



# Responding to the Need for New Local Special Education Administrators: A Case Study

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# Executive Summary

**A Shortage of Local Special Education Administrators.** Skilled local special education administrators (LSEAs) are difficult to replace. Estimates vary, but about 10-15% of these positions turn over each year (Muller, 2009). The pipeline of emerging leaders has received scant attention, and few well-qualified candidates exist when school districts experience vacancies. Only half of the states require a special credential for the LSEA role, so little incentive exists for special education professionals to prepare for these positions (Boscardin, Weir, & Kusek, 2010). Even when certification is required, aspiring LSEAs often find specialized programs unavailable or located too far away to be feasible for someone who works full time. Others seek required credentials through general educational leadership programs, only to find that little of their coursework addresses the education of students with disabilities. Additionally, developing leadership skills on the job can be especially difficult for special education professionals. To build these skills, individuals need broad opportunities to lead other adults, but high caseloads and funding constraints too often keep future leaders focused instead on direct services for students. Without a more effective emerging-leaders pipeline, skilled applicants for LSEA vacancies will remain in short supply.

**Why Does This Shortage Matter?** Local special education leadership is high-stakes work with long-lasting consequences for students, families, teachers, and schools. Procedural compliance has always been important because mistakes can result in costly dispute resolutions and audit exceptions. On the positive side, implementing special education requirements also positions LSEAs to advocate for a district-wide commitment to equitable and inclusive education and develop frameworks for including families in implementing and sustaining this commitment. Recently, LSEA leadership has become even more important as national attention has focused on student outcomes as well as procedural compliance in special education. Well-prepared LSEAs are able to advise districts on selection of research-based practices, support principals in planning for and implementing these practices, help develop instructional capabilities of staff, consult on implementation of multi-tiered systems for instruction and behavior support, help principals create and use data systems for

tracking individual student progress, and help schools sustain innovations through transitions in principal leadership. All of these benefits are placed at risk anytime an LSEA position becomes vacant. An emerging-leaders pipeline is essential to sustaining and improving quality services for students with disabilities.

**What Can State Education Agencies Do?** Several practical barriers contribute to the shortage of skilled applicants for the many LSEA vacancies, but states are well positioned to make a difference. For example, simply relying on universities to offer specialized LSEA programs is unlikely to succeed, even in states that require certification. With demand for graduates dispersed state wide and typically limited to a few positions in each district, preparation programs are just too small to secure stable university funding or to support the necessary range of faculty expertise. State agencies can help by supporting partnerships that engage expert academic and applied faculty from universities, school districts, intermediate agencies, and other organizations. In addition, LSEA positions, like other low-incidence roles in special education, often depend on tuition support to attract highly qualified candidates to difficult-to-fill positions. With little federal support for LSEA preparation, such incentives now largely depend on states to determine how preparing local leaders fits in an overall strategy for improving special education services. Understanding just how much leadership matters can help stimulate the needed investment.

**A Case Study Example.** This paper provides an example of how one state is addressing these challenges. The case study presented here describes the State of Washington's approach and initial results.

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# Responding to the Need for New Local Special Education Administrators

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) gives public school districts responsibility for ensuring that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education. Most districts, in turn, depend on local special education administrators (LSEAs) to oversee services for students with disabilities and ensure compliance with state and federal requirements (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Boscardin, 2005; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). This responsibility is high-stakes work with long-lasting consequences for students, families, teachers, and schools as well as district and state budgets, but LSEA positions are difficult to fill with well-prepared administrators. Despite repeated calls to develop, expand, and improve preparation programs, only about half of the states require any special license for the LSEA position (Boscardin et al., 2010). Grant funding for program development and scholarships is seldom available, and few universities have invested in the faculty expertise needed to offer preparation programs. The alternative—expecting new LSEAs to learn on the job—can leave new LSEAs ill prepared for their complex responsibilities. In this paper, we describe one state’s strategy for shaping the much-needed stream of future special education administrators as well as the preparation program that can build expertise for this critical role.

## Local Special Education Administration: An Increasingly Important Role

Procedural compliance has always been a central part of LSEA work. And although compliance is critically important, it is often viewed as somewhat removed from the research and program development that have built the special education profession’s capacity to respond to students’ educational needs. This perception is unfortunate for many reasons. Leading implementation of special education requirements is complex and multifaceted, and it engages LSEAs in some school districts’ most important work (Boscardin, 2011; Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009). For example, leading implementation of special education policies has typically given LSEAs responsibility for the following:

- ▶ Developing frameworks for conflict resolution and collaboration among families and professionals.
- ▶ Managing many of a district's most challenging relationships with families.
- ▶ Communicating and advocating for district-wide commitment to equitable and inclusive education (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).
- ▶ Organizing the structural and material supports needed by students with disabilities and their teachers (Crockett, 2011).

Expectations for LSEAs have expanded in recent years as legislation has increased the focus of monitoring and program oversight in special education to include a focus on student outcomes as well as procedural compliance (IDEA, 2004). Although building capacity to solve instructional problems is a familiar part of the LSEA role, recent changes reflect the sharp focus on student outcomes that has emerged throughout public education. These changes bring additional emphasis to the instructional leadership responsibilities of all district administrators, including those in special education. Although district leaders' influence on instruction is largely indirect, these leaders can support principals in ways that result in important instructional improvements (Honig, 2012). Well-prepared LSEAs now join with other district administrators to accomplish the following:

- ▶ Support new principals as principals build knowledge for including students with disabilities (Angelle & Bilton, 2009).
- ▶ Assist in selecting and implementing promising school-based improvements, including multi-tiered interventions and professional development for skills that teachers need to use new approaches (Shultz, Leibowitz, Zuliani, Fenton, & Ellis, 2015).
- ▶ Help principals create and use data systems for tracking individual student progress and sustain innovations through transitions in principal leadership (Stein, Therriault, Kistner, Auchstetter, & Melchior, 2016).
- ▶ Assist principals in retaining special education teachers and effectively supporting teachers' professional learning (Albrecht, Johns, Mounstevan, & Olorunda, 2009).

- ▶ Help sustain successful research-based practices and program innovations through transitions in principal leadership (McIntosh et al., 2013). LSEAs that provide such leadership for instructional improvement become critical resources in school efforts to successfully serve every student. But all of these supports for improved student outcomes are placed at risk each time an LSEA position becomes vacant. An emerging-leaders pipeline is essential to sustaining quality services and improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

## An Ineffective Pipeline for Emerging LSEAs

In many states and districts, the continuing and emerging responsibilities of LSEAs have given new urgency to the ongoing challenge of identifying and recruiting well-prepared local directors. Estimates vary, but about 10-15% of these positions turn over each year (Arick & Krug, 1993; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Muller, 2009). In half of the states (25), licensing requirements offer some support (Boscardin et al., 2010). When LSEAs are required to earn a certification specifically for their role, individuals gain incentive to pursue such preparation. Sometimes, these requirements are also sufficient for universities to fund and offer preparation programs. Yet the relatively small and geographically dispersed demand makes committing resources for needed faculty difficult for universities. Like many other administrative positions in school districts, opportunities are widely distributed in districts across the state so that enrollments are limited, except in universities that serve densely populated regions.

