



“WHAT IT TAKES” FOR A TURNAROUND: PRINCIPAL COMPETENCIES THAT MATTER FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A Guide to Thoughtfully Identifying and Supporting Turnaround Leaders

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in partnership with the University of Virginia
Partnership for Leaders in Education



<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org>

This work was supported by the Center on School Turnaround through funding from the U.S. Department of Education. It does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

The Center on School Turnaround, a partnership of WestEd and the Academic Development Institute, the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia, and the National Implementation Research Network, is part of the federal network of fifteen Regional Comprehensive Centers, serving individual states or clusters of states, and seven national Content Centers.

Suggested citation: Hitt, D. (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.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the following people for sharing their time, insight, and expertise:

- Janice Lowen Agee, Editor, WestEd
- Sandy Coroles, District Superintendent, Ogden School District, Utah
- Bryan Hassel, Co-Director, Public Impact
- Lori Haukeness, Assistant Superintendent, Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1, Colorado
- Ellen McWilliams, Assistant Superintendent, Akron Public Schools, Ohio
- Debbie Montoya, Priority Schools Bureau Director, New Mexico Public Education Department
- William Robinson, Executive Director, Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education, University of Virginia
- Lucy Steiner, Senior Researcher, Public Impact
- Darwin Stiffler, Superintendent, Yuma Elementary School District One, Arizona
- Dennis Woodruff, ClearView Consulting

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Introduction

Over the last eight years, the University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education (UVA/PLE) has partnered with over 50 districts and state education agencies across the country to embark on high-level change at the state, district, and school levels through the use of leader competencies. In this guide, we call upon our practice-based experience, expertise, and insight to provide both technical assistance and thought leadership to districts and systems involved in “school turnaround.”

Specifically, we discuss the behavioral event interview (BEI) and turnaround leader competencies, and we explain how each of these can support the turnaround endeavor. A BEI is a particular type of interview that allows candidates’ suitability for a position to emerge by measuring their competencies, which are ways of behaving, acting, and feeling that support a person’s performance in a particular role. This guide provides a rationale for using BEIs and competencies, and it takes an in-depth look at how they might be used in practice. It also explores how several districts and states use these research-based processes to improve selection as well as other human resource functions, such as school assignment and professional development.

Why Should the BEI and Competencies Be Considered?

The actions, programs, and processes of more and more states and school districts suggest that there is no place for antiquated hiring practices, especially in school turnarounds. Simply put, we know too much to not have a more thoughtful and research-based approach to selection and subsequent support of leaders. A substantial body of evidence asserts the importance of leaders in schools (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Mulford

et al., 2009; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012; Suppovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2009). The combination of what we know about leadership and what we know about the “high-leverage” selection processes indicates the essential nature of improved methods for finding turnaround leaders who can readily facilitate the growth and learning of students and teachers alike.

Is It Possible to Accurately Predict Candidate Performance?

The first turnaround leader competency model was based on Public Impact’s 2008 review of cross-sector research. Since that time, UVA/PLE has developed a student achievement-based model, and an increasing number of districts and state education agencies (SEAs) have explored the BEI and its competency approach as a way to inform principal selection, principal to school matching, and principal development. These SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs) report they are forecasting applicants’ suitability for turnaround leadership better than ever. As Debbie Montoya, Priority Schools Bureau Director for the New Mexico Public Education Department, observed:

Before this work came into our hands, we were identifying good leadership for curriculum and instruction. BEIs and competencies root us very quickly in leadership more broadly—a leader for change. This isolates what causes school change. You can have all the best curricular programs, but if a principal is not “leading,” we aren’t getting anywhere.

This sentiment is not altogether surprising because it reflects a growing body of research about the accuracy and helpful nature of competencies. This research helps to equip LEAs and SEAs with tools that enable them to identify not only high-quality

instructional leadership *but also* high-quality organizational leadership, as both are crucial for leading sustained school improvement.

How Would a Competency-Based Approach Work?

In light of what we have learned from the field and our research, we suggest that instead of a traditional interview and application materials review approach, districts and states should consider the cutting-edge work that an increasing number of their peers engage in to identify high-quality turnaround principals. There are several ways districts could thoughtfully and insightfully look for a new leader, including competency-based selection.

What Do SEAs Need to Know to Support LEAs and Schools in a Competency-Based Approach?

The purpose of this guide is to anticipate SEA and LEA needs and questions about competencies, including:

1. Why should SEAs encourage LEAs to **consider competency-based approaches** to hiring their principals for low-performing schools?
2. How can schools and districts **identify a potentially high-performing candidate who is a change agent**?
3. What are the **competencies that matter** for principals who orchestrate school turnaround?
4. What is a **BEI**?
5. What are the **key areas for sustaining** a high-quality BEI program?
6. What does this process look like in **actual** districts and states?
7. What are the **lessons learned and broader implications** for competencies?
8. How can **SEAs support and hold accountable LEAs** for developing more thoughtful leader selection processes?

A Word About Our Intentions

Although the idea of competency-based work is not new, what is novel is the concept’s maturation. Competency-based approaches have been utilized for more than seven years in school turnaround. As

such, it is important to continually consider how they have evolved to support the work we do for turnaround schools and their students. This guide seeks to reiterate the importance of competencies while also sparking new thinking through educating, stimulating, and supporting SEAs.

