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a. QUALITY OF THE PROJECT DESIGN

1. Professional development services are of sufficient quality, intensity, and duration to lead to improvements in practice. *ASCEND: Amalgamating School leadership Certificates and Executive coaching for New leader Development* will increase the number of highly effective educators in the North Carolina Piedmont-Triad region by supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices that prepare, develop, and enhance the skills of school leaders. Our project will address **Absolute Priority 2, Part 3: Supporting Effective Principals or Other School Leaders through evidence-based professional enhancement activities that lead to an advanced credential.** As documented in *Appendix A*, High Point University (HPU) will serve as the eligible applicant providing services through the Stout School of Education. Ranked in the top quartile of NC programs, Stout School of Education uses an equity-based approach in preparing educators to provide more accessible, relevant, and rigorous education for all K-12 students. Through our partnership with Piedmont Triad Education Consortium (PTEC), over the three-year grant period, our program will serve three cohorts of 50 (150 total) novice school leaders (principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators) each with less than three years of experience. The 18 school districts in our region represent a combination of high-poverty urban, city, suburban, and rural locales with all having multiple high-need schools on NC's persistently low-performing schools list. Recruitment for *ASCEND* will link with the Governor's NC DRIVE (Developing a Representative and Inclusive Vision for Education) Task Force recommendations by offering affordable postsecondary access, expanding and developing entry points, embedding diversity goals, strengthening support networks for educators of color, and providing professional development that fosters inclusive school environments.¹ Designed to lead to improvements in school leader practices, our professional development services will align with two key promising

evidence-based strategies that meet the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) group design standards, McREL Balanced Leadership^{2,3} and the New Leaders' Aspiring Principals Program,^{4,5} and include the following: ►**Certificates in Educational Leadership**: In the fall of 2022, Stout School of Education will launch NC's only Graduate Certificate Program that supports stacking of certificates towards completion of a Master of Education Leadership or Doctor of Education Leadership degree. Each job-aligned graduate certificate includes four courses offered at an advanced academic level, which can be taken as non-degree earning or may be applied towards fulfilling the requirements of a graduate degree. When completed in conjunction with state licensure requirements, degrees may also yield a principal or superintendent license for the state of NC. All certificate courses are aligned to the national Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation (AAQEP) and NC Department of Public Instruction standards for accreditation. Further, coursework will be aligned to the promising evidence-based McREL Balanced Leadership framework^{6,7,8} which emphasizes actions and behaviors of school leaders that are associated with improved student outcomes and is linked to the NC School Executive Principal and Assistant Principal Evaluation Process.⁹ Through *ASCEND*, school leaders may customize a pathway toward certificate and/or degree completion to meet individual and professional goals via: engaging in tuition-free, thoughtfully curated three-credit hour courses designed around job specific applications, learning virtually using both synchronous and asynchronous formats for flexibility, completing a full graduate certificate in one academic year (including a summer semester), working with a faculty member who is specially trained to deliver high-quality online learning, and advancing at their own pace by taking multiple certificate programs simultaneously. *Table 1* summarizes the current graduate certificate offerings at HPU.

Table 1. HPU School of Education Graduate Certificate Offerings	
Educational Leadership and Organizational Development	The Principalship
Educational Entrepreneurship and Consulting	Principal Supervision
Instructional Technology and Online Learning	The Superintendency
Education Policy and Advocacy	Special Education Leadership
Instructional Leadership and Coaching	Education Research and Evaluation

Based on the needs of our districts, we will design and offer three new leadership certificates:

① **Human Capital Diversity:** With a focus on increasing educator diversity (*Competitive Preference Priority (CPP) 1*), this certificate will prepare school leaders with the skills to implement improvements in recruitment, outreach, preparation, support, development, and retention of underrepresented teacher candidates in their districts. Coursework will train school leaders in working with teacher preparation programs that have a track record of success, such as the Stout School of Education, to attract and place diverse teacher candidates in their high-need schools as well as providing high-quality one-year clinical experiences.

② **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI):** This certificate will prepare school leaders to promote equity in underserved student access to educational resources and opportunities (*CPP 2*). Coursework will train school leaders to identify and examine the sources of inequity and inadequacy and engage in pedagogical practices that help transform the school climate into inclusive, supportive, equitable, unbiased, and identity-safe learning environments for students and teachers. Through our partnership with HPU’s Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Center for Creative Leadership, support will be provided on certificate curriculum review along with providing school leaders opportunities to access additional DEI training to complement what is being learned in their coursework.

③ **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** This new certificate will prepare school leaders to meet underserved

students' social, emotional, academic, and career development needs (**CPP 3**). We will draw upon the expertise of the Center for Creative Leadership to design this certificate and link content to the McREL Balanced Leadership framework.¹⁰ Coursework will prepare school leaders to develop educator and school capacity to support these needs emphasizing skills and behaviors that empower academic progress, recognizing and addressing environments that adversely impact SEL well-being, and implementing trauma-informed practices which include community-based violence related to military-or veteran-connected students. ► **Executive Coaching and Mentoring:** To link coursework and pedagogical practices to the school environment, concurrent professional development will be provided for school leaders through hands-on, job-aligned coaching and mentoring.^{11,12} Executive coaching is a learning approach that empowers self-awareness, inspires transformational change, and offers critical challenge and support.¹³ Through our partnership with the Center for Creative Leadership, we will train at least one executive coach per year for each of our targeted school districts. This high-quality training and certification is a nine-month program which develops the skills as an executive coach in an educational setting. With a formalized application and screening process, our focus will be to recruit coaches (e.g., retired educators who live in the district, principal supervisors, or educators currently employed by the district) whose experience mirrors the context in which the school leaders are working (e.g., urban, rural), who reflect the diversity of our school leaders, and who have worked in hard-to-staff and turnaround schools. In addition to graduate certificate coursework, year-long professional development for each cohort will provide an additional layer of intensity and duration at seven hours per month to support applied learning, team-based strategies, and improvements in practice:^{14,15} **Specialized Coaching (2 hours/month):** In-person, 1:1 specialized coaching will support school leaders as they identify compelling, specific, measurable goals for skill

development and impact in their school as a transformational leader. Coaching sessions will address individual needs through open and reflective dialogue, utilize strategies designed to create positive changes in how people think and interact with others, grow in their ability to think critically, analyze individual strengths and/or characteristics, and synthesize learning through a leadership lens to lead successfully in a high-need school. Used as a tool during the individualized coaching process, the Center for Creative Leadership will certify 25 HPU, PTEC, and district faculty to facilitate the 360 Assessment Benchmarks for school leaders to guide and monitor improvements in practice.¹⁶ This process helps form a common leadership language and consistent feedback mechanism across the cohorts.

④ **Team Coaching (2 hours/month):** This coaching will offer virtual and competency-aligned supportive coaching to a same-school principal and assistant principal team.¹⁷ This process will prepare two like-minded school leaders to accelerate the change process in struggling schools through vigorous coaching support based on identified school needs and the graduate certificate being completed.

⑤ **Sustained Coaching and Mentoring (1.5 hours/month):** In addition to an executive coach, school leaders will have access to a job-alike mentor. This process will engage school leaders in 1:1 mentoring with an experienced educator in a similar position. Recruitment and training will be similar to that of the executive coaches.

⑥ **Team Collaboratories (1.5 hours/month):** To provide group coaching and networking opportunities, school leaders will have the opportunity to participate in virtual group collaboratories led by a mentor with districts across the consortium. Through this approach, school leaders will be grouped based on similar district needs and those earning the same certificate and will support transferring what is being learned into practice in their respective schools. Collaboratories will provide the opportunity to dive further into applied practice of one of the 21 competencies from the evidence-based practice of Balanced Leadership (e.g., adaptability,

advocacy, communication, change agent, intellectual stimulation, situational awareness, visibility, etc.).¹⁸ To further accelerate group collaboration and sharing of best practices, we will provide additional professional development opportunities which include: annual leadership collaborative institute each October starting in Year 2, NC Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (NCASCD) conference in February, and specialized selection of two professional conferences based on the graduate certificate of focus and needs identified during coaching.

