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ALL THE VOICES: STATEWIDE COLLABORATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP UNDER ESSA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ESSA Leadership Learning Community (ELLC) was an unusual endeavor that allowed education agency leaders, community organization leaders, and others to work together on challenges facing schools and school leaders in their states. The ELLC was designed to take advantage of new opportunities for state and local decision making presented in its namesake: the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which in 2015 reauthorized the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The ESSA amendments, by shifting the weight of authority over federal elementary-secondary programs to the states, created opportunities for state policy innovation.

Over the years from 2016 to 2022, ELLC participants in 11 state teams produced advice to state agencies on policy design and rollout, created new programs of professional learning for school leaders and contributed to changes in existing programs, and produced materials for statewide use by community members and educators. These practical results came about because each team brought together different voices to articulate a shared vision and act on it. The title of this report comes from a comment by a team member looking back on more than four years of the experience to draw a lesson for future activities like the ELLC:

Build the team around all the voices....That's the power of the group, ... having the time and the ability to develop truly collegial relationships, have truly thought-provoking conversations about different things that are being done, and question what's being done and the thought process behind it.

For state agencies, local school districts, or community-based organizations, this report on the work of the ELLC offers potentially useful examples of ways in which they might join with others to address problems of practice and policy as they work toward effective, equity-centered school leadership, especially for high-need schools. The ELLC's lessons may be especially helpful for those who are in a position to convene leaders and high-level staff from disparate organizations in search of innovative ways to solve these challenges—or, conceivably, other equally complex challenges. Potential conveners could include state agencies, foundations, or technical assistance providers serving a state or region.

The ELLC was distinctive in tapping the energies of state, district, and community agencies and organizations and charging them with collaborating as a team. The initial members of state teams—up to about 10 in number on most teams—were leaders in the state education agency, at least one urban district, and a National Urban League affiliate.

The Wallace Foundation created the design for the ELLC and has supported it with approximately \$18 million over the years. National partners—the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Council of the Great City Schools, and the National Urban League—have led the initiative alongside the foundation in a four-member steering committee defining and supporting the ELLC's mission and its ways of working.

Ten teams have been ELLC members continuously since 2016 or 2017, representing Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. A Florida team briefly joined in 2017 and then rejoined in 2020. In addition to members from state agencies, urban districts, and the Urban League, teams have used their flexibility to add

representatives of other community organizations, local or statewide non-profits, rural school districts, regional service agencies, statewide associations, and universities, resulting in a different mix of members in each team.

Policy Studies Associates, under contract to The Wallace Foundation, has drawn lessons from the ELLC's work both for ELLC participants and for the field more generally. This report provides a look at the accomplishments of the teams and how the ELLC's structure and resources contributed to those accomplishments.

In this report, we explore the ways in which teams influenced policies and practices related to equity-focused leadership and school improvement, and what factors made a difference in their ability to do so. A major data source is the Policy Studies Associates archive of meeting notes and team products.

ELLC teams have left imprints on state and local policies and practices across the participating states. Because the teams had wide latitude to find their areas of focus, faced disparate policy contexts, and typically had fluid membership, the changes they brought about vary across states and localities, but they cluster around four categories of accomplishments: **advising the state agency on ESSA; creating new programs for principals; contributing to the design of other new or existing programs for school leaders; and creating new resources for the field.**

Although ELLC teams over the years addressed many aspects of educational practice and policy that were not directly related to federal elementary and secondary legislation, some **teams contributed to state agencies' decisions on implementation of the ESSA amendments.** Teams in Missouri, Maryland, and Nebraska made substantive contributions to the way their states implemented the Title I provisions on accountability and, especially, the provisions on school improvement. An example of the results is a greater emphasis on adequate supports for leadership in schools identified for improvement.

Several teams took initiative to **create new learning opportunities for school leaders.** This work involved much discussion in which all members contributed their own experience-based perspectives. We describe in this report programs that are up and running as of mid-2022 and appear likely to continue (including the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Academy, now going into its fifth year, and a collaboration among three rural Nebraska districts in principal preparation) as well as a smaller Florida program started in the midst of the pandemic that offered timely learning opportunities for principals.

In addition to the programs that ELLC team members designed from scratch, **other state programs for principal learning benefited from the substantive contributions of ELLC teams.** Here, an example is a program of preparation and professional learning in New York State, for which the ELLC team led the development of online curriculum materials on equity that are aligned with national leader standards.

Several teams created **new resources to advance effective equity-centered leadership** in their states. These resources ranged from written guidebooks of ways different constituencies can contribute to equity-centered leadership in their states to revised and expanded preparation and professional learning opportunities. Minnesota's new *Equity in Action Framework* for communities and school leaders explains how each can play a role in shifting the power of education decision-making and strengthening community leadership to promote improved outcomes.

Teams engaged deeply with policy implementation. They recognized challenges facing education, and the solutions they pursued were practical approaches to school leadership, school improvement, and community engagement—generally ones that can be carried out locally within an existing state policy framework.

Membership shaped teams’ interests and capacity. The time contributed by team members was the most significant resource that the teams had. Teams used their flexibility to bring in additional members who were practitioners, knowledgeable observers, or stakeholders in the state. Most teams thought carefully about the work they had defined for themselves and considered the question, “Who else should be at the table?” Despite fluidity in team membership, a committed nucleus formed in almost every team.

Our evidence suggests that **a key driver of team success has been the relationships team members have built, both organizational and interpersonal.** This was far from automatic. State education agencies, local districts, and community groups have historically and continually vied with one another to influence education policy and rarely worked in concert towards shared goals, even where interests align well (see Appendix A). Tense relationships have been the outcome of decades of this dynamic. One critical feature of the six-year ELLC has been space to cultivate relationships among the different players. Informal partnerships among individual team members often spanned organizational boundaries and sometimes crossed sector boundaries. These relationships allowed, at times, for important personal conversations about race.

The ELLC allowed teams to hammer out priorities. The statement of purpose for ELLC was a complex one—at the intersection of leadership, equity, and school improvement—and some teams found it hard to reach a shared purpose. In retrospect, though, most interviewees felt that their work ultimately benefited from working through this struggle.

New perspectives from outside the team informed and energized teams. Convenings in New York City served as milestones in the ELLC experience. Site visits to districts with varying approaches to school leadership (generally as part of Wallace initiatives) were described as useful sources of ideas and connections. Grants of \$75,000 to each team extended the teams’ capacity by allowing them to bring in consultant help.

Summing up, we have found that cross-sector collaborations in the ELLC were fruitful—not in spite of but, arguably, because of the novelty of this kind of collaboration. The experience of these 11 teams with the ELLC implies lessons for those who might want to design or fund similar efforts in the future :

- **Engage and listen to different voices on equity, leadership, and education.**
- **Balance flexibility in design, purpose, and functioning with adequate support and resources to ensure continuing success.**
- **Attend to the history of voicelessness that is the context for bringing multiple voices to state education policy conversations.**
- **Actively focus on equity as the shared value and objective that enables cross-sector collaboration.**

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INTRODUCTION

In the ESSA Leadership Learning Community (ELLC), education agency leaders, community organization leaders, and others have together taken on challenges facing schools and school leaders in their states. They have produced advice to state agencies on policy design and rollout, for example on official definitions of equity, on requirements for principal certification, and on approaches to improvement for schools that are identified for low student achievement. They have created new programs of professional learning for school leaders and contributed to changes in existing programs of preparation and professional learning. They have produced materials for statewide use by community members and educators, focused on equity or on ways in which parents and communities can work with their schools. These practical results have emerged in 11 participating states, in each case because a team brought together different voices to articulate a shared vision and act on it.

The ELLC began in fall 2016, when its namesake, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), had recently amended the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The ESSA amendments shifted greater authority over federal elementary-secondary programs to the states, creating opportunities for state policy innovation. When states were developing their ESSA plans, the ELLC started up as a way to bring together different constituencies within a state around a shared commitment to effective, equity-centered school leadership, especially for high-need schools.

The ELLC was intended to address problems of policy and practice, notably by building on the opportunities to strengthen school leadership available under ESSA. For example, the ESSA amendments offered states and districts a clearer path to using the funds to bolster school leadership, which research shows to be critical to school quality and success.¹ It did this through new language in Title II-A that specifically authorized the use of funds for activities related to school leaders and provided an optional 3 percent state set-aside of Title II-A funds for such activities at the state level. As another example, states and districts might use their flexibility to choose interventions focused on school leadership as a way of using their Title I school-improvement funds for schools identified as in need of support and improvement.

