



L3 Principal Pipeline: Descriptive Report on Cohort I

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

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September 2020

Key Findings for Cohort I

- While the one-year change in TNReady results were mixed, TVAAS growth scores indicated higher performance in schools led by an L3-trained principal, as compared to the District overall.
- Though schools' Insight ratings declined *on average* under the leadership of an L3-trained principal, a deeper dive reveals that over half the schools' instructional culture improved or remained the same under an L3-trained principal's leadership.
- L3-trained principals presided over greater reductions in office referral rates and rates of exclusionary discipline (out-of-school suspensions and expulsions) compared to the rest of the K-8 schools in the District.
- In their first year in the role, the L3 novice principals averaged an overall TEAM observation rating of 3.1, or just above average effectiveness.

Introduction

Beginning in 2017-18, Shelby County Schools (SCS) instituted a principal training program called Leadership³ (L3), housed in the Office of Leadership Development. L3 is designed to train assistant principals (APs) to become effective principals. L3 fellows complete a one-year residency (one school year and one summer) while still serving as AP and are then hired as principals in available vacancies the following school year.

At the time of this report writing, the L3 program had trained three cohorts of APs. This report focuses on just the first cohort, because it is the only group of fellows with adequate performance data to examine. That cohort apprenticed in 2017-18 and became principals in 2018-19, the only year for which all the metrics presented in this report were available. (This report was written before most 2019-20 end-of-year metrics would normally be available, and the COVID-19 pandemic pre-empted many of those metrics anyway.) Moving forward, subsequent L3 cohorts will have multiple performance measures that can be examined, but for now, the first L3 cohort is the only group with enough data worth exploring.

The first L3 cohort's residency year consisted of a variety of activities, with supports from a number of entities. Fellows attended three types of seminars throughout their residency year:

1. Instructional Leadership Seminars, which took place one weekend a month (Friday night and full Saturday) at the University of Memphis
2. Executive Leadership Seminars, which took place one day a month, led by SCS chiefs as well as by civic, faith-based, non-profit, consultant, and corporate leadership partners
3. Leadership Strategy Seminars, which took place for two hours twice a month after school, led by the SCS Director of Leadership Development

In addition, each fellow was assigned a mentor principal, who was someone other than the sitting principal of the school where the fellow was an AP. The mentor principal's job was to provide feedback and encouragement, to listen, to guide, and to support the fellow in attaining their



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professional goals. Furthermore, fellows were able to observe their mentor principal in action during shadow visits one day a month.

Each fellow was also assigned a coach, a retired principal who was paid a stipend to participate alongside the fellow in learning sessions, share leadership experiences with them, observe them in action on a weekly basis, guide them in reflective thinking, provide feedback, assist them in developing their leadership style, and informally evaluate them using a rubric from [Public Impact](#).

The sitting principal of the school where the fellow was an AP provided support by formally evaluating the fellow and by practicing distributive leadership through the gradual transfer of administrative responsibilities to the fellow.

Beyond the support provided by the sitting principal, mentor principal, and coach, the Office of Leadership Development provided further support to each L3 fellow. That department's responsibilities were to share resources, recommend best practices, provide infield practical support (such as meeting the fellow at the school during shadow visits with their mentor principal), and establish and monitor the fellow's personal and professional goals.

After the one-year residency comes two years of induction, in which the novice L3 principal receives further support and training. Each novice principal is assigned a mentor as well as a principal supervisor, attends the New Principals' Institute and Bootcamp, attends four two-hour leadership development sessions, completes two assigned readings and online work, and receives one-on-one coaching from a District leadership coach.

Since the inception of the L3 program, the Office of Leadership Development has monitored the progress of each cohort of fellows and has made adjustments to the program in areas where deficits have been detected. Thus, the program now contains elements not described above, including a bridge program for those fellows who were not hired as a principal upon completing the residency. Other adjustments include a move away from theoretical to more practical perspectives, having SCS departments lead more of the sessions, building out an entire curriculum that follows a logical progression with stated learning objectives, and more. The Leadership Development team has also written protocols for the District to follow for the hiring of interim principals and APs, which should help streamline and standardize those processes as well as ensure that talent is selected from leadership pipelines.

This report presents a variety of metrics designed to shed light on how the first cohort of L3 fellows has performed as novice principals. This study is by necessity descriptive in nature rather than evaluative, primarily owing to a very small cohort and the lack of a fair comparison group. The first L3 cohort consisted of nine fellows during the residency year (2017–18), eight of whom were hired as principals the following year. Of those eight, one principal served part of 2018–19 at one school and part of the year at another and was thus excluded from analysis, leaving a total of seven schools/principals in the analyses.