2. *Extent project is designed to build capacity and yield results beyond Federal assistance.* Our needs assessment is based on feedback from our 18 school districts and revealed a variety of gaps that our project will address: providing ongoing and sustained school leader training to be highly effective, reducing educator shortages, improving diversity especially in high-need schools, addressing changing student demographics and meeting the needs of the population of students moving to the area, making strategic human capital decisions **(CPP 1)**, promoting equity in underserved student access to educational resources and opportunities **(CPP 2)**, and meeting the SEL needs of students and teachers **(CPP 3)**. As highlighted in our logic model in *Appendix G*, *ASCEND* is designed to build capacity in our region by advancing school leader feelings of preparedness in leading high-need schools, raising confidence in leading schools with high concentrations of high-need students, improving performance, enhancing relationships between school leaders and teachers, and increasing retention at high-need schools. Capacity building and future results will come from the following: ❶ At the end of the three-year project, districts will have access to a pipeline of 150 diverse school leaders who are empowered to be effective educators through extensive professional learning as a result of earning a graduate certificate(s) and engaging in coaching experiences that will continue to have impact on student achievement beyond Federal assistance. ❷ The design of three new graduate certificates (Human Capital

Diversity; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Social-Emotional Learning) will be available at HPU for future school leaders to develop pedagogical practices. ❸Diverse and trained executive coaches and mentors in each district will be available to provide professional learning and support for current and future school leaders to improve their practice. ❹Our partnership with PTEC will enable the development of a sustainable, web-based resource portal to offer free educational leadership professional development to districts. Participants will serve as a resource by offering training and content development. This portal will provide opportunities to share best practices, provide collegial support, address common issues, and facilitate the development of peer networks.

3. Extent there is a conceptual framework underlying the research or demonstration activities and quality of that framework.

The vision of *ASCEND* is to create layers of support based on *promising evidence* for school leaders to increase the number of highly effective educators in the high-need, diverse Piedmont-Triad region of NC. Three main goals underly our conceptual framework for our proposed demonstration activities: ❶recruit and prepare K-12 school leaders to effectively serve high concentrations of high-need students, ❷increase leadership diversity and retention while improving leader performance, and ❸improve academic achievement and SEL among high-need students. Our field-initiated innovations will be tested through a K-12 pipeline of school leaders from 18 regional school districts with a mix of high-poverty urban, city, suburban, and rural locales all with significant numbers of high-need schools providing a strong setting to test strategies that improve school leader effectiveness and student outcomes. The study of our demonstration activities will include both a formative component to assesses program implementation and a summative component to assess achievement of goals and performance measures. Our detailed logic model in *Appendix G* links inputs to activities and indicates predicted short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes tied to our overarching vision. The theory of action for our

framework is that if school leaders are engaged in evidence-based professional enhancement activities through ❶ education leadership graduate certificates, ❷ executive coaching and mentoring, and ❸ capacity building, then this continuum of support will lead to improvements in practice and student outcomes. Rather than taking a siloed approach, we hypothesize that the operational relationships and cumulative effect of all three components will have a positive impact on school leader effectiveness and underrepresented student achievement. The quality of our framework centers on two promising evidence-based practices documented on the *Evidence of Effectiveness Form*. ❶ **McREL Balanced Leadership**: The WWC determined one study meets group design standards without reservations demonstrating evidence of a potentially positive effect of Balanced Leadership on school leader retention.^{19,20} The Balanced Leadership approach engages school leaders in professional development that focuses on 21 specific actions and behaviors (e.g., adaptability, advocacy, communication, change agent, intellectual stimulation, situational awareness, visibility, etc.) that are linked to improved student outcomes. This professional development includes training sessions on the 21 actions and then provides one-on-one coaching to support improvements in practice. Through *ASCEND*, we will mirror the Balanced Leadership approach by aligning course content for our graduate certificates to the 21 actions and behaviors and providing one-on-one executive coaching plus supplementary group and team coaching, mentoring, and collaboratories. Research finds that executive coaching provides positive outcomes for school leaders including improvements in team leadership performance, sustainable organizational change, increased self-awareness and emotional intelligence, higher leader resilience levels, and development of strategic thinking skills.²¹ Further, the NC School Executive Principal and Assistant Principal Evaluation Process is aligned to the Balanced Leadership framework providing additional opportunities to focus on school leader effectiveness.²² ❷ **New**

Leaders' Aspiring Principals Program: The WWC determined one study met group design standards with reservations demonstrating evidence of a statistically significant positive effects of Aspiring Principals on mathematics and literacy achievement outcomes (promising evidence) and principal retention (moderate evidence).^{23,24} The program targets aspiring principals who may become promising future principals providing a one-year residency program along with intensive support through experiential learning, mentoring, and in-person professional development sessions and webinars. Through *ASCEND*, we will mirror the Aspiring Principals approach by providing each school leader cohort with one-year intensive graduate coursework and professional learning opportunities similar to a residency program. This process will include concurrent professional development through graduate certificate coursework; hands-on, job-aligned coaching and mentoring estimated at seven hours per month; and in-person training sessions (e.g., annual leadership collaborative institute, NCASCD conference, and specialized selection of two professional conferences based on identified needs).

4. Extent services to be provided involve the collaboration of appropriate partners. Table 2 summarizes partners with specific commitments found in letters of support in *Appendix D*.

Table 2. ASCEND Partnerships

Piedmont Triad Education Consortium (PTEC; 18 school districts) will delegate a representative to serve on the Advisory Committee; facilitate communication about *ASCEND* across the districts; collaborate with the Leadership Team to inform graduate certificate program offerings, executive coaching, and high-quality professional development relevant to the needs of the districts; and host an educator resource portal on PTEC's website where educators trained through the program may share resources with education leaders across the districts.

NC Department of Public Instruction will consult with the Leadership Team on professional

Table 2. ASCEND Partnerships

learning programs, opportunities, and strategies that will be useful for program participants; facilitate connections to virtual professional development resources, such as webinars, online modules, and online forums; and invite participating school districts to in-person professional development opportunities, such as conferences, seminars, meetings, and technical assistance.

HPU's Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs will designate a representative to serve on the Leadership Team; provide Diversity Education trainings to school leaders participating in the *ASCEND* to give them a better understanding of paths to educational equity and ways to ensure that traditionally underserved students receive equitable access to resources and opportunities; and provide consultation to the Leadership Team and Stout School of Education on the development of a graduate certificate program focusing on DEL

Center for Creative Leadership will serve on the *ASCEND* Advisory Committee; offer leadership development resources to school leaders who are participating in the program as part of the annual educational leadership collaborative institute; facilitate a 360 Assessment and follow-up coaching for each program participant; provide technical assistance in the development of a SEL graduate certificate program at HPU; train one executive coach for each of the participating school districts and HPU through the Institute for School Leaders Coaching Excellence (total of 20 per year); and train one 360 Assessment facilitator for each of the participating districts and HPU through Assessment Certification Course (total of 25 in Year 2).

NC Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (NCASCD) will provide opportunities for *ASCEND* school districts to network with other districts across the state at the annual NCASCD conference and access to professional development resources, including those related to improving the performance and skillsets of new principals, assistant principals, and

Table 2. ASCEND Partnerships

central office staff, as well as those related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and SEL.

District Partners will engage in ongoing communication with the ASCEND Leadership Team and Advisory Committee to inform grant programming and activities, assist with recruitment of school leaders into the program, provide 0.05 FTE in-kind superintendent (18 total per year) salary and benefits, and provide 0.15 FTE in-kind participants (50 cohort members plus 20 executive coaches; 70 participants per year) of salary and benefits.