Our Purpose	Our Intended Outcome(s)
<p>To Educate: Gain and solidify both conceptual and specific understanding about competency-based processes that could, in turn, influence LEA use of competencies or other thoughtful selection and human resource practices.</p>	<p>Succinctly capture the rationale for competencies so that SEAs could facilitate, encourage, and influence LEA design of a thoughtful, research-based principal and leader selection process, and demonstrate how SEAs might establish high expectations for and engage LEAs in discussions about the need for high-quality selection practices.</p> <p>Equip SEAs with awareness about competency-based selection and how the field could use this work in practice and in various contexts to enhance talent management efforts.</p>
<p>To Stimulate: Encourage innovative thinking at a systems level about how to influence LEAs.</p>	<p>Update the field about how competency-based work has evolved since its original inception just over seven years ago to include development of a competency model derived from principal and student achievement data in schools.</p> <p>Provide glimpses of new “promising practices” that SEAs and LEAs currently utilize, which could spark thinking about how competencies would look in individual contexts.</p>
<p>To Support: Position SEAs to provide useful tools for LEAs.</p>	<p>Encourage SEA support of LEAs by providing specific insights relevant to LEAs, as well as providing a resource to disseminate to LEAs, including the redesign questions in Appendix A in this guide.</p>

Discussion of Key Questions for a Competency-Based Approach

The following section addresses the questions identified regarding competency-based approaches.

Why Should SEAs Encourage LEAs to Consider Competency-Based Approaches to Hiring Their Principals for Low-Performing Schools?

Research is revealing that leader competencies matter in efforts to improve student achievement. Cutting-edge studies confirm that leader competencies are important when it comes to turning around a low-performing school (Zhu, Hitt, & Woodruff, 2014; Public Impact, 2008). This body of evidence is robust enough that it should, at the very least, inform LEA selection of principals for school turnaround. Most “traditional” selection processes have no research base to support their use. Despite this lack of research, many LEAs persist in using traditional selection methods. To change this reality, SEAs have an opportunity to provide support and influence for change. SEAs will need to simultaneously support and hold districts accountable in a way that leads LEAs to fundamentally improve the selection process. The ideas in this guide can serve as a catalyst for innovation that (a) aligns with what we know from the research, and simultaneously (b) maintains responsiveness to each LEA’s context.

How Can Schools and Districts Identify a Potentially High-Performing Candidate Who Is a Change Agent?

Through building a thoughtful selection process, schools and districts can better identify candidates who can lead turnaround. Recognizing that the traditional tools—review of application materials (preparation programs, job history, references) and interviews—might not be the only tools could be key to improving the selection process. First, while some preparation programs are geared toward producing a turnaround leader, we lack the longitudinal data to confidently evaluate these claims. This means that preparation alone should not be relied upon as an indicator of readiness to lead turnaround. Second, most applicants do not have prior experience as turnaround principals, which raises the question of what could serve as a proxy for turnaround experience. Third, traditional interviews lack the validity to assess a candidate’s proclivity for turnaround.

What would a thoughtful and more accurate selection process entail? How might it differ if we diagnose candidates’ levels of certain competencies to increase the likelihood of “knowing what we are getting”? Ideally, evaluating a candidate would involve multiple sources of evidence, which would be derived from reliable and valid measures.

The selection process would also ideally be approached collaboratively with multiple perspectives assessing the candidates’ strengths on the same important indicators.

Ideally, once a candidate is selected and hired, the district immediately has robust diagnostic data about the new principal’s strengths and areas for growth.

These indicators would reflect what we know about solid turnaround leadership. Discussion and consideration of evidence supporting committee members’ assessments would yield best thinking from multiple perspectives. Then, these perspectives could come to an “inference-free” consensus based on examining the evidence that exists for what matters for turnaround.

Ideally, once a candidate is selected and hired, the district immediately has robust diagnostic data about the new principal’s strengths and areas for growth. A “perfect” turnaround principal is hard to find. However, if the district has insight into the areas that matter for turnaround, as well as where the principal needs additional support and development, the district could help strengthen the principal’s skills parallel to the onboarding process.

What Are the Competencies That Matter for Principals Who Orchestrate School Turnaround?

There are no easy answers when it comes to talent management; however, research is beginning to coalesce around a model for turnaround leaders’ thinking and behavior. One way to better approximate the more precise selection and smoother onboarding of turnaround principals is to utilize an interview technique eliciting candidates’ responses that provide insight into how they would function as school turnaround leaders. With this insight, districts also would equip themselves with a clearer picture of the development that would support the new principals during their early, critical days as principals.

To bring a more systematic approach into the selection process, some districts and systems have added another “tool” to their box and adopted use of a BEI during their selection process (McClelland, 1998). The BEI has been used for some time in the business world, and as education practitioners began to search for solutions to the conundrum of leader replacement called for in most school turnaround models, the BEI emerged as a way to assist the selection process. In short, BEIs identify a person’s level within a competency.

Public Impact’s original, foundational work to identify competencies related to effective turnaround leadership includes ten competencies derived from a literature review of research in effective turnaround in business leadership (Steiner & Hassel 2011). The UVA/PLE became one of the first external partners to include BEIs in its work with partner districts. Given its interest in providing evidence-based assistance to partners, UVA/PLE embarked upon an empirical investigation of the competencies related to effective school turnaround leadership. Building upon Public Impact’s review of the literature in organizational turnaround, the UVA/PLE examined the BEIs of principals whose efforts resulted in substantial improved student performance in their schools. As a result of this investigation and analysis of student performance data, a new model that both confirms some of the literature-based components and asserts three new competencies was developed (Zhu, Hitt, & Woodruff, 2014). Levels for scoring purposes were also adjusted to reflect what student achievement data indicated.

The competencies in both models have strengths and limitations. Public Impact’s work draws from a comprehensive review of studies in organizational turnaround, yet the research upon which the model rests are studies external to education, which means that the findings might differ from competencies of *school* leaders. The UVA/PLE model attempts to address this limitation and build upon Public Impact’s foundation

for competencies through investigating how the model might be adjusted for school leaders. It analyzes longitudinal data, including principals' BEI scores and the increases in student achievement at their schools. However, the sample size is small (41 principals), so further research with more principals is warranted to confirm findings.

