Like districts nationally, Delaware’s 41 school districts and charters—which we refer to in this report as local education agencies (LEAs)—found that students’ needs for social and emotional support, mental health support, and academic support increased dramatically during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Of Delaware’s 41 LEAs, 16 are traditional public school districts, three are vocational-technical districts, and 22 are charter school networks. With the flexibility of the state’s Opportunity Funding program for students experiencing poverty (SEPs) and multilingual learners (MLs), Delaware LEAs chose to invest more in hiring staff to help these students than in any other type of spending, such as instructional materials or professional learning for staff.
KEY FINDINGS

- Delaware local education agencies (LEAs) responded to the coronavirus pandemic by choosing to invest more of their flexible Opportunity Funding in hiring staff than in any other type of investment, such as curriculum materials or training. LEA leaders consistently reported that hiring staff was a best practice for serving multilingual students and students experiencing poverty.

- Most new staff were hired to provide individualized academic instruction. Second most common were staff to provide mental health, social and emotional learning, and behavioral supports to students.

- Many of these staff provide holistic supports to students, including connecting families to food, transportation, and other resources to meet student and family needs beyond school.

Opportunity Funding is a form of weighted pupil funding for Delaware’s K–12 schools. The program, which was first adopted in the 2019–2020 school year, was intended to reduce gaps in achievement between Delaware students overall and SEPs and MLs. The second and third years of Delaware’s Opportunity Funding program overlapped with the first two full school years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report is for the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE). In this report, we share what Delaware’s LEA leaders saw as their most promising Opportunity Funding investments. We also highlight via short case studies three representative ways that LEAs used their flexible Opportunity Funding. We pay particular attention to how LEAs used flexible Opportunity Funding to support SEPs’ and MLs’ academic, social, and emotional needs during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude with recommendations for the DDOE to support their ongoing administration of the program.

This is the fourth and final report of our independent evaluation of the Opportunity Funding and Student Success Block Grant (SSBG) programs. Our evaluation began in 2019 and examines these two programs over the three school years spanning 2019–2020 to 2021–2022. The flexible Opportunity Funding stream is one of the four streams within these state-funded programs. During the 2021–2022 school year, it provided an additional $524.25 for each SEP and $600 for each ML that an LEA enrolled, amounting to approximately 1 or 2 percent of per-pupil funding overall. All told, the DDOE allocated $30 million in flexible Opportunity Funding during the 2021–2022 school year based on the number of MLs and SEPs that LEAs enrolled. We refer the DDOE to our third-year report for a description of how LEAs invested their mental health and reading support Opportunity Funding, as well as our analyses of student achievement (Doan et al., 2023).

How We Conducted Our Analysis

This report relies on two data sources. The first source is questionnaires that Delaware LEAs filled out in each year of our three-year evaluation. The second source is interviews that we conducted with staff in three LEAs. We selected these LEAs in consultation with the DDOE because their flexible Opportunity Funding investments were typical of most other Delaware LEAs (i.e., hire a variety of staff to improve student achievement, address mental health, and boost student attendance) and because they represent a diversity of rural and suburban settings in the state.
In each of the 2019–2020, 2020–2021, and 2021–2022 school years, DDOE or RAND Corporation staff administered either a midyear or end-of-year questionnaire (or both) to all Delaware LEAs. The purpose of the questionnaires was to help the DDOE and RAND assess the implementation status of the DDOE-approved Opportunity Funding investments that LEAs had listed in their annual application, barriers to implementation, and LEAs’ perceptions of which investments they thought were most effective for addressing their students’ needs.

As shown in Table 1, large majorities of LEAs completed the questionnaires in each of the three years, which means that we have relatively complete information about investment implementation across the state of Delaware. In this report, we focus on the most recent questionnaires (filled out in spring 2022) to provide the DDOE the most-up-to-date information about LEAs’ flexible Opportunity Funding investments.

We qualitatively analyzed LEAs’ responses to the following two questions on the 2021–2022 questionnaire. The questions reflect the terminology that the DDOE used at the time, and has since updated, for SEPs and MLs and also reflect the fact that the survey did not define the term best practice.

