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Developing Educators Throughout Their Careers: Evaluation of the Rio Grande Valley Center for Teaching and Leading Excellence

An i3 Development Grant

Executive Summary, Final Report

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Rio Grande Valley Center for Teaching and Leading Excellence

The Rio Grande Valley Center for Teaching and Leading Excellence (the Center) is a partnership between IDEA Public Schools, a charter management organization, and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA ISD). The Center was funded in 2010 as part of the first cohort of the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) competitive grant program. The Center aimed to strengthen support for new teachers, teacher leaders, and school leaders and to raise the quality of teaching for students in one of the poorest regions in the country. Drawing on the Teach For America summer institute curriculum, the Center created New Teacher Training (NTT) featuring a summer institute, ongoing professional development, and coaching during the participants' first year of teaching. The Center also invested in teacher leaders with two types of training: (1) Leadership Skills Training (LST) focused on enhancing teacher leaders' management and problem-solving skills; and (2) Skillful Teacher Training (STT), developed and delivered by Research for Better Teaching to hone teachers' instructional leadership. Both LST and SST consisted of summer institutes and ongoing professional development during the school year. TLT participants took each training successively over two consecutive years. Under the Center's school leadership training, each district provided a range of development opportunities tailored for selected assistant principals and experienced, new, and aspiring principals.

The Center offered its first NTT and TLT summer institutes in 2011, and ran trainings for three years—2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14—under the i3 grant. At the end of the grant period, each district brought the NTT and TLT trainings in house and continued aspects of the school leader training further tailored to their respective contexts.

Evaluation of the Center

The three-year evaluation of Center activities followed the three cohorts of NTT and TLT participants served under the i3 grant. The evaluation had two purposes, as specified by i3 requirements. First, the study tracked implementation fidelity, primarily of NTT and TLT; second, it assessed the impact of NTT on teacher and student outcomes and the impact of TLT on teacher outcomes. The implementation fidelity analysis annually tracked participation and quality, as defined by Center directors, for NTT and TLT.

To estimate impact on outcomes, the evaluation design used a randomized controlled trial for NTT and TLT in PSJA ISD. Students in grades 4 through 8 were randomly assigned to new teachers and their peers in the same grade, subject, and school. Because IDEA Public Schools is a smaller district typically with one teacher per subject per grade at the secondary level and because all NTT participants from IDEA

Public Schools were secondary teachers, student random assignment across NTT participants and non-participants within the same grade, subject, and school was not possible. Analysis of NTT outcomes for IDEA Public Schools is therefore descriptive only.

For TLT, PSJA ISD identified large enough teacher leader pools each year to allow random assignment LST, STT, and delayed treatment comparison groups, with the latter beginning TLT one year after identification. IDEA Public Schools elected to train all of its teacher leaders selected as content or grade-level team leaders. Therefore, TLT participants at IDEA Public Schools were randomly assigned to either LST or STT and the results for IDEA Public Schools compare the relative effects of those two trainings, not the effects of LST or STT relative to a comparison group that had not taken either training.

To maximize statistical power, the impact analyses combined the sample of participants and comparison teachers across all three cohorts for each of NTT and TLT.

This final report provides annual implementation fidelity measures for NTT and TLT, the estimated effects of NTT on teacher and student outcomes, the estimated effects of TLT on teacher outcomes, and a discussion of other key aspects of the Center's work, including school leadership training and the partnership between IDEA Public Schools and PSJA ISD.

New Teacher Training

Implementation

New Teacher Training was implemented with fidelity all three years across the vast majority of indicators. Specifically, the NTT summer institutes met the thresholds of the fidelity measures for delivering sessions that were practice-based, interactive, and engaging for participants. On average, participants across all years also reported that NTT had a moderate to great deal of influence on their teaching practice. Attendance in both districts and across all years remained the greatest implementation hurdle, falling short of the threshold of 90% attendance set by the Center directors.

Teacher Outcomes

Teacher outcomes studied for NTT include self-reported job satisfaction and teacher efficacy ratings and one-year retention rates. NTT participants in PSJA ISD reported slightly higher job satisfaction ratings than comparison teachers (same grade and subject in the same school) did (3.3 versus 3.2 on a 4-point scale, $p < 0.05$). Their self-efficacy ratings were lower than those of comparison teachers (3.35 versus 3.52 on a 4-point scale, $p < 0.0001$). These results suggest that the preparation from the summer institute and the ongoing professional development and coaching supports during the school year sufficiently mitigated the challenges that typically overwhelm beginning teachers. At the same time, NTT participants seemed to have a realistic sense of their

abilities in the classroom relative to the comparison group (necessarily composed of more experienced peers because all beginning teachers participated in NTT).

NTT participants in IDEA Public Schools did not differ in job satisfaction or self-efficacy ratings compared with teachers of the same subjects and grades at other IDEA campuses. Because the majority of new hires at IDEA Public Schools were beginning teachers and because IDEA has been growing rapidly, the average years of teaching experience is lower at IDEA than at a typical school district. The closer match between NTT participants and comparison teachers at IDEA (e.g., 62% of NTT participants and 44% of comparison teachers had less than three years of experience) might explain the similarities in job satisfaction and self-efficacy.