Below is an overview adapted from both models. Each model captures the "behaviors that matter" for turnaround. Because UVA/PLE uses the second model with partner LEAs and SEAs, school leaders' seven competencies are described here:

- *Focusing on sustainable results*, taking responsibility for improving school outcomes, and implementing initiatives to accomplish sustainable results, based on an understanding and analysis of the school's challenges.
- *Holding people accountable for school performance*, being mindful of school performance needs, and holding others accountable for high standards.
- *Impacting and influencing* by taking actions to affect the perceptions, thinking, and actions of others.
- *Engaging the team* and working with a group of adults to leverage their input, develop actionable and tangible goals, and implement change in the school.
- *Committing to students* by demonstrating a belief in their capabilities and having the courage to take a stand on behalf of students.
- *Thinking conceptually* and demonstrating the ability to see meaningful patterns among seemingly unrelated issues or ideas, leading to new ideas or fresh perspectives.

Public Impact Model:

Competencies Based on Review of Research on Organizational Turnaround Outside of Education

Demonstrating Achievement

Demonstrating Initiative and Persistence

Planning Ahead

Monitoring and Directiveness

Developing Others

Impacting and Influencing

Demonstrating Team Leadership

Showing Self-Confidence

Thinking Conceptually

Thinking Analytically

UVA/PLE Model:

Competencies Based on Both Public Impact Model and Student Achievement Data of High-Performing Turnaround Principals

Focusing on Sustainable Results

Holding People Accountable for Performance

Impacting and Influencing

Engaging the Team

Committing to Students

Thinking Conceptually

Thinking Analytically

- *Thinking analytically* by demonstrating the ability to analyze issues and opportunities logically, and recognizing cause and effect.

Research provides insight into the leader practices that link to improved student achievement. However, what districts and systems wish to know when selecting a turnaround leader is a bit different, since they seek to determine which candidates

Each of these competencies has four “levels” of sophistication to rate candidates.

UVA/PLE Competency	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Focusing on Sustainable Results	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
Holding People Accountable for School Performance	Demonstrates school performance mindset	Aligns individual expectations to school performance standards	Monitors performance and helps people to improve	Strengthens organizational capability for performance
Impacting and Influencing	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
Engaging the Team	Communicates with the group	Works with the group	Aligns team efforts toward clear goals	Empowers the team
Committing 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
Thinking Conceptually	Compares situations or ideas	Utilizes insight to help prioritize	Reframes situations for clarity	Generates new ideas and approaches
Thinking Analytically	Sees the facets of a situation	Understands basic cause and effect	Identifies cause and effect among several items	Articulates complexity among multiple variables

Note. UVA/PLE empirically derived this model through mixed methods analysis of principal interview data. 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.

have “what it takes” to enact these practices in tumultuous environments. Having “what it takes” largely depends on the internal state of mind or what some researchers call

“This type of interview pulls some things that are inside of candidates out so you learn more about what they are thinking and what they are capable of.”

— Sandy Coroles, District Superintendent, Ogden, Utah

“psychological” resources. Of all the types of resources leaders typically have, psychological resources are the hardest to develop or change (Leithwood, 2012). If this is the case, it makes sense that emphasizing these hard-to-develop resources during selection may be a key to (a) picking a candidate who has the best chance of becoming a high-functioning turnaround leader, and (b) reducing the amount of development work needed during the onboarding process.

The point of a model is to establish criteria to analyze candidates’ responses so that districts can consider how well the candidates would fare as turnaround principals. As Sandy Coroles, District Superintendent of the Ogden School District, Utah, explained, “This type of interview pulls some things that are inside of candidates out so you learn more about what they are thinking and what they are capable of.”

What Is a BEI?

A BEI is a way to measure candidates’ strengths on the competencies that matter.

After their job applications are screened initially, candidates participate in the BEI. The BEI lasts about two hours. Three to five people work together on a committee; one is the interviewer while the others scribe.

The assumption within BEI methodology is that recent past performance is an indicator of future performance, and that measuring the past performance using the competency model described here is the best way to render some of the most insightful information about a candidate’s background. When they are probed and asked to tell their stories, candidates reveal detailed and rich depictions of their practices as leaders in key situations. At a basic level, these self reports describe if, how, and why the candidates made decisions, created a vision, built consensus, resolved conflict, developed people, harnessed teachers, and involved external stakeholders. At a deeper level, these stories lay the groundwork for analysis of how well the candidates would fare as turnaround leaders. The interview team transcribes all the information.

At the BEI’s conclusion, the interview team spends time individually reviewing the transcripts. During the review, the team analyzes what the candidates said for evidence of a score on each competency. Then, using the competency model, each member assigns a “level” or score (1-4) for each competency. Once each member has had time to review and assign levels, the committee comes back together to reconcile their decisions.

As a result, most districts consider the individual strengths and limitations illuminated by the BEI process and how those strengths and limitations would likely play out in the unique context of the school and district.

A high-functioning interview team’s goal is to make “inference-free” assessments of each competency. By focusing on the actions and thoughts directly attributed to the candidates, teams are better able to

make accurate determinations. Since the competencies are the principals’ mindsets and behaviors shown to influence student achievement in turnaround settings, an overall assessment of each candidate’s capacity and potential as a turnaround leader emerges.

Then, depending on the particular state or school district, the BEI scores are used as part of a multifaceted selection process. Districts could use a spectrum approach, which might include a BEI, some form of student- and teacher-level data associated with past job history, and performance tasks. Some districts rely more on the BEI results, while others reference a range of indicators. Rarely does any candidate display strength across the entire competency model. As a result, most districts consider the individual strengths and limitations illuminated by the BEI process and how those strengths and limitations would likely play out in the unique context of the school and district. Occasionally, a candidate will be weak across all competencies. In these cases, most districts choose to remove the candidate from further consideration.

Roles During the BEI

A team works together to conduct a BEI, and each role is important in creating a high-quality interview.

Trainers. Districts and states interested in utilizing the BEI as part of the selection process need high-quality initial training. During the training, districts and states experience BEIs as modeled by a team of three or four trainers who have been conducting BEIs for years. Typically, trainers work with the staff to incrementally involve them in the BEI process.

