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R E P O R T



Federal and State Roles and Capacity for Improving Schools

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Prepared for the Sandler Foundation

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Preface

There is widespread concern among educators and policymakers in the United States about the poor performance of the public schools, particularly schools that serve students from low-income families. Although education is primarily a state function, the federal government also has a longstanding interest in improving education for disadvantaged students, and it targets funding to this group. Federal involvement in states' provision of education has grown since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Pub. L. 89-10) in 1965, and the 2002 reauthorization of ESEA, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Pub. L. 107-110), represented a significant increase in federal intervention, particularly in terms of school improvement. There is the potential for ESEA to be reauthorized in 2011, and there is much discussion about the most-effective way to balance federal and state responsibilities for improving schools and how best to frame federal policy to promote this goal.

To explore this issue, the Sandler Foundation asked the RAND Corporation to review the literature on the state and federal roles in education, examine the effectiveness of states' ongoing school-improvement efforts, and consider options for framing future federal guidance and support of state school-reform efforts. The findings and recommendations should be of interest to federal and state legislators and policymakers as they consider how to frame federal policy vis-à-vis the states in any reauthorization of ESEA. A companion report, *Expanded Measures of School Performance* (Schwartz et al., 2011), explores changes in the measures used to monitor schools under ESEA.

The research sponsor, the Sandler Foundation, is a national foundation that works to improve quality of life. In the area of education, the foundation seeks to further policies that support high-quality learning environments that are equitable for all students.

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Summary

Improving the quality of low-performing public schools in the United States is of utmost importance to both federal and state policymakers, and each group has enacted policies toward this end. At the federal level, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which has been reauthorized multiple times since its inception in 1965, supplements state and local resources provided to schools serving low-income and low-performing students in an effort to improve those schools' performance. At the state level, education departments have undertaken a variety of efforts to improve school performance, ranging from those targeted widely, such as the annual public grading of schools, to those targeted narrowly, such as school take-overs. Despite such federal and state efforts, there has not been a dramatic turnaround in these schools. Last year, more than one-half of fourth and eighth graders who attended high-poverty schools did not score above proficient on a national reading test (the National Assessment of Educational Progress), compared with fewer than one in five students from the same grade levels who attended low-poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010). Although there have been occasional successes, none of the current initiatives appears likely to reverse the situation on a large scale.

The potential reauthorization of ESEA provides an opportunity to reevaluate the roles of the federal government and the states with respect to improving schools and boosting student achievement. This report considers alternatives to the current roles of the federal government and of the states with respect to school improvement. With the assistance of an expert panel of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, we sought to answer three key questions related to school-improvement policies at the federal and state levels:

1. What policy levers does the federal government have at its disposal to promote school improvement, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
2. What actions are states currently taking with respect to educational improvement, and which appear to be working?
3. How can the federal government best promote school improvement and support states in this task?

To answer these questions, we examined the roles of the federal government and the states in the oversight of public education, the range of policy options the federal government has used to influence state actions, and the strengths and weaknesses of each. We also examined states' recent efforts to improve schools, illustrating some of the variation that exists among states in terms of capacity, actions, and effectiveness.

For the review of state improvement efforts, we selected a purposeful sample of 15 states with ongoing school-improvement policies or practices that had been formally evaluated. We searched each state education agency's (SEAs) official websites to identify current school-improvement policies or practices, and we wrote summaries of each state's efforts in this area.¹ We then conducted a search for published research and evaluation results related to the SEA policies and practices identified in the 15 states. When we found such evidence based on external evaluation, we incorporated it into our summary documents. Finally, we conducted follow-up interviews in the nine of the 15 states where the most-distinctive policies or practices seemed to be occurring and added the results of these interviews to our summary documents. These summaries formed the evidence base for our review.

Readers should bear in mind certain limitations of this study. First, although data for the study were systematically collected, it is possible that some relevant information was missed. We do not claim that the policies and practices mentioned represent an exhaustive list of the SEAs' efforts to promote and support school improvement. Second, the study reflects only current and past policies and practices; it does not capture SEAs' ongoing efforts at shaping future policies and practices. Third, the report focuses on the state perspective on school improvement. There are likely to be effective local initiatives that we did not include in our review. Finally, this is an impressionistic summary of the evidence, not a formal statistical summary or meta-analysis. The purpose was to describe the range of improvement efforts and their effectiveness, not to confirm best practices or to create a validated list of strategies that work. The review allows us to present a description of what selected states are doing to improve schools and to identify highly successful efforts if they exist.

In answering the first question about the federal role in school improvement, it is important to remember that education is primarily a state function in the United States and that federal education policy is constrained by law, tradition, and politics. There are a number of ways the federal government can influence states' provision of education. These include mandates (such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Pub. L. 101-476, 1990) requiring states to deliver particular services; inducements (such as ESEA) providing financial resources to states if they comply with certain conditions; inducements with competition (such as Race to the Top; see U.S. Department of Education, 2010b, 2010c) offering resources to a small number of states that score highest in terms of implementing specified policies or practices; capacity building (such as the Regional Educational Laboratory Program) designed to improve states' ability to support educational efforts; and system-changing policies (such as the Race to the Top assessment grants) that shift the balance of power over education, in this case empowering consortia of states to undertake assessment development.

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. Three issues appear to be key in thinking about the structure of future federal policies to promote states' efforts to foster school improvement:

- First, regardless of which policy instrument is used, states' effectiveness in implementing federal school-improvement policies is likely to depend heavily on state capacity, so attention must be paid to ensure that adequate capacity exists.

¹ States also support more continuous-improvement functions, such as teacher certification, but this study focused primarily on improving struggling schools.

- Second, someone must pay for the costs of innovation to find new improvement efforts and for the costs of maintaining a larger state infrastructure associated with increased involvement to improve schools. In the present economic climate, limited state budgets might inhibit efforts toward school improvement.
- Third, any change in the federal–state relationship and the responsibility for school improvement will have to be endorsed in the political arena. In the end, federal policy-makers must recognize that variations in state capacity, budgets, and political perspectives will influence states’ willingness to work with the federal government in different ways to improve schools.

In answering the second question, our review of school improvement in 15 states suggests that states are still searching for effective strategies to improve low-performing schools. The evidence we found does not reveal any widely successful approaches to school improvement. Under these circumstances, it would not be wise for federal policy to push states toward a single set of solutions. The review also suggests that states’ efforts at school improvement span a wide range of activities in terms of focal point of impact (from the state as a whole to individual schools and districts) and intensity (from mild to strong requirements). We did not find a case in which a state had “put all its eggs in one basket” as far as improvement is concerned. If one goal of federal policy is to help states improve their effectiveness, then federal policy going forward needs to accommodate a variety of initiatives.

What do these analyses suggest for federal policy—particularly the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind? Three general conclusions stand out from our review:

- First, the federal government has multiple policy alternatives from which to choose, and reauthorized ESEA legislation need not merely replicate approaches from the past.
- Second, the challenge that educators and policymakers face at present involves developing rather than replicating successful strategies to improve low-performing schools. Lacking an effective general model, federal policy should support more experimentation, evaluation, and dissemination of new knowledge.
- Third, states vary tremendously in terms of their strategies and capacity to improve low-performing schools. These differences reflect states’ individual history, character, and current economic conditions and crises, and they should not be ignored in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement.

In conclusion, although we cannot describe the optimal federal–state relationship, the evidence in this report suggests that it would entail flexibility and incorporate a range of policy levers. In providing both support and flexibility to states, the federal government might wish to consider both traditional inducements to support equity and other policy approaches to help build key state capacities where they are lacking; to induce innovation, evaluation, and dissemination of effective solutions as they arise; to develop independent expertise to help states; and to build networks to foster communication and problem solving. Though some of these actions fall outside of the federal government’s historical role in education policy, the impending reauthorization of ESEA presents an opportunity to refine the system of federal guidance and support in ways that both account for and enhance states’ capacity to improve their public education systems.

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Abbreviations

ARI	Alabama Reading Initiative
ASMP	Alaska Statewide Mentor Project
AYP	adequate yearly progress
DAIT	District Assistance and Intervention Team
DE	Distinguished Educator
EAHCA	Education for All Handicapped Children Act
ED	U.S. Department of Education
EED	Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
FLDOE	Florida Department of Education
HSE	Highly Skilled Educator
IASA	Improving America's Schools Act
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IES	Institute of Education Sciences
ISBE	Illinois State Board of Education
KERA	Kentucky Education Reform Act
LEA	local education agency
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NECAP	New England Common Assessment Program
NYSED	New York State Education Department
REL	Regional Education Laboratory
RFP	request for proposals

RSSC	Regional School Support Center
RTTT	Race to the Top
SAIT	School Assistance and Intervention Team
SEA	state education agency
SES	socioeconomic status
SIG	School Improvement Grant
SLDS	Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems
TAKS	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills
TAP	Teacher Advancement Program
TEA	Texas Educational Agency

Introduction

One of the key challenges that the U.S. education system currently faces is to improve the quality of low-performing public schools. In 2006, more than 4,900 schools were classified as being in corrective action or needing restructuring because of low student achievement according to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and this number had more than doubled since 2004 (Taylor et al., 2010). Achievement deficiencies are particularly acute in schools serving low-income students that receive Title I support; almost half (46 percent) of all Title I schools were in corrective action or restructuring status in 2006 (Taylor et al., 2010).

