



Partnership for Leaders in Education

Darden School of Business
Curry School of Education

Leader Competencies and Turnaround Actions Shown to Influence Student Achievement: A Model to Inform Talent Management and Development in Schools

Hiring Effective Turnaround Leaders: Important Issues in Identification

Given the critical role that leaders play and the growing accountability for underperforming schools, school districts typically attempt to identify new principals when launching a school turnaround initiative. Often, districts find themselves with a new principal whose performance proves to be no better than that of the prior released principal. The mismatch between school leadership needs and principal capacity is explained in part by research that demonstrates that traditional interview techniques rarely provide the level of insight into an interviewee needed to make an informed decision.

Furthermore, while a principal's documented success turning around a low-performing school is likely a reliable and valid predictor of future success, schools and districts lack a robust supply of experienced and seasoned turnaround principals. Instead, districts draw from applicant pools that may not include candidates with prior turnaround experience, let alone successful experience in leading turnaround or a high-poverty school. When launching turnaround, districts are often left to assess whether a recently placed principal could lead turnaround if given proper support and accountability. This implies that districts need to develop new ways to more precisely analyze candidates and their qualifications.

Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education's Use of Behavioral Event Interviews and Competencies

One way for districts to better identify turnaround-ready leaders is the utilization of a more accurate and insightful leader selection process. The process the Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE) uses involves a behavioral event interview (BEI). The BEI is a scientific process for detecting candidates' potential to effectively lead turnaround through measurement of competencies. Competencies are patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, or speaking that predict a person's success in a job or role.

Through our empirical investigation, we identified a BEI model for competencies that directly links to improved student achievement. The use of BEIs permits our partners' hiring processes to become more intentional, informed endeavors that utilize a rigorous process to identify a candidate's potential to effectively facilitate a school's turnaround. To ensure district ownership of the selection process, our team trains district leaders to score BEIs, and thus the district participates directly in the interview process our experts facilitate.

Implications for a Deeper Use of Competencies

Current selection and placement. The PLE works with partners to identify existing internal candidates as well as recruit externally for turnaround leadership positions. We allow existing principals to be considered, though if retained there often is a need to strengthen the team around them. We encourage partners to screen for past performance, beliefs, and instructional leadership skill, leveraging the BEI output as an additional, independent data point.

We administer BEIs and assess competencies for these candidates and help districts match principal placement with school need.

Development. We work with districts to design individualized plans for turnaround principals, fostering growth in competencies identified as areas for improvement.

Future selection. We are working with partners to consider how competencies could inform future leadership selection processes as well as how to generate a pipeline for competent leaders.

Model for Principal Competencies Shown to Link to Student Achievement

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

Note on model. This model is empirically derived through mixed methods analysis of principal interview data. We conducted and recorded behavioral event interviews that leveraged Public Impact's 2008 turnaround leadership

competency model. Selected leaders' school-level student achievement results were correlated to their BEI principal candidacy transcripts in order to derive a new model. Shaded cells indicate the levels that distinguish outstanding from typical principals based on student achievement scores; however, levels are additive, and therefore, outstanding principals encompass criteria described in lower levels as well. Analytical thinking did not distinguish.

Note on system leadership competencies. The PLE has not empirically derived a competency model for system leaders, but has established a model based on observations in the field. Compared with the principal model, this model is similar but de-emphasizes team engagement, commitment to student learning and analytical thinking and emphasizes problem solving, transformational leadership, developing others and persistence.

TURNAROUND LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES AND ACTIONS

Research on successful turnaround efforts in other sectors and evidence from turnaround efforts in 15 states affirm that effective turnaround leaders engage in specific actions that drive, enable, and sustain dramatic change. Additionally, these leaders possessed or developed competencies that enabled them to successfully lead despite resistance and other challenges. A competency is a pattern of thinking, feeling, acting or speaking that causes a person to be successful in a job or role (such as conceptual thinking or self-confidence).

