

Stated Briefly

# Reshaping rural schools in the Northwest Region: Lessons from federal School Improvement Grant implementation



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This brief summarizes the findings from a study that surveyed principals of rural schools nationwide that were designated as in need of improvement and that used the transformation model under the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. It provides information about the use of SIG funds in rural areas and is designed to help state leaders as they assist schools in implementing current SIGs, create new statewide models for SIGs, and modify current requirements for rural schools. The study was not part of the federal evaluation of the SIG program, which provides more comprehensive information about SIG schools.

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## **Why this brief?**

Approximately a third of U.S. schools serve rural areas, and all 50 states include rural schools (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Federal School Improvement Grants (SIGs) charge states with ensuring that all schools awarded SIGs, including those in rural areas, implement the strategies in their chosen model of school improvement and receive ongoing, intensive technical assistance from the district, the

This brief summarizes the findings of Scott, C., & Ostler, N. (2016). *Reshaping rural schools in the Northwest Region: Lessons from federal School Improvement Grant implementation* (REL 2016–107). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. That report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?ProjectID=430>.



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state, or an external organization (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011).

But there is little research evidence to guide state leaders in adapting the SIG improvement models to rural communities. Although a recent national survey showed that SIG schools adopted more of the federally required improvement strategies than did similar schools that did not receive SIGs, the results were not disaggregated by geographic location or rural/urban setting (Herrmann, Dragoset, & James-Burdumy, 2014). Case studies have shown that rural schools and districts face steep challenges when implementing certain actions, such as removing teachers and principals and adopting parent involvement practices commonly promoted by the SIG program (Klein, 2010; Rosenberg, 2011; Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014; Scott, McMurrer, McIntosh, & Dibner, 2012).

Since 2015 the U.S. Department of Education has allowed states to design and implement their own improvement models using SIG funding, as long as the state-created model aligns with the intent and purpose of the SIG program (Final Requirements—School Improvement Grants, 2015). Rural SIG schools were also able to modify one of the requirements in the original federal models, as long as the modification met the original intent and purpose of the SIG program and the state approved the change. As implementation continues with this new flexibility, state leaders will play a central role in supporting and monitoring the implementation of SIGs. This study of the implementation of SIG in rural schools provides information that may guide state leaders in supporting and monitoring school improvement efforts in rural areas.

### **What the study examined**

The study surveyed 201 principals of rural schools nationwide that were in the first cohort of SIG schools and that used the most common set of strategies for improvement—the transformation model. The first cohort of SIG schools typically began implementing the three-year grants in the 2010/11 school year. Because principals completed the survey in spring 2014, the study team expected that most of the grant activities had been completed, though schools were allowed to roll over unused grant funds. The survey had a 67 percent response rate (that is, 135 principals responded).

The survey items asked about 12 transformation model strategies in three areas:

- Improving instruction.
  - *Data for instruction.* Promote the continuous use of student data in order to inform and differentiate instruction.
  - *Professional development.* Provide staff with ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development.
  - *Research-based curricula.* Use data to identify and implement new research-based curricula.
  - *Expanded learning time.* Establish schedules and strategies that provide expanded learning time.
  - *Operational flexibility.* Use operational flexibility—such as staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting—to improve instruction and student outcomes.
- Ensuring the presence of high-quality staff.
  - *Staff evaluation.* Use rigorous, transparent, and equitable staff evaluation and principal evaluation systems that take into account data on student growth as well as other factors.
  - *Staff retention.* Implement strategies to retain staff.
  - *Staff rewards.* Identify and reward staff, school leaders, and other staff members who improved student outcomes.
  - *Staff recruitment.* Implement strategies designed to recruit staff.
  - *Staff removal.* Identify and remove staff members who do not improve student outcomes.

- Engaging family and community.
  - *Family engagement.* Provide ongoing mechanisms for family engagement.
  - *Community engagement.* Provide ongoing mechanisms for community engagement.

