

# PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

## BACKGROUND

The School Leadership Program (SLP) provides grants to high-poverty school districts to assist in the recruitment, preparation, and retention of effective principals. SLP is currently the only federal program specifically dedicated to strengthening school leadership.

**An investment in principals is an investment in teacher and student success.** Given the significant influence of a principal on school culture, teacher practice, and student learning, it is critical that we get serious about properly preparing and developing school leaders.

**Principal development and support is essential—and currently deficient.** School leaders regularly describe their pre-service preparation and professional development as wholly inadequate in preparing them to be effective leaders, particularly in the area of improving instruction.<sup>1</sup>

Federal policy must support vital investments in school leader preparation and support.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

New Leaders recommends funding a dedicated school leadership program<sup>2</sup> at \$38.8 million.

**Fund cutting-edge, evidence-based strategies to improve principal effectiveness:** Use competitive grants and other activities to test promising strategies, which could set new bars for what is possible and inform more effective uses of formula funds. While it is important to weave school leadership into other initiatives, funding a dedicated program can be particularly effective in spurring innovative models and building the capacity of principals to deliver results for students.

**Focus on up-front preparation:** Seed models of promising principal preparation programs, support the redesign of traditional programs committed to implementing best practices, and scale up programs with evidence of effectiveness.

**Provide on-going support to principals and instructional leadership teams:** Provide current principals with the support they need now. Providing support to principals and their instructional leadership team fosters the kind of collaboration that enables educators to strategize, build community, and hold one another accountable for results.<sup>3</sup> By sharing and distributing leadership, principals can focus their time and energy on their most important responsibilities while drawing on and strengthening the skills of their entire staff to support school improvement.

**Train principal managers:** Advance meaningful professional development for school leaders by investing in principal supervisors. Just as teachers need great principals, principals need supervisors that balance support and accountability.

Developing great school leaders needs to be a core strategy—not an afterthought

Reserve national activities funds for principal effectiveness activities

## PRINCIPALS MATTER

Research shows—and our experience confirms—that strong school leaders have a powerful multiplier effect, dramatically improving the quality of teaching and raising student achievement in a school. Principals account for 25 percent of a school's impact on student achievement, which is significant for a single individual. Moreover, 97 percent of teachers list school leadership as essential or very important for their career choices—more than any other factor. The bottom line: school improvement simply does not occur without strong leadership, particularly in under-performing schools.

## ABOUT NEW LEADERS

New Leaders is a national nonprofit that develops transformational school leaders and promotes the system-level conditions that allow strong leaders to succeed. Founded in 2000, New Leaders has trained nearly 2000 principals and teacher leaders who are building vibrant schools and elevating student achievement and graduation rates in high-need schools across the country. Beyond its flagship principal training program, New Leaders provides a comprehensive portfolio of leadership development programs to support educators at all levels, from teacher leaders to district administrators. It also advocates for effective leadership policies and practices in school systems nationwide. For more information, visit [www.newleaders.org](http://www.newleaders.org).

## CONTACT

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<sup>1</sup> Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K.L., Anderson, S.E. (2019). *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Final Report of Research to The Wallace Foundation*. University of Minnesota and University of Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> We support funding the current SLP or the President's proposed Teacher and Principal Pathways program as long as the funding includes support for aspiring principals as well as current principals and their instructional leadership teams.

<sup>3</sup> Louis et al.

## PROGRAM IN PRACTICE

**How school leadership funding helped Chicago students:** “I had already completed my training and was credentialed as an administrator when I joined New Leaders,” Alfonso Carmona says in describing how he became a principal. “I honestly thought that being an administrator was doing paperwork. I knew there was something missing. I just didn’t know what it was!” Carmona now leads Robert Healy Elementary, a high-poverty school he’s taken from good to great. He attributes his success to three key leadership practices he learned during his training as an SLP-funded New Leaders Resident.

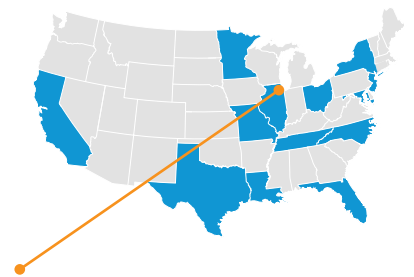
- 1. Teacher observations.** Carmona asserts that conducting meaningful teacher observations and delivering actionable feedback have been critical to improving instruction at Healy. He received intensive training in these skills during his leadership residency. “There was a high level of complacency; everyone thought we were doing fine and some teachers had gone five years without receiving feedback. In my first year, I conducted 15-20 walkthroughs in each classroom... Slowly people began realizing that there were some gaps on the job they were doing, especially for certain subgroups.”
- 2. Data-driven instruction.** “Analyzing data and applying it to instructional decisions was powerful for me—as a former economist, I know you can interpret data in different ways,” says Carmona. As a resident, he was trained in using data to guide curriculum, lesson planning, and pedagogy, and he has embraced data-driven instruction as a central improvement strategy for his school. Carmona has invested in technology both to increase student access and to provide teachers with better analytic capacity.
- 3. Leading difficult conversations.** As principal, Carmona found that leading honest and sometimes painful conversations with teachers plays a central role in accelerating school improvement efforts. Through coursework and practice during his residency, Carmona built these skills. “Some conversations were hard with veteran teachers who had been highly rated for over 20 years, but based on the data and our observations, they were teaching at a very basic level. I realized they had never been given feedback from one of their previous seven principals. And here I was twenty years their junior.”

In sum, the skills and practices that Carmona cites as vital to his success were developed and refined during his participation in the New Leaders training program, either in cohort learning sessions or during his residency under the tutelage of a master principal. This kind of hands-on, practical training is what enabled Carmona to achieve dramatic academic gains at his school.

**How school leadership funding could be improved:** Carmona is forthright in his critique of professional development for school leaders. “We’re doing an awful job investing in our leaders. We have this mentality that assistant principals are next in line, but we’re doing nothing to develop their capacity. Many principals become principals because they are the “next in line”, not because they were ready to take this new challenge.” He adds that “very little attention is paid to how principals build teacher leaders within their buildings. And we are still doing the same things with principals. No matter where you are, you get the same professional development. I got PD on data, even though I’m pretty good with it. What I needed was more training on how to address the needs of our diverse learners.”

This year, Carmona was selected for the Chicago Principal Fellowship, an executive leadership program for high performing school leaders. He applied for the fellowship seeking opportunities to grow in his role as a principal. “It’s the first time as a principal that I feel like I’m getting what I need. We attend classes at the Kellogg School of Business, we mentor current principals who are on the rise, and we get more flexibility over funding for our schools.” Carmona sees a need to double down on strategies that help principals focus on the right things. “There is a huge lack of understanding of how schools should be run. Too much compliance, too much time on paperwork, too much time on testing. How do we minimize all of these distractions to maximize what is truly important: student learning?”

## ALFONSO CARMONA LEADERSHIP IN ACTION



### Robert Healy Elementary Chicago, Illinois

Robert Healy Elementary School is a fine and performing arts magnet school serving 1,396 students in central Chicago. Nine out of ten students are low income and the school is ethnically diverse, with a large English learning population (25 percent of students).

Alfonso Carmona has led steady growth in student achievement since becoming principal of Healy in 2009. On state and local assessments, Healy’s results earned “far above average” ratings for both absolute results and growth over time. In 2014, 70 percent of students tested by the state met or exceeded standards in reading (13 percent higher than the state average) and 82 percent met or exceeded standards in math (22 percent higher than the state average).