

## Results in Brief:

# Leading Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from the Turnaround School Leaders Program

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The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, as amended by the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* has transformed federal support for low-performing schools by moving away from prescriptive models of school turnaround toward supporting state innovation. State approaches to implementing *ESEA* still demonstrate a strong commitment to school leadership as an important lever for improving low-performing schools. Thus, while Congress changed the requirements for addressing the needs of low performing schools through *ESSA*, lessons learned about school leaders from the Turnaround School Leaders Program (TSLP) may still be helpful to states and districts. The U.S. Department of Education (Department) funded two cohorts of TSLP grantees, one in 2014, the other in 2015. Each grant lasted three years. The grants were designed to support school turnaround by investing in partnerships between school districts and state education agencies, institutions of higher education, and nonprofit organizations. Each partnership contained at least one school district with at least five low-performing schools. The goal of the TSLP was to build the quality and supply of leaders with the skills and knowledge to turn around low-performing schools. This descriptive study examined the ways in which the first cohort of 12 grantees identified and trained future leaders of turnaround schools and presents preliminary indicators of program outcomes.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What role did partners play in the TSLP projects, and were partnerships expected to be sustained?
2. How did TSLP projects identify program participants?
3. How did TSLP projects develop and support leaders for turnaround schools?
4. How successful were program completers in finding leadership positions in turnaround schools and what factors affected placement rates?

## STUDY DESIGN AND LIMITATIONS

The study consisted of surveys of grantees and partners; in-person interviews with grantee staff, district administrators, and partner staff; focus groups with project participants; and analysis of grantees' annual performance reports. The study team collected survey data from 12 grantees between January and February 2017 and conducted site visits to seven grantees between April and June 2017.

This study described the ways in which grantees of the first cohort of TSLP grants identified and trained future leaders of turnaround schools and preliminary indicators of program outcomes. Results from this report can be used to inform state, district, higher education, and nonprofit efforts to develop leaders for turnaround schools.

Nonetheless, because of the small sample size, readers should be cautious about drawing overly generalized conclusions about the development of leaders for turnaround schools.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Survey and interview data indicated joint ownership and involvement in all TSLP project activities by project partners, with the grantee having the most significant role across all project activities, followed by training partners and district partners.
- All project directors expected to work with their grant partners on some area of the turnaround leader pipeline after the end of the grant; district and training partners were more uncertain.
- TSLP grantees implemented multiple strategies to recruit potential program participants, offering incentives including financial incentives and professional development opportunities. TSLP grantees relied primarily on referrals from peers and current school leaders to identify program candidates.
- TSLP projects were primarily designed to serve aspiring leaders; 10 percent of participants were current leaders.
- Training content and form was consistent with practices highlighted in current research on school leadership preparation in general.
- On average, project directors reported that 43 percent of program completers were placed in turnaround schools within one year of program completion.
- The number of program completers placed in administrative positions depended on the number of vacancies. Matching the number of program completers to vacancies was a challenge across projects, particularly in rural projects. There tended to be fewer vacancies in small rural districts, making it more difficult for program

completers from rural projects to find administrative positions upon program completion.

## PROJECT PARTNERSHIPS

**Survey and interview data indicate joint ownership and involvement in all TSLP project activities, with the lead organization having the most significant role across all project activities, followed by training partners and district partners.**

Survey respondents indicated that district partners played the most significant role in recruiting leaders or aspiring leaders for participation in activities, and training partners played the most significant role in developing and delivering training. Lead organizations exerted the greatest level of independent influence in developing metrics for and evaluating project success, and in deciding which participants successfully completed the program.

## IDENTIFYING AND SELECTING CANDIDATES

**TSLP grantees implemented multiple strategies to recruit potential program participants, offering incentives including financial incentives and professional development opportunities. TSLP grantees relied primarily on referrals from peers and current school leaders to identify program candidates.**

TSLP grantees used multiple sources of information to identify potential TSLP candidates (e.g., referrals, performance data, and candidates' employment history). All project directors used referrals from peers or current school leaders; most (75 percent) used lists of current teachers; and over half (67 percent) used information on the prior performance of candidates.

**Case study respondents described multilayered selection processes that required written applications, a series of interviews, performance simulations, mock scenarios, and problem solving.**

## DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING TURNAROUND LEADERS

**TSLP projects were primarily designed to serve aspiring leaders; 10 percent of participants were current leaders.**

All TSLP grantees focused on prospective school leaders and included components designed to prepare aspiring leaders (individuals seeking training and licenses to be eligible to be hired as principals) of turnaround schools. Ten projects also provided professional development and training for teacher leaders or current administrators.

**Training content and form was consistent with practices highlighted in current research on school leadership preparation in general.**

Despite the focus on leadership *for school turnaround*, projects geared training toward leadership, in general. Most projects reported relying on field-based projects, action research, analysis, and discussion of case studies. About

half of the grantees (seven) relied on portfolios demonstrating learning and accomplishments or capstone or concluding projects (six).

**Eleven TSLP projects included a supervised residency or internship or provided periodic professional development as aspiring leaders continued working at their jobs.**

In seven projects, the residency lasted one school year; two projects included residencies that lasted between one and two school years; and two projects included residencies that lasted less than half a school year.

**Supervision and support mirrored practices highlighted in the leadership preparation literature, including evaluations using observation by mentors and staff as well as self-assessments.**

Aspiring leaders in all case study projects worked with mentor principals, and all respondents felt that the relationship between the participants and mentor principals was a key to the success of the leadership preparation. Six projects provided aspiring leaders with mentors during their residency.

## **POST-PREPARATION PLACEMENT OF PROJECT PARTICIPANTS**

**On average, project directors reported that 43 percent of program completers were placed in turnaround schools within one year of program completion.**

The percentages reported on the survey ranged from 0 percent to 100 percent. University-led projects reported lower placement rates, likely because they tended to have longer training periods. At the time of the survey, many participants had not yet completed training or were beginning their job search.

**The number of program completers placed in administrative positions depended on the number of vacancies. Matching the number of program completers to vacancies was a challenge across projects, particularly in rural areas. There tended to be fewer vacancies in small rural districts, making it more difficult for program completers from rural projects to find administrative positions.**

Most program completers in case study projects looked for positions within their districts but occasionally found positions in other districts. Some program completers were not able to find positions in turnaround schools and accepted positions in higher performing schools.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

The complete report is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oepd/ppss/reports.html>.