This brief summarizes findings related to the study’s four research questions:

- How did principals of rural SIG transformation model schools rate their school’s implementation of the model’s requirements?
- To what extent did principals report challenges to implementation of the transformation model?
- To what extent did principals report that their school received technical assistance for the implementation of the transformation model?
- To what extent were principals’ reports of challenges and technical assistance associated with principal ratings of their school’s implementation?

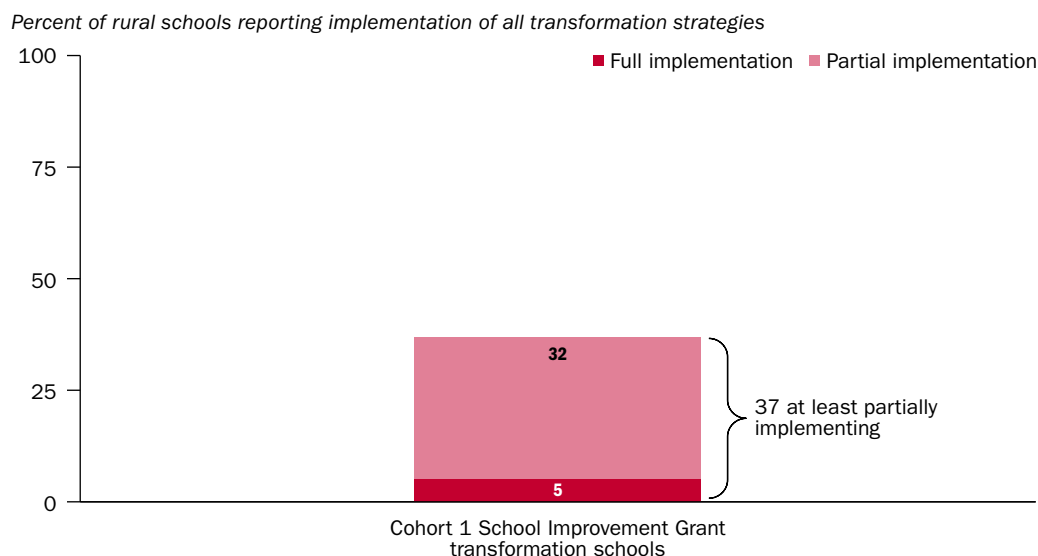
### **What the study found**

The study revealed information about principals’ perceptions of SIG implementation in their school, challenges to implementation, and the relationship between challenges and implementation, as well as their perceptions of the technical assistance their school received related to SIG implementation and the relationship between technical assistance and implementation.

**Few rural schools fully implemented the School Improvement Grant transformation model, and many rural schools found implementing the model challenging, especially strategies related to ensuring high-quality staff and engaging family and community**

Only 5 percent of rural schools had fully implemented all SIG transformation strategies that the survey examined, and 32 percent had partially implemented all the strategies (figure 1). Other principals reported that their school was either still considering how to implement one or more strategies or did not intend to implement one or more.

**Figure 1. Only 5 percent of rural schools fully implemented all School Improvement Grant transformation strategies, and 32 percent partially implemented all strategies in 2014**



**Source:** Authors’ analysis of School Improvement Grant rural principal survey data.

For the survey items related to improving instruction, more than two-thirds of principals said that their school had fully implemented all the transformation strategies, including using data for instruction, providing professional development, implementing research-based curricula, expanding learning time, and providing operational flexibility (figure 2). Strategies for ensuring high-quality staff and engaging family and community were fully implemented by fewer schools.