Several domains of school/principal performance are examined: academic achievement, academic growth, school culture, student discipline, and principal effectiveness. In some instances, the average



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performance of the L3 cohort is presented alongside the average performance of the rest of the District. In other instances, it was more informative to display the performance of the seven individual schools/principals alongside a District average. In either case, it is important to keep in mind the disparity between the L3 novice principals and the rest of the District in terms of average years of experience in the role of principal.

School Demographics

To provide some context for the metrics presented in the rest of this report, the demographic characteristics of the seven schools led by the first cohort of L3-trained principals are presented in Table 1. The average L3 student body was over two-thirds African American and about a quarter Latinx, with small percentages of students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. On average, 69% were economically disadvantaged, 16% were English learners, and 9% were students with disabilities. The L3 schools ranged in size from 359 to 850 students, with an average of 598 students. Five were elementary schools, one was a middle school, and one was a K–8 school.

Table 1. 2019–20 Demographic Profile of the Seven Schools Led by the First Cohort of L3-Trained Principals

Student Subgroup	Minimum	Average	Maximum
Black / African American	9%	68%	97%
Latinx	1%	24%	76%
White	0%	4%	10%
Multiracial, Asian, Native American, or Pacific Islander	1%	3%	6%
Economically Disadvantaged	47%	69%	86%
English Learners	0%	16%	48%
Students with Disabilities	0%	9%	14%
Number of Students	359	598	850

Academic Achievement: TNReady

A popular measure of school quality is the average level of achievement the student body exhibits on state-mandated standardized tests. The state of Tennessee requires public schools to administer the TNReady achievement and end-of-course tests every spring. For the schools led by the first cohort of L3-trained principals, the average share of students who scored *on-track* or *mastered* in 2018–19 was 14.5% in English / language arts (ELA) and 21.2% in mathematics. This performance is substantially lower than that of the rest of the elementary and middle schools in the District: 24.7% on-track/mastered in ELA and 33.2% on-track/mastered in math.

However, a straight comparison of on-track/mastery levels is never a fair measure of a school's or a principal's performance, because the students at some schools arrive drastically better prepared than the students at other schools. Looking at yearly change in on-track/mastery levels is a fairer (though not perfect) indication of performance. Thus, Figure 1 displays the change in on-track/mastery percentages from 2017–18 (the year before the first cohort of L3 fellows became principals) to 2018–19 (the first year the L3 fellows served as principals).



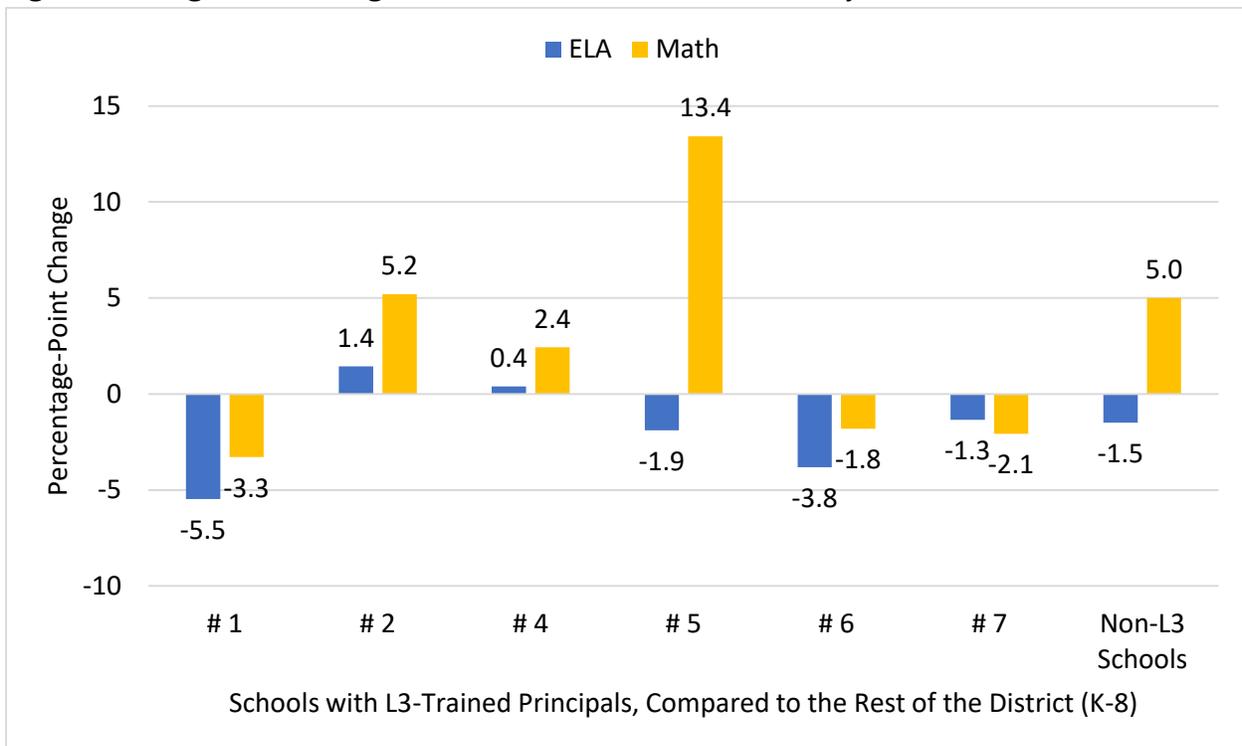
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The graph shows the change in ELA and math performance for each of the individual L3-led schools, along with the rest of the elementary and middle schools in the District for comparison. The results are mixed. In ELA, two L3-led schools outperformed the non-L3-led schools (one by a substantial margin), while four underperformed. In mathematics, three L3-led schools outperformed the rest of the District, while three underperformed. [Note that School #3 is not displayed; it was a newly reconfigured school in 2018–19 and thus did not have TNReady data from the previous year.]

