Executive Summary of

Strategic Staffing in North Carolina

A Summative Review of Local and State Implementation across the Race to the Top Period

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STRATEGIC STAFFING IN NORTH CAROLINA:
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Executive Summary

Effective teachers are critical to the academic success of students, but all too often, students who struggle the most do not have access to them. Concern about low-performing, poor, and minority students' access to effective teachers was a foundational component of the United States Department of Education's Race to the Top (RttT) program, which encouraged state applicants to propose ways to counter this persistent trend. North Carolina's RttT plan included several initiatives for achieving a more equitable distribution of effective educators, including support for one statewide and several locally-developed strategic staffing plans that *aim to distribute an education unit's more effective educators*[1] *into its lowest-performing schools*.

The State Strategic Staffing Initiative (SSSI) was designed to encourage highly-effective teachers statewide to relocate to lower-performing schools. The initiative provided ten traditional Local Education Agencies (LEAs; no charter schools were eligible) with vouchers to use as recruitment incentives at their highest-turnover schools. The annual amount of the voucher was $5,360 and could be used for tuition towards Master's degrees related to education, student loan payments, housing, or any combination thereof. In addition, many of the individual Detailed Scopes of Work (DSWs) crafted by LEAs to demonstrate how they would use RttT funds to support RttT goals outlined strategies for developing or maintaining local strategic staffing plans.

An overriding goal of the evaluation of these plans has been to determine whether they contributed to an increase in the presence of effective teachers in low-performing schools. Specifically, the intent of this evaluation has been to:

- Examine the implementation of the state recruitment incentive;

- Identify, classify, and describe all LEA-level strategic staffing initiatives in operation across the state that support RttT goals (whether funded by RttT or by some other source);

- Provide assessments of the impact of RttT-supported staffing initiatives on outcomes related to the distribution of effective teachers in low-performing schools;

- Provide evidence for policy makers and other stakeholders that they can use to improve the design and implementation of these plans; and

- Provide recommendations for continuation, expansion, or termination of these plans at the conclusion of the RttT period.

This report assesses the impact of the state and local strategic staffing plans on moving the state as a whole, as well as individual LEAs, toward a more targeted and thoughtful distribution of their most effective educators, as well as the advisability of continuing these plans at the end of

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[1] For this report, effectiveness is broadly defined as any measure that differentiates educator impact on students.

the RttT period. The report updates the information and early conclusions drawn about the plans in two previous formative reports.[2]

Criteria for Identifying Comprehensive Strategic Staffing Plans

Three criteria were developed from a review of research and of extant examples of strategic staffing initiatives to aid in the identification of comprehensive strategic staffing plans. Comprehensive plans: (a) focus on low-performing schools or student populations, (b) differentiate teachers through some measure of their effectiveness, and (c) incorporate some type of incentive that is designed to increase the number of more effective teachers in low-performing schools.

Findings

State Strategic Staffing Initiative

1. *Recruitment and Retention*. Only 17 teachers received the recruitment incentive in 2013-14, and none of the interviewed teachers indicated that they were aware of the existence of the incentive before choosing schools. Despite indications from some administrators that it was used for recruitment purposes, there is no evidence available that the incentive actually functioned as either a recruitment or retention tool.

2. *Impact*. While data do not allow the Evaluation Team to form direct conclusions about the impact of the vouchers on student outcomes, teachers and principals suggested that the vouchers could be contributing indirectly in other ways, such as by improving school culture via the increased responsibilities administrators expected of their voucher recipients (including provision of support and professional development for peer teachers, as well as expectations of high-quality teaching).

3. *Challenges*. The primary challenge to the success of the voucher program identified by participants and implementers was a lack of communication between LEAs, schools, and teachers, although there was some indication in the third year of the initiative from teachers and LEA administrators that this problem was beginning to be addressed.

