

TURNING AROUND THE LOWEST-PERFORMING SCHOOLS: THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

“There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader...” and, “...the impact of good leadership is greatest in schools where it is most needed.”¹⁵

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Regardless of the turnaround approach used, effective school leadership is essential to success.

- **Investments in good principals are a particularly cost-effective way to improve teaching and learning.**
 - Principals are uniquely positioned in their schools to ensure that excellent teaching and learning spreads beyond single classrooms.¹⁶
- **A good principal is the single most important determinant of whether a school can attract and keep the high-quality teachers necessary to turnaround schools.**
 - As education policy analyst Linda Darling-Hammond recently stated: “It is the leader who both recruits and retains high-quality staff. Indeed, the number one reason for teachers’ decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support – and it is the leader who must develop this organization.”¹⁷
- **Turning around failing schools must be the shared work of many in a school. But the principal must lead that work by:**
 - Aligning resources with learning activities, needs and priorities, and creating structures and incentives for learning around a common agenda.
 - Creating well-functioning instructional teams and distributing authority among many different staff in the school building (including teacher-leaders) to realize that vision.
 - Building external relations that can support a school-wide learning agenda, including garnering community support, sufficient resources and anticipating resistance or conflict.¹⁸

¹⁵ Kenneth Leithwood, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, Universities of Minnesota and Toronto, 2004, 3

¹⁶ Leithwood, 12

¹⁷ *Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform*, Speech by Linda Darling-Hammond, 2007, 17

¹⁸ See, for example, Michael Knapp et al., *Leading for Learning: Reflective Tools for School and District Leaders*, 2003; Leithwood, op. cit.; and upcoming research by Bradley S. Portin et al., of the University of Washington, on improving leading for learning in urban schools.