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*Executive Summary of*

# State Strategic Staffing: Recruitment Incentive for Lowest-Performing Schools

Race to the Top Formative Evaluation Report

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# STATE STRATEGIC STAFFING: RECRUITMENT INCENTIVE FOR LOWEST-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

## Executive Summary

The North Carolina Race to the Top program funds a State Strategic Staffing Initiative (SSSI), which is intended to provide students in lower-performing schools with greater access to highly effective teachers. This initiative makes it possible for Local Education Agencies (LEAs—North Carolina’s term for traditional school districts and charter schools) to provide a voucher to teachers as a recruitment incentive for them to transfer to an eligible school. The annual amount of the voucher is \$5,360 and can be used for tuition towards one of several Master’s degrees related to education, student loan payments, housing, or any combination thereof.

The Consortium for Educational Research and Evaluation–North Carolina (CERENC) is evaluating the SSSI as a part of the evaluation of NC Race to the Top (RttT) funded projects and programs. The goal of the Consortium’s evaluation is to examine the implementation and intermediate outcomes associated with the recruitment incentive. Implementation activities to date have been observed and the experiences and opinions of recruited teachers, their principals, and representatives from their LEAs recorded and described in this report.

### *Initiative Background: Structure of the Recruitment Incentive and Implementation*

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) allocated approximately \$3 million total for the 2011-12 school year through the 2013-14 school year to fund recruitment vouchers for teachers transferring into low-performing schools. Transferring teachers receive the voucher each year, for the period of the RttT grant, as long as they remain in their new school. The annual amount of the voucher is \$5,360 and can be used for tuition towards one of several Master’s degrees related to education, student loan payments, housing, or any combination thereof. The design of the recruitment incentive is such that only eligible teachers receive the vouchers and only certain LEAs are able to offer the voucher.

Teachers eligible for the SSSI voucher must be career-status teachers who have ratings at or above “Proficient” in each area of the Educator Evaluation System for teachers and have not taught in an eligible school in the same LEA in the prior year.<sup>1</sup>

NCDPI determined eligible schools by first selecting from the population of the lowest achieving schools, which are defined as schools with graduation rates below 60%, or the lowest-performing 5% of conventional schools. All schools were then grouped into their respective LEAs to avoid competition between schools within an LEA. The resulting list contained 36 LEAs from which 10 were selected based on their 3-year average turnover rate and their geographic location. Specifically, the LEA with the highest turnover in each education region and LEAs with a 3-year

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<sup>1</sup> Through the 2012-13 school year, to be career-status, teachers needed four consecutive years of service and a designation of career status by a local Board of Education. Recent legislative changes (SL 2013-360, Section 9.6) have eliminated the career status designation.

average turnover rate greater than 20% were selected.<sup>1</sup> (See Appendix B for a list of LEAs and schools eligible and Appendix C for a map of the education regions and eligible LEAs)

To date, few of the vouchers have been provided to teachers and none as a recruitment incentive. According to participation and budget estimates, the recruitment incentive was expected to be provided to approximately 181 teachers. Six teachers qualified for the voucher in 2011-12 and an additional six teachers qualified for the voucher in 2012-13. However, it appeared that only ten of the twelve teachers remained eligible in the 2012-13 school year.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Purpose of the Evaluation and Report***

The Consortium for Educational Research and Evaluation–North Carolina (CERE–NC)<sup>3</sup> is conducting an independent external evaluation of North Carolina’s RttT initiatives. The roles of the RttT Evaluation Team are to (1) document the activities of the RttT initiatives; (2) provide timely formative data, analyses, and recommendations to help the initiative teams improve their ongoing work; and (3) provide summative evaluation results toward the end of the grant period to determine whether the RttT initiatives met their goals and to inform future policy and program decisions to sustain, modify, or discontinue initiatives after the grant-funded period.

### ***Research Questions***

This report provides formative evaluation of the SSSI, which was proposed to increase the access of pupils in the lowest-performing schools to higher-quality teachers. Accordingly, this report focuses on the following research questions<sup>4</sup>:

1. Was SSSI implemented as intended?
2. Did SSI meet critical needs for teachers and principals to improve equitable access to higher-quality teachers and leaders in targeted geographic areas? Why or why not? What factors limited implementation of this program, if any?
3. How does SSSI change the climate in eligible and participating schools?
4. What is the nature and quality of the experience for teachers who receive the SSSI vouchers?

Data obtained to address these questions were collected primarily through interviews of participating teachers, principals, and LEA administrators, as well as the team implementing SSSI at NCDPI.

### ***Summary of Key Findings***

1. The SSSI vouchers were not used as a recruitment incentive. All teachers that received the voucher were informed of the incentive after they had transferred to their new school.

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<sup>1</sup> Region 8 has no schools that are in the list of lowest achieving. Also, no large urban districts met the selection criteria.

<sup>2</sup> This figure was determined by the Evaluation Team when scheduling interviews of eligible teachers.

<sup>3</sup> CERE–NC is a partnership of the Carolina Institute for Public Policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, and the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix B for a full list of the evaluation questions to be addressed in the final report.

