Federal Support for Attracting, Training, and Retaining Educators: How Districts Receiving Teacher and School Leader Grants Use Their Funds

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Ensuring students' equitable access to talented educators remains a national priority. Congress established the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive competitive grant program in 2015 to help address this goal, providing financial support to selected school districts to improve their systems for hiring, supporting, and retaining educators, particularly in high-need schools. Grantees can use TSL funds flexibly, for either or both of the two main components of those systems: basic infrastructure for generating and managing data, and a set of strategies that use these data to improve their educator workforce. However, the TSL program requires applicants to already be using two specific data-driven strategies that research has shown to be promising: performance-based compensation and personalized support and feedback to educators. As part of the 2017 competition, the program also incentivized the use of grant funds to address equity and educator diversity. With those initial 3-year grants having now drawn to a close, this report provides the first comprehensive review of the activities 2017 TSL grantee districts prioritized with their TSL funds, and how well these activities aligned with the key aspects of the program. The report is based on interviews conducted near the end of the grant period for the 24 districts that were part of the 2017 TSL cohort and is part of a broader evaluation of TSL required by Congress.

KEY FINDINGS

- ***Overall, TSL districts prioritized using grant funds on strategies to improve their educator workforce over strategies to improve their data infrastructure.*** *This finding may suggest that districts already had an infrastructure that they felt was mostly sufficient to drive decisions and thus used the program's flexibility to prioritize funding other strategies. Among other possible explanations is that districts still planned to prioritize upgrading their infrastructure, but primarily with non-TSL grant funds.*

- ***Consistent with key aspects of the program, TSL districts prioritized funding performance-based compensation and personalized support and feedback.*** *Grantees were required to have performance-based compensation and coaching programs but not required to use grant funds to improve or support these activities. Nevertheless, most did. Districts typically used grant funds for some form of performance-based compensation—effective educator bonuses or extra pay for effective educators to take on larger roles at the school—or on programs for teacher leaders or full-time instructional coaches who provided personalized support and feedback to teachers.*

- ***TSL districts may not have prioritized funding activities that directly addressed educator equity or diversity as much as the program expected.*** *Although all TSL districts proposed to address equity and diversity, as encouraged by the U.S. Department of Education, most of their reported high-priority activities did not appear to specifically address these goals. Only some indicated that the prioritized activities were to improve educator diversity, and few reported that increasing underserved students' equitable access to effective educators was central to their high-priority activities.*

Ensuring that underserved students have effective teachers is critical to closing long-standing learning gaps that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020). To support this goal, the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 established the Teacher and School Leader (TSL) Incentive competitive grant program. The TSL program funds a small set of school districts in each round of grants to improve student access to effective educators and to recruit, support, and retain an effective educator workforce, especially in high-need schools. Since 2017, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded 50 grants providing over $800 million to support school districts around the country, for an average grant of $16 million. In the first TSL round in 2017, 14 grants were awarded to grantees supporting 24 districts, with an average grant of $20 million. The grants help support activities that are aligned with two current objectives in the Department's strategic plan: diversifying the teacher workforce and supporting educators' professional growth and capacity to meet students' needs.[1]

The TSL program focuses on supporting a district's human capital management, the "educator system" intended to improve their educator workforce (Exhibit 1). That system has two key parts: (1) an infrastructure that supports the development, collection, and sharing of data, including measures of educator performance; and (2) strategies that use those data to directly improve the educator workforce through activities related to recruitment, ongoing development, and retention. Grantees had to demonstrate that they already had both components in place (Exhibit 1, blue box) and describe how they would use TSL funds to improve the system.

Exhibit 1. How the Teacher and School Leader Grant program may improve student achievement
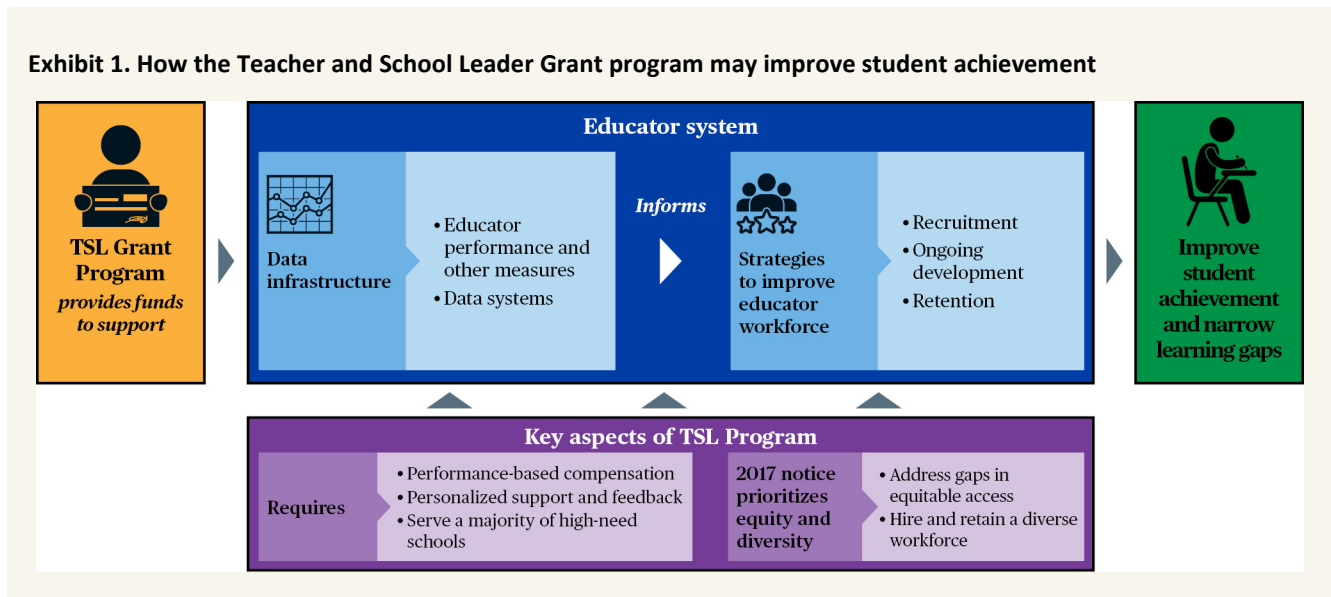
In addition to already having an educator system in place, TSL grantees had to meet three additional requirements to be funded (Exhibit 1, left side of purple box). First, they had to be using ***performance-based compensation*** to differentiate educators' pay based at least in part on their contribution to increases in student achievement. Second, they had to be providing ***personalized support and feedback*** (coaching) to educators based on their needs. Finally, as part of the TSL program's overall goal to improve equity, the majority of schools to be supported with grant funds had to be high need, where a school was defined as high need if at least half of its student population was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2017, the Department introduced two additional priorities to the TSL program, encouraging grantees to ***identify and address gaps in students' equitable access to effective teachers*** and to ***improve the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce*** (Exhibit 1, right side of purple box).

Notwithstanding those requirements and priorities, the TSL program otherwise gave grantees a great deal of flexibility over how they used funds to improve their educator system. Districts could use TSL funds to support the improvement of either part of their system—their data infrastructure or strategies to improve the educator workforce. For example, districts could improve their infrastructure by creating new measures of teacher performance that could be used to identify professional development opportunities based on teachers' needs. Alternatively, districts could use their TSL grant to directly fund performance-based compensation or other strategies to improve the educator workforce.

