RESEARCH FINDINGS TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL POLICYMAKING:

Evidence & Action Steps for State, District & Local Policymakers

By the Staff of The Wallace Foundation

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Dear Readers:

For the past decade, The Wallace Foundation has worked with states, districts, city governments and community organizations around the country to expand learning and enrichment opportunities both in and out of school. From that work, we have accumulated a body of knowledge and field-based lessons that we believe are highly relevant for developing comprehensive approaches to achieving the Race to the Top reform objectives and other federal strategies to improve public education. As recently described in the Federal Register, those submitting plans to address those objectives will be asked to demonstrate a high degree of policy and strategy coordination at all levels of public education.

In the following pages, we offer a number of research findings and action steps drawn from policies and practices that have been shown to be critical to the success of educational reforms at the local, district and state levels. Given our particular expertise in the areas of educational leadership, arts education and out-of-school time learning, we have focused specifically on recommendations that address the following topics:

- **Coordinating state, city and district policies**
- **Turning around the lowest-performing schools – the role of district leaders**
- **Turning around the lowest-performing schools – the role of the principal**
- **Preparing and developing effective school leaders**
- **Expanding opportunities for out-of-school learning**

Publications cited in this document can be downloaded for free from Wallace's website at www.wallacefoundation.org. And please feel free to contact me or others on our staff if you'd like more information:

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Respectfully,
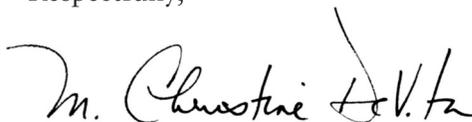
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COORDINATING STATE & DISTRICT POLICIES

"Close collaboration and coordination between states and districts has not been the historic norm. It is complex, time-consuming and challenging to maintain. And it takes the sustained backing of top government and education leaders with the authority to make change happen."[1]

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

- **Better state-district policy coordination has important payoffs.**
  - Where district and state policies are closely aligned, school principals report relatively strong authority over hiring teachers, determining school schedules, and defining student achievement goals; and, they are able to devote more of their time on average to the improvement of class-room instruction.[2]
  - Principals in less coordinated states report greater frustration over time spent in improving instruction and also report that they had less authority over evaluating and removing teachers and administrators.[3]

- **Effectively connecting state and district policies, while rare, can be a promising path to statewide school improvement.**
  Places making the most progress in creating and sustaining more cohesive education leadership policies had the following in common:
  - Strong political support and the engagement of top leaders (state, city, district);
  - Comparatively little staff turnover at key policy positions;
  - Common state-level policies such as academic standards and graduation requirements;
  - Pre-existing social networks and collaboration among governmental and non-governmental organizations; and
  - Shared vision and goals among school boards and superintendents – essential if districts are to translate state policies into local practice.[4]

- **Top leadership commitment is also essential in coordinated efforts to expand learning opportunities outside the school day and year.**
  - Committed public and private leadership is "the price of admission" for achieving large-scale improvements in out-of-school time learning opportunities.[5]
  - Similarly, committed and inclusive leadership has been crucial to recent efforts to expand access to and quality of arts education in New York City, Los Angeles, Alameda County, CA, Boston, Chicago and Dallas.[6]

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[1] *Leadership for Learning: Making the Connections Among State, District and School Policies and Practices*, The Wallace Foundation, 2006, 6

[2] Findings are from upcoming research by RAND, expected to be published later in 2009, on how developing "cohesive leadership systems" has the potential to improve school leadership.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] *A Place to Grow and Learn: A Citywide Approach to Building and Sustaining Out-of-School Time Learning Opportunities*, The Wallace Foundation, 2008, 4

[6] Susan J. Bodilly, Catherine H. Augustine, *Revitalizing Arts Education through Community-Wide Coordination*, RAND, 2008, 65

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]

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[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]

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[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).

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]

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[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.

