

NCLB AND SCHOOL PLANNING

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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C. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

C-1. What must the school do when it is identified for improvement?

The process of school improvement begins with the school developing a required two-year plan that addresses the academic issues that caused it to be identified for school improvement. The school may develop a new plan or revise an existing one, but in either case it must be completed no later than three months after the school has been identified. §200.41

C-2. What is the purpose of the school improvement plan?

The purpose of the school improvement plan is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the school, so that greater numbers of students achieve proficiency in the core academic subjects of reading and mathematics. The school improvement plan provides a framework for analyzing problems and addressing instructional issues in a school that has not made sufficient progress in student achievement.

C-3. What topics must the plan address?

Together, the components of the school improvement plan should embody a design that is comprehensive, highly structured, specific, and focused primarily on the school's instructional program. Specifically, the plan's design must address:

- core academic subjects and the strategies used to teach them,
- professional development,
- technical assistance,
- parent involvement, and must contain
- measurable goals.

The plan should also specify the implementation responsibilities of the school, the LEA, and the SEA serving the school. §1116(b)(3)(A)

C-4. How must the plan address the school's core academic subjects and instructional strategies?

The school improvement plan must demonstrate that the school will implement policies and practices grounded in scientifically based research that are most likely to bring all groups of students to proficiency in reading and mathematics. Included among these strategies, as appropriate, would be additional learning activities for students that take place before school, after school, during the summer, and during any extension of the school year. §1116(b)(3)(A); §200.41

For schools in need of improvement, scientifically based research provides a standard by which the principal and teachers can critically evaluate the many instructional strategies and programs that are available to them and choose those with the greatest likelihood of producing positive results.

C-5. What are examples of instructional strategies grounded in scientifically based research?

Strategies grounded in scientifically based research are those that have demonstrated, over time and in varied settings, an effectiveness that is documented by high-quality educational research. High-quality scientifically based research employs an experimental or quasi-experimental design and produces replicable results, confirmed by peer review, that can be applied to the general population. For example, scientifically based research has shown that explicit instruction in (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) vocabulary development, (4) reading fluency, and (5) reading comprehension is effective in teaching reading to students in grades K-3. Strategies that apply this research in a classroom setting would be grounded in scientifically based research.

Scientifically based research uses rigorous and systematic procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge about "what works." The application of systematic, empirical methods, rigorous data analyses, and an experimental design using randomized trials ensures a high degree of confidence in the results. A complete definition of scientifically based research can be found in section 9101(37) of the reauthorized ESEA.

C-6. What are examples of policies and practices with the greatest likelihood of ensuring that all groups of students achieve proficiency?

Policies and practices with the greatest likelihood of ensuring that all students achieve proficiency are those that affect the school's teaching and learning program, both directly and indirectly. Policies and practices that have an impact on classrooms include those that build school infrastructures, such as regular data analysis, the involvement of teachers and parents in decision-making, and the allocation of resources to support core goals. Other policies and practices that have a more direct effect on student achievement include the choice of instructional programs and materials, the use of instructional time, and improved use of assessment results. Decisions about the specific policies and practices to be implemented should be based on a thoughtful review and analysis of the individual school's needs.

C-7. Can a school identified for improvement implement a comprehensive school reform model as a part of its school improvement plan?

In calling for the use of strategies based on scientifically based research, the ESEA specifically states that a school can implement a comprehensive school reform model as a part of its improvement plan. Adopting a comprehensive reform model can be an effective strategy, especially if the school in improvement is in search of an external structure and technical assistance that will help it identify and address organizational and instructional issues. However, a model alone cannot address all of the identified needs of a school and cannot substitute for a coherent plan for systemic change. The implementation of a comprehensive school reform model, or any other program, must be viewed as one strategy, albeit an important one, in a school's comprehensive plan for improvement.

C-8. Why must the plan address professional development?

