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.1

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

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

New Leaders recommends funding a dedicated school leadership program2 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.3 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.

2 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.
3 Louis et al.

PRINCIPALS MATTER

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**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?”
**BACKGROUND**

**Investment in principal effectiveness needs to be commensurate with its importance.**

ESEA Title II, Part A funds can be spent on a wide range of human capital activities, including recruitment, professional development, and career development for teachers and school leaders, as well as class-size reduction.

**School leadership is underfunded.** Unfortunately, school leadership is significantly underfunded. A representative sample of 800 districts reported spending just four percent of Title II-A funds on professional development for administrators, compared to 40 percent for teachers and paraprofessionals.1

**Current funding is not being used effectively.** The funds currently allocated towards school leaders are not focused on the most effective activities,2 such as high-quality preparation, job-embedded professional development, and reducing the number of principals supervised by each principal manager.

Federal policy needs to shift the balance and the focus of investments in school leadership.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

New Leaders recommends increasing funding for ESEA Title II-A and setting aside funds for states and districts to address cross-cutting leadership needs—an efficient use of dollars that will pay dividends in building great schools where teachers thrive and student excel.

**Reserve Title II-A funds at the state and local levels for principal effectiveness activities**

Reserve funds at the state level: Increase the state-level reservation of Title II-A funds to 10 percent and set aside at least half of that specifically for principal effectiveness activities. A set-aside for school leadership could support revising leadership standards, improving principal preparation, and implementing evaluation and support systems. At a minimum, states should have the option of accessing a portion of Title II-A funds specifically for principal effectiveness.

Use funds effectively: Ensure that funds are spent on activities that research has proven effective. For example, consider high-quality professional development where principals and teachers share leadership, resulting in stronger relationships and higher student achievement.3 Provide detailed guidance that includes a deeper focus on school leadership.

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1 According to findings from the 2012-2013 Survey on the Use of Funds Under Title II, Part A (June 2013), in a representative sample of 800 districts, just four percent of federal Title II funds were reportedly spent on professional development for administrators as compared to 40 percent for teachers and paraprofessionals.
**How school leadership funding helped Cleveland students:** As Chief Academic Officer for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), New Leader Michelle Pierre-Farid has an enormous scope of responsibility. She oversees principal supervisors, curriculum and instruction, school improvement, data and accountability, special education, athletics, supports for English learners, and social and emotional learning.

Despite the many issues competing for her attention, Pierre-Farid maintains a strong focus on principal leadership. “Looking at the research, leadership matters. A principal’s impact on student achievement is second only to teachers.” Recognizing this, CMSD has strategically increased principal autonomy as a key school improvement strategy. “Principals should have more authority in the hiring and placement of teachers. The selection process is important: create a framework and allow schools to find teachers who best fit. They should also be able to remove teachers fairly and quickly. Principals should have flexibility in how to use funds and how they use their school day. If I believe in a later start time or in a double block of math, if I provide data on the reason why, that should be allowed to occur.”

To support principals, Pierre-Farid works through the district’s seven principal supervisors. “With a caseload of 15 principals each, they are a lever for change, so we have created a community of practice to increase their capacity to support principals.” She has also made a number of investments directly in principals, including an onboarding program, leadership coaching, an aspiring principals program, professional development on key issues (e.g., setting academic goals, implementing new academic standards, and supporting social-emotional learning), and targeted support for turnaround principals. Pierre-Farid says that principals need support specific to their role. “If you expect teachers and teacher teams to make decisions based on formative assessment results, then as a principal I need to look at data with my instructional leadership team.”

**How school leadership funding could be improved:** Pierre-Farid has leveraged district funds, federal grants, and foundation dollars to pay for investments in principals. “So many times under Title II guidance, leadership is not included, so you have to look all over the world for funding for principals.” She laments not having enough flexibility and clarity in Title I and Title II guidance and she points to the planning process for Race to the Top as a possible model for prioritizing principal leadership through formula funds. In those plans, states and districts had to articulate how they were building the capacity of principals. “Districts should show how they are leveraging leaders and teachers to implement key strategies. If you’re building understanding of new standards, how are you doing it for teachers and how are you doing it for principals? If you want to change practice, you have to get people to change.”

With competing priorities and unclear federal direction, using existing formula funds for school leadership can be difficult. Yet strong district leaders know that they must pay attention to how schools are organized and led if they want to create schools where teachers love to teach and students love to learn. “Explicit uses of funds for school leadership, a needs assessment and planning requirements that recognize the important role of teachers and school leaders, and clearer direction from the federal government would help districts leverage formula funds to help principals create the best learning environments for all students,” says Pierre-Farid.
BACKGROUND

The Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) provides for the development and implementation of sustainable, performance-based compensation systems for teachers, principals, and other personnel. This program has helped high-need schools and districts move from a pay system based primarily on seniority to one that focuses on student outcomes.

Principals build teacher capacity and identify and support teacher leadership and other career advancement opportunities. Reforms focused on improving teacher effectiveness have brought a sharp focus to the critical role school leaders play in hiring the right staff, bringing out the best in each and every teacher, and helping those teachers to expand their reach. Research has suggested that a primary way that principals affect student achievement is by improving teacher effectiveness and retention. They develop teachers, manage talent in their buildings, and make schools great places to work. Unfortunately, many efforts to boost teacher effectiveness have downplayed or underestimated the role of principals.

