



RESEARCH BRIEF | SUMMER 2020

A BETTER WAY TO PREPARE PRINCIPALS:

Impact of a competency-based fellowship
on aspiring principals' growth into leadership

NIET

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

THE IMPACT OF A MULTI-DISTRICT, COMPETENCY-BASED PRINCIPALSHIP PROGRAM

The *Leadership Instruction for Teachers* (LIFT) program is a collaboration among the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, Texas Tech University, and 12 high-need school districts across Texas and Louisiana. Facilitated through a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant, this partnership worked to build capacity within districts through university preparation and a competency-based fellowship. Evaluation of the impact of the LIFT program shows successful recruitment of high-quality aspiring principals into the program, improvement of leadership and coaching skills, positive perceptions toward the program, and placement of graduates in leadership positions in high-need schools upon program completion.

Background

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, has 20 years of experience supporting educators, including work with over 75 institutions of higher education (IHEs) across the country. This work includes support for observation systems for the preparation of teachers and administrators, training for faculty, clinical supervisors, cooperating teachers and candidates, ensuring alignment from coursework through clinical experience, as well as creating new or redesigned programs (i.e., residency programs, induction programs, and mentor teacher certificates). Additionally, NIET supports IHEs with the NIET Portal for Raising Educator Preparation (NIET PREP), a subscription-based interactive web tool that provides 24-7 support and access to professional development, training, and certification resources.

Recent evaluations of NIET-IHE partnerships supported by U.S. Department of Education Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants have shown positive impacts of training educators to be effective and placing them in high-need schools where they are needed the most. This research brief provides evaluation highlights of a SEED-supported partnership focused on building district capacity to prepare aspiring principals.

Principal Preparation

Teacher quality and principal quality are the top two school variables impacting student achievement (Bartanen, 2020; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger, 2011; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Tan, Gao, & Shi, 2020). High-poverty, low-achieving school districts, which arguably need the best principals, have difficulty attracting high-quality applicants (Blanchard et al., 2019; Grissom, Bartanen, & Mitani, 2019). Principal preparation programs in the U.S. have been criticized for their failure to address the real-world demands of school leadership (DeVita, et al., 2007; Johnson, 2016). One study using a national sample of 31 preparation programs found that principal candidates receive limited training in several areas aligned with principal responsibilities, including the use of data, the use of research, the hiring or terminating of personnel, and the evaluation of personnel in a systematic way (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Traditional principal preparation coursework often does not emphasize creating a school environment conducive for student learning and effective teaching, providing structures for effective professional development, or building communities across diverse school stakeholders (Gates et al., 2014). Moreover, few principal preparation programs have strong clinical training components, specifically field-based trainings that would allow prospective principals to have hands-on experiences of the real-life demands of school leadership under the close supervision of highly skilled school leaders (Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2007; The Wallace Foundation, 2016). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2017) has identified this gap between training and practice as a barrier preventing headway on the national principal shortage and recommends clinical training components to address it.

The LIFT program addresses these challenges by embedding key competencies in (1) a yearlong job-embedded clinical experience that serves as the foundation for the program, and (2) job-embedded coursework that has been aligned with national and state leadership standards.

The LIFT Program

To build local capacity in districts, a partnership among NIET, Texas Tech University (TTU), and 12 high-need school districts across Texas and Louisiana implemented a job-embedded, competency-based school leadership program. The Leadership Instruction for Teachers (LIFT) Program recruits teachers from collaborating districts and trains them through a clinical experience and relevant coursework. Upon program completion of the 15-month program, principal fellows earn a master’s degree in education leadership and a principal certification.

The LIFT program implements a multitiered selection process to assure top-quality candidates are chosen, beginning with district partners nominating teachers who have strong leadership potential and culminating in a formal interview conducted by TTU, NIET, and district partner representatives.

The LIFT program builds competencies of aspiring principals in two main ways:

1. A Yearlong Clinical Experience with Structured Support

The program places candidates in a different school within their originating district. They serve as a principal fellow (interim assistant principal) for one school year. Principal fellows work closely with a high-quality principal mentor, a practicing school leader with extensive experience and demonstrated leadership skills. Principal mentors evaluate principal fellows’ performance during the yearlong clinical experience using the state-recommended principal evaluation systems. University faculty serve as coaches who provide weekly individualized support to principal fellows and conduct monthly site visits that support both the principal fellows and principal mentors.

2. Job-embedded Coursework

The coursework aligns with national and state leadership standards. It focuses on implementing human capital management systems, distributed leadership teams, and instructional coaching in high-need schools. All coursework is based in the actual work of being a school leader. Principal fellows apply the standards for using school data to determine teacher professional development and acquire knowledge of teacher evaluation and feedback processes to aid in coaching teachers. This process helps aspiring principals become familiar with the state standards and expectations of a school leader.

The LIFT program prepared 46 aspiring principals in four cohorts, impacting 35,000 students in 42 schools in Texas and Louisiana. This brief presents evidence of the program's impact for building local capacity to prepare aspiring principals. It describes results from analyses of principal fellows’ (1) competencies related to leadership and coaching skills, (2) perceptions of the LIFT program, and (3) placement upon graduation. We conclude with some overarching reflections for stakeholders seeking to engage in similar efforts.