ELLC teams have met the expectation of addressing current problems, and their work has been innovative. The most innovative feature of the ELLC, though, is its engagement of an unusually wide range of voices over many years. It has been distinctive in drawing together the energies of state, district, and community agencies and organizations, not just by inviting them to a few meetings but by charging them with collaborating as a team. The initial members of each state team—up to about 10 in number on most teams—were leaders and key staff in the state education agency, an urban district, and a National Urban League affiliate. Unlike the existing peer networks that all of the members already belonged to, this unusual team composition meant that members forged some new relationships across entities that had different priorities and experiences and may have had little

¹ Grissom, Jason A., Anna J. Egalite, and Constance A. Lindsay. 2021. "How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research." New York: The Wallace Foundation. Available at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis>.

basis for shared trust. Each team has found its own ways of tapping members' expertise, navigating differences of background and perspective, sharing advice and criticisms, broadening the conversation by inviting members from more organizations, and ultimately designing and acting on new plans. The title of this report comes from a comment by a team member looking back on more than four years of the experience to draw a lesson for future activities like the ELLC:

Build the team around all the voices....That's the power of the group, ... having the time and the ability to develop truly collegial relationships, have truly thought-provoking conversations about different things that are being done, and question what's being done and the thought process behind it.

The Wallace Foundation created the design for the ELLC and has supported it with approximately \$18 million over the years. National partners—the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Council of the Great City Schools, and the National Urban League—have led the initiative alongside the foundation in a four-member steering committee that defines and supports the ELLC's mission and its ways of working.

The steering committee members initially selected five states to participate and invited leaders from their constituent agencies to form the nucleus of each state team. Over time, more states joined the ELLC, and more members joined teams. Ten teams have been ELLC members continuously since 2016 or 2017, representing Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. A Florida team briefly joined in 2017 and then rejoined in 2020. In addition to members from state agencies, large urban districts, and the Urban League, teams have taken the initiative to add representatives of other community organizations, local or statewide non-profits, rural school districts, regional service agencies, statewide associations, and universities, resulting in a different mix of members in each team.

Unlike many foundation-supported initiatives, the ELLC did not come with major cash grants to the participating sites. Instead, Wallace offered a range of supports, including facilitation for teams and travel for team members to convenings and site visits. Each team met about once a month in its own state, usually in person until the COVID-19 pandemic began. A facilitator supported each team, arranging the schedule of meetings, supporting team discussion, and troubleshooting issues ranging from logistics to team dynamics. Also supporting each team was a "discussion driver," a consultant with leadership experience in local or state agencies who also attended all meetings and was charged with helping to keep high-need schools at the forefront of discussion. Policy Studies Associates provided documentation for all meetings. Before COVID-19, all ELLC members convened in New York City a few times per year for plenary presentations and cross-team discussion. Each member was also able to join at least one visit to a site somewhere in the country for presentations and discussions on Wallace-funded work in school leader preparation, development, and support. Virtual national convenings of the whole ELLC took place in 2020 and 2021.

For 2021, which was set to be the last year of the ELLC, each team was invited to propose a scope of work for a \$75,000 grant with which the team could engage consulting help to support the completion of work under way and the transition to a sustainable, post-ELLC future. The foundation approved funding for all 11 proposals for these "glidepath" grants (so named because they were intended to ease the transition to the end of ELLC funding, similar to the process of landing a plane). This report describes and analyzes what the ELLC teams did and how they did it.

About This Report

Policy Studies Associates, under contract to the Wallace Foundation, has drawn lessons from the ELLC's work from 2016 through 2021, both for ELLC participants and for the field more generally. The experiences and accomplishments of ELLC teams are connected to major issues in education today, and the aim of our work has been to add lessons and conclusions to the store of knowledge on these issues. This report provides a look at the accomplishments of the teams and how the ELLC structure and resources contributed to them.

In this report, we explore the ways in which teams influenced policies and practices related to equity-focused leadership and school improvement, and what factors made a difference in their ability to do so. A major data source is the Policy Studies Associates archive of meeting notes and team products.

The following study questions have framed our analyses:

- What strategies did teams pursue to achieve the stated mission of the ELLC?
- How did teams organize themselves?
- In what ways did team dynamics appear to matter for team accomplishments?
- In what ways did teams (as teams) or members (acting on relationships and learnings built through teams) shape actions "on the ground" at the state and local levels?
- In what ways did team accomplishments appear to stem from team dynamics, ELLC-wide events (i.e., convenings and site visits), or other specific features of the initiative?

The study team has worked alongside the ELLC, documenting each team meeting in notes that the facilitators, discussion drivers, and team members can use. These notes have been the primary data source for this report. Data collection also included 32 interviews with team members and three focus groups in which 15 facilitators and discussion drivers participated. PSA assured team-level anonymity for information relating to team activities and dynamics that may be sensitive or identifiable, while also assuring anonymity for all quotes and paraphrases from the words of individuals.

ELLC ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This section of the report describes major examples of the 11 teams' work. Many teams have innovated to strengthen school leadership in service of school improvement. Teams based in individual states brought together members with different experiences and knowledge, and they developed plans and products for equitably improving students' opportunities where improvement is most needed.

We roughly categorize the teams' accomplishments into these types:

- Advising the state agency on ESSA, with respect to language about equity in state ESSA plans and the rollout of support for Title I schools identified for improvement
- Creating new programs for principals at different career stages
- Contributing to the design of leader-development programs being launched or expanded in a state
- Creating new resources for educators and communities that place equity in the foreground and recognize parents and communities as assets to their schools

For each type, we describe examples from different states to give a sense of the range and scope of the teams' work overall. Specific details appear in text boxes for readers who may find them useful as sources of ideas for adaptation and use elsewhere. Where information is available for early evaluation of a program or product, we summarize it, but most teams have not had time or resources to evaluate their work formally at this point.

Advising the State Agency on ESSA

Although ELLC teams over the years addressed many aspects of educational practice and policy that were not directly related to federal programs, some teams contributed to state agencies' decisions on implementation of the ESSA amendments. Teams in Missouri, Maryland, and Nebraska made substantive contributions to the way their states implemented the Title I provisions on accountability and, especially, the provisions on Comprehensive Support and Improvement. This part of the Title I law contains the requirements for providing substantial support to schools identified for improvement under the accountability system.

Equity and accountability policies in Missouri and Maryland

The Missouri ELLC team provided feedback on the state's draft ESSA plan that was incorporated into the final submitted version. After first looking at the state's plans for leaders under Title II-A, the team broadened its lens and recommended ways of embedding equity measures into the state accountability system. In June 2019, the proposed rule to implement the new accountability system passed the state board with a new section of equity indicators measuring district actions to serve the needs of "each student," to address equitable distribution of resources, to take "deliberate action to

address matters of inequity,” to “initiate and promote collaborative relationships” with communities, and to ensure “fair and unbiased” implementation of student discipline policies.

Official policy statements on school leadership within the ESSA framework were a core focus of the Maryland team’s work. For example, in early 2017 the team recommended including in the state’s ESSA plan more explicit language about supports for school leaders, especially in relation to developing and implementing a plan for instructional improvement and developing a strong leadership team. Team members highlighted the importance of this support, especially for leaders of low-performing schools. They noted that low-performing schools tend to have less effective school leaders, adding that that the distribution of effective principals is at its core an equity issue.

Maryland team members advised the state agency in developing a communications strategy for the new ESSA accountability system, which included the first-ever system for rating schools. Reviewing the initial timeline for rolling out that accountability system, team members advocated adding a planning year for identified schools. The state proposed this change in timeline, and the U.S. Department of Education approved the policy change. The ELLC team also provided ideas that were incorporated into the state’s equity regulations and guidance, which the state released in 2018.

School improvement policy in Nebraska

When the Nebraska Department of Education looked ahead to identifying schools for Comprehensive Support and Improvement under the ESSA amendments to Title I, the chief state school officer made it clear to the agency and to the ELLC team that he wanted schools and districts to see this designation as a learning opportunity in which the state would take a supportive rather than a punitive stance, and solutions would emerge from local educators rather than distant bureaucracies. The result was the launch of the Nebraska Leadership Learning Network, with principal leadership as a key force for school improvement. Struggling schools were invited but not required to join, accompanied by district leaders and their regional Education Service Unit. They have engaged in facilitated planning, taking a design approach.

Creating New Programs for Principals

Several teams took initiative to create new learning opportunities for school leaders. This work involved much discussion in which all members contributed their own experience-based perspectives. We describe here three programs that are up and running as of mid-2022 and appear likely to continue, as well as a smaller program launched in the midst of the pandemic that offered timely learning opportunities for principals.

Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute

Equity, cultural responsiveness, and community partnerships are hallmarks of the curriculum of the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute, which is going into its fifth year of serving principals in five districts, based on a vision developed collaboratively within Wisconsin’s ELLC team. (See text box.)

Superintendents of Wisconsin’s “Big 5” urban districts have worked with the Urban League and the state education agency to fill a gap in the learning opportunities that had been available to urban principals. By 2018 the team had launched the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute, which welcomed its fourth cohort of participants in 2021. The Wisconsin team envisioned the institute as “the longer road to achieving equity” by cultivating “principal leaders who will create a culture where you have people saying, ‘I want to work there.’” The institute was intentionally designed to build principals’ capacity as equity champions who enable success for their students and teachers.