This report—the first of two to address a congressional mandate to evaluate the TSL program—examines how the first round of 24 districts prioritized use of their TSL grant funds.[2] Policymakers may be particularly interested in understanding this program and its strategies because they developed TSL as a more flexible version of the predecessor Teacher Incentive Fund program that focused more narrowly on performance-based compensation.[3] Policymakers may also be interested in whether TSL's greater flexibility in how grantees use funds may have made the program and its activities less distinct from other federal programs intended to support educators. For example, Title II-A of the Every Student Succeeds Act, which provides funds to support activities to improve the educator workforce,

also gives grantees substantial flexibility in how they use these funds.[4] More about the study and its design is described below.

TSL GRANTEES AND STUDY DESIGN

Who are the grantees?

- The 2017 TSL grant program awarded 14 3-year grants, 3 of which included multiple districts, for a total of 24 districts receiving funding.
- More than two-thirds of grantee districts were located in the South, and nearly half (47 percent) were in urban areas.[5]
- A larger percentage of TSL districts and schools than districts and schools nationally were high need, as intended:
  - 79 percent of schools in TSL districts had more than half of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch compared to 43 percent of schools in the average district nationally.
  - 33 percent of students in TSL schools were proficient in math and English language arts compared to 48 percent of all students in the same states.
  - 53 percent of students in TSL schools were Hispanic compared to 24 percent nationally. 33 percent of students in TSL schools were Black compared to 16 percent nationally.

What data were collected?

- All districts were interviewed twice in summer 2020, near the end of the initial 3-year grant period, to gather information on how they used grant funds over the 2017-18 through 2019-20 school years.[6]
- In the first interview, respondents reported what activities the grant funded in the district from a list of 26 activities organized within 6 strategies.[a] They were also asked to identify any other activities not on the list. Respondents then selected their three highest-priority activities based on their grant goals and the amount of grant funds used to support the activity.
- In the second interview, districts provided detailed information on each of their three highest-priority activities, including why they prioritized the activity and whether or how they used data to support the activity.

How were the data analyzed and presented?

- Interview responses were systematically coded and then tabulated into counts of the number of districts using TSL funds to support a given activity or the number of districts that selected the activity as one of their highest-priority activities.
- Interview responses were reviewed to assess whether districts prioritized activities that addressed two priorities encouraged by the 2017 grants—equitable access to teachers and diversity of the educator workforce. If respondents reported that the district prioritized an activity to improve students' access to effective teachers and used data to identify and implement the activity, then the high-priority activity was coded as addressing the grant's equity priority. If respondents reported that they chose to prioritize an activity to improve the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce, then the high-priority activity was coded as addressing the grant's diversity priority.
- Direct quotations from respondents enrich the tabulations by illustrating the specific activities or districts' rationale for prioritizing those activities. These quotations were purposefully selected for clarity and relevance and are not representative of all responses.

[a] See Appendix A, Exhibit A.1 for a list of the activities. An *activity* is a specific action that contributes to an overall strategy. For example, a teacher residency program may be part of a district's recruitment strategy. A *strategy* is a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim, such as a district using funds to recruit a high-quality diverse workforce. A strategy can include a wide variety of activities.

DISTRICTS REPORTED THAT THEY PRIORITIZED FUNDING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THEIR EDUCATOR WORKFORCE OVER STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THEIR DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

The TSL program expects grantee districts to engage in activities designed to improve recruitment and hiring strategies, support the ongoing development of existing teachers and school leaders, or retain and reward effective educators. To ensure these strategies are data driven, TSL districts need a strong infrastructure in place. In particular, they had to have the ability to collect and make data accessible to district and school staff so that the data can inform ongoing development, staffing, and instructional decisions. To satisfy program requirements, they also need reliable measures of educator performance that are based, at least in part, on student achievement growth. TSL provided districts
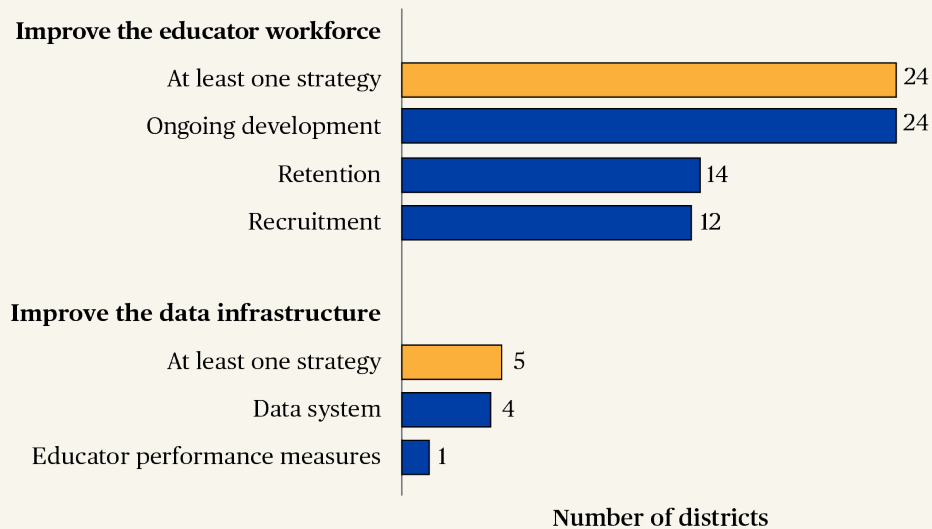
flexibility to use grant funds to strengthen this infrastructure, to invest in more direct educator improvement strategies, or both, making it important to understand which types of activities they prioritized.

- *All districts prioritized using TSL grant funds for activities intended to improve how they recruit, support, or retain educators, with support for ongoing development being most common.* All 24 districts said they prioritized support for ongoing development designed to help their teachers or school leaders be more effective (Exhibit 2, first panel). Over half of the districts (14) reported prioritizing retention activities, while half of the districts prioritized recruiting a more effective and diverse group of educators. Most districts' (18) three highest-priority grant-funded activities spanned some combination of recruitment, ongoing development, and retention. Six districts narrowly focused their high-priority activities on only ongoing development (Appendix B, Exhibit B.2).

Exhibit 2. Strategies districts reported prioritizing with their TSL grant funds

Improve the educator workforce	
At least one strategy	24
Ongoing development	24
Retention	14
Recruitment	12
Improve the data infrastructure	
At least one strategy	5
Data system	4
Educator performance measures	1

Number of districts

- *Few districts prioritized using grant funds to improve their data infrastructure.* Only 5 of 24 districts reported that they prioritized activities to improve data systems or to create or improve measures to evaluate educators (Exhibit 2, second panel). Four of these five districts prioritized improving their data platform for storing student and teacher data or helping teachers access and use the data. These improvements allowed teachers, principals, and district staff to go to a single platform to look up information on teachers and their students. For example, principals could examine characteristics of teachers such as their experience levels or educator performance measures on this platform, and also find information on the characteristics and achievement of the students in that teacher's classroom. Doing so could help them identify the teachers who need additional support and help diagnose the type of support that might be most beneficial.