**Emerging responsibilities of LSEAs have given new urgency to the ongoing challenges of identifying and recruiting well-prepared local directors**

Districts in the remaining 25 states that have no special certification requirements face an even more difficult recruitment challenge when LSEA vacancies occur. These states typically require only a general principal or school administrator license for appointment as an LSEA and, thus, provide little or no incentive for either program development or individual preparation related to LSEA responsibilities. Moreover, with little content related to special education required in these general administrator preparation programs, new LSEAs often enter their positions with neither specialized

preparation nor related experience. For example, recent data compiled by the Washington Professional Educator Standards Board (2012) show that only 50% of currently serving LSEAs in the state hold initial certification as special education teachers or related-services providers. The report concludes that current and new LSEAs, therefore, exhibit wide disparities in the knowledge and experience needed to lead improvements in special education. Naturally, with so many new LSEAs learning on the job, the focus in many districts remains narrowly on issues of compliance. The significant opportunity for LSEAs to work with principals to lead instructional improvements for students with disabilities is all too easily deferred.

## How States Can Help: Facilitating Program Development

State education agencies (SEAs) can play a significant role in facilitating the development and implementation of LSEA preparation programs. By managing or collaborating with the state's educational certification and licensing system, the SEA can identify state-wide needs and articulate the rationale for the preparation of LSEAs. Given the SEA's unique relationship with universities and school districts across the state, SEAs can also foster collaborative partnerships between districts and universities to develop faculty and programs in the state. In addition, SEAs may allocate state-wide resources to create incentives and supports for candidates attending LSEA preparation programs. This aid can contribute to developing and retaining strong leaders in the field throughout the state. With state support, regional service districts and other organizations can create leadership opportunities and professional development to pave pathways to leadership for teachers and specialists. These leadership pathways can guide aspiring LSEAs and support the induction and continued development of new directors.

## A Washington State Example

In Washington, 223 designated special education directors serve 303 local educational agencies. Several of these directors serve more than one district through cooperatives of small districts typically managed by one of the state's Educational Service Districts (ESDs). Over the past several years, Washington's state director of special education reported discussions about the need for a more systematic

approach to LSEA preparation with the special education directors in the state's nine ESDs, the State Advisory Committee on Special Education, and many local directors. Concerns shared among these groups included the high level of support that many local directors needed for basic compliance, reporting, and budgeting responsibilities; the large number of LSEAs nearing retirement, with concomitant loss of continuity and expertise in districts and across the state; and the significant number of schools identified by the state for improvement because of low performance of students receiving special education. Ultimately, these conversations led a team of educational administration and special education faculty members from several campuses of the University of Washington and Washington State University to begin planning for a jointly led program. This planning team's design constraints included the following:

**An effective and sustainable preparation program requires leadership and coordination at the state level.**

- ▶ **Program size.** With help from the ESD special education directors, we estimated a need for approximately 15 to 20 new LSEAs in the state each year, reflecting a annual turnover rate of about 10% annually. We planned for a program that would meet about half of this estimated need, assuming that districts would choose to continue hiring from other sources for the remainder. This relatively small size (in relation to other university programs) made clear that no one campus would be likely to sustain an adequate budget for the program, which, in turn, led us to design an ongoing collaboration among universities and ESDs for program leadership.
- ▶ **Geographical access.** To respond to identified needs, an LSEA preparation program would need to be accessible to participants who live and work throughout the state. Consequently, we learned from the outset that traditional courses would be impractical. This led to a mixed instructional model, described below, that combined monthly Saturday sessions with provisions for online learning and support for internships in candidates' school districts.
- ▶ **Quality and innovation.** A consistent goal of planning groups was that the new program stimulate quality and innovation among LSEAs in the state

and not simply respond to pressure to provide convenient pathways to traditional compliance leadership roles. This led us to both define a rigorous curriculum and seek support for scholarships that would allow the program to attract highly capable candidates with documented professional expertise in serving students with disabilities. We understood that ongoing support for candidate scholarships could well be required to ensure both sustainability and quality.

- ▶ **Sustainable state-wide faculty.** The expertise to teach and lead the program resided across various departments, campuses, and school districts; not a single faculty member in the state was prepared for research and teaching in special education administration. In response, we designed a state-wide faculty with arrangements for collaboration in semi-annual retreats for mutual learning and program review. We also developed co-teaching strategies to ensure that expertise was continually shared among academic and practitioner faculty members and that candidates had ongoing access to both vantage points throughout the program.
- ▶ **Grounded in-state and professional standards.** Along with a commitment to co-designing the program with various in-state partners, we also saw Washington State's standards for preparation of program administrators (based at the time on the ISLCC standards for school leaders) and the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) advanced program standards as foundational elements to include in the program's curriculum and assessments. The revised national professional standards, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015), subsequently provided an opportunity for additional curriculum development in the program.

## **The ECSEL Program**

The Expanding Capacity for Special Education Leadership (ECSEL) program is the result of our effort to design around these state-specific planning constraints. ECSEL is a 2-year preparation program leading to a master's degree in educational leadership and the Washington State certification as a resident program administrator. Although this certification generally applies to any school administrator role except the principal,

ECSEL specifically focuses on preparation for LSEAs.

In addition to the planning constraints noted above, the ECSEL structure reflects a belief that emerging responsibilities (student outcomes as well as compliance) place LSEAs much closer than before to the center of instructional leadership in a school district. Much of these expanding responsibilities involve the LSEA working with principals and teacher leaders to improve instruction, requiring significant expertise in how exemplary special education services are organized, managed, and delivered at the school level.

**The ECSEL program is structured to respond to the increasing need for more preparation by:**

- ▶ Focusing the entire first year on school-level leadership for special education services and shifting in the second year to capabilities for district-level leadership.
- ▶ Maintaining a cohort-based structure. Candidates progress as one group, with each group completing the entire 2 years before the next cohort begins. This extended engagement with each cohort allows the faculty to support intentional development of a professional community among candidates and helps candidates understand how special education programs operate across a diverse set of school districts.