Recognizing this problem, both federal and state policymakers have made ongoing efforts to improve school quality, particularly for schools serving students whose needs are greatest. At the federal level, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was first enacted in 1965, attempts to improve schools by supplementing resources in schools that serve students from low-income families. Successive reauthorizations of the law have grown more specific about how to identify and intervene in such schools. NCLB delineated specific interventions to be taken with schools classified as needing corrective action and stricter interventions for those in restructuring status. The ESEA blueprint developed by the current administration (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a) also differentiates among schools with respect to improvement efforts. First, it focuses federal attention on the lowest-performing schools (roughly 15 percent of schools) while deferring to the states with respect to improvement in the remaining schools. This focus on the lowest-performing schools was incorporated into the rules governing school-improvement grants under NCLB. Second, the blueprint differentiates three classes of improvement efforts, suggesting that states strive to promote improvement among all schools but focus their most-intense efforts on a small slice (5 percent) of persistently low-performing schools and apply moderate effort to other schools that are struggling (roughly 10 percent).

Both on their own and in response to federal policymaking, states have undertaken a variety of programs targeted at improving low-performing schools. Most often, states mandate quality-related measures, such as certification requirements for school-based staff and school-accreditation procedures for all public schools, but states have also adopted a diverse set of additional efforts to improve school performance, such as assigning effective teachers to mentor new ones (e.g., Alaska), providing leadership training to principals (e.g., Idaho), sending external assistance teams to evaluate and advise on school operations (e.g., Connecticut), and reconfiguring state education agencies (SEAs) to focus on improving failing schools (e.g., Rhode Island).

Yet, despite both federal and state efforts at improvement, the United States has not been successful at addressing the persistently low performance of many students. History suggests

that it is unlikely that either level of government acting alone can address these problems; rather, it will take the best efforts of federal, state, and local authorities to improve this situation. It is also not clear how responsibility should be divided among governmental levels or how their efforts should be coordinated.

One complicating factor is the considerable variation that exists in the capacities and governance structures of the states. For example, states differ in the extent to which responsibility for educational decisions is centralized and the SEA has control over various functions. As a result of such significant state-level variation, federal policies that work effectively in one state might not work effectively in another. For example, one state might have the capacity to mount school-improvement efforts in 15 percent of its Title I schools, while another might not.

Nevertheless, the possibility of reauthorizing ESEA provides an opportunity to rethink the roles of the federal government and the states with respect to school improvement. Under NCLB, states had to adopt the federal accountability framework in order to receive funding, although federal policymakers attempted to strike a balance between uniform rules and state flexibility. Although the framework was fairly rigid, including requirements for annual testing, proficiency goals for all students by 2014, and specific interventions in schools that did not make adequate progress toward that target, it gave states the authority to establish their own curriculum standards, adopt their own aligned assessments, and develop their own major restructuring interventions. Since Congress is now considering the reauthorization of ESEA, it is an appropriate time to ask whether NCLB struck the right balance between uniformity and flexibility for states and whether its approach to school improvement is the best way to go forward.

There are many issues that will need to be addressed during the reauthorization debates, and this report focuses on one of them: What is the best way to divide responsibility for school improvement between the federal government and the states? With the assistance of an expert panel of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, we identified three key questions related to school-improvement policies that are salient to this discussion:

1. What policy levers does the federal government have at its disposal to promote school improvement, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
2. What actions are states currently taking with respect to educational improvement, and which appear to be working?
3. How can the federal government best promote school improvement and support states in this task?

To answer these questions, we carried out a study from June 2010 to February 2011 that examined school-improvement efforts in selected states, interviewed SEA staff members responsible for school improvement in a subsample of those states, and reviewed the relevant research and evaluation literature. Our findings are presented in the following chapters. Chapter Two describes the roles of the federal government and the states in the oversight of public education, the range of policy options the federal government has used to influence state actions, and the strengths and weaknesses of each. Chapter Three examines states' recent efforts to improve schools, illustrating some of the variation that exists among states in terms of capacity, actions, and effectiveness. Chapter Four discusses options for federal school-improvement policy at the current time and offers some recommendations related to the reauthorization of NCLB.

Federal and State Roles in School Improvement

Balance Between Federal and State Responsibility for School Improvement

There is a clear division of responsibility for education in the United States between states and the federal government. Public education is not explicitly addressed in the U.S. Constitution; consequently, power to administer it has always been the purview of the states.¹ Thus, public education in the United States is strongly and historically rooted in local control (Faber, 1991). The vast majority of funding for education comes from state and local governments. In 2007, the most-recent year for which data are available, only \$0.07 of every \$1.00 spent on public education came from the federal government (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Total spending for education has increased over the past two decades, but the distribution of these dollars across federal, state, and local entities has not changed significantly (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

State Role

One consequence of state control of education is that the United States has not one but 50 distinct systems of education.² Although SEAs conduct similar general educational functions (i.e., teacher certification, school accreditation), they take highly individualized approaches to these activities. For example, some adopt a statewide curriculum framework that applies to all schools; others delegate curriculum decisions to local districts. There are myriad other examples of differences among states in important education policies. In addition, states also vary in terms of student outcomes, such as graduation rates and academic achievement. For example, in 2009, the percentage of fourth-grade students who were rated as proficient or above on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading ranged from 18 percent in Louisiana to 47 percent in Massachusetts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Furthermore, SEAs themselves vary in size, expertise, priorities, and traditions, all of which influence their capacity to deliver high-quality educational programs and to improve existing programs (Dahill-Brown and Lavery, 2009). Researchers think about three broad components of capacity: (1) infrastructure, including financial resources, number of staff, and technology to support schools; (2) professional resources, including leadership, communication skills, and access to expertise; and (3) political resources, which include support from the legislative and executive branches as well as from unions (Le Floch, Boyle, and Therriault,

¹ The U.S. Constitution provides that “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (Amendment 10, December 15, 1791).

² For simplicity’s sake, we refer to 50 states, but, in reality, the District of Columbia has a separate governance system for its schools, as does Puerto Rico.

2008). States vary in terms of all three elements. Financial resources are perhaps the most-easily quantified aspect of capacity, and variations in resources illustrate the degree of differences that exist among states. For example, New York spends more than \$17,000 per student on elementary and secondary education, while Utah spends less than \$6,000. The range of funding available for SEA activities is similarly broad. It is difficult to find direct comparisons of the resources available to individual SEAs, but, for example, the Oregon SEA received about \$29 million in its Improving Teacher Quality state grant under NCLB, while Ohio received about \$108 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Although even harder to quantify, there are also considerable differences between states in terms of professional and political resources.

In part because of these capacity differences, states face very different challenges when it comes to school improvement. A recent survey of state education officials found that the two most-significant perceived constraints on states' effectiveness at improving schools were inadequate numbers of SEA staff and insufficient state and federal funds for school improvement (Le Floch, Boyle, and Therriault, 2008). Even though NCLB permits states to use a portion of their Title I funds for improvement purposes, there are still wide gaps in student performance across states and in state capacity to address student deficiencies. In fact, states with higher numbers of troubled schools rated themselves as less able to make needed improvements. When considering the role of states in school improvement, one needs to keep in mind all of these elements of capacity; if they do not exist in a given state, then policies might need to be enacted to bolster them.

Federal Role

The federal government first enacted major education legislation in 1965 with the passage of ESEA as part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society reforms. After several early iterations, Title I of ESEA became the primary federal program that granted money to states for services targeting educationally disadvantaged students from low-income families. The federal government has since implemented other significant educational programs, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (most recently amended as Pub. L. 108-446), but ESEA remains the program targeting the largest number of K-12 students.

Although the federal role in education has been limited historically to efforts to increase parity in terms of schooling inputs, it has grown markedly since the 2002 passage of NCLB. Reauthorizations of ESEA have imposed progressively more requirements on states. In the original ESEA model, the federal government provided supplemental resources to serve particular students but provided limited guidance about what services to provide. The 1994 reauthorization of ESEA, called the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) (Pub. L. 103-382), required states to set goals for Title I student achievement, adopt content standards, and provide data showing their progress toward meeting the goals they set. The 2001 reauthorization of ESEA, NCLB, placed new requirements on each state as a condition of accepting federal education funds, imposing greater uniformity in accountability policies. In particular, the law required states to intervene in schools that were not making adequate progress at improving achievement and to identify organizations to provide supplemental education services to students at underperforming schools (Stecher, Vernez, and Steinberg, 2010).