  Even though districts did not prioritize activities related to data infrastructure in their grant spending, nearly all (23 of 24 districts) reported using TSL grant funds to improve their infrastructure to some extent. Most commonly, districts used the funds to improve how they measured educator performance (21 districts, Appendix B, Exhibit B.3). Districts

also often used TSL funds to make their data system better documented and more user-friendly (16 districts), such as by creating data management tools like data dictionaries, manuals, or protocols that guide users on how to analyze district data.[7]

DISTRICTS REPORTED PRIORITIZING ONGOING DEVELOPMENT FOR EDUCATORS BY FUNDING ACTIVITIES THAT EMPHASIZED PERSONALIZED NEEDS, MOST COMMONLY THROUGH TEACHER LEADERS, COACHES, AND INDUCTION PROGRAMS

A key aspect of the TSL program is that it requires districts to have educator systems that can identify the specific needs of their educators and provide personalized support and feedback. Personalized coaching for teachers has been found to have positive effects on both instructional practices and student achievement (Clark et al., 2022; Kraft et al., 2018). One approach is to designate high-performing "teacher leaders" to engage in one-on-one coaching with their colleagues while continuing to teach their own classes. Teacher leader programs are viewed as a promising approach to providing personalized support and feedback because teachers may be more receptive to receiving coaching from a peer who understands the local context and day-to-day challenges than from a full-time staff or outsider (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Poekert, 2012). Interest in this approach has grown in recent years as a way to improve the teaching workforce and provide career ladder opportunities to effective teachers (Aragon, 2018). Alternatively, districts could employ full-time coaches or mentors to provide personalized support and feedback to teachers.[8] Intensive mentoring to novice teachers from more experienced peers (Literacy Information and Communications System, 2015) is often a core feature of induction programs.

- *More than half of the districts prioritized a teacher leader program, and most involved teacher leaders providing personalized support and feedback.* The most common ongoing development activity, reported as a high priority for more than half of districts (15), was using teacher leaders to support other teachers in their schools (Exhibit 3). Most of these programs were new to the district, although four districts used TSL funds to extend an existing teacher leader program (see Exhibit 4 for examples). Teacher leaders in these 15 districts performed a variety of roles, but their primary duty in most cases (9 of 15) was to provide personalized support and feedback (coaching) to a small team of teachers (Appendix B, Exhibit B.5). In particular, these teacher leaders had to regularly observe their colleagues' classrooms and provide feedback on their instruction. In

Districts reported several reasons for prioritizing a teacher leader role that provided peer coaching; the most common was to support novice teachers.

"Why did you prioritize a teacher leader program that provides individualized coaching?"

"Attrition of novice teachers is a huge problem... We wanted them to build trust with a colleague in the building that could support them… someone in the school they could look to as a job-like coach."

6 of these 9 districts, the personalized support and feedback were directed toward novice teachers, and in all but one district, these teacher leaders were paid more for taking on the role (Appendix B, Exhibits B.6 and B.7).

- *One-quarter of districts prioritized using full-time instructional coaches not currently teaching to provide personalized support and feedback.* Like teacher leaders, these full-time coaches in 6 districts supported teachers by observing teachers' instruction and providing feedback (Exhibit 3). This coaching was typically available to any teacher, with only a few districts restricting coaching to novice teachers. Several districts noted that coaches play an important role in developing teachers' skills and improving teacher retention and described the coach role as an intermediary between teachers and school administrators. Typically, districts that prioritized funding a program that provided personalized support and feedback did so by using funds to support either a full-time instructional coach or a teacher leader program, but not both. However, one district prioritized both activities (Appendix B, Exhibit B.5).

- *More than one-third of the districts prioritized induction or other onboarding programs to provide personalized support for novice teachers.* The 10 districts that prioritized these programs typically used experienced teachers (mentors) to provide this support and most (7 of 10) did not offer teachers extra pay for taking on the role. The support did not include formal coaching cycles but instead involved supporting novice teachers in their adjustment to the school and to teaching. Districts reported that their primary motivation for the program was to improve the effectiveness of new teachers or to improve teacher retention.

Exhibit 3. TSL-funded prioritized activities to provide support for ongoing development to educators

Ongoing development activities

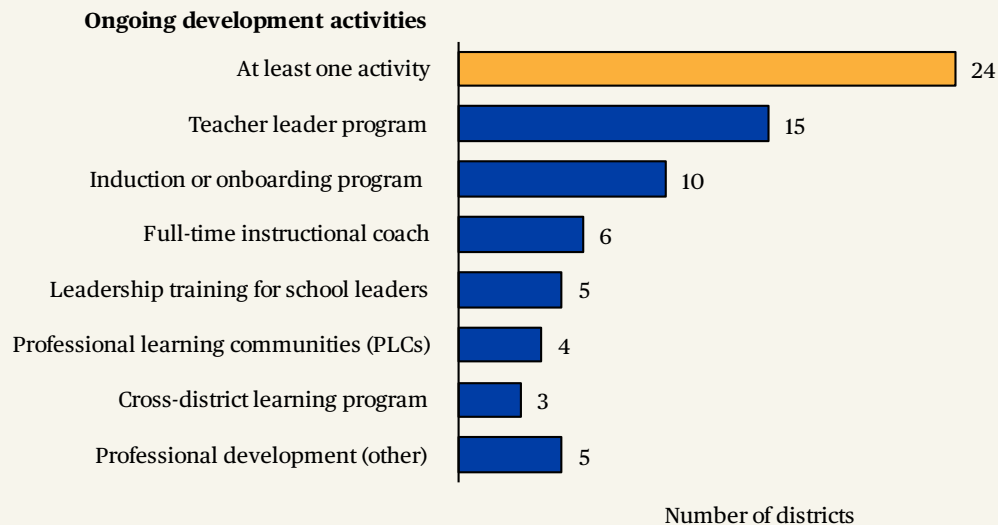| Activity	Number of districts
At least one activity	24
Teacher leader program	15
Induction or onboarding program	10
Full-time instructional coach	6
Leadership training for school leaders	5
Professional learning communities (PLCs)	4
Cross-district learning program	3
Professional development (other)	5

Number of districts

Exhibit 4. Examples of TSL-funded activities to provide personalized support and feedback

Districts often prioritized activities that involved personalized support and feedback, where a fellow teacher or full-time coach engaged in coaching cycles with a supported teacher. However, they used different approaches for providing personalized support and feedback, sometimes combining them with other forms of educator support.

- *The most common model for providing personalized support and feedback was to do so using teacher leaders without involving full-time coaches.* Eight districts followed this approach. One district, for example, funded three types of teacher leader roles—model teachers, peer collaborative teachers, and master teachers—with each including release time from classroom instruction. Model teachers showcased instructional techniques by leading laboratory classrooms where they modeled key instructional strategies and practices but did not provide coaching cycles. Peer collaborative teachers also led laboratory classrooms but did provide coaching cycles. Master teachers worked across district schools to promote cross-school coaching and professional development opportunities without themselves providing coaching cycles.

- *Some districts used grant funds to support a full-time coach to provide personalized support and feedback.* Four of the six districts that used a full-time coach combined it with a teacher leader program that did not feature coaching cycles. For example, in one district an instructional coach provided regular coaching cycles to struggling teachers on topics determined jointly with the teacher leader. The teacher leaders also led networks of mentors in their schools to support new teachers but without providing personalized support and feedback.