Successful change efforts depend on how leaders manifest their strongest competencies and stretch themselves in new areas. Thus, change does not happen because leadership teams possess competencies, but because they take action that matters for improving practice, effort, engagement and instruction. The remainder of this brief summarizes the types of action leaders use to demonstrate competencies, unlock their potential, and lead a school-wide (or district-wide) effort to drive toward results and solve problems amidst the inevitable complications that arise. Building on prior frameworks, the PLE has identified the following key competencies and example leader actions tied to those competencies critical for a successful turnaround.

| Competency | Example Action | Example Action |
|--|---|---|
| Focuses on Sustainable Results | Motivates change with early success and perseverance | Perseveres for many months to overcome obstacles that threaten most critical goals |
| Engages the Team | Engages core team to develop vision, launch effort and distribute leadership | Helps staff members personally identify problems and enhance their commitment to school's work |
| Impact and Influence | Adapts communication and action to resonate with audience and engage reluctant stakeholders | Clearly states compelling rationale for change and uses multiple vehicles to communicate |
| Holds People Accountable for School Performance | Reinforces high expectations via consistent systems and follow-through | Honestly confronts performance problems and insists on change of course |
| Commitment to Student Learning | Takes initiative and risk to alter organizational norms and pilot new ideas | Shifts staff, despite opposition, into optimal roles and reallocates resources including people and budget to deliver results |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Conceptual Thinking | Continually adjusts based on results and new learning | Crystallizes the meaning and importance of a lot of complex data in a few simple findings to create clarity for others |
| Analytical Thinking | Drives problem solving based on meaningful data and pattern recognition | Determines how to best establish data-driven cycles of improvement that all teachers truly leverage |

COMPETENCIES IN ACTION

Our research has demonstrated that effective turnaround leaders typically have their own distinct distillation of competencies that enables them to be successful. Following are examples of specific actions that have empowered leaders to effectively drive change, building on the summary above.

Focus on Sustainable Results & Engage the Team

A new principal joined a school that had just been rated as “Academically Unacceptable”. She reviewed data with faculty to strategize about the upcoming year, and developed a system of monthly progress checks with department leaders. Throughout the year, the principal created an environment that encouraged innovation on how to meet the objectives the team had outlined.

For example, in order to address students’ failure to complete homework, faculty established a mandatory lunch study hall for students who did not complete homework at home. Not only did this initiative allow students to get support from subject teachers during their lunch break, but students began to recognize the importance of homework to their success. The principal also recognized the underutilization of the special education teachers, which stemmed from how these teachers were perceived by the classroom teachers. She worked with the special education teachers to help them feel more involved in the school’s goal-setting exercises and encouraged them to participate in development trainings throughout the school year. Within two years, the school became the first secondary school in its county’s history to receive a “Recognized” rating.

Impact and Influence

Recognizing Hispanic students were performing poorly relative to the other students in his school, a principal noted a lack of respect toward Hispanic students by non-Hispanic students and even some teachers. Few Hispanic students were encouraged to participate in student activities or take leadership roles. To better develop a relationship with the Hispanic students’ parents, the principal began attending Catholic mass alongside these parents every Sunday.

As a result, the parents began to trust him and give him feedback about how to deal with the students at school. He constantly asked these parents how he could make their children’s lives at school better. For example, one parent said that her daughter wanted to be included on an athletic team, but was passed over for the team year after year. The principal spoke to the coaches who previously had not noticed that Hispanic students were not well represented on the teams. A series of changes resulted in increased Hispanic student participation in advanced classes and leadership roles and ultimately double-digit test gains across all subject areas.

Analytical Thinking and Holding People Accountable

A principal newly assigned to a turnaround school was working to develop a professional development program to help teachers instruct more effectively. First, she spent time reviewing

test scores and collecting her own data about the instructional issues in each teacher's classroom. The principal noticed that there was little connection between actual learning and objectives, between professional development and student needs, and between experience and results.

By grouping her teachers based on their performance and highest-leverage professional development needs, the principal created a targeted professional development program that focused on her teachers' needs. She also expected teachers to demonstrate through action plans what they would do differently as a result of data analysis and professional development. The principal held teachers accountable by following up with them on their commitments and expecting them to be able to articulate their data-driven changes.