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Council of the Great City Schools

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New Report Shows Federal Program Helping Major Cities Turn Around Low-Achieving Schools

WASHINGTON, Feb. 10 – A new report by the Council of the Great City Schools finds that urban school districts mounted an unprecedented number of school turnaround efforts in the 2010-2011 school year with funds from the revamped federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.

While the nation's big-city schools have seen significant academic gains in the past several years, there are still pockets of schools that are not responding to districtwide reforms and need special intervention. Increasingly, urban school districts are utilizing SIG funds to turn around these schools, implementing some of the toughest reform models called for in SIG at higher rates than seen in other schools nationwide.

The report – *The School Improvement Grant Rollout in America's Great City Schools: School Improvement Grants 2010-2011* – indicates that the number of urban turnaround schools has increased significantly since the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program underwent transformation and expansion as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, and launched in 2010. Some 298 chronically low-achieving Tier I and II schools in urban districts were selected to receive grants and undergoing turnaround efforts in the first year of SIG—roughly as many schools as these districts tackled in the previous five years of reform (284 schools).

The report offers a detailed picture of the specific strategies being pursued in urban schools across the country. Some 54 percent of the SIG schools in the urban districts implemented the **turnaround** intervention model, which includes replacing the principal and at least half of the staff; 36 percent of the urban schools used the **transformation** model, which also includes replacing the principal and instructional reforms; 5 percent of the urban schools utilized the **restart** intervention model, which includes closing the school and re-opening as a charter school; and another 5 percent of the schools used the **closure** model, which involves closing the school and moving students to a nearby school with higher performance.

These findings indicate that the nation's urban school districts are using the turnaround and closure models at about twice the rate of the nation.

“The School Improvement Grant program provides an important and substantial new tool in the arsenal of many big-city school districts,” says Council Executive Director Michael Casserly. “In addition to districtwide reforms, urban school systems are tailoring interventions to address the needs of specific schools that are struggling to achieve.”

Prior to the expanded SIG program, school districts faced a number of challenges in their efforts to turn around low-achieving schools, such as removing ineffective teachers, securing turnaround funding and recruiting teachers to challenging schools. The report found that the urban school districts believed the revamped SIG program can help address some of these challenges.

Although it's too early to measure the impact of SIG on student achievement in the first year of the expanded program, the report points out that most big city schools responding to the survey were satisfied with how the grant gave them ample flexibility to implement turnaround measures. They also expressed optimism that the SIG program has a "strong chance of significantly improving student achievement in these persistently low-achieving schools."

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