

Freeing Up School Turnaround Leaders

School leadership is a key factor in school turnarounds.¹ The general prescription for what school leaders should do tends to be this: Set high expectations for staff and students and give strong instructional supports.² Most school systems recognize how tall an order this is, given everything else the principal job entails. Even principals who are ready to engage more deeply in curriculum and instruction are still expected to directly manage schedules, finances, facilities, student safety, and discipline, all while creating an engaging school culture and climate.

This bind is acute for all principals, but even more so for those working to change cultures and raise achievement in low-performing and high-need schools. Time management and distribution of tasks are of the essence. Yet many school systems are not set up to help principals use their time effectively. How can school systems make principals' roles more manageable while ensuring that teachers receive the support they need to improve instruction?

Three public school districts have been test driving promising school leadership models that bolster principals' ability to focus on instructional leadership: Council Bluffs Community School District in Iowa; Fitchburg, Massachusetts; and District of Columbia Public Schools. The new school leadership models benefited these districts, even though they were not a panacea. For a variety of reasons, these districts still struggle to build sufficient staff capacity to address the myriad functions necessary to make schools successful.

The three districts are stressed on many levels, and each chose a model that fit its greatest perceived needs. But all sought to support high-quality teaching and learning better. Elements of the three models are compared in table 1.

School Administration Manager

At the end of the 2006–07 school year, Council Bluffs Community School District, a high-poverty district just across the Missouri River from Omaha, Nebraska, learned that it had the lowest graduation rate in the state of Iowa. District leadership decided to adopt the School Administration Manager project, or SAM®, which had originally been developed for Jefferson County Schools in Kentucky.³

As the name suggests, the addition of a school administration manager is key. Participating principals are expected to establish goals for increasing time spent on supporting instruction and to meet with the SAM daily to review how they are spending their time during the school day. Principals also delegate specific duties to the SAM or other members of the school staff so that they are not pulled away every time an issue arises within the building.

Superintendent Martha Bruckner hoped that the SAM model would ease principals' transition from management to instructional leadership.⁴ With financial support from the Iowa West Foundation, the district piloted the SAM model with seven schools beginning in the 2007–08 school year. With additional funding from the district's general fund, by 2009–10 every school in the district had a SAM.⁵

Council Bluffs principals choose their SAM's tasks based on their preferences and school needs, as long as the SAM is helping free up time for the principal to focus on instruction. SAMs in the district generally take on noninstructional tasks such as maintaining the principal's calendar and school schedules, helping handle student discipline, supervising and evaluating paraprofessionals, and serving as liaison to parents. Many of the principals of the pilot SAM schools doubled

Three districts allow for divvying up duties so principals can focus on instructional leadership.

by Roxanne Garza and Melissa Tooley

the percentage of time they spent on instructional leadership activities, according to district administrators.⁶ These activities included observation of classroom practice; preparation for feedback, evaluations, or instructional meetings; and working with students in the classroom.

During our focus groups, Council Bluffs principals reported a direct, positive impact on not only the quantity but the quality of time they devoted to instructional leadership. Teachers reported that the nature of conversations with their principals changed and that they received more frequent feedback. One teacher, who spends three-quarters of the day as

an instructional coach, indicated that the SAM allows principals time to review and analyze assessment data, thereby allowing school decisions to be more data driven.

The district is further supporting principals' roles as instructional leaders by blending state and district resources in order to contract with the School Administrators of Iowa for SAM-related tools, such as time-tracking software, data housing, and training for SAMs.

While it is difficult with existing analysis to prove that the SAM initiative was responsible for improved student outcomes, several principals thought this was a fair "dotted line" to draw.