1. “Are there 1–2 of your flexible Opportunity Funds investments that you think offer examples of best practice for serving English Language Learner students? If so, what are those 1–2 best practices?”
2. “Are there 1–2 of your flexible Opportunity Funds investments that you think offer examples of best practice for serving low-income students? If so, what are those 1–2 best practices?”

We described our methods for analyzing the questionnaires in detail in our prior reports (Doan et al., 2021; Doan et al., 2022b).

We also conducted 20 phone interviews during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years with 22 staff in three LEAs: Colonial, Laurel, and the charter school Academia Antonio Alonso (La Academia). These interviews occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. We spoke to the LEA-level staff who administered the Opportunity Funding investments, the individuals who were hired into Opportunity Funding–supported positions, and a sample of principals and teachers who worked with those new staff in their schools. The purpose of these interviews was to gather illustrative examples of how three LEAs identified their most pressing student needs, selected investments, and implemented those investments to provide the DDOE with rich examples of on-the-ground implementation of investments that LEAs commonly implemented statewide.

When we discuss the questionnaire and interview data, we use most to refer to half or more of respondents. We use some or few to refer to less than half of the respondents, with some meaning more than few.

Limitations of Our Analysis

This report draws on school leaders’ perceptions of which investments they would consider “best practice” rather than direct evidence of whether the investments did or did not improve SEPs’ or MLs’ academic outcomes. Thus, we cannot authoritatively state whether the particular investments that Delaware LEAs made with flexible Opportunity Funding produced their intended effects. Because LEAs had wide latitude to select investments for Opportunity Funding, not all aspects of each investment aligned with the DDOE’s recommended practices, as we

| TABLE 1 |
| Questionnaire Completion Rates |
| Percentage completed | 91% | 92% | 85% |
| Number completed | 34/37 | 39/42 | 36/42 |
Hiring specialized staff to address SEPs’ and MLs’ academic needs was the investment that the greatest number of Delaware LEA leaders perceived to be a best practice.

describe in the final section. For a more in-depth quantitative analysis of the effect that Opportunity Funding and SSBG programs had on student outcomes, please see our companion report (Doan et al., 2023).

**Investments That LEA Leaders Deemed Best Practice**

In all three years of the study, LEA leaders identified which investments they deemed best practices for SEPs and MLs. We remind readers that the survey did not define the term best practice, so LEA leaders may have been thinking of the investments in terms of their ability to raise academic achievement, improve SEPs’ and MLs’ overall well-being, or some other outcome. In each of the three years, LEA leaders’ most popular answers about best practice investments were, in descending order:

- hiring new staff (mostly for academic support, followed by social and emotional learning [SEL] and mental health)
- training staff to implement new programs
- acquisition of new materials or tools.

As we describe in our third-year report (Doan et al., 2023), of the 233 investments that LEAs made in 2021–2022 with flexible Opportunity Funding overall, 150 of the investments were for staff. Staff dwarfed all other categories of investments, such as professional development and curriculum or programming purchases. Of the 150 investments for staff, 40 were for ML-specific staff, such as ML-certified classroom teachers or ML paraprofessionals; 23 were for social, behavioral, or mental health support, such as social workers; 21 were for academic support, such as math or reading interventionists; and the remaining 16 were general or not classified.

Although LEAs used the flexible Opportunity Funding to hire staff for SEPs and/or MLs, many of the newly hired staff—such as social workers—often worked with all referred students, rather than only the portion of students who qualified as SEPs or MLs. We discuss each of these practices in the following sections. We intersperse into these sections vignettes from three LEAs to provide the DDOE with rich examples of how some of these investments were implemented.

**Hire Specialized and Administrative Staff to Address Student Academic Needs**

Hiring specialized staff to address SEPs’ and MLs’ academic needs was the investment that the greatest number of Delaware LEA leaders perceived to be a best practice. LEAs hired teaching staff, academic interventionists, and school leadership and administration staff with Opportunity Funding. These new staff provided MLs and SEPs with extra academic support or one-on-one individualized academic interventions. The extra staff also allowed LEAs to reduce student-to-instructor ratios, enabling instructors to provide students with more individualized support. For example, as one Christina School District administrator wrote in a questionnaire, “The addition of these staff members allowed us to place paraprofessional support in each kindergarten classroom.”

