

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: TURNAROUND LEADERSHIP – ASPIRING LEADERS PIPELINE

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS ♦ MIAMI, FLORIDA

In response to a critical shortage of leaders to support school turnaround efforts, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Miami-Dade) implemented a strategy to develop the skills of aspiring leaders who are in the district and want to become principals and instructional coaches in its lowest performing schools. Miami-Dade’s SIG- and Title I–funded Education Transformation Office (ETO) uses this principal development strategy as part of its focus on providing district support for its lowest performing schools.<sup>1</sup> To address the leadership shortfall, ETO offers multiple pathways for promoting school turnaround leadership skills in district staff. The strategy aims to build the skills of current teachers and assistant principals who already are working in low-performing schools and who have a record of success in improving student outcomes.

## THE STRATEGY: Multiple Pathways for Developing School Turnaround Leaders

Miami-Dade is developing strong instructional leadership with three programs:

- Project Lead Strong, a new district-level program to train aspiring principals and assistant principals.
- Instructional Coaches Academy (iCAD), a new district-level program to increase the number of district instructional coaches who work full time in core content areas (reading/English language arts, mathematics, and science) at the district’s lowest performing schools. As the number of ETO-supported schools increases, there is a growing demand for instructional coaches.
- Florida Turnaround Leaders Program (FTLP), a state-level program to train aspiring principals and assistant principals.

The three programs have the following common elements: First, they are each at least partially funded by SIG. The SIG- and Title I–funded ETO manages the programs or uses SIG funds in combination with other funding to support the programs. Second, each program requires participants to have experience working in a Miami-Dade school and to have an established record of success in improving student outcomes. For example, teachers must have shown gains in student scores within their classrooms over time while assistant principals must have shown gains in student achievement among a subgroup of students (e.g., English Learners) within their schools. Third, all three programs provide training on instructional leadership, which includes intensive, on-the-job training and ongoing support.

### Miami-Dade Public Schools at a Glance

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

**Locale:** Suburb, Large

**Enrollment:** 350,239

**Free or Reduced-Price Lunch:** 72%

**Racial/Ethnic Composition:** 66% Hispanic, 24% Black, 9% White, 1% Asian, <1% American Indian, <1% Other

**English Learners:** 19%

**Students With Disabilities:** 10%

### Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Miami-Dade

SIG Model	# of Schools	School Level	# of Schools
Transformation	12	Elementary	9
Turnaround	14	Middle	7
Restart	0	High	10
Closure	0	Other	0

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**Project Lead Strong.** Project Lead Strong focuses on the preparation of principals to lead low-performing middle and high schools. The program operates on two leadership-preparation tracks: preparing current teachers to be assistant principals and preparing assistant principals to be principals. The program began at the start of the 2011–12 school year and will run through the 2016–17 school year. Each year, two cohorts (each with 24 participants) enter the program. The demand for the training is greater than the number of available training slots. Thus far, approximately 300 candidates applied for each cohort’s 24 positions. During its first year, the program was open only to staff in the 26 SIG schools; however, as of summer 2012, Miami-Dade has accepted applicants from throughout the district.<sup>2</sup>

The 18-week program has three components: (1) a residency at a low-performing school, (2) a relationship with a principal or assistant principal mentor, and (3) ongoing professional development and training.

*Residency.* During the 18-week program, aspiring principals and assistant principals are assigned to a school and receive ongoing professional development and support. Each resident is released from his or her regular work (within the district) for the duration of the program. Project Lead Strong covers the cost of the temporary staff hired to cover the resident’s position. Residents function as the acting principals or assistant principals of the schools to which they are assigned; they make instructional, behavioral, organizational, and operational decisions—under a mentor’s tutelage. Participants end their 18-week residencies with a half of a school year’s worth of experience as an assistant principal or principal.

*Mentors.* Each member of the teacher cohort is assigned an assistant principal mentor, and each member of the assistant principal cohort is assigned a principal mentor. Each mentor guides no more than two participants per year. The district selects mentors who currently are principals and assistant principals in low-performing schools that have made progress in improving student achievement. The mentors provide daily specialized coaching and guide residents in the decision-making processes.