In addition to providing access throughout the state, the ECSEL design reflects candidates' current responsibilities as full-time professionals who typically have significant leadership responsibilities in their schools.

**In response to geographical and time constraints of ECSEL candidates, the program organization includes the following three roughly equal parts:**

- ▶ Face-to-face sessions.
- ▶ Online support for performance tasks.
- ▶ An internship.

Each year, the program launches with a 3-day summer institute, followed by once-monthly, full-day Saturday sessions. The following section features this content, which

describes ECSEL’s curriculum. A set of performance tasks provide the opportunity to practice and demonstrate expertise in the topics addressed in the program, and the required internship offers a simultaneous opportunity to practice skills and contextualize learning. With this structure, the ECSEL program directly responds to suggestions for improvement of leadership preparation in education, including the following:

- ▶ Extended and responsible internships that are closely connected to both position responsibilities and coursework (Fry, Bottoms, & O’Neill, 2005).
- ▶ Ample opportunities to demonstrate expertise in leading instruction (Bellamy, Crockett, & Nordengren, 2014).
- ▶ Opportunities for mutual support among colleagues in a cohort (Byrne-Jimenez, Gooden, & Tucker, 2017).

## **The ECSEL Curriculum**

The content of the ECSEL program is grounded in an effort to answer the following two questions:

### **1. Which responsibilities does a local special education program need to fulfill?**

This first question focuses attention on a district’s entire special education program. Although leadership in well-run programs is typically shared across several individuals, LSEAs need to understand the full scope of these responsibilities and be able to support individuals and teams who have direct responsibility. By addressing the first question, an LSEA may then focus on the individual leadership capabilities necessary to ensure that the special education program fulfills its responsibilities. Research points to several domains, or dimensions of leadership, that are relevant to the LSEA’s work.

Answering the first question has engaged ECSEL faculty members in an ongoing process of defining key responsibilities of district special education programs. The LSEA model outlined in Table 1 is our effort to delineate these

**The LSEA model defines eight core responsibilities for special education administrators.**

**(See Table 1)**

responsibilities. Although the model continues as a work in progress, it now incorporates recommendations from a series of reviews by ECSEL faculty, advisory committees, and external consultants as well as use by ECSEL candidates to complete performance tasks in the program. The LSEA model identifies eight core responsibilities and several sub-responsibilities of a special education program.

## **2. Which capabilities do LSEAs need to lead programs that meet these responsibilities?**

This second question focuses on individual leadership capabilities that an LSEA needs to ensure that the special education program fulfills its responsibilities. Research points to several domains, or dimensions of leadership, that are relevant to the LSEA's work. We use these dimensions of leadership, summarized in Table 2, to frame the program's six seminars.

### **Dimensions addressed in seminars in ECSEL's first year, which focus on school level leadership:**

- ▶ Personal leadership for schools.
- ▶ Leadership for curriculum and teaching.
- ▶ Student-centered leadership.

Core topics provide a thematic focus for each leadership seminar.

(See Table 3)

### **Dimensions addressed in ECSEL's second year focus on:**

- ▶ Institutional leadership.
- ▶ Organizational leadership.
- ▶ Community leadership.

Topics that the ECSEL program emphasizes reflect consideration of both the LSEA responsibility model and the dimensions of leadership. Through an effort to explore how each dimension of leadership affects success in each responsibility area, we identified five core topics in each seminar to give emphasis and thematic focus to candidate learning. The core topics associated with each of the seminars are included in Table 3. In each core topic, our goal is for candidates to develop conceptual, strategic, and personal knowledge relevant to LSEA work, and we assess these three dimensions of candidate knowledge related to each core topic across performance tasks described below.

## The Internships

ECSEL's two internships simultaneously occur with program seminars to provide a context to practice new learning and an opportunity to connect academic and strategic learning through performance of the required performance tasks.

**An 800-hour internship is required, 400 hours during each program year.**

- ▶ The first internship takes place in a school and focuses on school-level leadership for special education services.
- ▶ The second internship takes place in the district office and engages candidates in district-level leadership responsibilities.

Internship areas are connected to candidates' current school and district responsibilities, so each candidate's principal and district special education director provide mentoring. A program faculty member provides additional supervision and support for mentors.

## Performance Tasks and Candidate Assessment

All candidate assignments are included in the program's performance tasks. Each task provides an opportunity to apply knowledge related to one or more core topics while also giving candidates an opportunity to practice important leadership responsibilities. Table 4 lists performance tasks for the programs' first and second years. Tasks include, for example, an audit of a school's multi-tiered supports for instruction, reflections on a set of leadership self-assessments, and an annual improvement plan for a district special education program.

**Performance-task products are collected by each candidate in an electronic dossier that:**

- ▶ Allows faculty members to monitor overall progress during the program.
- ▶ Serves as a summative evaluation at the end of the program.
- ▶ Provides the evidentiary basis to support recommendation for Washington State certification.

The rubric for assessing performance tasks guides faculty scoring to the extent that each product provides evidence of conceptual, strategic, and personal knowledge

associated with each core topic in the program (see Table 5). Faculty members provide online written feedback on performance tasks throughout the year, give advice on how candidates can balance evidence from performance tasks across core topics, and evaluate the entire dossier for evidence of proficiency in all core topics.

**Performance tasks measure conceptual, strategic, and personal knowledge of the core topics.**

**(See Table 4)**

## **Implementation of the ECSEL Program**

Although the partnership among universities, districts, and educational service districts is active in all aspects of the program, the University of Washington Bothell administers the ECSEL program. Within the university structure, the School of Educational Studies approves ECSEL courses, and the School's Goodlad Institute for Educational Renewal manages grant supports. On the university calendar, each of ECSEL's three seminars is spread across the entire academic year, with the required 8 credit hours earned through roughly equal commitment to face-to-face instruction, online support for performance tasks, and school- or district-based internships. All three seminars meet at the same time in monthly Saturday sessions that include candidates and faculty members from all three seminars. Each cohort completes the entire 2-year program (all six seminars) before the next cohort begins.

An initial cohort of 10 special education professionals co-developed and piloted ECSEL starting in the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years. Two cohorts have now completed the program, and the third cohort is in its first year. The state special education program provided support for development and piloting of the program, and a leadership preparation grant from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs provided scholarship support for subsequent cohorts.

## **Candidate Recruitment and Selection**

Two broad concerns guided candidate recruitment and selection. The first concern was to select candidates who would have the experience and capabilities to assume the responsibilities of a school district's LSEA as soon as they graduated at the end of the 2-year program, which led us to set the following high standards for admission and selection:

- ▶ At least 5 years of experience as a special education teacher or related services provider with instructional responsibilities.
- ▶ Expertise in instruction and interventions for individuals with disabilities.
- ▶ Intellectual capability for completing a demanding graduate program.
- ▶ Strong interpersonal skills.
- ▶ Success and impact in prior leadership experiences.
- ▶ Clear and sustained commitment to self-development as a professional leader.
- ▶ Demonstrated commitment to supporting the education and inclusion of students with disabilities.