LEAs often hired staff who had specific expertise relevant to SEPs’ or MLs’ needs. For example, some LEAs hired staff to support MLs with their English
language acquisition skills. As one staff member from New Castle County Vocational Technical School District described in their 2022 questionnaire, “Hiring additional teachers [of MLs] and paraeducators has been extremely helpful in supporting our [ML] population. We have been able to support our growing number of [MLs] with the use of these funds.” Some LEAs also used the funds to provide additional compensation to teachers of MLs and to paraprofessionals, as well as to academic interventionists and specialists who worked with MLs. LEA leaders also reported hiring new staff to improve social services for MLs, such as bilingual family interventionists, social workers, or family interventionists.

LEA leaders reported that investments to hire academic support staff for SEPs were a best practice. This included hiring such staff as reading specialists, pre-K teachers, pre-K paraeducators, and academic interventionists to provide one-on-one tutoring. In many LEAs, these new hires helped organize the shift to remote instruction that occurred early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to LEA leaders, the individualized academic supports that these new staff provided were essential to help students struggling with pandemic-induced interrupted learning. For example, in their questionnaire, Capital School District leaders described the importance of their investment in a reading interventionist for supporting MLs while school buildings were closed early in the pandemic. According to this leader, the reading interventionist provided “small group and 1-on-1 direct teaching and conferencing through frequent Zoom sessions and phone calls. They also designed instructional resources to increase accessibility of the at-home learning materials.”

How One LEA Addressed Students’ Language and Reading Struggles: The Case of Colonial School District

Here, we highlight the Colonial School District’s use of its flexible Opportunity Funding dollars to both (1) acquire the Imagine Learning Literacy program to help MLs with English language development and (2) hire tutors through the Reading Assist program to work with students receiving Tier 3 supports, some of whom were MLs or SEPs. Students receiving Tier 3 supports receive intensive interventions that are highly individualized (DDOE, 2021a). District staff said that they selected Reading Assist and Imagine Learning primarily because each took a personalized approach, tailoring instruction to the needs of each individual student.

 Colonial began these literacy programs in fall 2020, which was several months after the pandemic first began. The Imagine Learning online curriculum tracks student progress and automatically adapts to students’ individual learning levels. Reading Assist is a tutoring program in which students receiving Tier 3 supports (so designated primarily based on a DIBELS [Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills] assessment) are pulled out of the classroom to work daily for 30–40 minutes with human tutors in person or virtually to improve the students’ language processing skills, reading capabilities, and phonological abilities. Tutors—who are required to have a bachelor’s degree—are hired locally, trained by Reading Assist, and placed in schools. The district’s literacy coaches directed the Reading Assist tutors and helped teachers use the Imagine Learning curriculum.

Literacy coaches were essential to execution of both programs. For Reading Assist, literacy coaches met with the tutors weekly or even daily to help them diagnose student learning needs, use data to monitor student progress, and devise strategies to keep students engaged and motivate them to do the work. The tutors with whom we spoke said that the meetings with literacy coaches helped them be more effective and therefore facilitated student progress. For Imagine Learning, literacy coaches played a similar role when working with the teachers using the curriculum. In addition to training teachers, the literacy coaches also observed lessons and provided feedback to teachers, helped co-teach lessons, and occasionally pulled students for additional small group or one-on-one instruction.

In spite of the many challenges stemming from COVID-19, the literacy coaches and other Colonial staff with whom we spoke reported that they saw significant reading and language improvements for MLs and students receiving Tier 3 supports.
Beyond frontline staff, some LEAs also hired administrative, school leadership, or management staff with flexible Opportunity Funding. Specifically, they hired such leadership positions as academic deans, curriculum directors, culture and climate deans, and equity coordinators. Administrative staff coordinated the implementation of initiatives related to curriculum and instruction, behavioral management, student culture, and coordination of academic planning. Staff members hired in administrative and leadership positions often worked schoolwide but also focused on specific populations. For example, Caesar Rodney School District hired a second language acquisition coordinator to work specifically with MLs. According to an LEA leader’s questionnaire response, this coordinator helped “oversee the day-to-day operations of the [ML] department of the district. She is the first contact for our teachers [of MLs], and for many of our [ML] parents when they have questions.”

