



**Network of State Turnaround and Improvement Leaders — Leadership Council**

# Thought Leadership Forum Brief: Turnaround Leadership and Leadership Competencies

May 2018

## Overview

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In January and February 2018, the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd hosted two online Thought Leadership Forums for state education agency (SEA) officials who are members of the Leadership Council of the Network of State Turnaround and Improvement Leaders. The monthly forums for 2018 are intended to build the capacity of SEAs and regional comprehensive centers to support rapid school improvement.

Forums are developed in pairs, with each pair focused on a key issue related to supporting school turnaround. The first of the two forums features a presentation by a recognized expert in the identified area; the second forum, convened the following month, profiles an SEA's work related to the topic, providing an on-the-ground example of the issue in action.

This brief summarizes the information presented in the January and February 2018 forums, which explored the transformative uses of turnaround leader competencies for supporting existing principals and as a basis for identifying, recruiting, and developing new leaders to serve in complex and challenging settings.<sup>1</sup> The January presentation was by William Robinson of the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education. The February forum, led by Hannah Peria and Elisabeth Peterson from New Mexico Public Education Department, highlighted Principals Pursuing Excellence, the department's competency-based development program for turnaround leadership. The brief concludes with recommendations for SEAs on how to support and develop turnaround leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief draws directly from the forums, reflecting the knowledge, views, and experiences of the presenters; the references included in this summary are those that were included in the presentations.

## Expert Presentation: Competencies and Turnaround Leadership

**Competencies** are underlying motives and habits — patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking — that determine a person’s impact in a specific job or role. Differences in the performance level of leaders are due, at least in part, to the fact that in terms of competencies, proficiency falls onto a continuum. Steiner and Hassel (2011) suggest that in complex work, a leader’s underlying competencies drive success more than that individual’s observable skills and knowledge, even among leaders with similar education and experience.

The competencies needed for school leadership in general are essential but are not by themselves sufficient for leaders who are attempting to turn around persistently low-performing schools. Research shows that leaders in this group require additional competencies. Turnaround leader competencies help illuminate the qualities that matter in the unique context of efforts to foster rapid and significant improvement in student learning. Schools in need of turnaround are chronically low-performing organizations that lack the leadership required to launch and sustain improvement efforts (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). Turnaround leaders are adept at eliciting new practices and behaviors from teachers and other stakeholders to lift them and their schools out of the low performance that can be paralyzing.

### Competency Models and Competency Assessment

Competency models identify the high-impact behaviors that are associated with successful turnaround leaders and that, thus, must serve as the content of professional development for leaders. Assessing a principal’s competency levels within a given model enables a district to support growth in critical areas that are not yet strengths for the principal.

Based on its analysis of the actions of successful turnaround principals, the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education developed an evidence-based competency model (table 1)

that identifies the competencies shown by the analysis to be linked to improvements in student achievement (Hitt, 2015). The model suggests the thoughts, behaviors, and actions turnaround leaders need if they are to halt a school’s performance decline, stabilize the school, and initiate and oversee its rapid upward performance trajectory.

### The Behavioral Event Interview as a Competency Assessment

There are different methods for assessing the relative strength of an individual’s turnaround leader competencies. One method is the Behavioral Event Interview (BEI). Based on the assumption that past performance is a major predictor of future performance, the BEI is an in-depth interview in which a trained interviewer asks a candidate to share, in detail, examples of past leadership successes and significant challenges. A BEI may last up to two hours, with an interviewer using probing questions to identify and magnify the candidate’s past actions. In this process, candidate stories are expected to be high stakes in nature and to detail a specific leadership episode, with a beginning, a middle, and an end that suggests either positive or negative resolution. The process concludes with the interviewer reviewing the interview transcript and preparing a final report that includes competency scores.

States, districts, or schools that conduct BEIs may use the resulting data in the selection, onboarding and placement, and ongoing development of education leaders, particularly those in schools (see table 2 on page 4).

