# Miami-Dade County Public Schools Project Lead Strong

# Year 1 Evaluation Report

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**Submitted to**

**Miami-Dade County Public Schools and
the U.S. Department of Education**

**Submitted by**

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# Contents

# Executive Summary

Miami-Dade County Public Schools received funding from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement's School Leadership Program initiative to create Project Lead Strong (PLS), an 18-week principal-in-residence program for training turnaround leaders. The program proposed to train sixteen principals as principals-in-residence, eleven assistant principals as interim principals, and eleven teachers or other staff as interim assistant principals for a total of 38 individuals over the five-year period. The program is currently in its first year and will place its first cohort of principals and assistant principals in the 2011–2012 academic year (Year 2).

American Institutes for Research (AIR) is the external evaluator for Project Lead Strong. The multi-method evaluation study has formative and summative components to present a holistic view of program quality and impact. AIR will produce one report on program progress annually, as well as timely and informal reports to program staff. This report is the first annual report.

AIR is able to report quality-of-process data, which is based upon interviews and the professional development satisfaction survey data. Baseline data on participant skills, beliefs, and practices based on data from the VAL-ED assessment and the Principal Self-Efficacy Survey are also reported. When Project Lead Strong participants begin leading schools, additional data collection and reporting will occur. A summary of key findings from the report are highlighted below.

## Key Findings

According to data from interview with participants and program staff, AIR finds that the participants are attracted to the program because of the 18-week residency experience and participation in the Harvard School Leadership Institute. With respect to the value of the 18-week residency, interview with the first cohort of participants indicates they highly value the professional development, mentorships, and in-school residency activities provided through the program. The professional development satisfaction survey confirms the value of the program's professional development sessions.

Baseline finding from the VAL-ED assessment indicate that interim principals and their mentors consider the participants to be *distinguished* or at the highest level of principal performance in five of the six core components of principal effectiveness. As noted in the discussion of findings that follow, these results should be interpreted with caution due to the limitations of self-reported data.

Findings from the Principal Self-Efficacy Survey demonstrate that interim principals and interim assistant principals believe that they do not have many weaknesses as a school leader. The only area that participants were self-rated as *very weak* were in their ability to *protect time so that teaching and learning can take place*. Additionally, survey results indicate that 50 percent (n = 3) of participants spend more than half of their time participating in follow-up classroom

observations or debrief meeting. Nearly one third of participants (n = 2) spend half or more of their time conducting classroom observations.

Based on interviews with program and district staff, AIR also finds that the PLS program has faced three primary challenges during the first year of implementation. They include:

- **Delay in Hiring Program Director.** Miami Dade County Public School (M-DCPS) was delayed in finding and hiring a qualified program director within the proposed timeline. This delay caused a three month delay in program implementation.

- **Change in Year 1 Recruitment Targets.** Because of the delayed program start, the timeline for recruiting participants into the program was subsequently altered as well. Due to the postponement, the district was reluctant to release or "unseat" current principals from their positions mid-school year. This caused a change in the recruitment and training plan for the first year of implementation, and efforts became focused solely recruitment for interim principals and interim assistant principals. With approval from the U.S. Department of Education, the program selected and trained three assistant principals as interim principals and three teachers or other staff as interim assistant principals for their first cohort of participants. Beginning in Year 2 (2011 – 12) and beyond, the program plans to meet its original recruitment targets.

- **Limited Pool of Candidates.** Despite the approved modified recruitment targets, the program still struggled to recruit individuals for these two positions within the adjusted timeline. This was due primarily because the recruitment and service provision was limited to the Education Transformation Office region, which significantly limited the pool of candidates that the program could select from. Based on findings from interviews with program staff and PLS participants AIR has identified five re-occurring themes or areas of improvement for the PLS program. These areas include: developing recruitment criteria and expanding scope or area of qualified candidates beyond the Education Transformation Office region; better mentor matching and monitoring of mentor and mentee relationships; providing a consistent or systematic in-school experience for participants; provide clear delineation of roles and responsibilities between residents and their mentors so as to limit misunderstandings; and provide clear and explicit criteria and processes for the use of formal feedback and evaluations. A detailed explanation for each of these recommendations can be found at the conclusion of the report.