Though the results are mixed, one should consider that these data represent the L3 cohort's first year in the role of principal. Most of the schools in the District are led by more experienced principals (some *much* more experienced), and thus any comparison should keep this disparity of experience in mind.

Figure 1. Change in Percentage of On-Track & Mastered on TNReady from 2017–18 to 2018–19



Academic Growth: TVAAS

The Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) is designed to show how much *growth* students exhibited on achievement tests from one year to the next. The appeal of value-added models such as TVAAS is that they are intended to level the playing field among low and high achievers in a way that merely comparing yearly change in proficiency (as above) cannot. In other words, the aim of TVAAS and other value-added models is to zero in on academic growth regardless of starting point.

TVAAS scores are generated by assessing students' performance on end-of-year state-mandated assessments in light of their past performance on such assessments. Students outpacing their past



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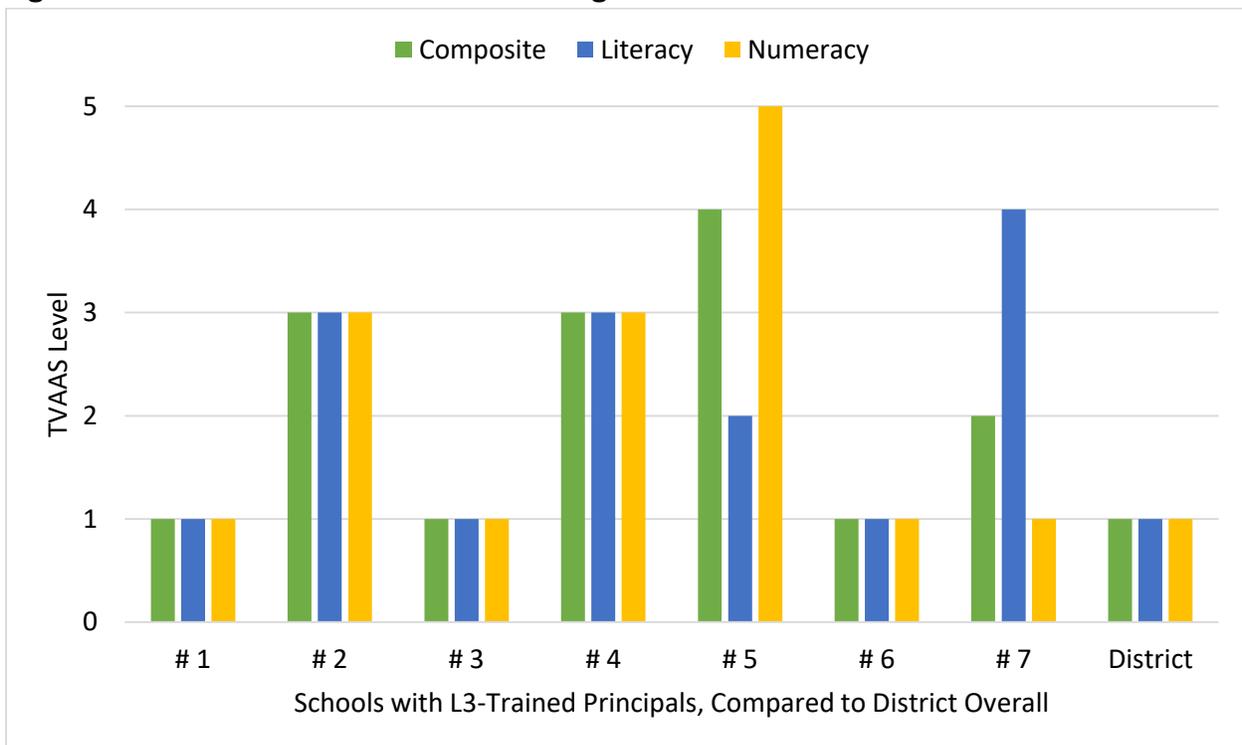
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performance will have higher TVAAS scores, while students falling short of their past performance will have lower scores. The TVAAS model generates student-, teacher-, school-, and district-level scores, which are ranked on a 1-to-5 scale from lowest to highest student growth.

