



Expert: Large-scale school improvement possible

Along with increasing high school graduation rates in recent years, K-12 stakeholders have seen "enormous expansion of the knowledge base about what matters most for student success and school improvement," according to Mariana Haynes, senior fellow with the [Alliance for Excellent Education](#).

During a recent Alliance webinar on leveraging innovation to increase educational attainment, Haynes pointed out that although the nation recently reported the highest-ever overall graduation rate of 81 percent in 2012, that leaves almost 20 percent of students who do not from graduate from high school on time in an era when family-sustaining jobs increasingly require postsecondary education or training.

Still, within that context, "Large-scale improvements for outcomes in our public schools are possible," said Robert Balfanz, principal investigator and researcher with the [Center for the Social Organization of Schools](#) at the [Johns Hopkins University School of Education](#). Balfanz, who is also director of the Everyone Graduates Center, pointed out that in 10 years, the U.S. graduation rate went from its lowest to highest rate.

When educators "infuse the school" with capacity indicators allowing them to "fine-tune supports" for students driven by early warning indicators and work with community partners on student supports, schools can tackle continuous improvement rather than "one-shot, one-model" initiatives, Balfanz said.

His research has focused on responding to early warning indicators based on attendance, achievement, and discipline to get at-risk middle and high school students on a supported path to graduation. Balfanz added that graduation rate progress was "substantially better" in states that worked hardest on turnaround.

"There is an argument for a strong federal role, because they can help shine the spotlight on the places that need to make more progress and help connect with places" that have seen gains in student achievement and graduation rates, Balfanz said.

The [Education Department](#) recently released new guidance allowing [School Improvement Grant](#) funds for evidence-based whole-school models. ED has used a "tiered approach" by supporting programs that have varying degrees of evidence supporting practice, said Scott Sargrad, deputy assistant secretary for policy and strategic initiatives in the [Office of Elementary and Secondary Education](#).

The tiered approach "has been a really interesting way for us to both incentivize the development of evidence at those lower levels and also support the scaling of practices and strategies" from schools with a larger evidence base, Sargrad said.

While SIG funds go to the lowest-performing schools, "you really need to have a strong district role that is thinking systemically about turning around these schools," Sargrad said. "You really do need a strong district role."

He added that ED has tried to make sure that LEAs are aligning district-level resources with school-level interventions and modifying policies and practices to support school level reforms.

ED has sought increased funding for the Investing in Innovation program and included language in the FY 2016 budget proposal for schools to use their existing federal formula funds for activities with an evidence base. The budget also requested increased funds for SIG specifically focused on evidence- based activities. Sargrad added, "We'd love to see something like that get into [ESEA] reauthorization."

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