Elements of School Turnaround Leadership Development Programs

by Public Impact

Research conducted by Public Impact to provide guidance to the Colorado Department of Education’s implementation of Senate Bill 14-124: School Turnaround Leader Development Program.
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Introduction

Colorado’s recently passed legislation, Senate Bill 14-124 to establish a school turnaround leader development program, provides a unique opportunity to strengthen state and district efforts to dramatically improve student achievement in its lowest performing schools.

Research shows that turning around a low-performing organization of any kind requires a different type of leadership compared to maintaining performance at a higher performing organization.¹ Turnarounds require that leaders abandon the status quo and develop and implement a strategic plan that will deliver dramatic and rapid change. Even leaders who have excelled in other situations will often fail in a turnaround setting; according to one study, only about 30 percent of turnaround efforts in any sector are successful.²

A school turnaround is therefore more likely to succeed if school leaders possessing the competencies, knowledge, and skills associated with turnaround success are at the helm. It follows then that programs with the goal of preparing leaders to lead school turnarounds should select leaders with underlying competencies and skills for success and provide training that effectively prepares them to take bold actions necessary for dramatic improvements in student achievement.

Federal and Colorado-established requirements for implementing plans to turnaround low-performing, “priority” schools require Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to replace the school principal. Yet few school districts have established a sufficiently robust pipeline of qualified turnaround leaders to meet the demand for new leadership. In response to this challenge, nearly half of all states have established initiatives to strengthen school leadership in low-performing schools.³ The scope and design of these programs vary. Many programs initiated by State Education Agencies (SEAs) focus on support for new and seated principals in low-


³ Public Impact research on publicly available information indicates that at least 19 SEAs have initiated training programs for turnaround school leaders.
performing schools and providing some combination of professional development, coaching, mentoring, and cohort-based training. States have also established programs to prepare “aspiring principals” to assume leadership in turnaround schools. Many large, urban school districts with a high number of low-performing schools have established their own programs to meet the demand for qualified leaders. In addition, universities and national and local education organizations have established training programs specifically designed to recruit, select, and prepare leaders for success in low-performing, “turnaround” schools, or in otherwise disadvantaged communities with a high percentage of minority and low-income students.

As Colorado moves forward with the design and implementation of its school turnaround leader development program, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and State Board may consider what program design elements are present in some of the most successful and well-established turnaround leader development programs in order to guide the design of the RFP process for selecting turnaround training providers and participating school districts.

Overview of Research
Public Impact worked with the CDE to identify key program design elements of effective turnaround leader development programs across the nation. We also reviewed publications from national organizations focused on school leadership development programs\(^4\) to identify program design elements deemed essential for high-quality leader training. An inventory of leadership development programs reviewed in our analysis is listed in the Appendix. The data we collected is based on publicly available information about the program design, Public Impact knowledge of these programs through our work in the sector, and interviews with some of the leadership training program administrators. We focused our review on reputable programs with demonstrated results in developing highly-effective school leaders as well as some recently established SEA-initiated programs for turnaround leader training.

Collectively, these programs represent a variety of organizational models, including programs operated by universities, school districts, SEAs, charter management organizations (CMOs), non-profit organizations, and collaborative efforts across multiple entities. These programs train a range of participants, including existing leaders, new leaders, and aspiring leaders (including teacher leaders).

Priority Elements for Turnaround Leader Development Programs

Based on Public Impact’s analysis of existing school turnaround leader development programs, and in consideration of leadership training frameworks developed by leading national organizations, we determined that highly effective turnaround leader development programs consistently feature certain key program design elements.

