



# EDUCATION

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
EDUCATION AND THE ARTS  
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT  
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE  
INFRASTRUCTURE AND  
TRANSPORTATION  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
LAW AND BUSINESS  
NATIONAL SECURITY  
POPULATION AND AGING  
PUBLIC SAFETY  
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
TERRORISM AND  
HOMELAND SECURITY

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

This electronic document was made available from [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org) as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Skip all front matter: [Jump to Page 1](#) ▼

## Support RAND

[Browse Reports & Bookstore](#)

[Make a charitable contribution](#)

## For More Information

Visit RAND at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)

Explore [RAND Education](#)

View [document details](#)

## Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND electronic documents to a non-RAND website is prohibited. RAND electronic documents are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see [RAND Permissions](#).

This product is part of the RAND Corporation technical report series. Reports may include research findings on a specific topic that is limited in scope; present discussions of the methodology employed in research; provide literature reviews, survey instruments, modeling exercises, guidelines for practitioners and research professionals, and supporting documentation; or deliver preliminary findings. All RAND reports undergo rigorous peer review to ensure that they meet high standards for research quality and objectivity.

# R E P O R T

---

## Federal and State Roles and Capacity for Improving Schools

Michael A. Gottfried, Brian M. Stecher,  
Matthew Hoover, Amanda Brown Cross

Prepared for the Sandler Foundation

This work was prepared for the Sandler Foundation. The research was conducted in RAND Education, a unit of the RAND Corporation.

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

**RAND®** is a registered trademark.

© Copyright 2011 RAND Corporation

Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Copies may not be duplicated for commercial purposes. Unauthorized posting of RAND documents to a non-RAND website is prohibited. RAND documents are protected under copyright law. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit the RAND permissions page (<http://www.rand.org/publications/permissions.html>).

Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation  
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138  
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050  
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665  
RAND URL: <http://www.rand.org>  
To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact  
Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;  
Fax: (310) 451-6915; Email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)

## Summary

---

Improving the quality of low-performing public schools in the United States is of utmost importance to both federal and state policymakers, and each group has enacted policies toward this end. 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 provided to schools serving low-income and low-performing students in an effort to improve those schools' performance. At the state level, education departments have undertaken a variety of efforts to improve school performance, ranging from those targeted widely, such as the annual public grading of schools, to those targeted narrowly, such as school take-overs. Despite such federal and state efforts, there has not been a dramatic turnaround in these schools. Last year, more than one-half of fourth and eighth graders who attended high-poverty schools did not score above proficient on a national reading test (the National Assessment of Educational Progress), compared with fewer than one in five students from the same grade levels who attended low-poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010). Although there have been occasional successes, none of the current initiatives appears likely to reverse the situation on a large scale.

The potential reauthorization of ESEA provides an opportunity to reevaluate the roles of the federal government and the states with respect to improving schools and boosting student achievement. This report considers alternatives to the current roles of the federal government and of the states with respect to school improvement. With the assistance of an expert panel of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, we sought to answer three key questions related to school-improvement policies at the federal and state levels:

1. What policy levers does the federal government have at its disposal to promote school improvement, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
2. What actions are states currently taking with respect to educational improvement, and which appear to be working?
3. How can the federal government best promote school improvement and support states in this task?

To answer these questions, we examined the roles of the federal government and the states in the oversight of public education, the range of policy options the federal government has used to influence state actions, and the strengths and weaknesses of each. We also examined states' recent efforts to improve schools, illustrating some of the variation that exists among states in terms of capacity, actions, and effectiveness.

For the review of state improvement efforts, we selected a purposeful sample of 15 states with ongoing school-improvement policies or practices that had been formally evaluated. We searched each state education agency's (SEA's) official websites to identify current school-improvement policies or practices, and we wrote summaries of each state's efforts in this area.<sup>1</sup> We then conducted a search for published research and evaluation results related to the SEA policies and practices identified in the 15 states. When we found such evidence based on external evaluation, we incorporated it into our summary documents. Finally, we conducted follow-up interviews in the nine of the 15 states where the most-distinctive policies or practices seemed to be occurring and added the results of these interviews to our summary documents. These summaries formed the evidence base for our review.

Readers should bear in mind certain limitations of this study. First, although data for the study were systematically collected, it is possible that some relevant information was missed. We do not claim that the policies and practices mentioned represent an exhaustive list of the SEAs' efforts to promote and support school improvement. Second, the study reflects only current and past policies and practices; it does not capture SEAs' ongoing efforts at shaping future policies and practices. Third, the report focuses on the state perspective on school improvement. There are likely to be effective local initiatives that we did not include in our review. Finally, this is an impressionistic summary of the evidence, not a formal statistical summary or meta-analysis. The purpose was to describe the range of improvement efforts and their effectiveness, not to confirm best practices or to create a validated list of strategies that work. The review allows us to present a description of what selected states are doing to improve schools and to identify highly successful efforts if they exist.

In answering the first question about the federal role in school improvement, it is important to remember that education is primarily a state function in the United States and that federal education policy is constrained by law, tradition, and politics. There are a number of ways the federal government can influence states' provision of education. These include mandates (such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Pub. L. 101-476, 1990) requiring states to deliver particular services; inducements (such as ESEA) providing financial resources to states if they comply with certain conditions; inducements with competition (such as Race to the Top; see U.S. Department of Education, 2010b, 2010c) offering resources to a small number of states that score highest in terms of implementing specified policies or practices; capacity building (such as the Regional Educational Laboratory Program) designed to improve states' ability to support educational efforts; and system-changing policies (such as the Race to the Top assessment grants) that shift the balance of power over education, in this case empowering consortia of states to undertake assessment development.

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. Three issues appear to be key in thinking about the structure of future federal policies to promote states' efforts to foster school improvement:

- First, regardless of which policy instrument is used, states' effectiveness in implementing federal school-improvement policies is likely to depend heavily on state capacity, so attention must be paid to ensure that adequate capacity exists.

---

<sup>1</sup> States also support more continuous-improvement functions, such as teacher certification, but this study focused primarily on improving struggling schools.

- Second, someone must pay for the costs of innovation to find new improvement efforts and for the costs of maintaining a larger state infrastructure associated with increased involvement to improve schools. In the present economic climate, limited state budgets might inhibit efforts toward school improvement.
- Third, any change in the federal–state relationship and the responsibility for school improvement will have to be endorsed in the political arena. In the end, federal policy-makers must recognize that variations in state capacity, budgets, and political perspectives will influence states’ willingness to work with the federal government in different ways to improve schools.

In answering the second question, our review of school improvement in 15 states suggests that states are still searching for effective strategies to improve low-performing schools. The evidence we found does not reveal any widely successful approaches to school improvement. Under these circumstances, it would not be wise for federal policy to push states toward a single set of solutions. The review also suggests that states’ efforts at school improvement span a wide range of activities in terms of focal point of impact (from the state as a whole to individual schools and districts) and intensity (from mild to strong requirements). We did not find a case in which a state had “put all its eggs in one basket” as far as improvement is concerned. If one goal of federal policy is to help states improve their effectiveness, then federal policy going forward needs to accommodate a variety of initiatives.

What do these analyses suggest for federal policy—particularly the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind? Three general conclusions stand out from our review:

- First, the federal government has multiple policy alternatives from which to choose, and reauthorized ESEA legislation need not merely replicate approaches from the past.
- Second, the challenge that educators and policymakers face at present involves developing rather than replicating successful strategies to improve low-performing schools. Lacking an effective general model, 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 history, character, and current economic conditions and crises, and they should not be ignored in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement.

In conclusion, although we cannot describe the optimal federal–state relationship, the evidence in this report suggests that it would entail flexibility and incorporate a range of policy levers. In providing both support and flexibility to states, the federal government might wish to consider both traditional inducements to support equity and other policy approaches to help build key state capacities where they are lacking; to induce innovation, evaluation, and dissemination of effective solutions as they arise; to develop independent expertise to help states; and to build 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.