

Why GAO Did This Study

The School Improvement Grant (SIG) program funds reforms in low performing schools. Congress provided \$3.5 billion for SIG in fiscal year 2009, and a total of about \$1.6 billion was appropriated in fiscal years 2010-2012. SIG requirements changed significantly in 2010. Many schools receiving SIG funds must now use the funding for specific interventions, such as turning over certain school operations to an outside organization (contractor). GAO examined (1) what, if any, aspects of SIG pose challenges for successful implementation; (2) how Education and state guidance and procedures for screening potential contractors and reviewing contractor performance compare with leading practices; and (3) to what extent Education's technical assistance and oversight activities are effectively supporting SIG implementation. GAO surveyed SIG directors in all 50 states and the District of Columbia; analyzed Education and state documents; and interviewed officials from 8 states and school districts in those states, SIG contractors, and education experts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education (1) provide additional support to states about making evidence-based grant renewal decisions and (2) ensure that contractor performance is reviewed. Education generally supported our first recommendation but disagreed with the second. We modified our recommendation to address some of Education's concerns.

View [GAO-12-373](#). To view an e-supplement with more data see [GAO-12-370SP](#). For more information, contact George Scott at (202) 512-7215 or scottg@gao.gov.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

Education Should Take Additional Steps to Enhance Accountability for Schools and Contractors

What GAO Found

Successful SIG implementation posed a number of challenges. Specifically, state and district officials were challenged to build staff capacity and commitment for reform, facing difficulties such as recruiting and retaining strong staff members. In addition, the SIG requirements to develop teacher evaluations and increase student learning time were difficult to implement quickly and effectively because they required extensive planning and coordination. Furthermore, states sometimes had limited evidence about the performance of SIG schools when making grant renewal decisions. For example, although Education's guidance identifies meeting annual student achievement goals as a key criterion for making renewal decisions, some states did not receive student achievement data by the time decisions had to be made. States also made decisions through qualitative assessments of schools' implementation efforts, but such determinations were not always based on extensive interaction with schools or systematic monitoring. Education did not provide written guidance to states about making evidence-based grant renewal decisions after they encountered these challenges.

Districts used a significant portion of their SIG funds to hire contractors for a range of services, such as managing school operations and conducting teacher professional development. Leading practices show that screening potential contractors and then reviewing their performance are important for ensuring accountability and quality of results. Education required screening of contractors before contract awards were made. However, Education did not require review of contractors during contract performance, and states varied in whether they ensured that contractors were reviewed during the course of contract performance.

Education's assistance and oversight activities are generally supporting SIG implementation. In our survey, nearly all states reported they were satisfied with Education's technical assistance, particularly the agency's SIG guidance and conferences. In addition, many states reported that Education's guidance was timely. With respect to oversight, Education monitored 12 states in school year (SY) 2010-2011 and found deficiencies in 11 of the 12 states. Education is working with states to correct these deficiencies. For SY 2011-2012, the agency plans to use a risk-based approach to conduct on-site monitoring in 14 additional states. To maximize its oversight resources, Education also plans to conduct some limited monitoring in five additional states in SY 2011-2012. Education officials told us that they plan to monitor the remaining states in SY 2012-2013 and that these states represent a small percentage of SIG funds.