

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: DEVELOPING STATE-LEVEL PRINCIPAL PIPELINES

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

To increase the number of principals with the skills to turn around schools, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) established the Delaware Leadership Project in 2010 as an alternative route to principal certification for teachers who aspire to lead the state’s lowest performing schools.<sup>1</sup>

## THE STRATEGY: Providing Residency Training and Summer Sessions for Aspiring Leaders

The Delaware Leadership Project is a 15-month fellowship program for aspiring principals that begins and ends with two full summers of training and includes a school-year residency during which candidates work under a mentor principal in a low-performing school. The program, which is free for participants, also leads to a principal certificate. Participants receive a stipend of up to \$65,000 based on their present salaries. The Leadership Project is funded through the state’s Race to the Top grant as well as two private foundations. Program graduates must make a commitment to work in one of Delaware’s low-performing schools for at least three years after completion of the program; however, there is no guarantee of a principal’s position at the end of the 15 months.

**Details About the Program.** The Leadership Project is operated by a nonprofit organization that has experience working with the state’s low-performing public and charter schools. DDOE opted for an external provider for the program (rather than an established educational institution such as a university or school district) to secure independence in the recruitment, selection, evaluation, and dismissal of candidates. The Leadership Project was designed in close partnership with staff from the New York City Leadership Academy, which has a decade of experience with new-leader training.

**Participants.** The Leadership Project is a highly selective program. Out of a pool of approximately 120 candidates, only a total of 12 became Fellows in the first two cohorts. DDOE determines the number of Fellows based on projected demand for leaders in high-need, low-performing schools and on funding availability. To recruit candidates, DDOE sponsors information sessions in schools across the state, sends letters to search agencies, holds superintendents-only webinars as well as open webinars, and advertises in educational journals such as *Education Week* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Approximately 60 percent of applicants are from Delaware. The Leadership Project seeks candidates who are current teachers (rather than current or former administrators, who are

### Delaware Public Schools at a Glance

**Start of SIG Implementation:** 2010–11

**Enrollment:** 128,946

**Free or Reduced-Price Lunch:** 49%

**Racial/Ethnic Composition:** 50% White, 32% Black, 13% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 2% Other, <1% American Indian

**English Learners:** 6%

**Students With Disabilities:** 15%

### Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Delaware

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	6	Elementary	1
Turnaround	0	Middle	0
Restart	0	High	5
Closure	0	Other	0

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eligible for the Delaware Academy for School Leadership, an executive leadership program at the University of Delaware that provides professional development to administrators who have been nominated by their districts).

*Minimum Requirements.* Candidates for the Leadership Project must have a master’s degree in any field from an accredited college or university, at least a 3.0 grade point average in their undergraduate and master’s degree programs, five years of teaching experience, and a willingness to commit in writing to working in a Delaware low-performing school for three years. Candidates also must provide evidence, such as student test data, showing that they made progress in closing the achievement gap in their schools. Candidates who meet these criteria but have unsatisfactory classroom observations or evaluation reviews are not invited to participate.

*Screening and Selection.* An interview team—representing the Leadership Project, DDOE, the New York City Leadership Academy, and current Delaware principals—conducts group interviews of the candidates. A subset of approximately 50 applicants then moves on to participate in individual interviews with two members of the interviewing team. Both interviews include simulations in which the aspiring principals explain how they might respond to various school-based scenarios. The interviewing team scores these situational responses using a rubric that includes the domains of personal behavior/resilience, problem solving/creativity, communication/group process, and management.

*Program Facilitators.* Leadership Project facilitators are assigned to a cohort of Fellows and participate in regular meetings throughout the program. They also serve as coaches during the Fellows’ residency and post-Fellowship school placement. Facilitators are former principals or other school administrators from Delaware and neighboring states, often with experience in low-performing schools and turnaround environments. Facilitators provide support for two years after their Fellows’ placements, serving as “confidential thought partners” to help program graduates reflect on their leadership practices.

*Oversight.* Although an external intermediary organization implements the Leadership Project, DDOE was involved in setting and reviewing the curriculum content in the early stages of the program. Now DDOE oversees the program at a higher level—setting benchmarks and monitoring progress. The intermediary organization gives progress updates during weekly phone calls with its liaison in DDOE’s Office of Teaching and Learning. The intermediary also provides quarterly written reports to DDOE and the Delaware Professional Standards Board, with data on recruitment, selection, student achievement, placement, and retention of its candidates in schools.

**Fellowship Training.** The Delaware Leadership Project provides training during two summer sessions and a school-year residency.

