

Education Innovation and Research (EIR)

Early-Phase Grant Application

Rural Schools Leadership Academy: Developing the Next Generation of Principals Across the Rural Landscape



Submitted to:
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A. Significance

Teach For America (TFA) is a national corps of outstanding recent college graduates and professionals who commit to teach at least two years in urban and rural public schools and become lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity. Since 1990, TFA has placed and supported over 54,000 teachers in high-need schools throughout the country. We currently have 46,000 alumni, over 60 percent of whom continue to work in P-12 education, including 12,000 teachers, 1,010 principals, and 290 school system level leaders.

When TFA started over 25 years ago, our primary programmatic focus was on preparing and supporting bright, young people to become effective teachers in high-need classrooms and long-term leaders in the pursuit for educational equity. Over time, we have seen hundreds of our corps members (CMs) take the next step and leverage their strong leadership skills to become principals, achieving broader impact. In response to this natural principal pipeline among alumni, TFA sought to make more high-quality leadership pathways accessible through partnerships with external organizations; however, it became increasingly clear that the same opportunities did not exist in rural LEAs. As a result, TFA founded the Rural Schools Leadership Academy (RSLA) to provide alumni with robust professional development (PD) that grows the skills and mindsets necessary for rural school leadership. We started RSLA with the following goals in mind: accelerate talented people with an aptitude for leadership into rural principalships; meet a critical need by providing high-quality leadership training that would otherwise not be available in rural LEAs; and increase retention of TFA alumni in rural communities through a pathway for advancement. We would use an EIR grant to strengthen and test the RSLA program; place 260 TFA alumni on the path towards a rural principalship over five years; and explore expanding the program to non-TFA alumni.

This project focuses on Absolute Priority 1-Supporting High-Need Students and Absolute Priority 5-Improving the Effectiveness of Principals. The research base shows the potential for

principals' impact on student achievement. On average, principal quality accounts for 25% of a school's total impact on student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). An effective principal can translate to an additional two to seven months of student learning (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012), so it is crucial that principals are well trained and supported.

However, the availability of principal training programs is lacking in rural areas; only 14% of rural districts have PD programs for aspiring principals compared to 38% of urban districts (Gray, Bitterman, & Goldring, 2013). Even when principal training does exist in any LEA, rural or urban, it is often of low quality. Principal preparation programs generally do not use robust selection criteria, are not rigorous, and use curriculum that tends to be outdated and overly theoretical (Levine, 2006; Hess & Kelly, 2007). Furthermore, conventional administrator preparation programs tend to be "well-intentioned, but insufficient," and "lacking vision, purpose, and coherence" (Orr, 2006). Once in the role, a principal's daily work occurs in fragmented, isolated cultures that are very different from professional learning communities (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008; Wagner & Kegan, 2006), and they often have little district support for their professional learning (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Tucker & Coddling, 2002). The limited availability of high-quality pre-service preparation and PD in rural communities contributes to high rates of principal turnover and ultimately, to challenges with student achievement. Principal turnover in rural schools is higher than the national average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) and in Pennsylvania, nearly 150% of the turnover in urban schools (Joint State Government Commission, 2003). This turnover is especially harmful to student achievement scores in high-need schools (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012).

Given these realities, there is a significant need in the field for work that: continues to develop the knowledge, skills and mindsets of aspiring rural school principals; builds a network of support around them; and increases retention of strong leadership in rural communities. The RSLA program

aims to achieve these goals.

A1. National significance of the proposed project.

The RSLA program will be nationally significant for three reasons. First, while the program will serve a significant proportion of TFA alumni from four states (ID, LA, NC, TX)¹ where we have a large presence and there is high-quality student outcome data, alumni from 13 other regions² are eligible to apply and participate in the program. As such, our program design makes us uniquely equipped to deliver leadership PD to people from a wide variety of rural communities through one single program, which would allow us to foster high-quality principal pipelines in 24 rural LEAs across the country. Second, if funded, over five years we will have put 260 emerging leaders on a pathway towards a rural principalship, which not only contributes to increasing their impact in high-need schools but serves as a means to encourage these individuals to stay and continue to serve in their rural communities. Finally, in a world of changing demographics where students of color make up a greater percentage of the public school population, including in rural communities, the increased academic and emotional benefits of having educators that match student populations requires greater attention to increasing educator diversity, including that of principals (Sanchez,

¹ We plan to serve larger proportions of alumni and district educators in ID, LA, NC, and TX because with the help of our evaluator, American Institutes of Research (AIR), we identified these states as ones with high-quality and easily accessible student achievement data. We only focus on four states as this is the most manageable for AIR given the allotted budget. We will work with our rural-serving TFA regions in those states (Idaho, Louisiana Delta, Eastern NC, Rio Grande Valley) to increase recruitment in partner rural LEAs. For Year 1, we will partner with Edgecombe County Schools, NC and Homedale Joint District, ID, and add South Texas ISD and Concordia Parish, LA in Year 2. We may need to partner with additional LEAs in Year 3 to be able to hit the necessary sample size for the evaluation.

² Alumni are also eligible from these rural-serving regions: Alabama, Kentucky, Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, S. Carolina, S. Dakota, S. Louisiana, and Washington.

Thornton, & Usinger, 2009). One of the priorities of the RSLA program is to recruit a diverse pool of candidates who represent the backgrounds of the communities they serve; 29% of RSLA participants across cohorts identify as people of color, including half of our 2016 cohort, vs. 18% of principals nationwide and 9% of rural principals (Sanchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2009).

A2. Promising new strategies that build on, or are alternatives to, existing strategies.

The RSLA model is a promising, innovative strategy to fulfill a critical need in rural communities. Our innovative program design brings together teachers and leaders from rural contexts across the country and exposes them to some of the best adult leadership PD, which contributes to keeping them in their rural communities. As outlined in more detail below, the program offers two different leadership streams: Stream 1 for teachers with little or no leadership experience to accelerate them to teacher leadership and Stream 2 for existing teacher leaders or midlevel leaders to accelerate them to principalship.³ First, the RSLA team chooses participants in each stream using a rigorous selection process driven by our [REDACTED] see Appendix F). Programming is administered through various touch points and organized in concrete learning blocks that are aimed at developing certain leadership competencies in our [REDACTED] and designed and delivered by the RSLA team or external partners with a proven track record in a particular learning objective. Touch points include a week-long intensive during the summer subsequent to acceptance into the program, followed by fall and spring retreats. Finally, participants participate in a professional learning community (PLC) through monthly calls, during which they focus on particular competencies in which they need additional support.