Methods the Federal Government Uses to Influence State Education Policy

In thinking about how federal policy, such as NCLB, might be changed, it is helpful to consider what kinds of options the government has at its disposal. Although future federal policy options with respect to educational improvement are not necessarily constrained by past choices, a review of federal policy levers is a helpful place to start when thinking about future possibilities.

As we noted, the Constitution does not explicitly assign the federal government any role in the provision of education, and, over U.S. history, the federal government has acted in the area of education only when vital national interests were involved (Jennings, 2000). In the 20th century, federal policies in the education sphere have included income-tax deductions for educational expenses, funds for vocational education, and the GI Bill of Rights. In the wake of the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision finding that segregation violated the 14th Amendment guarantee of equal protection under the law, the federal government took a more-active stance to promote the equitable treatment of individual students. ESEA was the initial foray into this area, and it remains the cornerstone of federal education policy, providing resources to state and local education agencies to meet the needs of underserved students.

Federal education policy takes many forms, and scholars have offered a variety of schemes for categorizing these policies (Elmore, 1982; Berman and McLaughlin, 1974; Neuman, 2009; Romero, 2010). For the purposes of this report, we think the distinctions proposed by McDonnell and Elmore (1987) are most relevant. They describe four types of policy instruments the federal government uses to influence state action: mandates, inducements, capacity building, and system changing. To these we add a fifth, inducements with competition, which reflects the approach taken with the recent Race to the Top program. In the following sections, we provide examples of specific federal educational programs within each category and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative for the purpose of school improvement.

Mandates

Mandates enact rules that constrain the actions of states or agencies. The most-significant federal mandate in education is probably the requirement to provide services to students with disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) (Pub. L. 94-142) required schools to provide appropriate services to all handicapped children. The law, which was prompted by a judicial decision in Pennsylvania, did not originally provide financial support to help states comply with the new rules. EAHCA, renamed IDEA in 1990, has been updated many times, most recently in 2004. Under IDEA, the federal government agreed to pay up to 40 percent of the average per-pupil expenditure for educating children with disabilities. However, actual federal appropriations are consistently below the 40-percent level that would constitute full federal funding, leaving states to cover the remainder of the costs (Apling, 2006). Mandates, such as IDEA, can place substantial financial burdens on states, and displeasure at “unfunded mandates” has become a political rallying cry among those who are opposed to increased federal interventions into local policies.

Technically speaking, there are no federal mandates with respect to school improvement. Title I is, in fact, an inducement (see the next section), and states could, in theory, opt out of Title I requirements. However, the federal government induces universal state participation through the sheer size of the financial resources attached to this policy.

Some of the advantages of using policy mandates are that they have the potential to be direct, universal (i.e., apply to all 50 states), and inexpensive from the perspective of the federal government (i.e., the federal government can mandate a policy and leave the financial responsibility for enacting it to the states). Mandates can be tailored to provide benefits to specific classes of individuals or to society as a whole. They address perceived needs that are not being met by all states.

On the other hand, specific mandates often require expansion of bureaucracies to monitor and ensure compliance. Furthermore, they can engender a compliance mentality among recipients, who sometimes choose to adhere to the letter rather than the spirit of the policy. In addition, universal mandates can cause some inflexibility in local implementation (Congressional Budget Office, 1994; Summers, 1989). Many federal, state, and local policymakers view large-scale federal mandates as intrusive, coercive, or unfair (Congressional Budget Office, 1994; Mitchell, 1990). Given these limitations, it is unlikely that mandates would be an attractive policy mechanism for addressing the problem of low-performing schools.

Inducements

Inducements (or incentives) provide funds to states or agencies if they adopt particular actions.³ Inducements have been the primary mechanism through which federal policymakers encourage states to provide services to low-income students and improve the performance of schools. The primary vehicle for these inducements has been ESEA, the current version of which is NCLB. States must engage in a number of school-monitoring and school-improvement activities described in NCLB in order to receive significant funding. The requirements include, for example, public reporting about the academic proficiency of students (both overall and subgroups defined in terms of race, economic status, and language proficiency), and the creation of systems of school support for low-performing schools (including the use of distinguished educators, school-improvement teams, and other strategies). Similarly, to obtain additional funding for School Improvement Grants (SIGs), states and districts must apply one of four federally defined turnaround models to the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools. As we describe in the next section, inducements can also operate in a competitive setting in which winners gain resources to enact programs and losers do not.

There are several positive attributes of inducements (many of which also apply to mandates) that are attractive in the context of school improvement. First, inducements can have broad influence if they offer incentives too great to resist, as is the case with the funding provided by ESEA. Using inducements, the federal government can affect large numbers of students and schools with a single piece of legislation; as a result, many see inducements as more efficient than more-piecemeal approaches (Congressional Budget Office, 1994; Mitchell and Andrews, 1981; Mitchell, 1990; White, 1994). Second, inducements can be constructed so they apply to all SEAs and promote broader standards for equity (e.g., resource levels determined by the number of low-income students) (White, 1994). Finally, though inducements can spur capacity development, they are often more-effective policy levers when existing capacity needs to be focused or directed (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987).

³ Although technically still inducements, many Title I regulations are discussed as if they are mandates because the incentives are so large and ingrained that it is almost inconceivable for states to refuse them. Similarly, the addition of new requirements to an existing inducement without concomitant new funding can be perceived effectively as a mandate.

However, inducements also share many of the negative features of mandates described above. When the incentive is so large that most states cannot realistically refuse to participate, as with ESEA, then inducements behave like mandates and hence feel compulsory. In addition, ESEA and similar inducements often contain punitive elements (i.e., revocation of funding), which can be unpopular among some policymakers and members of the public (Mitchell, 1990).

It is almost certain that a reauthorization of NCLB would continue to be framed in large part as an inducement. This is the form that ESEA has taken for more than half a century, and it is an appropriate approach to one of ESEA's core functions—to provide supplemental financial resources to address the disadvantages associated with poverty. Yet, if Congress seeks to incorporate greater efforts at innovation in the design of state improvement policies, then it might be wise to incorporate other approaches as well, including inducements with competition.

Inducements with Competition

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has tried a competitive method for promoting particular approaches to improvement. Such competitively awarded inducements fund only a portion of qualified applicants. All states can compete for funds, but only those judged to best reflect the competitive criteria receive support. Although ED has long used competition in the awarding of research grants and specialty contracts, it has not typically incorporated competition into broad-based policies. The most-prominent recent example of this new approach is the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative.

Thus far, ED has granted RTTT awards to 11 states and the District of Columbia based on an evaluation of their applications, including judgments about their prior accomplishments and the quality of their plans. Although it is premature to discuss RTTT's effectiveness in facilitating school improvement, it is noteworthy that most SEAs submitted applications.⁴ In fact, before any awards were announced, the competition itself induced noteworthy changes in state policies and practices. Adoption of the Common Core Standards was accelerated in advance of the August 1, 2010, deadline for submitting RTTT applications because states were awarded points in the scoring process for promising to adopt those standards. In his 2011 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama offered praise for this approach, saying, "For less than 1 percent of what we spend on education each year, it has led over 40 states to raise their standards for teaching and learning" (White House, 2011). Additionally, the RTTT competition sparked new initiatives within states: Many SEAs took actions in line with RTTT goals to make their applications more competitive (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011a). For example, Illinois lifted a cap on the number of charter schools it allows, and Massachusetts made it easier for students in low-performing schools to switch to charters (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011b).

The Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grant competition is another example of inducements in a competitive context, although, in this case, most states were eventually able to achieve success. These competitive, cooperative agreement grants provided up to \$20 million for grantees to update the quality of their student and teacher data systems. In November 2005, the first year of the grant program, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

⁴ In rounds 1 and 2, a total of 46 states and the District of Columbia applied for RTTT funding. Of these, a total of 11 states and the district have been awarded money (ED, 2010b).

awarded SLDS grants to 14 states. SLDS grants were awarded to 12 additional states and the District of Columbia in June 2007. Eventually, most states were able to secure grants by meeting the government's award criteria.

There is limited evidence regarding the effects of federal competitive inducements in education in general or in school improvement in particular, but this approach logically has both pros and cons (Manna, 2010). First, to be eligible to apply, states must align their policies and actions to meet federal priorities. This permits federal policymakers to achieve many of their goals without mandates (or strong inducements that resemble mandates), thus reducing arguments about federal versus local control. Second, competition for funding could spur a host of new, local innovations that foster school improvement; this too could have political appeal for federal policymakers (Nathan, Gais, and Fossett, 2003).

