



## Issue #6: Leveraging Leadership as a School Improvement Strategy

### ESSA Background

On December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law with strong bipartisan support as the latest reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESSA is notable for devolving authority to states, emphasizing the use of evidence-based school interventions, and providing states greater flexibility to design broader school accountability systems while maintaining student performance goals.

Importantly, ESSA offers a renewed focus on school leadership and recognizes the impact of leaders on school improvement and effective instruction. The law provides states and districts new opportunities to fund school leadership and explicitly acknowledges leadership as a legitimate target of educational-improvement activities.

Under the law, states were required to submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education detailing the goals, strategies, and funding priorities for their education system. To gain greater insight into the treatment of school leadership in state education systems, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), with the support of state-based review teams, conducted a comprehensive review of the 52 ESSA plans (50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico).

### The Significance of Leadership as a School Improvement Strategy

Under ESSA, states are granted greater flexibility in their chosen approaches to school improvement. Instead of the federal government advancing preferred strategies to improve schools, decision-making about how to best impact underperforming schools is devolved to state and local authorities, provided they use strategies with evidence of effectiveness. States are also provided flexibility in how they plan to identify underperforming subgroups of students and measures of student progress for which they will be held accountable.

ESSA requires state education agencies to provide a statewide system of technical assistance and support for underachieving local education agencies (LEAs). The law also instructs states to reserve at least 7% of their Title I allotment (formerly the School Improvement Grant) to support schools identified as underachieving—Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools and Targeted Support and Improvement schools—by the state accountability system. Of this 7% allotted for school improvement activities, 95% must be awarded as subgrants to LEAs by formula or competition (exception is made for the provision of school improvement services by outside entities such as nonprofit and for-profit external providers, with LEA approval).

#### Leveraging Leadership: At a Glance

- **60% of plans** listed leadership as an evidence-based improvement strategy for Comprehensive Support and Improvement and Targeted Support and Improvement schools.
- **10 plans** prioritize leadership as a improvement strategy in awarding LEA school-improvement subgrants.
- The most common method of awarding subgrants is through a **hybrid of formula funding and competitive grants**.

Under ESSA:

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools** are defined as the lowest 5% of Title I schools and high schools with a graduation rate less than 67%.
- **Targeted Support and Improvement schools** have at least one subgroup of students consistently underperforming.

ESSA requires that strategies for school improvement be “evidence-based” and verifiable by an experimental study. School leadership not only has been established as a top factor influencing student success, but also has a strong research base demonstrating impact. Furthermore, numerous leadership improvement activities meet ESSA’s evidence-based requirements.

Strategies to support school improvement that focus on leadership are also efficient levers to impact schools. With far fewer principals in each state than teachers, officials can seek to support leadership practice and, through the principal, influence the larger body of teachers in a school.

Given the evidence and high-impact value, a key factor for states seeking to improve underachieving schools is ensuring that those schools are led by quality school leaders.

*“Using the Georgia Systems for Continuous Improvement, GaDOE [Georgia Department of Education] will provide professional learning, resources, and intensive onsite coaching to schools identified for comprehensive and targeted support, in order to increase the effectiveness of principals, and other school leaders.”*

– Georgia’s ESSA Plan

**What Did UCEA’s Analysis Find?**

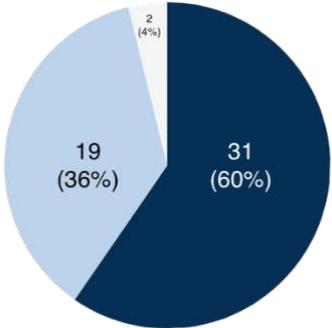
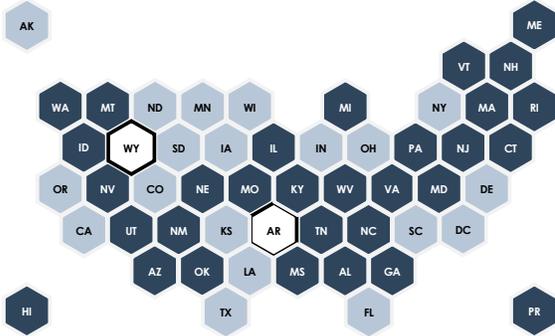
UCEA’s 52-plan analysis found that 31 out of 52 (60%) plans describe school leadership as a improvement strategy for underachieving schools.