5. Extent project design is appropriate to and will address the needs of the target population or other needs. ASCEND targets PTEC comprised of 18 K-12 public school districts in central North Carolina. These districts serve 271,555 students across 474 schools and include 2 of NC's largest districts, 11 rural, 2 suburban, and 5 town/city districts.²⁵ The region is plagued by poverty with 41.4% of all students qualifying for either free/reduced lunch or the Community Eligibility Provision.²⁶ Educational attainment is low across the region with 17.5% of adults 25+ having less than a high school diploma (NC: 12.4%; US: 12.2%) and just 22% with a bachelor degree or higher (NC: 32%; US: 32.9%).²⁷ **Identified Need: School Leader Professional Development (PD) and Support.** To meet the annual need for retiring principals, staffing new schools, and increased turnover and vacancy rates, NC must produce at least 300 new principals per year, however, the supply of qualified principals in NC has decreased by 50% in the last 15 years and is most acute in high-poverty, rural districts, the majority of the PTEC coalition.²⁸ This is due in part to state restructuring of educator pay which discourages teachers from gaining advanced educational leadership degrees or pursuing leadership positions.²⁹ NC has identified the need for increased supplemental support and PD for school leaders to include job-embedded, ongoing, and customized PD and coaching to improve leader retention and increase leadership efficacy.³⁰ Across

PTEC districts, 44% of principals or assistant principals are inexperienced with less than 3 years on the job (NC Average: 39%).³¹ Other identified needs include PD on evidence-based strategies to increase student achievement, meeting students' nonacademic needs, and those of subgroup populations.³² However, state PD is mainly compliance-focused with district PD funding going to teachers rather than school leaders.³³ ► **ASCEND Model Alignment:** *ASCEND* will provide new and aspiring leaders the opportunity to earn tuition-free certificate credentials from HPU with the ability to choose a PD pathway that meets their specific needs across 10 content and 3 new certificates developed through SEED which will better position and support these educators in leadership roles. Each certificate pathway consists of 4 courses aligned to national AAQEP and NCDPI standards. Participants can complete 1 course in the Spring and Fall semesters and 2 during the Summer. Each pathway can be taken as a non-degree standalone certificate or participants can stack 3 certificates and earn a Master's in Educational Leadership or 4 certificates (plus a dissertation) to earn an Ed.D. degree. Existing certificates are listed in Table 1 and the three new certificates aligned with SEED will be launched in 2023 and include: **OHuman Capital Diversity (CPP 1)**, **@Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (CPP 2)**, and **@Social-Emotional Learning (CPP 3)**. In addition to meeting identified school leader needs on topics such as subgroup populations and academic and non-academic student needs, certificate courses will be aligned to the evidence-based McREL Balanced Leadership model, identified by WWC as having promising evidence in increasing educational leader retention.³⁴ A 2021 study also found the model increased leader effectiveness with positive impacts on student achievement.³⁵ NCDPI's current educator evaluation system is based on the McREL model.³⁶ HPU's certificate course pathways design was developed to include and promote key McREL components including strategic, cultural, instructional, human resources, managerial, external and micro-political leadership abilities.³⁷

Along with graduate coursework, professional development for each cohort (*described in Section A1*) will provide an additional layer of intensity and duration at seven hours per month to support applied learning, team-based strategies, and improvements in practice. This part of our program model is based on the New Leaders' Aspiring Principals Program, which targets aspiring principals who may become promising future principals providing a one-year residency program along with intensive support through experiential learning, mentoring, and in-person professional development sessions and webinars which was found by WWC to have a statistically significant positive effect of Aspiring Principals on mathematics and literacy achievement outcomes (promising evidence) and principal retention (moderate evidence).^{38,39}

Identified Need: Student Outcomes: A total of 86 PTEC schools have been identified as “low-performing” with 96 labeled as reoccurring low-performing schools (low-performing in 2 of the last 3 years).⁴⁰ Target students are below state averages in key academic indices including: a) ACT Scores (Target Schools: 17.1; NC: 18.2; US: 20.7), b) SAT Scores (Target: 1,094; NC: 1,147); and c) % Passing AP Exams (Target: 38%; NC: 49%, US: 64%).⁴¹ Further, SEL indicators show referrals to law enforcement are more than double the state average while incidents of bullying outpace the state average in our target schools.⁴²

► **ASCEND Model Alignment:** *ASCEND* will provide certificate programs which directly address increasing student achievement (e.g., The Principalship, Educational Leadership, Instructional Coaching, DEI, SEL). These courses are aligned with the Balanced Leadership approach and are designed to build 21 leadership responsibilities and 66 leadership practices which were found by WWC to have potentially positive effects on school leader retention⁴³ with a 2021 study confirming an empirical relationship between school leader effectiveness and student achievement.⁴⁴ HPU has ensured certificate pathways course content aligns with this model to equip school and district leaders with the skills, knowledge and

dispositions to make data-based decision-making to ensure all students have accessible, relevant, and rigorous educational experiences. Integral to this approach is the use of three key components identified as increasing educator capacity to provide transformational leadership in high-need schools: instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management, all of which are incorporated into HPU graduate certificate programs.⁴⁵

Identified Need: Disproportionality: Principal demographics in our target schools (White: 76.2%, Black: 20.5%, Other: 4.3%) are not reflective of our student population (White: 50.1%, Hispanic: 22.9%, Black: 15.8%, Multi-Racial: 5%; Other: 1.6%). Additionally, 59% of target schools were cited by the state for consistently underperforming student subgroups on state standardized exams with 269 of the 278 schools failing to meet student growth targets for students with disabilities (SWD);⁴⁶ 32 for English Learners; 27 for Black students; and 25 for Economically Disadvantaged Students.⁴⁷ Black students, English Learners, and SWD consistently underperformed in key academic indicators compared to their more affluent, white counterparts.⁴⁸ Similarly, SWD, Black, Hispanic and Economically Disadvantaged students were far more likely to be suspended, reported for bullying/harassment, or referred to law enforcement.⁴⁹ A 2021 statewide task force (i.e., DRIVE) has proposed revising NC Teaching Standards to incorporate anti-racist, anti-bias, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy standards as well as strengthening support networks for educators of color to increase leader effectiveness and foster more inclusive environments.⁵⁰

► **ASCEND Model Alignment:** *ASCEND* proposes to increase the supply of well-trained school leaders who are the same race/ethnicity as the majority of PTEC students as minority leaders are uniquely positioned to understand and address the social, political and economic inequalities common to students of color.⁵¹ HPU will work with PTEC districts to recruit minority school leaders for enrollment in our graduate certificate program, which features applicable certificate-

bearing strands on Special Education, Instructional Leadership and Coaching, and SEED supported certifications in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion **(CPP 2)** and Social-Emotional Learning **(CPP 3)**. Certificate courses incorporate research-based components combined with coaching and support shown to increase educator retention, efficacy, and improve student outcomes.^{52,53} Additionally, minority students with same race/ethnicity leaders are less likely to receive disciplinary infractions, and more likely to graduate and enroll in college.⁵⁴

b. SIGNIFICANCE

1. Importance or magnitude of the results or outcomes. *ASCEND* has been designed to ensure that our vision, to create layers of support based on *promising evidence* for new principals, assistant principals, and central office staff to increase the number of highly effective educators in the high need, diverse Piedmont-Triad region of NC with an emphasis on increasing educator diversity, equity, and student SEL, is achieved. In the short- and mid-term, *ASCEND* will increase the number and percentage of school leaders who feel well-prepared to lead high-need schools and have confidence in leading schools with high concentrations of high-need students as well as improve performance for principals and assistant principals, relationships between school leaders and other educators, and student SEL. *ASCEND's* long-term outcomes will lead to increased retention of school leaders at high-need schools and improved student academic achievement.