Interviewer. Often, the interviewer role is regarded as high pressure due to the level of “on the spot” nuanced probing questions needed. The interviewer is responsible for making in-the-moment judgments about question formulation and redirection. How well the interviewer elicits this level of

information and detail from the interviewee has implications for the validity of the subsequent scoring. While some sites identify a person or two who feel comfortable and confident as interviewers, many sites opt to continue to partner with a trainer to conduct interviews. Through continually observing the trainer interviewing, eventually a person emerges who is ready to assume the lead role, as occurred in Ogden, Utah. Brad Smith, who is now state superintendent, served as an interviewer. During BEI training, participants can consider the interviewer’s role and attempt to identify early on a person who can pay special attention to how the training team conducts the interviews.

Scribes. Typically, two or three people transcribe the interview. During training, at least one trainer functions as a scribe alongside two or three site-based practitioners. Scribes do their best to capture every word spoken by the interviewer and the interviewee. Participants report that this experience is similar to scribing during a teacher observation. Scribing itself does not require intensive training; however, trainers offer initial suggestions about how to scribe in a way that generates accurate scoring.

Scorers must find evidence within their scribed transcripts to justify the level they assign.

Scorers. Immediately after the interview concludes and the interviewee leaves, the interviewer and the scribes all serve as scorers. Scorers must find evidence within their transcripts to justify the level they assign. This process takes about 30 minutes, sometimes longer for new teams.

Then, the scorers come together and in rounds share their decisions about scores and the evidence within the transcript that supports their decisions. Sometimes new teams assign divergent levels, which is to be

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—Sandy Coroles,
District Superintendent, Ogden, Utah

expected as teams become familiar with the scoring process and facile with the model. Once all scorers have shared their levels, discussion ensues. Often, members change their minds upon hearing another person’s evidence, which they might have overlooked. In these cases, reconciliation comes more quickly. However, there are also times when longer discussion ensues as team members work to reach common understanding and consensus about level assignment. In these instances, teams find it helpful to return to the exact places within the transcripts to examine the evidence for level assignment. Doing so allows an “inference-free” level to emerge through dialogue and consensus. Sandy Coroles described her experience in Ogden with competency-based selection: “I learned that before we used the BEI and competencies to guide our process, I tended to give scores based on what I felt or my impressions were. But now, I have to look for evidence.”

What Are the Key Areas for Sustaining a High-Quality BEI Program?

Initial training, calibration, and establishing a point person are the major components of a high-quality BEI program.

Initial Training

BEI training typically consists of a district or SEA team working alongside trainers for five days. When a district or system is ready to begin using BEIs, and candidates have been

identified, a team of trainers will guide and model the work. The team of trainers works with a team from the district or state team. The district team is typically comprised of the superintendent, associate superintendents, and executive directors. A state team typically is comprised of those involved in turnaround or leadership development. In this way, district and SEA leadership learn through actually accomplishing the work. There are no simulations or set ups. The training begins with an overview of the process, but sites quickly engage in administering and scoring candidates’ BEIs. The trainer typically functions as the interviewer throughout the five days and even beyond, but site participants work as scribes and scorers from day one.

After the five-day training, teams are not only trained in BEI administration, but candidates are fully scored and ready for consideration. At this point, sites continue administering BEIs on their own, although they may still call upon a trainer as an interviewer.

Some districts may choose to teach themselves BEI methodology and a competency-based approach through the use of publicly available resources. Public Impact (2008) developed a comprehensive toolkit for districts, which differs in some ways from in-person training. Some districts indicated that the toolkit provides a high-quality resource and support beyond the initial in-person training for BEI teams, and it has particular relevance for the interviewer or point person (discussed below) for building capacity. However, most districts suggested that exposure to high-quality modeling of the BEI helped them with implementation. They did not need to work in isolation without the benefit of technical assistance.

Calibration

Ideally, sites will regularly engage in calibration. Calibration is the process of teams aligning their scoring decisions and checking for consistent scoring across candidates and among the team. BEI teams can set

aside time to score and reconcile outside of a scheduled BEI. One way to accomplish this calibration is to periodically assemble the entire BEI team (all who are trained and serve as scorers, even if they do not normally work together) and have the team review a previous transcript. The team codes and scores individually, shares their scores, and then reconciles scores based on the evidence in the data. Doing this type of exercise twice yearly for active teams helps the district maintain its edge in scoring. Less active teams should consider additional calibration sessions.

Establishing a Point Person

As with any initiative, a leader or coordinator of the work is needed for a high-quality BEI program. This person leads the work and also stays in contact with the trainers, organizes calibration, and strengthens his or her own practice to eventually function as the interviewer. Developing capacity for an in-house interviewer is an important milestone toward sustaining competency-based work in a system. Establishing a point person who shepherds the work is a tall order, especially when the superintendents and executive directors who are involved with this work are already charged with so much. However, doing so preserves the integrity of competency-based processes and sets the system up for sustainability. As discussed above, districts and states must intentionally think about the role of the interviewer in the BEI, since much hinges on the strength of the interviewer’s skills.

What Does This Process Look Like in Actual Districts and States?

To better understand how districts and states implement competency-based practices, examples from Yuma Elementary School District One, Arizona; Ogden Public Schools, Utah; New Mexico Public Education Department; Montezuma Cortez Public Schools, Colorado; and Akron Public

Schools, Ohio, are included here. Thoughtful adaptation of the BEI to individual contexts should be encouraged, and each of these district and state agencies adapted the competency-based selection process somewhat differently to meet their specific needs.

Competencies in Selection: *Yuma Elementary School District One, Arizona*

For the past three years, Yuma Elementary School District One has utilized competencies in its selection process. Initially, the superintendent, two associate superintendents, and the executive director for human resources were trained in competency-based selection and BEI methodology. Ensuring that senior-level leaders, including the superintendent, understand the importance of the work helps to sustain the work. According to Superintendent Darwin Stiffler, Yuma has conducted 25 BEIs to select building-level administrators for all vacancies.