The teacher retention rates one year after training were lower for NTT participants than for the respective comparison groups in each district. PSJA and IDEA NTT participants were 72% and 52% less likely to stay, respectively, compared with veteran teachers in the same district. To contextualize these findings, NTT participants in PSJA ISD had a much higher likelihood—3.9 times greater—of retention one year later compared with beginning teachers from 2008-09 through 2010-11 who would have been eligible for NTT had it existed then. This difference probably also reflects the economic recession beginning in 2009 and the state budget cutbacks in 2011. Nonetheless, it suggests the importance of new teacher supports in helping novices be resilient and successful in the classroom that first year.

Student Outcomes

We analyzed student achievement on state tests (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness or STAAR) in reading and math in grades 4 through 8 and in social studies in grade 8 in PSJA ISD. On the basis of a randomized controlled trial and controlling for prior achievement, the student outcomes of NTT participants in PSJA ISD did not differ from those of the comparison group. Considering other research that documents lower student achievement for beginning teachers compared with veteran teachers (Croninger, Rice, Rathbun, & Nishio, 2005; Harris & Sass, 2008; Rice, 2003; Vanderhaar, Munoz, & Rodosky, 2007), our finding of similar performance suggests a potentially positive influence of NTT on student achievement.

Teacher Leader Training

Implementation

We tracked the implementation fidelity and outcomes separately for the two types of TLT, Leadership Skills Training (LST) and Skillful Teacher Training (STT). As with NTT, LST and STT were implemented with fidelity in both districts, meeting the thresholds for the vast majority of indicators. The summer institutes were practice-based, interactive, and engaging for participants. Both types of summer institutes initially did not meet the check-for-understanding indicator but improved in

subsequent summers. A majority of LST and STT participants reported that the training influenced various aspects of their leadership practices. Attendance among LST and STT participants in both districts, however, was lower than the implementation fidelity threshold across all three years with the exception of LST in the first year.

Teacher Outcomes

Teacher outcomes for TLT included self-reports of teacher efficacy, job satisfaction, instructional leadership efficacy, management efficacy, and problem-solving efficacy. LST and STT participants in PSJA ISD did not differ from the delayed treatment comparison group on any of the teacher outcomes, except that STT participants had a lower self-reported teacher efficacy rating than the comparison group (3.4 versus 3.6 on a 4-point scale, $p < 0.05$). LST participants did not differ from STT participants in IDEA on these teacher outcomes.

These results suggest that, although the trainings were generally well-delivered and well-received, the intensity of training received within one year, especially as reflected in attendance rates, may not have been sufficient to result in short-term changes in outcomes.

Other RGV Center Results

School Leader Training

Both IDEA Public Schools and PSJA ISD supported a significant number of experienced, new, and aspiring principals through a range of offerings tailored to individual needs. Opportunities included formal training such as leadership institutes at Harvard University, internships or residency programs for prospective principals, and new principal support and coaching. IDEA Public Schools and PSJA ISD supported a total of 67 and 70 participants, respectively, across the three years. Large majorities of school leader training participants reported that their training effectively addressed key leadership skills such as evaluating and providing instructional feedback, encouraging teachers to take leadership roles, and building professional community (71% to 88% across the two districts).

In addition, leaders in both districts participated in Action Learning Training, which focused on a team-based, problem-solving approach to address key organizational priorities. IDEA Public Schools had 72 participants across three years and PSJA ISD had 64 participants across two years. Smaller proportions of district leaders, however, reported that the training was effective in addressing a range of district leadership functions. Of the district-level respondents, fewer than 45% in IDEA and fewer than 72% in PSJA reported that the training supported them in activities such as helping schools develop and maintain high standards, model instructional leadership for principals, or develop tools to support principals' instructional leadership.

Comparative Interrupted Time Series

Because the Center played a larger role in each district's human capital strategy beyond NTT and TLT, we conducted additional analyses to understand whether the Center had a broader impact on student outcomes not captured in the NTT and TLT results. These analyses, using a comparative interrupted time series approach, indicate that PSJA ISD student achievement in reading and math across all tested grades relative to other schools in South Texas (Education Service Center Region 1) was similar the three years before and the three years after the establishment of the Center. IDEA Public Schools exhibited similar results for grades 6 through 8 in reading. While IDEA Public Schools' grades 6-8 math achievement continued to be higher than that of Region 1 schools on average, the gap became smaller in the three years after the Center was established.

Limitations and Implications

Several key limitations shape our interpretation of the findings.

- The NTT student outcome results derived from a randomized controlled trial in PSJA ISD and the results probably cannot be generalized to IDEA Public Schools or charter school contexts more broadly because of organizational differences that are likely to affect whether and how new teachers are able to apply what they learned from NTT.
- NTT participation was broader than the state-tested grades and subjects, and the evaluation was unable to measure effects on the full range of grades and subjects taught by NTT participants.
- Both NTT and TLT might have had effects on other classroom outcomes, such as classroom culture, positive teacher-student relationships, and student engagement in learning, that were beyond the scope of this study.

The overall partnership was an ambitious effort that provided opportunities for collaboration across multiple levels of the system at both districts. Implications and lessons about partnership include the importance of having Center directors with similar authority in their respective districts to make joint decisions about the Center; creating buy-in at all levels of the system if leaders expect collaboration at those levels; and finding balance in joint work where appropriate and separate implementation where difficult logistics or different goals, strategies, or organizational structures warranted having the districts following their own path.