► **Regional Approach Blueprint Model:** In taking a regional approach, *ASCEND* is well positioned to serve as a model program for other districts or regions that encompass a hybrid mix of rural and urban high-need schools, which could also be adapted to focus on the activities with the most impactful outcomes in only urban or rural areas. Our regional approach will build from the work of the Tucson Regional Education Collaborative (TREC). TREC has developed a roadmap to implement a regional collaborative using best practices in the field of design thinking

and high-quality professional learning.⁵⁵ To date, the program has been lauded by superintendents to reduce costs, attract highly effective educators to the region, and as a promising avenue for a university to bridge gaps between the districts while strengthening relationships.⁵⁶ The proposed regional approach will also allow for the expansion of PTEC's resource portal. ► **Resource Portal:** *ASCEND*'s contributions to the online resource portal will be a collection of evidence-based resources and professional development activities (i.e., tools, job-aids, research, and other leadership resources) categorized by their linkage to effectuating positive change in the 21 McREL Balanced Leadership competency areas. ► **McREL Balanced Leadership:** In a recent report in WWC, a 2015 study on the Balanced Leadership program's effects on 124 principals found that the program was effective in reducing principal turnover in the three years following the intervention with an average effect size of 0.45 and +17-improvement index. The study was found to meet WWC standards without reservations and have potentially positive effects, indicative of evidence of a positive effect with no overriding contrary evidence.⁵⁷ Certificate coursework will be aligned to the promising evidence-based McREL Balanced Leadership framework. ► **_____ Leaders' Aspiring Principals Program** The WWC determined one study met group design standards with reservations demonstrating evidence of statistically significant positive effects of Aspiring Principals on mathematics and literacy achievement outcomes (promising evidence) and principal retention (moderate evidence).^{58,59} The program targets aspiring principals who may become promising future principals providing a one-year residency program along with intensive support through experiential learning, mentoring, and in-person professional development sessions and webinars. Through *ASCEND*, we will mirror the Aspiring Principals approach by providing each school leader cohort with one-year intensive graduate coursework and professional learning opportunities similar to a residency program. This process will include concurrent professional

development through graduate certificate coursework; hands-on, job-aligned coaching and mentoring estimated at seven hours per month; and in-person training sessions (e.g.,

► **360 Assessments:** In a recent study of 12 vocational high school principals across 40 participating pilot schools, 360 Assessments were found to benefit the school leaders in improving their effectiveness.⁶⁰ In partnership with the Center for Creative Leadership, we will train at least one 360 Facilitator per district and all school leaders participating in the *ASCEND* program will receive a 360 Assessment and one hour of coaching follow up. ► **Job-alike Mentoring and Collaboratories:** Research in the field has long held that mentoring from an experienced individual with a similar job is an effective strategy to increase principal effectiveness.⁶¹ In a survey from late 2021, 77% of secondary principals expressed a desire to have more time to connect with principals facing similar challenges.⁶² *ASCEND* will address this desire by providing job-alike mentoring (1.5 hours per month) and team collaboratories (1.5 hours per month) to program participants. Through our mentoring and collaboratory activities, *ASCEND* will pilot the research-based and newly developed Networked Improvement Community framework. Using this framework, HPU will serve as the hub and will use our collaboratory activities to develop a theory of practice improvement; build a measurement and analytics infrastructure; learn and use improvement research methods; lead, organize, and operate the network; and foster the emergence of culture, norms, and identity consistent with network aims as a means to develop and test promising strategies that address the critical challenges facing school leaders.⁶³ The education leadership collaboratory institute, held annually in October starting in Year 2, will provide a venue for the sharing of promising practices, strategies, and activities of the piloted Networked Improvement Community. ► **Executive Coaching:** A

recent review of 44 studies focused on coaching for educators found that the pooled effect size on student academic achievement was .18 standard deviations.⁶⁴ In addition to grant-funded Executive Coaches, we will train one Executive Coach per district each year and *ASCEND* participants will receive one-on-one monthly executive coaching (2 hours) and team coaching (2 hours). ► **National Significance:** As a country, our schools and students continue to experience the phenomenon known as the ‘principal churn.’ In 2019, prior to the advent of COVID-19, annual principal turnover stood at almost 20%.⁶⁵ The National Association of Secondary School Principals recently released survey results which found that only 35% of 2021 secondary school principals were generally satisfied in their role as principal of their school, a significant decline from the 63% who responded affirmatively in 2019.⁶⁶ With job satisfaction facing this steep decline, it is not surprising that 38% of secondary principals reported expecting to exit the profession within the next three years.⁶⁷ The costs of the ‘principal churn’ are high, for both our communities and our students. A recent study in neighboring South Carolina found that the average cost to replace a high school principal is \$23,974.⁶⁸ More importantly, when principals leave their schools, students’ academic achievement declines. A recent quasi-experimental study found that when principals turnover, students’ academic achievement decreases by .01 to .02 standard deviations and persists for up to an additional year after a principal’s departure.⁶⁹ In addition to reducing principal turnover, particularly in light of new and emerging research, it is equally imperative that we develop, implement, and evaluate programs that have the propensity to increase a principal’s effectiveness. The Wallace Foundation recently conducted a systematic synthesis of two decades of research on how a principal affects both the students and the schools they serve, with the overall finding that effective school principals have a broader and stronger impact than previously known.⁷⁰ Specifically, in examining six rigorous studies, the report found that effective

principals, given the scope of their average reach, have the ability to impact the student achievement of 23 times the number of students in a school when compared with that of a classroom teacher (483 compared to 21), making investments in effective school leadership the greatest opportunity for a return on an investment.⁷¹ ► **Improvements in Student Academics:** Moving the needle of effectiveness for a principal from the 50th to 84th percentile of effectiveness results in student academic achievement increasing .13 standard deviations in math and .09 standard deviations in reading.⁷² Replacing a principal who had a 25th percentile ranking with an effective principal with a 75th percentile ranking yielded annual math and reading learning gains by almost three months.⁷³ ► **Improvements in Teaching:** Effective principals are more likely to recruit, hire, and retain effective teachers and having an effective teacher is the single largest predictor of increased academic achievement for students.⁷⁴ In 2018, researchers from Johns Hopkins and American University found that having one diverse teacher in elementary schools makes children more likely to graduate high school and significantly more likely to attend college.⁷⁵ Through *ASCEND*, school leaders will have the opportunity to receive training in effective strategies to attract, place, and retain effective diverse teachers in their high-need school as well as providing high-quality one-year clinical experiences  ► **Decreased Suspensions:** A recent NC study of principals found that when principals were more likely to suspend or expel (the 90th percentile of strictness) that students were less likely to graduate and more likely to be charged with a crime in early adulthood.⁷⁶ Recent research also indicates that inequities persist or are exacerbated when school leaders apply disciplinary practices unequally.⁷⁷ In training school leaders to identify and examine the sources of inequity and inadequacy, including disciplinary practices, *ASCEND* will provide principal and assistant principal participants with the tools and skills necessary to transform their school's climate to be inclusive,

equitable (CPP 2), and focused on the SEL needs of their students (CPP 3). ► **Increased School Climate and Teacher Satisfaction:** Teachers having principals who received higher performance ratings on their evaluations reported increased positive climate within their schools.⁷⁸ Teachers also report an increased school climate when principal turnover is reduced.⁷⁹ A recent principal survey of 502 PreK-12 school leaders found that 90% reported student and staff wellness as their greatest concern, further finding that almost 50% of principals were extremely concerned.⁸⁰ *ASCEND* will infuse skills and behavior training and education to prepare school leaders to develop educator and school capacity to recognize and address environments that adversely impact social and emotional well-being and implement trauma-informed practices to increase the school's climate for students and their teachers [REDACTED]. ► **Contributions to Research:** *ASCEND* will contribute to the field of school leadership research by providing school- and student-level outcome evaluation findings on the effectiveness of ❶ school leaders receiving evidence-based professional enhancement activities by type (i.e., school leader certificate programs, executive coaching delivered via one-on-one and in teams, collaboratory participation); and ❷ school leaders receiving training in Human Capital Diversity [REDACTED]; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion [REDACTED]; and Social-Emotional Learning [REDACTED]. At present there is limited research available on the relationship between effective principals and student nonachievement outcomes⁸¹ with *ASCEND* poised to work toward filling that gap. *ASCEND* will also contribute to the emerging research on the effectiveness of the Networked Improvement Community framework to solve the critical and complex problems faced by school leaders.⁸² Overall, *ASCEND* will serve to inform the field about which models, strategies, and practices had the greatest impact on school leader effectiveness.