There are also potential negative effects of using inducements with competition. First, it is possible that the majority of states will receive no support and will not be able to implement these reforms. As a result, the competition could actually widen the gap between the more-effective and less-effective state education systems. Second, inducements with competition, such as RTTT, could increase inequity in the distribution of resources to schools because winners are not selected based on need. RTTT, for example, could widen the effectiveness gap between educational systems in the 11 states and the District of Columbia that won grants and educational systems in the other states, and it could widen the financial-resource gap as well. Third, some states could choose not to align their policies and actions with federal priorities and opt out of the competition. By exercising this option, the states could deprive their students of effective programs and additional resources. Reasons for opting out might be practical, such as a tight timeline or the large cost of preparing an application, or they might be ideological, such as opposition to the grant criteria. Fourth, participation might increase tensions within states; for example, unions could see an SEA's participation in adopting federal priorities to win funding as acting contrarily to local needs (Peterson, Rabe, and Wong, 1986). Finally, competition could lead to polarization. For instance, in the second round of the RTTT competition, none of the nine winning states was located west of the Mississippi River. Taxpayers in losing states and regions might resent providing their federal tax dollars to a selected group of states rather than having them be distributed more uniformly (although this is probably true of many federal policies that redistribute taxes).

It is difficult to say whether RTTT's success at prompting state action should be associated with the competition itself or whether other factors, such as deteriorating state finances or an independently fueled interest in these policies,⁵ were responsible. Thus, it is not clear whether the next attempt to use inducements with competition will be as effective at rallying state action. Certainly, this approach should be considered where it is politically acceptable that not all states will benefit, e.g., to spur innovative strategies to address the most-difficult problems. Since we do not yet have a universally effective strategy for school improvement, it is conceivable that some experimentation supported by competitive inducements might be an element in reauthorizing NCLB.

⁵ In 2007, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundation supported a campaign called "ED in '08" to focus public attention on educational issues, such as high standards, teacher effectiveness, and increased learning time (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2007).

Capacity-Building Policies

Capacity-building policies are designed to enhance the material, intellectual, or human resources of the SEAs so they, in turn, can improve the education of students. Staff might develop valuable expertise; agencies might institute more-effective practices; individuals might learn skills that help them solve immediate problems; and systems might be reconstituted to operate more effectively.

In the present context, we are most interested in SEA capacity to improve schools. SEAs might accomplish this in variety of ways, including better provision of direct services to schools, more-effective support for district delivery of assistance, better management of external providers, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation of performance. As a result, federal capacity-building efforts can be quite diverse. For example, Title V of the original ESEA provided SEAs with funding to build the human capacity of their agencies. Many federal educational programs (e.g., Title I, special education, and SIGs) provide set-aside funds for SEA administration and technical support. The federal government also supports the Regional Education Laboratory (REL) program, Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers, and Content Centers (e.g., the Center on Teacher Quality and the National High School Center), which help states and regions to apply research, build internal expertise, and address local problems. These centers also provide a range of direct services to help improve schools, including planning and modeling research-based classroom practices, assisting with school-improvement plans, providing professional development throughout the school year, and tailoring support to match the specific needs of the individual targeted districts and schools.

However, capacity can be difficult to develop. Improving individual skills, organizational procedures, or systemic knowledge takes considerable time, and it can be difficult to sustain capacity-building efforts long enough to make a difference (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987). Some policymakers question whether capacity building is an appropriate role for the federal government or whether the responsibility for developing necessary educational expertise should be left to state and local agencies (Sunderman, Kim, and Orfield, 2004; Peterson, 1995). Finally, although the societal benefits of building capacity are potentially large (i.e., by increasing research and knowledge) (McDonnell and Elmore, 1987), it is unclear whether these efforts will reach the local level.

In our interviews with state respondents (discussed in Chapter Three), many praised the assistance the state received from federally funded REL participants. The state representatives said that they were able to utilize services from these centers to extend their ability to assist schools. On the one hand, this seems like a logical way for the federal government to help states tackle the problem of school improvement without having to build expertise in every state (at considerable cost). On the other hand, by utilizing such regional resources, the states might not, in fact, develop these capacities for themselves. As we noted, neither researchers nor practitioners have found a sure-fire formula for improving the least-effective schools, so it is hard to imagine that states can be successful on a large scale without developing additional capacity. The specific form that capacity building should take is uncertain.

System-Changing Policies

System-changing policies transfer authority among government entities (e.g., between the federal government and the states) and modify the way services are delivered. The RTTT assessment grants are a good example of a system-changing effort on the part of the federal government (ED, undated). States that had not previously collaborated on a large scale

were encouraged to form collaborative groups to bid for grants to develop the assessment, and the assessments being developed have to be aligned with the Common Core Standards (ED, 2010d; Lewin, 2010). A few states participated in assessment consortia prior to RTTT (e.g., New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont joined together to develop the New England Common Assessment Program [NECAP]), but this was an entirely new way of functioning for the majority of states. If the assessment collaboratives are successful, the result will be a transfer of authority for assessment design and development from individual states and their vendors, as well as an unprecedented alignment of standards and assessments across states. The RTTT competition also had system-changing elements; RTTT evaluated states, in part, based on the supply of high-quality charter schools that they allowed to operate. By encouraging growth in access to charter schools, the federal government is promoting a significant change in education systems at the state level.

System-changing policies are rare, and it is difficult to draw general conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of such efforts. Those who gain authority are likely to perceive the change as positive; those who lose might view the change narrowly in terms of their immediate conditions. By their very nature, system-changing efforts are designed to shift authority, and so it can be difficult to predict their long-term impact in advance. Moreover, the creation of new institutions might increase the need for new policy mandates, inducements, or capacity building down the road.

The current national conversation about education includes some system-changing ideas, particularly the further devolution of responsibility for school governance to the local level in the form of charter schools. The federal government could decide to encourage changes like this through legislation, although current evidence does not suggest that this change would lead to large-scale school improvement. System-changing policies usually lead into uncharted waters, and it seems unlikely that a politically divided Congress would agree on such a dramatic approach.

The Future of Federal Policy Regarding School Improvement

What kind of federal policy is likely to work best to promote school improvement? In 2010, the Obama administration set out its vision for reauthorizing ESEA in *A Blueprint for Reform* (ED, 2010a). The blueprint focuses specifically on helping states improve the bottom 15 percent of schools with a further delineation into three categories of improvement requirements. The proposed guidelines recognize that many states do not have the capacity to handle all of the schools that fail to meet the NCLB's adequate yearly progress (AYP) criteria (e.g., Ikemoto et al., 2007; National Governors Association, 2003). Although the blueprint incorporates flexibility in some areas (such as determining how to improve the middle-performing schools), it applies stricter requirements in others (such as more-effective tests, new measures for growth in achievement, and a federal assessment of how successful states are in closing achievement gaps). Additionally, the outline for the legislation calls for state intervention to help students who are not meeting the performance goals, even if these students are in high-performing schools.

Despite the fact that ESEA has been in existence for more than 40 years, political tensions still exist over what is the appropriate role, if any, for the federal government in public education (Davies, 2007; de Rugy and Gryphon, 2004). The policies outlined in the blueprint attempt to address some of the shortcomings identified in NCLB. Yet, ESEA has always

aroused concerns among some local policymakers that the federal government is usurping control of education from states and localities, and the blueprint does little to allay that concern.

What does this review of policy options suggest regarding federal policy to promote school improvement? Two points seem salient when thinking about federal policies to promote states' efforts toward school improvement:

- First, regardless of which policy instrument is used, states' effectiveness in implementing federal school-improvement policies is likely to depend heavily on state capacity. However, as noted above, capacity is multidimensional, and the relationship between capacity and policy implementation is not necessarily linear. Although states with higher capacity will have greater personnel, financial, and technological resources to implement new federal programs and partnerships designed to improve schools (Robelen, 2002; Sunderman, Kim, and Orfield, 2004, 2005), high-capacity SEAs might be so heavily invested in their own programs that they might not be receptive to new initiatives from ED (Dahill-Brown and Lavery, 2009). Thus, the impact of changes in federal policy vis-à-vis states is not easily predicted from an assessment of current capacity alone (McLaughlin, 1987). Nevertheless, federal policymakers should try to ensure that adequate capacity exists.
- Second, any change in the federal–state relationship and the responsibility for school improvement will have to be endorsed widely in the political arena. State political leaders view the federal role in school improvement quite differently (Nathan, Gais, and Fossett, 2003). So far, the publication of the blueprint has not reduced this variation in opinion. The choice of policy instruments is likely to have consequences in terms of political support, based in part on differences in state capacity, budgets, and political considerations.

This review suggests that the problem of school improvement might be reasonably tackled using a range of policy approaches, and federal legislators should think about combining policy levers in the reauthorization of NCLB. It is hard to imagine that ESEA will not retain inducements as a core element because this is an efficient way to provide resources to assist students most in need. However, competitive elements could be appropriate to spur innovation and accelerate change among states at the forefront of reform. Capacity-building needs are likely to continue as well, both to implement evolving strategies for school improvement and to address state fiscal constraints if the economic downturn continues.