# Introduction

School leadership has a strong and measurable impact on teaching quality and student achievement. Multiple research studies indicate that principals are the second most influential factor on teachers' instructional choices and are a determining factor in teachers' decisions to join or leave a school (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al, 2004). Meta-analysis of school effectiveness and leadership impact also show that leadership is the second most influential school-level factor after classroom instruction that affects student achievement (Leithwood et al, 2004). Unlike teachers, leaders' impact on teaching and learning is primarily indirect. Leaders influence teaching and student achievement through conversation with staff, development and execution of policies and procedures, and allocation of financial and human resources.

Recent national policies and standards have highlighted leaders' roles in creating conditions for high quality teaching and learning. Increasingly, leaders are accountable for engaging in "instructional leadership," which requires them to engage in teacher professional development, program design and development, and other instructionally pertinent tasks. Many school leaders are not prepared to assume instructional leadership roles, either because pre-service preparation programs did not ready them to be instructional leaders or because district conditions do not support instructional leadership (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2007). The U.S. Department of Education's School Leadership Program recognizes the need for improved school leadership, particularly in high poverty and low performing schools in urban and rural areas, and for new models of leadership development.

This report is the first of five reports to be delivered to Project Lead Strong (PLS) administrators by AIR. The report describes baseline conditions for PLS participants but does not describe baseline conditions for participating schools because PLS participants have not been officially placed as turnaround leaders in schools at this time. The report begins with an overview of the evaluation methodology and data collection that occurred between September 2010 and May 2011. Next, the report provides an overview of the PLS theory of action and describes changes to the theory of action or administrative changes that occurred. Then, the report provides descriptive baseline statistics related to participants' skills, beliefs, and practices as school leaders. Baseline statistics are presented according to the research question to which they pertain. The report concludes with a summary of findings, a discussion of program successes and challenges, and recommendations.

## Program Description

Now in its first year, the Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) Project Lead Strong (PLS) program seeks to improve student achievement and teaching quality by improving current and future school leaders' skills and abilities to act as instructional leaders, particularly in high poverty, low performing urban high schools. In short, PLS builds participant competency to become "turnaround leaders" in schools that need to take dramatic steps to improve teaching and learning. PLS is administered solely by the M-DCPS through a five-year (2010–2015) grant from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office of Innovation and Improvement's (OII) School Leadership Program.

The M-DCPS program aims to build the district's human capital for turning around low performing schools by training staff to become school administrators and by creating and testing a model for turnaround leadership development and support. Project Lead Strong is a 18-week, in-service professional development program that immerses prospective principals and assistant principals in the study of turnaround leaders. M-DCPS refers to PLS as a "residency program," which is described as an immersive learning experience whereby high performing principals in non-turnaround schools or prospective administrators learn by studying research, content, and by leading position-appropriate task in schools under the tutelage of experienced turnaround leaders. Principal residency programs are modeled after teacher residency programs and have shown some success in training new leaders, although the evidence base on principal residency program effectiveness is limited.

In their proposal to the Department of Education (ED), M-DCPS administrators argued that a residency is a more valuable professional development experience for turnaround principals and assistant principals because it provides opportunities to observe practice and gain experience in the leadership craft while learning leadership theory. As proposed, M-DCPS staff sought to develop a series of scaffolded learning experiences that end with participants leading position-appropriate, daily operations of a low performing high school under the mentoring support of a highly experienced turnaround leader. PLS participants are exposed to the same content during formalized workshops and other training sessions, but prospective principals and assistant principals have different in-school experiences. Principal residents and interim principals are to be mentored by experienced turnaround principals in the district. Similarly, teachers or other staff  recruited to become interim assistant principals are to be mentored by experienced and current high performing turn-around or non-turnaround assistant principals within the district. (See Table 1 below). It should be clarified that it is only the principals' in residence who have completed training that the program expects will be placed in a turn-around school. The assistant principals and teachers in the PLS program, however are expected to be promoted to the position of interim principal and interim assistant principals, respectively and remain in their current school once their current administrator (e.g., principal in residency) leaves.