Table 1. School Leader Models

Model Element	Council Bluffs Community School District	Fitchburg Public Schools	District of Columbia Public Schools
NSL role/initiative name	School Administration Manager	Student Program Support Administrator	Director or Manager of Strategy and Logistics
Initiative goal(s)	Increase principal focus on instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Increase principal focus on instruction ■ Improve special education service delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Increase principal focus on instruction and people management ■ Allow teachers to focus more time on instruction ■ Provide support/career paths to operations staff ■ Increase staff morale and retention
Key responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintaining principal calendar and school schedules ■ Tracking principal time ■ Ordering supplies in response to teacher need ■ Overseeing building maintenance ■ Helping to handle student discipline ■ Organizing assemblies and staff meetings ■ Serving as liaison to parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Overseeing special-education-specific work ■ Conducting special education teacher and paraprofessional observations, evaluations ■ Attending grade-level and data team meetings ■ Facilitating teacher PD ■ Handling student discipline, as assigned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Supervising school-based operations staff ■ Managing student information systems ■ Emergency planning and response ■ Handling building maintenance ■ Ordering and delivering supplies ■ Organizing assemblies, field trips ■ Budgeting ■ Finding coverage when teachers are absent ■ Maintaining school calendar
Official member of school admin team?	No	Yes	Yes
New role in schools?	Yes	Yes	Yes
NSL funding source	District general funds	District general funds	School funds
License required?	Originally not, now SAM license (unique to Iowa)	Originally teacher, now school administrator	No
Salary	Slightly less than first-year teacher (\$~43,000)	Same as assistant principal (~\$80,000)	Varies based on role and experience, generally similar to teacher with a bachelor's degree and 10–20 years' experience (~ \$68,000–\$98,000)
Supervised by	Principal	Principal (and dotted line to district director of pupil services)	Principal
Supervisor of	Front office and facilities staff, paraprofessionals	Special education teachers and paraprofessionals	Front office and custodial staff

One noted that graduation rates have continued to rise over the past 10 years in which SAMs have been in place (figure 1). Another offered, “I think the school is being managed better than when I was trying to do both [instructional leadership and building management] by myself because [my SAM] is so much more able to be responsive to teachers. And when people’s needs are getting met, there’s a direct correlation to morale.”

Principals in Council Bluffs still face many demands. They say it continues to be a challenge to balance the instructional support needs of teachers with student academic needs and other student and family needs, especially when many live in poverty, deal with mental health or substance abuse issues, and face a host of other difficulties. Council Bluffs also struggles to fund its SAM positions even at low salary levels, but it has expressed a commitment to finding resources to continue doing so.

Student Program Support Administrator

Located in a former mill town 50 miles from Boston, Fitchburg Public Schools was one of the first districts in Massachusetts to pilot new educator evaluation and support systems under the state’s federal Race to the Top grant in 2012–13. As part of negotiations with its teachers union, the district agreed that administrators would assess teacher practice through announced classroom observations, which make up the evaluative component, and other nonevaluative approaches.⁷ But significant time was needed to plan and complete this work. And while all schools had at least one assistant principal, that role traditionally handled discipline.

At the same time, schools and parents were pinging the central office for a more transparent, integrated approach to special education. The district had more students in special education relative to other districts in the state, with several group homes in its boundaries. It had struggled to stay in compliance on special education services and documentation.⁸ Historically, evaluation team leaders (ETLs)—who were on a teacher contract but based out of the district’s central office—had led the mandatory Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for students who required special education services. While there were some efficiencies to the ETL role (e.g., one ETL could serve several schools), parents felt

that ETLs did not know their child’s situation, and school staff felt ETLs did not appreciate how each school worked.⁹

The district decided in 2012–13 to use funds that had been designated for the ETLs to create a new role, the student program support administrator (SPSA). Like the former ETLs, the administrators facilitate, coordinate, and supervise delivery of special education services. But the new, school-level role also supports other school management responsibilities. They vary by school but typically include a mix of instructional and noninstructional duties—for example, conducting special education and paraprofessional observations and evaluations and handling student discipline.

Central office administrators in Fitchburg perceive shifts in how principals approach their work compared with five years ago. Assistant Superintendent Paula Giaquinto says principal walkthroughs of teacher classrooms used to be “an event” but is now integral, expected practice. The other big change noted was a clearer, more intentional focus on principals’ data and assessment literacy and on using data to determine what to focus on next.

Fitchburg principals report that the SPSAs enable schools to better manage and integrate special education as well as pitch in elsewhere. They perceive special education staff as more effective because of the support received from SPSAs, and they also indicate that SPSAs are slowing down the rate of referrals to special education by offering general education teachers strategies to help kids before they refer them.