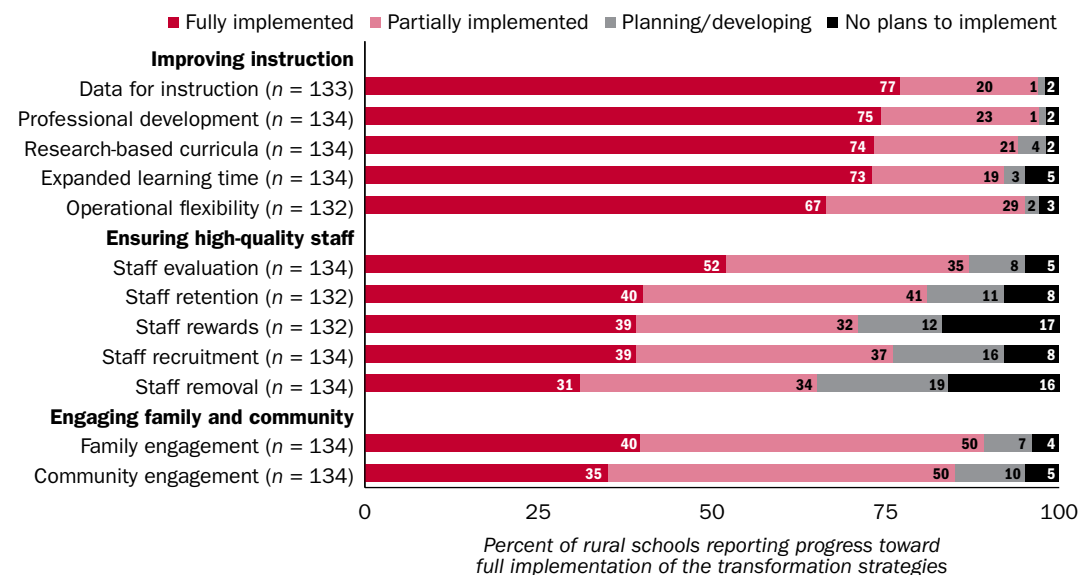
Principals reported many challenges to implementing the transformation model, including insufficient funding, staff expertise, staff time, technology, teacher support, and district support. Across all strategies examined in the survey, 78 percent of principals reported having faced at least one challenge to at least one strategy. On average, principals reported that their school had experienced implementation challenges for three of the strategies they had attempted to implement.

The percentage of principals reporting challenges varied by transformation strategy (figure 3). Among principals whose school worked to implement each strategy, more reported challenges implementing strategies related to ensuring high-quality staff and engaging family and community than reported challenges implementing strategies related to improving instruction. But at least 20 percent of principals reported implementation challenges for each strategy. The strategy for which the smallest percentage of principals reported challenges was implementing research-based curricula (21 percent), and the strategy for which the largest percentage reported challenges was staff rewards (47 percent).

**The more strategies for which principals reported facing challenges, the fewer strategies they reported that their schools had fully implemented**

Principals identified an average of three transformation strategies that their school found challenging to implement. As the number of challenges increased, the number of strategies fully implemented decreased. When principals reported 3 or more strategies with challenges, they also reported that their school had