We are in our fourth year of operation of the RSLA and the results are incredibly promising.

³ By teacher leader, we mean a department head, team leader, PLC leader, etc. A midlevel leader is an Assistant Principal, Dean, Instructional Coach, etc.

Interest in the program has grown tremendously from 34 applicants in 2013 to 110 in 2016; as a result, we have expanded from an initial cohort of 18 participants to 38 today. To date, 60% of all RSLA alumni have demonstrated positive movement towards a school leadership role or principalship, including 79% of our most recent cohort, and 74% continue to remain in a rural community. We look to build on these promising results with an EIR grant and not only expand our programming and reach, but also leverage the opportunity to rigorously test our approach.

This program builds on existing literature in numerous ways, including in PD design and school leadership competencies and skills. RSLA PD sessions are based on literature that calls for principal-facing PD to be grounded in the theories of adult learning and focused on understanding of self, context, and the interactions between the two (Kegan, 2000). The decision to offer two distinct streams stems from literature demonstrating that sound teacher leadership development requires connections to leadership opportunities early and often throughout an educator's leadership trajectory (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This is especially important in rural communities where such opportunities are not as common and the offerings more limited. The cohort model of RSLA is grounded in literature that suggests that adult learning is best accomplished through socially cohesive communities of practice that emphasize shared learning and opportunities for collaboration (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Kay, Hagan, & Parker, 2009; Wenger, 1998). Finally, our [REDACTED] draws on research of competency models and leadership traits such as cultural intelligence, mindset, and grit (Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Van Dyne, et al., 2012; Dweck, 2012; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). We also make use of existing competency and leadership development models from other organizations that support educational leadership development, including the Broad Superintendents Academy, New Leaders, Denver Public Schools, DC Public Schools and Public Impact, among others.

Further, learning block content is designed and delivered by leading experts in the field who

draw on research to inform training. Our rural educators rarely have the same opportunities as their urban counterparts to access some of the premier leaders in leadership PD. Given this reality, we focus on bringing the experts to them, in a cohesive manner focused on their zone of development. For example, we partnered with Uncommon Schools on our [REDACTED] [REDACTED]” learning block given their expertise in coaching teachers, including their easy step-by-step procedures which are more readily internalized by beginner teacher leaders.

Should we receive this grant, between 2017 and 2022, TFA will expand the number of RSLA participants and programming beginning in Year 2 of the grant. TFA plans to grow the number of participants accepted into each stream, beginning with 40 total in Year 1 of the grant and scaling up to 55 in subsequent years, which will allow us to train and develop 260 aspiring rural principals over the course of the grant. The program design will evolve as well. First, we will add an additional retreat to increase the diversity of leadership experiences to which participants are exposed. We will also add a capstone project to ensure that participants are applying their newly acquired knowledge and skills in practical ways through their current roles. Finally, we will facilitate the continued operation of the PLC to ensure that these emerging leaders have access to a network of support throughout their leadership trajectory.

A3. An exceptional approach to the priority or priorities established for the competition.

The RSLA program is an exceptional approach to improving the effectiveness of principals in rural communities in three ways. First, creating a dual-stream program allows TFA to cultivate a high-quality pipeline of rural principals that starts as early as a teacher’s second year in the classroom and provides a continuum of supports throughout their leadership trajectory. This kind of connected, comprehensive programming provides a clear and cogent pathway to a principalship in fewer than six years after completing Stream 1, which fosters greater educator retention in rural communities (TNTP, 2012). Second, we utilize a rigorous selection process that is aligned with our

████ and effectively identifies those educators that are best positioned to be strong leaders in rural schools. As mentioned in the studies cited above, most principal preparation programs do not have rigorous selection criteria, which could diminish the impact of leadership training on schools and their students. Finally, through the PLCs that are central to the program, by the end of the grant period we will build a network of rural school leaders who cross geographies, share a mission, and are set up to support each other in their continued work to deliver an excellent education to high-need students in their respective rural communities. Given rural principals' limited access to high-quality resources, the PLC will be particularly significant to their practice.

The RSLA program also represents an exceptional approach to supporting high-need students. In the LEAs where we recruit participants, 74% of students participate in the free- and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) program and 13% have individualized education plans. Furthermore, the schools in which RLSA participants and alumni hold teacher and school leadership positions are 73% FRPL, including schools in which RSLA alumni are principals. We also dedicate significant training to culturally-responsive leadership which is focused on preparing participants to be truly transformative leaders of high-need schools. Regardless of whether these future principals share the same backgrounds as their high-need students, we believe it is critically important for them to develop a full understanding of: the barriers low-income communities face; the impacts of those barriers on academic learning, school culture, and the student's self; and the strategies and methods to overcome those barriers to foster an excellent education and a strong community in their schools. See Appendix F for a sample curriculum from our culturally-responsive leadership training.

B. Quality of the Project Design and Management Plan

B1. Goals, Objectives and Outcomes.

This project aims to: (1) increase the number of effective principals in high-need rural schools; (2) build a network of rural school leaders and principals supporting each other in leading effective

schools; and (3) increase the retention rate of educators in rural communities.

Table 1. Project Goals and Targets.

