



SELF Leadership Program Produces Bright Spots in Challenging Times

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Since 2015, SELF has been helping schools improve the education of students with diverse learning needs and helping schools better support and retain special education teachers and leaders. We work shoulder to shoulder with educators because we believe that all schools can and should be places where students' strengths are leveraged to empower authentic learning—especially students with disabilities.

We are incredibly grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for their generous support of this research project. This three-year evaluation conducted by McREL International has helped us to focus on continuous improvements to our programs and services, refine our model, and reflect on the impact of our work as it took place throughout the COVID pandemic, Hurricane Ida, and a long overdue reckoning of systemic racism in our country.

We are proud to share these positive findings of the impact of our work—especially the strong retention of special educators, notably educators of color, and the successful implementation of SELF's core programming. As this report shows, SELF offered support and leadership development to educators who ultimately grew in their ability to lead and develop others, improving academic programs for the most vulnerable students in their schools.

As we continue to provide a continuum of programs and services across the country, supporting and accelerating the development of educators across the school-based talent pipeline from paraeducators to teachers to special education coordinators to principals to superintendents, we know that our work begins with the shared belief in the potential of all young people and each educator taking deep personal responsibility for student success.

The findings from this study offer evidence to the field that effective practices and support are needed to grow, develop, and retain special educators at a time when so many are leaving the profession early in their careers. At SELF, we know that these practices are not only needed in schools across the country, they are core to all of our programming, and as the study shows they are having an impact.

To all the teachers and leaders who trusted us and opened your classroom doors for collaboration with us—in New Orleans, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Denver, and so many other places—we are grateful for the work you do each and every day. You remind us to see each student as a whole, complex person—and that it is all of our jobs as educators to understand how disability intersects with their other identities to inform their school experiences.

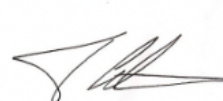
With Belief and Hope in the Future -



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SELF Leadership Fellows Program Produces Bright Spots in Challenging Times

A New Orleans-based program to help current and aspiring special education leaders increase their professional competencies shows promising results—even as a pandemic and a hurricane disrupted participants' lives and normal school operations.

In recent years, special education (SPED) teachers, leaders, and administrators have seen their roles blur and job expectations increase as they try to equalize educational opportunities for an increasing proportion of students. They and their schools and districts face numerous challenges as they strive to deliver high-quality educational experiences to students with exceptionalities, including persistent achievement gaps, high levels of teacher attrition (one recent study found that SPED teachers are 11% more likely to leave the profession as teachers in general education—and even those who remain are 72% more likely to change schools¹), and a lack of effective professional development opportunities.

For SPED leaders in particular, there is a documented lack of accessible, effective training in special education best practices and law, resulting in leaders who in many cases are underprepared to support SPED teachers or to advocate and support students with exceptionalities.^{2, 3}

To address these issues and improve educational programs for students with special education needs, **the [Special Education Leader Fellowship \(SELF\)](#) program was created in 2015 in New Orleans, Louisiana, to develop the leadership competencies of current and aspiring special education leaders** (including teacher leaders) and response to intervention (RTI) coordinators.

SELF's goal is to equip participants with a vision of excellence in special education programming; strengthen their ability to meet the range of student and teacher needs; develop teachers, parents, service providers, and students as partners; and lead high-performing special education teams in schools.

This white paper, written by McREL in partnership with SELF, summarizes and highlights key findings from McREL's evaluation of the SELF program. For a copy of the full evaluation report, please contact SELF at info@selfnola.org.

¹ Espel, E. V., Meyer, S. J., & Weston-Sementelli, J. L. (2019). *Factors related to teacher mobility and attrition in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota* (REL 2019–008). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL_2019008.pdf

² Pazey, B. L., & Cole, H. A. (2013). The role of special education training in the development of socially just leaders: Building an equity consciousness in educational leadership programs. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(2), 243–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X12463934>

³ Templeton, R. R. (2017). Special education leadership at the elementary school level: How does knowledge influence leadership? *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 30(1), 19–30.