Hire Specialized Staff to Address Students’ Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs

The second most common investment that LEA leaders identified as a best practice for Opportunity Funding investment was hiring new staff to address SEPs’ and MLs’ mental health and social and emotional needs. In Delaware, as was the case nationally, students’ needs for social, emotional, and mental health support increased dramatically during the pandemic. Delaware LEAs worked to improve students’ social and emotional health and mitigate behavioral issues by hiring staff with expertise in these areas, such as school counselors and psychologists, behavioral health specialists, and SEL specialists.

In their questionnaire responses, LEA leaders named hiring these staff as a best practice to address the social, emotional, and mental health needs of both SEPs and MLs, but they more often mentioned these staff as a best practice to address the needs of SEPs in particular. Although the questionnaire that LEA leaders filled out did not ask why they perceived this investment to be a best practice, our interviews in the three case study LEAs alongside LEAs’ questionnaire responses suggest that LEA leaders may have drawn on their knowledge of the challenges that can accompany poverty—such as limited access to reliable transportation and food insecurity—that were exacerbated during the pandemic when they decided to hire these specialized staff. Newly hired social workers and family interventionists helped families in poverty who were struggling to manage student attendance, academics, or behavior. For example, Polytech School District employed a social worker as a student support specialist; this person worked with students to address issues that prevented them from focusing on academics. In their questionnaire, leaders at Polytech said that this person “has been an invaluable asset in addressing attendance and the doubled failure rate during the pandemic while also connecting students with needed academic, mental health, and community services.”

Often, these specialized staff worked with all students—not just SEPs or MLs. According to LEA leaders who made this investment, SEL or mental health staff were able to provide students with a safe space to talk about their emotions. The result of this work, according to LEA leaders, was improved school culture and academic achievement. SEL staff were
How One LEA Tackled Students’ Mental Health Needs: The Case of Laurel School District

Laurel School District used its flexible Opportunity Funding and mental health and reading support Opportunity Funding dollars to hire behavioral health coordinators to support students’ mental health needs. Laurel staff who we interviewed hypothesized that pandemic conditions were linked to students’ frustration with subpar academic performance, which led to behavioral challenges among SEPs in particular. They also noted low attendance from MLs and needed staff with time to address the holistic causes of low attendance. They therefore designed a position (behavioral health coordinator) to address these needs.

Laurel first hired two behavioral health coordinators in the 2020–2021 school year, which they increased to three in 2021–2022. The behavioral health coordinators were trained mental health specialists rather than teachers. Although they worked with all referred students, they predominantly served MLs and SEPs.

The behavioral health coordinators carried out a wide variety of activities to support students and families. They conducted behavioral assessments of students, used behavioral data to develop student behavior support plans, and helped students learn SEL skills in group and individual settings (using Second Step, a widely used SEL curriculum). The behavioral health coordinators organized individual and group anger management and counseling sessions virtually and in person. As one administrator emphasized, “[S]omeone who specifically focuses on behavior is extremely helpful. They have the time to . . . come up with the solutions. It helps teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators.”

Coordinators also built relationships with families living in poverty to help them access needed resources, such as housing, food, and mental health supports. They worked to provide transportation and other supports to ensure that students and their families were taken care of. Finally, they helped develop a team of wellness specialists, which included a licensed clinical social worker and a trauma specialist, to support student needs and crises.

Two main challenges arose with the behavioral health coordinator role. First, behavioral health coordinators’ student caseloads grew too large to be sustainable, leading to long working days and making them feel burned out. One coordinator told us that her caseload was supposed to be 35 students but that she regularly saw 70–80 students. Although administrators wished to hire additional coordinators to reduce student caseloads, finding consistent funding to do so was reportedly difficult.