Each 25-member cohort (including a cohort from each of the Big 5 districts) has 10 months of professional learning, coaching, and networking, with a capstone project. The curriculum addresses competencies in turnaround leadership, identifying and addressing inequities in district and school policies and practices, cultivating a school climate that is culturally responsive and trauma-informed, and leveraging community resources and partnerships that support leading for equity. Indeed, the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute has been deeply influenced by a community perspective.

Beginning in December 2020, alumni from the first two cohorts participated in a professional learning community addressing three topics: the Equity Champion journey, Current Context and Best Practices, and District Supports and Recommendations. Participants discussed best practices for the three areas, developed future strategies, and received group coaching from facilitators.

The state education agency agreed to seed the institute’s start-up with \$350,000 from its Title II-A set-aside funds and has committed to continue to fund and oversee it through a fifth cohort. As of 2022, 72 principals have completed or are participating in the institute. In the cohorts that began in 2020 and 2021, 90 percent of entering principals completed the program. Ninety-four percent of participants agreed that WULI has improved their ability to address equity in their building. Alumni have been promoted to central office roles—including chief of school leadership.

HOW THEY DID IT

All members of the team made essential contributions to the design, launch, and continuity of the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute. At the start, Milwaukee Public Schools was on the team along with the state education agency and the Urban League of Madison. During the first year, the team expanded to add the other districts who make up the state’s “Big 5” districts: Green Bay Area Public School District, Kenosha Unified School District, Madison Metropolitan School District, and Racine Unified School District). As they discussed leadership for school improvement, the five superintendents identified a need for professional learning better aligned with their communities and schools. The learning opportunities available statewide, they felt, showed too little understanding of urban schools’ needs and failed to emphasize equity. In these discussions, the Urban League spurred the team to embrace a bold vision of leaders and schools that are culturally competent and deeply connected with communities. The state agency, also committed to strengthening leadership in schools that serve many

students in need, made the policy decision to devote some of its federal Title II-A set-aside to the operations of the new Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute.

The state agency has managed the Institute, which has had consultant support from in-state experts and from The Leadership Academy, a national organization with an educational equity mission. Other ideas came from ELLC-supported site visits, from which participating team members brought back ideas for the design and content of the Institute. The team has maintained an active advisory role with the Institute over the years. The districts have kept their commitment to provide principals with the necessary time and coaching for their participation. In short, the Institute began and has continued as an embodiment of a vision of equity leadership that united a disparate team of state, local, and community leaders.

Tri-City Alliance ASCEND in rural districts

In Nebraska, the ELLC inspired and helped nurture a program designed to serve non-urban school districts. Three districts in south-central Nebraska worked out an agreement to partner with each other and with two of the state's regional Educational Service Units for a new program of principal preparation. They viewed this as an opportunity to develop a strong, shared principal pipeline to serve their combined population of 19,000 students.

One of the superintendents, a member of the ELLC team from the early days, has played a major role in the creation of the partnership and its new Tri-City ASCEND Academy for aspiring leaders. Through ELLC participation, she had a chance to learn about comprehensive, aligned principal pipelines as developed with Wallace Foundation support in six large, urban school districts. These pipelines included standards-aligned work on principal preparation, hiring and placement, supervision, and support, and they showed positive, statistically significant effects on student achievement.² The three superintendents reasoned that similar benefits could logically follow from their own work if they banded together to prepare a cohort of promising school leaders.

² Gates, S. M., Baird, M. D., Master, B. K., & Chavez-Herrerias, E. R. (2019). *Principal pipelines: A feasible, affordable, and effective way for districts to improve schools*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

In rural south-central Nebraska, the districts of Grand Island Public Schools (enrollment of 9,920), Kearney Public Schools (enrollment of 6,055), and Hastings Public Schools (enrollment of 3,672) agreed that instead of competing for rising leadership talent they would collaborate in offering a research-based approach to principal preparation. Their school boards formally agreed to this collaboration. With assistance from outside consultants and two of the Nebraska's regional Educational Service Units, the districts used agreed-on criteria to select top candidates, assembled them into a cohort for instruction informed by university curricula and aligned with the needs of districts in their part of Nebraska, and ensured that the candidates had authentic leadership experiences in schools as part of their preparation. Candidates spend time working in schools in more than one of the districts to broaden their experience. The school boards also agreed that candidates would be able to move to any of the three districts for placement as a principal rather than necessarily staying in the district where they had previously served. ASCEND graduated its first three elementary candidates in 2021. <https://www.gips.org/News/2021/04/21/nebraska-public-school-launch-tri-city-ascend-academy/>

Leader Induction Academy in Oregon

The Oregon ELLC members have focused on another part of the principal pipeline: induction for new principals. The team now serves as the steering committee for a Leader Induction Academy being piloted in Portland Public Schools, aiming to refine a framework for the development of new school leaders that any district in the state can use. (See text box.) The team has included three of the state's largest districts (Portland, Eugene School District, and Salem-Keizer Public Schools), but members recognize that the state has many smaller, rural districts that also deserve high-quality, equity-minded school leaders. Therefore the team is also working toward improvements in statewide leader preparation based on the framework that informs this academy.

For its statewide efforts in advancing school leadership, the Oregon team has developed a strategic framework titled *Designing a State Partnership for Principal Leadership*. This document, developed iteratively and in response to changing conditions in the state, is intended to drive policy and practice efforts to develop school leaders with equity mindsets and skills. It guides a partnership among ELLC team members: the large districts, the state education agency, the state administrator licensing board, the Educator Advancement Council (a legislated education policy board for preschool through graduate school), a regional Education Service District, and principal preparation providers in higher education. The strategy also sets the stage for eventually broadening the partnership to include other districts and Education Service Districts. According to a collaboratively developed description, the partnership aims to: develop and carry out a coherent vision of a principal pipeline; lift up the importance of principal leadership; pursue equity; advance shared standards; and provide leadership from the state agency and school districts.

The ELLC team has informed the work of a member district, Portland Public Schools, in creating and launching a three-year Leader Induction Academy in school year 2020-21, with a second cohort starting in 2021-22. The academy has about 35 participants, as well as 3 full-time and 5 half-time coaches. Founded on a set of Principal Leadership Competencies developed collaboratively by the ELLC team, the academy seeks to develop school leaders who are skilled in equity practices and who can be effective instructional leaders in any school, including schools serving marginalized communities. The competencies are aligned with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and the state’s 2020 standards for administrator licensure (which themselves integrate equity throughout and were developed by an ELLC team member). The academy’s scope and sequence is designed around the competencies and related standards. Recently, the ELLC team used its glidepath grant to engage The Leadership Academy to improve the Leader Induction Academy’s design and its mechanisms for ongoing assessment of participant progress on the competencies. As of early 2022, the academy continues under the direction of two longtime ELLC members, and the ELLC team is focusing its efforts on a state-level leader development approach.

Principal Learning Network in Florida

On a smaller scale, the Florida team (formed in early 2020) created a new program that served a group of principals during the pandemic. At that time, the Florida Department of Education was pivoting from its longtime emphasis on teachers and teacher preparation to a strategy that attended equally to the importance of school leadership. New top officials at the state agency saw leadership generally, and principals in particular, as not just an area for regulation but an area that could be a lever for school improvement and instructional change if supported actively and effectively.

The ELLC team has worked to support this renewed vision of leadership through two interconnected sets of activities. The first was the Florida Principal Learning Network, a network of principals drawn from across the state. (See text box.) In the second set of activities, the Florida team designed and is currently piloting a revised monitoring system for leadership preparation programs. The revised system is intended to help the state education agency ensure that higher education institutions are preparing leaders with the skills the agency envisions for school leaders.

The Florida Principal Learning Network met four times during spring and summer 2021 as a group of 22 principals from 14 districts. The districts involved varied in their size and geographic location and included comparatively small rural districts. Network members' discussions addressed key issues facing school leaders in Florida and informed thinking in the state education agency. These issues were:

- **Leadership strategies to promote literacy, civics, and improved instruction both for their own sake and for the sake of more equitable student outcomes**
- **A deep dive into the state, district, and school level data to forge recommendations to improve data on the achievement gap in Florida**
- **Creating a culture of caring in schools, especially in the context of COVID-19.**

In addition to three virtual meetings and one meeting in person, the participating principals received mini-grants to attend conferences during spring 2021.

Contributing to Program Design

In addition to the programs just described, which ELLC team members designed from scratch, other state programs for principal learning have benefited from the substantive contributions of ELLC teams.

New York P-20 Partnership

The New York state team has offered advice over the years on the design and rollout of an initiative in principal preparation called the P-20 Partnership. ("P-20" refers to all levels of schooling from preschool through graduate programs.) When New York joined the ELLC in spring 2017, planning for the partnership was already well under way, informed by an advisory committee, and several members of that committee also became members of the ELLC team. The state department of education launched the P-20 Partnership support from Title II-A and The Wallace Foundation (under a grant that was separate from Wallace's support for the ELLC). The P-20 Partnership funded six school districts to partner with a nearby university and a community-based organization to develop and operate a selective program of principal preparation closely aligned with district priorities and needs. Participants would be jointly selected by the district and the university, and the program would feature substantial internships in district schools in addition to coursework, each reflecting input from all partners.

Most ELLC team members were either university professors, state agency officials, or large-district leaders, and they had considerable experience that was relevant to the work of the partnership. With a strong commitment to equity and experience in pursuing it, team members advised the state agency on ways to identify and prepare principal candidates who would work effectively with diverse populations of students. Their contributions culminated in a project supported by the glidepath

grant: the development of an online learning package, organized around the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders,³ to guide aspiring and sitting principals in leading for equity. (See text box.)

With its glidepath grant in 2021, the New York ELLC team had the opportunity to engage leading scholars to develop curriculum materials about leading for equity, suitable for online learning. During the development process, team members offered advice on ways to gain the support of key decisionmakers for the development, adoption, and use of learning materials. The resulting product, called *Leading Schools for Equity and Inclusion in New York*, has sparked excitement among team members. The modular lessons combine a wide array of text and videos that can be used flexibly in programs that equip aspiring and sitting principals to lead culturally responsive education and to dismantle inequities. The organization of the materials is aligned to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, with one module corresponding to each standard. Students and faculty in the P-20 projects piloted early versions of the materials. The team looks forward to gaining official state agency approval and helping disseminate the product for use around the state in university- and district-based programs. They believe it fills needs both in university programs that are organized around standards and need greater focus on equity, and also as part of the professional learning hours required for school leaders under the current state certification system.

Missouri Leader Development System

The Missouri team has worked closely with the state education agency to inform many state programs and policies for school leaders. A major state program in school leadership is the Missouri Leader Development System, re-started and expanded with the Title II-A set-aside and serving principals at all stages from novice to veteran.

The Missouri team shaped the work of the Missouri Leadership Development System with principals of low-performing schools by identifying the key competencies and supports these principals need to lead turnaround efforts. The team received updates on the progress and challenges of the broader system rollout and offered suggestions aimed at enabling district and state collaboration to support all principals. In December 2019, the state agency began work to make equity a more explicit part of the system, a process guided by the ELLC team’s equity work. By 2021, the system’s “specialists,” who work directly with principals, and the state agency team had embedded equity into many of the system’s learning modules and convened an equity committee to provide ongoing monitoring of implementation.

³ National Board for Educational Administration (2015), *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*. Reston, VA: Author.

Creating New Resources for the Field

Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook

The Tennessee team developed two editions of the *Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook* to provide practical guidance for how to leverage leadership for equity. (See text box.) The team has distributed the *Playbook* within Tennessee and more widely, including to other ELLC teams. The Minnesota team modeled aspects of its own equity framework on the Tennessee Playbook. Nebraska created an equity playbook in 2019, and the Nebraska Department of Education featured that playbook prominently within the state. In Tennessee, however the current governor's policy stance does not support distribution of the *Playbook* by the state agency. Although the original *Playbook* had the agency's support under a previous administration, the second edition has been released as a product of the team, without the state agency imprimatur.

The *Playbook*—originally published in 2018 and revised and expanded in 2022—identifies eight equity commitments and actions that district leaders, school leaders, school boards, teachers/teacher leaders, families/guardians, and community allies can use to identify ways to address major equity issues. These eight commitments and actions are:

- **Decrease Chronic Absenteeism**
- **Reduce Disproportionate Suspension and Expulsion Rates**
- **Increase Early Postsecondary Opportunities**
- **Provide Equitable Access to Effective Teachers**
- **Recruit and Retain a Diverse Teaching Force**
- **Embed Cultural Competence in School Practices**
- **Partner with Community Allies**
- **Allocate Resources Equitably**

HOW THEY DID IT

Every member of the ELLC team contributed to the writing, revision, and editing of the Playbook. The team devoted most of its meeting time between 2018 and 2020 to developing, debating, and drafting the first and second editions. Refining and finishing the second edition took place during 2021 and 2022. Team members have noted that the unique collection of talents from across sectors and regions in Tennessee—most particularly, urban districts, rural districts, and the Urban League—strengthened the final product in ways that would not have been possible had a single organization tried to develop a similar resource.

The Playbook has been an important part of the work of the Tennessee Transformational Leader Alliance (TTLA), which served as a leader pipeline incubator and helped districts develop a deeper pool of high-quality leaders. Using Title II-A state set-aside funds, the alliance awarded grants to nine principal pipeline programs, three of them led by ELLC team members. Alliance programs used the Playbook as part of their training of new principals.

Within Tennessee, team members have used the Playbook in statewide conferences of principals and teachers, district-level training, Urban League meetings, and principal preparation programs. Undeterred by the current lack of official state agency support, the team plans to distribute hard copies to every school leader in Tennessee as well as nonprofit organizations and teacher/principal preparation programs statewide. As one district leader put it, “The most important part is it’s versatile. It’s not a requirement. Districts can use it on the needs that they have within their district or community.”

Minnesota Equity In Action Framework

From the beginning of its involvement, the Minnesota team committed to two core features of the ELLC: the focus on leading for equity; and an equal partnership among the Minnesota Department of Education, Minneapolis Public Schools, and Urban League Twin Cities. These features remained the team’s north star throughout discussions of how education systems in Minnesota could—and should—center the role of community in education decisions. Over the years of its existence, the Minnesota team thoughtfully developed a vision of school leaders, families, students, and communities working together to bring about student success. Members discussed equity in depth. To begin to fill the gap that they saw between their vision and current realities, team members began working on what would become the *Minnesota Equity in Action Framework*, which not only describes the vision of partnership but gives leaders in schools, districts, and communities specific guidance for achieving it. (See text box.) The team engaged other equity experts to help in developing a model of professional learning communities in which groups of principals might learn how to better lead for equity and anti-racism.

The *Minnesota Equity in Action Framework*, a 20-plus page document, provides a framework and a process for professional development for strengthening leadership in communities to equitably support students. Co-developed by ELLC team members from the Urban League Twin Cities, the Minnesota Department of Education, and Minneapolis Public Schools, it focuses on five “key equity priorities”:

- 1. Address Access and Resource Inequities**
- 2. Recruit and Retain a Diverse, Culturally Responsive Teaching Force**
- 3. Eliminate Disproportionate Suspension and Expulsion Rates**
- 4. Embed Cultural Competence in Systemwide Educational Practices**
- 5. Engage and Partner with Parents/Families and Community Allies**

For each equity priority, the *Framework* outlines specific strategies and actions for district leaders, school leaders, educators, parents/families, school boards, and community allies. It explains how each can play a role in shifting the power of education decision-making and strengthening community leadership to promote improved outcomes. The publication also has links for supporting resources.

The *Framework* reflects the influence of the ELLC in several ways. Significantly, development of the *Framework* was an iterative process: it was shaped and refined over time, incorporating ideas raised by the full ELLC team at monthly meetings and collaboratively drafted by a subcommittee representing each of the three agencies. Discussions with the Tennessee ELLC team about successes and lessons learned through the development and dissemination of the *Tennessee Equity Leaders Playbook* influenced both the structure of the framework and the plans for intentionally supporting and piloting its launch. The glidepath grant supported consultant help in completing the Framework.

Widening the reach of Equity Labs in Missouri

Equity Labs are not new in Missouri, but the ELLC team has helped to expand their use in school districts and their influence on principal preparation. Equity Labs are optional day-long sessions run by the state education agency that bring school and district leaders together to teach them how to use data to identify equity gaps between schools. ELLC team members participated in Equity Labs and offered feedback to make the sessions more useful to school and district leadership. ELLC team members worked with state staff to identify ways to serve more of Missouri's 500 districts, since the Equity Labs are time-intensive. Team members also helped develop follow-up supports for districts that will increase the chances that the districts will make changes to address the equity issues identified.

During one ELLC meeting, state staff led the team members who represent the three largest districts in the state (Saint Louis Public Schools, Kansas City Public Schools, and Springfield Public Schools) through a mini-lab with their own data. This experience led team members who work in leader preparation programs to develop and pilot a module for their programs that borrows from the Equity Lab, giving future leaders preservice training in using data to recognize and address equity issues in their schools and districts. These team members used their networks and their roles in the Missouri Professors of Educational Administration organization to encourage other preparation programs to use the module. As of December 2021, all 23 of the state's accredited preparation programs were piloting or had adopted the module or similar equity modules into their curriculum.

Learning resources for Maryland

The Maryland ELLC team provided critical information to the state agency staff who developed the state's signature professional learning experiences, including the Promising Principals Academy and the Leading for School Improvement Institute. The team then used its glidepath grant to work with The Leadership Academy to develop a suite of learning resources related to leading for equity and grounded in the state's equity framework. Representatives from each organization worked with the Leadership Academy to develop learning modules for a Leading for Equity curriculum. (See text box.)

Looking ahead to dissemination and use of the modules, the ELLC team connected with a statewide council of the equity officers for all of Maryland's school districts, who are well positioned to provide input from their own districts, ensure message alignment, and help promote use of the resources. The state education agency has committed state funds to support expansion of the materials.

