

Baltimore City Unable to Attract Proven Principals

Incentives May Draw Turnaround Experts, But Intensive Support Needed for Others

Executive Summary

Despite invigorated efforts, the Baltimore City Public School System is relying almost exclusively on promising but unproven principals to turn around many of its failing schools. Since the school system is giving significant additional authority to school principals, it is important to try to attract as many principals with proven track records as possible. For other principals to succeed, they will need intensive preparation and significant ongoing support. Incentives can be used to recruit and retain outstanding principals.

Background

The Need for Strong Principals

Research points to a strong school principal as a critical ingredient in turning around a failing school. Effective principals are instructional leaders. They set high standards for all students, attract and retain good staff, allocate resources efficiently, establish strong community partnerships and advocate for the school with the central office^{1 2}.

It is common sense that the person most likely to improve a dysfunctional enterprise is someone who has already done so in a similar situation in the past. If a business chain had a troubled store, it would not send to that store someone with a poor record in other stores. Only as a last resort would it send a person who had never managed a store before. Instead, it would send one of its turnaround experts, providing whatever incentives needed to convince the person to take on this challenge and whatever resources and authority the person needed to succeed.

This is not the pattern in failing schools in Maryland. In five separate studies, Advocates for Children and Youth has found that many of Maryland's most challenging schools suffer from a revolving door of principals, each of whom is new to the task. Since it takes three to five years to turn around a failing school, it is not surprising that most of Maryland's low-performing schools have shown little or no improvement.

What is the solution to this crisis? As a candidate, Governor Martin O'Malley made headlines by proposing

¹ Prince, C (2002). Missing: Top staff in bottom schools. American Association of School Principals.

² Hale, E. & Moorman, H. (2003) Preparing school principals: A national perspective on policy and program innovations. Institute for Educational Leadership. Washington: DC.

\$200,000 bonuses to attract "turnaround principals" to challenging schools. This is an increasingly popular idea with much merit, but it raises many questions, including whether there are enough of these people who will come to Maryland's challenging schools because of large financial incentives.

With up to 200 schools in the State needing assistance, it is unlikely that every school will have a turnaround principal. For schools unable to benefit from principals with proven track records, what can be done to recruit principals with the greatest promise? What supports will they need to maximize their likelihood of success?

School-Based Management in Baltimore City

Under the leadership of Dr. Andrés Alonso, the Baltimore City Public School System has made the role of school principal even more important. Starting this school year, principals have significantly greater authority, particularly over the allocation of financial resources.

Expanded authority can be another incentive used to attract proven principals, in addition to financial rewards. To come to a school, a star principal would want to have maximum latitude to make changes needed to produce results.

On the other hand, new freedoms can create more challenges for new principals. The job is already complex and difficult: now a principal is required to make countless programmatic decisions, e.g., whether to reduce class size or offer summer school.

Baltimore City tried school-based management in the 1980s, as did many other school systems. One of the lessons is that the best principals thrive when left alone, while other principals drown in a sea of too many choices and too many responsibilities for which they had inadequate training or support.

An Initial Analysis

This report examines principal replacements and the movement toward school-based management in Baltimore City.

Dr. Alonso has replaced one quarter of the system's principals. This report examines to what extent he has succeeded in attracting proven principals. What, if anything, can be done to attract more? What are the implications if he has to rely in whole or in part on principals who are promising but not proven?

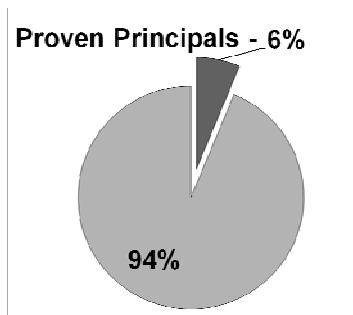


Analysis

Advocates for Children and Youth used two factors in determining whether a newly appointed principal was “proven.” First, the person needed to have served previously as a principal for at least two years in the same school. Second, while a principal at the school, student achievement had to increase more than the state average. This methodology was meant to provide a broad brush determination, not to judge the overall merits of specific appointments. Certainly, school system officials had significant additional information in making their decisions.

BCPSS appointed 48 principals to challenging schools between July 1, 2007, and August 12, 2008.³ School system records and internet searches were used to determine whether each of the 48 principals had previously served as a principal for two years in the same school; 7 principals of the 48 had done so. For each of these 7 principals, we examined the change in student achievement during the principal’s prior school tenure. We determined whether test scores had increased by at least 5 percentage points more than the change in the overall state average.⁴ Only 3 principals met this standard.

