

# A Portrait of School Improvement Grantees

**In the last year, the federal government has invested \$3.5 billion dollars in an effort to fix the nation's bottom 5 percent of public schools. In the coming months, it will roll out another \$546 million dollars to do the same.**

The initiative is known as the School Improvement Grant, or SIG, program. It is the largest pot of federal funds ever aimed at improving a discrete set of the worst-performing schools. Whether this huge federal investment will pay off remains to be seen. There is nothing easy about reforming schools.

The SIG program is not the first federal investment in fixing low-performing schools, but it does represent a new approach, one that, if the Obama administration prevails, will find its way into the long overdue reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government's most recent approach, relies exclusively on absolute measures of proficiency to measure school performance, SIG allows states to choose their most troubled schools based on their own formulas that combine absolute proficiency with measures of student learning growth over time. School districts then compete for SIG funds, unlike the more typical formula-based distribution of dollars under Title I of ESEA. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has criticized NCLB because it might soon identify over 80 percent of the nation's schools as "failing" and in need of reform.<sup>2</sup> The SIG program, by contrast, allows states to target resources and reforms on only the neediest schools.

SIG grantees are eligible for up to an unprecedented \$6 million dollars per school over a three-year period to implement one of four prescribed models: school **closure**, **restart** as a charter school, **turnaround** through replacing the principal and 50 percent of the instructional staff, or **transformation**, which requires implementing a slate of reforms. None of the SIG reform models has an unvarnished track record, and none has been implemented at this scale. The timelines for implementation and improvement are demanding and, given the history of federal school turnaround efforts, arguably unrealistic.<sup>3</sup>

This Education Sector Chart You Can Trust takes an early look at how the \$3.5 billion has been allocated and how it is being used. So far, 843 schools from 49 states and the District of Columbia have been selected as SIG grantees, and the combined grants are expected to serve 594,117 students.<sup>4</sup> What do these schools look like? What reform models have they chosen?





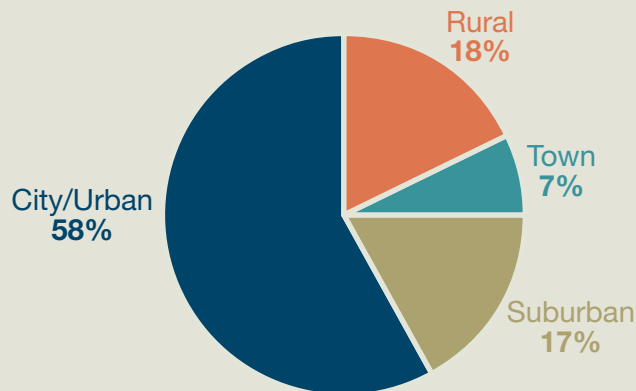
schools), select the model and click on the highlight button in the left hand corner. To return to the original map, unclick the highlight button.

Nationwide, many SIG grantees look a lot like the schools that typically receive the majority of federal dollars—large, low-performing, traditional public schools that are highly segregated, low-income, and in urban areas. Of the 843 SIG schools across the country, more than half have African-American/Latino populations that are 86 percent or higher; the median free/reduced lunch rate is 78 percent; and around 58 percent of the schools are located in urban areas.

But that is not the complete picture of America's lowest-performing schools. A substantial proportion of schools are in rural (18 percent) or suburban (17 percent) areas or in towns (7 percent).<sup>6</sup> (See **Chart 1**.) The SIG program signals a shift toward prioritizing high-poverty rural schools. Typically, rural schools receive fewer Title I dollars than their urban counterparts because funding formulas favor wealthier states with larger urban districts.<sup>7</sup> While urban schools have greater access to programs like private foundation grants and urban-specific programs, rural schools, often located in the poorest school districts, lack the capacity and resources to tackle expensive large-scale school reform.

CHART 1

Most grantees are city/urban schools, but not all of them.

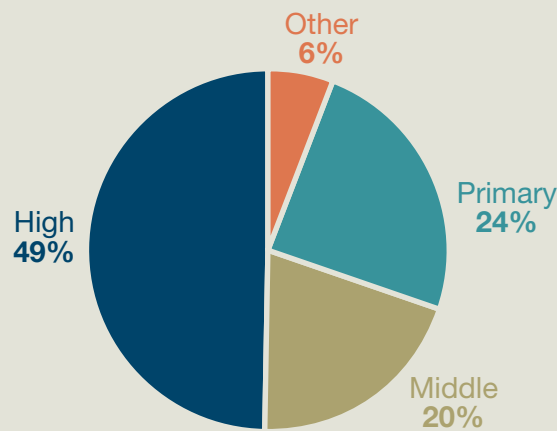


**Note:** The definitions for "urbanicity" come from the National Center for Education Statistics' urban-centric locale code, which classifies territory into four major types: city, suburban, town, and rural. You can find more information about NCES locale codes at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/handbook/data/pdf/appendix\\_d.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/handbook/data/pdf/appendix_d.pdf).

Generally, larger schools are associated with poorer student performance, but the distribution of school enrollment numbers varied among the grantees. The average student enrollment for a SIG grantee is 704 students. While 176 grantees—mostly high schools—enroll more than 1,000 students, 41 grantees enroll fewer than 100 students. The smallest school, Pryor 7–8, a junior high in rural southern Montana, has only 14 students and will receive \$134,368 for its first year of school improvement, or about 9,598 SIG dollars on average per student.<sup>8</sup> On the flip side, the largest school, Rancho High School in North Las Vegas, will receive \$1,002,023 in its first year for its 3,644 students—a mere \$275 per student.<sup>9</sup>

## CHART 2

## Nearly half of grantees are high schools.



**Note:** We used the NCES categories for school level. The NCES calculates a school's corresponding codes based on the lowest grade and highest grade offered.

1 = Primary (low grade = PK through 03; high grade = PK through 08)

2 = Middle (low grade = 04 through 07; high grade = 04 through 09)

3 = High (low grade = 07 through 12; high grade = 12 only)

4 = Other (any other configuration not falling within the above three categories, including ungraded).

You can find more information at the Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey, 2008–09, <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/data/txt/psu081blay.txt>.

Almost half (49 percent) of the SIG recipients are high schools. (See [Chart 2](#).) This also signals a shift in the distribution of federal grant dollars, which typically go toward elementary schools in the form of Title 1 money. Many high schools became eligible to receive SIG awards after the Department of Education issued a waiver that allowed high schools with low graduation rates (below 60 percent average over three years) to receive the grants as Tier II schools. Middle schools make up 20 percent of the schools receiving grants while elementary schools (which can include a few middle school grades) make up nearly a quarter (24 percent) of the schools. The remaining 6 percent represents schools that don't neatly fit into the categories, mostly small schools serving K-12 grades and credit recovery programs that allow students to earn high school credits in a shorter period of time.

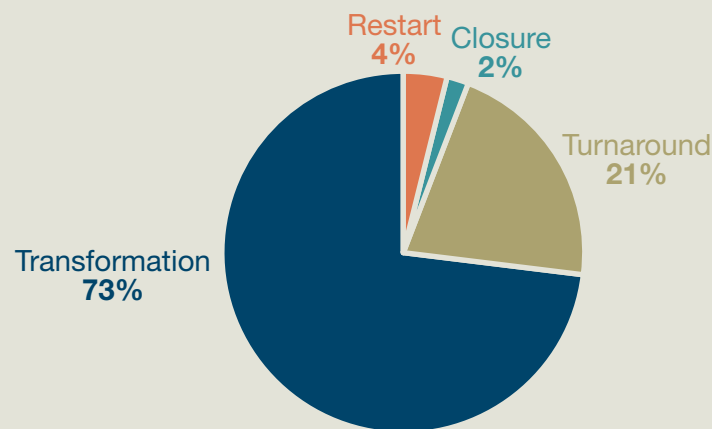
The 414 SIG high schools represent the federal government's first attempt to actively target the nation's "dropout factories." These are schools much like North Carolina's Goldsboro High School which, in its application, highlighted its high population with special needs (15 percent), a high poverty rate of 83 percent, and a graduation rate of 45 percent in 2009.<sup>10</sup> Despite a long list of reforms over the years, from reading interventions to learning coaches to small learning communities, only about 32 percent and 54 percent of the school's mostly poor and minority students are proficient in reading and math, respectively. After four years of low graduation rates and poor test scores, Goldsboro High School was labeled as one of the state's persistently failing schools, making it eligible for SIG funds.