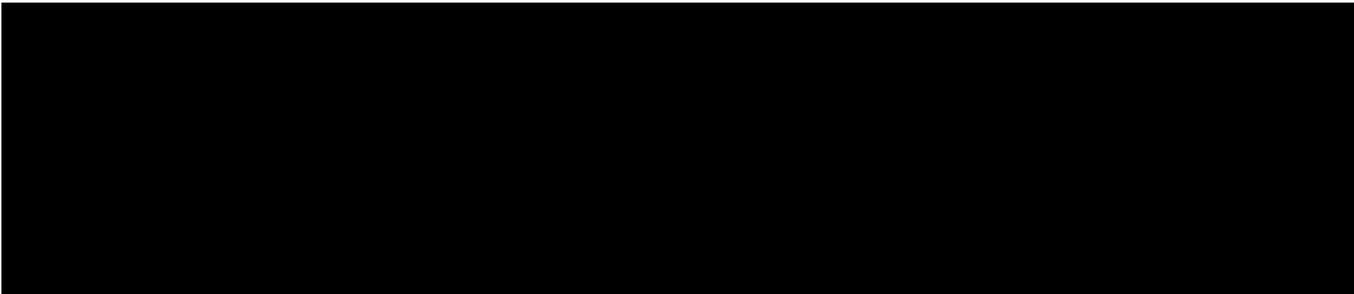
Project Goal		Metric	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
1	Implement a novel principal and school leader PD program in rural communities	# of RSLA participants	40	55	55	55	55
		# of schools served by the program	35	55	55	55	55
		# of students impacted by the program	7,029	18,324	34,578	58,374	86,154
		# regions which send participants to the program	17	17	17	17	17
		# of retreats completed	3	4	4	4	4
		Total # of PLC calls conducted	8	8	8	8	8
2	Increase the knowledge, skills and mindsets of participants to put them on the path towards effective principalship	% of participants who improve performance by one rubric level in at least three competencies on the SLCF	75%	80%	80%	85%	85%
		% of participants who self-report an increase in the likelihood of becoming a rural school leader or principal within 3 years (Stream 2) or 5 years (Stream 1)	60%	70%	75%	80%	85%
		% of Stream 2 participants who increase their mean score on their selected Val-ED Core Component or Key Process	N/A	75%	80%	80%	80%
		% of Stream 2 2017-18 participants and 2018-19 participants who become a rural midlevel leader or principal within 3 years	N/A	N/A	N/A	65%	65%
3	Develop professional learning communities among rural school leaders and principals	% of participants who leverage RSLA relationships at least once a month	80%	81%	82%	82%	82%
		% of participants who either agree or strongly agree that the RSLA experience allowed them to build or strengthen relationships that they will leverage moving forward	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%
4	Increase educator retention in rural communities	% of participants who remain in a rural community following RSLA	50%	60%	70%	80%	85%

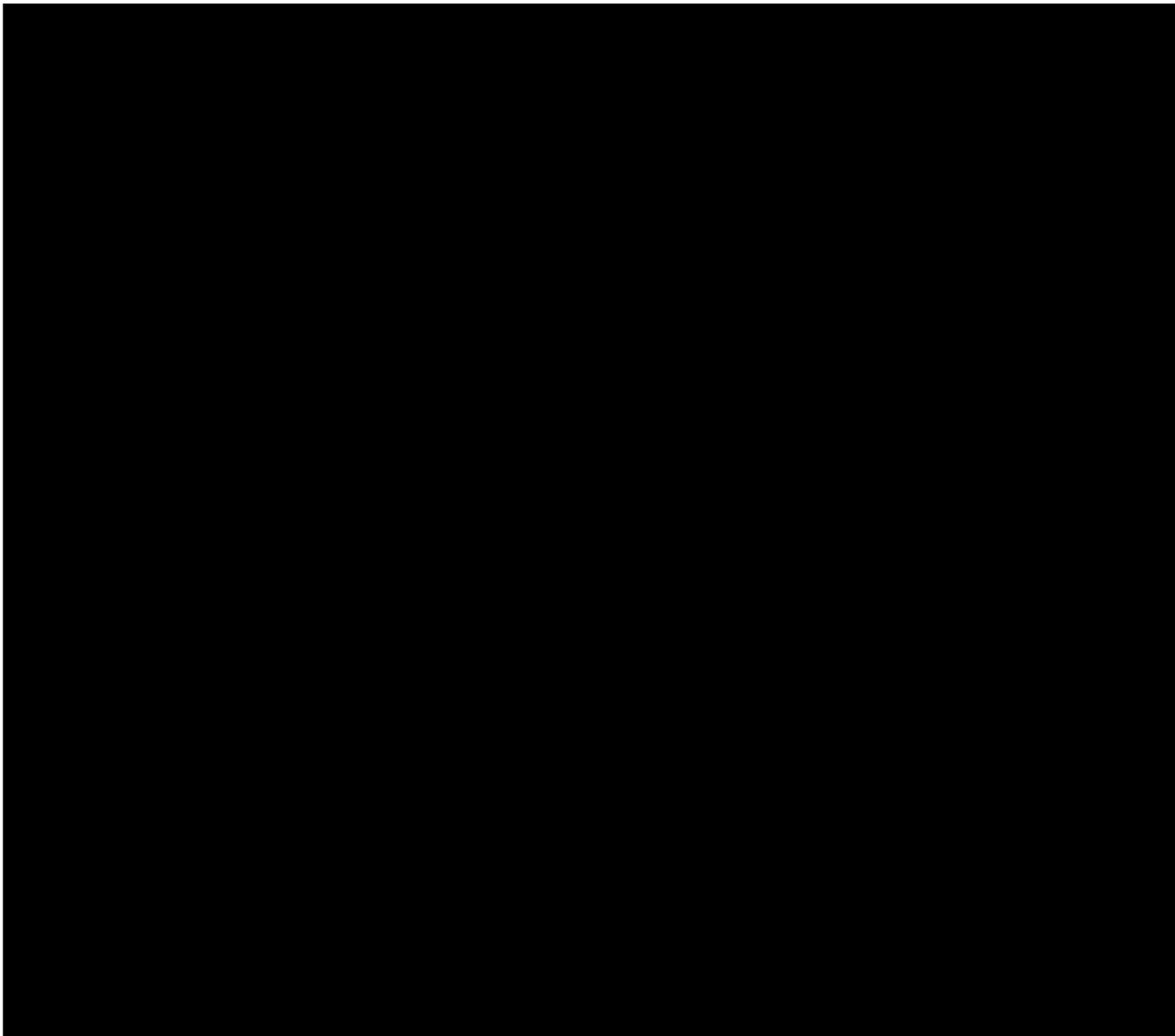
Participant Recruitment. Currently, almost 1,000 TFA CMs and more than 760 alumni teach in rural schools, which represents our primary recruitment base. We draw on two main mechanisms for recruiting: 1) our regions that recruit heavily on the ground among their CMs and alumni and 2) nominations from current and former RSLA participants.