Given that the principal is a school's instructional leader, school-level TVAAS rankings offer an important measure of a principal's effectiveness: the amount of *growth* in academic achievement the school's students attained for a given year. Figure 2 presents the school-level TVAAS rankings for 2018–19, which was the L3 cohort's first year serving as principal. (TVAAS data are not available for 2019–20, since the spring assessments were cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.)

As the figure shows, the District literacy, numeracy, and composite TVAAS levels were all 1, the lowest growth ranking. By contrast, four of the seven schools led by an L3-trained principal exhibited higher growth than the District average on at least two of the three measures, with two of the schools even attaining a TVAAS level of 4 or 5 on one or more measures. Given that the L3 principals were all in their first year in that role, whereas most schools in the District were led by principals with much more experience, the findings in Figure 2 are an encouraging signal of the L3 program's potential effectiveness.

Figure 2. 2018–19 School-Level TVAAS Rankings: L3 Schools vs. District Overall





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School Culture: Insight Survey

Beyond being the school's instructional leader, the principal sets the tone for the entire school culture. Any appraisal of principal effectiveness should thus take into account some measure of school culture if available. SCS administers TNTP's Insight survey to teachers every fall and spring, which provides information about teachers' perceptions of their school's culture along a variety of dimensions. Questions on the Insight survey ask teachers to rate a given aspect of their school on a scale of 1 to 10, from least favorable to most favorable. The survey asks multiple questions about each topic area (dimension) and combines them to create an index for that dimension. This study examines 14 different dimensions measured by the Insight survey:

1. Instructional Culture Index (ICI)
2. Academic Opportunity
3. Career Progression
4. Evaluation
5. Family and Community Engagement (FACE)
6. Instructional Planning for Student Growth
7. Leadership
8. Learning Environment
9. Observation & Feedback
10. Peer Culture
11. Professional Development (PD)
12. School Operations
13. Teacher Compensation
14. Workload

To get a sense of teachers' perceptions of the culture at the schools led by L3-trained principals, it is necessary to establish a baseline for comparison. This can be done by looking at teacher perceptions at those schools right before the L3 fellows became principals there—which, for the first cohort of L3 fellows, was the spring of 2017–18 (since they became principals in the fall of 2018–19).

Figure 3 displays the L3-school and non-L3-school averages on the 14 aforementioned dimensions for the spring of 2017–18, to serve as the baseline for comparing with Figure 4, which shows the same information for the spring of 2019–20. The latter time point is two years into the L3 fellows' tenure as principal. (Unlike some other measures presented in this study, Insight data were available for 2019–20.)



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Figure 3. Index Averages on Spring 2017–18 Insight Survey: L3 Schools vs. Rest of District