*Training.* All residents participate in five weekly training sessions run by ETO’s instructional supervisors and content-support specialists. Residents receive targeted professional development through workshops. They also conduct rounds of classroom observations (called “instructional rounds”) every two weeks.<sup>3</sup> ETO staff design and facilitate the workshops and instructional rounds. Workshops during school hours run a half-day, and some shorter workshops are held after school hours to minimize the time that participants are away from their residency positions. Mentors alternate hosting the workshops. Professional development covers topics such as instructional strategies, curriculum, and content and performance standards. Workshops also include administrative competencies such as budget development, employee supervision, and community involvement.

**Instructional Coaches Academy.** The iCAD trains current and future instructional leaders and coaches, who eventually support instructional improvement in Miami-Dade’s lowest performing schools. ETO staff originally designed the iCAD to provide coaches with strategies in instruction, behavior management, curriculum implementation, and other areas. For the past three years, iCAD training has included assistant principals from each of the 66 ETO schools (the 26 SIG schools and an additional 40 low-performing priority schools identified through the district’s *Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] flexibility plan*) as well as their schools’ instructional coaches. The iCAD training focuses on building participants’ content knowledge in English language arts, science, and mathematics as well as building participants’ abilities to recognize effective instructional strategies in the classroom.<sup>4</sup> The iCAD training is more content-driven than other professional development offered to school administrators.

Training includes a three-day summer academy and ongoing workshops throughout the school year. Instructional coaches from the 66 ETO schools each attend one 7½-hour iCAD workshop every two weeks; assistant principals join once a month to limit the amount of time they are away from their schools.

*Summer Academy.* The three-day summer academy focuses on training new instructional coaches, who are recruited from Miami-Dade schools. Applicants must provide evidence of their ability to improve educational outcomes for

students and demonstrate instructional practices—observed by school and district administrators—that are aligned with the district’s improvement strategies. The district strategies include the use of state assessment data to plan instruction and content for students as well as the use of district-designed benchmark assessment data to plan instructional supports and target individual students’ needs. The academy provides detailed information about strategies for using these data and for facilitating groups of teachers. In addition, coaches participate in sessions specifically focused on their content area and grade level (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school).

*Training Workshops.* The workshops are designed to provide ongoing support to participants throughout the school year. Workshops consist of whole-group sessions led by experts, breakout sessions for small-group discussions, and instructional rounds similar to those described for Project Lead Strong. In each workshop, coaches and assistant principals review lessons, instructional strategies, and curriculum resources. The district includes assistant principals in the iCAD training to improve their skills in school operations and instruction and to ground teacher evaluations in teaching and learning, rather than relying on non-instructional practices such as classroom organization and management. The iCAD training provides assistant principals with guidance on helping teachers increase student engagement, conducting classroom walk-throughs to build their ability to support instruction, and leading coaching conversations with teachers.

**Florida Turnaround Leaders Program.** In addition to the district-designed programs, ETO has leveraged a state program to address Miami-Dade’s needs. The statewide Florida Turnaround Leaders Program (FTLP) trains aspiring principals and assistant principals who are working in low-performing schools. The program, funded and designed by the Florida Department of Education, is administered by the district through the ETO. ETO’s administration of FTLP includes designing the application process, selecting participants, and selecting and matching mentors to participants. Administering the FTLP allows the district to align the program with the identified needs of its low-performing schools.

Each FTLP cohort in the district includes 20 to 25 participants who are working in ETO schools. The first cohort participated during the 2012–13 school year, and a second cohort participated during the 2013–14 school year. FTLP participants are selected for from a pool of current high-performing teachers and assistant principals. This 18-week program includes mentors, an internship, and professional development. ETO oversees the participants, assigns them to mentors and internships, and designs and facilitates the professional development.

*Mentors.* ETO identifies the mentors to be paired with FTLP participants. Similar to Project Lead Strong, selected mentors have experience managing schools through a turnaround process and have track records of improving student achievement.

*Internship.* Similar to Project Lead Strong, each participant completes an 18-week internship with a mentor. During this internship, the aspiring principal or assistant principal leads the mentor’s school under the close supervision of the mentor.