Teachers perceive less of a difference in principal practice from this change. Principals surmised that teachers may not notice “behind-the-scenes” changes in administrative work (e.g., reviewing data with coaches). But many teachers do find the SPSA valuable to their own practice. Some cited using their school’s SPSA as an advisor for working with struggling students, and others found their SPSAs to be proactive in offering information that would help them better serve their students with IEPs. Most of all, special education teachers say having an SPSA in the building improved their ability to strategize and receive constructive feedback about instruction, whether they were lead teachers in pull-out settings or co-teachers in inclusion classrooms.

Principals expressed concern about potential

The other big change noted was a clearer, more intentional focus on principals’ data and assessment literacy.

The solution was to offer schools a senior-level, operations-focused staff member who had the authority to supervise and evaluate certain staff.

turnover among SPSAs, as they have administrative licenses and can use this experience to move into leadership roles in more affluent, less demanding districts. And because the best source of new SPSAs is the special education staff, SPSA turnover often means replacing a special education teacher and an SPSA. Fitchburg Public Schools sought to equalize SPSA compensation with that of assistant principals starting in 2016–17.

Director of Strategy and Logistics

In spring 2013, an Education Resource Strategies report documented the extent to which teachers in District of Columbia Public Schools spent time on noninstructional, non-professional development activities.¹⁰ In follow-up exit surveys, the district found that teachers' frustrations were rooted in not having supplies and operational support, which meant they were spending their own time (and sometimes their own money) to get them.

"We saw clear evidence that having to deal with things like fixing broken copiers, not receiving supplies on time, and so on, had a direct effect on teacher retention," said Scott Thompson, deputy chief for innovation and design in the district's Office of Instructional Practice. As a result, the Office of Human Capital started reviewing staff roles to see how they could be more effective and efficient.¹¹

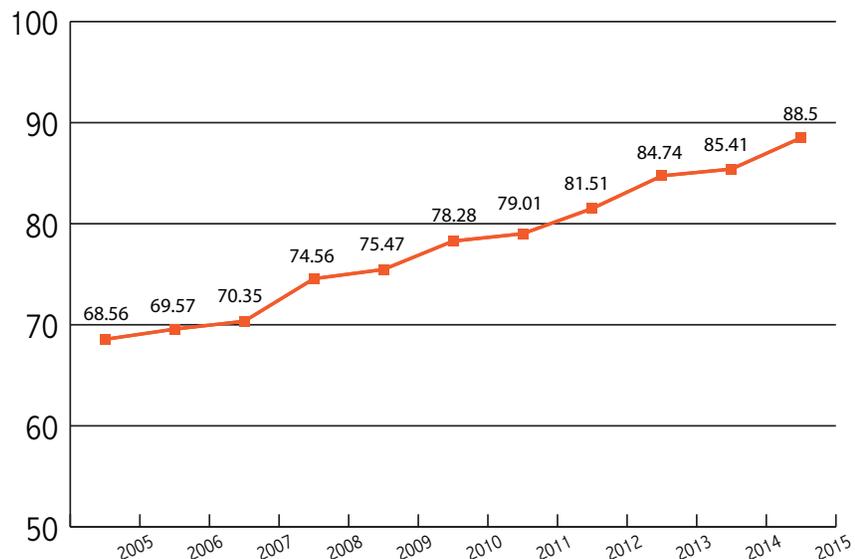
The district was also increasingly focused on distributed school leadership. To streamline the principal's job, the district started to help principals distribute instructional duties. But after finding that most principal time was spent on building management, the district decided to help distribute operational duties as well.

After reviewing examples from the charter sector, the district's human capital team decided the solution was to offer schools a senior-level, operations-focused staff member who had the authority to supervise and evaluate certain staff. They created a director of strategy and logistics role for supervising building management and a manager of strategy and logistics role for smaller schools, with similar qualifications and responsibilities (three years of experience and a bachelor's degree).

These administrators supervise operational functions and operational staff within the building, leaving school leaders and teachers free to focus on instruction and student learning. They handle budgeting, supervising and evaluating front office and custodial staff, school calendars, and building maintenance issues. They do not handle student-facing work, such as school discipline.

The district piloted the new roles in 2014–15 at nine schools. Prior to the pilot, principals reported spending about half their time on building management and operations; after the pilot, they reported spending just a fifth of

Figure 1. Council Bluffs' Four-Year Graduation Rate, 2005–15 (percent)



their time in this area.¹² The district made the position available to all interested schools in 2015–16, and as of 2016–17, 60 schools had the new staff in place.