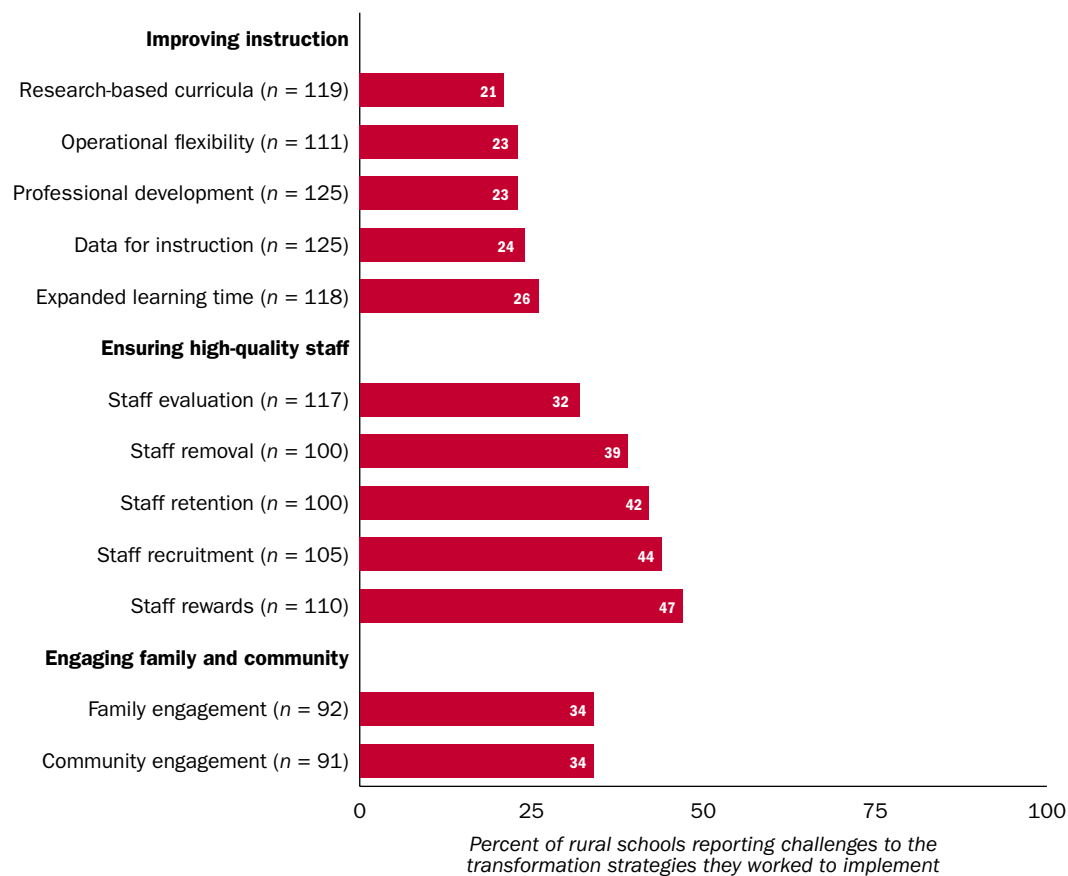
**Figure 2. More than two-thirds of principals said that their schools had fully implemented transformation strategies to improve instruction in 2014**



**Note:** The number of schools reporting differs across strategies because respondents were removed if they left the item blank.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of School Improvement Grant rural principal survey data.

**Figure 3. More principals reported challenges implementing strategies related to ensuring high-quality staff and engaging families and communities than reported challenges implementing strategies related to improving instruction in 2014**



**Note:** The number of schools reporting differs across strategies because respondents were removed if they said their schools did not attempt to implement the strategy, if they did not know whether the strategy was challenging, or if they left the item blank. Respondents could report that more than one strategy was challenging.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of School Improvement Grant rural principal survey data.

fully implemented an average of 5.2 strategies. In contrast, when principals reported fewer than 3 strategies with challenges, they reported that their school had fully implemented an average of 7.5 strategies (figure 4).

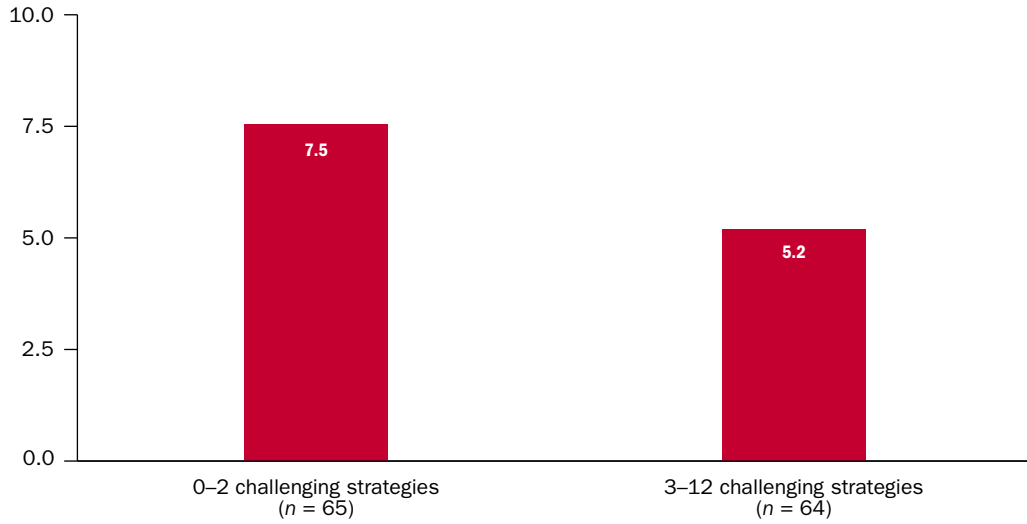
**Most principals reported that their school had received technical assistance from at least one provider for at least one of the transformation strategies examined in the survey**

Most schools (93 percent) received technical assistance from at least one provider for at least one transformation strategy examined in the survey. The percentage of principals reporting that their school had received technical assistance varied across strategies. At least one technical assistance provider delivered support for each strategy, but not all schools received support for each strategy.