Second, some coordinators mentioned that their own and others’ roles were not clearly defined. This lack of role clarity made it difficult to identify when a student was having behavioral or emotional problems and connect them with the right resources, such as school counselors, family crisis therapists, the school psychologist, or teachers.

Despite these two challenges, several staff we spoke with in Laurel School District in spring 2022 said that they saw significant improvements in attendance, students’ behavior, and emotion processing. As one administrator noted, “[MLs’] attendance and self-esteem has improved . . . For [SEPs], anger management has been a big thing.” Laurel plans to keep this position going for as long as it can fund it.

either hired to teach SEL lessons (e.g., Second Step) or to train classroom teachers to do so. A La Academia leader described the benefits of hiring SEL specialists to work with students who had mental health issues: “These professional staff have been better able to engage students in learning and positive behavior. The results of their interventions may also be reflected by the decrease in behavioral disruptions, and academic progress data as reported by classroom teachers.” In another example, Milford School District hired school counselors who provided students with direct instruction on character education and SEL skills. Similarly, Gateway Charter School used its funding to purchase a new SEL curriculum for its school counselors to implement with all of its students.
The third most commonly mentioned type of best practice investment was staff training. Even though it was the third most common, in practice it was a very small share of LEAs’ flexible Opportunity Funding investments. Of the 233 investments that Delaware’s 42 LEAs made in 2021–2022 with flexible Opportunity Funding, only ten (in six LEAs) were for professional development (Doan et al., 2023).

For those LEAs that named training as a best practice, they tended to provide new hires and existing staff with coaching, training, and other professional learning to help them implement the specific academic, social, and emotional improvement efforts in their school. For example, Freire school in Wilmington invested in professional learning to improve high school students’ SAT scores and to help teachers implement a new math curriculum. LEAs with large percentages of MLs often focused teacher professional development and coaching on the reading and language interventions and curricula that they had adopted. LEAs that had hired staff or implemented efforts to improve student mental health also provided professional learning and training for these
Most LEA leaders perceived that adding staff was a best practice for supporting the academic, social, and emotional needs of SEPs and MLs.

Purchase Additional Instructional Tools and Increase Instructional Time

Finally, a few LEAs mentioned the purchase of instructional tools, such as new curricula, tutoring programs, or technology tools to help SEPs or MLs with their academic achievement. Some LEAs adopted new core or supplemental curricula, as Colonial did with Imagine Learning, which was designed to build the specific academic skills that SEPs or MLs needed to work on. For example, Delmar School District purchased and then expanded a new curriculum for incoming MLs to help with language development and building vocabulary.

Like Colonial, some LEAs implemented tutoring programs (which entailed hiring new staff) that allowed students to receive one-on-one attention and focus on the academic content where they struggled the most. For example, Milford School District provided one-on-one tutoring to students, based on their PSAT scores, in an effort to increase districtwide SAT proficiency. Students in the program received targeted academic tutoring during the school day and after school and received support from guidance counselors on skills to support them in the classroom.

Some LEAs used their new instructional tools to monitor the academic progress of students in their priority groups. Christina School District was one LEA that used iReady, a new instructional tool, along with other preexisting data sources, to monitor student progress. A Christina administrator said, “We were able to track progress of student performance via progress monitoring, local benchmarks, and computerized programs such as iReady that provide a fall and winter diagnostic.”

Education technology was another category of purchase that some LEA leaders mentioned as most effective to improve MLs’ or SEPs’ achievement. Some LEAs used flexible Opportunity Funding to provide MLs with laptops and educational technology products (e.g., Zearn, Achieve 3000) intended to boost academic achievement. These tools had the added benefit of reducing the financial burden on families experiencing poverty.

Recommendations for the DDOE

We conclude with two recommendations for the DDOE based on LEA leaders’ perceptions of best practice flexible Opportunity Funding investments. The overriding theme is that most LEA leaders perceived that adding staff was a best practice for supporting the academic, social, and emotional needs of SEPs and MLs. Adding staff—as opposed to curricular materials or more training for current staff—was by far the most common best practice that LEA leaders named, and it is also the most common type of investment that Delaware LEAs made with flexible Opportunity Funding.

