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## **Create a National Corps of “SuperPrincipals”**

**Establish a national corps of elite principals for our toughest schools.**

### **The Problem**

If teachers are public education’s most important human resource, principals run a very close second. Their jobs are more complex and intense than ever. They must be instructional leaders, chief financial officers, disciplinarians, judges, security chiefs, fundraisers, directors of external relations, technology geeks, masters of regulatory arcana, a shoulder to cry on, and the complaint desk for parents and others—all at the same time. It’s no wonder that researchers have raised red flags about “principal burnout” and the need for “superprincipals.”

All schools need and deserve strong leaders. Yet one out of every two school districts reports a shortage of principals, according to a 2000 report by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The problem is particularly acute in urban districts where the pressures of leading schools are greatest, and it is growing. Worse yet, there are precious few exemplary programs to train and prepare principals. A 2005 report by Arthur Levine, then president of Teachers College, Columbia University, rated most such programs as inadequate or poor.

### **The Plan**

Washington currently does little to help groom great leaders for schools. It should change that by inviting the nation’s colleges of education and non-profit groups to bid on a \$30 million annual contract to run a new National School Leadership Corps tasked with producing exemplary principals for our toughest schools.

The Corps’ projected cost is based on the budgets of similar but smaller national programs such as the successful nonprofit New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) and the newer for-profit National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) founded by the National Center on Education and the Economy. Its funding could be supplemented with state, school district, and charitable contributions. It would draw on lessons learned

from NLNS, NISL and others models, as well as on the latest research on school leadership.

The Corps would offer a year of rigorous training and an advanced degree<sup>1</sup> to current and prospective principals who in turn agree to serve for at least three years in a high-need school. Only schools and districts deemed “in need” would be able to post positions with the Corps, and its graduates who fill those positions would be eligible for a signing bonus.

Other key elements of the Corps include:

- Competitive entry, with only the strongest traditional and non-traditional candidates admitted;
- Culmination in a Master’s in Educational Administration, signifying advanced knowledge in school leadership, human development, school governance, financial management, educational technology, and data analysis;
- Constant self-evaluation and research on the staying power of graduates and their success in raising achievement in their schools; and
- No cost to all selected students.

In addition, the Corps would offer current principals intensive four-week residential courses to hone their leadership and management skills. It would also be a hub for research on school leadership with an eye toward influencing policy and encouraging replication of “best practices” in schools of education. The Corps would be guided by an advisory board composed of the directors of innovative principal-preparation programs, state and local education officials, and foundation representatives.

## **The Politics**

Influential associations representing principals, school superintendents, school boards, and big-city school districts would almost certainly rally behind the Corps. So too would colleges of education and nonprofits attracted by the prestige and revenue derived from running the Corps. The two national teachers unions would probably throw their support behind the idea as well and might even want to contribute to the program’s design. The National League of Cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and similar groups would also likely be eager to see some of the nation’s best principals leading their public schools.

Foes of big government, on the other hand, may oppose the creation of a new federal program. Others might point to NLSL and NISL and ask, “Where’s the need for another training program?” Still others might point to the historically uneven track record of the U.S. Department of Education’s research and development work.

The key to success will be persuading Congress and the White House that while NLSL, NISL, and similar principals’ institutes are valuable, they alone are not sufficient to surmount the critical and growing national problem of inadequate school leadership. Corps supporters also would do well to argue that while NCLB tells states and schools “what” to do in terms of setting goals to improve student achievement, it offers them precious little support in terms of “how” to do it. The Corps’ research and best-practices functions would go a long way toward correcting that problem.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>See Arthur Levine’s 2005 report *Educating School Leaders*, written for The Education Schools Project, for further description of the Master’s in Educational Administration degree.