Federal policy needs to advance a broader view of human capital management that bolsters principals’ capacity to improve teacher effectiveness and student outcomes at scale.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

New Leaders recommends funding TIF at $350 million with a deeper focus on school leadership.

Ensure that human capital systems include the full continuum of educators

Broaden TIF to focus on more than just performance compensation: Statutorily support the creation of comprehensive human capital systems and career ladders that advance school improvement. Invest in innovative districts to help uncover new models for recruitment and retention. Ensure that applicants address teachers, teacher leaders, principals, and principal managers in the creation and development of model human capital management systems.

Recognize the importance of school leadership: Add “leader” to the program name (the Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund (TLIF)) and ensure that applicants address teachers, teacher leaders, principals, and principal managers in the creation and development of model human capital management systems.

Set aside 30 percent of the funds for school leadership activities: Ensure that a portion of TIF resources are dedicated specifically to school leadership activities. For example, allow districts to honor master principals and tap into their expertise by Designating their schools as leadership labs to train future leaders. In this instance, TIF funds might be applied to create new roles within the master principal’s building, such as assistant principal for finance and operations, freeing up a high-impact leader to dedicate a portion of her time to developing colleagues.

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How a focus on comprehensive human capital management helped DC students:

Janeeece Docal’s instincts as a leader always point in the direction of building strong teams in the service of equity and excellence for students. Like many leaders of under-performing schools, Docal had to move fast when she started her tenure at Powell Elementary: “The school didn’t have much curb appeal, was failing, was in restructuring, was in danger of closing,” she remembers. She engaged families through several strategies—neighborhood walks, weekly coffees, and the formation of a new parent organization—to build trust, and generate excitement about the school. She engaged teachers to adopt *Tools of the Mind* and *Understanding by Design* instructional strategies to meet the needs of English language learners. But she was also cognizant of the need to distribute leadership responsibilities. “In all of this work, I felt like it was just me in the beginning, taking input from the staff. After setting initial priorities, it was important to build an instructional leadership team (ILT).”

Docal selected members of the ILT, but kept the meetings open, a strategy that allowed new leaders to emerge continuously. “Everyone’s invited and the agenda is public. Those who come show that they have an interest in systemic change, have the passion for it.” She also put all of her discretionary resources into staff, staff development, and teacher recognition. “Now the teachers have formal teacher leader roles and training. They can model and give feedback. Every teacher in the school does peer observation rounds. Also, through my classroom walkthroughs, I’m able to see staff who have exciting practices to share. Innovations in the classroom have surfaced leaders for the school.”

Docal’s approach—combining intensive family engagement and a comprehensive talent management strategy—has paid off. Enrollment has more than doubled from 211 to 446, student achievement continues to rise, and teacher retention is high. “As a team, we’ve turned Powell around and we’re primed to take it from good to great. It’s almost a school that could be run by the teachers; the principal is the vanguard carrying the mission.”

How a focus on comprehensive human capital management could be improved:

Docal’s own training as a New Leader is indicative of what she wants other aspiring leaders to experience. She relied on Barry Jentz’s entry planning techniques to start the school year with strong faculty meetings. She used Ronald Heifitz’s framework for adaptive leadership to help teachers navigate the challenging work of change. And she implemented Paul Bambrick-Santoyo’s observation and data team strategies to make instruction the central priority.

Above all, Docal attributes her practice as a leader to what she learned under the tutelage of a master principal during her principal training residency. She wants the residency model to be the norm as part of a broader human capital system. Teachers often come without all of the best practices. We have to teach and orient them and then give them leadership opportunities. If we could have the leadership residents here and build a pipeline; that would be amazing.”

Docal also believes districts need to create the conditions for principals to focus on developing leadership talent. She is committed to building future leaders, even if it means they leave her school to become principals elsewhere. “The leadership pipeline is important but can be taxing on the school. Multiple people have been promoted from Powell to other leadership roles. If people are always being promoted, which is part of my role, then I am always in a mode of training and supporting. The principal becomes more of a coach, so expectations from the district and staff about the principal’s role may need to change.”

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**Powell Elementary**

Washington, DC

Powell Elementary School is a high-need school serving 446 students in central Washington, DC. Eighty-two percent of students are Hispanic/Latino and 11 percent are Black. The school houses a Spanish dual language program and incorporates project-based learning and assessment into the core curriculum.

Since Janeeece Docal became the principal in the fall of 2009, the school has achieved consistent, dramatic student achievement gains, including a 14 percent increase in reading scores in her first year and a 16 percent gain in math scores in her second year. As a testament to this progress and to the dramatic increase in student enrollment over five years, Docal was named Principal of the Year for DC Public Schools in 2014.
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.

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.

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Leroy Gaines leads a
What school turnaround looked like at Acorn Woodland:
The second lesson involves the preparation of leaders. Kean had learned in her
That's not how Kimi Kean found the school when she
New Leaders standards-aligned assessments and a standards-aligned instruction
where there's a deep empathy for other folks' struggles and a deep commitment
was really clear, I needed to model high expectations, and I needed to hold people
her New Leaders training: "The structure of data driven instruction was in place,
and evolving. She also brought instructional leadership practices to Acorn from
leadership accordingly. As a result, she was comfortable with her role changing
and support needed to lead the long process of school transformation.

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.

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

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.