States' Role in School Improvement

States have engaged in a diverse array of activities designed to improve the performance of schools, although the research literature on the effectiveness of state efforts at school improvement is not extensive. To facilitate this review, we classify state activities in terms of their point of impact (state, district, or school) and their intensity (from low to high effort and duration), following the suggestion of Rhim, Hassel, and Redding (2007). The former dimension is similar to the distinction between less- and more-targeted interventions used in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008). The latter is similar to the distinction between mild and strong state efforts described by Brady (2003). This is not a perfect classification scheme, but it provides a simple way to present the evidence we found. It is also consistent with the framework described in the blueprint, which identifies three classes of schools for impact and calls for interventions of different intensities. Although our review is not exhaustive, this chapter describes examples of state improvements at several points in this space.

Because of our focus on struggling schools, we do not include in this review states' efforts to establish minimum standards for educational facilities and staff, such as safety reviews, school-accreditation procedures, and teacher and principal licensure requirements. However, we do include initiatives to raise existing standards statewide if they were undertaken with the explicit purpose of improving outcomes for underperforming schools.

The intention of this chapter is to describe a variety of improvement efforts, undertaken or overseen by SEAs,¹ for which there is external evaluation of effectiveness.² This evidentiary review of state actions is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, we use the descriptions to illustrate the range of school-improvement initiatives that has occurred within the states. This review will serve as a foundation for thinking about the federal role in school improvement.

¹ We focus on school-improvement activities led by SEAs because state departments of education are the primary mechanisms through which K–12 public education is provided. However, we remind the reader that the SEA is not the only organization that is engaged in school improvement. In some states, other agencies, such as the department of corrections, and nongovernmental intermediary organizations, such as local school-support centers, might also contribute to education-improvement efforts.

² We focus on programs that have been evaluated, although we acknowledge that many other school improvements are being tried but are yet to be assessed.

Methods

A complete review of every state's efforts at school improvement was beyond the scope of this study; instead, we focused on a purposeful sample of 15 states with ongoing school-improvement policies or practices that have been formally evaluated. To generate this sample, we contacted members of our expert panel and asked them to recommend states that were doing an effective job of school improvement. We supplemented their recommendations based on an initial review of the research literature on school-improvement efforts during the past decade, and we nominated a few additional states to provide broader geographic representation. This process yielded an initial set of 27 states.³

We narrowed this initial set of 27 states to a final, analytical sample of 15 states in three steps. First, a member of the research team conducted a search of each of the SEAs' official websites to identify documentation of past or current school-improvement policies or practices initiated by the SEA. The research team wrote summaries of each of the identified policies or practices. Second, we conducted an extensive literature search looking for published research and evaluation results related to the identified SEA policies and practices in these 27 states.⁴ When we found such evidence, we incorporated it into our summary document. In general, we found very limited research on the effectiveness of policies and practices being implemented by these states to support school improvement.

Third, we conducted interviews in the nine of the 27 states where the most-distinctive policies or practices seemed to be occurring. We contacted the highest-ranking person who could be identified in the state office responsible for program improvement.⁵ These semistructured phone interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, on average, and they explored five themes: description of the improvement efforts, whether there were evidence of their effectiveness from research or evaluation, how efforts have changed over time, how the federal government has played a role in school improvement, and how interviewees would envision a changed federal role in the future, if at all. If necessary, we followed up by telephone or email to clarify our understanding or to obtain additional information. We then narrowed our sample to 15 states for further analysis, including only those states for which one or more school-improvement programs had existed (confirmed by either our web search or interview with an SEA official) and for which those programs had undergone an external program evaluation (see the appendix for a list of states and program areas).

The summaries of 15 states' school-improvement policies and interviews formed the evidence base for our review. We read them carefully to look for similarities and differences among the features of the various policies and practices.⁶ Our goal was to represent the diversity of improvement practices at the SEA level, so we noted distinctive features and focuses of state policies and where states' efforts overlapped. For example, we observed that some policies

³ The 27 states are Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

⁴ Note that we did not critique these articles based on their methodologies, though the methods in some evaluations were more rigorous than others.

⁵ These nine states are Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Virginia.

⁶ We also reviewed them in terms of evaluation results to see whether there were distinctive or systematic elements associated with positive impact, but we found nothing definitive.

were focused narrowly on improvement of specific identified schools or districts while others applied more broadly to schools or districts across the state. Finally, we adopted a two-dimensional classification system based on Rhim, Hassel, and Redding (2007).

Readers should bear in mind certain limitations of this study. First, although data for the study were systematically collected, it is possible that some relevant information was missed. We do not claim that the policies and practices mentioned represent an exhaustive list of the SEAs' efforts to promote and support school improvement. Second, the study only reflects current and past policies and practices; it does not capture SEAs' efforts to shape future policies and practices. Third, the report focuses on the state perspective on school improvement; there are likely to be effective local initiatives that we did not include in our review. Finally, we present an impressionistic summary of the evidence, not a formal statistical summary or meta-analysis. The purpose is to describe the range of improvement efforts and their effectiveness, not to confirm best practices or to create a validated list of strategies that work. The review allows us to present a description of what selected states are doing to improve schools and to identify highly successful efforts where they exist.

In the following sections, we describe selected state improvement policies and practices from our sample of 15 states, beginning with those activities whose point of impact is state-wide, followed by those that focus at the district and school levels. Within these focal groups, examples are arranged from less to more intensive. In each case, we provide illustrative examples from different states and summarize the related evaluative evidence.

Statewide Improvement Efforts by States

Although most attention is paid to the cases in which states intervene dramatically in the lowest-performing schools, many states engage in activities to promote school improvement broadly. These efforts include developing a theory of action for improvement that applies to all schools, developing external expertise to support school improvement as needed, and creating accountability systems with public report cards that grade schools and assign consequences on the basis of those grades.

Developing a Formal Theory of Action for Improvement

Several states in our sample have tried to enhance school-improvement efforts by developing a formal theory of action to guide improvement and identify the core features of the school-improvement process. Such theories of action provide details about the SEAs' strategies for improvement, including the roles and responsibilities of the state, districts, and other organizations. These improvement guidelines can also include explicit rationales for these strategies and assignments.

Massachusetts offers an example of this approach. The SEA developed a formal theory of action for improvement that delineates the roles and responsibilities of the SEA and school districts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008). The theory makes it clear that districts are responsible for oversight of and support for failing schools but that the state is responsible for providing resources and technical assistance, monitoring performance, and intervening in cases in which that proves to be necessary. The SEA's role varies based on the performance of the schools; it intervenes minimally in high-performing schools but much more intensively in low-performing schools.

Rhode Island has also developed an improvement theory of action to structure turnaround efforts. The document, called “A Functionality Framework for Educational Organizations” (Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008), specifies accountability functions and responsibilities for each level of the education system: state, district, school, and teacher (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2008). An SEA official from Rhode Island explained in our interview that having a theory of action provides “an interconnectivity within the SEA that brings people together from across the agency to ensure consistency in improvement practice.”

Although the development of an improvement theory of action is a logical starting place to implement reform on a large scale, such theories have not been shown by themselves to lead to improvement. An IES study of eight northeast states concluded that having a formal theory of action does not guarantee effective action with respect to school improvement (Hergert, Gleason, and Urbano, 2009). The authors noted that an explicit plan of action does not itself ensure consistent provision of support and services to underperforming schools. Rather, uneven coordination of services and misalignment of responsibilities across departments and service providers limited the effectiveness of the theories of action in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and other states in the region.

Developing and Using External Expertise

Although some SEAs in our sample assume primary responsibility for assisting low-performing schools, others adopt a strategy built on the development and use of intermediary organizations (such as regional organizations, area education agencies, or intermediate school districts) or external providers. Rather than maintain or develop turnaround expertise in-house, they rely on other organizations to fill this role. One of our interview respondents suggested that this approach occurs a lot in states with relatively limited SEA capacity (Illinois SEA official, personal communication, 2010). The use of intermediary organizations or external providers to promote school improvement predates NCLB, though the use of external organizations has grown substantially since its enactment (Taylor et al., 2010). The use of external expertise is often attractive to SEAs because these organizations can offer a new perspective on effective improvement strategies (Taylor et al., 2010).

For instance, the New York State Department of Education funds Regional School Support Centers (RSSCs) throughout the state to support districts and schools identified through state and federal guidelines as requiring improvement. RSSC services include planning and modeling research-based best classroom practices, assisting with school-improvement plans, providing professional development throughout the school year, and tailoring support to match the specific needs of the individually targeted districts and schools. Once a district or school has been identified as in need of improvement, school-improvement teacher-trainers are assigned to provide support. However, researchers reported that the SEA found it challenging to work with these regional centers due to a lack of alignment among services and approaches (Hergert, Gleason, and Urbano, 2009).