[REDACTED] As detailed in our Budget Narrative, each line item is linked to *ASCEND* objectives and activities focused on [REDACTED]. *ASCEND* is an innovative model that

creates layers of support based on *Promising Evidence* for new principals, assistant principals, and central office staff to increase the number of highly effective educators in the high need, diverse Piedmont-Triad region of NC with an emphasis on increasing educator diversity, equity, and student SEL. *ASCEND* will target 150 (50 per cohort, across 3 cohorts) school leaders, with an estimated reach of 72,450 students in three years across the 18 regional school districts with a per school leader cost of \$33,953 per year (match and grant budget). These 18 districts represent 19% of the public school student population in NC. The significance of our project will lead to meaningful long-term outcomes such as increased retention of school leaders at high-need schools and improved student achievement. Examples of replicable activities include standalone or stackable certificates focused on educational leadership, executive coaching, and a school leader resource portal. HPU and our partners are providing a 3-year in-kind match of over 25% of the budget as outlined in *Table 3* and in letters of support in *Appendix D*.

Table 3. Matching Contributions	
Description of Contribution	3 Year Total
<p>Leadership Team: The <i>ASCEND</i> Leadership Team (LT) will deliver implementation oversight, share progress with partners and stakeholders, review evaluation reports, make timely corrections, and develop a long-term sustainability plan to continue the project once grant funding ends. The LT will be responsible for designing the three new certificates offered through <i>ASCEND</i>.</p> <p>Match: Time and effort will be tracked for match and includes: [REDACTED] at .15 FTE; [REDACTED] at .40 FTE; [REDACTED] at .40 FTE; [REDACTED] at .25 FTE; Faculty Vacancy 1 ([REDACTED]) at .40 FTE; and Faculty Vacancy 2 ([REDACTED]) at .40</p>	\$638,878

Table 3. Matching Contributions

Description of Contribution	3 Year Total
FTE.	
<p>Partner District Superintendents: Superintendents from our 18 participating Piedmont-Triad districts will contribute 0.05 FTE of salary and benefits to support the <i>ASCEND</i> program annually. Match: Average salary (\$200,000) and benefits (23%) of \$246,000 x 0.05 FTE x 18 superintendents.</p>	\$664,200
<p>Partner District Participants: Partner districts will contribute 0.15 FTE of salary and benefits of their cohort members and participants completing the CCL Executive Coaching 9-month training. Match: Average salary (\$80,000) and benefits (23%) of \$98,400 x 0.15 FTE x 50 cohort members plus 20 executive coach trainees.</p>	\$3,099,600
<p>Center for Creative Leadership (CCL): CCL programs focus on developing the capacity of education leaders to be more effective and intentional in their leadership by helping each participant develop a clear vision of their leadership strengths and developmental needs, and then moving to leverage these strengths and address needs. 1) Annually, CCL will conduct an Institute for School Leaders Coaching Excellence to train up to 20 executive coaches per year as a sustaining support within each of the participating school districts at \$1,350 in-kind discount per executive coach x 20 executive coaches per year. 2) CCL will deliver leadership development resources to school leaders as a part of our annual educational leadership collaborative institute at \$3,750 in-kind discount per quarter x 4 quarters per year for technical assistance and development of</p>	\$126,000

Table 3. Matching Contributions	
Description of Contribution	3 Year Total
leadership development resources per year.	
Piedmont Triad Education Consortium (PTEC): PTEC will apply their skills and leverage relationships with the 18 district partners to support <i>ASCEND</i> by delegating a representative to serve on the Advisory Committee; facilitate communication about the SEED program across the 18 PTEC districts; collaborate with the Leadership Team to inform graduate certificate program offerings, executive coaching, and high-quality professional development relevant to the needs of the 18 PTEC districts; and host an educator resource portal on PTEC's website where educators trained through the program may share resources with education leaders across the 18 PTEC districts valued at \$120,000 annual in-kind contribution to include time and effort of Executive Director, Program Associate, and Office Manager; professional development offerings; resource portal hosting; content development; and convenings.	\$360,000
TOTAL 3-YEAR MATCH	\$4,888,678

3. Potential for incorporation into the ongoing program. ► **Project Purpose:** HPU will continue to work with our *ASCEND* partners to provide school leaders with evidence-based professional enhancement activities, including activities that lead to an advanced credential, beyond the end of Federal funding. ► **Activities:** HPU presently offers twelve certificates, of which ten are relatable to school leadership topics, and the three certificate programs developed through *ASCEND*: Human Capital Diversity (**CPP 1**); Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (**CPP 2**); and Social-Emotional Learning (**CPP 3**) will be incorporated into the certificate offerings at HPU following the end of

Federal funding for *ASCEND*. The competency-related and evidenced-based resources will remain available to all regional PTEC partners in the resource portal. The executive coaches in each district will retain their training and be available to continue providing coaching to future school leaders at each of the participating districts beyond the life of the grant. Our program partner, the Center for Creative Leadership, will provide certification to 25 HPU, PTEC, and district faculty on the facilitation of the 360 Assessments and coaching follow-ups through *ASCEND*, allowing HPU and each district to continue offering this activity beyond the life of Federal funding.

► **Benefits:** The standalone and stackable certificates as well as executive coaching will continue to produce school leaders who are well positioned to experience increased retention in high-need schools and achieve improved student academic and nonacademic outcomes.

Our dissemination plan will include sharing findings, building buy-in, guiding implementation and sustainability, and shaping the field with a focus on communicating best practices in a means that is accessible by various stakeholders (i.e., school leaders, educators, school boards, practitioners, and policy makers). ❶ The effectiveness and successes of *ASCEND*'s strategies aligned to the 21 McREL competencies will be documented in our resource portal. Maintained by PTEC, with resources developed and evaluated to be effective during the *ASCEND* project, the resource portal will serve as a web-based repository for curricula and activities to improve school leader effectiveness, practice, policies, and implementation that can be shared with ease. ❷ Staff from HPU's Department of Leadership will share best practices through presentations at conferences such as the annual NC Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (NCASCD) and other statewide and national conferences related to school leadership at a rate of at least four times per year in Years 2 and 3 and any subsequent years of the grant. HPU will also host an annual education leadership collaboratory institute for 100

participants from the PTEC districts to share resources, tools, strategies, and best practices for effective and impactful school leadership. ③ In collaboration with our evaluator, we will submit our study report to ERIC and WWC; post results on HPU and our collaborating partners' websites; and submit to online registration databases such as the Registry of Efficacy and Effectiveness Studies. ④ We will also host site visits for other institutions of higher education and local educational agencies looking to replicate our model. ⑤ Further, we will participate and share findings in any applicable US Department of Education hosted communities of practice, webinars, and convenings.

c. QUALITY OF THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

1. Extent goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved are clearly specified and measurable.

ASCEND has established three primary goals: ① recruit and prepare K-12 school leaders to effectively serve high concentrations of high-need students, ② increase leadership diversity and retention while improving leader performance, and ③ improve academic achievement and SEL among high-need students. The performance measures associated with each goal are defined in Table 4. For objectives with school level data (objectives 3.1-3.6), baseline will be calculated once we determine which schools the ASCEND participants lead.