**Table 6. Summary of Responses from Professional Development Satisfaction Survey**

| Number of Responses (*N* = 37) | Topic | Usefulness of Walk-through | Quality presentation | Quality of Group Discussion | Satisfied with Quality of Session | Usefulness to Residency | Usefulness to Future Position |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | High School Accountability (Second 800 Points) | Very useful* (two did not participate) | Excellent | Excellent | Extremely satisfied | Extremely useful | Extremely useful |
| 4 | Case Study-Turnaround High School Ratchets up Improvement/ Book Study: The Turn Around Toolkit | Extremely useful | Very good | Excellent | Extremely satisfied | Very useful | Very useful |
| 4 | Using FAIR Assessment Data | Extremely useful | Very good | Very good | Very satisfied | Very useful | Extremely useful |
| 3 | Book Study: The Turnaround Toolkit | Extremely useful | Excellent | Excellent | Very satisfied | Extremely useful | Extremely useful |
| 4 | Lesson Study | Very useful* (one did not participate) | Very good | Excellent | Very satisfied | Extremely useful | Extremely useful |
| 4 | Book Study-Utilizing Data | Extremely useful * (two did not participate) | Excellent | Very good* (one did not participate) | Extremely satisfied | Extremely useful | Extremely useful |
| 5 | Career and Technical Education | Very useful * (3 did not participate) | Good | Good* (two did not participate) | Very satisfied | Very useful | Very useful |
| 5 | Directing the Work of Instructional Coaches/Literacy Across the Curriculum | Very useful* (three did not participate) | Excellent | Excellent* (one did not participate) | Extremely satisfied | Extremely useful | Extremely useful |
| 3 | Fish Bowl/Case study: Pathways To Prosperity | n/a | n/a | Excellent | Very satisfied | Very useful | Extremely useful |

The professional development satisfaction survey allowed participants to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each professional development session. Common strengths of the sessions included the following:

- Productive and interesting group discussion ($n = 7$).

- Hands-on experience working with student data ($n = 5$).

- Gaining practice through role-play ($n = 2$).

- Well organized, comprehensive, and thorough presentations ($n = 7$).

Common weaknesses of the professional development sessions identified by participants included the following:

- Time did not always allow participants to truly engage with the material being taught ($n = 12$).

- Presentations were not always tailored to specific needs of the participants and their schools ($n = 2$).

- The Career and Technical Education (CTE) presentation was not well organized or engaging and could be improved ($n = 2$).

The results from the professional development satisfaction survey were echoed in the interviews with participants and program staff. All of the respondents truly valued the training offered by the professional development sessions. However, the amount of value given to each professional development session depended highly on the background and experience of the participant— sessions that complimented the weaknesses of the participant tended to be valued more highly. Additionally, the interview data also demonstrates that group discussion within the sessions is highly valued among program participants. The interview data also showed that most program participants believed that they could benefit from the lengthening of the professional development sessions. Finally, two program participants believed that it would have been helpful to have a professional development session on budgeting earlier in the residency, and one program participant believed that the professional development sessions should start almost immediately after the orientation.

**Evaluation Question 4: To what degree has PLS participation increased participant skills, efficacy, and retention?**

As noted earlier, by participating in the district's leadership residency program and eventually becoming new turnaround school principals, interim principals and interim assistant principals selected to participate in PLS hope to gain training help in order to strengthen their leadership skills, specifically in the area of instructional leadership. By improving their skills in this area, it is believed that these selected administrators will be able to more effectively lead turnaround schools. To gain insight and baseline data into whether PLS participants can effectively lead schools (not yet turnaround schools), participating interim principals ($n = 3$) and their respective supervisors (e.g., assigned mentors) were asked to complete the VAL-ED survey. Additionally, all participants ($n = 6$), interim principals and interim assistant principals, were asked to complete the Principal Self-Efficacy survey. Following is a discussion of the baseline results of the VAL-ED survey; a discussion of the results of the Principal Self-Efficacy survey appears later in the report.

Weiss, C. (1997). *Evaluation.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.