Regional Recruitment. In November, the RSLA team first engages TFA’s 17 rural regions to recruit for the RSLA application with a kick-off call to orient regions towards the RSLA program, walk through the recruitment timeline, and describe recommended strategies to ensure robust recruitment for the program. These strategies include: 1) whole-group outreach leveraging regional social media platforms; 2) small group outreach to groups that are traditionally underrepresented in school leadership and principal positions such as women and people of color; 3) one-on-one outreach with their most promising candidates; and 4) use of the RSLA team to host Q&A calls for interested candidates. We encourage regions to recruit at least five applicants, with the ultimate goal of having two RSLA participants per region; regions adjust their targets up or down depending on their capacity, the size of their corps and alumni base, etc. Once the application is open in December, the RSLA team sends a report to all regions tracking the numbers of applications started and completed within each region, to inform regions of whether there is need for additional recruitment. If we receive an EIR grant, we would expand our recruitment support to our partnership LEAs to recruit non-TFA educators from within those LEAs for the program.

Nominations. We also request from current and former RSLA participants three nominations for the program. We then send each nominee a personal email to encourage them to apply to RSLA and offer application support via the RSLA team or the nominee’s region. These nominations also serve to give an edge to an applicant if their application is on the cusp of admittance or rejection.

Participant Selection. Over the last two years, 36% of RSLA applicants were accepted into the program. To choose the 40-50 participants per year, we will ask for the following:





The RSLA team employs a rigorous selection process to ensure that we accept those applicants best positioned to intentionally develop their leadership and ultimately become a rural school principal. We developed a detailed rubric to score each application based on specific [REDACTED] competencies that we believe are prerequisites for the RSLA program; Table 3 lists all of the [REDACTED] competencies that we assess in an applicant. The RSLA team recruits and robustly trains a group of 7-10 selectors from TFA staff and RSLA alumni to review and score applications. Selectors make a recommendation based on their full application review; for those applicants who meet a certain bar from this initial review, the RSLA team then consults the applicant's TFA region for

additional input. Finally, after reviewing all of the evidence provided by selectors and the region, the RSLA team makes a final determination to accept or reject the applicant for the program. Applicants are notified of the decision at the end of February.

Program Participation. The aim of our programming is to create an experience that provides emerging and aspiring principals with a complete picture of what it means to be an effective principal in a high-need rural community. We accomplish this in a number of ways. First, we focus on providing training in competencies by stream that: 1) are not commonly developed in existing principal pathway programs or 2) participants identify as areas in which they need development or are of interest based on their feedback and self-assessments (see below). Second, we expose participants to effective rural school leadership in various contexts through our programming.

Targeted competencies are differentiated by stream. Stream 1, which targets teachers who aspire towards an eventual principalship, focuses on developing competencies that are most foundational to any leadership position (i.e. [REDACTED] and ensuring that these future school leaders are fundamentally sound at delivering instruction. Stream 2, which aims to accelerate current teacher leaders and midlevel leaders to a principalship, focuses on cultivating competencies centered on talent development and systems management (i.e. [REDACTED] hip).

RSLA programming consists of three distinct components: 1) self-assessments and action plans informed by the [REDACTED] 2) in-person retreats; and 3) monthly PLC calls. With an EIR grant, we would also add a capstone project.

Self-assessments and action plan. To inform programming and participants' individual action plans throughout the program, participants complete self-assessments on the [REDACTED] using a detailed rubric developed by the RSLA team (See Appendix F). These assessments occur four times: twice

formally (i.e., submitted electronically to the RSLA team) after program acceptance in May and program completion the following April and twice informally (i.e., not submitted to the RSLA team) after the summer retreat in July and at program midpoint in December. Participants also work with a RSLA team member during the summer retreat to develop an action plan. In their action plans, participants select an [REDACTED] area to target, identify a goal in that target area, and determine action steps to achieve that goal. These processes allow participants to grow the mindsets to continually reflect on their development and determine strategies to address any gaps.

In-person retreats. The bulk of our programming takes place through in-person retreats. The first, the summer “week intensive” retreat occurs over five days (M-F) in July following acceptance into the program. The remaining two retreats happen during the school year in October and the following March over three days (TH-S). Each retreat takes place in a different rural context, and we work with our partner TFA regions in the selected locations to arrange and manage each retreat. If we receive an EIR grant, we would add a fourth retreat in the winter to increase the amount of PD provided to participants and to expose participants to another rural context.

There are two major parts of each retreat: PD sessions aligned to our scope and sequence, and excellent school site visits.

Professional Development. The RSLA team is intentional about programming during all three retreats. We use participant self-assessments and other application information to develop objectives to match the competencies and leadership level of each stream’s cohort, which then informs scope and sequence of PD during the retreats. We use a hybrid approach to designing and delivering training content based on where expertise in each objective rests. For some objectives, we use external partners to implement training, and for others, internal staff are best qualified to design and deliver content. See a sample retreat scope and sequence for both streams below.

[REDACTED]

Week Intensive

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
Sessions	Personal Presence- <i>Inspiring Educators</i>	Reflective Hike Culturally Responsive Leadership, Part 1- <i>Teach to Lead</i>	Building Relationships on a Team- <i>TNTP</i> School Culture- <i>TNTP</i>	What Makes Excellence in Rural Schools? School Vision- <i>RSLA Team</i> Excellent School Visit	Action Planning and Cohort Closing
Competencies of Focus	Personal Leadership; Interpersonal Leadership	DEI Leadership; Interpersonal Leadership	Managing People & Projects; Interpersonal Leadership	Personal Leadership; Synthesis	Reasoning & Strategic Thinking

