funds.

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

¹ In Colorado, the extent to which districts have well-developed systems to monitor their schools varies across districts. In addition to providing extra support to districts that do not have well-developed systems, CDE aims to learn from the high-capacity districts that have sophisticated and well-developed monitoring tools and systems already in place.

² The description of the UIP refers to the UIP 2014–15 School Improvement Plan Template V6, available at http://www.cde.state.co.us/uiip/uiip_templates.

³ Interview questions cover topics such as improvement strategies, social and emotional supports to students, extended learning time, and implementation of three SIG models (turnaround, transformation, and restart).

⁴ For more information on Colorado’s online Tracker system, see http://www.cde.state.co.us/uiip/uiip_trainingandsupport_tracker.

⁵ Schools upload documents into the Tracker system throughout the year and use the repository as a tool to self-assess. During the formal monitoring process, performance managers review the information in the Tracker, checking that schools have submitted and completed all required documentation. Because schools can view the Tracker all year long, they have the opportunity to review data on each of the indicators (academic achievement, academic growth, academic growth gaps, and postsecondary and workforce readiness) prior to the state visit.

⁶ The 2014–15 UIP asks schools to identify three major improvement strategies and describe the action steps for implementing the strategies, the timeline for changes, key personnel, needed resources, implementation benchmarks, and the status of the strategy.

⁷ When three schools from one district received a status of “not renew,” CDE invited district officials to meet with CDE staff to discuss how the district could make the case that additional funds would help the schools. CDE recommended that the schools seek “innovation school” status (under the Innovation Schools Act), which would give them more autonomy.