Yuma conducts an initial review of applications. The committee then selects five candidates to engage in a BEI. The BEI team consists of the two associate superintendents and the executive director for human resources. Then, of the five candidates, those who score high enough across the levels within each competency are invited for an in-person interview, which the superintendent leads. Stiffler reported that that the school leaders hired under a competency-based system are outperforming those who were hired under their previous traditional interview process.

Competencies in Selection: *Ogden Public Schools, Utah*

Ogden Public Schools has used competencies and the BEI for the past four years. All of its current principals have been chosen through a selection process that involves competencies and the BEI. Three of the zone superintendents are trained to conduct BEIs. In Ogden’s practice, BEIs usually consist of six people but no less than four. Ogden has adapted the process to meet its needs

by shortening the interview to one hour. According to Superintendent Coroles, the staff spent two hours originally, but after a year, they began experimenting with making the interview less time intensive. Since the same people work together, calibration remains high, and reconciliation takes less time. The scoring and discussion take Ogden about 45 minutes.

As with any adjustment, tradeoffs exist. Some districts may administer BEIs to a larger pool of applicants, thus necessitating a time consideration. Other districts may do more initial screening and then have the time to do a full BEI for each candidate. If adjustments are made, districts should do so judiciously and proceed cautiously, because generating a thorough transcript with rich self-reporting is key to accurate scoring.

In terms of formative outcomes, Coroles reported that BEIs have enabled Ogden “to pick the right person for the job” with much more confidence. “Job performance has improved. When you walk into the schools now, the culture has changed,” noted Coroles.

Competencies in Selection and Performance Management: New Mexico Public Education Department

While one of the BEI’s most common uses is during selection for a building-level position, some states and districts have found other uses for it. New Mexico’s Public Education Department developed and administers the Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program, which is designed to create a cadre of transformational turnaround principals. Educators interested in becoming and serving as turnaround principals can apply for the developmental program. During the program, participants receive mentoring and guidance from experienced and effective leaders. PPE requires that everyone in the program, from participant to mentor, engage in a BEI. In this way, the BEI helps the program select not only candidates who are ready to undergo PPE training, but also

mentors who will help shape PPE participants. Given the mentors’ influential role, PPE considers the selection of mentors critical for the program’s quality. Mentors need to score well on the competency model if they are to provide the right type of influence on the program participants.

According to Debbie Montoya, Priority Schools Bureau Director, BEIs and competencies have provided a framework for understanding and identifying organizational leadership. She stated, “We had a firm grasp on identifying instructional leadership, perhaps because indicators of effective instruction—which signal effective instructional leadership—abound. This is not the case for organizational leadership, however. Our process was lacking in identifying organizational and change leaders, and we now rely on competencies and the BEI to fill that void.”

In practice, the BEI is a time-intensive investment. Montoya explained, “Since a true BEI lasts about two hours, and scoring is another hour, I think carefully about how to construct my expectations for the team.” PPE conducted over 100 interviews, which means that about six weeks of the team’s time is set aside each year for PPE program selection. However, Montoya said, “The time is well worth the effort; the process yields participants and principal mentors who show strength in the areas that matter for turnaround.” In this way, the BEI serves as a proactive time investment that may prevent systems from engaging in inaccurate selection and subsequent improper resource use.

Principal Development: Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1, Colorado

Lori Haukeness, a former turnaround principal supervisor, currently is assistant superintendent for the Montezuma-Cortez School District in Colorado. Principal supervisors provide support and accountability that lead to the growth of school leaders. As principal supervisor, Haukeness used the BEI and competencies for both selection and

[The principal supervisor] asked each principal to think of the evidence from that week that related to each competency. Together, they decided from which level... the principal was operating, and they discussed ways to leverage variables within the principal’s scope so that growth on that competency could occur.

development. Each turnaround principal was measured on the competencies as candidates. Then, the results of the BEI followed the principal into the position. Every week, Haukeness met with all of the principals individually to discuss their progress within each competency. As mentioned earlier, rarely is there a “perfect” turnaround principal. What is more realistic is a principal who has relative strength across a spectrum of competencies with the potential and willingness to develop and continually improve and grow in reference to the school’s unique context.

The Cortez approach assumes growth and support will be needed for all principals, particularly as the change process unfolds. In their meetings, Haukeness asked each principal to think of the evidence from that week that related to each competency. Together, they decided from which level in the competency model (one to four) the principal was operating, and they discussed ways to leverage variables within the principal’s scope so that growth on that competency could occur. For example, if a principal shared with Haukeness that he or she was operating from level one (communicates position to others) in impacting and influencing, she then might suggest how the principal could move into levels three and four by carefully considering the perspectives and motivations of a group of teachers the principal wished to influence. Rather than

just focusing on how the principal would like to see teachers at a particular grade level use data to inform instruction, Haukeness utilized a competency-based approach to encourage the principal to think about how to elicit a desired response from the teachers. In doing so, the principal considered the teachers’ realities and involved them in the design and decision-making process about how they could use data to inform instruction. Weekly meetings composed of these reflective conversations ended with an understanding about goals and strategies for the coming week, and the principal realized that Haukeness would check back in about evidence of progress.

The nature of school turnaround is that often we create models before we see them in reality, which is frequently the case for districts when they first embark upon competency work. Given the emergent nature of promising practices in school turnaround, principal supervisors do not always get much of a head start in deeply understanding the competencies or seeing how they look in practice. However, principal supervisors need to be especially fluent with the model, as they support and hold accountable the turnaround principals on a daily or weekly basis. Haukeness noted, “Finding ways for principal supervisors to quickly and deeply understand the competencies and how they might play out in practice is critical.”

Integrating Competencies into a Spectrum of Talent Management Processes: Akron Public Schools

Akron Public Schools began its work with competencies initially to select principals for its eight turnaround schools. Akron conducted 20 BEIs for the eight positions and reported the benefit of the procedure in terms of providing an unbiased way of evaluating candidates. The initial impressions led them to consider how else competencies could inform their work. Ellen McWilliams, assistant superintendent, explained, “Right away, we started to think

about broader ways to apply BEIs and competencies; [the competency of] team leadership just seemed to fit with what we expected of our principals, and we wanted to foster this practice.” McWilliams reported that building high-functioning teams to undertake the work of school turnaround made logical sense in that no principal could function as a hero for a sustained period of time. As such, Akron looked for leaders who could identify organizational needs and individuals’ strengths, align the two, and then empower those individuals to join the leadership effort.