Fall Retreat

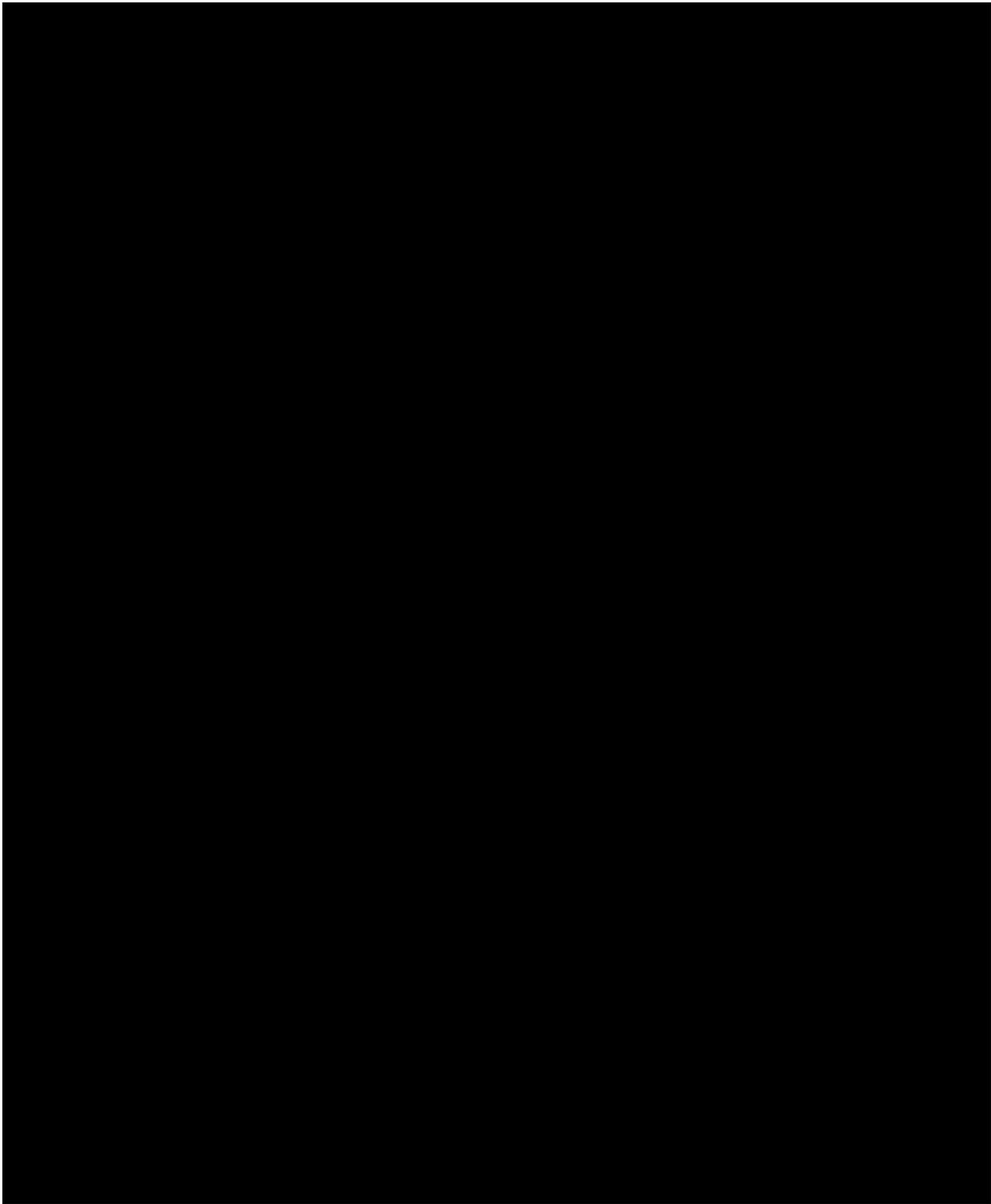
	Thurs Eve	Fri	Sat	Sun Morn
Sessions	Values Based Leadership Development: How do your actions align with your values?- <i>RSLA Team</i>	Excellent School Visit Culturally Responsive Leadership, Part 2- <i>Teach to Lead</i>	Presence and Leadership Roles- <i>Inspiring Educators</i> Contextualization Protocol- <i>RSLA Team</i>	Building Aligned Teams- <i>Uncommon Schools</i> Action Plan Check-in
Competencies of Focus	Personal Leadership; Interpersonal Leadership	Synthesis; DEI Leadership; Interpersonal Leadership	Managing People & Projects; Interpersonal Leadership	Managing People & Projects

Spring Retreat

	Thurs Eve	Fri	Sat	Sun Morn
Sessions	Values Based Leadership Development- <i>RSLA Team</i>	Excellent School Visit Leading From the Middle- <i>Uncommon Schools</i>	Culturally Responsive Leadership, Part 3- <i>Teach to Lead</i> Introduction to Coaching- <i>TNTP</i>	Fierce Conversations- <i>Lighthouse Schools</i> Closing
Competencies of Focus	Personal Leadership; Interpersonal Leadership	Synthesis; Instructional Leadership	DEI Leadership; Interpersonal Leadership; Managing People & Projects	Interpersonal Leadership; Managing People & Projects

Stream 2 Retreat Scope and Sequence (Facilitator in Italics)

Week Intensive



participants to highlight an effective school principal in a particular rural context; for example, we expose participants to effective rural principal leadership in schools that serve predominantly Native students (New Mexico), predominantly Black students (Mississippi or Eastern NC), and predominantly Latino/a students (Rio Grande Valley or Idaho), which informs each retreat's location. In each locale, we offer two school site choices, providing participants with a choice to select a site that best aligns with their individual leadership development goals and context. We would hold the new retreat, enabled by this EIR grant, in Appalachian Kentucky to offer exposure to effective leadership in a school with a predominantly white student population.

Monthly PLC Calls. Participants also take part in monthly calls, starting in August, to support and enhance their intensive in-person retreat training. The scope and sequence of the calls are informed by the training needs assessment performed by the RSLA team at program's beginning (see above under "Professional Development") and by participant surveys identifying areas of interest following in-person retreats; and we target objectives that can easily be executed in a virtual setting. As a part of each call, we feature an excellent rural principal who speaks about his/her experience and offers effective strategies in the call's particular focus area. As a part of this EIR grant, we seek to increase capacity to facilitate the PLC's continuation for participants post program completion.

Capstone Project. As part of this EIR grant, we also plan to build the capacity to require and help participants complete a capstone project by the end of the year. We anticipate that capstone projects will vary based on the selected competencies of focus, but could include: working to reimagine school-wide discipline; redesigning teacher-facing professional development; improving classroom observations and feedback. Participants will present their selected project, strategies utilized, results, and reflections at the end of the program in April.

