

# Strengthening School Leadership in Delaware: A Profile of Collaboration and Impact

Region 4 Comprehensive Center – April 2023

In 2019, the Region 4 Comprehensive Center<sup>1</sup> (R4CC) and the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) formed a partnership to strengthen leadership of Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools in two urban districts. Over the course of several years, this partnership added new partners and evolved to redefine leadership practice for multiple roles. In the process, DDOE built capacity and clarified a statewide strategy for strengthening school leadership and principal supervision.

## School Leadership: A State Lever for School Improvement

DDOE provides a statewide system of support for CSI schools and their districts. State leaders identified two urban districts they believed could benefit from R4CC support, both having a substantial proportion of CSI schools with persistently low student outcomes. Informed by evidence that school leadership plays an important role in student outcomes<sup>2</sup>, DDOE began developing a strategy for strengthening school leadership in these districts and asked R4CC to collaboratively design and implement the **Delaware Leadership Network**.

The Network began as a collaborative project focused primarily on principal development in two districts. R4CC designed the Network to build capacity at the school, district, and state levels to implement rigorous instructional systems for student growth and school improvement.

When the Network provided evidence of value and insights to other needs, DDOE asked R4CC to design and implement a second collaborative project: the **Delaware Principal Supervisor Leadership Program**. The

*“There has been a gradual expansion in the system of support. It started with R4CC supporting principals in the Network, and then expanded to the coaching of principal supervisors, and now that coaching has extended down to principals who then coach their teachers. The focus of all this is on instructional leadership and reconceptualizing the leadership role from overseer to support provider...The feedback we get is that this is impacting instructional programming.”*

Director of Educator Excellence,  
Delaware Department of Education

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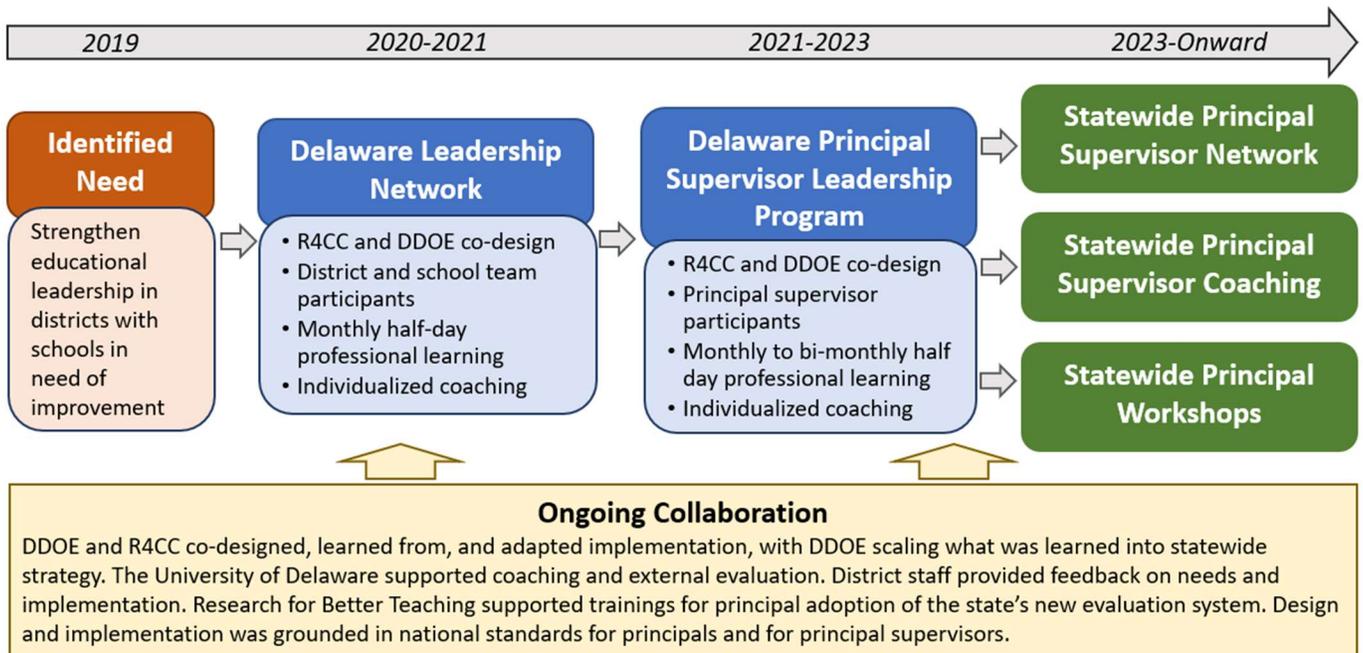
<sup>1</sup> The [Region 4 Comprehensive Center \(R4CC\)](#) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve education agencies in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. R4CC is a part of a network of 19 regional centers and a National Center, delivering evidence-informed, capacity-building support to state and local education agencies as they work to improve student results.