“By far, the opportunity to spend every single school day as an assistant principal was the most valuable piece of the LIFT program. The job-embedded component of the program gave me the opportunity to have first-hand experience in a variety of areas.”
—LIFT Principal Fellow

Finding 1. Key Competencies: Growth in Leadership and Coaching Skills

In Texas, principal mentors formally evaluated principal fellows twice during their yearlong clinical experience, at midyear and end-of-year. Mentors used the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS) rubric for evaluations. T-PESS consists of 21 indicators that make up five standards aligned with the Texas Principal Standards and has five performance levels: 1) Not Demonstrated/Needs Improvement, 2) Developing, 3) Proficient, 4) Accomplished, and 5) Distinguished. Principal fellows substantially improved their skills on all T-PESS standards (see Figure 1) as demonstrated by statistically significant differences between average T-PESS scores for their first and second evaluations: Instructional Leadership, $t(33) = 4.37; p < .001$, Human Capital, $t(33) = 3.40; p < .01$; Executive Leadership, $t(33) = 3.10, p < .01$; School Culture, $t(33) = 2.23, p < .05$; Strategic Operations, $t(33) = 2.45, p < .05$ ¹. By the end of the school year, average scores demonstrated leadership skills above proficiency, aligning with the program’s goal of preparing effective school leaders.

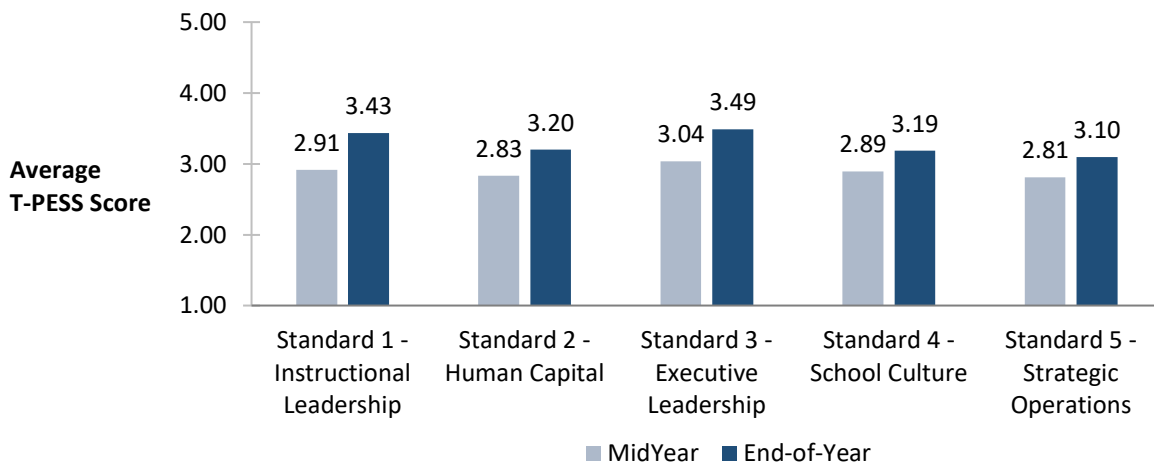


Figure 1. Average T-PESS scores among principal fellows improved from midyear to end-of-year evaluation.

Throughout the school year, principal fellows coached two teachers in need of growth through four POP Cycles – Pre-conference, Observation, and Post-conference. During each cycle, principal fellows were videotaped. TTU evaluators used pre- and post-conference rubrics to analyze the video and, on a 1 (Approaching) to 5 (Exemplary) scale, rated the principal fellows’ ability to facilitate discussions. Across the cycles, principal fellows improved their coaching for both pre- and post-conferences (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the change from Cycle 1 to Cycle 4 showed statistically significant improvement, increasing about one full point on average for both types of conference sessions, $t(40) = 10.65, p < .001$ for pre-conference and $t(40) = 9.13, p < .001$ for post-conference².

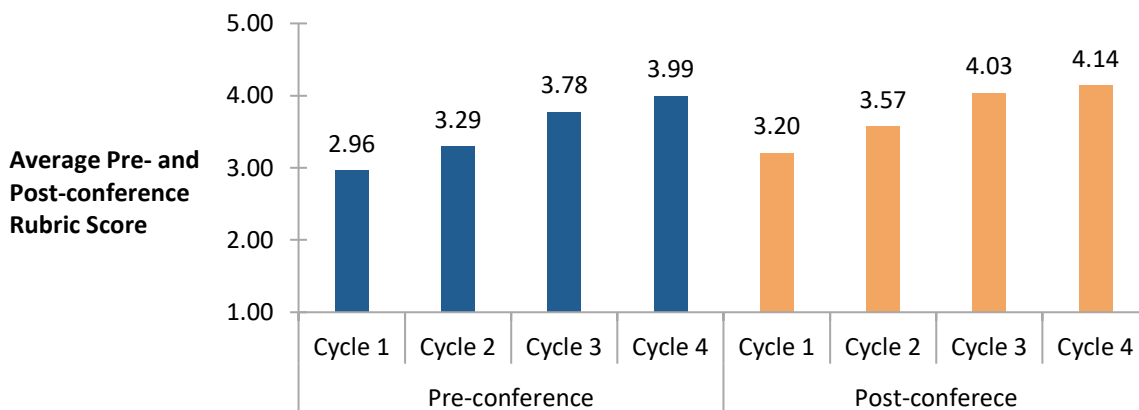


Figure 2. Principal fellows improved their ability to facilitate pre- and post-conferences.