Illinois uses external providers to supplement its own limited capacity for improvement (Illinois SEA official, personal communication, 2011). In May 2010, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) required each school district applying to the state for federal SIG distributions to identify an external lead partner that would play a major role in the turnaround of its schools. ISBE felt that lead partners would be a successful strategy given the state’s emphasis on local control in the provision of public education (Illinois SEA official, personal communica-

tion, 2011). A lead partner works on a contract basis with an underperforming district or school to help it improve its performance. Lead partners are expected to assist in improvement efforts in a variety of ways, including conducting needs assessments of the district and schools, coordinating the development and implementation of a school-improvement plan, and implementing a school-intervention model in conjunction with the district. To create a pool of potential lead partners, ISBE issued a request for proposals (RFP) and developed a state-approved list of eligible organizations. Illinois made it clear to districts that their applications for federal SIG funds (which the states have discretion to distribute) would receive higher scores if they granted lead partners sufficient autonomy, accountability, and responsibility (ISBE, 2010).⁷

According to an early study of SIGs, such states as Illinois, which encouraged districts to use lead partners in their improvement efforts, have not found this approach to be entirely satisfactory (Mass Insight Education, 2010). Districts had very limited success in finding qualified lead partners in the first round of their SIG applications. The study indicated that the districts required significant help in attracting, selecting, and utilizing lead partners. It also found that the SEA underestimated the amount of support that the districts would need. The study recommended that, in future rounds of competition for SIG funds, SEAs should play a more-significant role in making local education agencies (LEAs) aware of the role of lead partners, in selecting the appropriate contractors, and in executing school-turnaround plans once a partner has been selected.

Public Accountability

Although NCLB requires the publication of information about the performance of schools, some states in our sample had been operating their own systems for rating and reporting on school performance for a much longer period of time.⁸ Public reporting of school performance can serve many purposes, including monitoring school progress, signaling valued outcomes, motivating school staff, and taking actions to improve schools. The mere fact of publicly identifying low-performing schools can motivate educators to improve (Koretz et al., 1996) without additional incentives, although, in most cases, the reporting systems were also accompanied by more-specific consequences for schools or students. Most of the research that has been conducted has examined the impact that these consequences have on low-performing schools.

For example, since 1999, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) has assigned each school a letter grade as part of its “A+ Plan for Education.” The grades are based primarily on standardized student-achievement data; initially, the grades were based on the level of student achievement, but, in 2002, the system was modified to include yearly learning gains as well. The purpose of the grades is to communicate how well a school is performing relative to state standards, and the state produces annual school reports, including grades, as well as other vital performance information. In addition, the system has consequences. On the positive side, schools receive cash rewards for high student achievement or improvement. On the negative side, if a school receives a grade of F repeatedly, then all students in the school are eligible to

⁷ This also serves as an example of a state using incentives with competition.

⁸ The research evidence refers primarily to these pre-NCLB reporting systems.

receive vouchers to attend private schools or higher-rated public schools (through the Opportunity Scholarship Program).⁹

Researchers who examined the effect that Florida's grade-based accountability system had on student achievement and on changes in school policies found that schools that received a grade of F in one year immediately improved the test scores of students in that school in the following year (Rouse et al., 2007). Moreover, these improvements continued in the long term. They also found that schools with a grade of F systematically changed schooling policies and practices and that these changes might have accounted for the improvement in test scores brought on by an F grade assignment.¹⁰

Prior to 2010, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) provided public information about school performance as part of its registration-review process, which had been a practice in New York for several decades.¹¹ This process is the primary method by which the SEA shares information about schools and holds them accountable for performance. Those schools identified as furthest from meeting state performance standards or as providing poor learning environments were in danger of being placed under the classification of "registration review," and schools in this category that did not show adequate improvement within the first three years have their registration revoked entirely (Viteritti and Kosar, 2001). In addition to public notification, registration review triggered a six-step improvement process that included support from both NYSED and the LEA. This support included additional funding, assistance in curriculum and planning, and technical assistance. Schools must have also developed corrective-action plans to address findings of an SEA school-audit team, composed of superintendents, teachers, board members, curriculum specialists, parents, and state staff.

A study of the New York public accountability process found mixed results (Brady, 2003). Of those schools initially designated as requiring review, 50 percent improved sufficiently to be removed from the list altogether. At the other extreme, only 11 percent of the schools had been shut down. However, the author suggested that the standards for "graduating" off the list could be low. Furthermore, although one-half of the schools in registration review did make it off the review list, the other half did not and remained classified as failing schools.

A similar accountability process in South Carolina assigns one of five quality ratings to each school and district based on student test scores: excellent, good, average, below average, and unsatisfactory. Schools that have been rated as unsatisfactory are required by the state to undergo a comprehensive review by an external audit team composed of educators, university faculty, school-improvement council representatives, and business and community leaders. Additionally, unsatisfactory schools may apply for special funding grants to use for school-improvement purposes. In the first year, 2001–2002, 73 schools were identified as unsatisfactory. According to a report by the National Governors Association (2003), 26 of those schools

⁹ In 2006, the Opportunity Scholarship Program was declared unconstitutional by the Florida Supreme Court (Rouse et al., 2007).

¹⁰ Although this study focused on state-level efforts, a similar district-level grading policy in New York City has yielded similar short-term results. Researchers found that New York City schools that received a low grade in 2007 had improved student test results the following year (Rockoff and Turner, 2008). These results should be interpreted with caution, however, as there is a large body of research on high-stakes testing that suggests that test scores can be inflated when used in accountability contexts (see, for example, Stecher, 2002).

¹¹ In 2010, NYSED merged the registration-review process with the "persistently lowest achieving" components of RTTT. According to the department, the new registration-review process is "similar but not identical" (NYSED, 2010).

had successfully exited the program, still leaving more than 65 percent of schools that had not yet succeeded.

Improvement Efforts Focused on Districts or Schools

All states have more-focused strategies in place to work with smaller numbers of districts or schools needing intensive support. NCLB requires states to create systems of support for low-performing schools, but some states implemented such programs prior to this mandate. We lump districts and schools into the same category because many states apply similar strategies to address problems at both levels. In keeping with our structure, we present these strategies in order from least to most intensive, although that ranking is a matter of judgment and the specific order is not important to the larger purpose of this chapter.

Improving Principal and Teacher Quality in Low-Performing Schools

To comply with the teacher-quality provisions of NCLB, each state is required to develop an equity plan that includes innovative, effective, and targeted ways to retain highly qualified teachers in underperforming schools (Learning Point Associates, 2007). We saw several examples of state efforts to attract, motivate, and retain high-quality teachers and principals in underperforming schools. These programs use a variety of mechanisms, including training, mentorship, and salary bonuses.

Alaska offers one example of a staff-improvement program. In response to the high rate of teacher and principal turnover (particularly in rural communities, according to our interview of an SEA official), the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED) partnered with the University of Alaska in a project designed to increase teacher retention and equip principals with the skills to be instructional leaders and effective managers. The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project (ASMP) includes both mentoring for beginning teachers and coaching for new principals. The mentorship and coaching model is based on research from the New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Teacher mentors have extensive classroom experience, usually in multiple grade levels in both urban and rural districts. Principal coaches are retired administrators with demonstrated success in many settings in the state. Both mentors and coaches receive training through workshops and seminars before receiving new teacher or principal trainees. The mentors and coaches conduct monthly site visits and work with the new staff to jointly develop new course material, assessment strategies, discipline policies, and other program components. They also work together to analyze student work and to observe other teachers.

There is encouraging, though not conclusive, evidence about the program's effects. The Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, found a marked increase in the five-year weighted retention rate for first- and second-year teachers in districts participating in ASMP. According to SEA records, the retention rate prior to implementation was 68 percent; it had increased to 77 percent after the first year of program implementation (Alaska Department of Education, 2007).

Texas provides a second example of staff-improvement efforts. The Texas Educational Agency (TEA) partnered with the Milken Family Foundation to implement the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP). TAP's goal is to attract talented people to teach in high-poverty, high-minority, and low-performing schools by making teaching more attractive and reward-

ing. TAP provides the opportunity for effective teachers to earn higher salaries and advance professionally without having to move into administrative jobs (as is the case in many other professions). At the same time, TAP provides teachers with training opportunities to learn successful teaching strategies and holds them accountable for their performance.