Maryland’s new Leading for Equity modules, developed under the guidance of the ELLC team, address “the why,” “the what,” and “the how” of equity-focused leadership. The modules are designed to be accessible to persons with varying amounts of prior equity experience. The curriculum package cites and links to resources on:

- **Culturally responsive and sustaining education**
- **Curriculum and teaching**
- **General equity literacy and historical context**
- **Implicit bias, microaggressions, stereotype threat**
- **Race, racial equity, systemic racism**
- **Socioeconomic status**
- **Gender identity, expression, and sexuality**
- **Ethnicity and culture**
- **Ability, disability, and disability rights**
- **Capacity building**

Key audiences are sitting and aspiring principals and assistant principals, but the modules are also usable by district leaders and school boards.

Pennsylvania team leadership in diversity

The Pennsylvania team has had a longstanding focus on educator diversity, having learned that enrollment in the state’s preparation programs for teaching and leadership is overwhelmingly white and that only six percent of teachers in the state are persons of color.

The team has attended convenings and participated in discussions of a program now called the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium whose members include the School District of Philadelphia, seven institutions of higher education, and community partners such as the Center for Black Educator Development. The consortium was launched in November 2019 (under its former name, Aspire to Educate) to recruit and retain diverse educators in the eastern part of the state. More recently, ELLC team members have conducted events of several kinds to engage partners in Western Pennsylvania and beyond. (See text box.)

The ELLC team also engaged a consultant to conduct focus groups with African American and Black students, families, and leaders in community organizations on the topics of diversifying the educator workforce and furthering equity in Pittsburgh Public Schools. The data illuminated participants’ experiences, challenges, and concerns, while looking ahead to solutions. The team will use the

findings generated from these focus groups to inform future community outreach in Western Pennsylvania.

Using its glidepath grant and in partnership with the Pittsburgh Urban League, the National Urban League, and the assessment and research organization ETS, the ELLC team supported a three-part national conference of over 500 participants from across the nation in 2021 on “Building the Black Male Educator Pipeline” through recruitment, retention, and development. Also in that year, the team held a virtual media event: “Statewide Educators Call on PA’s 500 School Districts to Use American Rescue Plan Funds to Increase Racial Diversity Among Teachers” in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the School District of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh Public Schools, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Teacher Educators, and Cheyney University with the goal of creating awareness around educator diversity across districts. The team continued engaging districts by creating and disseminating a guide: “Now Is the Time! Using American Rescue Plan Dollars to Further Equity & Diversify the Educator Workforce.” The team also held information sessions with districts, providing more information on American Rescue Plan funding and on how to invest in equity and diversifying the educator workforce, along with an invitation to join the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium.

Reframing school improvement in Ohio

The Ohio ELLC team’s major accomplishment is the creation of a regional approach to school improvement and achievement, grounded in the strengths of communities and their schools. The team formed a regional learning network intentionally modeled on the design of the ELLC itself, named the Northeast Ohio ELLC or NeO ELLC. This network connects school districts⁴ in the northeast region, community partners,⁵ and the state education agency to address challenges of school improvement. These districts were chosen as participants in this work because they were deemed low-performing according to the State School Report Card and were on the verge of state takeover.

⁴ Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Lorain City School District, Maple Heights City School District, Warrensville Heights City School District, Youngstown City School District, East Cleveland City School District

⁵ Cleveland State University, Lorain County Urban League, Rust United Methodist Church, and the Urban League of Greater Cleveland

NeO ELLC districts meet every six weeks to share and learn best practices from each other, meaningfully engage with their local communities, and collaborate with the Ohio Department of Education to turn around the districts' low performance on the state report card. The aim has been for participating districts to share their best research-based or innovative practices that are showing tangible results. The underlying notion is that districts in similar contexts should be best able to help each other improve by learning from each other what they are doing that is working well in key areas. Discussions have ranged across areas such as: K-3 literacy; curriculum development, planning and instruction; teacher professional development; family engagement, and high school graduation.

A number of meetings focused on ways of strengthening student performance through school leadership that is well connected to community assets and supports. Team members have shared their successes and lessons learned in detailed discussions and through school visits, receiving both appreciative comments and suggestions from their peers. Meeting participants take lessons learned back to their district and share key takeaways with staff.

The districts involved in the NeO ELLC have seen progress of a kind that is not reflected well in the state report card for schools. The group has moved to change the perception of schools in these districts and their students as "failures" and to shift the conversation to a more asset-based frame of reference.

Having gained momentum, the NeO ELLC recently expanded to include Akron Public Schools, whose new superintendent had been a member of the Ohio ELLC team since its second year, as an administrator in her previous district. The team remains open to adding more districts over time.

Under its glidepath grant, the Ohio ELLC has partnered with the Ohio State Family Engagement Center to create a toolkit for parents that can help support better parent understanding and engagement with schools. This toolkit will be particularly important as parents continue to navigate the challenges of the pandemic and work to ensure the best educational experience for their children. The toolkit will be used by community advocacy organizations and schools themselves to help foster improved school-family-community relationships. All participating districts in the NeO ELLC have been involved in the creation of the toolkit and will continue to be involved in its dissemination.

HOW THEY DID IT

The NeO ELLC originated in a team whose members are deeply committed to learning from one another around a shared purpose of improving schools. The ELLC team's meetings has norms that are different from those of most interactions in this country between state agency leaders and local educators and community leaders: Ohio state education officials do not set the agenda or lead the discussion in the ELLC team but rather behave as co-equal members of a group. Team members from the Urban League and other community-based organizations offer both support and criticism to the state and local educators on the team, and they have not hesitated to call out the state agency when its words or deeds have implied a lack of respect for communities or a lack of attention to equity

Having established this way of working together, members of the ELLC team designed a network for mutual support and exchanges of ideas among districts and agencies that are taking on the challenges of strengthening their local schools. In the NeO ELLC, it is assumed that the members bring assets to the table and that all can learn from each other when they share their best ideas and promising results.

Common Themes in the Work

Collectively, these ELLC teams have informed adjustments in state policy, created new programs in educational leadership, and helped guide improvements in programs that were already in existence or being planned. They have developed or directed the development of new resources for local education practitioners, aspiring school leaders, and communities. They have seldom made policy, but they have drawn on their experience and knowledge to offer highly practical help with the implementation of policy in their states.

From the first convenings in 2016-17 onward, equity has been a throughline for ELLC teams. All 11 teams have pursued equity through their work. Most teams have also addressed school improvement, often with locally grounded approaches designed to support rather than stigmatize the schools or districts identified for improvement.

The teams' ways of working have varied across teams and also within teams over time. They have included:

- *Advising state and local agencies.* All of the teams have had regular discussions from which members can draw advice for their own work. It has also been common for state agencies to ask for advice from the team, gathering perspectives from the different districts, community organizations, and other entities such as universities represented on the team. While common for ELLC, it should be noted that, historically, it has not been at all common for state agencies to seek the kind of input that teams have provided through ELLC. At times, too, most teams have served as a helpful venue in which local leaders share ideas and advice with one another. All these exchanges of ideas have left imprints on policies and programs in states and districts.
- *Creating something new to fill a gap.* Some teams took initiative to build something that they believed their state needed. Examples are the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute for principals; the *Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook* and other equity resources in Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, and Ohio; and the Northeast Ohio ELLC. These contributions—a program with multiple cohorts, tools designed to inform and guide a

variety of users, and a network that shows staying power for its members—have directly served individuals beyond the team itself.

- *At the glidepath stage, capturing and sharing knowledge.* With an opportunity to pay for professional services, most of the teams settled on an idea of capturing and sharing knowledge for a wider audience. The vehicles for conveying the knowledge and skills range widely, including materials in print and electronic form as well as designs for learning networks. A common denominator, though, is that the teams believed the ELLC had helped them build knowledge worth sharing, and they wanted to gather and disseminate those learnings in usable and potentially sustainable forms for future policy and practice.

HOW THE ELLC WORKED

The initial aims of the ELLC had roots in the opportunities presented by ESSA, especially the devolution of some authority from the federal government to the states and the new funding possibilities for school leadership. The ELLC's core aims centered on the nexus of school leadership and equity, particularly for schools that serve the most vulnerable students. We would argue that its contributions are not only in the content of the teams' products but also in the innovative structure of the ELLC itself:

- It deliberately brought together teams of policy implementers from state and local agencies along with seasoned community leaders interested in education
- It gave them six years with wide latitude for discussion and action, facilitation and learning opportunities along the way, and modest grants at the end, to allow them to invent and carry out work related to state policy.

We believe that this design deserves analysis as a source of ideas for policy and philanthropy. In this section of the report, we analyze the resourceful ways in which teams acted within the structure the ELLC gave them.

Engagement with Policy Implementation

Most team members brought the perspective of middle managers in state and local agencies or policy observers based in the Urban League or another agency or institution. Their perspectives on the implementation of state policies deeply informed the practical resources that teams developed.