<sup>2</sup> Grissom, J., Egalite, A., and Lindsay, C. 2021. [“How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research.”](#) New York: The Wallace Foundation.

program focused on strengthening the coaching and supports that supervisors provide principals.

As of 2023, the learnings and benefits resulting from these two collaborative projects have contributed to DDOE’s commitment to develop a **new statewide network and coaching program for principal supervisors**, as well as a **new principal workshop series on high-quality coaching** as part of the teacher evaluation system. R4CC will support these emerging statewide programs, helping to apply aspects of the original two projects at a broader scale.

### Collaborative Efforts to Strengthen School Leadership in Delaware



### Delaware Leadership Network (2020-2021)

R4CC worked with the DDOE Education Associate for School Leadership to design and implement the Delaware Leadership Network as a year-long professional learning community for district and school leaders of twelve low-performing schools. Network membership included principals, school leadership teams, principal supervisors, curriculum directors, and human resource officers, as well as DDOE personnel, R4CC facilitators, and coaches from the partner Delaware Academy for School Leadership (DASL) at the University of Delaware. Activities included:

- Monthly half-day professional learning sessions (up to 80 participants each),
- Individualized coaching for principals,
- Data collection, analysis, and discussion related to school leader needs and challenges, and
- Regular meetings with DDOE to collaboratively plan delivery and inform state strategy.

Network programming was grounded in the research-based Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and focused on improving instructional leadership and areas of need expressed by stakeholders, including principals themselves. Asserting that coaching is a crucial evidence-informed lever for changing principal practice, R4CC developed a coaching model that included contracted DASL coaches to reinforce the monthly R4CC-led learning and to support principals in building rigorous learning systems for students.

R4CC also served as an analytic partner for DDOE, districts, and schools by collecting feedback for Network improvement and data to inform decision-making at the school, district, and state levels. For instance, R4CC analyzed DASL coaching reports, conducted interviews with principals in the Network, and led efforts to identify district-level needs for promoting improvement.

## Principal Supervisor Leadership Program (2021-2023)

When districts participating in the Network experienced turnover among principal supervisors, DDOE asked R4CC to extend its work with the districts by co-designing and implementing a professional learning program for principal supervisors. The Delaware Principal Supervisor Leadership Program is a one-year professional learning community for principal supervisors and other district leaders, such as curriculum directors. DDOE personnel from the offices of educator excellence, equity, and innovation co-delivered programming with R4CC personnel with the intention of R4CC gradually releasing facilitation of the supervisor program to DDOE staff. Activities include:

- Monthly half-day professional learning sessions in 2021-2022, ramping down to every six weeks in 2022-2023,
- Individualized coaching for principal supervisors, and
- Regular meetings with DDOE to collaboratively plan delivery and inform state strategy.

The program is focused on aligning principal supervisor work with the national Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards. These research-based standards guide principal supervisors in working with principals and strengthening enhance district-level efforts to help principals support teachers. Principal supervisors and R4CC personnel participated in monthly professional learning sessions on Delaware's new state teacher evaluation system. The sessions, led by partner Research for Better Teaching (RBT), emboldened leaders to shift their mindset about evaluation from compliance to growth.

*"Professional learning is not a new phenomenon. However, working with R4CC and being intentional on school leadership is a different pathway for our team. The work from R4CC is high quality, actionable and job embedded.....We thought of principal supervision as being managerial and we've now shifted to where we develop school leaders who in turn develop teacher leaders. We are also reimagining professional learning for our principal supervisors to include coaching around instructional leadership. The work now ties nicely into our evaluation system which brings our purpose full circle."*

Deputy Superintendent,  
Christina School District

Instructional leadership is at the core of the work of the program, along with a shift in the principal supervisor role from oversight to support. After the program's first year, one district asked for an additional year of R4CC support, which is currently underway.

Throughout implementation of the program, R4CC, DDOE, DASL, and RBT met monthly to ensure programming was aligned and met the needs of state, district, and school stakeholders. District leaders were also consulted to make mid-course modifications.

## Scaling What Was Learned for Statewide Implementation

A key outcome from these two collaborative projects is that DDOE is scaling this leadership work statewide. DDOE personnel were heavily involved in the collaborative implementation of the R4CC projects, learning what works, what is challenging in the field, and what program designs could be implemented to promote broader success. The R4CC projects served as pilots to learn from, as well as a proof cases of program features. In 2023, DDOE is launching three related statewide initiatives with R4CC support:

*"This work is shifting mindsets here—not just practice. Addressing the notion of mindset has been beneficial and has helped change how principal supervisors and principals conceptualize their roles with respect to improving teacher practice."*

External Research Partner,  
University of Delaware

1. **A statewide network for principal supervisors.** Like the supervisor program implemented during 2021-23, this network will ground content in national standards and focus on shifting principal supervisor practice from oversight to principal support.
2. **A statewide principal supervisor coaching program.** This coaching program will aid principal supervisors in helping principals improve their coaching of teachers and their instructional leadership capacities.
3. **Principal workshops.** DDOE will provide workshops for principals to support the launch of the Delaware Teacher Growth and Support System (DTGSS), the state's new teacher evaluation system. Like the Network implemented in 2020-21, these workshops will focus on shifting principals' evaluation practices from being compliance-oriented to supportive of teacher growth through high-quality feedback and support.

In addition to informing state strategy, there is evidence that the Delaware Leadership Network and the Principal Supervisor Leadership Program built capacity at the district and school levels. R4CC administered surveys to Network participants in 2021, finding that:

- 100% of participating principals strongly agreed that their Network coach "supports me in implementing systems and structures that support improved teaching and learning outcomes in my school" (N=10).
- 90% of all district- and school-level Network participants agreed that sessions "improved my understanding of how collaborative planning and data utilization strategies can impact performance" (N=48).

An external research partner at the University of Delaware administered surveys and conducted interviews with Principal Supervisor Leadership Program participants, finding that:

- Mid-program survey responses in 2022 indicated that 71% of participating principals and supervisors agreed that “the Network has helped me be better at my job.”
- By the end of the program, 100% of responding principals said they received some or significant support from supervisors related to:
  - “coaching on instructional leadership activities,”
  - “reviewing quantitative data from my school,” and
  - “purposeful, goal-aligned, actionable feedback using the evaluation system.”

## Lessons Learned for Next Steps

R4CC’s partnerships in Delaware have produced lessons for ongoing implementation of educational leadership work in Delaware, as well as for subsequent R4CC partnerships.

**Coherence is Important.** One lesson learned is that district participants encounter multiple partners and initiatives in their work, and coherence is a priority. Organizations like Comprehensive Centers must work collaboratively and intentionally with state clients, other partners, and educational leaders to ensure that participants can clearly see alignment in what they learn and what they are asked to do. Coherence can be elusive and maintaining coherence requires constant attention. R4CC strategies for coherence in these projects included: grounding R4CC work in national standards, being responsive to participant needs and school and district contexts, and nurturing a collaborative relationship with the state and other partners through joint planning and regular check-in meetings.

**Collaboration Can Support Sustainability and Scaling.** In addition to being a key ingredient for the successful implementation of a project, effective collaboration can create better conditions for sustainability and the scaling of efforts to other contexts. The close partnership among R4CC, DDOE, DASL, RBT, and the University of Delaware made it possible to establish the work within institutional and policy parameters—and to promote shared learning among all partners. Related efforts to strengthen leadership now continue at local and state levels, and they have informed the development of a broader state strategy that DDOE plans to use in the coming years.

Lastly, lessons from the Delaware projects have informed R4CC’s development of subsequent initiatives with other partners, including:

- the Maryland Next Level Leadership Academy with the Maryland elementary and secondary school principal associations,
- the Maryland Superintendent Academy and the Maryland New Superintendent Academy with the Maryland district superintendent association,
- the Calvert County Next Level Leadership Academy with Calvert County School District (MD), and
- other projects focused on district principal pipelines and principal professional learning.