The second concern was to ensure that the program would provide opportunities for a diverse group of emerging leaders, including those from the state's small and rural districts where difficulties in filling local director positions have been pervasive.

The application process for each cohort has been widely communicated through the state's ESD special education directors, presentations in state-wide special education meetings, online information, and mailings to all district special education programs. Applicants for each cohort have numbered two to three times as many individuals as the program could accommodate, so admission to ECSEL has been competitive. Our recruitment efforts did succeed in attracting state-wide applicants, including many from small districts, but our applicants, like the state's special education teacher population, have been almost exclusively Caucasian. Final selections among applicants have been made by a subcommittee of ECSEL's advisory committee that includes a local special education director, a rural ESD representative, a parent of a student in special education, and faculty members from two partner campuses.

### **Candidate Demographics**

The 46 candidates selected for the first three ECSEL cohorts work in eight of the state's nine ESD districts. All graduates and current candidates serve districts that include some high-need schools, and about one-third work in small or rural districts. Twenty hold positions in the most densely populated region of the state working

for large urban or suburban schools. Ten work for medium-sized school districts in suburban settings, and 16 work in small rural schools.

Upon entering the program, all candidates held at least one graduate degree and had between five and 23 years of professional experience in special education. Half of the candidates served as special education teachers while the remainder included school psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and one dual school psychologist/counselor.

## **The ECSEL Faculty**

Without in-state programs or faculty who specialize in special education administration, ECSEL relies on pooled expertise from universities, state-funded projects, and local special education leaders across the state. Our effort was to balance academic and applied knowledge and include those with experience in preparation of both special education professionals and other general education leaders.

### **ECSEL faculty members included:**

- ▶ Professors from three campuses in the state.
- ▶ Local special education directors.
- ▶ The director of a technical assistance organization.
- ▶ Other school administrators with experience as principals, directors of teaching and learning, and superintendents.

**“Drawing upon experiences as administrators, the faculty support candidates in developing a district lens needed to lead high-quality special education programming.”**

**-Sue Dedrick, ECSEL Faculty**

Coordination among this diversely skilled and widely dispersed faculty has been achieved in several ways. Importantly, most faculty members choose to attend all Saturday sessions, whether or not they have personal instructional responsibilities during the session, allowing them to share substantive expertise and foster deep content connections across the core topics. The combined faculty members of the Year 1 and Year 2 program meet for an annual retreat to review program data, identify opportunities for improvement, and coordinate work across both years of the program. In addition, faculty members from each year’s program attend a summer

institute to kick off their year-long seminars and then meet as a group mid-year for an in-depth review of each candidate's progress. These frequent opportunities for discussion have created a high level of program coherence, even though faculty members have primary professional responsibilities across a range of different institutions.

## **Saturday Sessions**

The ECSEL cohorts' face-to-face meetings occur during monthly, full-day Saturday sessions and a 3-day institute each summer. Each monthly Saturday session is structured to include the following:

- ▶ In-depth discussion of two core topics (about two and one half to three hours each).
- ▶ Discussion of candidates' learning from their internship experiences (about one hour).
- ▶ Learning-from-practice seminar (about one hour).
- ▶ Periodic (several times per year) half-day enrichment sessions in which candidates meet and interact with special education leaders and resources in the state.

Because the in-class discussion of core topics is relatively short (our presenters regularly note that each topic could be an entire course), we depend on substantive work by candidates before and after each session. A pre-session assignment for each core topic typically includes at least one reading and may involve completing a preparation task in the internship such as interviewing an administrator about how a related process works in the school or district.

Candidates then meet online with their professional learning group (see below) to discuss the assignment and post a summary of key concepts and questions on the program's course management system. This online meeting ensures that the Saturday session can proceed with a shared knowledge and vocabulary and that faculty members have an opportunity to consider candidate questions before the seminar.

After each session, candidates are expected to consolidate and extend their learning

in the following ways:

- ▶ Additional post-session readings ask candidates to explore additional facets of the core topic.
- ▶ Candidates document both pre- and post-session readings in their reading logs (one of the performance tasks described below).

Other performance tasks and the candidate's internship reflections give ongoing opportunities to apply knowledge of the core topic and document how the candidate is using concepts and vocabulary from the core-topic discussion to understand and learn from experiences.

**Learning-from-practice seminars highlights key lessons from candidate's internships.**

In addition to two core-topic discussions, Saturday sessions include an hour-long learning-from-practice seminar. During this time, the internship coordinators lead discussions that highlight and integrate key lessons from candidates' internships and ongoing work experiences. Candidates share strategic and personal knowledge they have gained through application of content knowledge covered in each core topic. Candidates and faculty also work together to support use of leadership development plans (another performance task—see below) to guide individual growth across all parts of the program.

## **Supporting Candidate Learning**

**Learning management system.** The Canvas course management system serves as a single point of connection for faculty and candidates across the three seminars for each year of the program. The course management system:

- ▶ Provides ongoing access to program information.
- ▶ Organizes resources for each core topic.
- ▶ Facilitates communications among candidates with faculty and the university's program advisor.

**Performance task management database.** We supplement the course management

system with a locally developed database for managing and scoring performance tasks.

This database allows for the following:

- ▶ Candidates to upload a work product for each performance task, with each succeeding version stored and organized.
- ▶ Faculty members to upload feedback on each product for convenient candidate review.
- ▶ Both candidates and faculty members to monitor accumulation of evidence of conceptual, strategic, and personal knowledge across performance tasks for all core topics.
- ▶ Tracking and graphing of performance task scores and internship hours.

This database allows for timely, individualized conversations about evidence contained in each candidate’s dossier of performance task products with advice about how to prioritize ongoing self-directed learning.

### **Professional learning groups. ECSEL**

requires candidates to self-organize into small professional learning groups (PLGs) with three to four members.

These PLGs support candidate learning in the following ways:

- ▶ Regularly collaborate on reading-log entries.
- ▶ Review each other’s performance-task products.
- ▶ Discuss key concepts prior to each Saturday session.
- ▶ Develop partnerships that encourage deep thinking about core topics and individual development opportunities.

“I would honestly say the most helpful thing is the availability of my cohort colleagues to consult with and having a network of special education administrators across the state . . . ”

**-ECSEL Graduate**

Each PLG develops and posts a written agreement detailing how the group will

provide mutual support in the program. One faculty member serves as primary liaison to answer questions and provide each PLG with other needed assistance.