In short, 3 out of 48 newly appointed BCPSS principals had a track record of success in turning around a struggling school.⁵



³ Principals were identified through the BCPSS Board of School Commissioners “Personnel, Employment and Payroll Committee Recommendations for Action” (PEP) Reports. We included principals who had to reapply for their positions because of chronic poor student performance in a school. We excluded two principals whose appointments were rescinded after they accepted positions in other districts. Since this analysis focused on struggling schools, we excluded four principals appointed to schools whose test scores were higher than the state average.

⁴ We calculated the difference between school and state proficiency/pass rates in the year before the principal’s arrival. This was the base year. We compared this to the same figure for the principal’s final year in the school. For elementary schools or K-8 schools, we used 3rd grade reading and math on the Maryland School Assessments (MSA); 8th grade results were used for middle schools. For principals with experience in high schools, passage rates from the English 2 and the Algebra High School Assessments (HSA) were used. If a principal began his or her tenure before the MSA / HSA began in 2003, comparable scores from the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) results were used. One principal began her prior tenure prior to the introduction of the MSPAP. We did not consider 2007-08 test results since they were not available at the time of new appointments.

⁵ See Technical Appendix for the results for each of the 48 principals (not identified by name or school).

Discussion

To the extent that Baltimore City schools seek to attract principals with proven track records, additional efforts are needed. Financial incentives can help. If the Governor made available \$200,000 signing bonuses paid over 4 years, the school system would have stronger candidates to consider. Dr. Alonso has proposed \$20,000 bonuses to principals in 10 percent of schools. The program was scheduled to begin in the 2008-09 school year but is contingent on raising private funds. The program would be voluntary, and details are still under development.

Beyond financial incentives, Baltimore City should continue to enhance its recruitment efforts: identify strong (or effective) candidates within the city such as the Triad Program, and encourage them to explore the opportunities afforded by the expanded autonomy.

For the principals who are hired without proven track records, it is important that they have as much preparation as possible and receive significant ongoing support. Some of the newly named principals come from New Leaders for New Schools, where they receive a full year of principal training in a school. When placed in a school, they are supported by a full-time coach; however, the coach works with multiple principals.

Many of the other newly named principals were previously assistant principals, and it is unclear (or uncertain) what type of preparation (or training) they were provided with. These principals are receiving less ongoing support than the principals that were developed in the New Leaders for New Schools Program. They have coaches who are currently also principals of existing schools and therefore have much less time.

It is likely that almost every principal will need more support than currently exists. However, it is important to determine carefully what supports are really useful.

Recommendations

1. Use financial and other incentives that strengthen recruitment efforts to attract outstanding principals with proven track records;
2. Ensure that assistant principals and other internal candidates receive stronger preparation before their appointments as principals;
3. Ensure that all principals, particularly those without proven track records, have access to intensive and ongoing help in how best to take advantage of their newly enhanced responsibilities; and
4. Continue to expand the leadership pool by developing leadership talent within the school system.

Technical Appendix

Principal in Challenging School	Previously A Principal	2 Years As Principal In Same School	Tests Increase 5% More Than State Average Increase	Proven Track Record
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Yes	Yes	No	No
5	Yes	Yes	No	No
6	Yes	Yes	No	No
7	Yes	Yes	No	No
8	Yes	No	No	No
9	Yes	No	No	No
10	Yes	No	No	No
11	Yes	No	No	No
12	Yes	No	No	No
13	Yes	No	No	No
14	Yes	Yes	No	No
15	Yes	Yes	No	No
16	Unknown	No	No	No
17	No	No	No	No
18	No	No	No	No
19	No	No	No	No
20	No	No	No	No
21	No	No	No	No
22	No	No	No	No
23	No	No	No	No
24	No	No	No	No
25	No	No	No	No
26	No	No	No	No
27	No	No	No	No
28	No	No	No	No
29	No	No	No	No
30	No	No	No	No
31	No	No	No	No
32	No	No	No	No
33	No	No	No	No
34	No	No	No	No
35	No	No	No	No
36	No	No	No	No
37	No	No	No	No
38	No	No	No	No
39	No	No	No	No
40	No	No	No	No
41	No	No	No	No
42	No	No	No	No
43	No	No	No	No
44	No	No	No	No
45	No	No	No	No
46	No	No	No	No
47	No	No	No	No
48	No	No	No	No