2. Overall, LEA representatives were satisfied with the level of communication about the SSSI. However, they also indicated that at times the amount of information about all of the NCDPI and RttT initiatives was overwhelming, particularly if the information flowed through one individual in the LEA. Some LEAs limited communication about SSSI vouchers to principals. Some LEA officials indicated that they were not sure that they had accurate and complete information, and others indicated that the incentive did not fit with local staffing strategies.
3. Respondents offered several insights about the limited implementation of the recruitment incentive. Teachers reported that their choices to move had to do with their personal lives, and principals reported that they had limited information and lacked confidence in using the incentive as a recruitment tool. LEA representatives felt limited in their ability to recruit beyond their LEAs using the incentive and were skeptical of potential net benefits of the redistribution of teachers within their LEAs.
4. Concerns were raised in eligible schools that teachers transferring from other, perhaps less challenging schools would need professional development to be successful. One principal stated that some teachers may be highly effective in a less challenging environment, but may have difficulties translating that effectiveness into a different environment.
5. Voucher recipients also raised concerns that the vouchers alone would not provide sufficient incentives for teachers who received them to remain in eligible schools. Also, respondents recommended that induction strategies should be added along with the vouchers for a more comprehensive staffing strategy, and that the vouchers also should be available to effective teachers already in the schools.
6. In general, teachers felt that the overall impact of their transfer to their new school was positive. Teachers cited improvements in their students' test results and behavior, enhanced collaborative efforts among their colleagues, and their movement into leadership roles as examples of their positive experiences. Some teachers did experience a lack of collaboration among their peers that they felt was, in part, due to their receipt of the voucher. Most principals also believed that the eligible teachers had a positive impact on school climate, though some expressed concerns that the vouchers caused resentment among highly-effective teachers already in the schools that negatively affected school climate.

### ***Recommendations***

1. *Expand communication about the initiative:* Clear and accessible communication at all levels is essential to the successful implementation of any policy initiative. Responses indicate the communication from the state level to the LEA level was satisfactory, but diminished from the LEA level to the school level and from the principals to the teachers. The initiative should consider more focused follow-up on the flow of information to all levels.
2. *Integrate state- and local-level recruitment and retention policies and strategies:* Respondents indicated that retention strategies for lower-performing, harder-to-staff schools and LEAs are equally, if not more, important than recruitment incentives, as these schools and LEAs face significant teacher turnover. In already-tight labor markets, an enhanced focus on retaining effective teachers likely will provide an additional avenue for providing equitable access to highly-effective educators for students in low-performing schools. Possible strategies for supporting retention along with recruitment:

- a. *Provide new faculty orientation:* Getting teachers to relocate is only part of the problem; as important is getting them to stay. Feedback from participating teachers and principals suggests that incorporation into the initiative of a formal orientation to the school, LEA, and even surrounding community may help to break down some of the barriers that otherwise would hinder new teacher integration into the target schools.
- b. *Provide context-sensitive professional development:* Responses from interviews revealed that one area of concern for teachers, principals, and LEA administrators was that transferring teachers, though effective, may have difficulty maintaining that effectiveness in their new environments. These teachers may have little to no experience in educating students in the kinds of environments the initiative targets. Administrators indicated that an incentive with accompanying professional development that helps incoming teachers understand their students and their needs may improve not only teacher willingness to transfer but also the performance of their students.<sup>1</sup>
- c. *Consider repurposing some of the funding for retention incentives:* Both principals and teachers were concerned about teacher retention at their schools. Several voucher recipients suggested adding a retention incentive to the recruitment voucher for teachers already at the school who otherwise meet the requirements of the voucher. They indicated that such an approach would improve the fairness of the incentive, since both existing effective teachers and incoming recruited teachers would receive an incentive to stay in the school. This approach also would mitigate the negative impact on school culture associated with only rewarding incoming teachers.

### *Next Steps*

1. *Revise the scope of work:* The Evaluation Team will revise its scope of work to account for low participation and to provide more insight into the difficulties of implementing and opportunities for improving a recruitment incentive. These revisions will include: (a) an expanded interview pool that includes teachers and principals from eligible schools who did not participate in the recruitment incentive; (b) more teacher focus groups regarding recruitment policies; and, if the number of teachers receiving the SSSI vouchers increases significantly, (c) analysis of participation effects on student outcomes, as well as teacher evaluation measures.
2. *Combine the evaluation of NC RttT strategic staffing initiatives:* In the final year of the evaluation, combined rather than stand-alone evaluations of all RttT strategic staffing initiatives will be conducted. The Evaluation Teams will combine their efforts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which all RttT staffing programs improve equitable distribution of effective teaching and subsequent student achievement.
3. *Include case studies:* Part of the integration of the incentives evaluations will include a more in-depth analysis through case studies to determine the extent to which recruitment strategies function within the broader context of LEA strategic staffing plans.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, context-sensitive professional development is being provided for some school administrators in low-performing schools by the NCDPI District and School Transformation (DST) division. This professional development focuses not only on recruitment and retention of effective teachers, but also on how administrators can improve teacher development through better leadership practices.

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