

PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

BACKGROUND

The School Improvement Grant (SIG) program is designed to support the lowest-performing schools—those that are most in need of strong leadership.

Turning around a chronically failing school requires a special type of leader. Such leaders can diagnose the root cause of problems and build consensus around solutions—even when these require tough choices. They focus intensely on changing the culture of a school as a basis for other improvements. They are instructional leaders who know how to bring out the best in every teacher and student in the building. And they act decisively in the short term while maintaining a focus on long-term success.

Turning around the lowest-performing schools requires strong leadership

A turnaround school leader needs supportive conditions. To hit the ground running, turnaround leaders should be appointed early enough to participate in critical planning activities, including developing the school improvement strategy, hiring the right staff, and making tough calls on the budget. They also require the right balance of support and autonomy from the district so they can deploy funding, personnel, and other resources in service of their improvement plan.

Federal policy should ensure that these schools are staffed with leaders who have the right disposition and the specific competencies needed to succeed in this challenging context.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

New Leaders recommends funding SIG at \$555.8 million, the amount requested by the Administration.

Focus federal resources on the schools where great leadership is needed the most

Continue support for the Turnaround School Leaders Program:

Strengthen leadership pipelines for persistently low-performing schools by investing in projects that select, prepare, support, and retain school leaders in SIG schools.

Ensure principals are prepared to transform outcomes in long-struggling schools:

Require districts to verify that principals are “turnaround

ready” in order to access SIG funds. The verification can be achieved through demonstrated prior effectiveness in a similar role or completion of a program that prepares principals specifically for turnaround schools.

Empower principals to lead turnaround before day one: Ensure principals tapped to lead SIG schools are involved in early decisions about planning, staffing, and budgeting for the coming school year.

Invest in innovation: Use SIG and other federal funds to create “leadership lab” schools where great principals can grow other great leaders, test promising ideas, and scale new models of teacher leadership by developing in-school systems and structures that support shared leadership and development.

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.

CONTACT

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PROGRAM IN PRACTICE

What school turnaround looked like at Acorn Woodland: Leroy Gaines leads a good school. The building is calm when it needs to be calm. Teachers and students have meaningful leadership roles. The staff carefully examines student learning data as indicators of the effectiveness of instructional practices aligned to new standards. “It’s a joy to work here,” says Gaines. “I love coming to work every day. It’s a good combination of high expectations, fun and also a sense of urgency. I think our staff works extremely hard. It’s nice when you’re in a building with people who enjoy the work and enjoy being around students and families. Also, it’s enjoyable to be around families that like it.”

That’s not how Kimi Kean found the school when she assumed the principalship of Acorn Woodland a decade before. “Our school was in a place of real chaos. It was not safe.” Kean also points to unacceptable discipline data as indicative of the school’s situation: “80 percent of our office referrals and suspensions were African American boys, even though about 45 percent of our students were African American. We had to take responsibility for that.” Kean began a multi-year effort to build and sustain a positive school culture focused on interrupting historical patterns of dysfunction. “In year one, I was really clear, I needed to model high expectations, and I needed to hold people really accountable for demonstrating high expectations, and that means students and adults. Years two and three were about building the capacity of teacher leaders to really run the school culture and to really stand up for it.” By years 4 and 5, Kean and her staff had funded a Dean of Students position to focus on diagnosing student needs and collaborating with families to address those needs.

Gaines took on the next level of work, focusing the school culture work squarely on equity. “We don’t want to just have acceptance and have folks being around each other in the same space. We want to actually move to where there’s action. And where there’s a deep empathy for other folks’ struggles and a deep commitment to battling those struggles and joining in on the movement.” Gaines also took on the challenge of focusing on more rigorous instruction, aligning teaching to new standards a year before most schools.

How school improvement funding could be improved: Though not a SIG school, the dramatic improvement of Acorn Woodland – where almost no students were proficient in English Language Arts or mathematics at the start of the change— offers two important lessons for how SIG is structured and funded. The first involves time. The experience of Kean and Gaines highlights the need for providing time for improvement. Acorn Woodland’s trajectory – from principal-led work to teacher empowerment to institutionalized practices and powerful stakeholder engagement—characterized Kean’s and Gaines’s approach to critical facets of leadership: school culture, instructional practice, and family engagement. In every case, change took years to take root. “Parent engagement at Acorn has evolved over the years,” says Gaines. “In the beginning, we were just excited that parents were coming to the school and engaging in our meetings. Now we have twenty-four parent leaders at the school site. When you walk into our building and you see the parents and you see the teachers, you can’t really tell who’s who.”

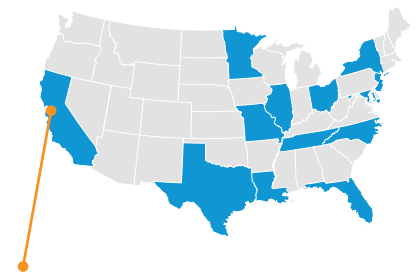
The second lesson involves the preparation of leaders. Kean had learned in her New Leaders preparation program how to diagnose school conditions and adapt her leadership accordingly. As a result, she was comfortable with her role changing and evolving. She also brought instructional leadership practices to Acorn from her New Leaders training: “The structure of data driven instruction was in place, but it wasn’t aligned with the curriculum or with standards. Now we have the New Leaders standards-aligned assessments and a standards-aligned instruction framework.” To make more turnarounds like Acorn Woodland possible, there needs to be more federal support to ensure that low-performing schools are led by principals who are prepared as turnaround leaders and have the sustained funding and support needed to lead the long process of school transformation.

Schools can turn around with great leadership



Leroy Gaines

Kimi Kean



Acorn Woodland Elementary
Oakland, California

Acorn Woodland Elementary School serves 285 students from kindergarten through Grade 5. It is a very high-need population serving primarily immigrant Latino families: 94 percent are low-income and 67 percent are English Learners.

Under the leadership of two successive New Leader principals, the school was transformed from crisis to excellence. In 2002, almost no students at Acorn Woodland were proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) or mathematics. Seven years later—through Kimi Kean’s leadership, first as a New Leader Resident then for six years as principal—seventy percent of students were proficient in math and 48 percent were proficient in ELA. New Leader Leroy Gaines assumed the principalship in 2011 and boosted ELA scores by 15% and math scores by another 7% within three years. Last year, Acorn Woodland was named a California Distinguished School in recognition of its high student achievement.