PREPARING AND DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS

"High-achieving nations…make intensive, consistent investments in teacher and leader development."[19]

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

To attract and keep the right leaders, particularly in low-performing schools, states and districts should draw on the following effective but underutilized approaches to preparing them for the job and creating the right incentives and conditions to support their success:

- **Provide better, more selective training for principals to prepare transformative leaders whose goal is to significantly improve teaching and learning and to turn around failing schools.**
  - Proven effective practices in the preparation of future school leaders include:
    - Selective recruitment to identify expert teachers with leadership potential;
    - A challenging, coherent curriculum that focuses on instructional leadership, the ability to change the culture of schools and improve the skills and effectiveness of teachers;
    - Active, student-centered instruction that integrates theory and practice, problem-based learning, budget exercises, hiring and effective data use; and
    - Well-designed and supervised administrative internships that provide real opportunities for aspiring principals to experience leadership first-hand.[20]

  - Graduates of the NYC Leadership Academy – which incorporates the above practices – were placed in extremely low-performing schools and improved their schools' academic performance at higher rates than other new principals in English-language arts and at comparable rates to non-Academy trained principals in math.[21]

- **Don't ignore state policies that can affect principal training.**
  - Experts have raised serious concerns about the quality and relevance of the leadership preparation provided by many university-based programs – which are where most of our principals are trained – and about the speed and effectiveness of state actions to address those shortcomings.[22]
  - Collaborative efforts by state and local leaders have shown promise in improving these training programs in some states. About 200 such programs located in Wallace-funded states have either been forced to redesign their programs to align with new leadership standards and to what's known about effective training practices or, less frequently, have been shut down for failing to do so.

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[19] The Wallace Foundation, *Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform*, 2007, transcript of address by Linda Darling-Hammond, 19

[20] Linda Darling-Hammond et al., *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs*, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007, 6; also see The Wallace Foundation, *Becoming a Leader: Preparing School Leaders for Today's Schools*, 2008

[21] New York University Institute for Education and Social Policy, *The New York City Aspiring Principals Program, A School-Level Evaluation*

[22] Southern Regional Education Board, *Schools Need Good Leaders Now: State Progress in Creating a Learning-Centered School Leadership System*, 2007, 2

- **Encourage school districts to better exercise their own "consumer" power to influence the training of the school leaders they will eventually hire.**
  Some districts are becoming more "discerning customers" by:
    - Being more selective in hiring program graduates (Chicago, Fort Wayne, IN and Louisville, KY);
    - Using contracts and other inducements to influence universities to improve their program content and delivery (Louisville, St. Louis, Providence, Chicago and Springfield, IL); or
    - Becoming competitive with universities by starting their own district-level preparation programs (New York City, Providence, Fort Wayne, Boston and Springfield, MA).[23]

- **Provide more and better mentoring for new principals once they're hired.**
    - More than half the states and many districts have recently introduced mentoring for principals – a sharp reversal of a long-held "sink-or-swim" attitude toward novice school leaders.[24]
    - In the absence of quality criteria, however, mentoring can be just a "buddy system" that fails to propel the progress of new principals as effective leaders of learning.
    - States and districts should ensure that mentoring is focused on student learning. (For example, the NYC Leadership Academy guides its mentoring by using a Leadership Performance Planning Worksheet, which identifies key behaviors linked to successful instructional leadership. The Worksheet has been used to mentor nearly 1,000 new principals in eight states and districts.)
    - To attract high-quality mentors, states and districts need to provide enough funding for stipends and to train mentors to perform their roles effectively. One example: Missouri recently began to provide such training and has done so for more than 600 mentors statewide.

- **Enhance peer and district support for both novice and veteran principals.**
    - Recognizing that effective instructional leadership requires regular, sustained support for both novice and veteran principals, central office staff in some urban districts are providing individual support to school principals as well as creating networked groupings where peer principals can support each other.[25]

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[23] Findings are from an upcoming report by the Education Development Center on how school districts can influence the quality of university-based leader preparation programs, expected for publication later in 2009.

[24] The Wallace Foundation, *Getting Principal Mentoring Right: Lessons from the Field*, 2007, 3

[25] See Bradley Portin, Michael Knapp, et al., *Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools*, Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy, University of Washington (available at www.wallacefoundation.org in October 2009) and Margaret Plecki, Michael Knapp, et al., *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement*, Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy, University of Washington (also available on Wallace's website in October 2009).