The need, then, is to equip those staff to succeed. The DDOE has an opportunity in its ongoing administration of flexible Opportunity Funding to communicate to LEA leaders its guidelines and principles for the instruction that these new staff carry out. Specifically, the DDOE has outlined in several policy documents its vision for high-quality instruction for MLs (DDOE, 2019), for culturally responsive education.
We recommend that the DDOE use the flexible Opportunity Funding application process and annual meetings with LEAs to communicate its instructional priorities and share guidance for achieving those priorities.

(DDOE, 2022a), for acceleration (DDOE, undated) to provide access to grade-level instruction (DDOE, 2021b) to all students rather than remediation, and for the selection of high-quality instructional materials (DDOE, 2021c) and high-quality professional learning (DDOE, 2022b). The DDOE is also in the process of revising its terminology to reflect the student-first approach that it advocates Delaware schools adopt as a part of culturally relevant instruction. For example, the DDOE is changing its terms from English learners to multilingual learners and from low-income students to students experiencing poverty to stress the person first and to emphasize assets rather than deficits. We offer the following two recommendations to the DDOE to connect these principles and guidance to help shape the flexible Opportunity Funding investments that LEAs make.

First, we recommend that the DDOE use the flexible Opportunity Funding application process and annual meetings with LEAs to communicate its instructional priorities and share guidance for achieving those priorities. LEAs had wide latitude to select Opportunity Funding investments, and our findings demonstrate that LEAs used these new staff in a variety of ways and provided varying amounts of support and guidance to help them succeed in their roles. The guidance that LEAs did provide may not always have aligned with the DDOE’s recommended practices. Thus, reviewing each LEA’s specific proposed or actual investments (e.g., the hiring of additional personnel, professional learning, or a vendor for tutoring) with the flexible Opportunity Funding is a perfect moment to connect LEAs’ expressions of need to the practices that the DDOE wishes to promulgate for providing high-quality professional learning for those staff to support access for MLs and SEPs to grade-level instruction. We suggest that the DDOE have links to its policies on hand for application reviews and monitoring meetings to aid conversations about how these investments can align with the DDOE’s recommendations. We also recommend that the DDOE revise its flexible Opportunity Funding application template to point LEAs to the specific guidance that the DDOE offers about selecting instructional materials, professional learning, and culturally relevant education.

Second, we recommend that the DDOE review the complete set of flexible Opportunity Funding investments each year to gauge where LEAs see their greatest needs and to then responsively develop needed supports to help LEAs succeed in executing those investments. For example, the prevalence of hiring staff for mental health, for SEL instruction, and for behavior management are instances for which the DDOE can responsively develop guidance or job aides that could help LEAs structure those roles effectively, with high-quality professional learning and perhaps lists of high-quality instructional content from which to choose.
APPENDIX

Case Study Sample and Methods

In January 2021, RAND researchers collaborated with the DDOE to select three LEAs in which to conduct in-depth interviews to gather information about implementation of their Opportunity Funding investments. These LEAs were Colonial School District, Laurel School District, and Academia Antonio Alonso Charter School. We selected these LEAs in consultation with the DDOE to highlight different types of investments in different LEA settings within Delaware.

In August 2021, we conducted six interviews with LEA leaders, school leaders, and staff from the three case study LEAs. These interviews addressed topics related to how the Opportunity Funding investments were selected and implemented and the role that the COVID-19 pandemic played in implementation and LEA activities during the 2020–2021 school year. In May and June 2022, we conducted 14 additional interviews with LEA and school staff in the three LEAs to obtain more-detailed information about the progress of investment implementation and future plans. We used standard qualitative methods to develop our interview protocol and to collect and analyze our interview data. Therefore, this report includes recycled text from other reports that used similar methods (e.g., Doan et al., 2022a).