Table 4. ASCEND Goals and Performance Measures
Goal 1: Recruit and prepare K-12 school leaders to effectively serve high concentrations of high-need students.
1.1 Each year, at least 50 school or district leaders will earn a leadership certificate. Measure: HPU certificate award records.
1.2 Each year, at least 75% of school leaders who earn a certificate will report feeling well-prepared to lead schools with high concentrations of high-need students. Measure: Annual

Table 4. ASCEND Goals and Performance Measures

evaluator-developed school leader survey.

1.3 Each year, at least 75% of Human Capital Certificate recipients will report feeling well-prepared to recruit and support diverse educators for their school. **Measure:** Human Capital Certificate program evaluator-developed exit survey.

1.4 Each year, at least 75% of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Certificate recipients will report feeling well-prepared to support equity and inclusion at their school. **Measure:** Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Certificate program evaluator-developed exit survey.

1.5 Each year, at least 75% of Social-Emotional Learning Certificate recipients will report feeling well-prepared to support the development and implementation of strategies to support SEL skills among students. **Measure:** SEL Certificate program evaluator-developed exit survey.

Goal 2: Increase leadership diversity and retention while improving leader performance.

2.1 At least 90% of Cohort 1 ASCEND school leaders will be retained at their school for two years following completion of a certificate program. **Measure:** District records.

2.2 Each year, increase by at least 3 points the percentage of “highly effective” ASCEND school leaders. **Measure:** Earning a summative evaluation rating of at least “accomplished” on each of the Principal Evaluation Standards 1-7 and receives a rating of “exceeds expected growth” on Stand 8 of the North Carolina Principal Evaluation Standards.⁸³

2.3 In SY 2023-24, the percentage of teachers at schools with an ASCEND leader who report positive school leadership will increase by at least 5 percentage points over the 2022 baseline. **Measure:** North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey 2024.⁸⁴

2.4 Each year, at least 90% of ASCEND school leaders will report satisfaction with executive coaching supports. **Measure:** Annual evaluator-developed school leader survey.

Table 4. ASCEND Goals and Performance Measures

Goal 3: Improve academic achievement and SEL among high-need students.

3.1 In SY 2023-24, the percentage of students at schools with an *ASCEND* leader scoring proficient or better in reading will increase by at least 3 percentage points over the 2022-23 baseline, with an additional increase of at least 3 percentage points in SY 2024-25. **Measure:** Reading EOG Test Grades 3-8, English II EOC Test Grades 9-12.

3.2 In SY 2023-24, the percentage of students at schools with an *ASCEND* leader scoring proficient or better in math will increase by at least 3 percentage points over the 2022-23 baseline, with an additional increase of at least 3 percentage points in SY 2024-25. **Measure:** Mathematics EOG Test Grades 3-8, Math 1 and Math 3 EOC Tests Grades 9-12.

3.3 In SY 2023-24, the percentage of students at schools with an *ASCEND* leader scoring proficient or better in science will increase by at least 3 percentage points over the 2022-23 baseline, with an additional increase of at least 3 percentage points in SY 2024-25. **Measure:** Science EOG Test Grades 5 and 8, Biology EOC Grades 9-12.

3.4 In SY 2023-24, the percentage of 11th grade students at schools with an *ASCEND* leader who are college and career ready will increase by at least 3 percentage points over the 2022-23 baseline, with an additional increase of at least 3 percentage points in SY 2024-25. **Measure:** ACT Composite Score of 20 or higher.

3.5 In SY 2023-24 and 2024-25, at least 70% of schools with an *ASCEND* leader will report an annual decrease in suspensions and expulsions over the previous year. **Measure:** Rate of suspensions/expulsions per 1,000 students, district disciplinary records.

3.6 In SY 2023-24 and 2024-25, at least 70% of schools with an *ASCEND* leader will report an annual decrease in the rate of bullying and harassment over the previous year. **Measure:** Rate of

Table 4. ASCEND Goals and Performance Measures

bullying/harassment per 1,000 students, district disciplinary records.

We will provide data for the GPRA Measures: **0** % of participants who serve concentrations of high-need students, **8** % of highly effective teacher and principal participants who serve concentrations of high-need students, **0** % of highly effective teacher and principal participants who serve concentrations of high-need students, and serve for at least two years, **8** cost per participant, and **0** # of grantees with evaluations that meet the WWC standards with reservations.

2. Adequacy of the management plan. ASCEND will increase the retention of leaders at high-need schools and improve student academic achievement across the NC Piedmont-Triad region. HPU has modeled our management plan based on the success of other initiatives in the Stout School of Education, including a 2018 US Department of Education Teacher Quality Partnership grant, to ensure the objectives of our project are achieved on time and within budget. Resumes and job descriptions for key personnel are included in *Appendix B. OLeadership Team (LT):* Meeting monthly, the LT will deliver implementation oversight, share progress updates with partners and stakeholders, review evaluation reports, make timely connections, and develop a long-term sustainability plan to continue the project once grant funding ends. Moreover, the LT will be responsible for designing the three new certificates offered through ASCEND, Human Capital Diversity; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and Social-Emotional Learning. Led by ASCEND Project Advisor (PA), [REDACTED], Dean, HPU Stout School of Education at 0.15 FTE; the LT will include [REDACTED], Chair and Associate Professor of Leadership Studies at 0.40 FTE; [REDACTED], Associate Professor of Leadership Studies at 0.40 FTE; [REDACTED], Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies (not counted toward match); and [REDACTED], Senior Director of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs at 0.25 FTE. At the time of this

application, we are in the process of hiring two additional Leadership Studies faculty who will serve on the LT at 0.40 FTE each.

② **Project Director (PD):** A full-time master's level grant-funded Project Director will be responsible for directing all aspects of *ASCEND*, including day-to-day program implementation, communication and activities across partnerships, fiscal and programmatic oversight and accountability in collaboration with the finance office, federal reporting requirements, implementation and continuous improvement efforts, and serving on the Leadership Team and Advisory Committee. [REDACTED], Chair and Associate Professor of Leadership Studies, will serve as Interim Project Director (in-kind) until one is hired.

③ **Accountability Coordinator (AC):** We will hire one full-time Accountability Coordinator who will ensure fiscal accountability through budget management, maintain accurate reporting to comply with federal requirements and local policies, manage the cohort data, and engage in tasks related to the management of each cohort of the education leadership collaboratory.

④ **Executive Coaches (EC):** HPU will contract with five highly effective, retired principal supervisors and superintendents, with coaching experience, to serve as an executive coach for our participants and conduct 1:1 and team coaching and virtual group collaboratories. Participants will be matched with an executive coach in support of their job effectiveness as a building or district level leader.

⑤ **Job-Alike Mentors (JM):** We will contract with highly effective, experienced school leaders to provide 1:1 job-alike mentoring. Participants will be matched with a mentor in their same position.

⑥ **The Evaluation Group (TEG):** Identified through a competitive procurement process that complies with the requirements of 2 CFR 200.317-326, EDGAR 75.135, and local policies, TEG will conduct a rigorous study to determine effectiveness and disseminate findings for continuous improvement and replication. The evaluation will be led by Kathy Dowell, Ph.D. and Melissa Page, Ph.D. who both bring a wealth of experience to evaluating teacher and school leader support

programs including cmTent and prior Teacher Quality Partnership and Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund grants. **&Advisory Committee (AdC):** Comprised of our LT, the Center for Creative Leadership, Piedmont Triad Education Consortium, and each district superintendent, the Advisory Committee will meet twice a year to review data, receive program updates, and make recommendations for improvement. *Table 5* presents timelines and milestones for completion of major project activities for each goal of *ASCEND*. Specific, well-defined objectives and annual performance targets to monitor goal attainment were previously highlighted in *Table 4* above.