Program Structure and Components

The two-year cohort-model program provides participants, known as SELF Fellows, with supports for the development of their leadership competencies by providing one-on-one coaching and seven interconnected training and professional development (PD) elements to provide a coherent infrastructure that facilitates deep learning and enables SELF Fellows to enact the theory of action at their schools and school systems. The program elements include:

- A week-long summer training consisting of workshops with national experts and high-performing practitioners.
- Four to eight Formal Fellow Training Sessions during the school year to introduce Fellows to leadership competencies, practice emerging skills, and deepen their learning of previously introduced concepts.
- Two Fellow and Principal Training Sessions to create in-school partnerships that support Fellows' work and lead to highly effective special education programming in their schools.
- A minimum of 16 school-embedded coaching sessions when SELF Leadership coaches provide responsive support to Fellows aimed at improving Fellows' skills to more effectively lead their teams; providing feedback on the quality of SPED programming in the schools; and supporting Fellows to advocate for change through partnership and service to students.
- Critical Friends Group Meetings that occur several times per year and provide a structured space for Fellows to collaborate and determine solutions to solve common challenges.
- A Peer Program Review, when Fellows join the SELF staff for a review of each other's SPED programming, with an opportunity for Fellows to give and receive feedback regarding the

SELF focuses on helping SPED leaders develop these eight competencies:

- **Personal leadership:** An ability to define a direction for one's leadership and work, and to move in that direction with consistency and clarity.
- **Courageous leadership:** An ability to cultivate the resilience of the team through behaviors and ways of being that foster a sense of connection and belonging.
- **Adaptive leadership:** The ability to lead others during moments of turmoil and change.
- **Situational leadership:** An ability to adapt one's leadership style to the ways in which a specific task and follower interact.
- **Data-driven practice:** An ability to effectively collect and use academic and social-emotional data to set goals, monitor progress, and make adjustments.
- **Content knowledge:** A knowledge of content standards and best practices in instruction (including data-driven, universal design, and trauma-informed), as well as an ability to develop others in these areas.
- **Compliance:** A knowledge of compliance expectations as well as understanding of the ways authentic compliance drives student outcomes.
- **Family and community practice:** An ability to establish an inclusive community that partners with students and families.

strengths and priorities for program improvement and support their goal setting, action step planning, implement changes, and progress evaluation.

- An annual national school visit to give Fellows the opportunity to travel to another city and observe high-quality special education programming grounded in best practices research.

Evaluating the Program’s Impact

In November 2019, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded SELF a 36-month grant to implement and evaluate the SELF program over the course of three years. McREL International was selected to conduct the evaluation study. SELF staff and McREL evaluators created a program logic model aligned to the SELF theory of action and designed to illustrate the relationship between the SELF program elements and the intended short- and long-term program outcomes.

The intended **short-term outcomes** included the Fellows’ development and growth in **eight leadership competencies**—personal leadership, courageous leadership, adaptive leadership, situational leadership, data-driven practice, content knowledge, compliance, and family and community practice—as well as increases in **three leadership efficacy areas**—administrative management, personal management, and professional growth.

The logic model also identified three intended **long-term outcomes**:

- **Improved retention of special education leaders** (the Fellows) in current positions or advancement to leadership positions.
- **Improved retention of special education teachers** (research suggests that teachers are more likely to persist in their positions when they are supported by SPED leadership⁴).
- **Increase in academic performance** for students with exceptionalities.

The purpose of the evaluation study was two-fold: to examine the extent to which the SELF program was implemented with quality and to explore the program’s preliminary effects on short- and long-term outcomes.

For the study, which took place from 2020 to 2022, McREL developed and used a mixed-methods design that included surveys and interviews with a sample of SELF Fellows and supporting staff (including coaches, supervisors, and team members). The evaluation team also conducted analyses of school-level student achievement data to examine program implementation and preliminary effects.

The primary focus of the evaluation study was on the Fellows who participated in the Leader Fellowship program during the duration of the grant (Cohorts 5–7). However, given the relatively brief duration of the grant, McREL evaluators also collected data from people who had previously completed the program (Cohorts 1-5) to capture a more robust view of the program’s impact.

⁴ Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 697–744. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>

To that end, McREL surveyed the 56 alumni of Cohorts 1–5 in February 2022 to gather information on the long-term impact SELF has had on them professionally. The data from the survey also provides more insight into one of the program’s long-term retention goals: Fellows retained in current positions or advanced to leadership positions.

In the Midst of a Pandemic and Category 4 Hurricane

In that first year, as Cohort 5 had just begun their two-year program, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the world, with schools navigating unprecedented changes and challenges in their operations as they closed buildings and shifted to remote learning. The SELF program continued to operate in 2020, but with modifications in how trainings, visits, and coaching sessions were delivered to comply with health and safety recommendations and requirements.