*Summer Curriculum.* During the first five-week summer session, the Leadership Project curriculum focuses on five domains: data analysis; school culture; culture of learning (standards, curriculum, and assessment); resource allocation; and capacity building. The curriculum is problem-based, providing Fellows with situational role-playing opportunities. Because DDOE provides data coaches to all schools to guide professional learning community meetings, the Leadership Project develops candidates’ abilities in reading and sharing data and using data to make decisions. In addition, the Leadership Project assigns a summer reading list of education books and research articles.<sup>2</sup>

*School Residency.* Fellows serve as administrators for 10 months in Delaware’s low-performing schools under the mentorship of experienced principals and with the ongoing engagement of Leadership Project facilitators.<sup>3</sup> During their residencies, Fellows design improvement projects for their host schools and also supervise teachers. The Leadership Project presses the Fellows to create improvement projects that will last beyond the Fellows’ residency in their schools. For example, one Fellow’s project focused on addressing the transition challenges a student faces when entering the middle school from its feeder elementary school. The Fellow formed a committee of district leaders and staff, middle and elementary school staff, and community members to develop a plan for smoother and more successful student transitions. As part of the supervisory training, the Leadership Project requires Fellows to identify

low-, average-, and high-performing teachers and provide targeted guidance to teachers on strategies to improve instructional practice at each performance level. Fellows are expected to illustrate how their supervision produced academic gains.

During the residency period, Fellows also attend leadership development sessions with facilitators twice a week (one full day and one evening) to discuss what they are learning about their practice. Leadership Project facilitators meet with mentor principals to make sure that both are coordinating their efforts to support their Fellows. Fellows also may attend state-provided professional development sessions typically reserved for current principals and administrators, such as training on teacher evaluation.

As part of the residencies, Fellows receive mid-year evaluations using performance standards created by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). The ISLLC standards for school leadership are widely used to guide and accredit leadership programs, professional development, and performance evaluation.<sup>4</sup> Based on these reviews, some of the candidates in the original Leadership Project pool were removed from the program.

*Transition.* After their residencies, Fellows use the summer to plan their transitions, including developing their résumés and practicing for interviews. Leadership Project facilitators coach the Fellows through this process. Although placement in a leadership position is not guaranteed, nine of the Leadership Project's first 12 graduates acquired assistant principal or principal positions in one of Delaware's low-performing public schools, another is an academic dean, and two continue to seek appointments. To facilitate their hiring, DDOE created a committee of district and state staff who will interview candidates for low-performing schools. In the lowest performing schools, state sign-off on specific school leadership choices is now mandatory.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The lack of an employment guarantee for program graduates poses a challenge for the Leadership Project and DDOE. The Leadership Project perceives local central offices and school boards as more willing to hire and promote from within and to select staff who have seniority in their districts. DDOE has attempted to address this problem by creating interview committees with representatives from both the state and the district for hiring principals in low-performing schools. In some instances, the state requires a district to hire a new principal if the school does not show achievement gains after one or two years.

After the first cohort graduated, the Leadership Project learned that it was very important to find appropriate matches between candidates and their mentor principals. Now it gives more careful consideration to the personalities involved. The Leadership Project also learned the importance of beginning the program acceptance process earlier than May; by then, some applicants have accepted other positions. Now the program sends acceptance letters in April.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

The state is seeking to pass regulations that will hold other university and college school-leader preparation programs more accountable. Bills in the Delaware State Senate, still being finalized, seek to ensure that preparation programs have more selective entry criteria (such as grade or test score requirements) and exit criteria (such as portfolio requirements and examinations). Finally, the state is in the process of developing a long-term, four-year comprehensive strategic plan to increase the quality of educator talent entering its lowest performing schools.

## CONCLUSION

The Delaware Leadership Project offers an alternative route to leadership certification that attempts to recruit and train turnaround leaders through an extensive period of classroom and hands-on experience, under the guidance of facilitators and mentoring principals.

## SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: State at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); and SIG school data are from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>.

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## IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

<sup>1</sup> These schools are a subset of the persistently lowest achieving SIG-eligible schools. They receive both SIG and Race to the Top funding to implement one of the four SIG models and are referred to as Partnership Zone Schools.

<sup>2</sup> In 2013, the Leadership Project Summer Reading book list included the following titles:

- *Resource for Leadership: Tradeoffs and Tough Decisions on the Road to School Improvement*
- *The Flat World and Education*
- *The Challenge of Change*
- *The Power of Protocols: An Educator’s Guide to Better Practice*
- *Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction*
- *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*
- *Strategy in Action: How School Systems Can Support Powerful Learning and Teaching*
- *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*

<sup>3</sup> District superintendents identify potential schools for the residency, and principals in the nominated schools can choose whether or not to accept the Fellows and serve as mentors. If they opt to participate, mentoring principals must apply to the Leadership Project. Once approved, the Leadership Project pairs mentor principals with Fellows based on an analysis of the strengths and needs of both as well as a careful consideration of the mentor-mentee personalities. Five districts hosted the first cohort of aspiring leaders.

<sup>4</sup> The ISSLC performance standards are as follows:

- Standard 1: Setting a widely shared vision for learning
- Standard 2: Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth
- Standard 3: Ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment
- Standard 4: Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources
- Standard 5: Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner
- Standard 6: Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts.