

Issue Brief

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Leadership for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools A Western Regional Roundtable

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Eight Western U.S. states sent representatives to a two-day meeting that explored the connections between educational leadership and school improvement.

In April 2004, teams of policymakers and practitioners from eight Western states joined Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano and the National Governors Association (NGA) at *Leadership for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: A Western Regional Roundtable*, a two-day meeting that explored the connection between educational leadership and school improvement. Our keynote speakers and numerous panelists offered a number of insightful perspectives and recommendations to heighten the impact of school leaders on the school improvement process.

PERSPECTIVES

Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano

Education is the single most important responsibility of a Governor. The need for strong leadership in districts and schools is critical. Good leaders identify other leaders and give them the opportunity to lead. While the No Child Left Behind Act and the labeling of schools can be a challenge to the exercise of creative leadership, the Act's underlying focus on raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps is sound. Leadership--from the Governor's Office and from within our schools and in our classrooms--is necessary to make this happen.

Richard Laine, Director, Education Programs, The Wallace Foundation

Leaders count, but leadership is even more important. Effective leadership requires knowledgeable and skillful leaders plus the right conditions to allow for the exercise of leadership to support student learning. Instructional leadership is central, and must be supported by a clear vision and an ability to manage change. Schools and classrooms must lead this change, but what states and districts do impacts educators and leaders who work within those settings. The engagement of Governors and other key policymakers is necessary to challenge intractable problems and promote effective solutions.

KEY MESSAGES

Instructional leadership is essential, but leaders also need to function within a political system and be adept at facilitating change. The Wallace Foundation is funding research and work in districts and states to identify key behaviors and conditions for effective leadership.

State/district partnerships are critical to turning around low-performing schools at scale. While helping individual schools often bears results, a state/district partnership can bring change to scale by delivering skill sets needed for effective leadership and by providing intensive assistance to schools that lack the internal capacity for turnaround. Building the capacity of individual administrators and

teachers to share in leadership roles and to implement needed changes is also critical.

There is no single way to be a good leader. States need to be able to recognize and promote a variety of high-performing leadership styles and recruit and retain promising and proven leaders, particularly in low-performing schools.

Target resources and assistance to areas of greatest need. State leaders note a correlation between targeted assistance and increased student achievement. Diffuse assistance has little impact. Determining levels of internal accountability should be a precursor for targeting assistance since effective response to external accountability depends on internal accountability. Focused demand from school districts to teacher education programs also can have greater impact.

The responsibility for school improvement does not always come with the authority to make the necessary changes to turn around under-performing schools. State policymakers must understand and acknowledge this all too common disjunction. Skilled and able superintendents and principals operating within an accountability/governance system that does not provide them authority to make decisions and allocate key resources binds their hands.

Research on the effects of accountability on school improvement recommends that states send consistent signals to schools and their leaders and practice parsimony in policymaking. Accountability is a big part of the context in which leaders operate. Attention primarily to test scores and not student learning can result in dysfunctional responses.

Out-of-school factors also affect the achievement gap. Building relationships with parents and community support can engender improved school performance.

The National Governors Association (NGA) is grateful for the support of the Wallace Foundation in supporting this meeting. The NGA works in partnership with four other national organizations (Council of Chief State School Officers, Education Commission of the States, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Conference of State Legislatures) on the State Action for Educational Leadership Project (SAELP), funded by the Wallace Foundation.

Selected Meeting Resources:

- View the [Agenda](#)
- American Institutes of Research - [California's Public Schools Accountability Act \(PSAA\): Evaluation Findings and Implications](#)
- Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) - [Balanced Leadership Framework](#)
- Panasonic Foundation - [PowerPoint Presentation](#)
- Panasonic Foundation - [Essential School System Purpose and Responsibilities](#)
- Wallace Foundation - [Educational Leadership](#)

Related Documents

- [Reaching New Heights: Turning Around Low-Performing Schools - A Guide for Governors](#)
- [Improving Teaching and Learning by Improving School Leadership](#)

Related Links

- [Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano](#)
- [Department of Education-School Improvement](#)

Resources

- [The New Teacher Project--Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms](#)
- [WestEd--Leadership Initiative](#)

SAELP

- [Wallace Foundation](#)
- [Council of Chief State School Officers](#)

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