## The Reform Model of Choice

Despite their diversity, roughly 73 percent of SIG schools selected the same model — transformation. (See [Chart 3](#).) In fact, transformation was the exclusive model in 15 states: Arkansas, Delaware, Iowa, Montana, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Districts are required to justify their choice to state education agencies in their applications. Often, districts cited the use of research-based strategies as the primary reason, but given the short time frame for applications (states had as little as three months to apply), and the difficult and seemingly drastic nature of the other models, many districts may have seen the transformation model as the easiest one to implement. Indeed, only 21 percent of the schools chose the turnaround model, which required a major staffing overhaul. Bringing in help from the outside through the restart model was an even less popular choice, accounting for only 4 percent of the total.

CHART 3

### Which reform models are most popular?

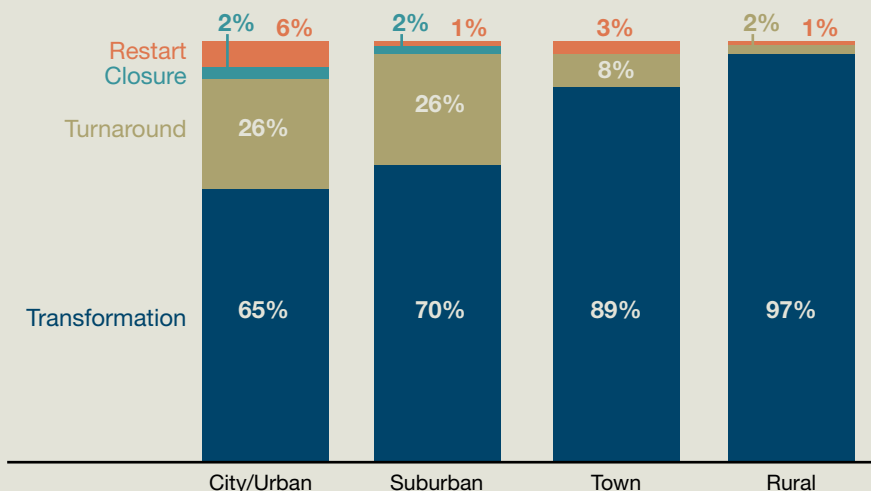


Least popular of all was the choice for school closure, which amounted to a mere 2 percent of the total, revealing the reluctance of most school districts to shut down their lowest-performing schools. Wisconsin has the most closures, with Milwaukee Public Schools shutting down four high schools, including three charter schools. Notably, the Milwaukee School Board had already decided to close two of those schools, W.E.B. DuBois High School and Foster and Williams Visual Communications Campus, before the state announced its list of SIG grantees.<sup>11</sup> Out of the 19 schools across the country shutting down, most requested help with transition costs like transferring student records, moving, community notification and outreach, scheduling, and severance payouts for teachers. South Carolina's Spartanburg School District Seven, for instance, plans to close Myles W. Whitlock Junior High due to low achievement and declining enrollment and plans to use half of its requested funds for severance pay and benefits for eight teachers and three aides who will not be placed in positions within the district.<sup>12</sup>

Two districts chose a combination of the models to fit their particular needs. Thornridge High School in Dolton, Ill., for example, combined closure and transformation models. It will reassign students in grades 10–12 next year to other schools and will reopen as a freshman academy for all district students.<sup>13</sup> Lake Middle School, the lowest-performing middle school in Denver, chose a creative combination of restart and turnaround. It plans to split SIG funds between two separate schools that are located in the same building. One of the schools will implement a “restart” through West Denver Prep, a charter school organization, and the other will “turnaround” its existing International Baccalaureate program.<sup>14</sup>