Teams gravitated toward practical work that could matter at the local level

With members from communities and school districts setting the pace in many teams, the work tended to center on policy implementation and local practice, especially around equity. Teams recognized challenges facing education, and the solutions they pursued were practical approaches to school leadership, school improvement, and community engagement—generally as enacted locally within an existing state policy framework.

Although “the ESSA moment” was a source of inspiration at the start and in some cases state employees who were working on the ESSA plan were ELLC team members, no ELLC team played a major role in shaping its state's ESSA plan. Instead, the ELLC teams explored possibilities for supporting improvement in struggling schools or for raising the salience of equity statewide or in participating districts. Members had chances to learn about school leadership as a force for improvement and equity in schools, and they found ways to support this kind of leadership through new programs, new resource materials, and new networks of practitioners and community members.

Top state officials who paid attention to their state's ELLC team saw value in the role the team was taking. For example, one chief state school officer, trying to embed a stronger commitment to equity

in state policy, recognized the broad-based group of leaders on the ELLC team as a group whose input and endorsement could give added power to the commitment and who could advance the work in their own roles. A chief in a different state commented in an interview about the value of the team's work, which was grounded in local activities. This chief described the team as a force for good practices in districts and expressed appreciation for its work, saying, "Helping to shape good practice is as important as good policy."

The state education agency was not necessarily in charge

All teams identified and pursued work that met the aims of at least two of the participating sectors (state, district, and community). The original vision of ELLC work that would almost seamlessly combine priorities of the state education agency, districts, and the National Urban League came to life in some of the work:

- The Wisconsin Urban Leadership Academy serves principals in urban districts with a design and curriculum very much informed by input from the Urban League as well as by district leaders, and it earned a dedicated funding stream from the state, which now manages it
- The Northeast Ohio Network continues to inform the improvement of districts that the state agency has identified as being in academic distress (or on the verge of that identification), with active partnership from Urban League affiliates. Larger urban districts and the state agency participate in—and report that they learn from—the exchange of ideas about school improvement.
- The *Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook* reflects several years of deep collaboration among the state agency, urban and rural district leaders, two universities, and the Urban League. The second edition does not have official approval from the state agency, but the state agency staff under previous state leadership made important contributions.
- A dedicated triad of leaders from the state agency, Urban League, and Minneapolis together championed and led the development of the Minnesota Equity in Action Framework.

The state agency was part of mutually beneficial exchanges of ideas with districts in most teams. The Maryland and Nebraska state agencies received advice from districts (and, in Nebraska, also from that state's regional Educational Service Units) on identifying and supporting schools identified for improvement under ESSA, and this advice helped shape the state's procedures. In the Missouri team, the state agency had a consistently collaborative dynamic with districts, and there were continuing two-way exchanges of ideas about state-supported leadership development for principals and about districts' expanded work with principal supervisors.

These examples illustrate a dynamic that existed in almost all of the teams: the state agency had a role in setting the agenda for the team, but team norms and the facilitators' guidance helped ensure that every member organization would have a voice. Only at the glidepath stage did the state agency acquire clear decision-making authority. At that stage, a signature from the state agency was mandatory on applications for the \$75,000 glidepath grants. By that time, however, teams generally had norms that allowed an open exchange of ideas about plans for the project.

Membership That Shaped Team Interests and Capacity

The time contributed by team members was the most significant resource that the teams had. By design, each team began as an assemblage of leaders and staff from the state education agency, large urban districts, and community-based organizations. All members approached team discussions and planning with their distinctive expertise, professional networks, and lived experience. Some individuals named to the teams had positional authority as chief state school officers or district superintendents; community representatives were respected in their local areas and often statewide.

Teams used their flexibility to bring in additional members

Teams asked themselves, "Who else should be at the table?" Most teams added members from rural districts, nonprofit organizations, and other entities that might include universities, regional service agencies, an educator licensing agency, a regional foundation, or the state association for school boards or district administrators. Thinking about the issues they wanted to address and the potential challenges ahead in implementing solutions, teams used their collective savvy to identify actors within the state whose perspective and support would be critical.

Inconsistent attendance or turnover in membership could pose challenges

Every team had fluctuations in member participation, although in most cases these were not seriously disruptive. The COVID-19 pandemic depressed attendance; even a virtual meeting required more time than some busy members could spend. And every team found that some individuals who were invited to join came a few times and did not return. These patterns were not unexpected in an unusual venture like the ELLC, which had no funding or formal accountability system for individual members.

However, the work of two teams was hampered to some extent by limited member participation. One team had very inconsistent participation from the state education agency and also from the district level, with the result that many team discussions lacked a strong K-12 agency voice. Members of this team embraced their glidepath project, however, and ended up with a sense of success and a statement of support from the chief state school officer. On a different team that had a particularly large amount of turnover, a member commented in an interview that, "no one really knows who is authorized to speak for whatever district or institution they represent, and so everyone's really kind of reticent."

Change at the top brought unwelcome change for one team when an agency deliberately adopted a new policy stance. The Tennessee Department of Education withdrew from the ELLC team after a new governor distanced his administration from use of the term "equity."

Despite fluidity in team membership, a committed nucleus formed in almost every team

Participation in the ELLC struck a chord in enough individual members that ten of the teams had a core of participants who continued to attend meetings over the years. (One team was the exception, with only one such member.) The "core" members developed a kind of institutional memory for their team. Moreover, pairs or small groups of members often formed strong bonds and worked along with the facilitator and discussion driver to keep the team on track. An interviewee described how their team maintained its norms of active participation from all:

If anybody wasn't speaking up, we might [say], "Hey, what's going on? You know, we haven't heard from you today." And so there was a lot of respect at the table and a lot of shared

responsibility that everybody at the table would have equal voice and be heard. ... I've been at a lot of tables, and I don't always see that.

Often a team had two to four informal leaders, who could be any combination of Urban League representatives, district leaders (superintendents or others), higher education faculty, and state officials. The presence of multiple informal team leaders allowed easier transitions when teams experienced turnover, even turnover among these key team actors.

Relationships as a Driver of Progress

Our evidence suggests that a key driver of team success has been the relationships team members have built, both organizational and interpersonal. This was far from automatic: state education agencies, local districts, and community groups have historically and continually vied with one another to influence education policy and rarely worked in concert towards shared goals, even where interests align well. Research on the politics of education has documented what is described in one study of federalism as a “tug of war” among agencies and groups. (See Appendix A). Tense relationships have been the outcome of decades of this dynamic.

Time and space to cultivate relationships has been critical

For example:

- Expansion of the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium into Western Pennsylvania builds on the relationships and networks created by ELLC team members. As a team member said in an interview, the ELLC “allowed [the team] to build broader trust-based relationships, and equally as important is understanding the politics around everybody that was at the table.”
- In another state, interviewees reported that the interactions between the state agency and two of its largest districts have become notably different—and notably improved. A team member from one of these districts reflected, “I think the big thing is we finally got to have a voice at the table....[Previously,] the urban districts just get told [what to do] and punished. We've never been asked [to be at the table] before.” This team intends to continue working together in the foreseeable future, with or without external support.
- As school board races gain national spotlights, social capital built between school boards and other players in the educational sphere is becoming increasingly important, according to interviewees. On the Nebraska team, for example, with the addition of the state association of school boards, “school board members have become a key part of the strategy, have come to the table in the past year and have been an incredibly important addition.” A Tennessee team member commented on the presence of a school board representative on that team, saying, “I think it was very thought out about the myriad of voices and stakeholders in our state.”

Team members are now navigating a political environment that is highly polarized around equity, among other issues. Relationships formed and strengthened by ELLC membership have the potential to be a source of support moving forward. A team member observed, “There’s no doubt. This has

been a unifying time. It's 'us' against 'them'. We're all under attack in some way. Outside voice [from opponents of equity] has created unified purpose [among us]."

Informal partnerships have spanned organizational boundaries and sometimes sector boundaries

There are examples of cross-agency or cross-sector working relationships within the team giving rise to organization-level partnerships. For example, the Urban League of Cleveland now formally partners with school improvement efforts in the Northeast Ohio region; and the Nebraska Department of Education now has a closer working relationship with the state's Educational Service Units.

Members have remarked in interviews on the value of relationships forged on ELLC teams as their organizations navigate challenging situations surrounding racial justice. In the case of one ELLC team, "two superintendents used the Urban League representative as 'counsel' in the wake of high-profile equity events happening in their districts," which was possible "because of the ELLC relationships."

Transparency about race was personal at times

After the death of George Floyd, members of one team shared their families' reactions in ways that gave new insights to their fellow members: one spoke of a spouse who worked in law enforcement and had received death threats; another described his young Black sons praying for their own safety. In interviews, some white members of the ELLC—including ones in policymaking positions—said that members from community-based organizations, many of them Black, had given them new insight into Black students' and families' experiences with education and into the work being done in communities where predominantly Black schools were identified for improvement.