The academic success of students correlates highly with the qualifications and skills of their teachers. Although by the end of the 2005-06 school year all teachers must be highly qualified, ongoing professional development is crucial to ensure their continuous improvement in the instructional skills needed to help all students meet or exceed proficiency targets on State academic assessments.

C-9. What kinds of professional development should be provided?

The professional development component of the school improvement plan should directly address the academic achievement problems that caused the school to

be identified. In most cases, this professional training will focus on the teaching and learning process, such as increasing content knowledge, the use of scientifically based instructional strategies, especially in core academic subjects, and the alignment of classroom activities with academic content standards and assessments. Another example of useful professional development would be training teachers to analyze classroom and school-level data and use it to inform their instruction. The professional development detailed in the school improvement plan must be provided in a manner that affords increased opportunity for teachers to participate, and must incorporate teacher mentoring activities or programs. §1116(b)(3)(A)(iii)(III) and (x);§200.41

C-10. Why must the school improvement plan contain provisions for teacher mentoring?

This requirement reflects statutory and regulatory support not only for recruiting and hiring highly qualified teachers, but for strategies to retain them. Currently many teachers leave the profession within five years of beginning their teaching careers. Mentoring programs pair novice teachers with more experienced professionals who serve as role models and provide practical support and encouragement. High-quality, structured mentoring programs have a positive effect on the retention of qualified teachers.

C-11. What is the source of funding for the professional development detailed in the school improvement plan?

A school identified for improvement must spend not less than 10 percent of its allocation of Title I Part A funds, for each fiscal year that the school is in improvement, for the purpose of providing high-quality professional development to the school's teachers, principal and, as appropriate, other instructional staff. The school improvement plan must provide an assurance that this expenditure will take place. §1116(b)(3)(iii)

C-12. What is "high-quality" professional development?

"High-quality" professional development is professional development as defined in the reauthorized ESEA (section 9101(34)). In general, the definition recommends professional development that is sustained and classroom-focused. It must contribute to an increase both in teachers' knowledge of the academic subjects they teach and in their use of effective, scientifically based instructional strategies with a diverse range of students. It must be provided over time and not take the form of one-day or short-term workshops. High-quality professional development is an integral part of effective improvement plans, at both the school and LEA levels.

C-13. How must the school improvement plan address parental involvement?

The school improvement plan must address parental involvement in two ways. First, it must describe how the school will provide the parents of each student enrolled with written notice about the school's identification for improvement. Second, the plan must specify the strategies that will be used to promote parental involvement. Effective strategies will engage parents as partners with teachers in educating their children and will involve them in meaningful decision-making at the school. §1116(b)(3)(A)(vi) and (viii)

C-14. Why must a school improvement plan contain measurable goals?

By establishing measurable goals, a school in improvement clearly articulates the purposes and intended outcomes of its improvement plan. In addition, the goals provide a means of tracking the school's progress over the two years of the plan.

Since schools identified as in need of improvement already have a history of not meeting the academic needs of all of their students, it is especially important in this plan that their goals are clear and are tightly focused on the fundamental teaching and learning issues that have prevented the school from making adequate progress. The measurable goals must promote continuous and substantial progress to ensure that students in each subgroup enrolled in the school meet the State's annual measurable objectives.

The ultimate purpose of setting and achieving measurable goals is to improve student academic achievement, remove the identified school from school improvement status, and build its capacity to continue to make adequate yearly progress in the future. §200.41(c)(4)

C-15. If the school identified for improvement has an existing plan, must it create a new plan to meet the school improvement requirements?

No. A school with an existing plan may use the three months after it is identified to review and revise it to ensure that the plan incorporates the required statutory elements. However, for any plan to serve as a useful tool for improvement, it must address identified needs, contain realistic goals and strategies, and reflect the commitment of staff, students, parents, and community to its implementation. If the existing plan has not served as a functional tool for improving student achievement, the school and its students might be better served by beginning the planning process again, assessing needs, and creating a realistic plan that can and will be implemented and has a high likelihood of increasing student achievement.