Then, as New Orleans schools were preparing to reopen in August 2021, Hurricane Ida made landfall in Louisiana. Days before the storm’s arrival, entire communities were evacuated—including educators and students—and the hurricane caused extensive damage to community infrastructure and further disrupted school system operations.

The delivery and evaluation of the SELF program occurred against this backdrop, when many of the SELF Fellows were taking on multiple roles and additional responsibilities (in addition to participating in the professional learning) and contending with significant workplace and personal stressors.

The complexity of the environment makes the study’s positive findings that much more remarkable.

Key Findings

1 There was a positive retention rate of SELF Fellows in their current positions.

The generally high rates of Fellows retained in their current positions is a positive finding that carries with it positive implications for SPED teachers.

- 97% of all Fellows remained in the New Orleans Public Schools system after *two years* of the program. While comparative retention data for leaders in special education roles is scarce, the 2021-22 Educator Workforce Snapshot shows that Louisiana school leaders in general had an 83% annual retention rate.⁵
- 72% of Fellows in school-level positions during the first year in the program remained at their original schools during the second year of their program.
- 43% of all Fellows in Cohorts 1-4 remained in the New Orleans Public School system four years after beginning their fellowship. (Cohort 5 participants had not yet had four years).

⁵ Louisiana Department of Education. (n.d.). *Louisiana state profile: 2021-2022 educator workforce snapshot*. https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/teaching/2021-2022-state-educator-workforce-snapshot.pdf?sfvrsn=40396318_6

- In particular, the retention rate of Fellows who are educators of color (EOC) was notably high, ranging from 80% to 100% across Cohorts 5-7.

Research suggests that formally training Fellows to support students with disabilities and SPED teachers, and being retained in their current positions, may provide a reliable “protective factor” for SPED teachers that helps prevent them from leaving their positions.^{6,7}

The positive retention-rate finding is a bright spot at a time when schools and districts across the nation face educator shortages and attrition in both SPED and general education. While the Fellows in this program include teacher leaders and those in other leadership positions, the positive retention rates of Fellows may result in corollary positive impacts regarding SPED teacher shortages. Qualitative data further support this assertion, with reports of Fellows improving their school culture for SPED teachers, staff, and students with disabilities.

2 **Despite the double disruption of the pandemic and hurricane, the SELF program was successfully delivered.**

On average, the Fellows were able to attend most of the program’s components due to the SELF team’s program adaptations.

A majority of Fellows agreed that the SELF program has given them useful knowledge and skills in their roles, and many reported that they had been able to make improvements to their schools’ SPED/RTI systems and processes as a result of their participation in SELF.

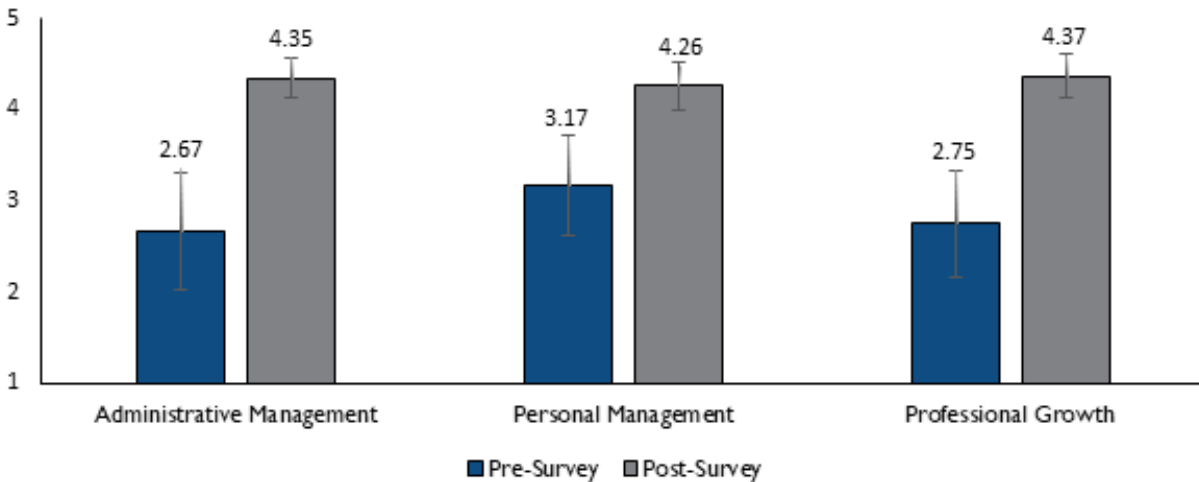
3 **SELF Fellows improved their leadership competencies and exemplified the eight special education leadership domains in their school or district contexts, which improved their ability to better support students with disabilities and SPED teachers in their schools.**