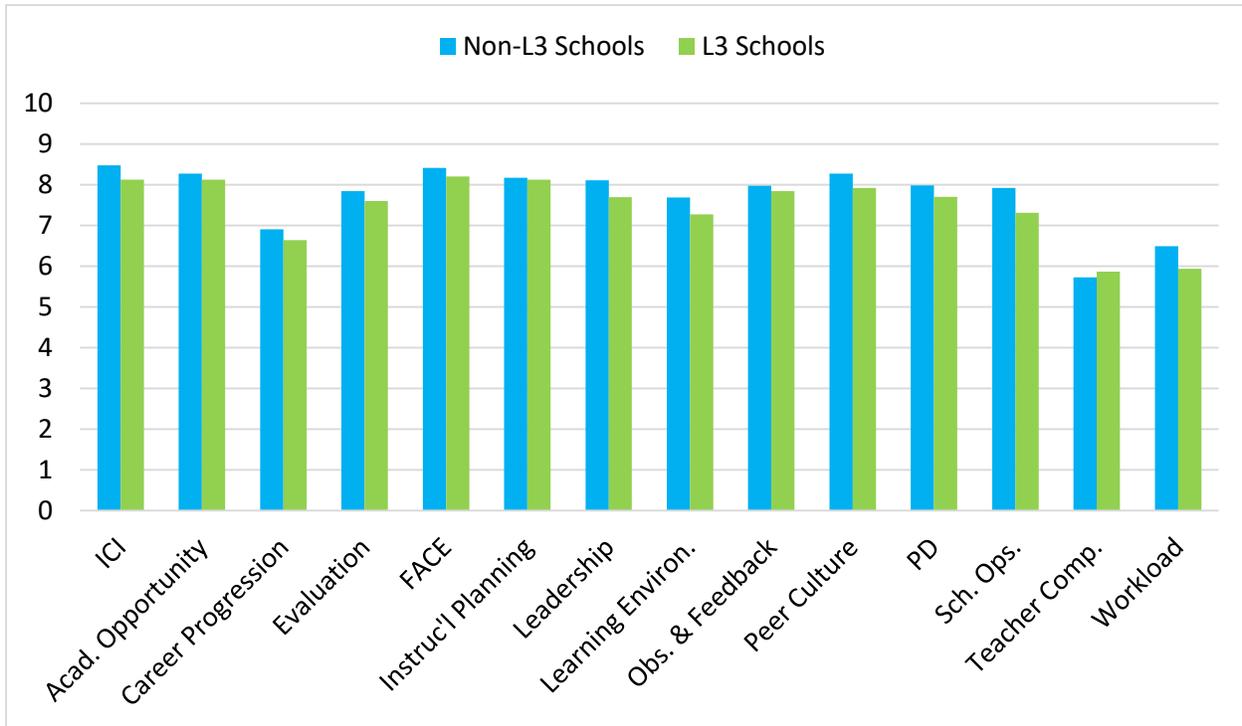
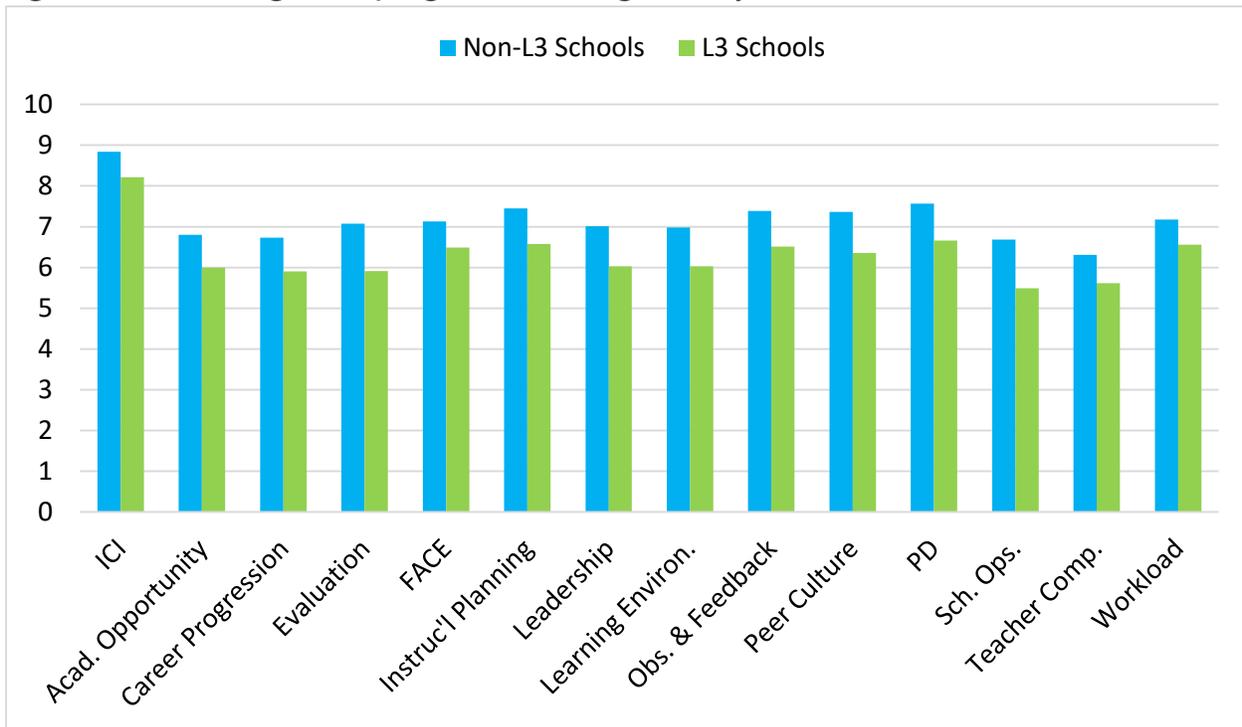


Figure 4. Index Averages on Spring 2019–20 Insight Survey: L3 Schools vs. Rest of District