B2. Management Plan. The tables below describe the key personnel and the management plan.⁴

⁴ See Appendix G for key personnel on the external evaluation team and the external evaluation project management plan.

Table 3. Key Project Personnel

Name & Title	Project Responsibilities & Time Commitment	Relevant experience
Hilary Lewis, Vice President, School Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Director • Leads TFA’s efforts to develop alumni school leaders • 20% effort on project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 years of experience on TFA’s School Leadership team, leading initiatives such as the RSLA, Rural Principal Fellowship, annual School Leaders of Color Conference, and Schools to Learn From • Director of Instruction and Principal at West Gary Lighthouse Charter School for 4 years • 2001 Greater New Orleans CM
Lisa Nuyens Heyne, Managing Director, Alumni School Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designs and runs programs for aspiring and current TFA alumni principals • 70% effort on project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 years of experience designing and executing TFA school leadership programming • 4 years as Principal of L’Ouverture Middle Academy • 3 years as Special Education Team Leader at Fanning MS • 2005 St. Louis CM
Steve Colón, Senior Vice President, Org-Wide Learning and Strategy (OWLS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leads the OWLS team • Will manage research engagement with AIR • 2% effort on project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 years of experience using research and evidence to design innovations. • Former Vice President of the College Board • 10 years as an Adjunct Professor at St. Joseph’s College
Rita Zota, Managing Director, Federal Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leads TFA’s efforts to secure and execute federal grants • 5% effort on project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manages federal grants for TFA, including existing Dept. of Ed. (ED) SEED grant • 5 years working on ED programs at Office of Management and Budget • 2004 Houston CM

Table 4. Management Plan

Objective	IDENTIFY and PLAN improvements to our professional development model for growing the number of effective principals in high-need rural schools.		
Owner	Hilary Lewis		
	<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Milestones</i>
Gather continuous data on RSLA to inform improvement		Sept 2017-Jun 2018 Jul 2018-Jun 2019 Jul 2019-Jun 2020 Jul 2020-Jun 2021 Jul 2021-Jun 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants and others at their school complete pre- and post-program surveys • Participant and host region surveys administered following each retreat
Refine model annually based on what we learn each year on RSLA		Jan - June 2018 Jan - June 2019 Jan - June 2020 Jan - June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of previous year’s program completed by February • Revised program design complete by May 1 each year
Hire additional staff required to operate expanded RSLA		Mar - June 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job descriptions posted by March • All staff hired by June 30

Objective	IMPLEMENT our professional development model for growing the number of effective principals in high-need rural schools.		
Owner	Hilary Lewis		
<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Milestones</i>	
RSLA team conduct regional recruitment calls with regional teams and partner LEAs; RSLA team solicit nominations from current and former RSLA participants	Nov 2018 Nov 2019 Nov 2020 Nov 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for nominations in Dec • Implement additional efforts if nominee pool does not appear to be on track to be sufficiently robust 	
Regions & LEAs execute on-the-ground recruitment of RSLA applications; RSLA team contacts nominees submitted by RSLA participants	Dec 2017-Jan 2018 Dec 2018-Jan 2019 Dec 2019-Jan 2020 Dec 2020-Jan 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regions conduct whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one outreach • Calls for prospective candidates with RSLA team • RSLA teams sends emails to nominees 	
RSLA team and selectors select applicants for incoming cohort	Feb 2018 Feb 2019 Feb 2020 Feb 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit and train selectors to independently review applications • Selectors review applications and make recommendation to RSLA team • RSLA team consults with applicant's regions or LEA • RSLA team makes final determination 	
Participants complete self-assessment at start of program	Apr-May 2018 Apr-May 2019 Apr-May 2020 Apr-May 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants complete self-assessment on [REDACTED] and Val Ed assessment • Deadline for completion June 1 	
Plan and develop RSLA programming scope and sequence	Feb-June 2018 Feb-June 2019 Feb-June 2020 Feb-June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use analysis from previous year's program implementation scope and sequence and participants' applications and self-assessments 	
Plan and implement 5-day Intensive	May-July 2018 May-July 2019 May-July 2020 May-July 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract with appropriate service providers • Plan logistics and programming 	
Plan and implement 3-day Fall Retreat	Aug-Oct 2017 Aug-Oct 2018 Aug-Oct 2019 Aug-Oct 2020 Aug-Oct 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with content providers to prepare for content delivery • Plan logistics and programming 	
Plan and implement 3-day Winter Retreat	Nov 2018-Feb 2019 Nov 2019-Feb 2020 Nov 2020-Feb 2021 Nov 2021-Feb 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with content providers to prepare for content delivery • Plan logistics and programming 	
Plan and implement 3-day Spring Retreat	Jan-Apr 2018 Jan-Apr 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with content providers to prepare for content delivery 	

	Jan-Apr 2020 Jan-Apr 2021 Jan-Apr 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan logistics and programming
Run Virtual Professional Learning Communities	Aug 2017-May 2018 Aug 2018-May 2019 Aug 2019-May 2020 Aug 2020-May 2021 Aug 2021-May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule and focus of each call mapped out by August 1 Participants attend monthly cohort virtual learning calls
Design, implement, and evaluate capstone projects	Aug 2018-May 2019 Aug 2019-May 2020 Aug 2020-May 2021 Aug 2021-May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design projects in Sep-Oct Implement projects in Nov-Apr Share out and review capstone projects and results in April
Objective	EVALUATE the effectiveness of the RSLA model	
Owner	Steve Colón/Hilary Lewis	
<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Milestones</i>
Ensure strong coordination between AIR evaluation team and TFA implementation team throughout the project	Oct 2017-Sept 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monthly meetings between AIR and TFA to discuss design and logistical challenges, preliminary findings, programming updates, etc. Annual meetings between AIR and TFA to review formative and summative findings
AIR drafts evaluation report	Mar-Sept 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final report complete Sept 2022

B3. Ensuring Feedback and Continuous Improvement.