...BEIs allowed Akron to be deliberate about the reasons for a match through explicitly identifying a principal’s attributes and limitations and matching them with the school’s contextual needs.

Akron eventually decided to administer BEIs to all of its principals so that it had a tool to proactively consider appropriate principal placement related to the each school’s needs and context as vacancies arose. Since a vacancy in a single school often caused a domino effect among other schools, McWilliams reported that identifying a method to accurately make these decisions in a coherent manner was more appealing than moving principals around for unarticulated reasons. In this way, BEIs allowed Akron to be deliberate about the reasons for a match through explicitly identifying a principal’s attributes and limitations and matching them with the school’s contextual needs.

Akron developed the Great Leaders Program, which provides mentoring and development to aspiring principals. Akron partners with local universities to tap high potential individuals to pursue required credentials, and Akron pays part of their tuition. These 13 to 20 aspiring principals engage in

a yearlong internship during the program. To help with internship placement, a BEI is administered so that program coordinators have high-quality insight into arranging a mutually beneficial placement. In addition to the prospective intern’s BEI, placements are made based on the principal’s leadership style and the school’s context.

To gain a broad picture of the quality of leadership, Akron looks at competency scores in the aggregate. Then, based upon this summary, professional development strands are designed for different sectors within the leadership. For example, when scores indicated that directiveness and having difficult conversations were areas for growth for its leaders, Akron brought in high-quality, extended-duration, external development on that topic. To complement that support, the district also holds the leaders accountable by regularly following up with the principals’ efforts toward growth.

Akron is tracking outcomes for schools and levels of principals’ BEIs, and it anticipates results to be forthcoming in the next few years. For now, according to McWilliams, there is strong evidence that the BEI identifies poor performers: “There were a few

“There were a few times that we gave into the temptation to hire a candidate despite the red flags from the BEI.” In each instance of poor performance, “The BEI anticipated problems.”

— Ellen McWilliams,
Assistant Superintendent, Akron, Ohio

times that we gave into the temptation to hire a candidate despite the red flags from the BEI.” In each instance of poor performance, McWilliams said, “The BEI anticipated problems.”

What Are the “Lessons Learned” and Broader Implications for Competency-Based Approaches?

As more and more systems adopt a competency-based approach, capturing the promising practices, as well as understanding challenges resulting from the approach, can help other sites anticipate and address implementation issues and refine their existing programs.

Focus on Devising Ways to Address Time, Leadership Awareness, Internal Capacity, and Quality

LEAs and SEAs utilizing competency-based approaches reported four specific areas, or “lessons learned,” they addressed to refine their work.

Maximizing Time

The biggest challenge practitioners initially faced was the time required to conduct a BEI. However, none of the sites mentioned in this report suggested that the time commitment was a reason to forgo work with competencies.

One compensating factor was that the BEI and competencies measured had benefits beyond the initial selection process. Most districts developed ways to maximize the BEI’s use and considered how it could be leveraged in onboarding and developing chosen candidates. As a result, the time investment seemed less of a barrier. Districts and systems seemed to realize that it was not often, without BEIs, that they gained insight into the quality of particular tools, routines, and processes

that their turnaround principals utilized to enact change in schools for the betterment of students.

Akron Public Schools found its way around the time issue by hiring a retired curriculum and instruction department executive director half time to coordinate the BEI program. He used about half of his time for BEI coordination, which allowed other Akron personnel, from associate superintendents to directors, to serve as BEI team members, with minimal disruption to their regular responsibilities.

Creating Top-Level Leadership Awareness

Most districts found that they needed a systemic approach for a multifaceted competencies approach to flourish. Across all the sites described here, senior-level leadership demonstrated a high degree of awareness and fluency with competencies. As the work in Yuma, Ogden, and Akron showed,

Across all the sites described here, senior-level leadership demonstrated a high degree of awareness and fluency with competencies.

the district superintendent, associate superintendents, and other senior leaders understood the competency model. For state-level work, state superintendents and

other senior state personnel understood the competency approach. Tackling this level of vertical alignment could at first be daunting, as multiple initiatives vied for these top-level leaders’ attention. However, most of these senior leaders fully understood the paramount importance of human capital and talent management. They were energized to find a research-based way to engage in talent identification and development tailored to turnaround schools’ needs.

Building Internal Capacity

As discussed earlier, several sites either continue to, or for a considerable time, depended upon external trainers. While high-quality initial training and follow-up support are important, for competency-based work to be sustainable, internal capacity should be built.

Sites particularly reported staff concerns or reluctance to serve in the interviewer role, and the sites often preferred to allow trainers to continue in the role. This arrangement accrued cost, and it also could possibly prevent the system from scheduling BEIs on an as-needed basis. Instead, during the initial training, site staff should begin to study the interviewer by recording and reviewing tapes or reviewing the transcripts for the actual question formulation, question order, and use of probing questions. While no two BEIs are alike, and there is no “formula,” potential interviewers can draw from the trainer model as they build their confidence and repertoire as interviewers. Interviewing is interviewee dependent. The interviewer’s goal is to elicit robust data from the candidate, which requires ongoing monitoring and adjusting the questioning strategy, as well as redirecting the candidate.

This guide encourages district leaders to stretch themselves to become interviewers and for SEAs to support them in doing so. The habits of high-quality interviewers can be cultivated, as evidenced by districts and states that have developed in-house interviewers.