Principals in the district acknowledge they are likely to use the extra time they gained to meet with assistant principals, department chairs, and coaches rather than directly with teachers. Correspondingly, some teachers did not view their lead principal as being more focused on instruction under the new model, but most teachers report that the instructional leadership team was more visible and more likely to offer “hands-on” support: Principals are seen in the halls more, and assistant principals enter classrooms more frequently.

In addition, teachers in a focus group we conducted reported that the red tape that used to characterize virtually any operational or logistics request had largely been eliminated, which they attribute to the new position. Along the same lines, having a staff member designated for all things noninstructional means that building maintenance problems and supply requests have been addressed more quickly.

Yet plugging one hole often means opening another. Because no additional financial resources are offered to schools to fund this position, principals may have to leave other positions unfilled in order to fund it.

For State Boards' Consideration

The experiences of these three school districts can inform other high-need districts that are considering modifying school leader roles and staffing structures to better support high-quality teaching and learning. It is difficult to draw a clear line from distributed leadership models to improved student achievement. These models cannot, for example, point to immediate higher test scores as a result of new staffing arrangements. But these models do show evidence of improvement in school culture, teacher morale, and various ways of attending to the needs of specific populations of students. As districts consider making such modifications, states should encourage districts to perform needs and resource assessments to ensure that the proposed solution matches their primary goal.

Figuring out how to meet staffing and instructional goals within budgetary constraints can

also be challenging, but fortunately the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states and districts a chance to support school leadership by modifying school leader roles and staffing structures as a lever for school improvement. In addition to Title I funds for school improvement, ESSA offers new flexibilities around using Title II dollars for evidence-based activities, which could include efforts like the ones we have described.¹³ While Title I and Title II can support school leadership efforts separately, states can also braid funding sources together for school improvement.

With or without ESSA funds, states and districts that are developing new school leadership roles should also consider the following steps:

- Develop sample school staffing models for meeting varied assessed school needs and goals. States could support districts by providing sample staffing models such as the national SAM model, or they could point to other examples like the SPSA model in Fitchburg or the DSL/MSL model in DCPS.
- Assess whether and how principal job descriptions, expectations, and evaluation systems should change when new school leader roles are added to better reflect expectations for that role. In particular, roles and responsibilities should be clarified through standards and evaluation/development systems for school leaders and district leaders (especially principal supervisors so that they are able to support principals' changing roles).
- Develop tools, guidance, and meaningful professional development for principals and their supervisors to support this work. If districts' primary goal is to improve principal's instructional leadership, principals will also need support in developing their knowledge and skills, including time management, even with additional staff capacity. ■

¹Kenneth Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).

²Kenneth Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).

³Kenneth Leithwood et al., *Leading School Turnaround: How Successful Leaders Transform Low-Performing Schools* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), p. 172; Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas, *Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

Most teachers report that the instructional leadership team was more visible and more likely to offer “hands-on” support.

Roxanne Garza is a policy analyst and Melissa Tooley is director of preK-12 educator quality with the Education Policy program at New America. This article is drawn from Tooley's "From Frenzied to Focused: How School Staffing Models Can Support Principals in Instructional Leaders" (Washington, DC: New America, 2017).

priority areas across the four domains. Through collaborative efforts with stakeholders, state boards could set up an ongoing schedule of briefings with districts that are implementing turnaround efforts. These briefings may help scale school improvement efforts across a state as well as scaling up leading state policymakers' understanding of these efforts. ■

¹See Mary Klute et al., "Summary of Research on the Association between State Interventions in Chronically Low-Performing Schools and Student Achievement (REL 2016-138)," report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016); Charles Thompson et al., "School Turnaround through Scaffolded Craftsmanship," *Teacher College Record* 118, no. 13 (2016): 1–26; Kenneth Leithwood et al., "Leading Data Use in Schools: Organizational Conditions and Practices at the School and District Levels," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 9, no. 3 (2010): 292–327.

²Kenneth Leithwood et al., "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership" *School Leadership & Management* 28, no. 1 (2008): 27–42.

