

TURNING AROUND THE LOWEST-PERFORMING SCHOOLS: THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERS

“Districts leaders need to invite innovation in every school...”⁷

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

In order to turn around the weakest performing schools, districts can:

- **Direct more resources to the highest-needs schools and students.**
 - Allocate funds or staffing to match needs, giving more funding to schools that are hardest to staff and have the greatest needs;
 - Invest most heavily in building the capacity of the weakest staff, where concerns about staff knowledge, skill or commitment are greatest;
 - Maximize the match between students and staff through changes in classroom or school assignments;
 - Increase allocation of instructional time through schedule changes or additions to the normal school day for underserved or underperforming students.⁸

- **Create incentives and conditions to enable schools with the most needs to attract high-quality principals and teachers.**
 - The inability of many disadvantaged districts and schools to attract highly qualified leadership candidates is not, at its heart, a candidate shortage problem.
 - It is, rather, a problem rooted in poor working conditions and incentives: high-needs districts have difficulty recruiting principals primarily because few well-qualified candidates are willing to accept the pay and working conditions that compare poorly to other districts.⁹

- **Provide timely, relevant data – and training in its use – to enable principals to accurately diagnose and address learning needs.**
 - Principals need real-time, useful data, and training in effective data use, to perform key diagnostic functions: identifying weaknesses in teaching or learning; crafting appropriate strategies to address them; and making decisions about resource allocations.
 - Districts including Atlanta, New York City, Portland and Eugene, OR are investing in new data systems, in data literacy for school staff, and in generating new forms of data (for example, regular surveys of principals or other school-level staff concerning district support).¹⁰

⁷ Southern Regional Education Board, *The District Leadership Challenge: Empowering Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning*, 2009, i

⁸ Margaret Plecki, Michael Knapp, et al., *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement*, Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy, University of Washington. This report is scheduled for publication in October 2009 and will be downloadable for free at www.wallacefoundation.org.

⁹ The Wallace Foundation, *Beyond the Pipeline: Getting the Principals We Need, Where They are Needed Most*, 2003, 5

¹⁰ Margaret Plecki, Michael Knapp, et al., *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement*, Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy, University of Washington. This report is scheduled for publication in October 2009 and will be downloadable for free at www.wallacefoundation.org.

- **Use principal assessments to focus more attention on improving instruction.**
 - Assessments typically used in prominent urban districts reveal little about a leader’s impact on instruction.¹¹
 - Instead of treating assessment as part of an ongoing professional development process, leader assessment is often seen as a single high-stakes event – a form to be completed or an interview conducted. And, few districts use assessment to get data that could help them accurately track how well principals are doing in order to address any shortcomings in their performance.¹²
 - For the first time, a new principal assessment system, VAL-ED, identifies and assesses key leadership behaviors most associated with improved teaching and learning, as well as the ability to share authority. And it provides data to help districts tailor professional development to address school leaders’ weaknesses.

- **Enable principals to devote more time on improving instruction**
 - One new approach being tested in 33 school districts in nine states is to add a school position called the SAM, or School Administration Manager, to relieve principals of many non-instructional tasks.
 - A soon-to-be-published evaluation of this Wallace-supported project found that participating principals – all of whom wanted to spend more time on instructional leadership – initially were spending roughly a third or less of their day on instruction, preoccupied instead by disciplinary or administrative tasks. After the first year, the evaluation found, a SAM can free up an average of an hour more per day for principals to focus on instruction.
 - However, principals working with SAMs typically also need coaching to help them shift their priorities toward instructional matters and away from more familiar daily routines, and to use their instructional time well.¹³

- **Refocus central office staff more on providing support to principals as instructional leaders and less on administrative management issues.**
 - Learning improvement depends on establishing a persistent, supportive and firm central office presence in the school, focused primarily on learning.
 - Some large urban districts are therefore working to fundamentally change the practices and priorities of central office staff so that they are more focused on the instructional needs of schools and their leaders.
 - In those districts, steps such as arranging schools in networks and developing new feedback pathways to the central office have increased responsiveness to particular school needs.¹⁴

¹¹ Andrew Porter, Joseph Murphy et al., *Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education: Technical Manual 1.0*, 2008; Wallace Foundation, *Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders: New Directions and New Processes*.

¹² *Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders: New Directions and New Processes*, The Wallace Foundation, 2009, 4

¹³ Findings are from an upcoming publication, expected later in 2009, by Policy Studies Associates evaluating the School Administration Manager project.

¹⁴ See Meredith Honig, Michael A. Copland, et al., *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*, Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy, University of Washington (available late in 2009). See also Margaret Plecki, Michael Knapp, et al., *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement*, Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy, University of Washington (available on Wallace’s website in October, 2009).