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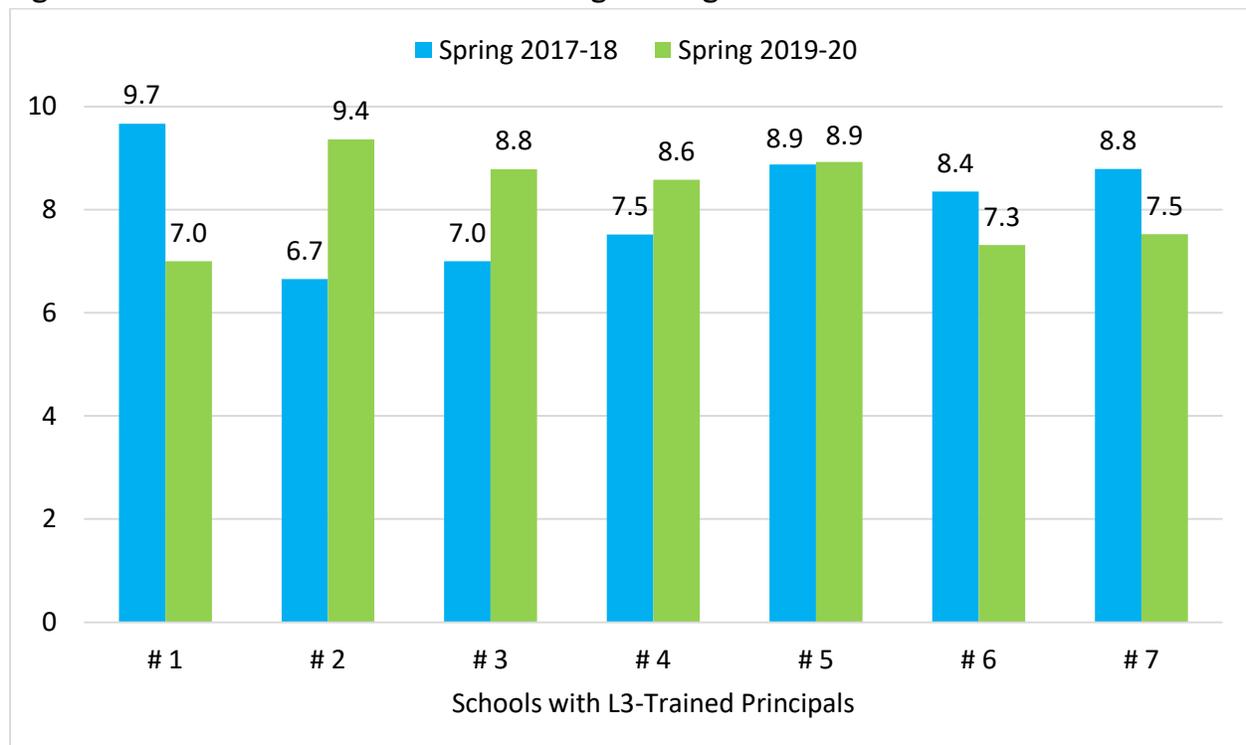
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Figure 3 indicates that, before the first cohort of L3 fellows became principals there, the L3-led schools fared lower than the rest of the schools in the District on all but one dimension. Figure 4 shows that, two years into the first L3 cohort’s term as principal, that gap had worsened. This means that teacher perceptions of their school culture deteriorated, on average, under the new leadership. However, it is important to remember that the L3/non-L3 comparison carries some inherent unfairness in that the L3 principals are being gauged against a group whose average years of experience in the role of principal is much higher than theirs.

Moreover, it could be that, while the *average* L3 results underperformed the rest of the District, perhaps an outlier or two dragged down that average. For a more granular look at the Insight results, Figure 5 presents the “before” and “after” results on the Instructional Culture Index (ICI) for the seven individual schools led by an L3-trained principal. The ICI is meant to be an overall measure of a school’s instructional culture, cutting across several of the more specific dimensions on the Insight survey. Thus, it serves as a good summary measure to help simplify a deeper dive into the results.

Figure 5 shows mixed results: three schools’ ICI deteriorated under their L3 principal’s leadership (one by about $2\frac{3}{4}$ rating points), one school’s ICI stayed the same, and three schools’ ICI improved (one by about $2\frac{3}{4}$ rating points). In other words, in the realm of instructional culture, a few of the L3-trained principals fared more poorly than their predecessor, but just as many outperformed their predecessor.

Figure 5. Individual L3 Schools’ Two-Year Change in Insight Instructional Culture Index