**Leadership as an Improvement Strategy**

Number of plans recognizing school leadership as an evidence-based strategy improvement strategy for underachieving schools:

**Legend**

31 plans describe school leadership as a strategy for improving underachieving schools.
19 plans do not include school leadership as a strategy for improving underachieving schools.
2 plans do not list or provide specific strategies for improving underachieving schools.



*“Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader.”*

–Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004

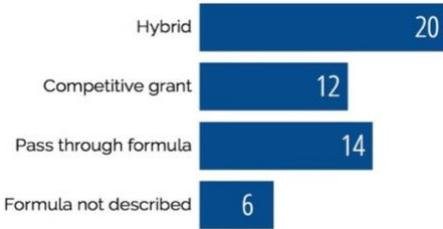
Additionally, UCEA found the most common method of awarding subgrants to LEAs is through a hybrid of funding formulas and competitive grants. Twenty

plans (38%) intend to utilize such a method, whereas 14 plans (29%) will use a general pass-through formula. Twelve plans (23%) will use a competitive process, and the remaining six plans (12%) do not explicitly describe their funding formula. In regards to school leadership, only 10 plans (19%) will give priority to LEAs who cite leadership as an improvement strategy.

Given that states can choose to prioritize criteria areas in awarding subgrants, UCEA is encouraged to see a handful of states specifically citing leadership as an evidence-based improvement strategy.

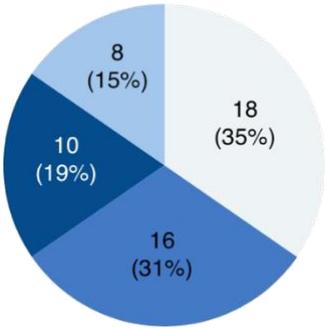
**Methods of Awarding Subgrants**

*The method used by each plan to determine how subgrants would be awarded to LEAs:*



**Priority Given to Leadership**

*The number of plans describing giving priority to LEAs that list school leadership as an improvement strategy in awarding subgrants:*



10 plans included leadership as a priority criterion.
16 plans did not include leadership as a priority criterion.
8 plans did not describe priority criteria.
18 plans did not include a competitive component in funding formula.

**Highlight States**

Based on its 52-plan analysis, UCEA researchers choose to highlight three states’ plans, as examples of thoughtful attention to school leadership through their description of school improvement strategies. These examples of state investments are merely highlights without claims of exhaustive representation of the variety of thoughtful plans for the use of Title II, Part A funding.



**Pennsylvania** intends to expand the Quality School Leadership Identification Index to additional schools deemed high priority. The index will grant these

schools access to improved recruitment and hiring processes, processes for projecting vacancies, and professional development for managers and others involved in the hiring of school principals for all schools. The goal of the Quality School Leadership Identification Index is to recruit and retain high-quality school leaders in the schools with the highest demand.

**Georgia** House Bill 338

established the position of Chief Turnaround Officer within the Georgia Department of Education. With the help of third-party experts, the Chief Turnaround Officer will conduct an on-site technical review (which includes a leadership assessment) of schools deemed low performing. After determining causes of low performance, the Chief Turnaround Officer will work with the school to implement its improvement strategies.



**Vermont** plans to establish the Vermont Leader’s Professional Learning Academy. This new academy will concentrate on improving the capacity of school leaders, primarily those leading schools identified for Comprehensive or Targeted Support and Improvement.



## Implications

UCEA's finding that 60% of plans recognize leadership as an evidence-based improvement strategy is an encouraging data point. After two decades of academic research supporting leadership as a highly effective improvement strategy, states appear to be recognizing its significance in greater depths.

However, it would be even more impactful if states proactively encouraged the use of school leader strategies to impact low-performing school among LEAs. Currently, only 10 plans include leadership as a favorable criterion when awarding subgrants to LEAs. Whereas LEAs may independently use school improvement grants to invest in leadership, state education agencies emphasizing leadership would expand the reach.

The research asserts virtually no documented cases of successful improvement schools without a successful leader. This being the case, investing in leadership as a school improvement strategy is not only pragmatic—it is powerful.

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