

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: ORGANIZING SEAS TO SUPPORT TURNAROUND EFFORTS

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Faced with the increasingly complex challenge of guiding and supporting SIG, Race to the Top (RTT), and other low-performing schools, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) improved coordination and alignment between two of its divisions that are responsible for these low-performing schools and their districts. Working with the staff from the branch responsible for coordinating coaching and other supports and the branch responsible for compliance monitoring, NCDPI developed tools and processes to increase and improve cross-divisional communication strategies and ensure the provision of consistent guidance to districts and schools.

THE STRATEGY: Create Tools and Processes to Ensure Cross-Divisional Coordination and Guidance for Low-Performing Schools and Districts

NCDPI staff members from two separate divisions interact frequently with SIG, RTT, and other identified low-performing schools. The District and School Transformation division employs district and school transformation coaches and instructional coaches who provide intensive, ongoing, and tailored supports to the lowest performing 5 percent of schools and the lowest performing 10 percent of districts in North Carolina. The Federal Program Monitoring and Support Services division employs quality-review monitors to ensure that school and district programs comply with federal rules and regulation. Among other activities, the quality-review monitors conduct comprehensive needs assessments in designated low-performing schools by extensively interviewing stakeholders and reviewing relevant data.

NCDPI decided to better coordinate communication between the staff of both divisions in order to improve their interactions with districts and schools. To achieve this goal, NCDPI developed:

- A tailored, online tool used by members of both groups to provide SIG and other low-performing schools with consistent information about turnaround processes
- Interagency “regional roundtable” forums to align resources and coordinate guidance for school improvement

Online Tool to Align Coaching and Monitoring Guidance. SIG, RTT, and Title I program staff as well as staff working with North Carolina’s state accountability system use varying methods to identify and interact with low-performing schools. To help simplify and focus turnaround efforts, NCDPI asked two staff members—one from the District and

North Carolina Public Schools at a Glance

Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11
Enrollment: 1,4507,864
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 52%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 52% White, 26% Black, 14% Hispanic, 4% Other, 3% Asian, 2% American Indian
English Learners: 7%
Students With Disabilities: 13%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in North Carolina

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	33	Elementary	10
Turnaround	7	Middle	2
Restart	1	High	22
Closure	0	Other	7

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School Transformation division and the other from the Federal Program Monitoring and Support Services division—to develop a matrix that crosswalks all the varying program requirements and key benchmarks of improvement for turnaround schools. After these staff presented a draft of the matrix for comment to teams of coaches and compliance review staff within their respective offices, NCDPI solicited additional feedback from a wide range of state and local stakeholders—including a Priority School Advisory Group composed of SIG and RTT school principals, district coordinators, and Title I program directors from all of North Carolina’s 115 school districts. The finished matrix outlines a three-year, step-by-step turnaround process for schools and districts.

To increase the usefulness of this matrix for both stakeholders and service providers, NCDPI integrated its contents into an online school improvement tool that houses requirements, performance benchmarks, and research-based improvement indicators for low-performing schools and districts. The tool provides the means for schools and districts to report to and receive support from the state. NCDPI requires SIG schools, priority schools,¹ and schools designated as focus schools² for more than one year to use this online system. Some RTT schools voluntarily use it as well.

This online tool also provides a platform for NCDPI staff to deliver consistent and coordinated guidance to low-performing schools and districts. For example, instead of communicating directly with their assigned schools, school transformation coaches send their feedback to one NCDPI individual, who reviews the feedback with staff from both the District and School Transformation and the Federal Program Monitoring and Support Services divisions. After approving the comments, NCDPI staff send the collective feedback to the schools through the online system.

To ensure effective collaboration through this tool, NCDPI convenes the quality-review staff and the district and school transformation coaches quarterly. These meetings provide staff from both divisions with an opportunity to share information and observations. For example, quality-reviewer monitors might note a need for coaching support while coaches might alert monitoring staff to compliance problems observed. These meetings also provide an opportunity for NCDPI leadership to answer questions and reinforce the need for consistent messaging.

According to one NCDPI staff member:

It was advantageous [to have local federal program directors maintain]...typical compliance items because those folks had gone down that road for years. But the problem was that those same people had not necessarily had as much experience when it came to curriculum and instruction...[and] human resources—or when it came to the true things that had to be in place for a turnaround to occur.... And then we had the opposite, where we had a strong curriculum and instruction lead who was overseeing the SIG grant efforts or the RTT efforts in the district, but those folks didn’t have a background when it came to federal requirements and compliance issues.... Now I think we’ve developed some capacity in the districts and in the schools to understand both sides of this.

Regional Roundtable Forums. NCDPI also includes representatives from the District and School Transformation division as well as the Federal Program Monitoring and Support Services division in its system of eight regional “roundtable” forums. Each forum is attended by representatives from 10 divisions of NCDPI.³ These forums are designed to help coordinate state services, oversight, and communication with educators in the field. Specifically, participants in each regional roundtable focus on the following:

- Facilitating and coordinating technical assistance to districts and schools, with a special focus on RTT and Title I requirements
- Analyzing the impact of all current initiatives under way in each district in the region
- Monitoring school and district progress toward achieving priority objectives
- Analyzing trends and common needs across the region
- Interacting with leaders of NCDPI divisions represented at the roundtables

The roundtable initiative (which predates SIG and RTT) is intended to align the messages, processes, and communication across different levels of the state system that engage with low-performing schools and districts.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

NCDPI staff members learned that improving schools by providing intensive coaching support and monitoring intervention requires substantial numbers of full-time personnel. RTT funding allows NCDPI to employ approximately 147 district and school transformation coaches and instructional coaches for sustained work in the field with 118 low-performing schools (including SIG schools) and 12 districts. Coaches work with a limited number of sites. For instance, each district transformation coach works with only one site while each school transformation coach manages only five to six schools. In contrast, some state education agencies employ only eight to 10 staff in equivalent positions for all of their targeted buildings and districts. State staff anticipate that they may have to reduce the number of schools they serve or cut back on the number of coaches serving sites if the state Legislature does not replace the RTT resources.

CONCLUSION

NCDPI credits the performance gains of its low-performing schools to its efforts to bring together, align, and leverage the guidance offered by transformation coaches with the authority and oversight provided by quality-review monitors. Bridging interactions between these groups bolsters the knowledge of both sides and produces capacities that positively affect the schools and district they serve.

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 Priority schools are the lowest performing 5 percent of Title I schools in the state.

² North Carolina's focus schools are Title I-eligible schools with in-school gaps between the highest achieving and lowest achieving subgroups or with subgroup proficiency scores lower than 50 percent during a number of years.

³ In addition to staff from the School and District Transformation and Program Monitoring and Support Services divisions, North Carolina's regional roundtables include state education agency staff or field representatives from the following divisions: Career and Technical Education, Accountability Services, Regional Education Service Alliances/Consortia, Curriculum and Instruction, Instructional Technology, Healthy Schools, Exceptional Children, and Educator Recruitment and Development.