Fellows successfully implemented systems and processes that improved and streamlined data collection and interpretation, facilitated professional development and increased understanding of compliance procedures, and improved communication among individuals across their organizations.

- Qualitative data revealed that Fellows felt that the SELF program increased their leadership skills, special education knowledge and skills, and access to resources.
- Improving on these leadership competencies due to the SELF program improved Fellows’ ability to better support students receiving special education services and SPED teachers in their schools.
- Coaches’ ratings of Fellows’ leadership efficacy improved over the course of the program, as shown here.

⁶ Billingsley, B. & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 89*, 697-744.

⁷ Cancio, E. J., Albrecht, S. F., & Holden, B. (2014). Combating the attrition of teachers of students with EBD: What can administrators do? *Intervention in School and Clinic, 49*, 306-312.



The study also found some mixed or inconclusive results, which all warrant future examination as the program continues in New Orleans and expands to cohorts in Los Angeles and elsewhere. For example, quantitative data show that Fellows’ self-reports on their perception of their own leadership efficacy decreased, yet at the same time their coaches and supervisors reported that the Fellows’ leadership efficacy had increased—perhaps reflecting a tendency of Fellows to rate themselves lower on this construct after learning more about SPED best practices and experiencing the challenge of applying their learning in schools. In addition, Fellows’ professional advancement (defined in this study as job promotion) rates were mixed—promotion rates varied widely among program cohorts. The reason for this is unclear, though promotion may not be the most accurate measure of advancement since a Fellow can advance in their professionalism and career without receiving a title or position change.

The program effects on student achievement were inconclusive. Results showed that there was no difference in school-level proficiency rates and the number of SELF Fellows who had been employed at a school. This may be because *school-level* proficiency rates may not be the most appropriate measure to use to examine the program’s effect on student achievement for students with disabilities. Some Fellows and their supervisors described anecdotal evidence that learning had improved while others shared that external factors that have impacted student learning (such as COVID-19) made it difficult to determine the source of any improvement or lack thereof.

McREL recommends future studies designed to better study the effect of the SELF program on areas with mixed and inconclusive outcomes.

Conclusions

The SELF program provides a novel approach to addressing a historical need to develop and support special education leaders. That is, to support students with exceptionalities, special education leaders need to develop and apply an extensive breadth and depth of knowledge of student needs, teacher needs, and special education policy. The SELF program’s use of one-on-one coaching and seven interconnected training and PD elements promoted the development of the Fellows’ eight identified leadership competencies and three areas of leadership efficacy.

Successful leaders compassionately and expertly weave together the laws, rules, and policies governing special education with the professional and interpersonal needs of teachers and the intricate and individual needs of the students themselves. However, to date, there is limited understanding of the factors that promote effective special education leadership. By integrating best practices for leadership education, theories of human motivation, learning, and support, and an understanding of student and practitioner experiences and needs in special education, the SELF program provides professional learning opportunities that facilitate the development of successful special education leaders.

Findings from this evaluation show that the SELF program has promoted Fellows' leadership competencies and efficacy, even during a period of major disruption to normal school operations. Furthermore, findings suggest that participation in the program promotes special education leader advancement and retention, key factors to supporting students with exceptionalities. Although future research is needed to determine the effect of program implementation on students' academic outcomes, findings provide initial evidence that the SELF program promotes special education leaders' and teachers' learning and leadership skills.

Recommendations for Future Studies

- Re-examine the effectiveness of the SELF-program on intended outcomes during a period when the SELF program is being implemented as designed.
- Qualitatively investigate Fellows' perceptions of how their self-efficacy changes over time.
- Reconsider the conceptualization of *advancement* to include factors other than promotion (for example, the cultivation of an improved climate for SPED teachers, students receiving special education services, and families).
- Obtain student-level data to better study the effect of the SELF program on student achievement.