We will continuously evaluate program design and implementation to inform improvement throughout the program’s duration by setting targets and collecting data on a number of metrics pre- and post-program which include longer-term outcomes and formative measures of training quality and satisfaction following each program session. Longer-term outcome measures include a self-reported assessment of the likelihood that participants become a school leader and in how many years. For all of our participants (current and past cohorts), we track retention in rural areas, and the extent to which they move closer to teacher/midlevel leadership (Stream 1) or principalship (Stream 2) roles (i.e. have moved up a step in leadership; for example, from teacher to teacher leader). We also collect formative data following each program session described above (i.e., each retreat and PLC session) and at program’s end by surveying participants’ satisfaction and their

perceptions of utility. After each session and at the end of the program, the RSLA team conducts an “after-action review” in which we evaluate the effectiveness of each session and the whole program. We use data collected on metrics to assess whether the programming aligned with our vision and goals; to identify possible causes for gaps in meeting our targets on measures; and to identify any innovations or experiments to address areas of improvement. We also aim to make any mid-course corrections for subsequent sessions in the current program year, if feasible, but otherwise plan for building in program modifications and adjustments for the following year.

B4. Plan for Broad Dissemination to Support Further Development and Replication.

We believe that this program is ripe for replication by a diverse range of education organizations (LEAs, CMOs, administrator training organizations) to reach teachers outside of the TFA network in more rural communities and even in urban school districts, and the learnings from RSLA can be shared widely for use in the education field. We are committed to sharing our results and findings from this project very broadly. AIR will publish their evaluation report on their website, and TFA will disseminate findings via: the TFA Quarterly (an internal mechanism for sharing the latest research and emerging innovations which will be external-facing in the next year); TFA’s alumni magazine *One Day* (circulation of 66,000); and our website (2.1 million unique visitors per year). Finally, TFA hopes to share its learnings on RSLA and school leader PD by providing technical assistance to an interested state, LEA, or other organization through a Supporting Effective Educator Development Mentoring Partnership, facilitated by the Department of Education. Such a mentorship will allow TFA to directly support these organizations in decisions about how to best structure school leader training to maximize school leader development at a low cost. Through an opportunity to participate in a Mentoring Partnership, we can develop systems, resources, and tools to enable us to provide the same kind of technical assistance more broadly to other state, LEA and external partners.

C. Quality of the Project Evaluation

AIR will conduct an external evaluation of TFA's RSLA project that meets What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) criteria, with reservations.⁵ AIR's study plan gathers data about program participants, teachers, and students each year of the project, over the following phases:

- **Preliminary phase** (Year 1: 2017-18): During the preliminary phase, TFA will plan for adjustments to the RSLA program and recruit, select, and admit Cohort 1 of the intervention. AIR will consult on RSLA expansion, develop participant surveys, and set baseline equivalency within the sample. A total of 37 schools will be included in the intervention, 20 schools will be included in the comparison samples by TFA, and AIR will confirm the samples.
- **Scaling phase** (Years 2-5: 2018–22): AIR will collect and analyze RSLA study data on Cohorts 1 and 2 each subsequent year of the intervention. During the scaling phase, AIR will annually report actionable, timely data on: (a) the fidelity of implementation of all RSLA components, including the facilitating factors and challenges to implementation; (b) RSLA's impact on participants' improved instructional leadership practice; (c) the impact of RSLA participation on teacher leader and school leader retention and career aspirations; and (d) the impact of RSLA engagement on improving school-wide student English language and math achievement.

The sections below detail the study, including research questions, instruments, and design. Appendix G includes a description of the evaluation project management and personnel and technical details.

⁵ After consultation with TFA, AIR determined that a quasi-experimental, comparative interrupted time series (CITS) design was most feasible, due to TFA's participant recruitment strategy, which leverages existing TFA CMs/alumni. AIR recognizes, though, that randomized controlled trials (RCT) offer better opportunities to study leadership interventions. Should conditions become more amenable to an RCT, AIR will consult with ED program officers to pivot to an RCT design.

Evaluation Purpose. The evaluation focuses on four key research questions, which address competition requirements and the RSLA theory of action. Table 5 displays the alignment of key research questions, relevant sub-questions, project goals, and data sources. Appendix G includes a description of each data source. The RSLA goals in the table are numbered according to Table 1 on p. 9. As Table 5 displays, AIR will collect and report formative data (RQ1) on program implementation and descriptive data on leader career decisions (RQ3).

Table 5. RSLA Program Objectives and External Evaluation Research Questions

Research Question	Applicable Sub-Questions	RSLA Goals	Data Sources
RQ1. Is RSLA implemented with fidelity in participating school sites and districts?	RQ1.1 To what degree has the RSLA for Stream 1 and Stream 2 been implemented with fidelity with participants?	Goal 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSLA participant surveys for Stream 1 and Stream 2 • RLSA comparison school survey of assistant principals for Stream 2 comparison schools • RSLA partner interview • Program document review
	RQ1.2 What district or school features support or inhibit the fidelity of implementation of the program?	Goal 1	
RQ2. To what extent has instructional leadership quality improved in schools led by participants in RSLA’s Stream 2 intervention, in comparison to other similar schools where leaders have not participated in RSLA?	No associated sub-questions	Goal 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) survey
RQ3. To what extent is RSLA participation associated with increased educator retention in the profession?	RQ3.1 Are RSLA Stream 1 participants retained in schools as assistant principals or principals at higher rates than the statewide average?	Goal 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District human resource data • Statewide, annual principal workforce reports
	RQ3.2 Are Stream 2 participants (teacher leaders) more interested in pursuing school principal licensure, and what percentage enroll in principal preparation	Goal 3	

	programs relative to other teachers in their schools?		
RQ4. What are the effects of RSLA Stream 2 participation on school-wide student learning in comparison to similar schools that did not participate in RSLA? ⁶	No associated sub-questions	Goal 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statewide standardized test scores in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, Grades 3 through 10

We explain the impact evaluation in more detail below, which is further supported by Appendix G.