More schools reported that their technical assistance came from districts than from the state, universities, or other types of organizations (figure 5). This was true across all strategies and for each strategy.

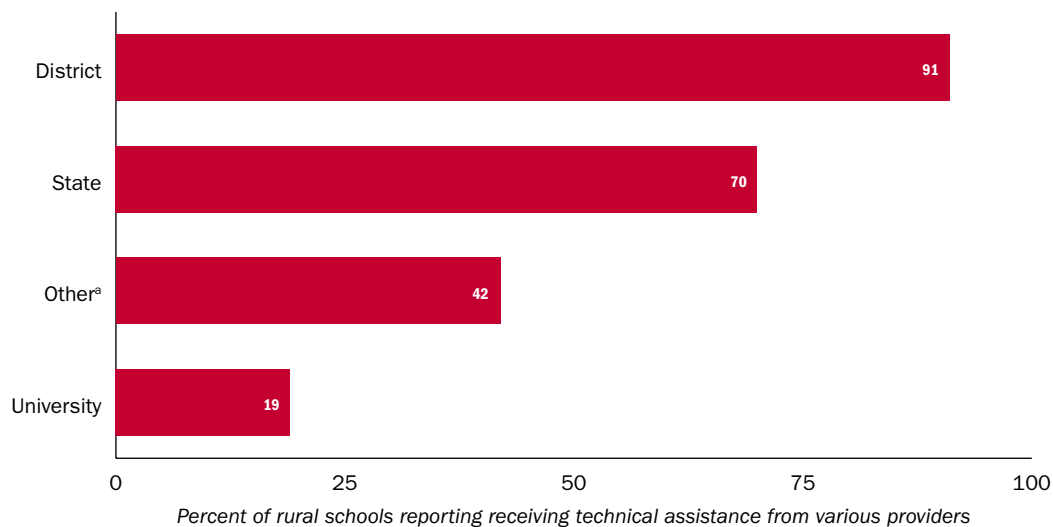
**Figure 4. When principals reported 3 or more strategies with challenges in 2014, they also reported that their school had fully implemented an average of 5.2 strategies**

Average number of strategies fully implemented



Source: Authors' analysis of School Improvement Grant rural principal survey data.

**Figure 5. More schools reported that their technical assistance came from districts than from the state, universities, or other types of organizations in 2014**



Note: n = 135.

a. Includes private organizations such as nonprofits, governmental organizations (for example, an educational service district or county office), individual consultants, teachers' unions, and, in a few instances, organizations that the study team was unable to categorize.

Source: Authors' analysis of School Improvement Grant rural principal survey data.

**The more strategies for which principals reported receiving technical assistance, the more strategies they reported that their school fully implemented**

Principals reported that their school had received technical assistance for an average of seven strategies. As the number of strategies for which schools received technical assistance rose, the number of strategies fully implemented also rose. When principals reported that their school had received technical assistance with 7 or fewer strategies, they reported that their school had fully implemented an average of 5.7 strategies. In contrast, when they reported that their school had received technical assistance for more than 7 strategies, they reported that their school had fully implemented an average of 7.2 strategies (figure 6).