Maintaining a High-Quality Program

Recalibration and development of the BEI teams improved the competency program’s quality, as noted earlier. Sites maintained their edge through engaging in “booster” trainings and recalibrating internally. These trainings were one or two days long and involved bringing trainers back to facilitate discussion of and reflection on the team’s scoring practices. Since trainers typically engaged in BEIs on a daily basis, they helped sites identify the areas in which they might be off in scoring and provided an external, fresh perspective on the work. Akron scheduled one- or two-day booster trainings during years two and three of its competency program.

Overall Considerations Referenced by Districts and States Implementing Competency-Based Approaches

LEAs and SEAs reported two broader implications gleaned from their efforts and experience utilizing competency-based approaches.

Maintaining Awareness of the Commitment the BEI Entails

Several of the sites mentioned that the BEI’s time-intensive nature was not only a factor for the district or SEA, but also for the candidates. Candidates frequently reported that the process of recounting their professional lives in an intensive interview situation was both exhilarating and exhausting. As more and more candidates become aware of which districts conduct BEIs and what a BEI entails, LEAs might want to consider any potential candidate burden. Further, if selection processes become overly lengthy or intensive, or if districts are slow in sequencing their selection processes, other districts will pick up some of the best candidates. For these reasons, this guide suggests that SEAs help LEAs consider a balanced approach that allows for both deep consideration of candidates and also maximizes insight and

Action Principles for SEAs

- **Create** awareness and help LEAs establish a vision for thoughtful selection.
- **Model** SEA use of competency-based selection.
- **Engage** as a thought partner to build LEA capacity.
- **Develop** a support structure for rural districts.
- **Partner** with external organizations.
- **Leverage** financial incentives.
- **Follow up** with districts.

time. Doing so, districts reported, positioned them differently in applicants’ perceptions.

Weaving Competencies into the Fabric of Other Human Resource Practices

While BEIs were originally intended to help districts and systems navigate the murky process of identifying and hiring a turnaround principal from pools of applicants with no turnaround track records, senior leaders quickly saw other potential applications of the BEI. While the only empirical research that exists are studies on competencies for selection, interviews with district and state leaders indicate promise for the use of BEIs in induction, mentoring, and professional development, as well as selection processes outside of turnaround.

How Can SEAs Support and Hold Accountable LEAs for Developing More Thoughtful Leader Selection Processes?

Much remains uncertain about the challenging work of turnaround, but one facet of the process that has become clearer is that

a high-quality principal selection process should include more than a traditional interview and review of application materials. A school can be “set up for success” with the right leader in place. The challenge for SEAs is to facilitate LEA awareness, agreement, and change in practice. This guide suggests several approaches for SEAs to consider.

Create Awareness and Help LEAs Establish a Vision for Thoughtful Selection

Before LEAs can change their current practices, they must be aware of options for a more thoughtful selection process. SEAs can consider the examples within this guide and complement them with their own reviews of their LEAs’ current best practices. If SEAs call upon the rationale in this guide (including the research base) for improved selection processes, LEAs will better understand the impetus for change. Then, perhaps during a meeting with superintendents or other senior leaders, part of the agenda could be devoted to discussing and sharing how LEAs currently select principals and what they see as potential improvements to existing processes (see Appendix A at the end of this document for prompts organized by implementation phase).

Competencies and the BEI are not the only facets to include in the selection process. American Institutes for Research’s Center on Great Teachers and Leaders suggests the following processes that aid committees in making decisions:

- Application review
- Application essay questions or writing sample
- Phone interview
- Behavior Event Interview
- Performance tasks
 - » Data analysis of a school, followed by developing a plan

- » Instructional observation, followed by giving feedback to a teacher
- Reference checks
- Background checks
- School visit
- Presentation to staff (e.g., mock data analysis and planning)
- Community forum

SEAs could also help LEAs think about how to collect and analyze data from (a) the principals they select; and (b) their schools’ performance outcomes, including student achievement on standardized tests, but also other formative indicators related to teacher effectiveness and organizational features that influence student achievement.

Finally, SEAs could encourage LEAs that choose to use competency-based selection to consider other uses of the BEI data. As shown by Akron, there are multiple ways to draw upon the BEI data to both select a leader and support the leader in continual growth.

Model SEA Use of Competency-Based Selection

Just as the New Mexico Public Education Department has done, some current state-level needs might be addressed by utilizing competency-based approaches and the BEI. SEAs could think about how they could learn to use competencies so that their agencies become leaders and sources of innovation. Doing so at the state level would not only convey the importance of high-quality selection, but it would also provide a “laboratory for learning” that LEAs could participate in or observe to better understand high-quality selection processes. If SEAs become models, a “train the trainers” approach would also be possible; SEAs would be sources of expertise and ongoing practitioners who could provide the guidance and support that LEAs need. If SEAs do become fluent in the BEI, they could support calibration efforts

at the LEA level by regularly attending BEIs and bringing an unbiased perspective to the process.

Engage as a Thought Partner to Build LEA Capacity

SEAs could engage in a dialogue with LEAs to consider what shifting to a more thoughtful selection program might entail. Just as New Mexico and Ogden had to reconsider responsibilities and other expectations, SEAs could help LEAs systematically think through the organizational mechanisms and processes that improving the selection program would impact. Human resources departments’ practices would need to be adjusted. For example, using the BEI selection process affects various logistics. BEIs also extend the selection process, and LEAs would want to consider if and how they might lose candidates to other LEAs due to intensive procedures or lengthy approval processes.

Develop a Support Structure for Rural Districts

Many states face the challenge of rural districts that operate in relative isolation. Since rural districts are typically geographically distant and small in staff, it might not be financially feasible to bring trainers into remote areas or to add another duty to an assistant superintendent’s job description, when that person has no executive directors or support staff. Given that there might also be only a handful of principals and limited vacancies in these small and remote rural districts, investing in full BEI training might not be necessary. In these cases, it could make sense for SEAs to designate an SEA-based team to conduct BEIs as needed, as well as to build LEA capacity through training to sustain the ongoing use of competencies in other facets of professional development and human resource management.