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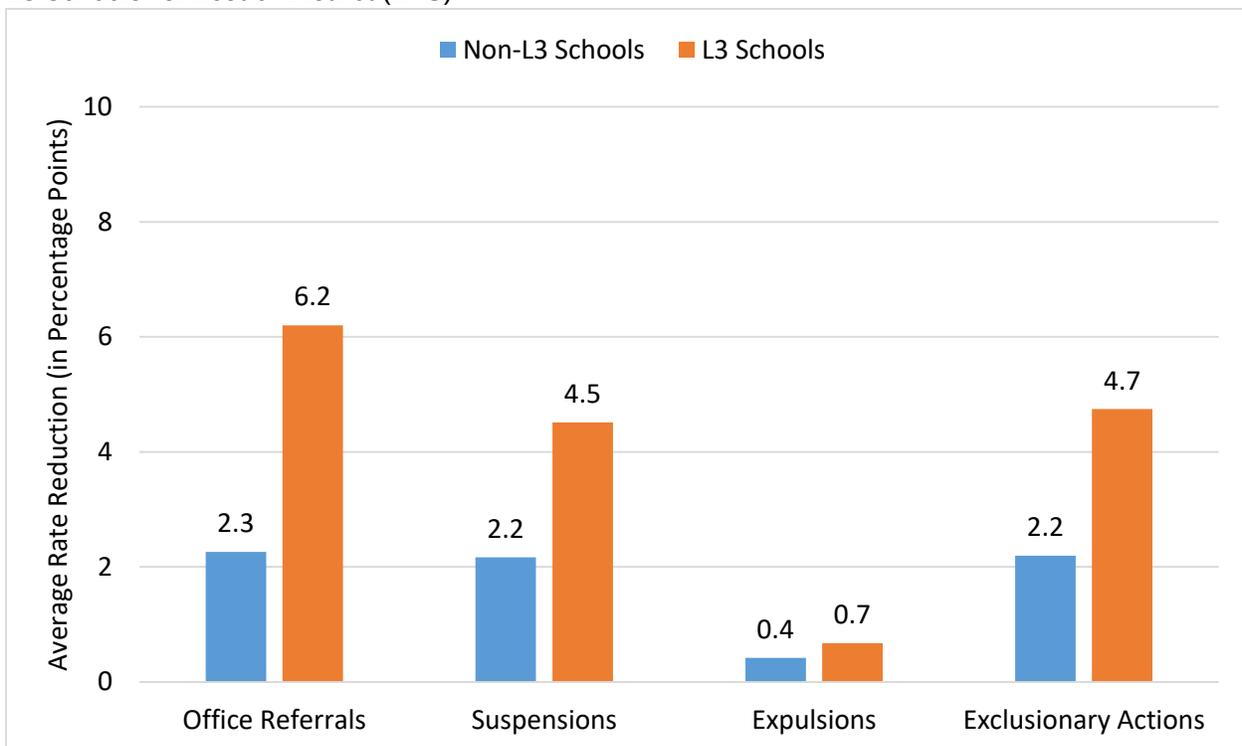
Student Discipline

One important aspect of a school's culture is its disciplinary practices. In recent years, SCS has been encouraging schools to move away from heavy reliance on disciplinary actions that remove students from school, such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (known as *exclusionary discipline*). Generally speaking, the more that behavioral issues can be dealt with in the classroom rather than with an office referral, the better. And the more that office referrals can be dealt with without exclusionary discipline, the better. Since the principal sets the tone for a school's disciplinary ethos, examining rates of office referrals and exclusionary discipline can provide yet another window into principal effectiveness.

Figure 6 displays the average reduction in office referral and exclusionary discipline rates from 2017–18 (the year before the L3 principals took office) to 2019–20 (the second year in which the first L3 cohort served as principals). As the figure indicates, the L3 schools averaged greater reductions in their office referral and exclusionary discipline rates than did the rest of the District's elementary and middle schools. (Note that the rate for exclusionary actions blends the suspension rate and expulsion rate into a combination metric.)

That the L3 principals achieved such results just two years into the job (especially as compared to a group with much more experience on average) is a promising signal of the L3 program's potential effectiveness in this domain.

Figure 6. Reduction in Office Referral and Exclusionary Discipline Rates from 2017–18 to 2019–20: L3 Schools vs. Rest of District (K–8)





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Principal Effectiveness: TEAM Observation Ratings

SCS uses the Tennessee Department of Education's TEAM (Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model) as its evaluation system for measuring principal effectiveness. TEAM observations are conducted twice a year, using a rubric grounded in the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS). The TILS standards and subcategories are as follows:

Standard A: Instructional Leadership for Continuous Improvement

- **A1. Capacity Building** – Builds capacity of educators to provide all students a rigorous curriculum, aligned with Tennessee state standards
- **A2. Data Analysis & Use** – Collaborates with educators to analyze and use multiple forms of data throughout the year to establish specific goals and strategies targeting student achievement and growth
- **A3. Interventions** – Leads educators to develop and execute interventions to address all student learning needs grounded in multiple sources of data (academic, social, and/or emotional).
- **A4. Progress Monitoring** – Systematically monitors and adjusts progress toward established goals and facilitates procedures and practices leading to continuous improvement.

