Buffalo School Superintendent James A. Williams is bucking federal guidelines by refusing to remove the principals of three failing schools -- a decision that could cost the district up to $42 million in grants.

The federal government offers districts up to $2 million a year per school, for three years, to help turn around failing schools. To get the money, the district must replace any principal who has been in his or her school longer than two years.

In Buffalo, the principals have been in place more than two years each at three of Buffalo's seven "persistently lowest-achieving" schools: Burgard Vocational High School, Riverside Institute of Technology, and International School 45.

But the superintendent says he will not move the principals.

If he did, Williams said, that would set in motion a domino effect of other problems.

"You can sit in Albany and just say, 'Remove that principal, they've been there longer than two years,'" Williams said. "But who am I going to replace them with? There's a shortage of leaders in this country."

That's not the only problem that would be created, he said. Pulling those three veteran principals out of their schools would create a dilemma for Buffalo: Where to put them?

The superintendent says a recent arbitration ruling prevents him from reassigning a principal to a position in the central office. That means he would have to reassign the principal to another school.

"If I follow the script to remove the principals from the buildings, I'm going to sit here with principals I don't need that must be head of schools," he added. "What am I going to do? Take their so-called 'bad' principals and put them in good schools and say, 'Here's your principal, folks?""
Beyond all those concerns, Williams says he believes each of those principals has been instrumental in creating positive change in their building.

Williams said he does plan to move Fatima Morrell, the principal of Lafayette High School, in one year. That school's problems are too deep-seated for any principal, including Morrell -- whom he described as "a very good principal" -- to overcome, Williams said. Lafayette will close in June 2011, then reopen with a new principal and many new teachers.

Even in schools that are performing well, experts agree: The most important person in that building is the principal. An effective principal builds collaborative relationships, troubleshoots problems before they explode, and is a visible presence in the building.

In a struggling school, the principal is even more important.

Karen Baroody is managing director of Education Resource Strategies, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that helps urban districts across the country use their resources most effectively. Her group is currently consulting with the Rochester and Syracuse school districts.

"From our perspective, if you don't have a good principal and you don't give that principal the ability to bring in strong teachers and get rid of low-performing teachers, it's really hard to get traction, even if you spend a huge amount of money on other things," Baroody said.

None of the districts her group is working with have refused to replace their principals, she said.

She was not familiar with the schools in Buffalo, and did not comment specifically on Williams' decision to keep the principals in place.

However, Baroody said her group recently conducted four case studies of low-performing schools trying to turn around. In three of the districts -- Atlanta, Charlotte, and New York City -- the principals were replaced.

In the fourth, unidentified, district, officials spent $1.2 million per year, per school, largely to extend the school day and year -- a cornerstone of Williams' turnaround plans for Buffalo's schools.

That district did not replace its principals. It was the only district out of the four where student performance did not improve.

**Williams blames state**
In Buffalo, Williams says the problem does not lie with his principals. The problem, he says, lies in Albany and Washington, D.C.

He sees the requirement that principals be replaced as part of a much larger federal push to undermine public schools.

"Washington, D.C., is trying to force school districts to be like they want you to be. I predict they're going to force on school districts more charter schools, more turnaround schools, and to follow their structure," he said. "That's the whole game they're playing, and it's not fair to our children."

State Education officials in Albany, who administer the federal school improvement grants, are out of touch with what's actually going on in Buffalo, Williams charged.

Riverside, Burgard and International School have recently undergone renovations, he said.

During the time each school was being renovated, students were not only displaced to a temporary location -- they were broken into two groups, with each group at a different site, because no temporary location could accommodate the entire school, he said.

"Look at the disruption you have, and the inconsistency in working with children," he said. "The state doesn't know anything about the construction projects we have here. They haven't gotten out of their offices to come and visit the second-largest school district in New York State."

In a recent letter to state Education Commissioner David M. Steiner, Williams laid out his arguments as to why those three principals should not be moved.

"There are practical reasons why principal removal would be counterproductive to our shared goals in specific circumstances," Williams wrote. "It is my contention that these principals are not at the core of the schools' low performance."

**Principals defended**

Florence Kreiter became principal at Burgard three years ago, after serving as interim principal there for several months.

In his letter to Steiner, Williams wrote: "The principal at Burgard High School has worked with the school to change the climate from one of low expectations to one of expected excellence. The climate is respectful above all else. Academic expectations are high."
State Education Department reports indicate that Burgard's passing rate on the English exam fell from 67 percent in 2007-08 to 43 percent the following year. The passing rate on the Math A exam fell from 45 percent to 15 percent.

Across town at Riverside, Michael Mogavero has been principal nearly six years. There, the graduation rate is 47 percent.

"The principal at Riverside High School has the knowledge of the school and surrounding community necessary to shepherd the students and staff back into their newly reconstructed, newly restructured school," Williams wrote.

Of all the persistently lowest-achieving schools in Buffalo, International School 45 is the building with the longest-serving principal. Colleen Carota has worked in the building for 20 years, including 13 as principal.

That school serves a large population of immigrants, including many children who do not speak English and have never been in a formal school setting before. Williams had tried unsuccessfully for the state to remove International School from the failing list, in light of the population it serves.

Williams noted that student scores have improved there, especially in math. In three years, for example, the percentage of eighth-graders proficient at math increased from 18 to 51 percent.

"The leadership of this principal has been essential to that success," he wrote.

Carota is seen even by many of her critics as having a good understanding of the international students in her school.

But a recent anonymous survey of teachers at School 45, conducted by the teachers union, found widespread complaints about Carota, whom teachers say has become nasty and intimidating. She routinely demeans teachers, curses at them, and threatens to take their teaching licenses.

Several teachers reported that she told them at a staff meeting, "If you think I'm a bitch, you can get a bigger one."

Teachers union president Philip Rumore generally defended Williams' refusal to follow federal guidelines. But he criticized the specific decision to keep Carota in her position.

"In cases like School 45, it's devastating what's going on in the schools. And what does the district do? Nothing. It defends them," he said. "If it was a teacher, they'd be brought up on tenure charges."
The Buffalo News contacted the four principals mentioned in this story, seeking comment. None responded.

Instead, Williams called a Buffalo News reporter, saying he would not allow the principals to be interviewed.

"This is their professional lives, not their personal lives," he said. "Personnel issues are not public information."

**Question of funding**

At one point in a recent interview, Williams acknowledged the possibility that Buffalo could lose out on its grant funding because of his decision not to replace principals.

"We probably won't even get funding for [persistently lowest-achieving] schools, because I'm not following their script," he said, referring to the state Education Department.

After three years, he noted, the school improvement grant funds would disappear, and Buffalo does not have the resources to step in with its own money to continue any programs that would be put in place.

"Why should I dismantle the system when we're showing progress, when three years from now, that money won't be there?" he said.

Later in the interview, though, he insisted that he believes Buffalo will get the grant money.

"I'm going to get the money. Yeah. Because we have a good plan," he said, referring to the turnaround plan the district submitted to Albany.

The state Education Department is expected to announce its decision regarding Buffalo's grant application in mid-August.

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