- *One district prioritized both a teacher leader program and full-time coaches to provide personalized support and feedback.* Based on data showing that attrition is highest in a teacher's early years, this district prioritized two activities that involved personalized support and feedback. Teacher leaders—released from half of their own classroom responsibilities—provided an hour of coaching each week to all first- and second-year teachers. Full-time coaches provided coaching to teachers in their third to fifth years of teaching who needed extra support.
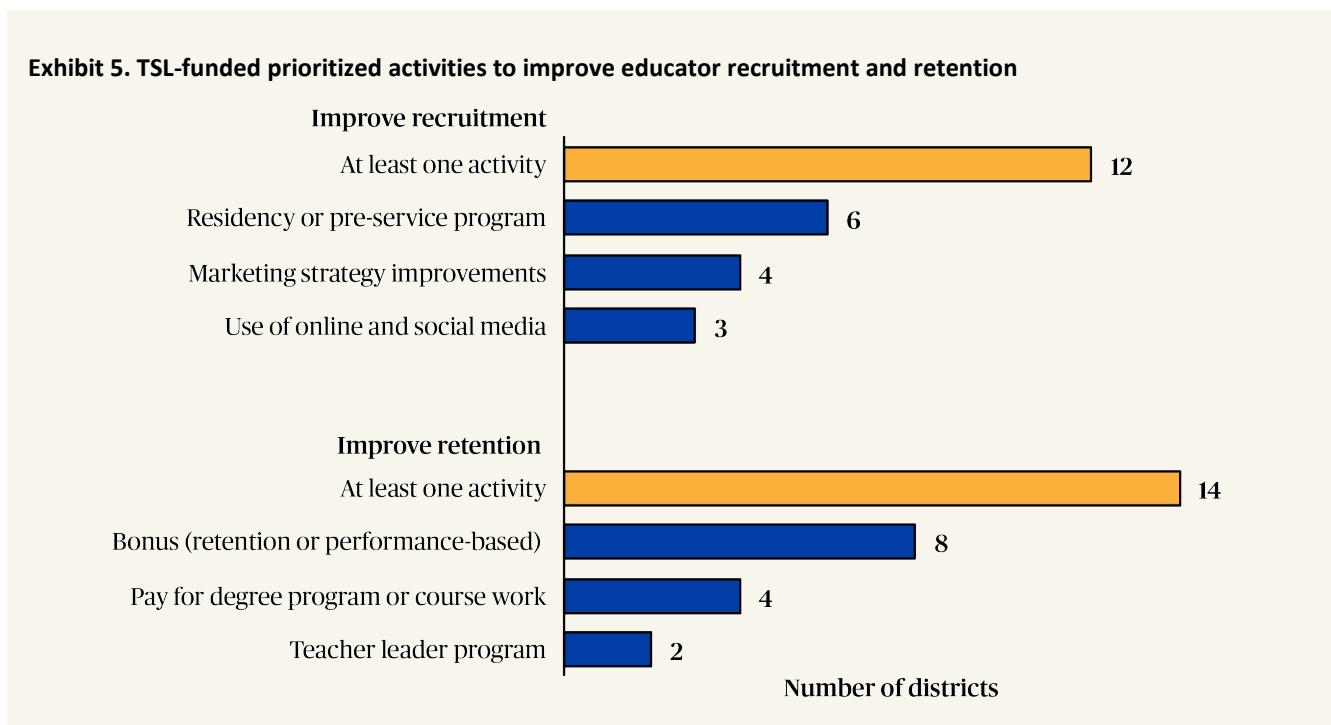
DISTRICTS REPORTED PRIORITIZING EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION MOST COMMONLY BY FUNDING TEACHER PIPELINE ACTIVITIES AND PERFORMANCE-BASED COMPENSATION

To improve their educator workforce, TSL districts have flexibility in whether and which activities to fund in order to attract and recruit high-quality educators to work in the district. Teacher residency programs, which combine education coursework and a clinical "residency" with an experienced mentor in the district (Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, 2017), are often cited as a promising way to fill hard-to-staff positions and better prepare new teachers. Although there is mixed evidence on whether residency programs produce more effective teachers (Papay et al., 2012; Sloan et al., 2018), teachers hired from residency programs have been found to have greater retention in their districts (Papay et al., 2012; Silva et al., 2015).

Offering performance-based compensation is another way to strengthen the educator workforce (Chiang et al., 2017; Pham et al., 2021) and is a key requirement of the TSL grant. Grantee districts could use TSL funds for this purpose, which typically occurred in one of two ways. First, districts could use TSL funds to offer educators bonuses, including performance bonuses for being rated as highly effective or hiring bonuses to fill hard-to-staff positions. Second, districts could use TSL funds to offer high-performing educators opportunities for more compensation in exchange for taking on more responsibilities, such as a teacher leader role.

- ***Developing or expanding residency or pre-service programs was the most common high-priority activity districts used to improve their recruitment practices.*** Six districts prioritized using TSL grant funds for residency or pre-service programs to improve recruitment (Exhibit 5). In 4 of these 6 districts, the grant led to the development of a new residency program, while 2 districts used the funds to expand existing programs (Appendix B, Exhibit B.8). The most common reason to invest in these programs, cited by 5 of the 6 districts, were to help fill hard-to-staff positions or hire effective teachers.

  Other activities that grantees prioritized to improve recruitment include refining their marketing strategy (4 districts) and using online and social media (3 districts). For the purposes of improving retention, offering bonuses was the activity that districts most commonly prioritized (8 districts), followed by paying for educators to obtain degrees or take courses (4 districts), and implementing teacher leader programs (2 districts) (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5. TSL-funded prioritized activities to improve educator recruitment and retention

Improve recruitment

At least one activity	12
Residency or pre-service program	6
Marketing strategy improvements	4
Use of online and social media	3

Improve retention

At least one activity	14
Bonus (retention or performance-based)	8
Pay for degree program or course work	4
Teacher leader program	2

Number of districts

- ***In keeping with the program's emphasis on performance-based compensation, almost all districts prioritized activities that included using TSL funds to reward or compensate effective educators.*** Overall, 23 of the 24 districts prioritized using their TSL grant to fund bonuses and/or extra pay (Exhibit 6 and Appendix B, Exhibit B.7). Thirteen districts offered bonuses to educators without requiring additional work or responsibilities, typically for recruitment or retention purposes.[9] Fourteen districts offered selected educators extra pay for taking on a role with additional job responsibilities. This most commonly included teacher leader roles but also included mentor teacher roles in induction or residency programs. Four districts prioritized using TSL funds for both bonuses and extra pay.

Exhibit 6. Districts' use of grant funds to provide bonuses and additional compensation for educators as part of high-priority activities
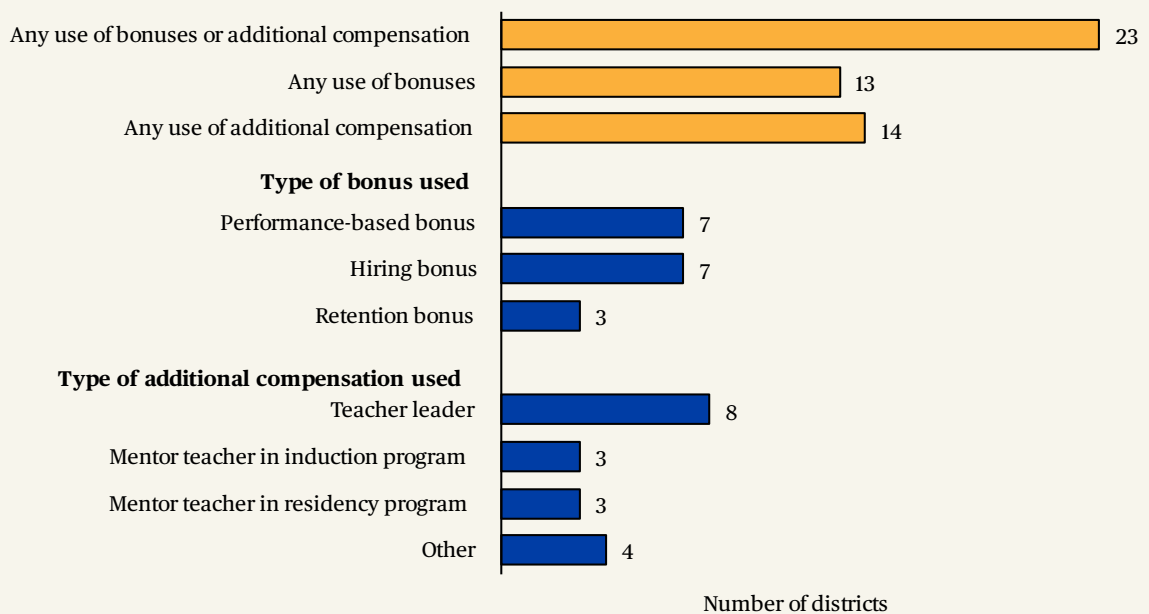
EDUCATOR EQUITY AND DIVERSITY MAY NOT HAVE RECEIVED AS MUCH PRIORITY IN THE USE OF TSL FUNDS AS THE PROGRAM EXPECTED