CHART 4

## City/urban grantees have more reform options.



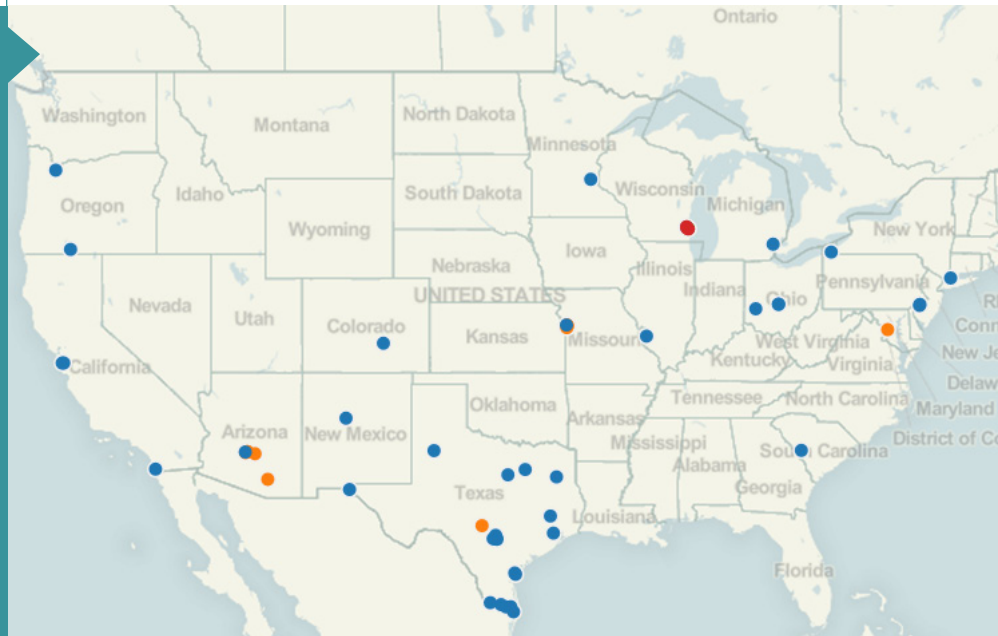
When looking at the distribution of model types throughout the country, urban districts and schools appear to have an advantage. All of the reform models are represented in urban schools, but in rural schools, for instance, there is a concentration of the transformation model. (See [Chart 4](#).) In part, this is because urban districts are better able to relocate students to another school, attract a charter management organization, or hire a new principal and staff. Schools in more remote locations face limited pools for hiring and fewer partnership opportunities and are left with only one real practical option—transformation. Imagine trying to implement the closure model in Akiachak School, the only K-12 school in rural Akiachak, Alaska, a town with 585 people and limited access to running water. The turnaround model would be equally challenging for this school, which already struggles to attract and retain teachers in this remote village.<sup>15</sup> But the distribution across models is also owed to the federal grant requirement that districts with more than nine Tier 1 or Tier II schools could only choose transformation for 50 percent of its schools, forcing urban districts to select other models.<sup>16</sup>

## A Few Surprises

Most SIG grantees are traditional public schools, but the 843 schools selected so far also include 56 charter schools in 15 states as indicated by this [interactive map](#), which filters out the charter schools and plots their location. Charter schools

### MAP 2

## Location of SIG grantee charter schools.



are often touted as the solution to fixing low-performing schools. They are granted greater autonomy, or the ability to implement a variety of reforms, in exchange for greater accountability and sanctions. Thus, in theory, it should not only be easy to shut down a low-performing charter, but it should be expected that low-performing charters will be closed. Yet, the presence of charter schools among a state's worst performers illustrates the variability in their performance. And their presence among SIG grantees illustrates an overall resistance to closing schools, regardless of how or by whom they are governed. Milwaukee Public Schools, for instance, is the only district that moved to close its three lowest-performing charter schools. Around 75 percent of the identified charter schools chose the transformation model, subscribing to many of the same reforms (such as extended learning time or more rigorous school evaluations) that charter schools often deploy to differentiate themselves from public schools in the first place. Notably, of the 56 charter schools receiving funds, 22 (nearly 40 percent) are charter schools from Texas, which has seen tremendous growth in charter schools over the last decade, but also varying degrees of performance.