Data Collection and Interview Protocol Design

Our LEA case study interviews focused on five topics: identification of student needs; Opportunity Funding investment implementation; investment selection and implementation; progress monitoring, collaboration, and data-sharing; and future plans for investments. We used standard qualitative methods to develop our interview protocol and to collect and analyze our interview data. Therefore, this report includes recycled text from other reports that used similar methods (e.g., Doan et al., 2022a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEA</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2022</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laurel School District</td>
<td>1 group interview (2 staff members)</td>
<td>5 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial School District</td>
<td>2 interviews</td>
<td>6 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academia Antonio Alonso Charter School</td>
<td>3 interviews</td>
<td>6 interviews</td>
</tr>
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</table>

LEA administrators and academic and behavioral support specialists. In 2022, we interviewed 17 staff members across the three LEAs (Table A.1). Five of these individuals were also interviewed in 2021. The staff we interviewed in 2022 included LEA staff, administrators, academic and behavioral support specialists, principals, and teachers.

Qualitative Coding and Analysis

We first created five codes that were aligned to our research topics. These codes included identification of student needs; Opportunity Funding investment implementation; investment selection and implementation; progress monitoring, collaboration, and data-sharing; and future plans for investments. These codes allowed us to categorize the data by topic (e.g., to review all the excerpts about future plans for investments together) and analyze them to pull out themes.

We used an iterative approach to coding in which two qualitative analysts coded the data in two stages. First, we organized the interview responses according to our five topics: One analyst coded the responses to each interview question under the appropriate topic. The analyst did this for each LEA separately. Then, another analyst reviewed all the excerpts under each of the five initial codes and created inductive second-level codes, where appropriate, to analyze themes under each code. These second-level codes focused on what the excerpt described (e.g., what investment or student need the interviewee was referring to), what was happening (e.g., how the investment was addressing student needs), and why (e.g., whether the investment was perceived to improve conditions in
the LEA over time and the perceived reasons for that shift).

The analyst reviewed all interview responses and documented the number of responses that fit into each second-level code. We used this information to help us understand the prevalence of various themes or topics within our sample and to inform our identification of key themes within and across sites. For example, a potential theme raised by one respondent in a single site was not considered a key theme for the within-site analysis. However, if this theme was echoed by respondents in multiple sites when we analyzed the data across the three sites, it was considered for inclusion as a key theme.

The first analyst and the qualitative researcher reviewed all the second-level codes within each site to identify within-site themes. Then, the first analyst and the qualitative researcher reviewed the data within each topic (i.e., the five initial codes) across the three sites to identify cross-site themes.

Throughout the data analysis process, the research team reviewed interview responses to surface additional second-level codes and identify emergent themes. The qualitative researcher reviewed the analysts’ coding at each stage to ensure that interview responses were accurately coded to each topic (i.e., the five initial codes), that the second-level codes were comprehensive and appropriate, and that the within-site and cross-site themes considered the relevant data and were based on more than a single response. The team met throughout the coding process to discuss and ensure that analysts were consistently developing and applying second-level codes and identifying themes.

We took multiple steps to ensure the integrity of our findings, such as searching for and examining both confirming and disconfirming evidence (Denzin, 2006). In addition, we leveraged multiple approaches to identify themes, including keeping a running record of potential themes throughout the data-collection process, conducting systematic analysis of coded excerpts, and scheduling regular team debriefs.
References

DDOE—See Delaware Department of Education.


About This Report

This report is the fourth report in a series describing the RAND Corporation’s evaluation of the two Delaware weighted funding programs for disadvantaged K–12 schools spanning the 2019–2020 to 2021–2022 school years: Opportunity Funding and the Student Success Block Grant. This report draws on annual surveys of Delaware local education agencies (LEAs) that received Opportunity Funding and describes investments that the LEAs themselves perceived to be best practices for improving the academic achievement of multilingual learners and students experiencing poverty. This report also draws on in-depth interviews in three LEAs that described consistent and effective implementation to share key implementation takeaways for other Delaware LEAs.

This study was funded through a contract with the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) to conduct an independent evaluation of these two funding mechanisms. This report will be of interest to Delaware LEAs and LEAs in other states implementing or considering similar statewide funding investments intended to serve multilingual learners and students experiencing poverty.

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More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to Elizabeth Steiner at esteiner@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.