Local Strategic Staffing Initiatives

1. *Reach and Diversity*. Based on a review of the final versions of each LEA's DSW, there were 21 LEAs statewide with comprehensive strategic staffing plans at the end of the RttT period—13 funded partially or wholly by RttT and eight funded entirely by another source. In addition, 49 more plans included some elements of a comprehensive plan. While there were some similarities across plans, overall the plans were diverse. LEAs invested about $76 million in RttT, local, and other federal funding in these plans across the RttT period.

2. *Equitable Teacher Distribution*. Incentives coupled with attention to non-monetary variables such as school climate appear to be key factors in plans that aim to increase low-achieving

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[2] *Local Strategic Staffing in North Carolina: A Review of Plans and Early Implementation* (2012) http://cerenc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Strategic-staffing_1stYear-Report_-FINAL-09-24-2012.pdf; *State Strategic Staffing: Recruitment Incentive for Lowest-Performing Schools* (2013) http://cerenc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/FINAL-State-Strategic-Staffing-8-29-13.pdf

students' exposure to effective teachers. Though not feasible for all LEAs, plans with multiple avenues for teacher entry that can appeal to a broader spectrum of educators also may increase an LEA's likelihood of more equitably distributing its most effective teachers.

3. *Portability*. Plans that leverage an LEA's existing pool of effective teachers (rather than relying on recruitment from outside the LEA) and that allow for flexible implementation across schools in an LEA show promise for being more portable—that is, more likely to be implementable in other LEAs—than rigid plans that rely solely on costly incentive structures.

4. *Sustainability*. Strategies that may help to ease sustainability pressures include making identification of sustaining funds part of the strategic staffing plan's ongoing implementation from the start, and considering ways to support the plan with funds that are currently earmarked for other purposes that directly relate to the strategic staffing plan.

Recommendations

- *Prioritize development and maintenance of a comprehensive communications plan*. Participant feedback about the implementation of state and local-level strategic staffing plans demonstrates that clear, consistent, and constant communication between implementers and teachers, as well as among implementers, is critical to the success of the recruitment and retention aspects of any staffing initiative. For example, teachers suggested that plan details be readily available on LEA websites, and that LEA- and state-level contacts be more clearly identified and more responsive to inquiries about staffing initiatives.

- *Design plans with shorter-term staffing targets—e.g., recruitment and retention of effective teachers—rather than with longer-term student achievement goals*. Recent quantitative research and early qualitative evidence from North Carolina's state and local-level strategic staffing plans offer little evidence of a *direct* link between strategic staffing components (such as incentives) and improvements in student achievement, but there is growing evidence for the impact of strategic staffing on *intermediate* outcomes (such as recruitment and retention of effective teachers) that may have longer-term impacts on student achievement.

- *Plan for sustainability*. Even the longest-running, most robust, and most successful plans across the state struggle to maintain ongoing funding; consider pursuing multiple funding sources, and plan for the end of each funding source several years in advance.

- *Work together across school district boundaries*. Currently, there is no formal mechanism in place for LEAs to learn from each other's experiences with the state-level strategic staffing plan and the dozens of local-level plans. The state should work with LEAs interested in developing or revising a strategic staffing plan to find ways to connect them with others across the state who can share their experiences and learnings.

- *Explore multiple plan options*. Similarly, LEAs interested in developing or revising a strategic staffing plan should consider multiple approaches and should be open to early experimentation with those approaches to support the development of an optimal plan for that LEA's specific conditions. For example, the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School System, which developed three separate programs to support local strategic staffing efforts, crafted an LEA-wide plan that first refined those programs based on field test results and then coordinated them to best meet the staffing needs of the LEA.

- *Review the latest research.* In addition to consulting with each other, LEAs also should stay current on constantly-updated findings about the effectiveness of new staffing strategies and work to share those findings with administrators and their human resources departments. As approaches to strategic staffing continue to expand, so, too, do data and evidence about their feasibility, sustainability, and effectiveness.

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