To improve equity and diversity, in 2017 the TSL program incentivized grantees to improve students' access to effective teachers and to include a specific focus on increasing the diversity of educators teaching underserved students. Grantees were awarded extra points on their application if they planned to use TSL funds to identify the most significant gaps in students' access to effective educators and fund activities to directly address those gaps, such as partnering with teacher residency programs or offering a financial incentive to high-performing district teachers to transfer to higher-need schools. Incentivizing grantees to address equity gaps can help underserved students, who are more likely to attend schools with high educator turnover and to be taught by novice teachers, get better access to effective teachers (Isenberg et al., 2022). In addition, students of color are less likely than White students to be taught by a teacher from their same racial or ethnic background (U.S. Department of Education, 2020a, 2020b), despite evidence that students of color may benefit from teachers who share their race or ethnicity (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018; Gottfried et al., 2022). Awarding grantees extra points if they planned to use TSL funds to increase the diversity of their teacher workforce is consistent with the program's goal of improving outcomes for students of color.

- *Districts addressed equity by using the funds to support a higher number of high-need schools than required, but few indicated that they prioritized using funds specifically to improve underserved students' access to effective educators.* In 22 of 24 TSL districts, more than half of the schools supported with TSL funds were high need—those in which at least half of the student population were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Appendix B, Exhibit B.9).[10] In fact, in the average TSL district, 93 percent of funded schools were high need, far exceeding the 50 percent minimum grant requirement. Funded schools also tended to be among the lower-performing schools in the district. Among the 16 districts that did not fund all their schools, TSL-funded schools had an average proficiency rate of 38 percent compared to 47 percent in the district's other schools (Appendix B, Exhibit B.9).[11]

  All 24 districts proposed in their grant applications to take steps to identify and address equity gaps, as described in the grant notice. However, during the study interviews only 4 districts reported taking these steps when describing their high-priority activities and why they prioritized these activities.[12] These 4 districts all also reported reviewing data to identify which schools should receive additional support to address equity gaps, one of the steps that the grant required to fulfill this priority. For example, two districts reported reviewing teacher turnover data and finding high rates of turnover in their high-need schools. Another district learned that its high-need schools had higher rates of teacher absences and vacancies in hard-to-staff positions, so it used its grant to provide bonuses for teacher attendance and hiring bonuses to fill hard-to-staff positions. Although 8 districts reported providing additional pay to effective teachers or school leaders if they transferred to a high-need school, none of these districts reported that this was one of its three high-priority activities.

- *Just over one-third of districts reported that attracting or retaining educators of color was central to one of their high-priority activities.* All 24 districts proposed to address educator diversity in their grant applications, consistent with one of the grant's priorities. However, during the study interviews, only 9 districts reported prioritizing attracting or retaining educators of color when describing their high-priority activities and why they prioritized these activities (see Exhibit 7 for one district's approach). These 9 districts focused on recruiting and hiring diverse educators in a number of ways, for example, by offering incentives to attract educators of color or bilingual teachers and establishing residency programs specifically aimed at recruiting from a more diverse candidate pool (Exhibit 8).

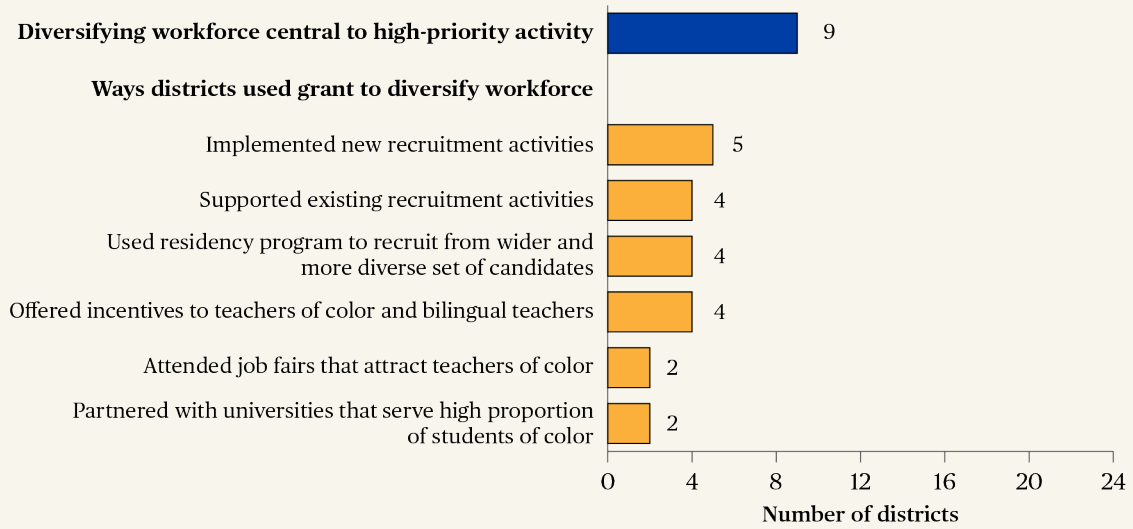**Exhibit 7. How one district used its TSL grant to diversify its educator workforce**

One district that was looking to overhaul its approach to recruiting found—based on student and teacher demographic data—that the percentage of educators of color in the district did not reflect its student population. After considering potential root causes for the disparity and getting input from a consultant, district leaders concluded that (1) they might be missing out on good candidates of color because they began recruiting too late in the year, and (2) educators of color might not be comfortable applying because they were not convinced that the district would provide a welcoming and supportive environment.

To attract more applicants, including more educators of color, the district **began its recruiting process much earlier in the year and included more informal recruiting events.** This included establishing mixers instead of job fairs to allow potential candidates to get to know about jobs in the district in a less formal environment. The district believed that this longer and less formal process would give candidates more of a chance to learn about the district and feel comfortable with the idea of working in the district.

The district had newly **created a group designed to support educators of color**, and they involved members of this group in the mixers and other recruiting events to establish relationships with candidates. After successful applicants signed a contract but before they started work, a member met with the newly hired teacher to help with their transition and scheduled regular follow-up meetings that continued through their first year at the school. This approach to mentoring new teachers was communicated to candidates during the recruiting process.

One respondent in this district noted that a primary focus was to onboard new educators of color and the data indeed indicate that these teachers are feeling successful and staying. This respondent also noted that they anecdotally have heard from new educators of color saying that they came to the district because they heard equity was a focus and important, and that turned out to be the case.