In addition to funding schools that in theory should already be closed, the SIG program offers no guarantee that funds are reaching the neediest or the least-resourced schools. The Stanford New School, a charter school created and supervised by Stanford University's School of Education, is projected to receive over \$3 million in SIG funds over the next three years. The charter school already

receives \$3,000 more per-pupil than the state average along with supplemental services from Stanford University, including enrichment activities, tutoring, and medical supports.<sup>17</sup> A private grant has already enabled the school to add an additional seventh period, a two-week transition program for ninth-graders, and mental health services.<sup>18</sup> The SIG funds will be used to expand upon these privately supported programs at this already well-funded, well-supported school.

Our analysis also found at least four SIG grantees that are associated with Edison Learning, a for-profit education management company with an uneven track record of performance. After eight years of being managed by Edison Learning, two Philadelphia schools—Alain Locke School and James Alcorn School—were identified by the Pennsylvania Department of Education in the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state. (The Philadelphia Public Schools ended its relationship with Edison Learning and its school management services in district schools last June; both Locke and Alcorn will undergo transformation.) Yet, despite its poor track record in Philadelphia, Edison Learning is contracted to “restart” and manage two SIG grantees—Boushall Middle School and Armstrong High School in Richmond, Va.<sup>19</sup>

In announcing the newest round of state SIG funds currently being distributed to states, Secretary Duncan emphasized the SIG strategy and the new approach to improving schools: “When a school performs in the bottom 5 percent of the state and isn’t showing signs of progress or has a graduation rate below 60 percent over a number of years, something dramatic needs to be done.”<sup>20</sup> In the coming months, districts will apply for funds and a whole new slate of schools will be identified, likely mirroring the current profile of grantees. Whether or not the worst of the worst schools can turn themselves around is yet to be seen. But the Obama administration is banking on it, all in hopes that targeting the “hot spots,” or public education’s neediest schools, could spark enough change in actors throughout the system—teachers, principals, students, and parents—to alter the system as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

1. See the Obama administration’s “A Blueprint for Reform,” at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/publicationtoc.html>
2. In his March 9, 2011, testimony to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “Eighty-two percent of America’s schools could be labeled ‘failing’” under NCLB. Arne Duncan, “Winning the Future With Education: Responsibility, Reform and Results,” Oral Testimony to House Committee on Education and the Workforce, March 9, 2011.
3. Comprehensive School Reform, a program under NCLB, provided funding to low-achieving schools that used scientifically based research models to

overhaul the entire school. However, studies have found that CSR-awarded schools did not implement many of the mandated components and did not make significant achievement gains from comparable non-CSR-awarded schools. For more information about CSR, visit <http://www.wested.org/cs/view/rs/1023>.

4. We obtained the 843 number by accessing each state's announcement of SIG recipients and/or contacting state education agencies. We were not able to obtain Hawaii and the Bureau of Indian Education's lists of grantees. We then cross-checked this list of schools with the federal Department of Education's listing of schools published here, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sig-awarded-schools.pdf>. That list does not include Tennessee, Montana, Florida, New Hampshire, Louisiana, Idaho, Hawaii, the Bureau of Indian Education, and District of Columbia schools. The number of students expected to be served is based on NCES enrollment data.
5. In identifying the 5 percent of the lowest-performing schools, states could use their own formula. The federal Department of Education offered guidance, but largely left the calculation up to the states. States could pick as many years and apply weights, but they were required to combine growth over time and achievement along with graduation rates over three years for high schools. Most states used the Department of Education's suggested options: the added-ranks and the single-percentage method. Other states, like Colorado, received approval for different formulas involving respective growth models. For more information about the suggested department guidelines in determining definitions, visit the Department of Education's Guidance on School Improvement Grants under Section 1003(g), at [www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/guidance20100120.doc](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/guidance20100120.doc). You can find the definition that states used by reading the state's application, at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/summary2010/index.html>.
6. The definitions for "urbanicity" come from the National Center for Education Statistics' urban-centric locale code. According to the NCES, "the urban-centric locale code system classifies territory into four major types: city, suburban, town, and rural. Each type has three subcategories. For city and suburb, these are gradations of size—large, midsize, and small. Towns and rural areas are further distinguished by their distance from an urbanized area. They can be characterized as "fringe, distant, or remote." For analytical purposes, we grouped schools according to their types rather than differentiating the subcategories. You can find more information about NCES locale codes at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/handbook/data/pdf/appendix\\_d.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/handbook/data/pdf/appendix_d.pdf).
7. For more information about rural school inequities in Title I funding, see the Rural and Community Trust at <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2312/>.
8. Montana Office of Public Instruction, "Title I School Improvement Grants Sec. 1003(g) Currently Served Tier I Schools, School Year 2010-2011," <http://opi.mt.gov/PDF/TitleI/SIP/SY-2010-11-CURRENTLY-SERVED-TITLE-I-SIG.pdf> (accessed March 10, 2011).

