

# Building Capacity Locally: Supporting Principals and School Leaders in South Carolina

## Fall 2021

At the heart of every great school is a great leader. In the context of school improvement, the role of the principal becomes even more important. Increasing access to great leadership has to be central to any turnaround effort.

In fall 2020, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) a \$2.5 million grant, in partnership with the University of South Carolina (UofSC) and the Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED).

The aim of the three-year Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant is to build and accelerate the leadership capacity of 150 South Carolina principals and school leaders in supporting science, technology, engineering, and math education (STEM) and social-emotional learning for students. The grant supports principal coaching and training, with a focus on advancing equity for all students. The project will impact approximately 58,000 students, over half of whom meet the state’s criteria for being considered in poverty.

Educational leadership research has consistently shown the importance of principals to the academic success of students<sup>1</sup>, and students in schools led by high-performing principals gain nearly three additional months of learning in math and reading each year.<sup>2</sup> Effective principals establish a culture of high standards, trust, professional development, and support for both teachers and students.<sup>3</sup> However, principals often need support to provide this type of leadership, and that is particularly true for those in underserved communities.<sup>4</sup>

The federal SEED grant program provides funding to implement evidence-based practices that increase school leader effectiveness. NIET is partnering with districts across South Carolina, along with the University of South Carolina and the Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity, to create the South Carolina Principal Leadership Network (SCPLN). Through this initiative, 150 school leaders will participate in a two-year cohort-based program of high-quality virtual professional development in STEM and social-emotional learning, coupled with quarterly on-site coaching and networking opportunities through virtual communities of practice. The training is rooted in evidence-based practices that accelerate student achievement growth and is tailored to the needs of participating schools.

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“The SCPLN has been a wonderful experience this year. It has provided me with many opportunities to reflect with other principals on the needs of our students, staff, and my professional needs. The community of practice gave me real-time support with needs in my building and was a unique experience to brainstorm with other principals around the state. The on-site coaching with an NIET leader took the learning from the modules and provided actionable steps to deliver in the classroom.”

Dr. Deborah Moore, Bridges Preparatory School

<sup>1</sup>Grissom et al., 2021; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger, 2011; McKibben, 2013; Papa, 2007; Papa et al., 2002; Rampey et al., 2009

<sup>2</sup>Grissom et al., 2021

<sup>3</sup>Burkhauser, 2017; Grissom et al., 2021; Youngs & King, 2002

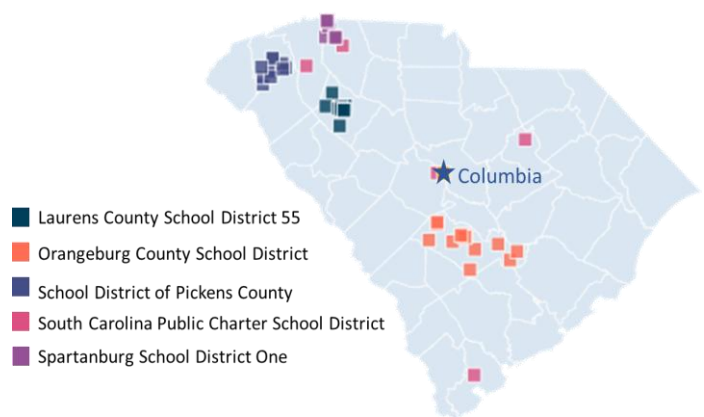
<sup>4</sup>Levin et al., 2020



During summer 2021, NIET senior specialists led training for more than 100 SCPLN school leaders.

## Goal 1: Create new, sustainable Principal Leadership Networks for 150 school leaders serving in underserved communities over the duration of the grant.

SCPLN is supporting school leaders in underserved communities through a two-year program that includes three cohorts, each comprising at least 50 school leaders. As of November 2021, **106 school leaders** from **53 schools** across **five districts** have participated. The leadership experience levels of participating school leaders vary, ranging from 0 to 22 years. Approximately half (55%) of the current participants are female. Sixty percent of participants identify as white and 40% identify as Black. On average, 70% of students in participating schools meet the state's criteria for being considered in poverty, and 10 participating schools are in a Qualified Opportunity Zone, which is an economically distressed community designated by the Secretary of the Treasury.



To provide school leaders with opportunities to connect with and collaborate with other school leaders in the state, NIET offers virtual **quarterly communities of practice**. During these collaborative learning opportunities, school leaders share and reflect on experiences applying new knowledge and skills at their respective school sites.

## Goal 2: Build instructional leadership capacity of school leaders serving in underserved communities through quarterly virtual training and personalized on-site coaching to support effective leadership.

Developing and retaining effective principals requires high-quality professional learning.<sup>4</sup> However, many principals, particularly those serving in high-poverty schools, face obstacles to participating in professional learning due to lack of time, funds, district support, or staff to cover for them while training.<sup>4</sup> Further, many existing professional development programs fail to provide authentic learning opportunities to apply new skills or work with a coach.<sup>5</sup>

To support SCPLN school leaders' professional learning, NIET provides the **NIET Principal Leadership Series**. This training is job-embedded, evidence-based virtual professional learning built on principal leadership standards that support school leaders to develop their skills across a range of practices impacting leadership: (1) creating and communicating a culture of equity, (2) leading instructional coherence, (3) building shared instructional leadership, and (4) sustaining reflective practice through continuous improvement and coaching.

NIET leadership coaches build on this learning by following up with each SCPLN school leader through quarterly **on-site coaching** sessions. Through individualized coaching sessions, participants receive support in applying the evidence-based practices in their daily work.

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### 95%

of surveyed SCPLN school leaders are satisfied with the Principal Leadership Series training.

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### 94%

of surveyed SCPLN school leaders indicate that coaching sessions allowed them to apply the information they learned during the NIET Principal Leadership Series training.

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Cohort 2 SCPLN school leaders met for a two-day summer kickoff meeting.

<sup>5</sup>Rowland, 2017



Cohort 2 SCPLN school leaders worked together during the summer kickoff meeting.

### Goal 3: Build the knowledge of school leaders serving in underserved communities in leading and strengthening rigorous programs to improve student outcomes.

South Carolina district leaders have expressed a clear need for enhancing both STEM and social-emotional learning programs, consistent with a growing demand for these skills in the workplace.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the South Carolina Department of Education's Profile of a South Carolina Graduate highlights that all South Carolina graduates should have access to: (1) world-class knowledge and skills, which include STEM knowledge, and (2) life and career characteristics, which encompass integrity, self-direction, global perspective, perseverance, work ethic, and interpersonal skills.

To address districts' needs and meet the goals set forth in the Profile, NIET has partnered with UofSC and BranchED. UofSC, a large university, provides a three-hour training on implementing and strengthening **STEM programs**. BranchED, a nonprofit leader in diversifying the educator workforce, facilitates a three-part training in the development of **social-emotional learning that integrates culturally relevant pedagogy** for all students. They also offer several communities of practice sessions as a follow-up to the training.



This partnership represents a unique opportunity for school leaders to take part in a systematic continuum of training and support, which helps them to build and apply leadership skills as well as develop knowledge to better meet the needs of their students. Embedding an intentional approach to equity in these programs is a timely need across the nation as the COVID pandemic has created new challenges in every community.

<sup>6</sup>Belfield et al., 2015; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Jang, 2016

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