³Thompson et al., "School Turnaround through Scaffolded Craftsmanship."

⁴Center on School Turnaround, "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework" (San Francisco, CA: WestEd, 2017).

⁵Barnett Berry, "Recruiting and Retaining 'Highly Qualified Teachers' for Hard-to- Staff Schools," *NASSP Bulletin* 88, no. 638 (2004): 5–27; Francis Crowther et al., *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2009); Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs," report (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007).

⁶Lucy Steiner and Sharon Barrett, "Turnaround Principal Competencies," *School Administrator* 69, no. 7 (2012): 26–29; Lucy Steiner and Emily Hassel, "Using competencies to improve school turnaround principal success," report (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, 2011).

⁷Center on School Turnaround, "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement."

⁸Clifford Adelman, "The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College," report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006); Marcia Masumoto and Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices and School-Community Interrelationships in High-Performing, High-Poverty, Rural California High Schools," *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 24, no. 1 (2009): 1–18; Kristin Moore and Carol Emig, "Integrated Student Supports: A Summary of the Evidence Base for Policymakers," report (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2014).

⁹Linda Lambert, "A Framework for Shared Leadership," *Educational Leadership* 59 no. 8 (2002): 37–50; Karen Seashore Louis et al., "Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning," report (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, 2010); William Saunders et al., "Increasing Achievement by Focusing Grade-Level Teams on Improving Classroom Learning: A Prospective, Quasi-Experimental Study of Title I Schools," *American Educational Research Journal* 46, no. 4 (2009): 1006–1033.

¹⁰Rebecca Herman et al., "Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: IES Practice Guide," report (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008); Marcia Masumoto and

Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices." ¹¹Joyce Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner, "Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships," report (Austin, TX: SEDL, 2013); Sara McAlister, "Why Community Engagement Matters in School Turnaround," *Voices in Urban Education* 36 (2013): 35–42.

¹²Rebecca Herman et al., "Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools"; Marcia Masumoto and Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices."

¹³Oregon provides such data in its district dashboard, <http://www.ode.state.or.us/data/reportcard/reports.aspx>.

cont'd from page 41...Freeing Up School Turnaround Leaders

Education Press, 2011); Reform Support Network, "Turnaround Leadership: How to Identify Successful School Leaders," December 2012, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/turnaround-leadership.pdf>.

³Mark Shellinger, then coordinator of the Wallace Foundation-funded Leading Education Achievement in Districts team in Kentucky's Jefferson County School District, based the SAM role on a position in the Victor Elementary District in Victorville, California, although that position was not part of a larger effort to track principal time use. See National SAM Innovation Project (NSIP), "SAMS Connect," 2015, <http://www.samsconnect.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SAM-Info.pdf>; and Christina A. Samuels, "Managers Help Principals Balance Time," *Education Week* (February 11, 2008).

⁴Martha Bruckner, superintendent of Council Bluffs Community School District, email exchange with authors, April 2017.

⁵The exceptions are three alternative schools in the district, which do not have a SAM.

⁶While principals are not required to share time-tracking data with the central office, many reported voluntarily to the Iowa West Foundation as evidence of the investment's impact.

⁷Staff perceptions about this model were gathered in conversation with authors by Paula Giaquinto, assistant superintendent of Fitchburg Public Schools; Rowan Demanche, director of pupil services; Alicia Berrospe, director of special education (March 9, 2017); conversation with Andre Ravenelle, superintendent (May 2, 2017); e-mail correspondence with Rick Zeena, administrator of human resources (June 6, 2017).

⁸Fitchburg teacher focus group discussion with authors, March 8, 2017; Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education, "Re: Onsite Follow-up Monitoring Report: Coordinated Program Review Corrective Action Plan Verification and Special Education Mid-cycle Review," 2005.

⁹Conversations with Giaquinto, Demanche, and Berrospe.

¹⁰Education Resource Strategies, "A New Vision for Teacher Professional Growth and Support: Six Steps to a More Powerful School System Strategy" (Watertown, MA: ERS, May 2013), 27.

¹¹Scott Thompson, deputy chief, innovation and design, Office of Instructional Practice, DCPS, conversation with authors, December 15, 2016.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Rebecca Herman et al., "School Leadership Interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review," research report (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017).