An Urban League representative, when asked in an interview what advice they would offer to someone in their position joining a hypothetical ELLC team, emphasized that the time is right for speaking up:

I would tell them to go into the meeting with an open mind and to go in and be bold with your ideas. Listen, you know, a lot, but don't let the group off the hook. I mean two days of going to a meeting so that someone can say he had a Black or brown face in the meeting—those days are done. Go into the meeting and expect to contribute to help people understand how we can get along better and how we can serve our communities better.

Hammering Out Team Priorities

With the ELLC's complex purpose and broad flexibility to address a range of problems of practice, most teams experienced at least fleeting moments of uncertainty about their direction. In retrospect, however, they appreciated the flexibility to forge their own purposes.

The statement of purpose for ELLC was a complex one

Figuring out how to work at the nexus of school leadership, school improvement, and equity was challenging for most ELLC members, and especially so for those who were not steeped in the jargon of education professionals. Unpacking how the three themes could complement each other was hard work that required intensive team discussion. And, because each team included members who were

essentially strangers to each other at the start, time had to be spent learning about each other's roles and backgrounds and developing norms and trust. Over a series of meetings, some teams settled on a direction fairly quickly, but others were still pondering their visions and the interwoven challenges in the ELLC mission after a year or more.

The teams' work ultimately benefited from the struggle to identify purposes

Although some members and facilitators said their team would have done better if the ELLC had prescribed a narrower focus for their activities, more applauded the flexibility they had experienced. The word "struggle" came up spontaneously in two of the three focus groups with facilitators and discussion drivers, each time in a positive way: "These people hadn't come together before, so it was important for them to sort of struggle with their purpose and priority-setting." "The latitude was really important. It allowed the team to struggle." Others commented that the teams "greatly benefited from wider guardrails in the opportunity to focus their work" and that "capacity building" for a team followed from "letting the group drive" so that the focus "came from the needs and consensus of the group."

Similarly, a member who has been with a team throughout the course of the ELLC said that more prescriptive management of the initiative would have impeded the work. This member cited the commitment that grew out of the team's opportunity to shape its own priorities:

The folks who were there were there because they were getting something from it. They intended to be there. And they were working towards things that needed to happen.... I think if there had been a specific task [mandated], ... it might not have worked as well for our group. There's very strong leaders in our group who have visions, and they're going to work on what they think is important.

New Perspectives from Outside

The ELLC initiative funded two kinds of out-of-state learning opportunities for teams: convenings in New York City; and site visits to school districts around the country. These opportunities often informed and energized teams. They provided a needed spark for many teams from the fresh perspectives they found among other teams and at the sites. In each case, members heard from experts and, just as important, had a chance to sharpen their own work through sharing it with peers. The glidepath grants opened the door to the benefits of outside expertise in a different way: teams were able to engage expert professionals who put time into working with the team and, in several cases, took a major role in developing a product that team members lacked the time to develop themselves.

Convenings in New York City served as milestones in the ELLC experience

The convenings varied in length and format, but all took place over one or two days and included a mix of plenary sessions, "team time," and (in most cases) breakout sessions for cross-team interaction. At lunchtime, the top officials from state agencies, large urban districts, and Urban League affiliates met separately with the steering committee member who represented them, while other team members mingled at tables in a large room. Typically, teams were charged with bringing something to the convening, such as a brief report on the progress they had made. While facilitators often took a large hand in preparing these statements, team members reportedly felt accountability

for showing their work to their fellow ELLC members from other states, and some commented that it helped spur them forward.

Being invited to present their work on the New York City “stage” had symbolic importance to team members. Facilitators and discussion drivers commented that for many of the members the invitation to New York City felt like a type of professional recognition that they had seldom if ever received. Most interviewees commented favorably on their experience in the convenings. They took particular note of the lunch conversations and the breakouts in which they had a chance to engage in some depth about their own and others’ work. They spoke respectfully of the plenary sessions, commenting particularly on the quality of the research findings that were shared. For the Missouri team, a discussion during team time with a researcher who had studied implementation of the Wallace Principal Supervisor Initiative sparked interest in introducing features of that initiative in their own state, and the state and member districts have collaborated in that effort ever since.

Team time in New York City often included not only hours spent together in a meeting room before or after the main proceedings but also a pre-meeting team dinner at a restaurant. Members, facilitators, and discussion drivers described these dinners as useful opportunities for team members to get to know each other on a more informal level and to have conversations that could advance the work they were doing together.

One member who has had experience in convening sizeable groups of education professionals suggested that the ELLC convenings could have done more to bring all the members together around the work and shared priorities. This member described the vision:

I think we needed more time in New York.... This could actually be a conference, an annual conference where you're hearing not only from the people who are at the state levels and at the district levels, but you're also hearing from [more] people in the field.

Site visits were described as useful sources of ideas

With districts, universities, and state education agencies around the country engaged in Wallace-supported initiatives on school leadership, there were visits to sites where ELLC members could meet with those doing the work, whether that work was about principal development, community partnerships, state principal academies, or even the technical topic of data systems supporting principal pipelines. (See Appendix B for the timeline and topics of the site visits offered.)

The visits brought together members who traveled from multiple states and thus allowed cross-team discussion, similar in some ways to what occurred in New York City but anchored in what the visitors were seeing and hearing at the site. This sometimes played out in complicated ways. After one visit, when a group of members from one team found themselves disagreeing with the approach used in the host site, they went home with a heightened commitment to continuing to articulate and share their own perspective in the product that they eventually developed. More typical, though, was the example of several members of one team who traveled to a site together and, in time spent as a team with their discussion driver while they were still at the site, reflected together on what they had seen and how they might borrow ideas for the work they were planning. As the discussion driver described it later, the visit “really sparked the idea, ‘We could do something like this.’” Other examples of the learning that occurred on site visits to Wallace grantee sites include:

- Educational Service Units in Nebraska have borrowed a protocol for in-school observations that they learned about and saw in their visit to San Diego State University and its partner districts, which were part of a Wallace Foundation initiative designed to improve university-based principal preparation programs. A staff member from an urban district in another state cited that same visit as a source of ideas about recruiting Latino staff.
- A district-based team member cited visits to districts in Maryland and Georgia that were part of another Wallace initiative to develop effective principal pipelines. She said that these visits familiarized her with the parts of a principal pipeline, and that the visits “really gave us a strong perspective about the support that principals were seeing on the job in their first year, and [I’m thinking], how do we do that? And how do we select in a rigorous way those people who get into a principal preparation program?”

For members from community-based organizations, the site visits offered a concrete way to understand topics that educators may be more familiar with, such as strengthening principals’ practice. A team member from the Urban League was excited to gain new insights into how school leaders can work and what kinds of learning opportunities can support them, saying in an interview:

My eyes were opened when we went to a middle school [at a site] and really saw how [the school leaders] were taking different improvement techniques and were serious about it and encouraging teachers [not to be afraid] to make mistakes [in the process]. And then going to [the organization that was providing professional learning to school leaders]—those were memorable moments that made it really strong. More of those practical, face-to-face interactions would be great.

Glidepath grants extended the teams’ capacity in several ways

During 2021, teams gained new knowledge and perspectives from a different source: the organizations and consultants whom they engaged with the glidepath grants. The content and design of the glidepath projects varied a great deal, but a common denominator was that they paid for the time of skilled professionals who worked with the team, enabling the team to oversee a product or set of services that went beyond what members could do on a volunteer basis. Some teams engaged experts to develop polished materials in the form of guidebooks or modules for the audiences that the teams wanted to reach. Others used the grant to support skilled facilitation of learning opportunities for principals—or, in the case of Nebraska, for members of the team itself, who felt that they needed to better understand issues of equity in education.

What Made a Difference

Summing up, the ELLC teams rose to the challenge of identifying and addressing practical problems thanks to a number of factors:

- Their experience in living through the implementation and effects of past policies, which taught them to offer thoughtful critiques of policy proposals and to develop and test practical solutions on the ground

- The distinctive assets that members brought, drawing on their professional and personal backgrounds and inviting others to become members who would fill gaps in the team's combined perspectives
- The relationships of trust and collaboration that they built over time, which enabled them to have difficult but necessary conversations and, later, to start or deepen partnerships among some participating agencies and organizations
- Their persistence in forging a purpose around equity-centered leadership for high-need schools
- The infusions of ideas and capability that came from convenings, site visits, and small grants

CONCLUSIONS

As this report has shown, the ELLC's team structure resulted in new ideas, programs, and resources for the participating states. Looking in depth at what the teams produced, most if not all bear unmistakable marks of having emerged from the different experiences and expertise that team members brought to the table. By allowing time for joint work to develop within groups that had relatively little in common at the start, the ELLC enabled collaboration to flourish.

There would have been more efficient ways to support the development of state-level plans or policies for supporting equity-focused school leadership in schools that face persistent challenges. State agencies know how to come up with such plans and policies on their own. However, when given the opportunity to provide a critique of states' draft plans or to create plans as a team, the ELLC team members brought their understanding of the pitfalls in communication and implementation that may accompany top-down planning, and of the capabilities that may lie untapped in communities, schools, and school districts. The plans that teams put into action reflected these broader understandings. Looking back, although no team member unilaterally shaped the work of their team, no team member took the opportunity of an anonymous interview to say that the work would have been better if they could have done that.