**Feedback on performance tasks.** Performance tasks, scheduled for completion throughout the year, are assigned to faculty members whose core topics most closely relate to each task. After candidates upload their products into the database, the responsible faculty member provides written comments on the task and rates the extent to which the product includes evidence of conceptual, strategic, and personal knowledge related to various core topics. The faculty comments and ratings provide ongoing and individualized guidance as candidates continue on to subsequent tasks. Two of the performance tasks—reading logs and internship reflections—require monthly submission of products, so faculty feedback is quite frequent throughout the program. And because different faculty members review different products, candidates receive feedback that reflects the applied and theoretical expertise of several different faculty members.

**Internship supports for candidates and mentors.** Candidate internships are supported through the following:

- ▶ Candidates are placed in their own school and/or district.
- ▶ The candidate's principal and local special education director serve as the on-site mentors.
- ▶ Experienced special education administrators, who are members of the ECSEL faculty, provide university supervision.
- ▶ On-site visits to candidates and mentors and ongoing telephone communications provide consistent internship guidance and feedback.
- ▶ ECSEL faculty supervisors attend every Saturday session, lead learning from practice seminars in these sessions, and provide written monthly feedback on internship reflections.

On-site (i.e., school and district) mentors are supported through the following:

- ▶ An annual orientation, which includes description of the Year 1 or Year 2 internship requirements, overview of candidate learning objectives for core

topics and performance tasks, and recommendations for routines that support regular contact between mentor and candidate.

- ▶ A monthly news and resource letter produced by ECSEL. Newsletter topics have included the program structure and theory of action, internship expectations, upcoming assignments, reminders about related documentation requirements, and mentoring tips.
- ▶ A competitive state internship grant, which reimburses districts for coverage of release time of interns. During the Year 2 program, candidates are encouraged to apply for a state internship grant, which provides 20-25 days of released time for candidates who are classroom teachers. This grant supports substitute teachers and allows candidates to complete more robust district-level internships than would otherwise be possible.

## Results

### **Program Completion**

Across the three cohorts, 46 candidates have participated in ECSEL. In the first cohort, all 10 candidates graduated on time and obtained state certification. During the first quarter of the second cohort, two candidates exited the program due to health complications. All remaining 15 candidates in the second cohort graduated on time and obtained their certification. Cohort 3 currently includes 19 candidates, all on track to complete their first program year on time.

### **Candidate Satisfaction with Preparation**

Overall, candidates have reported high levels of satisfaction with the ECSEL program. The program collected annual feedback on the quality of program learning supports from the first two cohorts.

Using a 4-point scale (4 as high quality and 1 as low quality), the following average scores were obtained:

- ▶ In-class discussion – 3.9
- ▶ Required and supplemental reading materials – 3.8

- ▶ Performance tasks – 3.7
- ▶ Faculty feedback support – 3.6
- ▶ Internship and PLG supports at the highest level – Rated highest
- ▶ All aspects of the program – 3.5 or higher

In written comments, candidates reported instruction and classroom discussions as paramount to their growth and development throughout the program, yet many candidates reported struggling with integration of learning across core topics and between class and internship activities until near the end of the program.

**We asked graduates of Cohort 2 to rate their level of preparedness for each of the sub-responsibilities outlined in the LSEA model (see Table 1).** A majority of graduates reported feeling highly prepared for each sub-responsibility.

- ▶ Graduates reported that they felt adequately prepared to lead family communication and supports and special education program oversights and improvement.
- ▶ On the other hand, a few graduates felt adequately or underprepared in leading budget responsibilities at the district level. Several graduates noted that they had few opportunities to practice budgeting activities in their internships and, although the half-day session on budgeting was informative, many graduates requested additional practice to manage this responsibility in the field.

A summary of these data is provided in Table 6.

### **Graduate Placement**

All ECSEL graduates obtained their certifications upon program completion and either maintained current leadership roles within their school districts or earned promotions. Across the three cohorts, districts promoted six candidates while they were still enrolled in the program. Within the first year of completing the program, 59% of graduates from the first two cohorts assumed leadership positions as a district's primary special education director or as an assistant director. Another 36% took central office leadership positions, and 4% held positions as teachers or specialists

with part-time coaching or lead specialists (see Figure 1).

Outcome data beyond 1 year out of the program is limited to the first cohort; cohort 2 is currently in its first year after graduation from ECSEL. In the second year out of program, nearly the entire first cohort received promotions in their districts. Three graduates held executive director of special education positions, and four others served as assistant directors to the primary or executive special education director in their district. Two graduates served in other central office leadership positions while one continued to serve as a special educator with part-time release for special education leadership and coaching responsibilities. By the third year out, 90% of Cohort 1 graduates held central office leadership positions, and one candidate continued working part-time as a special educator with part-time release for coordinating special education in a small school district.

The ECSEL program continues to collect outcome data and explore district-level impact of graduates. With only three graduates holding executive director responsibilities for at least two consecutive years, we do not have enough data to assess graduates' impact on program quality and student learning.

### **Interviews With Alums**

One year after the first cohort completed ECSEL, an independent contractor conducted individual interviews with each graduate. Results from the interviews revealed a few major themes that ECSEL faculty used to inform ongoing improvement to the program. Overall, graduates consistently reported high levels of satisfaction with the entire program. All graduates noted experiencing personal growth in their leadership skills both during the program and in their first year after graduation. Graduates also referenced their professional community of support as one of the greatest resources that the ECSEL program provided.

Across all interviews, graduates highly recommended ECSEL to other professionals desiring to further develop their leadership capacity in special education. Each graduate also reported appreciating the structure of the program and noted common features of ECSEL that supported their learning. Features graduates most frequently highlighted in interviews included the program's design to support on-the-job learning

and opportunities to apply theory and research to practice. Many graduates also shared that they frequently reference ECSEL reading materials and discussion notes while facing challenges in their current special education leadership roles. In addition, most of the cohort reported maintaining strong relationships within their PLGs and members of the cohort across the state for professional support and personal encouragement.

**“I see myself . . . moving up the administrative ladder much, much higher than I ever predicted I would or ever thought my career path would take me.”**

**-ECSEL Graduate**

Graduates found that the support of the PLGs, faculty, mentors, and the professional network helped their leadership development during and after the program. During their first year beyond the program, graduates reported leading building-level and district-level initiatives and working to improve the outcomes for students with disabilities. Many graduates described how they were able to draw upon lessons covered in the program session and seek ongoing mentorship supports when implementing practices in the field.