Finding 2. Positive Perceptions of the LIFT Program

To gauge principal fellows’ perceptions of the LIFT program, an online survey was administered toward the end of the program (98% response rate)³. The overwhelming majority of responding principal fellows reported feeling job-ready and having a positive experience during the program (see Figure 3).

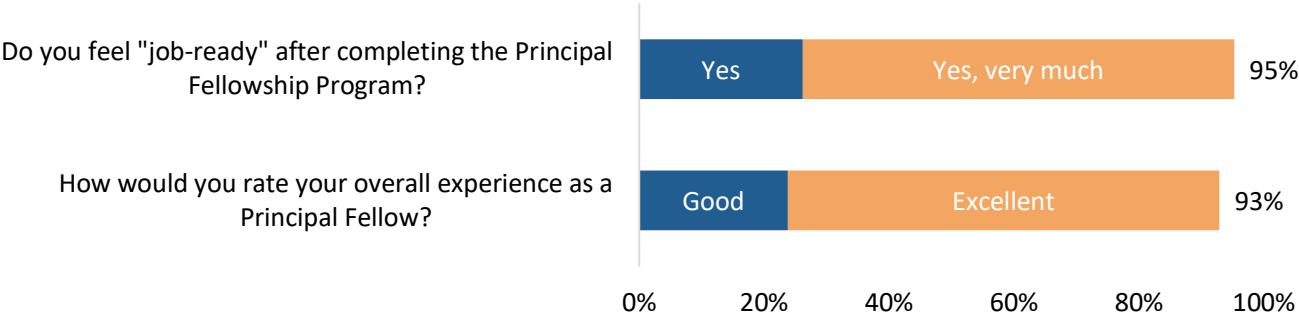


Figure 3. Principal fellows reported positive overall experiences.

Finding 3. Principal Fellows Serve in Leadership Positions and in High-Need Schools upon Graduation

Employment data were collected from principal fellows upon graduation. Within a year of graduating, the majority of principal fellows obtained a leadership role and took positions in schools where the majority of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (see Figure 4). For context and comparison, a study by Grissom et al. (2019) found placement rates for 12 principal preparation programs in Tennessee for leadership positions within five years of graduation were between 40-60%. Graduates of the New Leaders’ Aspiring Principals program, another highly successful preparation program with participants in multiple states, had a placement rate of 82% within one year of graduation (Gates et al., 2019). Taken together, these results demonstrate that, by comparison, the LIFT program’s combination of “grow your own” and field experience is a successful method for placing graduates into school leadership positions.

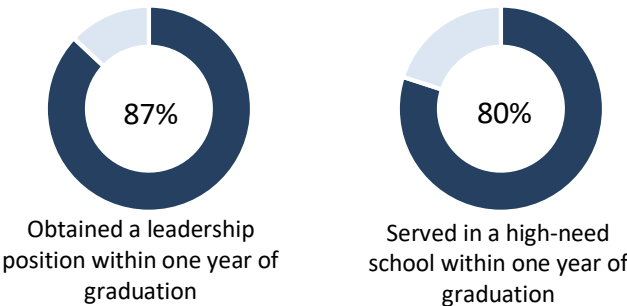


Figure 4. Principal fellow graduates obtain leadership roles and serve in high-need schools.

Conclusion

Our evaluation of the LIFT program on three measures — competencies, perceptions, and placements — shows that the program successfully prepares candidates to become educational leaders. The LIFT program addresses the need for relevant, on-the-job training for aspiring school leaders with mentoring from highly qualified mentors and coaches. It focuses instruction on job-relevant activities, data-informed leadership, and human capital management. As a result, graduates of the LIFT program feel prepared for school leadership, have demonstrated competencies, and quickly obtain leadership positions.

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Endnotes

¹To examine whether principal fellows' leadership skills changed over time, only those with T-PESS scores at midyear and end-of-year were included in the analysis (i.e., 34 principal fellows from Cohort 2, 3, and 4; 4 principal fellows from these cohorts had incomplete T-PESS scores and 5 principal fellows were evaluated under Compass, Louisiana's educator support and evaluation system).

²Out of 43 principal fellows in Cohorts 2, 3, and 4, 41 completed all four POP Cycles with their two teachers.

³This survey was administered to all 43 principal fellows from Cohort 2, 3, and 4.

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The contents of this report were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy or endorsement of the U.S. Department of Education.