9. "Nevada SIG Funding Summary Award," Nevada Department of Education, August 8, 2010, <http://www.nv.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=4294967532> (accessed March 11, 2011).
10. Wayne County Public Schools, "Local Education Agency Applications for 1003(g)," Public Schools of North Carolina, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/program-monitoring/grants/descriptions/wayne.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2011).
11. Erin Richards, "MPS Targets Weakest Schools in Bid for Federal Funds," *Journal-Sentinel*, March 12, 2010, <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/87423117.html> (accessed March 2, 2011).
12. Spartanburg School District 7, "School Improvement Grant Application Revision," South Carolina Department of Education, September 27, 2010, [http://ed.sc.gov/agency/Accountability/Federal-and-State-Accountability/old/fp/title\\_i/documents/Spartanburg7.pdf](http://ed.sc.gov/agency/Accountability/Federal-and-State-Accountability/old/fp/title_i/documents/Spartanburg7.pdf) (accessed March 17, 2011).
13. Thornton Township High School District 205, "FY 2011 ARRA, School Improvement Grant-Section 1003(g)," Illinois State Board of Education, June 24, 2010, [http://www.isbe.net/sos/sig1003g/funded\\_fy11/school\\_proposals/thornridge\\_hs\\_thornton\\_proposal.pdf](http://www.isbe.net/sos/sig1003g/funded_fy11/school_proposals/thornridge_hs_thornton_proposal.pdf) (accessed March 11, 2011).
14. Denver Public Schools, "Tiered Intervention Grant," Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Education, May 2010, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/turnaround/downloads/DPSFullApplication.pdf> (accessed on March 10, 2011).
15. Yupiit School District, "Akiachak School: LEA School Improvement Grants 1003(g) Application Supplement Transformation Model," Alaska Department of Education, <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/stim/pdf/AkiachakSchoolApp.pdf>, (accessed March 28, 2011).
16. H-17, LEA Requirements, "Guidance on Fiscal Year 2010 School Improvement Grants Under Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965," U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sigguidance11012010.pdf>, (accessed March 11, 2011).
17. Carol Pogash, "Charter Extension Denied to Low-Scoring Stanford School," *New York Times*, April 15, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/16/education/16sfcharter.html>, (accessed March 10, 2011).
18. Stanford New School, "School Improvement Grant: Application for Funding," California Department of Education, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/documents/sig10stanford.pdf>, (accessed on March 11, 2011).
19. Richmond Public Schools, "1003(g) Application for School Improvement Funds," Virginia Department for Education, June 14, 2010, [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/school\\_improvement/title1/1003\\_g/div\\_apps/richmond\\_city.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/school_improvement/title1/1003_g/div_apps/richmond_city.pdf), (accessed March 17, 2011).
20. Department of Education, Press Release, "Illinois to Receive \$22.1 Million to Turn Around Its Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools" (March 17, 2011),

<http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/illinois-receive-221-million-turn-around-its-persistently-lowest-achieving-school>

21. Atul Gawande, "The Hotspotters," *New Yorker*, January 24, 2011. Gawande describes a similar theory of system improvement in health care, which involves targeting the neediest patients or "hot spots."

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Padmini Jambulapati is a research assistant at Education Sector. She can be reached at [pjambulapati@educationsector.org](mailto:pjambulapati@educationsector.org).

#### ABOUT EDUCATION SECTOR

Education Sector is an independent think tank that challenges conventional thinking in education policy. We are a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to achieving measurable impact in education, both by improving existing reform initiatives and by developing new, innovative solutions to our nation's most pressing education problems.