



Identifying Effective Turnaround Teachers

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Effective teachers are the single most important school-based factor in student learning and are critical to successful school turnarounds.¹ Particularly in high-poverty schools, teachers can mean the difference between students making dramatic gains in reading and mathematics proficiency or remaining years behind grade level. Research suggests that teachers who are likely to succeed in the turnaround setting have specific competencies that can enable them to meet the peculiar challenges of a persistently low-achieving school.

How can local educational agencies (LEAs) and States find, screen and hire the teachers who will most likely contribute to turnaround success? This brief will discuss one approach districts and principals can take to identify teachers who can help improve low-performing schools, based on the findings of Public Impact's "School Turnaround Teachers: Competencies for Success."²

Selecting Teachers for School Turnaround

Ideally, principals and LEAs seeking to turn around low-performing schools easily could find staff with a proven record of classroom effectiveness in a turnaround. However, factors commonly used in hiring decisions, such as whether teachers have obtained advanced degrees or have taught for a certain number of years, do not necessarily correlate to improved student achievement.

Given the dramatic, quick changes required for a school turnaround, principals and LEAs need to hire on the basis of whether a candidate is likely improve student achievement, not simply on the basis of credentials. An understanding of the characteristics of teachers likely to succeed in the unique turnaround context can help decision makers identify the most promising candidates.

Outside education, successful turnarounds commonly entail targeted decisions about hiring and firing, rather than complete staff replacement.³ In these settings, dismissals are typically small in number and involve employees who cannot or will not make the radical changes needed to dramatically improve performance.⁴ This trend means, however, that it is likely that the great majority of turnaround schools will need to find at least some new teachers—novice or experienced—who can help the principal turn around performance by raising student outcomes. In many cases, schools will need to replace more than 50 percent of their staff, as part of the *Turnaround* school improvement model required by the Federal School Improvement Grant program. LEAs and principals can use competencies (discrete, measurable qualities detailed in the next section) to help them identify teachers to retain, and teachers who can replace dismissed or transferred staff to increase the likelihood of a successful turnaround.

Competencies are habitual patterns of behaving and thinking that enable teachers to use their content knowledge and instructional skills to improve student learning.

The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.

What are Competencies?

Competencies are habitual patterns of behaving and thinking that enable teachers to improve student learning. While instructional skills and content knowledge contribute to any teacher's performance, looking for specific competencies—such as initiative and persistence—can help identify teachers most likely to dramatically improve student performance in a turnaround school.

Up until the last few years, comprehensive school turnaround efforts have been few in number. Therefore, most turnaround attempts today involve teachers who have not worked in such a setting previously. Turnaround teacher competencies are general enough that they can be used to select teachers who have demonstrated these competencies in other roles, but who have not yet helped turn around a low-performing school. These competencies also will help teachers and their supervisors understand and address their strengths and weaknesses as they embark on the turnaround challenge.

The competencies described in this brief are drawn primarily from research on successful teachers in high-poverty schools in the United States, detailed competency studies of successful teachers in the United Kingdom and cross-sector research on successful organization turnarounds.⁵ Teachers who have many of these competencies have a higher chance of succeeding in any school. But in a turnaround school, where rapid change and high expectations are required, teachers need stronger and more consistent habits in these critical areas to transform underperformance into enduring learning success. Researchers can validate and refine these competencies as the number of successful school turnarounds grows and as they are able to compare more and less successful teachers in this context.

The following four clusters developed by Public Impact predict whether a turnaround teacher will succeed (see sidebar, "Competencies for Turnaround Success").⁶ A turnaround teacher will likely need a combination of competencies:

Competencies for Turnaround Success

Driving for Results

- ✓ **Achievement:** Setting ambitious goals and reaching a high standard of performance despite barriers
- ✓ **Initiative and Persistence:** Doing more than is expected or required in order to accomplish a challenging task
- ✓ **Monitoring and Directing:** Setting clear expectations and holding others accountable
- ✓ **Planning Ahead:** Planning to derive benefits or avoid problems

Influencing for Results

- ✓ **Impact and Influence:** Acting to change the perceptions, thinking and actions of others
- ✓ **Team Leadership:** Assuming authoritative leadership of a group to benefit the organization
- ✓ **Developing Others:** Working to increase the short- and long-term effectiveness of another person

Problem Solving

- ✓ **Analytical Thinking:** Breaking things down in a logical way, and recognizing cause and effect
- ✓ **Conceptual Thinking:** Discerning patterns among seemingly unrelated things

Personal Effectiveness

- ✓ **Belief in Learning Potential:** Expecting that all students, regardless of circumstances, can learn at levels higher than their current achievement indicates
- ✓ **Self-Control:** Acting to keep one's emotions under control, especially when provoked
- ✓ **Self-Confidence:** Believing in one's ability to accomplish tasks and acting to reflect that belief
- ✓ **Flexibility:** Adapting one's approach to the requirements of a situation and to change tactics

Source: Public Impact

1. **Driving for Results** – A turnaround teacher needs a strong desire to achieve outstanding student learning and carry out actions required for success. Without high competence in this cluster, a teacher in a turnaround school is unlikely to sharply increase student results since old practices have failed and must be changed to remove barriers to learning.
2. **Influencing for Results** – A successful turnaround teacher motivates his or her students, other school staff and parents to help students learn.
3. **Problem-Solving** – A teacher’s ability to identify challenges, analyze and design solutions in order to plan, organize and deliver instruction is critical to school improvement.
4. **Personal Effectiveness** – A teacher’s confidence, self-control and belief in the learning potential of his or her students helps enable success.