Although the structure and learning supports in ECSEL prepared graduates for their leadership roles in the field, one theme emerged as an opportunity for program improvement. Many graduates noted that when they first entered the program, they experienced confusion about how each of the readings, reflections, and performance tasks fit together. Although some appreciated the nontraditional approach of the program, many expressed a desire for greater clarification, greater scaffolding for learning through schedules and assignments, and a more consistent structure for communicating expectations.

## Discussion and Implications

### Encouraging Early Results

Although the ECSEL program is relatively new, experience in Washington already suggests that a state-wide approach for preparing LSEAs is feasible to develop and can contribute to continuity and improvement in special education leadership. ECSEL responded to daunting cross-state travel challenges with a blended program design

that utilizes e-learning and job-embedded internships to supplement monthly face-to-face meetings. The challenge of distributed expertise for teaching and leading the program led us to construct a broad partnership among universities, school districts, and regional service agencies. And the SEA has provided essential funding for program development and student support.

Our early results are encouraging. Applicants from throughout the state have applied to the program, and our state-wide selection panel has reported that each of the first three cohorts had far more qualified applicants than we can support. Many candidates were promoted into leadership roles while still enrolled in ECSEL, and several districts reported developing new leadership positions to retain ECSEL candidates in their districts. A large majority of graduates have been promoted into leadership positions in their districts or successfully competed for administrative positions in other districts. Results so far do suggest that ECSEL has been a powerful strategy to build state capacity for special education leadership.

### **Importance of State-Wide Collaboration**

In the Washington state context, the collaboration supporting the ECSEL program has been critically important. The state's special education office helped initiate the partnership by supporting program planning, offering visible encouragement for participants to become involved, and funding the pilot cohort. A significant number of administrators and advocates came together to support development of the program, and most have continued to stay involved in the program's operation as mentors, faculty members, advisory committee members, and sources of information for future candidates. Special education leaders in the state's nine ESDs have taken an active role in communicating about the program to potential candidates. ESD leaders have also supported candidates in the program by involving them in a variety of regional leadership activities that supplement their internships. ECSEL's state-wide faculty includes members whose primary responsibilities are in four different university campuses, several school districts, and a not-for-profit organization specializing in educational mediation and leadership. The team-teaching culture that has developed among the faculty ensures that several faculty members participate as discussants in every ECSEL session. This collaboration contributes to program coherence, ongoing faculty development, and program continuity across cohorts.

## **Importance of Candidate Scholarships**

Financial support for candidates has also been critical to the success of the ECSEL program. Like many other roles in special education, well-prepared LSEAs are in demand as districts attempt to fill important leadership vacancies. But far less demand exists for preparation programs by aspiring candidates. Simply depending on market forces is not sufficient to attract potential candidates to LSEA preparation. Discussions with ECSEL candidates corroborated this interpretation. Most candidates reported that they would not have been able to participate in ECSEL without scholarship support, citing either other financial obligations, long distance from the program, or competing professional responsibilities. Although ECSEL was fortunate to receive a Leadership Personnel Preparation grant (CFDA No. 84.325D) that provided support for initial cohorts, financial support for both the pilot cohort and those following the grant project will depend on state investments in special education leadership.

## **The Need for a More Complete Leadership Pathway**

Our experience in ECSEL has highlighted one area in which further development in the state could strengthen the preparation of new leaders. Research across several organizations indicates that leader development is a long-term process that depends significantly on opportunities to take on challenging and varied leadership opportunities that are embedded in one's job over time (Day, 2012; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994; Yip & Wilson, 2010). Formal preparation programs can be useful but do not replace learning from experience with challenging assignments. Over the past several years, many teacher leadership roles have emerged in general education settings that engage emerging teacher leaders in exactly this kind of varied and challenging leadership work. In particular, instructional coaching and mentoring positions can provide teacher leaders with valuable experience in working with other teachers to support instructional improvements. Although some leadership is often a part of special education teacher and related service positions, assignments can also be narrowly specialized around a particular area of expertise in special education and, thus, lack the breadth that could support effective leader development. One possible response, currently under discussion with our partners in Washington, is to develop regional special education leadership

cadres. These year-long programs would include teachers and related services staff who are selected for accomplishments in current roles and with interest in pursuing more leadership opportunities. By combining periodic cadre meetings with job-embedded leadership projects, the program would support emerging leaders as they assume challenging tasks that broaden their experience, expand their professional networks, and explore interest in future administrative positions. Such a program could also assist with efforts to increase diversity within special education leadership. We have experienced continuing challenges in recruiting diverse candidates into the ECSEL program and believe that providing intentional pathways for supporting diverse leaders from the early stages of job-based development could provide an important contribution.

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## Tables

**Table 1: Outline of the LSEA Model**

LSEA Core Responsibilities	Sub-Responsibilities
1. Direction Setting	Setting Strategic Goals Participation & Communication Annual Plan Representation & Advocacy
2. System Design	Policies & Procedures Comprehensive & Effective System Budget
3. Instructional Practice	Curriculum Multi-Tiered System Instructional Improvement Adaptations Student Learning Data
4. Personnel Capacity & Support	Staffing Model Recruitment & Selection Professional Development Personnel Performance
5. Collaboration & Conflict Management	Frameworks for Collaboration Dispute Resolution
6. Student Support	Student Transition Student Access Coordination of Related Services
7. Family & Community Support	Family Communications Community Partnerships
8. Program Oversight & Improvement	Indicators Department Oversight Improvement Cycles

**Table 2: Six ECSEL Leadership Dimensions and Seminar Topics**

<b>Year 1 Seminars</b>	
Personal Leadership	Personal Leadership helps candidates develop the personal qualities and commitments associated with successful leadership for special education programs. Candidates explore how their skills map on various models of leadership, articulate their professional values as school leaders, explore how others perceive their leadership, study communication and conflict management strategies, and explore ways to organize their knowledge to support reflection and continued learning.
Leadership for Instruction	Leadership for Instruction helps candidates expand and refine their knowledge related to assisting other teachers with the school's core work of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and tiered interventions that support student learning. Candidates will draw on previous professional experiences while deepening expertise related to preventing failure in the normal curriculum, intensifying instruction, and supporting the school to make adaptations and modifications needed by students with disabilities.
Leadership for Student Services	Leadership for Student Services helps candidates build expertise to design and collaboratively manage systems supporting a variety of services for students, including identification, evaluation, and individualized educational planning; school-wide and individual behavioral supports; and the full range of related services.
<b>Year 2 Seminars</b>	
Institutional Leadership	Institutional Leadership focuses on the legal, professional, and systemic context of local special education administration and builds skills for using legal and ethical reasoning to address special education challenges.
Organizational Leadership	Organizational Leadership focuses on internal management of district-level special education programs emphasizing development of human resources and creation of effective and continually renewing structures. Procedural aspects of managing special education programs in Washington State receive particular attention.
Collaborative Leadership	Collaborative Leadership focuses on broad collaborative decision making to develop external partnerships supporting special education and the skills to build constituencies of support for students with exceptional learning needs. Emphasis is on using cultural competence and deep understanding of emerging local issues to build broad constituencies of support for children with disabilities and their families.

