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How States Are Tackling School Improvement

A Sandler Foundation-funded report by RAND Education, “Federal and State Roles and Capacity for Improving Schools,” included an examination of 15 states that have formally evaluated their ongoing school improvement policies or practices. RAND found that states have a broad range of approaches that have had varying degrees of effectiveness, but no model has demonstrated a proven enough track record to warrant widespread adoption. For example:

- **Introducing state improvement frameworks** has proven to be a good a starting place to implement reform on a large scale, but the frameworks do not by themselves lead to improvement.
- **Providing targeted financial assistance to low-performing schools** may work, but states lack organizational infrastructure to ensure that strategies are sustained.
- **Assuming state responsibility for assisting low-performing schools** through direct assistance or intermediary organizations and external providers has had mixed success; obstacles have included state capacity challenges, the insufficient availability of expert partners and teacher resistance. The approach has worked well in Idaho and Kentucky, however, where individual experts work with low-performing schools.
- **Efforts to bolster principal and teacher quality in low-performing schools**, including mentoring for new teachers and coaching for principals have shown encouraging, but not conclusive, evidence of improvement in a few states.
- **Use of public report cards to track or grade school performance** in some states has helped schools move off the list of chronically low-performers when the schools have used the information as a catalyst to change policies and practices. In other states, however, as many schools have remained on the improvement list as have moved off.

RAND’s study concluded that a need remains for continued state experimentation in developing approaches that effectively improve schools. It also recommends that federal policy should support more experimentation, evaluation, and dissemination of new knowledge.
