

Finding school leaders

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One key ingredient of school reform is leadership, and that generally comes from principals. Last week, Advocates for Children and Youth, a Baltimore-based group, documented the correlation between inexperienced principals and poorly performing schools in Maryland, a correlation that is also tied to poverty.

Since many of these inadequately led, low-performing schools are in Baltimore, it's good that city schools CEO Andres Alonso already has been touting the idea of giving principals more authority in running their schools. He'll need help - from public and private sources - to come up with additional financial and other incentives to attract more experienced and visionary principals to do the important work of turning around failing schools.

Researchers at Advocates for Children and Youth examined high-poverty, low-performing middle schools in the city and in Baltimore County and Prince George's County from 2003 to this year. Among 10 of the city's troubled schools, the report found that nine had at least one change in principal, at least eight had two or more changes and half the schools had three or more changes. Such frequent changes at the top make it more difficult to recruit and retain high-quality staff, which is another important element in school turnaround efforts.

Mr. Alonso has made it clear that he wants to appoint strong principals, give them more decision-making authority and resources, and hold them accountable for results. For starters, he is allowing principals of middle and high schools to determine whether there is sufficient community support to install metal detectors as a way to deter violence.

But with the state budget gap squeezing the flow of dollars from Annapolis, Mr. Alonso has enlisted an action team of principals and central headquarters' staff to help figure out how school system resources can be redirected more effectively, particularly from North Avenue to individual schools. That's a worthy endeavor, but even more targeted rewards may be needed.

As a candidate, Gov. Martin O'Malley proposed hefty signing bonuses for experienced principals who would take on the challenge of turning around the state's lowest-performing schools. But we haven't heard much about that since the reality of the budget deficit set in. That means Mr. Alonso will have to look more to his cost-cutting and priority-setting efforts - and seek help from private entities - to find ways to attract and reward new school leaders.