

Introduction

In this issue brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy presents an overview of research into district-level responses to Massachusetts' waiver from the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), which provided local policymakers with the opportunity to implement comprehensive approaches to support low-income students and turn around underperforming schools.¹

Massachusetts' NCLB Waiver

On February 9, 2012, the U.S. Department of Education granted Massachusetts' request for a waiver from specific requirements in NCLB. This agreement included greater flexibility in the use of Title I funds. The stated purpose of Title I is to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers (or high percentages) of low-income students to help ensure that all students achieve proficiency on state academic standards.³ Historically, districts receiving Title I funding were required to adhere to strict budgeting and reporting requirements to document how school personnel spent their compensated time. The enactment of NCLB further restricted spending by requiring some portion of Title I funds be spent on supplemental educational services and school choice.

With Massachusetts' NCLB waiver, districts have the opportunity to rethink the use of Title I and Title IIA funding to support district- and school-level improvement strategies to bolster student learning and serve a greater proportion of low-achieving students.⁴ The flexibility provisions enable districts to: use Title I and Title IIA funds in support of low-achieving students district-wide; transfer up to 100% of Title IIA funds to support Title I-funded programs; and operate school-wide Title I programs in schools identified as among the state's lowest performing.

The NCLB waiver has been granted at a time when a number of tools have emerged to promote data-driven decision-making and help districts leverage knowledge of evidence-based practice to maximize existing resources. These tools include Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE)'s new Edwin system, which offers near-real time teacher, student, and course information, and includes the Early Warning Indicator System to identify students' likelihood of meeting key academic goals. Districts can take advantage of such instruments to craft strategies that provide students with additional support matched to their particular needs.

ESE, in fact, now requires districts with schools identified for improvement (schools in Level 3, 4, or 5 under the state's accountability & assistance system) to conduct a self-assessment of their needs based on ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness (see text box above). Through this self-assessment, districts are expected to develop a plan to improve school and/or district performance through implementing high leverage strategies, defined as: those that target the lowest achieving students in the lowest performing schools; aggressively address school performance and student achievement; are close to the instructional core; and are monitored for efficacy and impact. This process, when properly executed, may lead districts toward more comprehensive approaches in the employment of Title I funds. It is a process that all districts may consider, regardless of their accountability levels.⁵

District Case Studies

Recent research by the Rennie Center examined the methods and practices of Massachusetts districts taking advantage of new Title I flexibility provisions. The research focused on decisions made by districts to restructure programs to serve more high needs students. Specific districts were selected for this study if they implemented new or expanded programming and received a Title I allocation near the state's median funding allocation.

A set of common themes characterized district choices across the Commonwealth. Districts extended instructional time through longer school days and years, or summer programming; districts also expanded the grade levels served

Conditions for School Effectiveness²

1. Effective district systems for support & intervention
2. Effective school leadership
3. Aligned curriculum
4. Effective instruction
5. Student assessment
6. Principal's staffing authority
7. Professional development & structures for collaboration
8. Tiered instruction & adequate learning time
9. Students' social, emotional, & health needs
10. Family-school engagement
11. Strategic use of resources & adequate budget authority

(e.g., introduced pre-kindergarten programs). Districts increased the reach of their Title I programming, opting for school and district-wide programs to better meet student needs, including those of the lowest-achieving students. Finally, districts used Title I resources to hire data coaches or specialists to lead a collaborative review of student performance data with teachers, or paid for professional development opportunities for teachers to conduct data analysis themselves. This was done so districts could document and better understand which students were most in need of intervention services. Statewide findings were substantiated by in-depth case studies of school districts, including Westfield, Stoughton, and Dedham.⁶ The chart below highlights how these districts are using Title I funds to address local needs.

| Use of Title I Funds to Support Comprehensive Strategies | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Westfield</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading interventions for all elementary students identified as needing additional support Student mentor program with academic and social/emotional support for at-risk students Extended day program in two schools providing interventions and academic support in math and literacy to identified low-achieving students | <p>Stoughton</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extended day and year programs for students in the lowest-performing elementary school, with an option for other district students to participate Pre-kindergarten program for students in the lowest-performing school attendance area Behavior, curriculum, and data specialist positions to support teachers in the lowest-performing school | <p>Dedham</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded access to an academic summer program for at-risk students across the district After-school support for two Level 2 elementary schools not considered Title I Extended day program for half-day kindergarten students |

Strategies for Implementation

The decision-making processes of the districts in the case study are particularly instructive, given that the approaches documented mirror those of other districts. These findings may be helpful to other districts as they consider which programs to implement or expand to improve student outcomes.

Districts used federal resources in ways that aligned with existing district strategic plans. Many districts used new flexibility provisions to expand existing programs to more schools and/or students in the district. District administrators from study districts articulated the alignment between expanded programming and clearly articulated district priorities.

Districts relied on student performance data to identify low-achieving students for additional instructional support. Districts have come to use student performance data extensively in an effort to ensure the lowest-achieving students participate in interventions aimed at improving performance. All case study districts had, or were actively implementing, a common process for reviewing performance data to identify low-achieving students for support.

Central office and school leadership collaborated with school-level teams to make decisions about resource use. District administrators described collaborative decision-making processes. Although each process was different, all districts reported involving central office and school leadership with school-level instructional teams to determine programming.

Conclusion

The conversation on how best to use existing resources to help the lowest-achieving students in each district will likely remain a critical component of district planning processes in years to come. The study summarized in this brief demonstrates that using broad-based decision-making processes informed by data and involving multiple stakeholders can help districts restructure investments in teaching and learning to effectively service students.

¹ Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (Fall 2013). *ESEA Flexibility Study*. MA: Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2013-12FlexibilityStudy.pdf>.

² Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Conditions for School Effectiveness. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/general/>

³ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012). *Title I / Federal Support Programs*. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/titlei/default.html>

⁴ Title IIA 's purpose is to increase student achievement through comprehensive district initiatives that focus on the preparation, training, recruitment, and retention of highly qualified educators. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/educators/title-ia/>

⁵ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. *ESEA Flexibility Changes to School & District Accountability and Assistance, April 2012*. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/titlei/esea/ESEA-flexibility-overview.pdf>.

⁶ Full research report includes case studies of Dedham, Southbridge, Stoughton, and Westfield. Retrieved from: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2013-12FlexibilityStudy.pdf>.