New-Leaders Group Offers Initial Insights Into Effective Practice
By Catherine Gewertz

Washington

School leaders who are turning around low-performing schools use three distinctly different leadership strategies for early, middle, and late-stage improvement, says a new report by a national organization that trains principals.

New Leaders for New Schools, a New York City-based group that has trained more than 300 principals in nine cities, is studying its own principals’ work in an effort to find out what practices are most effective in producing solid improvements quickly in the most troubled schools.

The early findings, released at a March 10 briefing at the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank, represent the initial steps in a larger research project, in partnership with the RAND Corp., scheduled for completion in 2011.

The report said that while “distributive” leadership—the practice of widely sharing decisionmaking—is commonly hailed as a strong strategy, it is not well suited to the early, or “dramatic turnaround,” stage of improvement when a new principal arrives at a struggling school. That first, urgent stage of improvement demands a “directed” type of leadership, it said.

The principal can delegate more decisionmaking once the school establishes a strong foundation and enters the second stage of improvement, the study said, and can distribute it more broadly as the school refines or maintains its improvements.

‘Quick Wins’

New Leaders’ most effective principals tend to achieve “some quick, important wins” in the first two weeks, such as stating clear expectations and consequences about students’ behavior and potently conveying an atmosphere of support and caring, the study said. Such moves help train the school’s focus and culture on achievement, it said.

The study outlines broad themes that emerge from the literature on successful school management, and includes three case studies of successful New Leaders schools.

Jonathan Schnur, the organization’s co-founder and chief executive officer, said at the Washington briefing that the report should not be taken as a blueprint for school improvement, but as an early attempt to distinguish practices that are effective in schools making dramatic gains from those that are effective in schools making incremental gains.

New Leaders’ own experience illustrates how far the collective knowledge of effective school leadership has yet to go, Mr. Schnur said. About 20 percent of its principals are making dramatic gains, including at five schools that were the most improved or highest achieving in their cities, he said. But that means that 80 percent aren’t making such dramatic gains, he said.

U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, said at the briefing that ensuring strong principals at low-performing schools is “absolutely crucial, but we haven’t done much” at the federal level to make it happen.

Policymakers are wrangling over how the federal government should best address the principal-quality issue, he said. Mr. Schnur suggested three policy directions to explore in strengthening the principal corps in struggling schools: adopting voluntary, nationwide standards for their professional development; requiring colleges of education to track and evaluate the effectiveness of their principal graduates; and setting aside 10 percent of the money under Title II of the No Child Left Behind Act for training principals in exchange for rigorous evaluation of how that training affects student achievement. Doug Mesecar, the assistant deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education’s office of innovation and improvement, who also attended the briefing, said he was “intrigued” by the Title II suggestion and thinks “it is the way we need to proceed.”