Exhibit 8. Districts' use of funds to attract and retain a diverse workforce

Category	Number of districts
Diversifying workforce central to high-priority activity	9
Ways districts used grant to diversify workforce	
Implemented new recruitment activities	5
Supported existing recruitment activities	4
Used residency program to recruit from wider and more diverse set of candidates	4
Offered incentives to teachers of color and bilingual teachers	4
Attended job fairs that attract teachers of color	2
Partnered with universities that serve high proportion of students of color	2

Number of districts

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

LOOKING AHEAD

The TSL program awards competitive grants that provide significant additional funding to improve district systems for hiring, supporting, and retaining educators, particularly in high-need schools. Given that most educator support programs were consolidated within the Every Student Succeeds Act, it is important to understand what this largest remaining discretionary program funds and whether and how it differs from—and can complement—Title II-A, the formula-funded program for educator improvement. By highlighting the activities that grantees chose to prioritize with TSL funds, this report raises a few questions for policymakers working to ensure the program achieves its intended goals.

- **Does the flexibility grantees have for using TSL funds result in more overlap with activities funded by Title II-A than policymakers intended?** The TSL program provides wide discretion in how funds can be used to allow districts to meet local needs and context. With this flexibility, most grantees chose to prioritize supporting ongoing development of educator capacity. Because professional development is also the most common use of Title II-A funds, these two programs appear to be supporting similar activities. To the extent policymakers intend for these programs to be more distinct, they may wish to consider how to strengthen or clarify the unique features or expectations of TSL.

- **Could the TSL program further incentivize or support a focus on the equitable distribution of effective teachers and the diversity of the teacher workforce?** Although all grantee proposals addressed these TSL program goals, several years later most grantees did not report either goal when describing their highest-priority activities and motivation for the activities. If identifying and addressing equity gaps and educator diversity remain important objectives, the program may wish to consider whether there are ways to adjust how they are incentivized in future competitions or provide targeted technical assistance to help grantees achieve those goals.

The next report from this evaluation will turn from examining implementation of TSL grant funds to the effectiveness of key TSL strategies. One of the most common ways of supporting professional development with TSL funds was to use teacher leaders to provide personalized support and feedback to teachers. This strategy has become increasingly popular in schools as a way of improving the performance of novice and struggling teachers. A key part of the evaluation is rigorously assessing whether supporting teacher leaders in high-need schools improves the quality of the educator workforce and student academic success. Findings are expected in 2025.

ENDNOTES

[1] Strategic Objective 2.3 of the Department's FY22-FY26 Strategic Plan seeks to "support the professional growth, retention, and advancement of talented, experienced educators and other school personnel and their capacity to meet the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of underserved students." The Department also has a Learning Agenda, which lays out its priorities for building and using evidence to support the Strategic Plan and the Department's missions and efforts to improve agency operations. Priority Learning Question 3.1 mirrors Strategic Objective 2.3, seeking to identify "what policies, programs, services, and practices are effective in preparing, recruiting, and retaining a well-qualified educator workforce that is … prepared to provide underserved students the social, emotional, academic, and other supports they need to be successful in work and life." Strategic Objective 2.1 of the Department's Strategic Plan seeks to "strengthen and diversify the educator pipeline and workforce." Priority Learning Question 3.2 in the Department's Learning Agenda asks, "How can the education workforce come to reflect the diversity of the nation's learners?"

[2] The interviews occurred the summer after COVID-19 shut down schools in spring 2020. At the time of the interviews, most districts were at the end of their initial 3-year grant period and reported on how they used their grant funds, which was unaffected by COVID-19. Some districts hoped to extend their grant by one or two years, subject to the approval of the U.S. Department of Education. These districts also reported how they planned to continue to use grant funds, which at that time, they did not anticipate would be affected by COVID-19.

[3] The TSL program was designed to build on lessons from 10 years of implementing the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) program, which awarded more than 140 grants between 2006 and 2016 for a total of $2 billion. Similar to the TSL program, TIF provided funding for grantees to develop or expand human capital management systems for teachers and principals but relative to TSL, TIF put greater emphasis on performance-based compensation.

[4] The Title II-A program provides grants each year to all states along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico for activities designed to improve the educator workforce. The program awards grants to states, which then allocate funds to districts. Like TSL, the program provides substantial flexibility on the use of funds, and grantees use funds for a wide range of activities. Districts most commonly use Title II-A funds for professional development activities, with activities to reduce class size another common use of funds (Isenberg & Webber, 2021). Title II-A is a much larger program than TSL overall because it provides formula-based support to all public school districts nationally, whereas TSL competitively awards funds to a small number of districts. For example, Title II-A provided approximately $2.1 billion in total for all states in 2017, whereas 24 districts received a total of approximately $88 million of TSL funds in the same year. However, for TSL grantees, these funds on average represent a substantial short-term influx of resources relative to Title II-A. For example, the 20 districts with available funding data that were part of the 2017 TSL cohort received on average $4.4 million annually over three years from TSL, compared to approximately $5.1 million annually from Title II-A. In fact, for 16 of these 20 districts, the average annual TSL funding was actually larger than their annual Title II-A funding, by an average of approximately $3.2 million annually over the three years of the TSL grant.

[5] See Appendix B, Exhibit B.1 for more details.

[6] See Appendix A for more information on the two rounds of interviews.

[7] In addition, nearly all districts met TSL program expectations that their educator improvement strategies should be data driven. All but one district reported using data to inform one or more of their three highest-priority activities (Appendix B, Exhibit B.4).

[8] Full-time coaches do not have to juggle coaching and teaching responsibilities, and schools do not have to figure out how to cover a teacher leader's time away from their own classroom.

[9] Exhibits 5 and 6 show different information about how grantees used TSL funds to support bonuses. Exhibit 5 shows the number of districts that reported using a bonus specifically to improve retention. Exhibit 6 shows the number of districts that reported using a bonus to support a high-priority activity for any purpose. Other purposes included aiding in the recruitment of teachers or rewarding the most effective teachers.

[10] One district did not have data on the high-need status of its schools. In the other district, less than half of funded schools were high need, but the district was part of a multi-district grant in which more than half the funded schools were high need across the grant.

[11] Average proficiency is based on data from 13 of the 16 districts because proficiency data were unavailable for three of the districts.

[12] For example, in response to why it prioritized this activity, the respondent from one of the four districts said, "We knew the district had a retention problem for years and needed a way to stabilize that. Majority of turnover were in highest need schools…Often students with highest need were getting teachers with the least experience…" In response to the same question, another respondent from one of the four districts said, "From an equity lens, we want to put a thumb on the scale to make sure we're finding the best candidates and building pipelines to schools that haven't had access to candidates in the past…need to make sure every community gets access to our best teachers." Note that the district respondent did not have to use the word "equity" in their response but had to state that improving access to effective teachers was a reason for prioritizing the activity.

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APPENDIX A. DISTRICT INTERVIEW PROCESS AND INFORMATION OBTAINED

The study team conducted two rounds of interviews with district staff in the 24 districts receiving 2017 TSL grant funds. The purpose of the first interview was two-fold: identify the district's three highest-priority activities that they used the grant to support and review a list of 26 activities that the district may have used the TSL grant to support. The second interview asked in-depth questions about their three highest-priority activities.

First interview with districts

Prior to the first interview, respondents were emailed a list of activities, organized within six categories of improvement strategies (Exhibit A.1). The list was based on activities mentioned in the grant notice, in grant applications, and activities funded through the TSL program's predecessor, the Teacher Incentive Fund program. The email explained that the groupings were somewhat arbitrary, and that respondents should focus on whether they used TSL funds for the activity. For those activities that the district used the grant to support, respondents were to rate the activity as a high-, moderate-, or low-priority activity in terms of the goals of their TSL grant overall and based on the amount of TSL funds allocated to the activity. Respondents were also asked if the district used their grant to support a high-priority activity that was not included in the list of 26 activities. At the conclusion of the first interview, the study team confirmed with respondents the district's three highest-priority activities, which would be the focus of the second interview.

