

This brief was developed from excerpts of the article:

**Sun, M., Penner, E.K., Loeb, S. (August 1, 2017). Resource- and Approach-Driven Multidimensional Change: Three-Year Effects on School Improvement Grants. *American Educational Research Journal*. Vol. 54, Issue, 4, p. 607-643.**

**Overview of Superintendent Zone Reform:** In 2010, the California Department of Education extended 45 million dollars of SIG funding to San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) to transform its 10 persistently lowest-performing schools between the Academic Year 2010-11 and 2013. SFUSD's reform model grew directly out of the comprehensive school reform guidelines that drove improvements in student learning outcomes in Chicago Public Schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010). SFUSD's SIG interventions align closely with the five "essential supports" necessary for successful reform identified by Bryk and colleagues (2010) listed in the bullets below. Moreover, SFUSD created "The Superintendent's Zone", an administrative structure aimed at providing administrative and curricular support to SIG schools to strengthen the successful implementation of SIG reforms. Some of the practical and policy changes SFUSD made in the Superintendent Zone schools that align to the five essential supports are:

- **School leadership as the driver for change:** Activating school leadership as the driver for change: In addition to removing principals who had been at a SIG school for more than 2 years and providing new principals with more flexibility over hiring, SFUSD redesigned the ways in which the district central office provided support to schools.
- **Cultivating cohesive instructional guidance that promotes ambitious academic achievement for every child:** SIG schools were required to implement a Common Core curriculum that clearly specified what students should know and be able to do and set high standards for rigor and instructional quality. The schools also administered common interim assessments that tracked students' progress in meeting the standards
- **Developing professional capacity among teachers:** SFUSD provided job-embedded teacher professional development featuring one-on-one coaching. Moreover, SFUSD instituted a performance management system using common interim assessments and other evidence of student learning to improve teaching practice
- **Nurturing a student-centered learning climate:** SIG schools extended learning time for students both after school and during the summer and implemented an early-warning monitoring system of student progress.
- **Fostering parent-community ties:** All SIG schools implemented a community school approach beyond parent workshops that built family and community involvement and outreach.

Its evidenced-based comprehensive school improvement framework and focus on quality implementation make SFUSD a useful site for assessing the effects of SIGs for an urban district that attempts to use best practices to reform its most struggling schools.

**Research Methods and Data Sources:** This study utilizes a difference-in-difference strategy to estimate program impacts on multiple dimensions across the three-year duration of the SIG award in SFUSD. Our analyses use SFUSD administrative data on students, teachers, and their schools from 2005 to 2013. We supplement the administrative data with four years of personnel survey data from 2010 to 2013, in order to probe into the mechanisms of change with a particular focus on teacher capacity.

**Impact on student outcomes and school enrollment:** We find that SIG reforms in SFUSD resulted in gradual improvements in the first two years, and significant positive changes on several measures of school performance by the third year of the grant. Specifically, SIG reforms narrowed the achievement gap between these lowest-performing schools and the rest of the schools in the district from 0.79 SD in spring 2010 (right before the reform) to 0.39 SD in the third year of SIG. (See Figure 1 – below – from article of a visual showing the narrowing of the gap in one of the analytic models.) Equally importantly, SIG reforms reduced unexcused absences by 8.4 percent and improved school desirability for families, demonstrating an increase in the odds of being families' first choice by 159 percent in year 3. These emerging positive effects during the course of interventions are robust to a variety of alternative explanations, such as student mobility and attrition issues, concurrent policies, and mean reversion.

### **Impact on teachers' characteristics and teachers' perceptions of professional support:**

- SIG schools become more likely to retain teachers based on effectiveness, rather than seniority.
- [Over the three years of the reform,] teachers in SIG schools also significantly increase their self-reported collaborations with other teachers and reports of feeling supported by school leadership in their instruction in the last two years of the reform. [To] investigate how well SIG schools succeeded in developing the professional capacity of their teachers, [we] use annual teacher survey data between 2010 and 2013. We utilize a set of the questions from the survey that focused specifically on teachers' reports on the supportiveness of their school environments. Teachers were asked, on a seven-point scale ranging from never (0), once (1), twice (2), 3-4 times (3), 5-9 times (7), to 10 or more times (10) within each year, about the frequency of

- (a) visiting another teacher's classroom to watch him or her teach;
- (b) having a colleague observe your classroom;
- (c) inviting someone in to help your class;
- (d) going to a colleague to get advice about an instructional challenge you faced;
- (e) receiving useful suggestions for curriculum material from colleagues;
- (f) receiving meaningful feedback on your teaching practice from colleagues;
- (g) receiving meaningful feedback on your teaching practice from your principal;
- and (h) receiving meaningful feedback on your teaching practice from another school leader (e.g., AP, instructional coach).

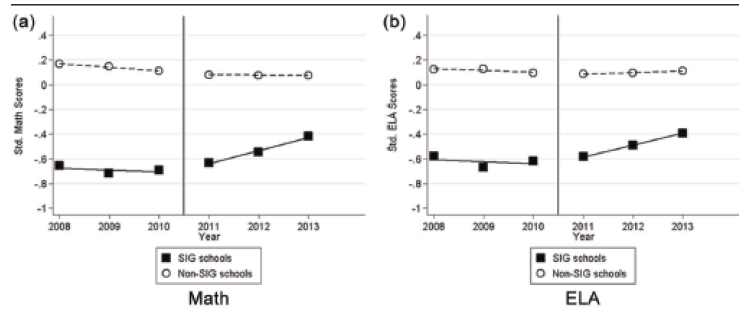
[On this survey measure,] there was no significant difference in teacher support after year one of the SIG award. However, by the second year, SIG school teachers reported the level of teacher support that was 0.50 points higher than the level in non-SIG schools (an increase of 0.26 SD). By the spring of 2013, this difference was up to 0.81 points higher (an increase of 0.41 SD).

### **Caveats important for SFUSD and beyond:**

- The SIG interventions include two major components: Evidence-based interventions and substantial financial investment. Our data cannot disentangle the program effect from the financial effect.
- Although it is desirable to know which components of the SIG interventions are most likely to contribute to the positive outcomes, we cannot separate the unique contribution of each component, because given the whole-school reform nature, all components are mingled together and implemented concurrently.

### **Policy Implications for SFUSD and beyond:**

- The positive impacts of SIG reform in SFUSD add growing evidence in support of school transformation guided by evidence-based frameworks. As opposed to interventions driven by federal mandate, ESSA give states and districts much more flexibility in taking actions. It is all the more important to provide states and districts with guidance for choosing and implementing effective interventions.
- Staffing the lowest-performing schools with effective teachers and supporting the development of their professional capacity are likely to be necessary if not sufficient elements of school improvement.
- Because comprehensive school reforms take time to implement, an important design feature to underscore is the gradual emergence and intensification of reform impacts, suggesting that such efforts should be given time to come to fruition.



**Figure 1. Comparison of trends in student achievement between SIG and non-SIG schools for “all starters.”**

Note. The “all starters” sample includes students those who were the district in fall 2010, regardless of whether they transferred between schools in subsequent years.