

“States Helping Schools Improve Act”: One Page Summary

Gary Ratner and Monty Neill, September 23, 2010

Many low-achieving public schools and districts need help to dramatically improve student learning. States are chiefly responsible for providing such help, but most states currently lack this capacity. States could effectively help if they were able to evaluate a school’s strengths and weaknesses, identify necessary changes, and then assist/monitor the change process. This bill would create a five year “pilot” grant program to enable about a quarter of the states to establish a school quality review (“SQR”) system to help identify and support their low-performing schools’ improvement needs. The system would utilize professional SQR teams that would provide high quality, independent, periodic evaluation of all aspects of school operations, refer the schools to necessary technical assistance or other resources, and make recommendations for improvement or appropriate interventions by the LEA or SEA. Reviews would begin in schools with the most prolonged, lowest student achievement, thus enabling review of schools already in “turnaround,” with subsequent reviews providing important evidence on progress.

The SQR system would be managed by a high level State School Quality Review Office, led by an accomplished educator knowledgeable about the school improvement process, and insulated from political pressure. Each state would have the discretion to operate its SQR entirely with state employees or contract out some, or all, of the actual review work to private contractors under close state monitoring, and to form a consortium with other states. Most reviewers would be experienced educators, chiefly successful retired principals and teachers, with States encouraged to include a small number of accomplished lay representatives on each team. All SQR members would receive in-depth training about effective school improvement strategies and conducting school evaluations.

Before the site visit, the team would review available demographic, student achievement, and other relevant data. During the visit, it would observe all or most teachers in their classrooms, interview administrators, teachers, other staff, students, parents, involved community members and relevant local institutions. It would evaluate all aspects of school operations that relate to teaching and learning, including student work, school climate, parental involvement in the school and parental support for student learning at home. After the visit, the team would discuss its conclusions and write a comprehensive draft evaluation report and recommendations for improvement. After opportunity for school comment, a finalized report would be sent to the school, the LEA and the public.

Each grantee would need capacity to: 1) provide technical assistance and needed supplemental resources (especially for schools not receiving RTTT, SIG or other special improvement funds) to help schools implement SQR recommendations that the State determined to be necessary and appropriate, and 2) oversee more intrusive interventions, such as staff replacement or school closure, where warranted in extreme situations. Thus, though its primary function is to assist improvement, the SQR process would be integrated into a state’s accountability system through public reports and other state interventions, where necessary.

The Secretary of Education would select up to 14 state applicants - to the extent possible, geographically diverse and including heavily rural states. Each participant would conduct SQRs in at least the lowest-ranked 10% of its schools, serving a maximum of its lowest-scoring 20%. SQRs would be conducted annually for schools in the bottom 5%, at least every 2 years for the next 5%, and at least every 3 years for schools in the 10%-20% range. Within 5 years of authorization, states would have reviewed at least the lowest-ranked 10% of schools.

The Secretary would research SQR-type programs in the U.S. and internationally and issue program regulations/guidelines. The Secretary would also establish a “States Helping Schools Improve Office” in the Department to respond to states’ requests for implementation assistance, conduct or oversee evaluations of program effectiveness, and publicly report on the program, including lessons learned. It is estimated that the Act would cost the Government about \$130 million/yr. for 12-14 states serving the lowest-scoring 10% of their schools, or about \$195 million /yr. if all participating states served their lowest 20% of schools.