Standard B: Culture for Teaching & Learning

- **B1. Leveraging Educator Strengths** – Leverages educator strengths to engage all students in meaningful, relevant learning opportunities
- **B2. Environment** – Fosters a safe, respectful, and orderly learning environment for all
- **B3. Family Involvement** – Takes measures to actively involve families in the education of their children
- **B4. Ownership** – Models and communicates expectations for individual and shared ownership of student, educator, and school success
- **B5. Recognition & Celebration** – Recognizes and celebrates improved educator and student performance related to school vision and goals

Standard C: Professional Learning & Growth

- **C1. Evaluation** – Implements and monitors a rigorous evaluation system using an approved Tennessee evaluation model and uses educator evaluation data to inform, assess, and adjust professional learning goals and plans
- **C2. Differentiated Professional Learning** – Engages faculty and self in data-informed, differentiated professional learning opportunities for educators, aligned with the *Tennessee Standards for Professional Learning*
- **C3. Induction, Support, Retention, & Growth** – Collaborates with others to induct, support, retain and grow/extend effective educators based on evidence of student and educator outcomes
- **C4. Teacher Leaders** – Identifies and supports potential teacher-leaders and provides growth opportunities in alignment with the *Tennessee Teacher Leadership Standards*
- **C5. Self-Practice** – Improves self-practices based on multiple sources of feedback, including performance evaluation results and self-reflection

Standard D: Resource Management

- **D1. Community Resources** – Strategically utilizes community resources and partners to support the school's mission, vision and goals



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- **D2. Diversity** – Includes a diverse set of educators and stakeholders in school improvement decisions
- **D3. Employee & Fiscal Management** – Establishes, communicates and enforces a set of standard operating procedures and routines aligned with district, state and federal policy and performs all budgetary responsibilities with accuracy, transparency, and in the best interest of students and staff

Principals are rated on a scale of 1 to 5, from lowest to highest effectiveness, on each of the above subcategories. Table 2 presents the 2018–19 TEAM ratings (averaged across the two observation periods) for the seven principals in the first L3 cohort. Because this was their first year in the role of principal, and because the TEAM uses a 1 to 5 scale whose meaning can be understood without reference to a comparison group, a District average is not presented for comparison.

As Table 2 indicates, 3 was both the mode (most common) and the median (mid-point) rating assigned across the subcategories; the mean (average) was 3.15. A rating of 3 signifies average effectiveness, or “meeting expectations.” None of the principals received a rating of 1 on any subcategory, and collectively they received 21% more ratings above 3 than below it.

On average, the principals performed best in Community Resources (4.1) and Family Involvement (3.8) and worst in Progress Monitoring (2.6) and Ownership (2.7). In terms of each individual principal’s overall average across the subcategories, the range was from 2.7 to 3.9, with a mean and median of 3.1, or just above average effectiveness.



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Table 2. 2018-19 TEAM Observation Scores for L3-Trained Principals

School	TEAM Rubric Subcategory															L3 Average	
	A1	A2	A3	A4	B1	B3	B4	B5	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	D1	D2		D3
# 1	2.5	3	2.5	2	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	4	3	2	2.7
# 2	2.5	2.5	3	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	3	3.4
# 3	4	3.5	4	4	4	4	3.5	4.5	3	3.5	3.5	4	4	5	5	3	3.9
# 4	3	3	3	2	3	4	2	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.0
# 5	3	3.5	2.5	2.5	4	3.5	3	4	3	4	3	3.5	3	5	3	3	3.3
# 6	2.5	2.5	2.5	2	2.5	4	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	4	2	3	2.7
# 7	3	3	3	3	3.5	4	3	3	2.5	2.5	3	3	2.5	4	3	3	3.1
L3 Average	2.9	3.0	2.9	2.6	3.3	3.8	2.7	3.4	2.9	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.1	4.1	3.4	2.9	3.1

Conclusion

This evaluation had the difficult objective of trying to determine the effectiveness of the District’s L3 Principal Pipeline program. A number of factors made it impossible to design a study that could definitively determine the program’s effectiveness. For one, the amount of available data was scant, owing to the program’s short existence, the small number of participants, and the COVID-19 interruption to the 2019–20 school year. Moreover, it was not possible to compare the principals trained in the L3 program to principals of similar experience who had not gone through the program. Instead, comparisons had to be made against *all* the other principals in the District, whose average years of experience as principal far surpassed that of the L3 fellows.

Nevertheless, just enough time had passed since the first cohort of L3 fellows became principals that a descriptive analysis could be conducted using several pertinent data sources. Though none of the results presented in this report can truly speak to program effectiveness (especially given the lack of a suitable comparison group), this study was able to describe the performance of the first L3 cohort in several key domains: academic achievement, academic growth, school culture, disciplinary practices, and observations related to principal effectiveness.

To summarize the findings, the overall picture of the cohort’s performance is favorable: the results in each domain were either mixed or a net positive. Examining the cohort’s performance after a few more years on the job will help paint a fuller picture, as will including subsequent L3 cohorts once sufficient time has passed to have data on their performance as principals. In the meantime, District leaders can use the descriptive data presented here to get a sense of how the first L3 cohort has fared so far in their journey as SCS principals.