



The Wallace Foundation Launches Major “Principal Pipeline” Initiative to Help School Districts Build Corps of Effective School Leaders

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Six-year project will measure effect on student achievement

August 23, 2011 - The Wallace Foundation is launching a \$75-million initiative to help six urban school districts develop a much larger corps of effective school principals and to determine whether this improves student achievement across the district, especially in the highest needs schools.

Based on 10 years of research, Wallace has identified four key parts of a "principal pipeline" that can develop and ensure the success of a sufficient number of principals to meet district needs: rigorous job requirements, high-quality training, selective hiring, and on-the-job evaluation and support.

The six districts, which serve thousands of low-income students, are: Charlotte-Mecklenburg in North Carolina; Denver; **Gwinnett County Public Schools** (near Atlanta) in Georgia; Hillsborough County (near Tampa) in Florida; New York City; and Prince George's County (near Washington, D.C.) in Maryland. The foundation selected these districts from 90 candidates because they already have efforts under way to groom qualified principals and thus are best able to put strong, complete pipelines in place. The six districts' plans include working closely with select principal preparation programs to improve the training aspiring school leaders receive before they are hired by the district.

Over the next five years, Wallace will give each district \$7.5 to \$12.5 million to develop, hire and support new school principals. A condition of the grants is that the six districts contribute funding to the effort. Wallace's grants are to account for two-thirds of the total investment; district funding is to make up the remaining third.

Wallace is launching the first phase of the initiative with \$21.35 million, of which:

- up to \$17 million will go toward strengthening efforts to build the pipeline in the six districts;
- up to \$3.5 million will support independent research that will answer a number of important questions, including whether a strong pipeline results in student achievement gains;
- \$850,000 will provide needed expertise and learning opportunities to the six districts.

"For the past decade, Wallace and its partners have helped identify objectively what it takes to shape a principal who can improve teaching and learning, especially in troubled city schools," said Will Miller, president, The Wallace Foundation. "We have now selected exemplary urban districts that are well on their way to putting in place the training and support necessary to have enough effective principals for all of their schools. The crucial question these grants and the associated research will explore is: can building a stronger principal pipeline improve teaching quality and student achievement district-wide?"

An answer to this question will provide education decision-makers a key missing piece of the school reform puzzle. Research suggests that leadership is second only to teacher quality among school influences on student learning, but more needs to be known about whether efforts to improve leadership pay off for student achievement and whether these efforts can achieve results at the scale of an entire district. If the results are positive, policymakers will know more about whether and how to invest in such improvements.

Over the next five years of the initiative, the six districts will be able to replace all their retiring principals and assistant principals with graduates of high-quality training programs. As important, the initiative will allow the districts to evaluate the performance of these novice school leaders once they are on the job – and then provide them with mentoring and other forms of professional development that address needs determined by the evaluations. The districts project that by the end of the initiative they will have filled at least two-thirds of their principal slots with highly-qualified school leaders.

Throughout the endeavor, independent researchers – to be selected by the foundation in coming months – will be examining the six efforts, in part to see what works and what doesn't in putting a district-wide pipeline together. By the sixth year, the researchers will measure the effects on student achievement of principals who have emerged from these pipelines. The research team will periodically publish reports about its findings.

"Wallace's research and experience shows that a world-class public education system requires an effective principal in every school," said **J. Alvin Wilbanks**, chief executive officer and superintendent, Gwinnett County Public Schools, and the nation's longest-serving urban superintendent. "Gwinnett has already made improving leadership a priority in closing the achievement gap. We are excited to be part of an ambitious initiative that will provide hard evidence about whether and how building a complete pipeline of effective principals can boost student achievement." Gwinnett plans to work with the University of Georgia, the University of West Georgia, as well as the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement.

School leadership often has been overlooked as an education improvement strategy, despite the evidence that leadership influences student achievement. Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without effective principals. One reason is that the principal is the single most important factor in determining whether a school can attract and keep the high-quality teachers necessary to turn around struggling schools.

The new "principal pipeline" initiative takes previous Wallace work an important step further. The foundation is seeking to find out whether districts can create pipelines that produce a large number of highly-qualified principals and whether student achievement rises as a result. A strong pipeline would have four interlocked parts:

1. **Defining the job of the principal and assistant principal.** Districts create clear, rigorous job requirements detailing what principals and assistant principals must know and do. These research-based standards underpin training, hiring and on-the-job evaluation and support.
2. **High-quality training for aspiring school leaders.** "Pre-service" principal training programs, run by universities, nonprofits or districts, recruit and select only the people with the potential and desire to become effective principals and provide them with high-quality training.
3. **Selective hiring.** Districts hire only well-trained candidates to be school leaders.

4. **Leader evaluation and on-the-job support.** Districts regularly evaluate principals and provide professional development, including mentoring, that aims to help novice principals overcome weaknesses pinpointed in evaluations.

The Wallace Foundation will also make additional grants to support the districts in their efforts to strengthen and complete their principal pipelines. These include \$600,000 for Education Development Center (EDC), a global nonprofit organization, to work with each district to assess the quality of its leader training programs using a tool previously developed by EDC with Wallace support. Based on that assessment, EDC will recommend ways to improve principal training to each district and its training programs. Wallace also gave a two-year grant of \$250,000 to the New York City Leadership Academy to manage creating a "learning community" among the six districts so they can exchange ideas, discuss common problems and engage with the evaluators and other experts.

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The Wallace Foundation is an independent, national foundation dedicated to supporting and sharing effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for children. The foundation maintains an online library of lessons at www.wallacefoundation.org about what it has learned, including knowledge from its current efforts aimed at: strengthening educational leadership to improve student achievement; helping disadvantaged students gain more time for learning through summer learning and an extended school day and year; enhancing out-of-school time opportunities; and building appreciation and demand for the arts.