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING

"…providing children and youth with wholesome places for learning beyond the school day is a worthy goal for all cities to pursue."[26]

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Schools and their leaders and teachers can't do the whole job alone. Cities and school districts can work together to extend and reinforce learning beyond the school day and year by:

- Creating more high-quality after-school and summer opportunities;
- Mobilizing and effectively coordinating other enrichment resources in communities, including libraries, arts and cultural institutions and parks; and
- Developing and using data to monitor attendance and program quality and to determine what parents and children really want in out-of-school time learning programs.

- **Promote coordination between and among school systems and youth-serving organizations to increase the availability of learning and enrichment opportunities beyond the traditional school day.**
  - To achieve such citywide coordination, the following factors are key: the commitment of top public and private leaders throughout the system; research to understand where existing resources are; and the development and use of data to track student participation and program quality.[27]

- **Conduct community mapping to reveal underserved areas, under-resourced programs or inequitable resource distribution, thereby helping to mobilize support for addressing those needs.**
  - New York City used neighborhood-by-neighborhood mapping to correlate the distribution of city-funded after-school programs with population data on high-needs children. As a result, the City's Department of Education was able to identify more than 500 schools mostly in underserved neighborhoods and opened them up, free of charge, to new city-funded after-school programs.

- **Use attendance data and surveys of parents and kids to reveal the needs and preferences for services both during and after the school day, whether those needs are being met, and barriers to participation.**
  - There are stark differences in the ways poor and minority families and better-off families perceive the availability of programs, as well as what they want from them. Poor families are far more dissatisfied with the availability and quality of programs and much likelier than more well-off families to want academically oriented after-school and summer programs for their kids.[28]
  - A number of cities have also been using market research to identify what parents and kids want in out-of-school learning. Such research in Washington, D.C., for example, found the greatest demand for arts and cultural programs and for homework help, while also revealing widespread anxiety about safety both at program sites and in getting to and from programs.

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[26] The Wallace Foundation, *A Place to Grow and Learn: A Citywide Approach to Building and Sustaining Out-of-School Time Learning Opportunities*, 2008, 14

[27] See *Revitalizing Arts Education through Community-Wide Coordination*, RAND, 2008; *Increasing Arts Demand through Better Arts Learning*, The Wallace Foundation, 2009; *A Place to Grow and Learn*, The Wallace Foundation, 2008.

[28] Public Agenda, *All Work and No Play? Listening to What Kids and Parents Really Want from Out-of-School Time*, 2004, 11-12

- **Match resources to results and target funding toward high-quality services that combine strong attendance, program effectiveness and good management.**
    - To support high-quality afterschool programming, a number of big cities – New York City, Chicago, Denver, Louisville, San Francisco, Boston and Providence, for example – have created Management Information Systems that can, for the first time, provide both citywide and program attendance data.

- **Significantly improve summer learning programs.**
    - Summer learning loss is well documented, along with its consequences in worsening the achievement gap. The problem tends to be more severe among lower-income families for whom engaging non-school activities are less available.[29]
    - Research has identified a handful of programs that have reduced summer learning loss in reading achievement or math.[30] But those programs have not yet been successfully brought to scale.

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[29] Ron Fairchild et al., *It's Time for Summer: An analysis of Recent Policy and Funding Opportunities*, National Summer Learning Association, Johns Hopkins University, June 2009, 3

[30] Mary Terzian et al., *Effective and Promising Summer Learning Programs and Approaches for Economically-Disadvantaged Children and Youth: A White Paper for The Wallace Foundation*, Child Trends, 23. The successful programs cited in this research included: Louisiana Summer Youth Opportunities Unlimited; Building Educated Leaders for Life (B.E.L.L.); and Read to Achieve. The Louisiana program and B.E.L.L. reduced summer learning loss in both reading and math.

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Supporting ideas.
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Our mission is to enable institutions to expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people. We do this by supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices.

To achieve our mission, we have three objectives:
- Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement
- Improve after school learning opportunities
- Build appreciation and demand for the arts

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