C-16. Who must be involved in developing the school improvement plan?

In developing or revising its plan, the school must consult with parents, school staff, the LEA, and outside experts. Ideally these outside experts will serve as technical assistants and partners with the school throughout the plan's implementation. §200.41

C-17. What is the review process for the school improvement plan?

Peer reviewers must consider a proposed plan for school improvement within 45 days of its submission, through a process established by the LEA. The LEA should involve as peer reviewers teachers and administrators from schools or districts similar to the one in improvement, but significantly more successful in meeting the learning needs of their students. Staff with demonstrated effectiveness and recognized expertise in school improvement will be able to evaluate the plan's quality and the likelihood of its successful implementation, and make suggestions for revisions. §1116(b)(3)(E)

C-18. Under what timeline must the LEA approve the school improvement plan?

Once the peer review of the proposed plan has been completed, the LEA must work with the school to make any necessary revisions and must approve the plan as soon as it satisfactorily meets the requirements detailed in the statute and regulations. It is essential that the school draft the plan, and the LEA revise and approve it, as expeditiously as possible since it provides the blueprint for changes designed to dramatically improve the academic achievement of all students.

C-19. May the LEA condition its approval of a school improvement plan?

Yes. Once the LEA has conducted a peer review of the proposed school improvement plan, it may approve the plan with conditions it deems necessary to ensure the plan's successful implementation. For instance, the LEA may condition its approval on feedback on the plan from parents and community leaders. The LEA may also choose to approve the plan on the condition that the school undergoes one or more corrective actions. These corrective actions can include implementing a new curriculum with appropriate professional development, significantly decreasing school-level management authority, or changing the internal organization of the school.

C-20. According to what timeline must the school improvement plan be implemented?

In order to realize improvement as quickly as possible, a school must implement its new or revised school improvement plan as soon as the LEA approves it, preferably during the school year in which the identification was made and no later than the beginning of the school year following its identification for improvement.

D. Technical Assistance

D-1. What is the LEA's responsibility for providing technical assistance to a school in improvement?

The LEA bears the primary responsibility for ensuring that the school in improvement receives technical assistance, as it develops or revises its school plan and throughout the plan's implementation. Technical assistance is practical advice offered by an expert source that addresses specific areas for improvement.

The LEA is not required to provide the technical assistance directly, although it may choose to do so. Other acceptable technical assistance providers include the SEA; an institution of higher education; a private, not-for-profit or for-profit organization; an educational service agency; or another entity with experience in helping schools improve academic achievement.

D-2. In what areas must the LEA assist a school in improvement?

Technical assistance for a school identified for improvement must focus on strengthening and improving the school's instructional program. It must help the school address the issues that caused it to make inadequate progress for two consecutive years. Specifically, the LEA must ensure that the school in need of improvement receives technical assistance based on scientifically based research in three areas:

- Data analysis: the LEA must help the school to analyze results from the State assessment system and other relevant examples of student work. The LEA must teach school staff how to use these data to identify and solve problems in instruction; to strengthen parental involvement and professional development; and to fulfill other responsibilities that are defined in the school improvement plan.
- Identification and implementation of strategies: the LEA must help the school choose effective instructional strategies and methods and ensure that the

school staff receives high quality professional development relevant to their implementation. The chosen strategies must be grounded in scientifically based research and address the specific instructional issues that caused the school to be identified for improvement.

- Budget analysis: reallocating resources to support improved student achievement is crucial to the successful implementation of the initiatives contained in the No Child Left Behind Act. The LEA must provide the school in improvement with technical assistance in analyzing and revising its budget to fund activities most likely to increase student achievement and remove it from school improvement status. §1116(b)(4); §200.40(c)(1)

In all three of these areas, the LEA has the opportunity to support thoughtful analysis and capacity building at the local level, both of which will not only help schools to improve, but will also help them to sustain their improvements over time.

Source: LEA and School Improvement, Non-Regulatory Guidance, January 7, 2004