Second interview with districts

Prior to the second interview, the study team emailed respondents to confirm its understanding of the district's three highest-priority activities. At the beginning of the second interview, the study team reconfirmed the district's three highest-priority activities and asked if there was another activity that the respondents thought was more of a high-priority activity than the ones identified. The second interview then obtained detailed information for each of the district's three highest-priority activities. This included a description of the activity; why the activity was a high-priority activity for the district; and if it was a new activity or an improvement of an existing district activity. For activities that directly focused on improving the educator workforce, the study team asked if and how they used data to inform or accomplish the activity, and if and how the district changed or improved its data system to support the activity. The study team asked respondents to reflect on what they considered the activity's successes, as well as the challenges and how they may have addressed them. The study team also asked about specific features relevant to each activity. For example, if a district described providing incentives to attract or retain educators, the study team asked about the size of the incentives and the criteria to receive an incentive. If a district described implementing a teacher leader program, the study team followed up to learn how teacher leaders were selected, who the teacher leaders supported, and what were the teacher leader's responsibilities.

Exhibit A.2 provides more information on the number and roles of the district staff who participated in each interview.

Exhibit A.1. List of potential activities supported by TSL grant funds reviewed during the first interview

Recruiting a high-quality and diverse workforce

- Developing partnerships with teacher preparation programs (e.g., a teacher residency program)
- Providing incentives to attract minority or bilingual teachers to work in the district or at particular schools
- Revising teacher or principal recruitment practices

Supporting improvement of teachers or school leaders

- Improving or developing new teacher induction activities
- Providing general professional development for teachers or school leaders
- Providing additional tools or resources focused on instructional improvement to teachers or school leaders (e.g., curriculum kits or subscriptions)
- Providing targeted professional development based on teacher or school needs
- Providing additional support for teachers (e.g., support from a colleague or hiring new mentors)

Retaining and rewarding high-performing educators

- Providing additional pay to teachers or school leaders based on their performance, without requiring extra work (e.g., performance bonuses)
- Providing additional pay to educators for taking on extra duties (e.g., teacher leaders)
- Providing additional pay for high-performing educators who transfer to high-need schools
- Providing additional pay for high-performing teachers to teach hard-to-staff subjects
- Providing additional opportunities or career pathways for high-performing educators without additional pay

Improving or creating measures to assess educator effectiveness used to inform performance-based compensation decisions, such as educator incentives or stipends

- Revising how to measure or calculate overall educator effectiveness
- Improving or revising teacher or principal observation measures
- Improving or revising student achievement growth measures
- Generating a new measure of educator effectiveness
- Improving or revising informal measures of educator effectiveness
- Improving or creating other measures aside from educator effectiveness measures used to inform human capital management decisions, such as teacher recruitment strategy
- Revising existing measures (e.g., student or teacher attendance, student behavior, student characteristics, teacher retention)
- Creating new measures

Improving or creating other measures aside from educator effectiveness measures used to inform human capital management decisions, such as teacher recruitment strategy

- Revising existing measures (e.g., student or teacher attendance, student behavior, student characteristics, teacher retention)
- Creating new measures

Improving data system to make more efficient and user-friendly or incorporate new data

- Converting paper records to electronic records stored in system
- Incorporating new or additional data on students, teachers, or leaders into the district's human capital management system
- Revising system so it can link together different types of data
- Creating data management strategies or tools (e.g., data manual, data dictionary, data use protocols)
- Improving data accessibility
- Creating or updating software

Exhibit A.2. Number and roles of district staff who participated in interviews

Interview participants	Number of districts
Number of people participating in first interview	
One person	16
Two or three people	6
Four or five people	2
Number of people participating in second interview	
One person	16
Two or three people	6
Four or five people	2
People interviewed for the first and second interviews	
Same people participated in first and second interviews	21
Not all the same people participated in the first or second interview	3
Roles of people participating in interviews	
Assistant superintendent and similar roles (including directors of curriculum and professional development)	8
District professional development staff	7
Superintendent	6
Grant office staff or TSL grant leader	4
District human resources staff	2
Other staff (such as clerk of the school board, executive assistant to the chief operating officer, and public relations and special projects director)	7
Unknown	6
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

APPENDIX B. SUPPLEMENTAL EXHIBITS

This appendix provides the supporting exhibits that are referenced in the main body of the report. The exhibits are sequenced in the order they appear in the report.

Exhibit B.1. Characteristics of TSL districts and schools compared with all districts and schools in the United States

Characteristic	TSL districts	Districts nationally
Comparison of TSL districts and districts nationally		
Majority of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (average percentage of schools within district)	79*	43
Urbanicity (percentage of districts)		
Urban	47*	16
Suburban	23	23
Rural	29*	61
Regional location (percentage of districts)		
South (AL, AR, DE, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV)	71*	23
Midwest (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI)	21	35
Northeast (CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)	4*	22
West (AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, WY)	4*	20
Total number of districts	**24**	**17,250**

Characteristic	TSL schools	Schools nationally
Comparison of TSL schools and schools nationally		
Percentage of schools with majority of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch	97*	55
Race/ethnicity		
Average percent Hispanic	53*	24
Average percent Black	33*	16
Average percent White	10*	52
Student achievement[a]		
Average math proficiency	33*	48
Average ELA proficiency	32*	48
Total number of schools	**863**	**100,238**

Source: Common Core of Data and EdFacts, 2017–2018.

[a] For math and ELA proficiency rates, TSL schools were compared with all schools in the states in which TSL schools are located to ensure that students in TSL and non-TSL schools took the same set of state assessments.

* Indicates that the difference between TSL districts (or schools) and the comparison districts (or schools) is statistically significant at 0.05 level.

ELA = English language arts.

Exhibit B.2. Strategies districts prioritized to directly support and improve the educator workforce

Prioritized strategy to directly support and improve the educator workforce[a]	Number of districts
Prioritized strategy	
Recruitment	12
Ongoing development	24
Retention	14
Recruitment, ongoing support, or retention	24
Prioritized only one strategy	
Recruitment	0
Ongoing development	6
Retention	0
Prioritized multiple strategies	
Prioritized two strategies	
Recruitment and ongoing development	4
Ongoing development and retention	6
Recruitment and retention	0
Prioritized all three strategies	
Recruitment, ongoing development, and retention	8
Prioritized two or three strategies	18
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

[a] As depicted in the logic model (Exhibit 1), the main strategies that TSL grantees could implement to directly support and improve the educator workforce were recruitment, ongoing development, and retention. Prioritized strategies and activities are those that district staff identified as receiving the greatest portion of grant funding and being among their highest-priority goals.

Exhibit B.3. Strategies districts funded to improve their infrastructure

Funded strategy to improve infrastructure[a]	Number of districts
Funded strategy	
Improve or create measures to assess educator performance	21
Improve or create other measures	11
Improve data system	16
Improve or create measures to assess educator performance, or improve or create other measures, or improve data system	23
Did not fund any activities to indirectly improve their educator workforce	1
Prioritized strategy	
Improve or create measures to assess educator performance	1
Improve data system	4
Improve or create measures to assess educator performance or to improve data system	5
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

[a] As depicted in the logic model (Exhibit 1), the main strategies that TSL grantees could implement to improve their infrastructure to support data-driven strategies to improve the educator workforce were (1) improve or create measures to assess educator performance, (2) improve or create other measures, and (3) improve data system. Funded strategies are those that district staff identified as receiving any funding from their TSL grant. Prioritized strategies and activities are those that district staff identified as receiving the greatest portion of grant funding and being among their three highest-priority activities.