Partner with External Organizations

SEAs could directly partner with or encourage LEAs to partner with universities or other leadership programs to share the responsibilities associated with spending time and money. Universities could benefit from engaging in competency-based work with future school leaders, particularly in coursework related to low-performing schools and overall program admission. Professional development for LEAs and schools also could be enhanced through considering how competencies might frame a programmatic approach. Building capacity outside of the SEAs and LEAs would also protect competency-based initiatives from turnover and provide a source of “back-up” training and expertise.

Leverage Financial Incentives

During the LEA grant application process, SEAs could require, or strongly encourage, LEAs’ use of a high-quality selection process. While there is no single recipe for a model, and the individual LEA context should inform the design of any process, SEAs would be on firm ground to insist upon examining and redesigning the principal selection process in competitive grant applications. Once grants are awarded and LEAs submit evaluations, the LEAs could report on their selection methods and how those link to school-level change. The research in this area (Zhu, Hitt, & Woodruff,

forthcoming) justifies such a move.

Educating state legislators and garnering their support regarding the importance of thoughtful principal selection processes are also methods of reinforcement.

Follow Up with LEAs

Whether it is continuing the conversation with LEAs that have not adjusted their selection processes or checking in with those who undertook redesign, one of the most important practices of any person or entity in a leadership role is following up on expectations, finding ways to support those agencies in the throes of change, and simultaneously holding them accountable for meeting goals. Follow-up is a key to driving positive growth and change. Doing so communicates the SEA’s commitment to an initiative, but also opens the door for ongoing dialogue and support throughout the challenges. SEAs could intentionally look for and call attention to high-quality selection programs within their states. This recognition would encourage both the recipient of the praise as well as other LEAs that might be slow to take the initial steps and embrace the need to redesign selection practices. To take it a step further, SEAs could consider how to develop or add to existing turnaround peer networks so that schools and LEAs could share best practices and other innovations as they redefine and refine their selection processes.

Conclusion

Every day, education leaders at all levels must make decisions. Many of these decisions are high stakes with far-reaching implications, particularly those associated with turning around a low-performing school. The decisions associated with human capital are often the most critical *and* perplexing. If we replace the principal, will the new one fare any better than the previous one? How will we choose between several seemingly comparable candidates? What are the tools that will help us make these tough calls? What are the criteria on which we should base our judgments? What is the evidence that justifies the decision? How do we find evidence in the uncharted territory of leadership for school turnaround?

This guide urges SEAs to continue to be aware of the realities LEAs face and to be proactive in helping LEAs meet challenges and uncertainties associated with school turnaround. LEAs are inundated with difficult questions like the ones above, and at times, they may default to the most expeditious process out of a sheer need to be definitive

quickly. However, this expeditiousness can lead to time-intensive, reactionary responses down the road, particularly when it comes to staff selection. As Debbie Montoya put it, “If I could pick, I would rather invest a few extra hours up front than countless hours picking up the pieces in a year from now.” This guide suggests multiple ways that SEAs can be thought partners and sources of anticipatory insight and perspective about LEAs’ selection endeavors.

Our experience and research suggest that competency-based processes can help address these and other questions and dilemmas of LEAs for the ultimate benefit of teachers and students. We have also observed how SEAs use competencies to improve their own efforts toward supporting low-performing schools. We foresee an even more powerful impact on organizations and students as SEAs increasingly assume leadership roles to help LEAs maximize the high-yield and pivotal processes of selecting, developing, and supporting principals.

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Appendix A

Redesigning for a Competency-Based Approach: SEA Support of LEA Principal Selection

SEAs can facilitate LEAs’ responses to the following questions about the selection process of turnaround principals during professional development, School Improvement Grant meetings, or other gatherings. This Appendix provides questions to discuss during the redesign process, after the guide itself has been reviewed.

Envision

1. What comprises our current selection process for turnaround principals?
2. How is this process aligned with what we know about a high-quality approach?
3. How does our current approach differ from what research asserts about a more innovative approach?
4. How do we see SEAs helping us to address the gap, if one has been identified in questions one to three?
5. How can SEAs sustain the work of thoughtful selection? Can a BEI “trainer of the trainer” who disseminates information to us be housed at the SEA?
6. What will be the sequencing of events within the entire selection process? (See page 17 in the guide for the list.)

Anticipate

1. When will we want to use a competency-based approach?
2. How will we gain access to initial BEI training?

3. Can we partner with other districts or entities for training?
4. How will we screen candidates from the larger pool to select for participation in BEIs?
5. Who will comprise our key team initially through the initiative’s “lift off”? Who are the people in our LEA/SEA we think will “get” what competency-based selection is, even before we engage in it?
6. Which positions will require BEIs, and what is the approximate number of BEIs we estimate?
7. Given the number of anticipated BEIs needed, how will we reduce responsibilities of those involved so that they can focus on the selection process?
8. Which one of us do we foresee as interviewer and lead for the program?
9. How will we garner support from the following: Executive Director associated with competency work, Human Resources staff, and Finance and Budget staff?

Enact and Refine

What works?

1. Which of the components we utilized elicited the most insightful information about the candidates?
2. Why do we think these components provided the most insightful information?

What needs our attention?

1. As job descriptions change and assignments are adjusted, who may need training now?

2. Who else can function in the interviewer role? How can we begin to develop a site-based interviewer?
3. How will we adjust our selection process to find a good blend of depth and timely action? How will we ensure that we do not lose candidates to other districts because we are not acting fast enough?

Look Forward

1. How will the competencies we measured inform the onboarding process and initial support for this candidate? Do we have the resources to commit

to this? How will we involve the principal supervisors?

2. How can we track how well our selection process is working over time? Can we look at the relationship between leading indicators/student achievement outcomes with how we measured the principals’ competencies when they were candidates?
3. How can we create structures to pass along the diagnostic data about competencies to principal supervisors or others responsible for principal support and development?



“WHAT IT TAKES” FOR A
TURNAROUND: PRINCIPAL
COMPETENCIES THAT MATTER
FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT