

Evaluation of the State Program Improvement Grant (SIG) Program

Third Interim Report

Executive Summary

Authors:

Thomas A. Fiore
Alison Tanner
Mark Price
Westat

Larry A. Magliocca
Ohio State University

Michael J. Puma
Chesapeake Research Associates

May 2004

Prepared for:

Office of Special Education
Programs
U.S. Department of Education

Prepared by:

Westat
1009 Slater Road, Suite 110
Durham, North Carolina 27703

EVALUATION OF THE STATE PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT GRANT PROGRAM

THIRD INTERIM REPORT

Executive Summary

The *Third Interim Report* presents findings from Year 3 of the Evaluation of the State Program Improvement Grant (SIG) Program. Under the SIG Program, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) awards competitive grants to states to implement SIG projects¹ based on State Improvement Plans. Westat's five-year, formative evaluation was commissioned by OSEP in 2000.

Framework for the Evaluation

By the end of Year 2 of the SIG Program Evaluation, it was clear that SIG projects were proceeding as planned, carrying out their activities, and accomplishing their immediate objectives. OSEP's administration of the SIG Program, while evolving, was also proceeding consistently with the general requirements of the program. A gap was apparent, however, between program intentions and program performance regarding the SIG Program's central goal of systemic change. The discrepancies stemmed from (a) a lack of clarity in the SIG legislation with no elaboration or further clarification from OSEP, and (2) an uncertainty about appropriate criteria and evidence for success related to systemic change. The findings of overall program consistency in implementation, but with some discrepancy regarding systemic change, led the evaluation team to restructure the overarching evaluation questions to focus broadly and clearly on the challenging and central issue of systemic change and its relationship to improved child outcomes.

Organization of the Report

An examination of the methods by which states use systemic change strategies to achieve results is the focus of much of Westat's *Third Interim Report*. Specifically, the report focuses on how states have used their SIG projects to effect systemic change and on descriptions of two models that depict critical aspects of systemic change as demonstrated by the SIG projects. The models are designed as inquiry tools for investigating and evaluating state-level systemic change. The report begins, however, with a presentation of the results of an analysis of how the SIG Program is evolving, which is a follow-up to Year 1's cross-project analysis describing states' intentions for their projects and to Year 2's limited update to that first analysis. The report ends with conclusions and implications.

¹ In this report, the term *SIG Program* refers to the overall program established by IDEA '97, and the term *SIG project* refers to the state projects funded through SIG Program grants.

During Year 3, new data collections and analysis included site visits to six SIG-funded states to conduct interviews with SIG project directors, project evaluators, and subgrantees; data extraction, including the review of the successful applications for SIG projects funded in 2002 and of all the SIG projects' annual grant continuation performance reports; observation of the 2003 application panel reviews; additional analyses of previously collected data; and extensive literature reviews. The remaining sections of the Executive Summary provide an overview of the findings and a summary of the implications.

Updated Cross-Project Analysis

OSEP's actions at the federal level (such as conducting SIG competitions, monitoring grantees' progress, and setting reporting requirements) are designed to bring about certain responses by states. States' responses to OSEP's actions are expected to reflect the intent of the overall SIG Program. How states respond initially, combined with how they modify their actions based on their experiences in implementing their SIG projects, becomes the actual SIG Program. In this sense, the SIG projects, as a group, constitute the SIG Program operations. The results of the two-part cross-project analysis address only states' intentions as stated in their applications and not whether projects actually implement the activities described in their application.

The first analysis, based on a review of grant applications from the first four cohorts, focused on the legislative elements that states addressed in their SIG applications. Overall, the findings indicated that states demonstrated a commitment to and investment in the guidelines set forth by Congress. This finding held true more or less equally across all four cohorts.

For the second analysis, also pertaining to the first four cohorts, the evaluation team used summaries of individual SIG project plans that they had prepared to create cross-project summaries. The project plan summaries were in the form of state-specific logic models that represent the critical features of the projects. The resulting cross-project summaries provide a comprehensive portrayal of all the states' plans for their SIG projects. Findings included the following:

- In general, states proposed goals that addressed personnel quantity, personnel quality, outcomes for students with disabilities, capacity and infrastructure, and parent involvement.
- All states proposed to address their goals by working with required partners, including LEAs and IHEs. While most states proposed plans for partnerships with in-state IHEs, several states proposed partnerships with out-of-state IHEs.
- With regard to nonrequired partners, states proposed collaborative relationships with a variety of organizations, including but not limited to disability organizations, professional organizations, and assistive technology centers.

Westat

- All funded states proposed professional development as a strategy, whether through the provision of teacher training or the development and redesign of teacher preparation programs.
- Information dissemination and technical assistance were also components of most SIG projects.
- Other significant strategies proposed by states included recruitment and retention efforts, data collection and evaluation, and family and community participation.
- The direct customers that states proposed to serve through their SIG activities included LEAs, parents and families, teachers, IHEs, and prospective teachers.
- All states intended that their efforts under the SIG Program would result in improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Systemic Change Through SIG Projects

While the language in the SIG Program legislation and the grant priorities clearly indicates that the purpose of the grant program is state-level systemic change, neither Congress nor OSEP defined systemic change. SEAs applying for grants were left to define systemic change and craft a SIG project that would achieve it. As a consequence of states' autonomy, the extent to which the SIG Program actually advances systemic change is a direct result of how state officials have designed and implemented their SIG projects. Therefore, much of the SIG Program Evaluation's investigation of systemic change has focused on the functioning and management of individual SIG projects.

Information to address evaluation questions related to systemic change came from multiple sources and were analyzed in multiple ways. The evaluation team conducted a thorough review of existing literature on state-level systemic change, reviewed SIG Program and SIG project documents, conducted observations, surveyed SIG project directors and evaluators, conducted interviews with federal and state education officials, conducted a cross-state focus group, and made site visits to multiple states.

The SIG Program Evaluation team focused its investigation of systemic change specifically on the management of SIG projects. The evaluation team chose this focus for two reasons. First, the extent to which the SIG Program actually leads to systemic change is in large part a result of how state officials designed and then implemented or managed their SIG projects. Second, this focus provides OSEP with information that is potentially most useful for improving the SIG Program because OSEP's influence on SIG projects, while indirect, is through the states' management functions.

The evaluation team reached the following broad conclusions about the systemic nature of SIG projects:

- Five management functions are common across the SIG projects that are focused on systemic change: needs assessment, vision-setting, planning and decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.
- Contextual factors play a significant role in initial and subsequent project planning, and environmental changes are considered in ongoing implementation.
- Of utmost importance, the management of systemic change requires use of information loops to ensure that (a) project visions and plans are communicated and used to inform implementation, (b) data regarding implementation are used to inform planning and decision-making and to make corrective adjustments, and (c) data are used to determine the value of all management functions in relation to reform results.

Additionally, the evaluation team reached conclusions, some encouraging and some of concern, related to the functioning of individual SIG projects, including the following:

- At a minimum, glimmers of systemic change can be seen in most states, and most SIG project leaders are discussing their projects in relation to systemic reform. In fact, perhaps largely due to OSEP's efforts in this area, the conversations about systemic change appear to be increasing over time.
- Similarly, some evidence indicates that individual projects are becoming more systemic in their strategies as they mature.
- Across all the SIG projects, many key initiatives, such as school-wide approaches to addressing behavior problems or district-wide literacy programs, are intrinsically systemic and require systemic change for successful implementation.
- The SIG Program has enabled some states to address longstanding systemic problems or needs that might otherwise have gone unaddressed, such as creating alternate assessments for students with disabilities, changing special education teacher certification requirements, and creating databases to track student outcomes and personnel turnover.
- SIG projects that appear on a path to effecting the greatest change have used the state's existing reform agenda and built on it, thus aligning policies and programs either within special education or across special and general education.
- SIG project staff in many states report unprecedented levels of communication between general education and special education staff at the SEA at least partly as a result of their SIG project.
- As projects unfold, project leaders are making changes based on changing environmental conditions and on the results they are observing.
- Promising SIG projects have also modeled the use of data for decision-making and made efforts to teach data use to local entities.
- No state to date has put together a systemic change project that encompasses all the features of systemic change assumed to be important.

Westat

- Many SIG project leaders struggle to articulate a vision for their project, or they are unable to explain how their various SIG project activities relate to a common purpose.
- Despite being a cornerstone of the legislation, true collaborative partnerships are rare under SIG projects.
- Few states have an evaluation that focuses specifically on assessing systemic change.
- SIG projects too often focus on acquiring or allocating additional funding as a means of sustaining programs, rather than changing systems or structures that might make additional funding unnecessary.

Ultimately, the Westat evaluation team synthesized findings to create models depicting the process of state-level systemic change. The models depict critical aspects of systemic change as demonstrated by the SIG projects and are potentially useful to managers and evaluators as tools for examining the state-level systemic change process. Although developed separately, the models are complementary.

The first is a functional model showing the relationships among systemic change management functions. The model captures five specific management functions SIG projects use to foster systemic reform, important influences on those functions, and the dynamic connections that make the functions systemic. The five functions indicate *what* reformers are doing, and the connections indicate *how* they are doing it. Each specific connection is defined by a broad question, which can serve as a starting point for developing specific evaluation questions for assessing the systemic reform, thus making the model a potential evaluation tool.

The second model, which is still under development, is a conceptual model of specific systemic attributes of strategies seen in SIG projects. It extends the first model by depicting qualifiers or descriptors of interactive processes that appear to be key to the successful implementation of state-level systemic strategies. In the evaluation team's investigation of SIG projects, these 14 interactive attributes were noted as contributing to the systemic nature of projects' actions and strategies.

Implications for Actions to Improve the SIG Program

The findings from the SIG Program Evaluation's investigation suggest that SIG projects are making worthwhile efforts and are having some success at effecting systemic change to improve professional development, technical assistance, and information dissemination. On the whole, however, projects are a good distance from employing comprehensive approaches to systemic reform, and the implementation and evaluation of systemic change need particular attention.

The evaluation team developed suggestions for areas where some action would be beneficial. It is important to note that the SIG Program is a joint effort of the federal government and states and that responsibility for program improvement is

diffuse. Multiple parties can and should take action to ensure that the program's goals are met. Some combination of individual-state, cross-state, and federal initiatives is probably most appropriate. The following list suggests areas where actions would be beneficial:

- The SIG Program's lack of clarity at the federal and state levels on what constitutes systemic change continues to limit the potential impact of the program. SIG project leaders and project evaluators first need a better understanding of systems and what it means to be systemic. They then need to determine how to change.
- SIG project leaders must act as change agents and must distribute or share leadership responsibilities with system stakeholders in order to facilitate the realization of systemic change. Project leaders, however, need additional, ongoing support to develop the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in these challenging roles.
- Collaboration and partnering in the management, implementation, and evaluation of SIG projects must be recognized as centrally important to the achievement of systemic change. Project leaders cannot assume that viable working relationships exist among organizations or that such relationships will automatically develop because there is contractual partnering. Project leaders generally need a better understanding of the nature of true collaboration and of ways they can support it.
- Devoting SIG project resources to the evaluation of systemic change processes is important to the success of the SIG Program. Project evaluators may need technical assistance to know how to focus on these processes.
- SIG project leaders, staff, and evaluators must be reflective observers of (a) the operations of their project, (b) the interactions among the various project components, and (c) the relationships between the project initiatives and the larger environment that the SIG project affects or is affected by. Project leaders need ongoing technical support to understand and negotiate these complex processes.
- Systemic change requires time and planning. States' attempts at this type of reform may be enhanced by a planning period prior to project start-up so that the project's reform focus can be clearly established from the beginning. During this planning period, states could craft a vision and purpose; determine the details of project activities; establish measures of the project's intermediate and long-term objectives; and establish procedures, responsibilities, and expectations for the project's management and evaluation.
- Similarly, new SIG project directors, staff, and evaluators could benefit from cross-project meetings that provide opportunities for technical assistance and for the sharing of ideas.