The experiences of these 11 teams with the ELLC imply lessons for future cross-sector collaborations to inform education practice and policy.

- **Engage and listen to different voices on equity, leadership, and education.** The single most innovative aspect of the ELLC was the diversity of voices engaged in conversation. Even amidst political turmoil, a pandemic, and membership turnover, teams maintained their commitment to creating spaces for conversation and taking action grounded in voices from multiple personal and professional backgrounds.
- **Balance flexibility in design, purpose, and functioning with adequate support and resources to ensure continuing success.** The possibility for teams to build the work that mattered most for their states and communities was another successful design element of the ELLC. That possibility, however, created a risk of fruitless struggle for some teams. Balancing flexibility with supports such as professional facilitation, convenings, site visits, and small grants helped drive success.
- **Attend to the history of voicelessness that is the context for bringing multiple voices to education policy conversations.** If you build it, they will come, but may not feel comfortable talking. The history of state agencies interacting with large urban districts or districts with community organizations is one as filled with distrust as any. This history matters. Bringing diverse voices to the table is insufficient without recognizing the weight of that history. The fact that many teams developed norms of listening to community members and not automatically deferring to the authority of the state agency appears to have been a healthy feature of the ELLC. It may be important for conveners to encourage these norms.

- **Actively focus on equity as the shared value and objective that enables cross-sector collaboration.** Teams might have taken their work in any number of directions related to leadership and school improvement. Equity, however, was the north star that oriented teams' work, brought members to meetings, and motivated team members during the darkest days of the pandemic.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: FEDERALISM AND ESSA

For state, local, and community actors to come together harmoniously around the implementation of a federal education law is not a routine event in our federal system. The backdrop for what ELLC’s founders called “the ESSA moment” is a long history of federalism in which local, state, and federal governments frequently clash over issues of authority in education. Federalism creates a “tug of war” in influence and power, and it creates an environment where policies made at one level directly influence all other levels (Marsh, 2013). Education policy is made and implemented on contested terrain.

The federal role in education has changed significantly over the decades since the original 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), when it first tasked state education agencies (SEAs) with administering major portions of the law. Substantial changes came from the standards-based reform movement of the late 1980s and successive ESEA reauthorizations, which expanded the federal role—and often the state role along with it (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; McDonnell, 2005). Race to the Top and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act expanded federal policy into the spheres of teacher evaluation and tenure, which had previously been “owned” by state and local entities. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) amendments to ESEA, enacted in 2001, had a lasting and significant effect on states, districts, and relationships across the public education spectrum. NCLB gave SEAs the power to take over schools and districts that were not demonstrating results, which drastically shifted the dynamics and balance of power between the state and local levels.

Despite the expansion of federal reach over the past four decades, the U.S. public education system ultimately relies on state and local entities to implement education policy. This has always given states, local governments, and school districts ways to maintain and reassert influence by avoiding or adapting the interventions that come from federal policy (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977). In this dynamic, “local actors work cooperatively with their states to challenge federal control, whereas in other instances they work against their state to pursue their own interests (which may or may not align with federal policy)” (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013).

When the Obama administration introduced NCLB waivers, states created ways to “comply with federal policy intent while protecting their interests and authority” (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). At the local level, when districts advocated for and won approval to offer supplemental educational services, this demonstrated the “political power of some districts and federal propensity to engage in bargaining during policy implementation” (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Vergari, 2007, p. 331). State and local entities have also opened public education up to a more diverse set of providers (e.g., charter schools), while more non-governmental community players have entered the policy arena. The need for other external support was exacerbated by an economic recession and the perpetual underfunding and understaffing of SEAs (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013).

After 14 years of NCLB, the 2015 ESSA amendments were designed to shift decision-making authority back to the districts and defer to local expertise, while introducing new chances to “unleash the states to try different strategies” with districts (Manna & Shoher, 2020). States and districts now

had the opportunity to choose whatever evidence-based interventions they believed would work best to improve their lower-performing schools.

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APPENDIX B: ELLC MEMBERSHIP AND TIMELINE

Exhibit B-1: ELLC Membership Over Time

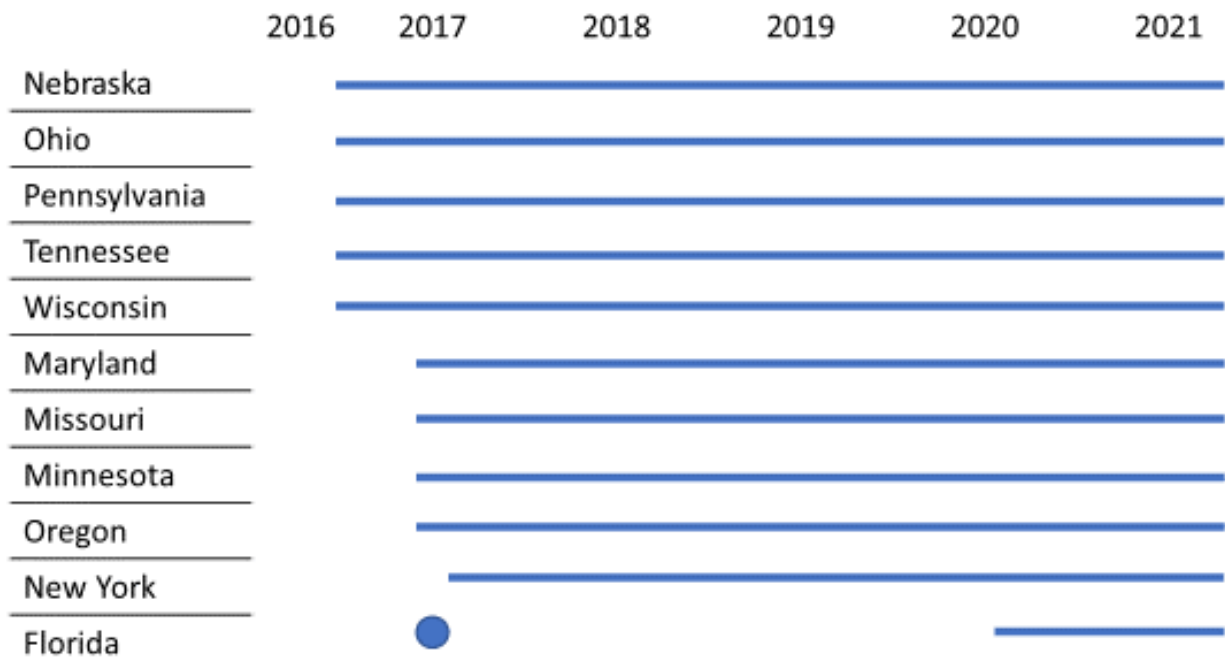


Exhibit B-2: ELLC Events Over Time

Year	National Convenings	Site Visits
2016	September: Launching the ELLC & Setting a Vision for Each State Team	N/A
2017	<p>February: Using School Leadership for ESSA Planning/ Goals and School Turnaround</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maryland, Missouri, Minnesota, Florida, and Oregon join the ELLC <p>May: Leading for Equity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New York joins the ELLC in May September: School Improvement and Its Intersections with School Leadership and Equity (included planning for Year 2) 	<p>March 28-29: New York Site Visit (Leader Development) April 10: Nashville Site Visit (Leading for Equity)</p> <p>May 1-2: Des Moines Site Visit (Community Engagement)</p> <p>November 14: San Diego Site Visit (The Clinical Experience)</p>
2019	<p>January: Lessons Learned in Year One, Cross Team Sharing, and Looking Towards Year 2</p> <p>May: From Plans to Tasks- Creating Systems</p> <p>October: Ingredients of a Successful Implementation Plan- Identifying high needs schools, funding sources, and roles and responsibilities</p>	<p>April 24-26: Prince George's County Site Visit (Principal Supervisors)</p> <p>September 10-12: UCONN Site Visit (SEL and Family/Community Engagement)</p> <p>October 15-17: Broward County Site Visit (Leader Tracking System)</p> <p>October 16-18: Denver Site Visit (Principal Pipeline), Des Moines Site Visit (Principal Supervision & Leading for Equity), New York Site Visit (Leading for Turnaround)</p> <p>October 23-25: Gwinnett County Site Visit (Statewide Leadership Academy)</p> <p>October 28-30: Long Beach Site Visit (Leading for Equity)</p>
2020 (COVID-19 Pandemic began in March)	<p>Feb/March: UPPI/ELLC Joint Meeting- Planning to Scale the Work</p> <p>October: Planning to Sustain the Work</p>	N/A
2021	<p>April: (Planned but Cancelled Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic)</p> <p>July: ELLC Next Steps & Hearing from the Steering Committee Members about the Current National Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch of Glidepath Grants <p>October: Using the partnerships developed during the past five years to address today's challenges</p>	N/A

