

How Federal Education Policy Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Can Support States in School Improvement

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For years, both federal and state policymakers have enacted policies to improve the quality of low-performing public schools. 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 to schools serving low-income and low-performing students in an effort to improve those schools’ performance.¹ At the state level, education departments have undertaken a variety of efforts to improve school performance, ranging from public reporting on schools to assigning experts to help with improvement. Despite such federal and state efforts, there has not been a dramatic turnaround in most of these schools.

In light of the upcoming ESEA reauthorization, the Sandler Foundation asked RAND to reexamine the roles of the federal government and the states in improving schools and boosting student achievement. To do so, RAND researchers addressed these questions:

- What policy levers does the federal government have at its disposal to promote school improvement, and what factors constrain their effectiveness?
- What actions are states currently taking with respect to educational improvement?
- How can the federal government best support states in their school-improvement efforts?

To address those questions, the researchers examined school-improvement policies and practices in 15 states, using public documents, the research literature, and interviews with state officials. They focused on a wide variety of public school-improvement efforts, not only those for

Abstract

Researchers examined the federal and state roles in improving schools and student achievement. They found that states are still searching for the most-effective ways to improve schools and that no specific strategy yet exists that will work for all states. They concluded that federal policymakers should consider the key issues of state capacity, cost, and state politics when designing policies to improve public education. Federal policy should also support more experimentation, evaluation, and dissemination of new knowledge and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

the most-persistently low-performing schools.² This brief describes the research team’s findings and recommendations related to ESEA reauthorization.

Federal Policy Must Consider State-Level Constraints

Although providing public education is primarily a state function, the federal government can influence states’ activities in a number of ways. These include *mandates* that require states to deliver particular services, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act;³ *inducements that provide financial resources* to states if they comply with certain conditions, such as ESEA; *inducements to compete for additional resources*, such as Race to the Top; *capacity building*

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¹ Public Law 89-10, April 11, 1965.

² The researchers did not include turnaround efforts that have not yet been rigorously evaluated, such as School Improvement Grants.

³ Public Law 101-476, 1990.

designed to improve states' ability to support educational efforts, such as the Regional Educational Laboratory Program; and *system-changing policies* that shift the balance of power over education, such as the Race to the Top assessment grants, which empower consortia of states to develop new assessment tools.

Although each of these approaches has inherent strengths and weaknesses, there are three key issues that federal policymakers should consider when designing policies to help states improve public education:

- **State capacity.** Regardless of the federal policy instrument, states' effectiveness in implementing federal school-improvement policies will depend heavily on state capacity. Therefore, policymakers must ensure that states have adequate capacity to carry out initiatives.
- **Cost.** In the present economic climate, limited state budgets might inhibit efforts toward school improvement. Therefore, federal policies must be sensitive to the problem of who will pay for the costs of innovation and the potentially larger state infrastructure required to improve schools.
- **State politics.** Federal policymakers must recognize that variations in state capacity, budgets, and political perspectives will influence states' willingness to work with the federal government to improve schools. Thus, any change in the federal-state relationship and the responsibility for school improvement will need widespread political support.

States Are Still Searching for Ways to Improve Schools

Following their examination of school improvement in 15 states, the researchers concluded that states are still searching for the most-effective strategies to improve low-performing schools. The existing evidence did not reveal specific strategies that could be applied broadly to improve schools nationwide. For example, the Teacher Advancement Program appears to have had significant positive effects on low-income and minority student achievement when implemented in Texas but not when implemented in the Chicago Public Schools. Similarly, public report cards with consequences for low-performing schools were found to have strong positive effects in Florida but mixed results in New York and South Carolina.

States' school-improvement efforts also span a wide range of activities. They vary in terms of their focus—from the state as a whole to individual schools and districts—and in the intensity of their requirements. None of the states in the sample had invested in a single strategy to improve all schools. The researchers therefore concluded that a realistic federal policy must accommodate a variety of initiatives.

The Optimal Federal-State Relationship Would Foster Capacity Building and Innovation

Three observations and recommendations emerged from the study. First, the federal government has several policy alternatives from which to choose, and reauthorized ESEA legislation should consider innovative improvement strategies and need not merely replicate approaches from the past. Second, the authors did not find evidence of a generally effective model for improving low-performing schools, so the challenge that educators and policymakers face at present is to develop such models. Therefore, 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 histories, character, and current economic conditions and crises. Recognizing these varying contexts, federal policy should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement.

The results of this study suggest that the optimal federal-state relationship would be flexible and incorporate a range of policy levers. In providing both support and flexibility to states, the federal government might wish to consider traditional inducements to promote equity, as well as other policy approaches. The latter include helping to build key state capacities where they are lacking; inducing innovation, evaluation, and dissemination of effective solutions as they arise; developing independent expertise to help states; and building 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. ■

Prepared for the Sandler Foundation

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