

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

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Directly supporting the turning around of low-performing schools can pose a challenge to state education agencies if agency staff have limited information about the needs of these schools. To address this challenge, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) combines frequent monitoring with technical assistance for its low-performing SIG schools and priority schools. Relying on experienced specialists who visit each school at least twice a month along with teams of specialists who conduct site visits annually, MDE monitors the needs of low-performing schools and customizes the types of support provided.

## THE STRATEGY: Monitoring to Support Low-Performing Schools

To monitor and support low-performing schools, MDE uses 10 implementation specialists—eight who work in SIG schools and two who work in priority schools.<sup>1</sup> Implementation specialists are retired school administrators paid by MDE to work with a group of low-performing schools. MDE uses retired administrators to take advantage of the peer-to-peer relationships between retired and active school principals as well as the depth of content knowledge those administrators provide. These implementation specialists are selected based on their histories of working in schools with similar populations to those of their turnaround schools as well as their proximity to the schools.

Implementation specialists focus their efforts on two central strategies:

- Twice-monthly site visits for monitoring and technical assistance, conducted by individual implementation specialists
- Annual monitoring site visits, conducted by teams of implementation specialists

Following these site visits, the implementation specialists must complete detailed accounts that are translated into reports shared at the school, district, and state levels.

**Twice-Monthly Site Visits for Monitoring and Technical Assistance.** MDE requires implementation specialists to visit their assigned schools individually at least twice a month to monitor and offer technical assistance in support of school turnaround efforts. The focus of these visits varies depending on the needs of each school, but each visit usually addresses one or two indicators in each of five focus areas of implementation: (1) organizational structures,

### Mississippi Public Schools at a Glance

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

**Enrollment:** 490,619

**Free or Reduced-Price Lunch:** 71%

**Racial/Ethnic Composition:** 50% Black, 46% White, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 1% Other, <1% American Indian

**English Learners:** 1%

**Students With Disabilities:** 13%

### Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Mississippi

| SIG Model      | # of Schools | School Level | # of Schools |
|----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Transformation | 13           | Elementary   | 4            |
| Turnaround     | 4            | Middle       | 4            |
| Restart        | 0            | High         | 8            |
| Closure        | 0            | Other        | 1            |

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(2) leadership, (3) personnel and professional development, (4) curriculum and instruction, and (5) support systems or strategies.

*Site-Visit Activities.* All visits include entry and exit conferences and building walk-throughs. Other activities may include meeting with MDE’s online assessment tool manager, meeting with district officials, and teacher observations. These activities depend on the focus of the visit and are included at the specialist’s discretion.

- *Entry and Exit Conferences.* During each visit, the implementation specialist meets twice with the principal or other members of the school leadership team to discuss the site-visit focus indicators. During the entry conference, the specialist asks the school leadership team about the implementation status of each focus indicator. During the exit conference, the implementation specialist shares findings and recommendations related to the indicators, gives a preview of what will be in that site visit’s report, and works with the school leadership team to develop mutually agreed upon action steps and time frames.
- *Building Walk-Throughs.* During each visit, the implementation specialist conducts building walk-throughs, which entail spending a few minutes in several classrooms. The specialist typically chooses the classrooms based on the focus of the site visit and conducts the walk-throughs with the principal and other members of the school leadership team. During these walk-throughs, the implementation specialist uses a schoolwide classroom observation tally sheet to record notes or tallies of the instructional delivery mode observed (e.g., whole group, guided independent practice, small group); the instructor’s role (e.g., facilitating, lecturing, monitoring, modeling); and the types of activities in which students are engaged (e.g., recall activities, higher-order thinking activities, group discussions, listening, or unengaged/off-task). MDE developed the schoolwide classroom observation tally sheet as a tool to help guide the walk-throughs, but the implementation specialist is not required to use it. The implementation specialist discusses the walk-through observations (e.g., tally sheet if used) during the exit conference.
- *Meeting With the Manager of MDE’s Online Assessment Tool.* Each low-performing school must identify a school process manager, who updates information in MDE’s online tool for assessing, planning, implementing, and monitoring school progress. These updates might include revised school improvement plans or meeting minutes. The implementation specialist then meets with the process manager to ensure that data are entered correctly and to provide technical support for navigating the system. For example, the implementation specialist verifies that the process manager uploads the minutes from the entry and exit conferences.
- *Meeting With District Officials.* The implementation specialist meets with district officials as a part of the site visit if he or she determines that a school could use additional support or interventions from the district. The specialist makes this determination based on his or her own judgment and each school’s unique circumstances.
- *Teacher Observations.* Depending on the focus of the site visit, the implementation specialist may conduct teacher observations, which typically last from 20 minutes up to an entire class period—longer than the classroom observations that are a part of the building walk-throughs. Principals generally request these observations and participate alongside the implementation specialist. The teacher observations are informal, so the implementation specialist typically does not use a form or rubric to formally record the observations. Instead, he or she discusses the observation with the principal and then meets with both the teacher and principal to provide feedback to the teacher.