## State Profile: New Mexico Public Education Department’s Principals Pursuing Excellence and its Use of BEIs

A growing number of SEAs are creating competency-based education leadership programs to increase school and district capacity to lead sustained school turnaround. One

Table 1. University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education Competency Model

Competency	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
<b>Focuses on Sustainable Results</b>	Identifies problems	Addresses problems	Takes initiative to create change and to deliver results in relation to problems	Sustains pursuit of measurable progress toward addressing problems and achieving results
<b>Engages the Team</b>	Communicates with the group	Works with the group	Aligns team efforts toward clear goals	Empowers the team
<b>Impact and Influence</b>	Communicates own position	Acts to influence thinking and mindsets of others	Adapts approach to affect actions of others	Leverages multiple stakeholders to change ingrained behaviors
<b>Holding People Accountable for School Performance</b>	Demonstrates school performance mindset	Aligns individual expectations to school performance standards	Monitors performance and helps people to improve	Strengthens organization's capability for performance
<b>Commitment to Student Learning</b>	Sees self as the champion	Takes ownership of students' learning	Stands behind potentially transformative decisions and/or policies benefiting students	Stands up for students in the face of powerful opposition
<b>Conceptual Thinking</b>	Compares situations or ideas	Utilizes insight to help prioritize	Reframes situations for clarity	Generates new ideas and approaches
<b>Analytical Thinking</b>	Sees the facets of a situation	Understands basic cause and effect	Identifies cause and effect among several items	Articulates complexity among multiple variables

Source: University of Virginia, Darden School of Business.

Table 2. BEI Use at the District Level

Strategic Use	Related Actions
<b>Selection</b>	BEIs can be administered to measure candidates’ strength on competencies shown to matter for student achievement in turnaround schools (but the BEI should be just one of a slate of indicators)
<b>Onboarding/ Placement</b>	Insight gleaned from using a BEI in the selection process can be used to proactively <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify a principal’s strengths in order to match that leader with the school most in need of those strengths,</li> <li>• set up supports for the new turnaround leader, and</li> <li>• intentionally create teams with skill sets that complement the competencies of the principals.</li> </ul>
<b>Ongoing Development and Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those who are supervising principals can “coach the competencies” during one-on-one interactions with their principals, both to reinforce a principal’s strong competencies and to help the principal further develop competencies that initially are less strong.</li> <li>• Districts can also devise whole-group principal development programs based on documented competency needs across their particular population of principals. This support can be provided in ways that build on the existing strengths of participating principals.</li> </ul>

Source: Author, using data from William Robinson of the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education.

of these is New Mexico’s Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE), which was initiated by the New Mexico Public Education Department in 2012 as the state found itself with an increasing number of low-performing schools. The two-year competency-based program is specifically focused on developing and supporting turnaround principals, and educators interested in preparing for this role apply to participate in the program. The first cohort began in the fall of 2013.

The department requires that everyone who participates in PPE — from educators who want to become turnaround leaders to individuals who are employed by the department as mentors — engage in a BEI as an entrance requirement. The use of BEIs helps department staff select not only candidates who are ready to undergo the training, but also those who will help shape PPE participants by serving as mentors. BEI results help ensure that participants receive tailored mentoring and guidance from experienced and effective leaders.

Given the influential role of mentors, the department considers mentor selection to be critical for

the program’s quality. Mentors must score well on the competency model if they are to provide the right type of influence on program participants. According to Debbie Montoya, Priority Schools Bureau Director for the department, the use of BEIs and competencies has given the department a framework for understanding how to develop the capacity for organizational leadership and for identifying potential leaders at the district and school levels. Table 3 presents several design elements of the PPE program and the turnaround competencies developed by each one.

Since PPE’s launch, the department has matriculated five PPE cohorts, developing more than 200 school- and district-level turnaround leaders. BEIs have been a selection tool in all cohorts. In putting together its most recent cohort, department staff conducted more than 100 BEIs over a six-week period. Montoya says the time and effort are well worth it: “The process yields participants and principal mentors who show strength in the areas that matter for turnaround.” In this way, conducting BEIs serves as a proactive