According to the TEA (2010), TAP schools in Texas have had significant increases in student achievement on the 2006–2007 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). TAP principals reported that the program has had a positive impact on teacher recruitment, including attracting more and better-qualified applicants. TAP was also credited with decreases in teacher turnover and with more-effective teachers remaining or being drawn to TAP schools (TEA, 2010). Surveys of teacher attitudes show that 70 percent of teachers in TAP reported higher levels of collegiality and job satisfaction than those not in TAP (TEA, 2010). TAP rewards and career opportunities provide the incentives needed to draw the most-effective teachers from other schools to TAP schools, even those that are traditionally hard to staff. At many of the TAP sites in Texas, highly qualified and effective teachers from high-socioeconomic status (SES) schools have transferred to lower-SES schools that are participating in the TAP program. It should be noted that TAP has been implemented in other locations, and the results have not been as positive. For example, Chicago's public school system implemented Chicago TAP in a randomized controlled trial to test its effectiveness. Researchers did not find significant effects on student achievement growth, although they did find improvement in in-school teacher-retention rates (Glazerman and Seifullah, 2010).

Support for Changes to Curricula and Instruction

Some states in our sample have made efforts to improve failing schools by requiring changes to the school's curriculum and instruction. Alabama offers a comprehensive example of this approach. The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) provides financial resources to schools in need of improvement so they can hire reading coaches, purchase reading programs and assessments, and provide funds for staff development. In return, these schools must also participate in state literacy reform measures that involve a structured curriculum using state-approved texts, extended school time dedicated to reading, frequent diagnostic assessment, and state-sponsored, ongoing mentoring.

ARI has led to significant improvement in student achievement in reading (Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, 2005). After five years, the 16 original ARI schools raised proficiency rates by 8.8 percent, as compared with 3.1 percent for those schools outside of the program (Moscovitch, 2004). Additionally, the report found that teachers are highly supportive of the initiative because it provides access to high-quality resources, professional development, and other benefits.

Use of School and District Assistance Teams

NCLB required states to develop systems of support that included school support teams and distinguished principals and teachers (Taylor et al., 2010). The NCLB requirements were patterned after efforts that several states in our sample were already making to assist low-performing schools, so it is not surprising that we found many examples of states using support teams or experienced educators as part of their strategy to help LEAs improve persistently low-performing schools.

Typically, the SEAs assemble teams of individuals who have held district and school leadership positions and who had previously been successful in improving the outcomes of stu-

dents. The teams are assigned to work directly with LEAs or schools to help them analyze data and evaluate school practices. In the case of LEAs, the teams are supposed to develop recommendations to improve the district's ability to bolster student achievement in targeted schools. The teams try to build the LEA's capacity to work with schools to develop school-improvement plans, monitor their implementation, and provide recommendations for revisions.

In 1990, the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) (Kentucky House Bill 940) brought about a transformation of education in the state. One of the provisions of KERA was the Distinguished Educator (DE) program, which was subsequently transformed into the Highly Skilled Educator (HSE) program and is now known as the Highly Skilled Assistant program. The SEA identifies the ten lowest-performing schools in the state, and each receives the support of three specialists. Principals receive long-term guidance from SEA-assigned mentors, who focus on issues pertaining to leadership and professional development. Teachers receive guidance from two SEA-assigned specialists—one in reading and one in math—to help design instruction. The ongoing guidance structure of this program is reflective of the SEA's general emphasis on the importance of regularly scheduled assessments (Kentucky SEA official, personal communication, 2011).

The Kentucky SEA believes that the program has made significant progress (Kentucky SEA official, personal communication, 2011). In the 2004–2006 time period, 49 HSEs served 47 schools and two districts; the academic index improved by an average of 7.5 points at all schools and districts served by HSEs. In addition, all but three schools deemed to be at the critical level in terms of their need for assistance improved enough to exit from the critical classification.

California and North Carolina also use assistance and evaluation teams. In California, School Assistance and Intervention Teams (SAITs) enter schools that failed to make AYP for two consecutive years. Teams evaluate schools, prescribe remedies, and aid in implementation. These teams consist of either third-party providers or staff from county offices of education. They are required to be at the schools three times per year. In North Carolina, School Improvement Assistance Teams focus on teacher instructional capacity. Team members, who have expertise in a particular core subject areas and prior experience as teachers, undergo a month-long training process to incorporate coaching, leadership, and organizational skills with their content and pedagogical knowledge. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction currently supports between 65 and 80 assistance teams per year.

California also has support and intervention programs at the level of the district. Called District Assistance and Intervention Teams (DAITs), these teams go to districts entering corrective action to build capacity and provide assistance. Specifically, the district and the team conduct a thorough needs analysis, analyze the results to identify high-priority needs, and create an action plan to address those needs.

The school-intervention team programs in California and North Carolina have had mixed success. In California, SAITs encountered resistance from teachers at the school level, and, as a result, they have not been entirely effective (Posnick-Goodwin, 2003). In a study of both programs, Mintrop and Trujillo (2004) attributed the lack of success of school-intervention teams in California to union efforts to protect school-employee territory within California schools. However, in North Carolina, SAIT efforts were more successful, and the authors suggest that this might be due to state laws against collective bargaining, which make teacher organizations less of an obstacle to change (Mintrop and Trujillo, 2004). Both California and North Carolina have since discontinued their school-intervention team programs.

Padilla et al. (2009) found a lack of success in DAIT programs in California: Their analysis of student achievement did not find any statistically significant improvements in the districts receiving DAIT assistance versus the control group. Nonetheless, the authors caution the reader not to jump to the conclusion that the program is ineffective. They suggest that it may take more time to see effects and that there might be more positive results from DAIT in the future. The DAITs are still in use in California.

One potential shortcoming of improvement teams is that the individual experts do not adopt a common perspective on school improvement. To address this challenge, in 2006, the Connecticut State Department of Education hired Cambridge Education to provide training to review teams based on a customized version of a standard-based school-inspection model utilized in England. Teams were trained to conduct a five-day review of all aspects of a district's operation and support for learning and provide feedback to the district to help it develop or refine an improvement plan. The SEA identified 12 urban school districts that had urgent needs to improve the quality of the educational programs and help students achieve at higher levels. The department of education assigned teams to work with each district to develop and implement improvement plans.

Evaluators found that short-term engagements, such as those provided by Cambridge Education in Connecticut, were not successful (Mass Insight Education, 2010). The evaluators found that teams in Connecticut often conducted a rushed and superficial evaluation of a school. As a result, the team's proposed plan of action was incomplete, and the school administration received it without sufficient assistance to implement it. The authors suggest that a much longer, ongoing relationship between review teams and schools is required to be effective at improving schools.

Some SEAs in our sample use individual consultants rather than review teams to address the needs of failing schools. These consultants work on-site to gain knowledge about the policies and practices of the school and prescribe improvement plans. Some educators believe that a single consultant is able to work more nimbly and respond better to a school's needs than a team.

Idaho's SEA has been using external school consultants since 2008. The Idaho Building Capacity project hires expert consultants to engage with Title I schools for a year at a time. The engagements match the calendar year, not the school year, so the consultant is at the school for one semester and has the summer to work with school administrators before the next school year commences. For a school to receive a consultant, it must receive approval from its LEA. According to our interview with an Idaho SEA official, the SEA believes that there must be "willingness from both the SEA and the LEA." Then the consultant works with both the district and the school to ensure that there is alignment between the district's policies and practices and the school's efforts.

The official we interviewed reported that the Idaho State Department of Education reported positive results from this program. Prior to the start of the Building Capacity project, only 26 percent of schools were meeting AYP. After the implementation of the program, more than 60 percent of schools were meeting AYP in 2010 (Idaho SEA official, personal communication, 2011).

State Takeover of Low-Performing Schools

Only one SEA in our sample, Alabama's, had a policy of school takeover. The program applies to a small number of schools that the SEA deems unable to make significant progress on

their own. In a takeover, the existing leadership of the school loses much or all of its decision-making authority. In 1995, the state of Alabama enacted the Alabama Accountability Plan, which requires the SEA to take over a school if the majority of the students score poorly on achievement tests for more than three consecutive years. Since 1995, the state has taken over six schools. In each case, the state appointed an administrator and an instructional leader to work alongside existing administration in the school. Alabama has not taken over a school since 2001, but experience prior to that date suggests that the program was at least partially successful.

According to a state official quoted in one of the evaluation reports that we reviewed, there seemed to be promising improvement in test scores in all schools affected by the state takeover (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2005). However, the study found that one school had closed, one was back on a watch list, one had made slow progress, and only two of the original six had made significant progress.

Summary: What States Are Doing to Improve Schools

This selective review of state efforts to improve school performance yields two important findings that are relevant to future federal policy. First, no particular strategy has demonstrated success in a convincing-enough manner to serve as the basis for a uniform approach to school improvement. None of the various approaches that states have tried, either on their own initiative or under the requirements of NCLB, appears to meet this admittedly vague standard. Although we did not review every improvement initiative in every state, we did attempt to find any improvement efforts that had demonstrated success. Both our review and our conversations with SEA personnel and research experts suggest that school improvement remains a vexing problem for states. This lack of a clear consensus about effectiveness suggests that future federal policy not attempt to be overly prescriptive.

