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CONTACT: Ali Diallo, 301-656-0348, Ali@thehatchergroup.com

Recovery Act Funding Refocuses School Improvement Grants in Michigan, Though School Officials Report Implementation Challenges

Boost in funding from federal stimulus aid helping Michigan low-achieving schools get on track

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Feb. 23, 2011 – Select low-performing schools in Michigan are receiving much larger and more focused school improvement grants (SIGs) than before as a result of additional SIG funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), according to a new report released Wednesday by the Center on Education Policy. These schools face challenges, however, in using the funds in accordance with federal requirements and timelines.

The report, *Changing Tires En Route: Michigan Rolls Out Millions in School Improvement Grants*, takes an early look at implementation of the ARRA SIG funding in Michigan. The state is using its ARRA SIG allotment of \$115 million to provide a smaller group of schools than in the past—the “persistently lowest-achieving”—with average federal grants of roughly 20 times Michigan’s previous maximum SIG award. These funds are to be used to carry out intensive reforms in school years 2010-11 through 2012-13.

“Since school districts in Michigan received their SIG funds in the fall, there is a high expectation that reform efforts will be quickly implemented over the next few years,” said Jack Jennings, the president and CEO of the Center on Education Policy. “The challenge will be to allocate these new resources to priority areas of school improvement.”

The report looks at the process used to identify schools eligible for ARRA SIGs. Based on state test results and graduation data from 2008-09, as well as current achievement status, 108 Michigan schools were identified for the first round of SIGs. Among these schools, 72 percent were in urban districts, 21 percent in suburban districts, and 7 percent in rural districts. Over half (56 percent) were traditional high schools, which is a greater share of high schools than the group of schools previously identified for restructuring, the final stage of No Child Left Behind improvement.

The greater emphasis on high schools is consistent with new SIG eligibility criteria that give funding priority to certain low-performing high schools that were not eligible for school improvement grants prior to ARRA, as well as to persistently low-achieving schools in general.

Schools awarded SIGs must choose one of four school improvement models. The most popular, chosen by 68 percent of Michigan school grantees, is the transformation model. It requires schools to undertake a combination of four reforms—replacing the principal and taking steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; instituting comprehensive instructional reforms; increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools; and providing

operational flexibility and sustained support. About one-third of schools chose to use the turnaround model, which involves replacing half or more of the school staff as well as the principal.

In addition to awarding ARRA SIGs to districts for their low-achieving schools, the state provides technical assistance to schools in the form of mentors and facilitator/monitors to ensure money is used efficiently, along with a partnership network composed of state officials and district and school leaders. Michigan schools are also expected to contract for additional support with external providers, which include a mix of for-profit, nonprofit and government entities.

In case studies of three Michigan schools—Lincoln High School (Van Dyke Public Schools), Romulus Middle School (Romulus Community School District) and Phoenix Multi-Cultural Academy (Detroit Public Schools)—school officials and administrators who were interviewed said the SIGs and assistance they have received from the state have brought new focus to their school improvement efforts.

“What we had tried in the past was a loose framework,” said Donn Tiganelli, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for the Van Dyke district. “Now we use evidence-based interventions, progress monitoring and strategies that are defined, aligned, articulated in an evidence-based framework.”

However, officials at all three case study schools reported feeling challenged by the prescriptive nature of SIG requirements and the rapid application and implementation process. Other challenges varied by school and included difficulty in hiring qualified staff to fill new support positions, communication problems with the school district and challenges getting teachers’ buy-in for new reform approaches.

“It remains to be seen how effective this more prescriptive, more focused, and better funded approach to school improvement will be,” Jennings said.

The full report is available online at www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.