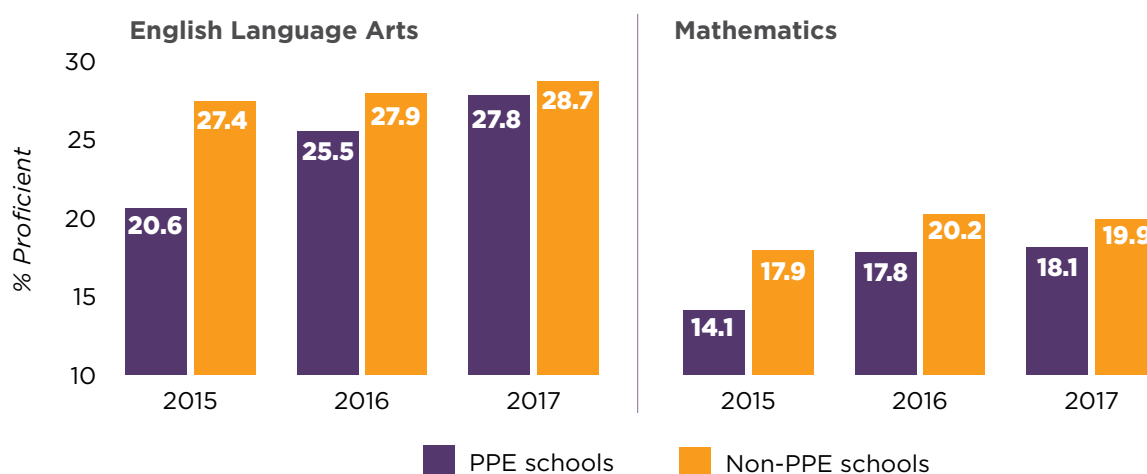
Table 3. PPE Design and Competencies

PPE Design Element	Competencies Developed*
Use of case studies	Engages the team; focuses on sustainable results
Coaching training	Holds people accountable; focuses on sustainable results; engages the team
Data-driven instruction training	Focuses on sustainable results, holds people accountable; analytical thinking; commitment to student learning

\* These competencies are those identified in the UVa/PLE Competency Model presented in table 1.

Source: Author, using data from New Mexico Department of Education.

Figure 1. Achievement Gains on Statewide Assessments for Students From Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) Schools Compared to Non-PPE Schools, for 2015-2017



Source: Author, using data from New Mexico Department of Education.

time investment that may prevent district leaders from engaging in inaccurate selection.

Schools whose leaders have participated in PPE have demonstrated some notable gains. Figure 1, above, shows the aggregated academic performance, from 2015 to 2017, of schools with leaders enrolled in PPE compared to schools whose leaders were not enrolled in the program. The percentage of students at PPE schools who tested proficient on the statewide English language arts assessment rose 39 percent during this period, compared to 4 percent for students at non-PPE schools. On the statewide mathematics assessment, the percentage of students at PPE schools who tested proficient

rose 28 percent during this period, compared to 11 percent at non-PPE schools.

### State Use of Turnaround Competencies as Levers

Forum presenters and participants shared several uses of turnaround leadership competencies in recruiting, retaining, and developing education leaders. Some state school improvement leads shared that they use competencies to train entire school leadership teams rather than to train an individual leader. Other states have developed specific professional development for turnaround leaders that is aligned to competencies.

One state shared that it is exploring the use of competencies as a basis for a micro-credential for turnaround leaders.

- a. Identifying and recruiting high-quality turnaround principals to serve as mentors; and
- b. Matching potential leaders with mentors.

## Recommendations for SEAs

Robinson offers the following recommendations to states engaged in developing and sustaining turnaround leaders:

1. Develop policies and practices that encourage the use of competencies for turnaround leader selection and development.
2. Consider how to support districts in maximizing the role of the principal supervisor. Using turnaround leadership competencies as guideposts, help districts promote and create development strategies for principal supervisors to coach turnaround principals.
3. Develop and support a pipeline of turnaround leaders in advisory roles at all levels of the system (state, district, school), using competencies for selection and development of these individuals.
4. In collaboration with identified turnaround leaders, develop and disseminate resources to support districts and schools to use BEIs in:

## Resources

Hitt, D. H. (2015). *“What it takes” for a turnaround: Principal competencies that matter for student achievement. A guide to thoughtfully identifying and supporting school leaders.* Center on School Turnaround at WestEd & University of Virginia Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education. San Francisco: WestEd.

Hitt, D. H., & Meyers, C. V. (2017). Beyond turnaround: A synthesis of relevant frameworks for leaders of sustained improvement in previously low-performing schools. *School Leadership and Management, 38*(1), 4-31.

Steiner, L., & Hassel, E. A. (2011). *Using competencies to improve school turnaround principal success.* Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia’s Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education. Retrieved from [http://www.darden.virginia.edu/uploadedFiles/Darden\\_Web/Content/Faculty\\_Research/Research\\_Centers\\_and\\_Initiatives/Darden\\_Curry\\_PLE/School\\_Turnaround/using-competencies-to-improve-school-turnaround.pdf](http://www.darden.virginia.edu/uploadedFiles/Darden_Web/Content/Faculty_Research/Research_Centers_and_Initiatives/Darden_Curry_PLE/School_Turnaround/using-competencies-to-improve-school-turnaround.pdf)



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