Measuring Impact on Instructional Leadership (RQ2): The RSLA theory of action purports that participation will be associated with improved instructional leadership (an output), which creates conditions for increased student learning (an outcome). Changes in instructional leadership quality (RQ2) will be annually assessed using the VAL-ED survey, an online survey completed by school-level instructional staff that has been validated for instructional leadership measurement (Elliott, Murphy, Goldring, & Porter, 2009). The survey will be administered to teachers in each school included in the study (intervention and comparison) in spring of the year prior to implementation (2018 for Cohort 1 and 2019 for Cohort 2), in spring of the first year of implementation (2019 for Cohort 1 and 2020 for Cohort 2), and in spring of the second year of implementation (2020 for Cohort 1 and 2021 for Cohort 2).

We will use a difference-in-differences (D-in-D) design with matched treatment and comparison groups to evaluate the impact of RSLA on instructional leadership practice as measured

⁶ AIR will assess student learning impact on the RSLA Stream 2 intervention only, which is a leadership PD intervention for midlevel leaders. The decision is informed by research which finds that (a) formal and informal teacher leader (Stream 1) positions vary widely with respect to instructional oversight responsibility and ability to influence school-wide curriculum, instruction, and assessment school-wide or within subdivisions of schools and (b) TFA expects Stream 2 participants to apply RSLA professional learning to improvement of school-wide ELA and math instruction. Since teacher leader positions vary widely, AIR concluded that Stream 1 likely provided limited opportunities to assess school-wide student learning.

by the VAL-ED survey. D-in-D designs have a long history in social science research (Snow, 1855) and are frequently used in economic research (Card & Krueger, 1994). Our D-in-D design analyzes changes in instructional leadership practices in treatment schools before and after the implementation of RSLA. Like the CITS design described later in this proposal, the D-in-D design supports more robust impact estimates than designs that rely only on comparisons between groups (such as a propensity score analysis) and designs that rely on changes over time within the treatment group only. The possibility that forces other than the treatment influenced the outcomes of interest is a major threat to the internal validity of designs that analyze changes within groups over time but exclude a comparison group. To the extent that the comparison group is equally susceptible to such forces, the inclusion of a comparison group helps to guard against such a threat. Our D-in-D design is described in greater detail in Appendix G.

Measuring Impact on Student Achievement (RQ4). Student performance data will be measured by scale scores on statewide ELA and math standardized tests for the 2014-15 through 2020-21 school years. To make scale scores comparable across states, grades, subjects, and years, scores will be standardized within each state, grade, subject, and year.⁷ A student's standardized score represents the extent to which the student scores higher or lower than the average student in that state, grade, subject, and year, relative to the overall distribution of student achievement in that state, grade, subject and year.

We will evaluate the impact of RSLA on student achievement using a CITS design, which is among the strongest quasi-experimental designs for causal inference (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; St. Clair, Cook, & Hallberg, 2014). Recent methodological studies by AIR and other

⁷ To standardize scores, we first subtract from the score the mean score in that state, grade, subject, and year and then divide the score by the standard deviation of scores in that state, grade, subject, and year.

researchers (Hallberg, Williams, & Swanlund, 2015) have demonstrated that CITS designs can produce valid inferences about the effectiveness of school-level interventions. If implemented correctly, a study with a CITS design would meet WWC standards with reservations.

In a CITS design, levels (“Are test scores high or low?”) and trends (“Are test scores increasing or decreasing?”) in outcomes (e.g., student achievement) are tracked over time. The analysis examines whether there is a break in trends in student achievement in RSLA schools after the implementation of the intervention, controlling for other observable changes in the school, such as changes in student demographics. To guard against the possibility that this break in trend is unrelated to the intervention but is instead the result of changes in state policies, economic conditions, or other unobserved factors that are not controlled for in the statistical model, the evaluation team will examine whether there is a break in trends in non-RSLA schools in the same state over the same period. Any difference between the break in trends in RSLA schools (if any) and the break in trends in non-RSLA schools (if any) provides an estimate of the intervention effect. More information about the CITS design and analytic approach is provided in Appendix G.

Sample and Power. Approximately 37 treatment schools and 20 comparison schools in four states will be recruited to participate in the study, with both treatment and comparison schools completing the VAL-ED survey and providing student performance data. We will use propensity score analysis or similar analytical techniques (Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1983; Guo & Fraser, 2015; Rasch, 1980) to create the set of 20 comparison group schools by identifying a set of schools that are statistically equivalent at baseline with the treatment schools on measures of the outcomes of interest or factors correlated with the outcomes of interest. The purpose of the matching exercise is to find comparison schools that have similar pre-intervention outcome levels, pre-intervention outcome trends, and other pre-intervention characteristics, such as the state where the school is located, school type (elementary, middle, K–12, high), school size, urbanicity of school location,

and student demographics, among others, as the treatment schools. The set of comparison schools will be selected so that differences in mean baseline characteristics of the treatment and comparison groups are less than 0.20 standard deviations of the pooled sample. Quasi-experimental designs—such as the D-in-D and CITS designs—with differences in mean baseline characteristics, including pre-intervention outcomes, of 0.25 standard deviations or less (for each characteristic) are able to meet WWC evidence standards with reservations (What Works Clearinghouse, 2014).

Minimum detectable effect sizes (MDESs) were estimated using power analyses, the details and rationale of which are described in Appendix G. If no schools exit from the study, the MDES for instructional leadership practice measures is 0.56, while at a 15% attrition rate, the MDES is 0.61. If no schools exit from the study, the MDES for student achievement is 0.22, while at a 15% attrition rate, the MDES is 0.24. Since RSLA is a new program, AIR has no attrition data and has chosen to account for an attrition rate similar to national statistics on principal workforce turnover. It is reasonable to believe that RSLA will have a larger impact on instructional leadership practice than on student achievement, because the program is designed to directly influence school leaders, while many of the factors affecting student achievement, such as students' families, neighborhoods, and innate abilities, cannot be directly influenced by RSLA. The estimated MDESs for both measures reflect this difference in their expected effect sizes.

Conclusion. At the conclusion of this EIR grant, we will put 260 emerging and aspiring school leaders on a path towards a rural school principalship. This will enable us to address a critical need faced by a high-need rural communities, while also increasing the likelihood that talented educators stay in these communities. These educators will grow their leadership skills through our robust and intentional PD, meeting their demand for high-quality training. Perhaps most importantly, we will have new insights into how our approach to principal PD will impact participants' leadership skills and their schools' performance, which will result in important information for the education field.

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