Exhibit B.4. Districts' reported use of data to inform their grant activities

Type of data use to inform or improve grant activities	Number of districts
Used data for high-priority activities	
Used data to accomplish at least one of the district's three highest-priority activities	23
Used data for more than one high-priority activity	19
Ways used data for high-priority activities	
Used data to identify teachers for leadership roles	11
To select teachers to participate in leadership role (but not teacher leader role)	5
To select mentors for peer teachers	4
To select teacher leaders	3
To select mentors for residency program	2
Used data to inform their recruitment and retention efforts	9
To understand extent and possible cause for teacher attrition	6
To inform residency program	3
Used data to determine which educators would receive a performance or retention bonus	9
Tied bonuses to educators' overall performance ratings	7
Tied bonuses to student achievement growth	4
Used data to identify schools to participate in the grant	5
Reviewed school/student achievement and/or teacher performance data	3
Reviewed survey or interview data	2
Reviewed other data (e.g., teacher attrition and vacancy rates, percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, promotion and attendance rates)	2
Used data to determine focus of professional development activities for groups of teachers	6
Used data to identify low-performing educators and provide personalized support and feedback	5
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

Exhibit B.5. Districts' use of grant funds to support a coaching role

Use of Grant Funds	Number of districts
Used TSL grant funds to support full-time coaching role	
Supported a full-time coaching role as a high-priority activity	6
Funded a full-time coaching role, but not as a high-priority activity	3
Activities or responsibilities of full-time coach	
Observed teachers' instruction and provide feedback	8
Supported novice teachers (typically teachers with 1 to 3 years of teaching experience)	3
Supported groups of teachers (e.g., professional learning communities or broad-scale professional development activities)	5
Used TSL grant funds to support a teacher leader coaching role	
Supported a teacher leader coaching role as a high-priority activity	9
Funded a teacher leader coaching role, but not as a high-priority activity	4
Used TSL grant to support full-time coaching role or teacher leader coaching role	
Supported a full-time coaching role or teacher leader role as a high-priority activity	14[a]
Funded a full-time coaching role or teacher leader role, but not as a high-priority activity	5[b]
Used TSL grant to support a full-time coaching role or teacher leader role (either as high-priority or funded activity)	19
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

[a] One district prioritized both a full-time coaching role and a teacher leader coaching role.

[b] Two districts funded both a full-time coaching role and a teacher leader coaching role but neither as a high-priority activity.

Exhibit B.6. Most common reasons why districts prioritized a teacher leader coaching role

Reasons why districts prioritized a teacher leader coaching role	Number of districts
To recruit, support, and retain novice or new teachers	6
Because teacher leaders have credibility with other teachers in the school or know the school	4
To improve instruction or student achievement	4
To provide high-quality teachers growth opportunities and retain excellent teachers	3
To provide an opportunity that can help teacher recruitment	2
Total number of districts that prioritized a teacher leader coaching role	**9[a]**

Source: Interviews with district staff in the 9 2017 TSL grantee districts reporting that they prioritized a teacher leader coaching role, summer 2020.

[a] The rows do not add up to the total number of districts because districts could report multiple reasons. Less frequent reasons are omitted for brevity.

Exhibit B.7. Districts' use of grant funds to support additional compensation

Use of Grant Funds	Number of districts
Bonuses used to attract, reward, and retain effective educators	
Offered a bonus as part of high-priority activity	13
Performance bonus	7
Hiring bonus	7
Retention bonus	3
Funded a bonus, but not as part of a high-priority activity	8
Performance bonus	5
Hiring	8
Additional compensation for additional responsibilities	
Offered additional compensation for additional responsibilities as part of a high-priority activity	14
Teacher leader role	8
Mentor teachers in induction program	3
Mentor teachers participating in residency programs	3
Other leadership roles (e.g., facilitate professional development activities, full-time coaching role, and model teacher role)	4
Funded additional compensation for additional responsibilities, but not as part of high-priority activity[a]	7
Other compensation to effective educators	
Paid tuition or certification costs	6
Compensated to attend professional development	5
Offered bonus or additional compensation for additional responsibilities	**23**
Offered bonus and additional compensation for additional responsibilities	**4**
Offered any additional compensation to attract, reward, and retain effective educators	**24**
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

[a] Information was obtained during the first interview with TSL district staff and focused only on whether the district used the grant to fund additional compensation for educators to take on additional responsibilities, not what role it funded.

Exhibit B.8. Districts' use of grant funds to support a residency or pre-service program

Use of Grant Funds	Number of districts
Prioritized a residency or pre-service program	
Used (and prioritized) TSL grant funds for a residency or pre-service program	6
Did not use TSL grant funds for a residency or pre-service program	18
Used grant funds to start a new residency or pre-service program or to support an existing one	
Started a new program	4
Supported an existing program	2
Reasons for prioritizing a residency or pre-service program	
Fill hard-to-staff positions or address teacher shortages	5
Hire teachers who will be high-quality and effective	5
Improve retention of new teachers	4
Diversify workforce	3
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Interviews with district staff in 24 2017 TSL grantee districts, summer 2020.

Exhibit B.9. Characteristics of TSL districts and schools

Characteristic	
Percentage of schools in district receiving TSL grant funds	
Number of districts that included all schools in the district	8
Number of districts that included at least 85% of the schools in the district, but less than all schools	5
Number of districts that included at least 25% of the schools in the district, but less than 85%	7
Number of districts that included less than 25% of the schools in the district	4
High-need schools[a]	
Percentage of schools in the district receiving TSL funds that were high need	
Number of districts in which less than 50% of funded schools were high need	1
Number of districts in which at least 50% but less than 90% of funded schools were high need	2
Number of districts in which at least 90% but less than 100% of funded schools were high need	4
Number of districts in which 100% of funded schools were high need	16
Average percentage of schools in the district receiving TSL funds that were high need	93%
School achievement[b]	
Schools receiving TSL funds in the 16 districts whose grant did not cover all schools in the district	
Average percentage of students proficient: Average across math and ELA	38%
Average percentage of students proficient: Math	38%
Average percentage of students proficient: ELA	37%
Schools not receiving TSL funds in the 16 districts whose grant did not cover all schools in the district	
Average percentage of students proficient: Average across math and ELA	47%
Average percentage of students proficient: Math	46%
Average percentage of students proficient: ELA	48%
Schools in the 8 districts whose grant covered all the schools in the district	
Average percentage of students proficient: Average across math and ELA	51%
Average percentage of students proficient: Math	52%
Average percentage of students proficient: ELA	50%
Total number of districts	**24**

Source: Common Core of Data and EdFacts, 2017–2018.

[a] High-need schools are defined as schools in which at least 50 percent of their students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. One district was missing information on the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

[b] Among the 16 districts whose grant did not cover all of the districts' schools, 3 districts were missing data on proficiency rates. Among the 8 districts whose grant covered all of the districts' schools, 2 districts were missing data on proficiency rates.

ELA = English language arts.

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DISCLOSURE OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None of the research team members for this evaluation has financial interests that could be affected by findings from this evaluation. None of the members of the technical working group convened by the research team over the course of the study to provide advice and guidance has financial interests that could be affected by findings from the evaluation.