*Report for the Twice-Monthly Monitoring Site Visits and Technical Assistance.* After each site visit, the implementation specialist submits a report to the state, district, and school within three to five days. For this site-visit report, the implementation specialist uses a standard form with seven main sections. Each of the report’s first five sections (organizational structures, leadership, personnel and professional development, curriculum and instruction, and support systems or strategies) includes six to 12 pre-identified indicators of implementation status (e.g., a leadership indicator might be: “The principal spends at least 50 percent of his/her time working directly with teachers to

improve instruction, including observations”). The final two sections of the report are the comments/general observations and actions to be taken.

For each section, the implementation specialist identifies the indicators that were the focus of the site visit and provides evidence or recommendations for each indicator based on the status of implementation. The implementation specialist chooses one or more indicators on which to focus for a particular section during the site visit. These indicators are chosen on the basis of the implementation status of the school, indicators that were the focus in previous visits, and the implementation specialist’s discretion based on the needs of the school.

For example, after visiting a SIG elementary school, an implementation specialist focused on one indicator: *Local education agency (LEA) and school identify and support school staff who are struggling or remove staff who fail to improve their practice*. The implementation specialist’s summary of the status of implementation and recommendation included: “The principal is currently monitoring the delivery and quality of instruction and providing feedback to teachers. I recommend that she create a daily observation schedule that will allow her to observe classes 50 percent of the day, because of the size of the school. I also recommend that follow-up observations of teachers be done to observe if the given suggestions are being implemented. Teachers who continue to struggle should be placed on professional growth plans.” In the final section of the site-visit report, the implementation specialist listed the actions to be taken and time frame for action. In this example, the implementation specialist clarified: “Develop a plan or schedule for classroom observations. This should be completed by April 29, 2013.”

MDE uses these reports to track progress from visit to visit. The bureau manager for MDE’s Office of School Improvement and School Recovery reviews the reports to determine if schools are completing action steps within the time frames specified. If time frames are not met, MDE intervenes by calling the district to assess the status and press the district to push the school to complete the specified action steps. The bureau manager also determines if there is anything “alarming” or if there is a reason for the state to become more involved. The district and school also receive the report. According to the bureau manager, the state rarely intervenes at the local level because schools respond to the implementation specialists and generally complete the action steps within the specified time frames.

**Annual Monitoring Site Visits.** In addition to the twice-monthly site visits and related reports completed by individual implementation specialists, all SIG schools participate in an annual monitoring site visit (also known as the “programmatic” site visit), with multiple implementation specialists. MDE uses this annual monitoring site visit to assess the progress that the school makes from year to year and to inform its preparation of reports for the U.S. Department of Education. As indicated in the name, the annual “monitoring” site visit focuses more on monitoring than on technical assistance. For example, the annual monitoring site visit provides a way for MDE to determine if a school implemented the strategies in its school improvement plan. The visit also allows MDE to assess reports of changes at the school from multiple sources (e.g., school and district leaders, parents, and teachers).

*Site-Visit Activities.* For the annual site visit, the eight implementation specialists who work in SIG schools are divided into teams of three or four. At each SIG school, a team of implementation specialists conducts a two-day monitoring visit. This team approach supports consistency in assessment and communication across schools. Three activities comprise the annual monitoring site visit: (1) a parent survey, (2) interviews with district and school leadership, and (3) interviews and formal observations of teachers. The purpose of conducting these three activities is to gather evidence from multiple perspectives about the school’s implementation of its selected intervention model and its compliance with SIG requirements. During these visits, teams of implementation specialists randomly observe teachers to compose a picture of the instructional delivery of the entire school. Together, the team of implementation specialists completes the formal teacher observations using an observation tool developed by MDE to measure dimensions of instructional practice of interest to the state. To become proficient at this task, the implementation specialists are trained on the teacher observation tool before using it for monitoring. The training includes discussions about agreement or consensus on the observation tool.