Table 5. ASCEND Management Plan		
Milestones	Timeline	Responsibility
Overarching Project Management and Activities		
Convene Leadership Team (LT)	Begin 10/22, monthly	PA,LT
Confirm partner commitments and match	10/22	LT
Confirm grant timeline and hire grant staff	10/22-12/22	LT
Launch recruitment efforts	Begin 10/22, ongoing	PD,LT
Create <i>ASCEND</i> professional development calendar	Begin 10/22, ongoing	LT,PD
Convene Advisory Committee	11/22, semiannually	PD,LT,AdC
Conduct evaluation (data collection/analysis/tools)	Begin 11/22, ongoing	TEG
Receive applications for Cohort 1	11/22	PD, AC
Review applications; Select and notify Cohort 1	12/22	LT
Launch Cohort 1	1/23-12/23	PD
Maintain reporting to SEED Program Office	Begin 4/23, semiannually	PD, AC, TEG
Receive applications for Cohort 2	6/23	PD, AC
Review applications; Select and notify Cohort 2	7/23	LT

Table 5. ASCEND Management Plan

Milestones	Timeline	Responsibility
Launch Cohort 2	8/23-7/24	PD
Receive applications for Cohort 3	6/24	PD, AC
Review applications; Select and notify Cohort 3	7/24	LT
Launch Cohort 3	8/24-7/25	PD
Submit SEED renewal application for Years 4-5	5/25	PD, LT
Submit final performance report and impact study	9/25	PD, TEG
Goal 1: Recruit and prepare K-12 school leaders to effectively serve high concentrations of high-need students [Objectives 1.1-1.5]		
Review existing certificates to align with McREL Balanced Leadership Program actions and behaviors	10/22	LT
Design DEI Certificate and align with McREL Balanced Leadership Program actions and behaviors	10/22 – 12/22	PD, LT
Launch DEI Certificate	1/23	PD
Design Human Capital Diversity and SEL Certificates and align with McREL Balanced Leadership Program actions and behaviors	1/23-4/23	PD, LT, CCL
Launch Human Capital and SEL Certificates	8/23	PD
Goal 2: Increase leadership diversity and retention while improving leader performance [Objectives 2.1-2.4]		
Contract with executive coaches and job-alike mentors	10/22 – 11/22	PD, LT

Table 5. ASCEND Management Plan

Milestones	Timeline	Responsibility
Train executive coaches and job-alike mentors	12/22	PD, CCL
Match Cohort 1 with executive coach and mentors	12/22	PD, AC
Launch Cohort 1 1:1 executive coaching	Begin 1/23, 2 hours/month	PD, EC
Launch Cohort 1 team coaching	Begin 1/23, 2 hours/month	PD, EC
Launch Cohort 1 job-alike mentoring	Begin 1/23, 1.5 hours/month	PD, JM
Launch Cohort 1 virtual group collaboratories	Begin 1/23, 1.5 hours/month	PD, EC
Launch 9-month Institute for School Leaders Coaching Excellence for districts	Begin 2/23, annually	PD, CCL
Complete Cohort 1 Educator 360 Assessment	2/23	EC
Match Cohort 2 with executive coach and mentors	7/23	PD, AC
Launch Cohort 2 1:1 executive coaching	Begin 8/23, 2 hours/month	PD, EC
Launch Cohort 2 team coaching	Begin 8/23, 2 hours/month	PD, EC
Launch Cohort 2 job-alike mentoring	Begin 8/23, 1.5 hours/month	PD, JM
Launch Cohort 2 virtual group collaboratories	Begin 8/23, 1.5 hours/month	PD, EC
Complete Cohort 2 Educator 360 Assessment	9/23	EC
Launch 360 Facilitator Certification Program	10/23	PD, CCL
Match Cohort 3 with executive coach and mentors	7/24	PD, AC
Launch Cohort 3 1:1 executive coaching	Begin 8/24, 2 hours/month	PD, EC
Launch Cohort 3 team coaching	Begin 8/24, 2 hours/month	PD, EC
Launch Cohort 3 job-alike mentoring	Begin 8/24, 1.5 hours/month	PD, JM
Launch Cohort 3 virtual group collaboratories	Begin 8/24, 1.5 hours/month	PD, EC

Table 5. ASCEND Management Plan

Milestones	Timeline	Responsibility
Complete Cohort 3 Educator 360 Assessment	9/24	EC
Goal 3: Improve academic achievement and SEL among high-need students [Objectives 3.1-3.6]		
Identify content for leadership resource portal	10/22-11/22	LT, PTEC
Create leadership resource portal	12/22-1/23	LT, PTEC
Plan educational leadership collaboratory institute	Begin 1/23, ongoing	LT, CCL
Launch leadership resource portal	2/23	LT, PTEC
Add content to the leadership resource portal	Begin 3/23, ongoing	Cohorts
Attend NCASCD Conference to disseminate findings	2/23, annually	PD, Cohorts
Attend school leadership conference	3/23, semiannually	LT, Cohorts
Implement ongoing sustainability planning	Begin 5/23, quarterly	PD, LT
Host educational leadership collaboratory institute & complete Multi-Health Systems Inc. Assessments	10/23, annually	PD, Cohorts
Disseminate lessons learned & promising practices	Begin 10/23, quarterly	LT

d. QUALITY OF THE PROJECT EVALUATION

1. Methods of evaluation will produce evidence about the project’s effectiveness that would meet the WWC standards with or without reservations. The ASCEND evaluation will be conducted by The Evaluation Group (TEG), our external evaluator selected via a procurement process in compliance with 2 CFR 200.317-326, EDGAR 75.135, and local policies. TEG has the capacity to conduct a rigorous, objective evaluation making them highly qualified to serve as our evaluator.

-12 education programs; a multidisciplinary team with expertise in all evaluation areas; training in WWC group design standards and human subject research; and expertise in creating and using project-specific, quantitative instruments and qualitative data collection techniques. TEG has conducted over 180 education evaluations, many of which have focused on teacher education and professional development in high-need areas. Examples of federal grant evaluations include Teacher Quality Partnership, Teacher and School Leader Incentive, GEAR UP, EIR, and Race to the Top District.

Impact Study: Our summative evaluation will include two rigorous, quasi-experimental impact studies to determine the impact of *ASCEND* on school leader retention and student academic achievement and answer the questions: What is the impact of *ASCEND* on retention of school leaders for two years following certification? What is the impact of *ASCEND* on the academic achievement of students in grades 3-12 after up to two years of post-certificate leadership? Both studies will use a quasi-experimental design that will meet WWC 4.1 evidence standards with reservations.⁸⁵ **Study One:** For **study #1**, 50 cohort 1 *ASCEND* school leaders who earn a certificate in Year 1 and receive executive coaching will be compared to a matched group of 200 comparison school leaders who do not enroll into the *ASCEND* program. Treatment and comparison school leaders be assessed for 2-year retention at their school and within their district.

