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Federal analysis of school grants shows mixed results

By [Lyndsey Layton](#), Published: November 21

A federal program that pumped a record \$5 billion into failing schools is showing mixed results, with students at more than one-third of the targeted schools doing the same or worse after the schools received the funding, according to [government data](#) released Thursday.

The Obama administration has handed out \$5.1 billion to states to improve academic performance at about 1,500 schools since 2009, the largest federal investment ever targeted at failing schools.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said in a statement that the numbers point toward success.

“The progress, while incremental, indicates that local leaders and educators are leading the way to raising standards and achievement and driving innovation over the next few years,” Duncan said. “To build on this success in our disadvantaged communities, we must expand the most effective practices to accelerate progress for students and prepare them for success in college and careers.”

Others called the data evidence that the heavy federal investment is a bust.

“The promise was dramatic, lasting change in turning around the nation’s worst 5,000 schools,” said Andrew Smarick, a former federal education official and a partner at Bellwether Education Partners, a consulting firm. “You can’t help but look at the results and be discouraged. . . . We didn’t spend \$5 billion of taxpayer money for incremental change.”

According to the data, students at about two-thirds of schools were more proficient on state reading and math tests in 2011-2012, compared to the year before their schools received the grants. But that progress was about the same made by students at all U.S. schools during the same period.

A significant number of schools that received School Improvement Grants — as many as half — were not included in the analysis for a variety of reasons, including missing data, the schools were shut down or the state tests were changed, making it impossible to compare scores over time.

If the data from those schools had been included in the analysis, the outcomes probably would have been

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worse, Smarick said.

A large chunk of the grant money came from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The School Improvement Grants had been part of No Child Left Behind, the 2002 federal law. But stimulus spending increased the budget for the grants sixfold.

Under the Obama administration, schools could receive up to \$2 million annually for three years. Any school accepting a grant had to agree to adopt one of four controversial strategies: Replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff; close the school and enroll students in another, better-performing school; close the school and reopen it as a charter school; or transform the school through new instructional strategies and other techniques.

But the strategy chosen by the school did not appear to make much difference in student proficiency rates, according to the federal analysis, as they all made about the same progress.

Rep. John Kline (R-Minn.), chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, said through a spokeswoman that the data show school improvement should be left to local leaders. "These tepid results underscore the limits of top-down mandates and the need for a new approach to education reform, one that allows state and local leaders to determine the best way to raise the bar in our schools," Kline said.

The government released data for two groups of schools — those that began receiving grants in the 2009-2010 school year and those that began receiving grants the following year. A department spokeswoman said the most recent data from schools receiving the federal grants, which would reflect student performance in the 2012-2013 school year, will be released next year.

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