Together, these crosscutting clusters encompass the characteristics of a teacher who is likely to work effectively and contribute to significant student learning gains in the turnaround setting.

To understand what these competencies look like in the classroom, consider a teacher with a high level of *initiative and persistence*—doing more than is expected or required to accomplish a challenging task. A teacher demonstrating this competency, even in a school providing little support, is more likely to: 1) use a variety of instructional strategies to ensure that all students meet challenging learning goals; 2) adapt instruction to individual learners as needed and 3) use ongoing, regular assessments to evaluate student progress. A teacher with too little of this competency would not engage in these behaviors often or well enough, which would lead to continued underperformance by many students. While teachers may have instructional skills and content knowledge, only certain patterns of classroom behavior ensure high levels of student learning.

Assessing Teacher Competencies

Teacher competencies can be measured through a behavioral event interview (BEI), a specific type of job interview. A BEI allows those conducting the interviews to rate the strength of the candidate’s specific

competencies. In a BEI, candidates are asked to describe their detailed actions and thinking in past work events. For example, “Think about a time when you *felt very successful or proud of something you accomplished at work*, and tell me the story. Think about a time when you *participated in a group or team of people to accomplish work that was satisfying to you*, and tell me the story.”

BEIs provide an opportunity for candidates to describe the actions that they have taken in the past, which are the best indicators of the types of actions they will take in the future. The past actions candidates took to achieve success at work are strong predictors of how they will pursue success in a turnaround setting. Local educational agencies can use these interviews alongside their more traditional screening methods—observations, writing samples and traditional interviews—to identify the qualities that will really differentiate candidates most likely to be successful in turnaround.

For example, at Project L.I.F.T.—an innovative zone of schools undertaking turnarounds in North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools—leaders used a modified BEI and turnaround competency model to screen teachers for all new positions at the start of the 2012-13 school year. Tennessee’s Achievement School District also included competencies in its screening process for teachers hired to take part in turnaround efforts in the bottom 5 percent of the state’s schools.

Conclusion

Turning around a low-performing school requires leaders to take a more specialized approach to staffing in order to realize significant achievement gains. Teachers who are likely to succeed in a high-need or turnaround school possess certain characteristics, beliefs and behaviors that can lead to dramatic gains in their classrooms. Turnaround school and district leaders will need to use special screening methods to find teachers with these competencies. Behavioral event interviews or similar assessments can help decision makers identify the right staff for a turnaround school. By using such tools, LEAs and principals can find candidates with the blend of competencies and characteristics that boosts the chances for turnaround success—whether those candidates are seasoned educators or new to the profession.

Practical Resources to Help Identify School Turnaround Teachers?

Competencies and the Behavioral Event Interview

- *School Turnaround Teachers: Competencies for Success* (2008). http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_Teacher_Competencies.pdf.
- *School Turnaround Teachers: Selection Toolkit* (2008). http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_Teacher_Selection_Toolkit.pdf.
- *Using Competency-Based Evaluation to Drive Teacher Excellence: Lessons from Singapore* (2010). http://opportunityculture.org/images/stories/singapore_lessons_2010.pdf.

Other Staffing Issues

- *Extending the Reach of Excellent Teachers* (2012). <http://www.opportunityculture.org>.
- *Financial Incentives for Hard-to-Staff Positions: Cross-Sector Lessons for Public Education* (2008). http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2008/11/pdf/hard_to_staff.pdf.
- *Performance-Based Dismissals: Cross-Sector Lessons for School Turnarounds* (2009). http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Performance-Based_Dismissals.pdf.

State and District Initiatives

- Project L.I.F.T. (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina). <http://www.projectliftcharlotte.org>. More information about the Project L.I.F.T. core competencies: <http://www.projectliftcharlotte.org/apply>.
- Tennessee's Achievement School District. <http://www.achievementschooldistrict.org>. More information about teacher recruitment efforts: <https://achievement.cloud.talentedk12.com/hire>.

Endnotes

¹ William Sanders and June Rivers, "Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement" (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, 1996).

² Public Impact's research on teacher competencies draws on the following four works: Russell Hobby, Sharon Crabtree and Jennifer Ibbetson, *The School Recruitment Handbook, A Guide to Attracting, Selecting and Keeping Outstanding Teachers*, (Taylor and Francis, 2004); Martin Haberman, *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (Kappa Delta Pi, 1995); "School Turnaround Leader Competency Model and Selection Kit" (Chicago, Ill.: Public Impact for The Chicago Public Education Fund, 2007); Lyle Spencer and Signe Spencer, *Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance* (Wiley, 1993).

³ Julie Kowal, Jacob Rosch, Emily Hassel and Bryan Hassel, "Performance-Based Dismissals: Cross-Sector Lessons for School Turnarounds" (Lincoln, Ill.: Academic Development Institute, 2009).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See the following examples: Haberman, *Star Teachers* (2005); Spencer and Spencer, *Competence at Work* (2003); "School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organization Improvement" (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Public Impact for the Center on Innovation and Improvement, 2007).

⁶ "School Turnaround Teachers: Competencies for Success" (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Public Impact for the Chicago Public Education Fund, 2008). http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_Teacher_Competencies.pdf.

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