**Table 3: Core Topics Emphasized in ECSEL Seminars**

<b>Part 1 Seminars and Core Topics</b>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Personal Leadership</b></p> <p>1.1 Developing expertise for special education leadership</p> <p>1.2 Leadership commitments and professional integrity</p> <p>1.3 Interpersonal communication and conflict engagement</p> <p>1.4 Self-management and personal integrity</p> <p>1.5 Applying leadership theory to administration of special education</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Leadership for Teaching and Learning</b></p> <p>2.1 Multi-tiered system of supports</p> <p>2.2 Curricular content and standards</p> <p>2.3 Coaching and supporting teachers' instruction</p> <p>2.4 Assessment of learning and progress monitoring and program evaluation</p> <p>2.5 Evidence-based instructional methods and adaptations</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Leadership for Student Support Services</b></p> <p>3.1 Student climate and behavioral support</p> <p>3.2 Early intervention, referral, eligibility, and assessment</p> <p>3.3 Development and implementation of individualized education programs</p> <p>3.4 Coordination of related services and assistive technology</p> <p>3.5 Coordinating student services with families</p>
<b>Part 2 Seminars and Core Topics</b>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Institutional Leadership</b></p> <p>4.1 What every special education director needs to know</p> <p>4.2 School law for administrators</p> <p>4.3 Education and special education law: History and core legal standards</p> <p>4.4 Education and special education law: Procedural due process and dispute resolution</p> <p>4.5 Leading when law and ethics differ</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Organizational Leadership</b></p> <p>5.1 Establish structures, programs, and policies to implement change and achieve special education goals</p> <p>5.2 Special student services leadership</p> <p>5.3 Problem solving during chaos: Change process and change management</p> <p>5.4 Strategic budget management</p> <p>5.5 Developing human capacity to implement special education programs</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Collaborative Leadership</b></p> <p>6.1 Cultural competence</p> <p>6.2 Building constituencies of support for children and families within community and with service agencies</p> <p>6.3 Collaborative communication</p> <p>6.4 Mission, vision, and goals of the special education program</p> <p>6.5 Stewardship for the school district, special education program, and the profession</p>

**Table 4: Performance Tasks in the ECSEL Program**

<b>Personal Leadership</b>	
Task 1A	Reflection on Prior Leadership Experience
Task 1B	Mission, Vision, and Commitments
Task 1C	Ethics Case Analysis (Washington State Assessment requirement)
Task 1D	Developmental Leadership Challenge
Task 1E	Reading Log and Reflections—Personal Leadership
<b>Leadership for Teaching and Learning</b>	
Task 2A	Instructional Observations, Assessment, and Conversation Plan
Task 2B	Formative Data Analysis and Use
Task 2C	Response to Intervention Audit
Task 2D	Reading Log and Reflections—Teaching and Learning Leadership
<b>Leadership for Student Support Services</b>	
Task 3A	School-Wide PBIS/Behavior and Social Analysis
Task 3B	Consistency Index
Task 3C	Disproportionality Review
Task 3D	Reading Log and Reflections—Leadership for Student Support Services
<b>Institutional Leadership</b>	
Task 4A	Applied Legal Reasoning
Task 4B	Change Plan
Task 4C	Reading Log and Reflections—Institutional Leadership
<b>Organizational Leadership</b>	
Task 5A	Yearly Leadership Activity Plan
Task 5B	District leadership Case Responses
Task 5C	Interview Toolkit
Task 5D	Reading Log and Reflections

<b>Collaborative Leadership</b>	
Task 6A	Public Issue Analysis and Influence Plan
Task 6B	Family Partnership and Collaboration Enhancement Plan
Task 6C	Annual Improvement Plan for Special Education Program
Task 6D	Reading Log and Reflections—Collaborative Leadership
<b>Internship</b>	
Task 7A	Internship Reflections
Task 7B	Internship Log
Task 7C	Leadership Development Plans

**Table 5: Requirements and Performance Levels for Knowledge of Core Topics Demonstrated in Performance Task Products**

<b>Criteria and Performance Levels</b>			
	<b>Emergent (1)</b>	<b>Proficient (2)</b>	<b>Outstanding (3)</b>
<b>Conceptual Knowledge</b>	Conceptual knowledge is generally limited to the description of particular theories, findings, or approaches without clear underlying conceptual frameworks that connect ideas to other learning.	Conceptual knowledge is demonstrated through a wider range of procedural and descriptive understandings. In addition, products show greater conceptual understanding and knowledge organization, showing connections between ideas and structuring of personal knowledge around conceptual frameworks and professional responsibilities.	Conceptual knowledge is demonstrated through application of sophisticated conceptual and theoretical frameworks to the material and showing integration of craft knowledge gained from practice and related academic knowledge.

<p><b>Strategic Knowledge</b></p>	<p>Strategic knowledge is generally limited to use of specific procedures and techniques.</p>	<p>Strategic knowledge includes a wider array of procedural skills together with understandings of the conditions under which various approaches are most useful. Products demonstrate ability to think beyond the school contexts in which they presently work.</p>	<p>Strategic knowledge is demonstrated by solving complex and multidimensional problems and by reflections showing deep strategic understandings about how to frame and address situations in schools under varied conditions.</p>
<p><b>Personal Knowledge</b></p>	<p>Personal knowledge is evidenced by some ability to articulate one's values and perspectives, but little evidence is available that new information has been integrated with prior knowledge and beliefs. Limited evidence that individual understands how the candidate's perspectives and values affect what is seen and understood from situations and readings.</p>	<p>Personal knowledge is demonstrated through empathy and personal self-knowledge (clarity regarding how the concepts fit into the system of values and commitments that motivate the candidate as a person and professional). Ability to consider information from multiple viewpoints and understand implications of different value systems. Thoughtful consideration of what acting on own beliefs in the context of professional practice means.</p>	<p>Personal knowledge is demonstrated in clear understanding of how concepts fit into the candidate's system of values and the commitments that motivate the candidate as a person and professional. Accurate self-knowledge about the limits of one's understandings and the possible impact of one's experiences and prejudices. Integrity to act on personal beliefs.</p>
<p><b>Demonstrated Impact</b></p>	<p>Little or no evidence that the individual has made a positive impact on school staff, systems and procedures, or student learning. Evidence that is presented is primarily anecdotal.</p>	<p>Impact on practice is evident in systematically collected information on how the individual's actions affected other professionals' work, the structures and culture of the organization, or students' effort and learning.</p>	<p>Impact on practice is evident in systematically collected information on how the individual's actions affected other professionals' work, the structures and culture of the organization, or students' effort and learning. The evidence demonstrates strong and pervasive impact on practices and learning.</p>

Note. Each performance task is assessed for evidence associated with all relevant core topics. For each core topic, a rating of:

- ▶ “1” denotes minimal or supporting evidence; primary documentation for this topic and criterion are needed from other tasks.
- ▶ “2” denotes some contributing evidence that, along with evidence from other tasks, will document knowledge for this topic and criterion.
- ▶ “3” denotes significant evidence for this topic and criterion.

