



# IMPROVING PENNSYLVANIA'S LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS:

## WHY GOVERNOR WOLF'S PROPOSAL IS NOT REAL ACCOUNTABILITY

*They say the definition of insanity is repeating the same thing over and over again expecting different outcomes...*

In 2010, President Obama announced a \$3.5 billion initiative to turn around the bottom 5 percent of the nation's schools called School Improvement Grants (SIG). The program was funded with stimulus dollars and distributed to states through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (more commonly known as "No Child Left Behind"). In turn, the Pennsylvania Department of Education allocates funds to our lowest-performing schools via competitive grants.

As a condition of funding, schools are required to implement one of four improvement strategies ranging from least aggressive to most aggressive: Transformation, Turnaround, Restart and Closure.

Of the 54 schools that have received SIG funds in Pennsylvania since 2010, 46 schools chose to implement the Transformation model, the weakest of the intervention initiatives and the model that most closely resembles the improvement plans touted by Gov. Wolf. These 46 schools received more than \$101 million over their three-year grant period, with the average grant per school coming out to more than \$2.2 million.

So what do you expect would happen when you invest more money in low-performing schools without requiring meaningful changes? When we examined the student performance of the 29 schools that received grants between 2010-12, to implement the Transformation model, this is what we found:

- On average, math proficiency decreased by 3.2 percentage points
- On average, reading proficiency decreased by 2.2 percentage points
- Only 10 schools saw gains in both math and reading
- 8 schools had decreases of more than 10 percentage points in either math or reading



Take, for example, Camp Curtin Academy in the Harrisburg City School District: In 2011, only 38.9 percent of its students were proficient in math. That same year the school received a little over \$1 million in SIG funds and received an additional \$1.29 million over the next two years. In 2014, 22 percent of Camp Curtin students were able to demonstrate proficiency in reading, a decline of 16.9 percentage points.

The same story can be told across the Commonwealth, in cities like Erie, and Lancaster, Allentown and Philadelphia. The shortcomings of SIG are a reminder that good intentions and more resources won't yield transformative results because, if given the option, local school districts will almost always choose the least aggressive, most politically safe turnaround strategy.

*“What do you think would happen when you invest more money in low-performing schools without requiring meaningful changes?”*

**The Research is Clear: SIG has vastly underperformed its expectations, providing further evidence that infusing cash into chronically underperforming schools without dramatic interventions yields minimal or no results.**

*“Only a little more than half of the schools that received a third round of the newly revamped SIG grants...improved, while the other half saw stagnant student achievement, or actually slid backward.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“The best thing we can say is that \$7 billion in SIG spending seems to have coincided with a 2 percentage point annual increase in reading proficiency in SIG schools.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“[T]here is very little difference between the goings-on of SIG schools and similarly low-performing schools that didn’t receive SIG funding.”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Alyson Klein, “New SIG Data Serve Up Same Old Conclusion: Mixed Results,” Education Week, Nov. 12, 2015, accessed Mar. 15, 2016, [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/11/new\\_sig\\_data\\_serves\\_up\\_same\\_ol.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/11/new_sig_data_serves_up_same_ol.html).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (quoting analysis from Andy Smarick).

<sup>3</sup> Andy Smarick, “IES on SIG: Troubling foreshadowing,” Flypaper blog, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Mar. 18, 2014, accessed Mar. 15, 2016, <http://edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/flypaper/ies-on-sig-troubling-foreshadowing> (commenting on the Institute of Education Sciences preliminary SIG findings).

### **Real Accountability in Action: Case-Study: Grover Cleveland School, Philadelphia, PA**

The Grover Cleveland School, a K-8 school in the School District of Philadelphia, was one of the lowest performing schools in the district and had a reputation as an unsafe environment for students. In 2011-12, only about a quarter of students were able to demonstrate grade level math and reading skills, and the school reported 69 incidents of misconduct, including six arrests.

During the 2011-12 school year, the Pennsylvania Department of Education awarded the Grover Cleveland School a \$3.37 million School Improvement Grant (SIG) to implement the Restart model.

Over the next year, the school used their SIG funds to implement the district’s internal turnaround initiative called Renaissance Schools, which targets the lowest performing schools and transfers governance to charter operators with a track record of high performance.

Since Grover Cleveland Mastery Charter School opened its doors, the school has undergone a significant transformation. In the 2013–14 school year:

- Student performance in math jumped to 54 percent, an increase of more than 27 percentage points over the achievement level in 2011–12
- Student performance in reading climbed to 43 percent, an increase of more than 17 percentage points over the achievement level in 2011–12
- There was only one incident of misconduct reported

Grover Cleveland Mastery Charter School is a perfect example of what can be achieved at a low performing school when additional funding is coupled with meaningful reform.

**AT PENNCAN, WE SUPPORT MORE MONEY FOR SCHOOLS BUT ONLY IF IT IS PAIRED WITH REAL PLANS FOR IMPROVEMENT.**