Study Two: To answer **study question #2**, student achievement outcomes for students in Grades 3-12 in our treatment schools (sample size of approximately 24,000) will be compared to student achievement outcomes for approximately 24,000 statistically matched students in schools without an *ASCEND*-trained school leader. Treatment and comparison students in Grades 3-8 will be assessed for differences in achievement outcomes on standardized end-of-grade (EOG) tests in math, reading, and science (Grades 5 and 8). Treatment and comparison students in Grades 9-12

will be assessed for differences on end-of-course (EOC) tests in English II, Math 1, Math 3, Biology, and A

Matching and Analysis: Both studies will use 1:1 propensity score matching (PSM) using nearest neighbor matches without replacement. Treatment and comparison students will be matched on race, ethnicity, gender, grade, and average scaled score on benchmark/previous year reading, science, and math state standardized assessments. School leaders will be matched on gender, race, ethnicity, and years of experience as a school leader. Propensity score matching will help establish baseline equivalence of the study groups by statistically controlling for key variables. The large pool of comparison school leaders and students within the participating districts increases the likelihood of constructing a valid, well-matched comparison group. Data for study #1 will be analyzed using logistic regression for the dichotomous retention outcomes. This study has a minimum detectable effect size (MDES) of 0.314 (alpha .05, power .80). Data for study #2 will be analyzed using 2-level hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to account for clustering of students within schools. The multi-level model will allow for obtaining intraclass correlations and accounting for differences in variation across and within schools and individuals. MDES for this study is 0.121 (alpha .05, power .80).

2. The methods of evaluation will provide performance feedback and permit periodic assessment of progress. Formative evaluation will provide program stakeholders with data needed to monitor progress in implementing program activities and make mid-course program corrections as needed.

Logic Model: Our logic model in *Appendix G* provides a sound theoretical foundation to guide the program design, evaluation, and interpretation of evaluation findings.⁸⁶ The model articulates **key components** (school leadership certificates, executive coaching, dissemination, and capacity building), **mediators** (short- and mid-term outcomes increased school leader preparedness, improved school leader performance, improved teacher-leader relationships, improved SEL

outcomes), and **long-term outcomes** (increased school leader retention, improved student academic achievement). Semi-annual reviews of the logic model will allow us to gauge progress, identify needed program changes, identify unintended outcomes, and ensure results are useful for continuous quality improvement. ► **Continuous Feedback:** In addition, we will combine quantitative program data from surveys and an implementation fidelity index (described in detail in *Section 5* below) with qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with school leaders annually to assess performance and progress toward meeting expected outcomes. *ASCEND*'s success relies heavily on continuous high-quality feedback. TEG will collaborate with the Leadership Team to build consensus on critical evaluation questions, methods, instruments, data collection protocols, and reporting formats. Monthly check-in meetings with TEG will provide opportunities for the evaluator to share updates on the evaluation process; results of the formative evaluation and measures of implementation fidelity; and interim evaluation findings. Evaluation results will also be shared via a dashboard with charts and graphs for ease of access to and interpretation of project data; survey and focus group snapshots; briefings; and interim and annual reports to the US Department of Education.

3. Methods of evaluation include performance measures that are related to the outcomes and will produce quantitative and qualitative data. Our objective performance measures are in *Table 4* in the Quality of the Management Plan. *Table 6* below outlines our data collection plan, with expected outcomes, associated performance measures, data sources, and a data collection timeline.

Table 6. ASCEND Data Collection Plan				
Intended Outcome	Performance Measure	Data Source	Quantitative or Qualitative	When Collected?
Certificates awarded	1.1	HPU records	Quantitative	Annually

Table 6. ASCEND Data Collection Plan

Intended Outcome	Performance Measure	Data Source	Quantitative or Qualitative	When Collected?
Increased school leader preparedness to lead schools with high-need students	1.2	School leader survey Focus groups	Quantitative and qualitative	Annually
Increased school leader preparedness to recruit and support diverse educators	1.3	Certificate exit survey Focus groups	Quantitative and qualitative	Upon completion of certificate
Increased school leader preparedness to support equity and inclusion at school	1.4	Certificate exit survey Focus groups	Quantitative and qualitative	Upon completion of certificate
Increased school leader preparedness to support SEL development among students	1.5	Certificate exit survey Focus groups	Quantitative and qualitative	Upon completion of certificate
Increased school leader retention	2.1	District records	Quantitative	Annually
Improved school leader performance	2.2	NC Principal Evaluation Rubric	Quantitative	Annually
Improved school leader-teacher relationships	2.3	NC Teacher Working Conditions	Quantitative and qualitative	2024

Table 6. ASCEND Data Collection Plan				
Intended Outcome	Performance Measure	Data Source	Quantitative or Qualitative	When Collected?
		Survey Focus groups		
Satisfaction with executive coaching	2.4	Annual school leader survey Focus groups	Quantitative and qualitative	Annually
Improved student academic achievement	3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4	NC EOG and EOC tests, ACT	Quantitative	Annually
Decreased suspensions/expulsions	3.5	District discipline records	Quantitative	Annually
Decreased bullying/harassment	3.6	District discipline records	Quantitative	Annually

4. Methods of evaluation will provide valid and reliable performance data. Our evaluation will use a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive set of data on project implementation and effectiveness. Quantitative data include NC EOG and EOC tests (assumed by WWC to have face validity and be reliable⁸⁷), ACT test scores, the NC Principal Evaluation Rubric, NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey, district school leader retention data, school disciplinary rates, and school leader surveys. During Year 1, we will calculate internal consistency of our school leader and certificate exit surveys by

calculating Cronbach's alpha and refining survey items until alpha exceeds the WWC requirement of 0.50. Qualitative data will include school leader focus groups, program staff interviews, and open-ended survey questions. Qualitative analysis will be guided by code development,⁸⁸ scholarly literature, stakeholder panels,⁸⁹ and member checking⁹⁰ and will provide depth and context to the quantitative data. The constant comparative method will be used to increase the trustworthiness of results. Each qualitative data collection process will stop when we reach saturation.⁹¹

In Years 1-3, we will conduct an implementation study to guide the replication of this project in other districts. ► **Implementation Study**: The implementation study will answer the questions: ❶ To what extent are program activities being implemented with fidelity? ❷ What program components are most effective at achieving desired outcomes and suitable for replication? and ❸ What factors facilitate implementation and what key challenges need to be addressed to guide replication? We will collect implementation data from multiple sources, such as school leader surveys, school leader focus groups, and program staff interviews to identify factors and challenges affecting implementation. ► **Fidelity Index**: Measuring fidelity of implementation of the program will be critical, as research has shown that higher fidelity of implementation of a program is linked to better program outcomes.⁹² We will use our fidelity data to assess the extent to which program activities are being implemented as planned and on schedule. For information to be useful in evaluation, fidelity data must be collected in an explicit and systematic manner.⁹³ To that end, during the first six months of Year 1, we will develop an implementation fidelity index to document and track the extent to which our *ASCEND* program strategies are being implemented as expected. We will collect fidelity of implementation data from multiple sources (e.g., program records, school leader surveys, certificate program logs). The

fidelity index will be created with input from program stakeholders to ensure that the index accurately reflects indicators and targets. The index will be comprised of indicators that align with the program components and strategies identified in our logic model (e.g., certificate program, executive coaching, dissemination, and capacity building) with minimum thresholds for determining “adequate” fidelity. For each program component, fidelity scores will be computed based on indicators of adherence (i.e., number of school or district leader certificate hours), exposure (i.e., number of school leaders coached), and quality (i.e., number of school leaders satisfied with executive coaching) to give us a comprehensive assessment of the implementation of each component. Component fidelity scores will be summed to compute an overall project fidelity score. Targets for each fidelity indicator will be established a priori using baseline data, scaling targets, and input from subject-area experts. ► **Dissemination**: TEG will provide reports on progress toward the implementation targets semiannually to support continuous, iterative program improvements. Qualitative data collection will focus on program strengths, areas for improvement, challenges to implementation, and changes that will improve implementation. To identify the components that have the greatest impact on outcomes, we will run regression models, with component fidelity scores as independent variables and student outcomes (i.e., achievement) as dependent variables. Results of these analyses will inform other IHEs and school districts about which components are most critical for replication and have the greatest impact on student outcomes. Finally, we will disseminate project results through an online leadership resource portal for easy access to resources, presentations at the NCASCD conference, and publication of our final impact evaluation report on the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) website. Through

and serve as a model for replication in other IHE-school district partnerships.