*Report for the Annual Monitoring Site Visit.* After the annual monitoring site visit, the team completes an annual site-visit monitoring report. The sections and indicators of this report mirror the twice-monthly site-visit reports but also include 1–4 ratings on indicators for the school:

- 1 = Not addressed or no evidence
- 2 = Emerging or limited evidence
- 3 = Full Implementation (supported by multiple sources)
- 4 = Exceeds standard (sustained practice and aligned with evidence of impact).

The 1–4 ratings indicate increasing levels of evidence of implementation, and the team provides these scores for each indicator according to a rubric (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Example of Scoring Rubric for Annual Site-Visit Report**

| Indicator                                                                                             | 1. Not Addressed or No Evidence | 2. Emerging or Limited Evidence                                                                                                                         | 3. Full Implementation (Supported by Multiple Sources)                                                                                                                                                                               | 4. Exceeds Standard (Sustained Practice and Aligned with Evidence of Impact)                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| LEA provides sufficient operational flexibility to the principal to lead transformation or turnaround |                                 | Principal flexibility evidenced by written statement or evidence of adjustments in scheduling, calendars, and human and/or fiscal resource allocations. | LEA provides sufficient operational flexibility to principal as documented by principal’s written statement. Evidence of flexibility may include adjustments in scheduling, calendars, and human and/or fiscal resource allocations. | District leadership team monitors, on a monthly basis, the effectiveness of decisions made by school leadership to transform or turn around schools and sustain successful practices (as evidenced by agendas, minutes, sign-in sheets, and progress data by school). |

MDE trains the implementation specialists on the rubric in several daylong meetings focused on the standards of evidence for assigning scores to each indicator. The training, which is interactive and discussion-based, focuses on developing interrater reliability to verify that all teams assess schools consistently. Teams conduct practice scoring and discuss how to reconcile differences. According to MDE staff, the rubric scoring is not “set in stone.” MDE continues to review the rubric to determine if revisions are needed for the future.

In addition, the annual site-visit monitoring report includes space for implementation specialists to report on findings within the five focus areas of implementation: (1) organizational structures, (2) leadership, (3) personnel and professional development, (4) curriculum and instruction, and (5) support systems or strategies. Within each of these five focus areas, implementation specialists report findings or evidence on MDE-established priorities:

- Fidelity of implementation as stated in the approved SIG plan
- Fidelity of implementation of purchased programs and resources
- Schedule and timelines
- Personnel recruitment, retention, and appraisal
- LEA support and monitoring
- External provider services
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Teacher evaluation system
- System of staff rewards that are tied to student achievement
- Recruitment of highly effective staff
- Professional development initiatives
- Increased learning time initiatives
- Operational flexibility
- Family and community engagement

It is the responsibility of the district and school to respond to each of the findings and submit an action plan within 30 calendar days of receipt of the report. Implementation specialists use the action plan to monitor, guide, and support the school during regular visits.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

MDE encounters challenges with the limited time availability of the implementation specialists. Because the implementation specialists are retired administrators, they have restrictions with the number of hours that they are able to work. MDE continues to explore strategies for increasing the number of implementation specialists to meet the growing number of low-performing SIG and priority schools. Presently, MDE is redistributing the assignments of the implementation specialists to accommodate changes in the number of schools receiving support. For example, schools in the first cohort of SIG (which received funds in 2009–10) no longer receive funds after three years of implementation. MDE continues to support these schools. To accommodate these schools, MDE assigns each implementation specialist to one Cohort 1 SIG school, one or two Cohort 2 schools, and two or three priority schools. Cohort 1 SIG schools have half the number of site visits.

## **CONCLUSION**

MDE provides support and oversight to districts and schools through the engagement of implementation specialists, who are retired school administrators. By combining site visits with technical assistance and tying them to annual monitoring site visits, the implementation specialists support schools by monitoring improvement plans and providing support as needed. Essential to the strategy are the specific reporting requirements completed after each visit and the short time frames in which state, district, and school personnel receive the reports and agree to the documented action steps.

## **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 an internal document within the U.S. Department of Education Office of State Support.

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## **IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS**

<sup>1</sup> Priority schools are as follows: (1) in the lowest 5 percent for performance among all Title I schools statewide, (2) high schools with a graduation rate falling below 60 percent for at least three years, or (3) schools implementing a 1003(g) School Improvement Grant. For more information about Mississippi priority schools, see:

<http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/federal-programs-fy13-cfpa/esea-flex-faq-for-educators.pdf?sfvrsn=0>