*Professional Development.* Part of the professional development is a case-study research project conducted by a team of four to five aspiring principals and assistant principals. They analyze several years of data on student performance and school culture (e.g., student behavior incidents and family involvement levels) in a priority school. The analysis culminates in a report that includes recommendations on turnaround strategies. Using a common rubric, mentors guide participants as they frame their research reports. Final reports are shared with the case-study school principal, mentors, and the Florida Department of Education.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Developing a coherent approach for instructional leadership was a challenge for Miami-Dade. The district originally had several programs to recruit and train leaders (principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches) in the

district’s low-performing schools. After identifying some fragmentation in the district’s training between the skills among these types of leaders, ETO decided to refine its leadership training programs. First, ETO began to use the same district staff to train the instructional coaches as well as the aspiring principals and assistant principals in Project Lead Strong and FTLP. Second, ETO began including the assistant principals in the iCAD training in order to increase the depth of instructional leadership training for these future principals and to improve the connection and understanding between the instructional coaches and assistant principals.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

Miami-Dade is scaling up its strategies by expanding ETO’s coverage and support beyond the 26 SIG schools to include the additional 40 priority schools identified under the state’s *ESEA* flexibility plan. Some strategies, such as assigning instructional coaches, include schools beyond the 66 ETO schools. In the 2013–14 school year, the iCAD workshops became available to all district instructional coaches, thus increasing the pool of trained coaches.

## **CONCLUSION**

Miami-Dade County Public Schools has a critical need for leaders among the 66 low-performing schools for which ETO is responsible. Systemic approaches to developing new school leaders are essential. By focusing these development programs on staff who have experience working in the district as well as demonstrated ability to improve student outcomes, the district is addressing this need from within its own ranks.

## **SOURCES**

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: District at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); and SIG information is 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> Miami-Dade’s Education Transformation Office (ETO) organizes and provides targeted support to the district’s 26 SIG schools and an additional 40 low-performing priority schools identified through Florida’s A–F grading system. ETO uses a common framework for supporting low-performing schools. The framework’s basic components include strong instructional leaders through principals, assistant principals, and content-area coaches; data-informed decision making through district benchmark assessments, state assessments, and weekly classroom observations; and embedded, routine support of instruction through daily coaching, lesson planning, collaborative teacher planning time, and job-embedded professional development. Miami-Dade’s 66 ETO schools receive the most intensive support, focusing on building school leaders and staff capacity to turn around and sustain improvements. The leadership development initiatives are an important part of supporting ETO schools.

To support these efforts, ETO is led by Miami-Dade’s assistant superintendent and five administrative directors. In addition, there are instructional supervisors organized by grade level and content area (reading, mathematics, science, and early childhood education) and approximately 70 content-support specialists who continually support the instructional coaches and leaders in the school.

<sup>2</sup> The Project Lead Strong participant selection process includes completion of an application packet and participation in two rounds of interviews. Applicants must submit a résumé, written responses to a set of questions, and student performance data. From the initial pool of applicants, ETO chooses a subset to interview. Teams of three ETO staff conduct the interviews. After a second round of interviews, ETO staff determine the 24 finalists. Staff use a scoring rubric to analyze each applicant’s overall experience in schools, experience in turnaround schools, and responses to interview questions.

<sup>3</sup> In Project Lead Strong, the observation and analysis of school practices through instructional rounds plays a primary role in training participants. The instructional rounds include class visits at the host school, followed by debriefing sessions on best

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## **IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS (continued)**

practices and areas of improvement. Instructional rounds may vary depending on the topic; however, they usually conform to the following structure: Participants divide into teams of four or five, and each team visits 10–20 classrooms per instructional round, spending 5–10 minutes in each classroom. Participants often use the district walk-through rubric, which provides a structure for discussions and a foundation for defining good classroom practice. Following each classroom visit, each team briefly discusses what was observed. Instructional rounds culminate in an in-depth debriefing of observed trends, recommendations, and lessons learned across teams, in a workshop setting. The first few instructional rounds give participants a global perspective on instructional strategies, school culture, and classroom management. Later instructional rounds, using the same district walk-through rubric, focus on specific observed instructional strategies and an analysis of what works and what does not, leading to strategies for improvement. This practice of conducting instructional rounds is designed to teach participants to differentiate support in response to the needs of different teachers and students.

<sup>4</sup> During iCAD training, coaches are organized by content area in English language arts, science, and mathematics to build the content knowledge of the coaches in their substantive area and then by grade level (elementary or secondary). Each assistant principal chooses a content area in which to specialize and then consistently attends the relevant iCAD workshop.