Each performance task is also reviewed to determine if the product provides evidence of impact on colleagues’ professional practice, school or district operations, or student learning.

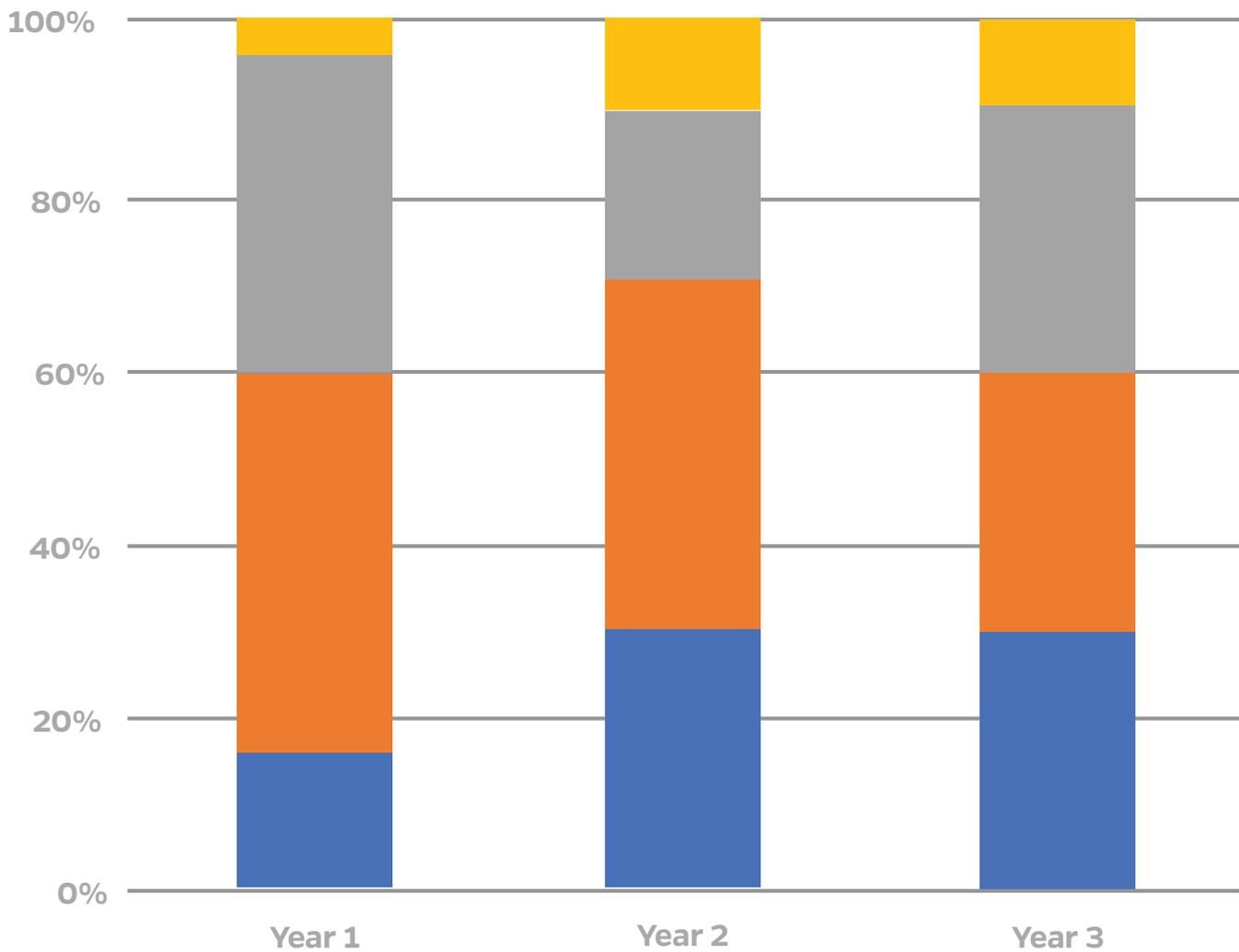
**Table 6: Cohort 2 Level of Preparation on LSEA Responsibilities**

COHORT 2				
Responsibility	Associated Sub-Responsibilities	Highly Prepared	Adequately Prepared	Under-Prepared
Direction Setting	Setting Strategic Goals	11	3	0
	Participation & Communication	9	4	1
	Annual Plan	10	4	0
	Representation & Advocacy	14	0	0
System Design	Policies & Procedures	8	6	0
	Comprehensive & Effective System	11	2	1
	Budget	0	11	3
Instructional Practice	Curriculum	4	9	0
	Multi-Tiered System	9	5	0
	Instructional Improvement	10	4	0
	Adaptations	11	3	0
	Student Learning Data	10	4	0

<b>Personnel Capacity &amp; Support</b>	Staffing Model	9	4	1
	Recruitment & Selection	9	4	1
	Professional Development	11	3	0
	Personnel Performance	8	5	1
<b>Collaboration &amp; Conflict Management</b>	Frameworks for Collaboration	12	2	0
	Dispute Resolution	9	5	0
<b>Student Support</b>	Student Transition	8	6	0
	Student Access	12	2	0
	Coordination of Related Services	10	4	0
<b>Family &amp; Community Support</b>	Family Communications	13	1	0
	Community Partnerships	12	2	0
<b>Program Oversight &amp; Improvement</b>	Indicators	9	5	0
	Department Oversight	10	4	0
	Ongoing Improvement Cycles	5	9	0
<b>Percent of Cohort 2 Responses</b>		<b>67%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>02%</b>

## Figures

**Figure 1: ECSEL Graduate Position Percentages by Years From Completion**



- Teacher/Specialist with part time release for coaching/lead specialist area
- Other central office leadership position
- Assistant Director of Special Education/Student Services
- Executive Director or Director of Special Education/Student Services