Second, states' failure to find effective solutions is not for lack of trying. Whether inspired by local educators, researchers, and policymakers or following the lead of NCLB, states are engaged in a diverse set of improvement efforts. They range in focus from individual schools and districts to broad statewide practices, and they vary in intensity from direct intervention to broader capacity building and system development. Despite the NCLB requirements that create a set of common approaches, there is considerable diversity in school-improvement activities undertaken by the states. For example, some states in our sample made prominent use of external partners and intermediary organizations to extend their reach and expand their capacities, while others reorganized to enhance their internal capacity to support school improvement. Nor are states "putting all their eggs in one basket." Those we reviewed are pursuing strategies to raise the effectiveness of the system more broadly, as well as strategies focused on targeting persistently low-performing schools and districts. In response to NCLB, states have invested considerable effort in their particular mix of strategies, and this fact alone would make it harder to try to create uniformity across states going forward.

Directions for Federal Policy to Promote School Improvement

This is an opportune time to reconsider federal policy toward school improvement because of the growing number of persistently low-performing schools and the potential reauthorization of ESEA being discussed in Congress. Unfortunately, there is no clear, unanimously endorsed strategy for improving low-performing schools that could form the basis for federal policy. Neither state nor federal policymakers have succeeded in solving this problem in a manner that can be replicated on a large scale, though both have invested considerable resources in trying.

States have tried a wide variety of approaches, as described in Chapter Three, including strategies they created themselves, as well as approaches inspired by federal policies. State efforts range from broad policies designed to have an impact on performance statewide to narrowly targeted practices directed toward individual schools or districts, and from mild changes to strong requirements. There are some success stories, but none that seems generalizable on a large scale.

Similarly, the federal government has used a variety of policy mechanisms, as discussed in Chapter Two, in its efforts to promote school improvement. Inducements, such as NCLB, are the most common federal approach. However, the specific improvement strategies uniformly promoted under NCLB (including corrective actions and restructuring efforts) have not produced strong evidence of success, nor has the recently expanded program of SIGs. Inducements with competition, such as RTTT, and capacity-building efforts, such as Investing in Innovation, are too new to have produced strong results, although they demonstrate a willingness to consider both other approaches to educational policymaking and different strategies for improvement.

The primary conclusions we draw from this review are that the problem of low-performing schools has not been solved, educators and policymakers are attempting to address it in a wide variety of ways, and it takes time to know whether a particular approach is successful or not. Although these are not startling findings, they do suggest three conclusions with respect to future federal policy regarding school improvement:

- First, the federal government has a number of policy alternatives from which to choose, and any reauthorized ESEA legislation need not merely extend traditional school-improvement approaches that had been implemented in prior administrations. The RTTT approach, using an inducement-with-competition model, is an example of such an alternative. The responses that RTTT generated in the states—e.g., adoption of Common Core State Standards in order to be eligible to compete—suggests the efficacy of this approach. Indeed, one state official suggested to us that “compliance is not the answer with federal policy, but incentives are” (Alaska SEA official, personal communication,

2011). Yet, individual policy instruments, such as inducements with competition, have drawbacks that could limit their contribution to widespread improvement in school performance. Competition could widen the gap between haves and have-nots because states do not have equal capabilities to compete in the reform domain. Private philanthropic efforts to assist some states in the RTTT competition caused some critics to accuse foundations of “pick[ing] winners and losers.”¹ Thus, to achieve widespread improvement, competitive policies might need to be paired with policies that are designed to promote equity, such as mandates or inducements.

- The second conclusion is that the real challenge that educators and policymakers face at present involves developing rather than replicating successful strategies to improve low-performing schools. None of the states in our sample has yet found a widely effective solution to this problem (neither developed on their own nor under the framework of NCLB). Lacking an effective general model for improvement, federal policy should encourage further development and experimentation by the states. Such a policy would give states more leeway to develop new turnaround strategies while also requiring them to conduct careful monitoring and evaluation. Toward this end, the federal government might want to consider further innovation grants (like Investing in Innovation), capacity-building efforts (like REL), and partnerships (like the RTTT Assessment Consortia) to spur states to participate in the development of new policies and practices. Indeed, officials we interviewed in nine SEAs appreciated having the opportunity to innovate, which suggests that this type of federal policy would have political appeal. At the same time, our interviews suggest that current resource constraints at the state level could limit states’ ability to innovate on their own. Policies to encourage innovation might be coupled with policies to support increased research, evaluation, and dissemination to ensure that new knowledge is shared rapidly. State officials we interviewed valued the research and evaluation findings they received through federally funded regional centers, including both the best practices of peer states and information about strategies that did not show promise.
- Third, despite the uniform accountability framework imposed on states by NCLB, there is still considerable variability among states in terms of their school-improvement strategies and their capacity to improve low-performing schools. Federal policy should recognize, as well as capitalize on, this naturally occurring variability. We found variation among states both in terms of local initiatives to improve low-performing schools and in those elements of NCLB that permitted flexibility (e.g., developing their own other major restructuring intervention). These differences reflect states’ individual history, character, and economic conditions, and they should not be ignored in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement. NCLB serves as a cautionary tale with respect to flexibility. Critics have pointed out that some states gamed the system by setting low standards for proficiency, with the implication that federal policy should be less flexible in the future. A plausible alternative interpretation is that NCLB awarded states flexibility in the wrong areas—flexibility over ends rather than means. In the future, rather than allowing states to set their own standards while requiring them to follow the same formula for action, the federal government should consider establishing common expectations for desired outcomes (as is now being done through the voluntary Common Core State

¹ David Shreve, Federal Affairs Council, National Conference of State Legislatures, quoted in Dillon, 2009.

Standards) and allowing the states more control over the improvement strategies that they develop to help underperforming schools attain them. Such a policy would permit a range of solutions within a framework requiring rigorous evaluation and follow-up. As noted above, the policy could address the current dearth of external evaluations of state school-improvement strategies by providing support for research, evaluation, and dissemination of effective approaches and incentives for elimination of ineffective ones. One way to address the substantial variation in state capacity is through continued efforts at providing capacity-building grants designed to address specific deficiencies, such as data systems. Another way is through a continuation of independent assistance centers, such as REL facilities, that marshal resources regionally to supplement state expertise.

In conclusion, the evidence in this report suggests that an effective federal–state policy to foster school improvement would incorporate a variety of policy levers to foster the development, evaluation, and dissemination of new improvement strategies, as well as multiple forms of capacity building. Toward these ends, the federal government might wish to consider both traditional inducements (with compliance mechanisms when appropriate) that promote equity as well as other policy approaches to help build key state capacities where they are lacking, induce innovation, evaluate and disseminate effective solutions as they arise, develop independent and regional expertise to help states, and build networks to foster communication and problem solving. These conclusions are not at odds with the policy framework suggested by the blueprint, which focuses federal attention on a low-performing slice of schools and differentiates among interventions of different strengths. In addition, the report suggests that there is a need for a renewed focus on developing, testing, and disseminating new strategies to improve schools. Finally, we note the need to frame federal guidance and support in ways that both account for and enhance the variation in states’ capacity to improve their public education systems. As Elmore (1982, p. 41) notes,

the important point for policymakers to keep in mind is that these conditions vary from state to state and among localities within states; standardized policies produce variable responses, whether they are intended to or not. If variability is inevitable, one wonders whether federal policy might be more effective if it were better designed to take account of variability.

Given the diversity in educational practice and capacity at the state level, the federal government might wish to develop policies that meet states “where they are” by customizing capacity-building efforts and that take advantage of state variation to develop and test new solutions to the problem of low-performing schools.

Appendix

Table A.1
Identified School-Improvement Policies and Practices in Selected States

State	Public Report Cards	Developing a Formal Theory of Action for Improvement	Support for Change to Curriculum and Instruction	Improving Principal and Teacher Quality in Low-Performing Schools	Developing and Using External Expertise	Use of School and District Assistance Teams	State Takeover of Low-Performing Schools
Ala.	P		P, E	P			P, E
Alaska	P	P		P, E	P		
Calif.	P	P, E				P, E	
Conn.	P	P		P	P, E	P, E	
Fla.	P, E		P	P			
Idaho	P	P	P	P	P	P, E	
Ill.	P				P, E		
Ky.	P	P			P	P, E	
Mass.	P	P, E		P	P		
N.Y.	P, E	P, E			P, E		
N.C.	P			P		P, E	
R.I.	P	P, E		P		P	
S.C.	P, E						
Texas	P			P, E			
Va.	P			P	P	P	

SOURCES: Authors' compilation from SEA websites, interviews with SEA officials, and literature reviews.

NOTE: P = policy or practice is or was in place. E = external evaluation of policy or practice was available at the time of this report.

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