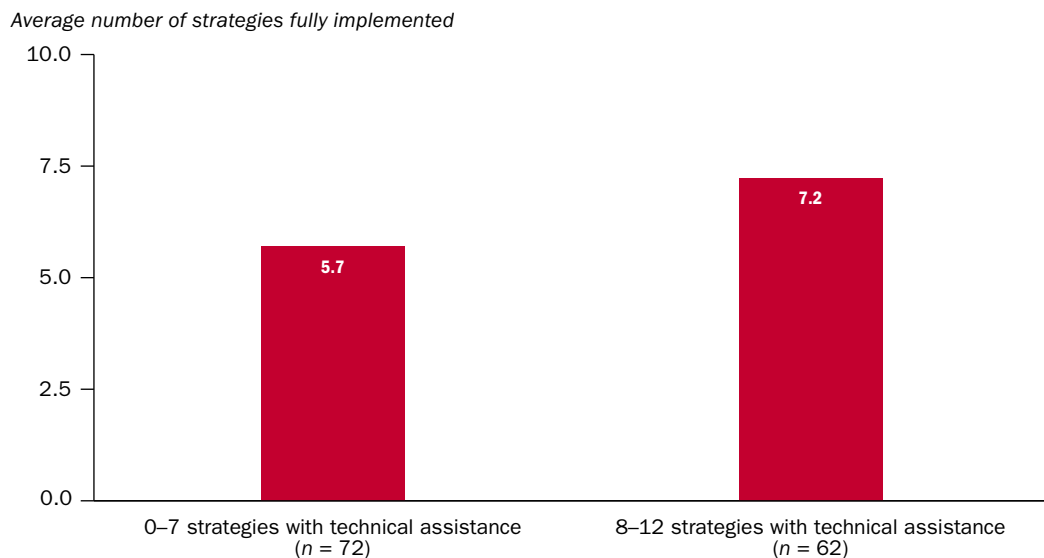
For 7 of the 12 strategies, when principals reported that their school had received technical assistance, they were significantly more likely to report full implementation of that individual strategy. These included:

- Using operational flexibility (such as staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to improve student outcomes.
- Using data to identify and implement a new research-based curriculum.
- Identifying and removing staff who have not improved student outcomes.
- Using staff evaluation systems that account for student growth.
- Implementing strategies to recruit staff members who are highly qualified.
- Identifying and rewarding staff who have improved student outcomes.
- Providing mechanisms for community engagement.

**Implications of the study findings for state leaders**

The findings confirm previous research that found that certain elements in the SIG transformation model were challenging for rural schools to implement—particularly those related to ensuring high-quality staff (Rosenberg, 2011; Rosenberg et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2012) and to engaging families and community (Rosenberg et al., 2014). State leaders can use the findings to inform future modifications of the transformation

**Figure 6. When principals reported that their school received technical assistance for 7 or fewer strategies in 2014, they also reported that their school had fully implemented an average of 5.7 strategies**



Source: Authors' analysis of School Improvement Grant rural principal survey data.

model for rural schools, as well as designs for state models for school improvement. Specifically, state leaders might consider two actions, outlined below.

### **Modifying or examining supports for challenging strategies, including ensuring high-quality staff and promoting family and community engagement**

State leaders may want to either modify or focus attention on the strategies that were implemented less frequently or not at all. If there is evidence that those strategies will be effective in rural schools, state leaders may consider offering more, or better, supports for them. If there is not such evidence, state leaders may want to consider modifying the strategies under the new, more flexible federal guidance. The full study did not examine whether full implementation of the strategies was effective or ineffective in improving schools, so leaders should proceed with caution and monitor implementation to ensure that any modifications or additional supports are helpful to schools.

### **Encouraging technical assistance for rural schools working on particular strategies for improvement**

The survey data reveal that the more strategies for which principals reported receiving technical assistance, the more strategies they reported that their school fully implemented. The relationship between technical assistance and full implementation was particularly strong for strategies involving operational flexibility, data-based curricula, community engagement, and staff evaluation, rewards, removal, and recruitment. Based on these results, state leaders might consider encouraging new or modified models that provide more technical assistance to rural SIG schools in these specific areas. The technical assistance might come from states, districts, universities, or other providers. The study could not identify whether technical assistance directly caused full implementation, so states or other entities need to draw on different data to ensure that technical assistance providers and their supports for alleviating challenges have a record of success.



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