1. Leadership competencies. All programs are grounded in a framework of “competencies” and/or leadership practices that define the skills, personal values and behaviors, and/or school-specific strategies necessary to lead the bold changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement. Research indicates that successful turnaround leaders implement a consistent set of “leader actions” to drive quick, dramatic organizational change, and that these leaders demonstrate underlying patterns of behavior, “competencies,” that allow them to effectively take these actions.5

Although many programs identify a “competency framework,” the term “competency” is used in two distinct manners. Competencies may define underlying patterns of thinking, feeling, acting or speaking that contribute to a leader’s ability to be successful. For example, KIPP’s leadership development programs are based on a competency framework that includes:

- Impact and Influence: Ability to adapt style and make a compelling and persuasive case and motivate others to action and build coalitions to achieve goals.
- Cultural Competence: Knowledgeable and respectful of the cultures of communities served. Ability to adjust behavior according to cultural norms and cues.
- Self-awareness: Ability to identify strengths and weaknesses, is aware of perceptions of others, and adjusts accordingly.

“Competencies” are also used by programs to reflect school leadership practices, or “actions.” For example, Southern Methodist University’s Aspiring Ed-Leaders Program is based on “domains of competence” such as:

- Leading Quality Instruction: Uses data to reteach in real time, monitor progress, and plan for effective instruction, while supporting strategies to engage students and measure teacher effectiveness.
- Leading Aspirational Vision and Culture: Defines high expectations, rewards high academics and behavior, supports relationships that protect every student and influences the aspiration for others to achieve.

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The leadership frameworks used by most programs incorporate both types of competencies in order to select for and train leaders on underlying behavioral attributes as well as leadership practices/actions that are necessary for success in a turnaround environment.

State or district sponsored leader programs are more likely than national or regional programs to feature leadership frameworks specifically aligned with state or district leadership standards (e.g., NYC Leadership Academy) as national and regional programs operate across multiple states. Colorado Principal Quality Standards⁶ outline the knowledge and skills required of an excellent principal and are oriented more to school leadership practice competencies. For example, “Quality Standard I: Principals demonstrate strategic leadership” provides that “Principals collaboratively develop the vision, mission, values, expectations, and goals of the school, collaboratively determine the processes used to establish these foundations, and facilitate their integration into the life of the school community.” However, this practice competency implies that the principal also has certain personal competencies, such as the ability to impact and influence, exert team leadership, and develop others.⁷ While the Colorado standards can be a useful reference point for aligning training content and participant selection criteria, they are designed to articulate leadership across all schools, not specific to low-performing, turnaround schools. So the standards do not necessarily address the unique dimensions of leadership required for quick, dramatic, transformative change.

2. Recruitment and selection. Turnaround leader development programs consistently feature a rigorous process for selecting talented educators who demonstrate competencies and experience needed for success. Some programs ensure rigor by directly managing the selection process for candidates, while others rely on partner districts or CMOs to select participants in accordance with jointly established criteria and selection process elements.

Eligibility criteria vary depending on whether or not the program is selecting for aspiring or existing leaders, but typically include:

- Demonstration of various skill sets or mindsets that reflect turnaround leader competencies aligned to the program’s leadership framework (e.g., results orientation, ability to influence and inspire, communication skills, commitment to continuous learning, etc.).
- Commitment to a minimum period of employment in a turnaround school in the host district or program network.
- Current employment with a partner district school. State or district sponsored programs typically specify that candidates should come from a specified district or be employed in a partner district.

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Teaching experience with a record of exemplary student results (typically at least three to five years of teaching experience).

Evidence of successful leadership work (e.g., minimum number of years of experience in a particular capacity (e.g., as an assist principal or other education or non-education supervisory capacity).

Generally, state and district sponsored programs require an administrator license/certification while non-regional programs specify a willingness to meet state principal certification requirements (e.g., KIPP) or principal licensure (e.g., Denver REDDI program).

Programs that partner with university based programs generally require candidates to also meet university eligibility requirements (e.g., Rice University Education Entrepreneurship Program in Houston).

While many of these turnaround leadership development programs focus on recruiting within the existing talent pool of partner school districts, Public Impact’s cross-sector research on turnaround leader selection highlights that “non-traditional” candidates can be successful if they demonstrate essential turnaround leader competencies, management experiences, and cultural fit with the school or district.8 The New Leaders aspiring principals program recruits many of its leaders from non-traditional backgrounds. Although all New Leaders principals have prior teaching experience, approximately half have spent most of their careers outside of K-12 public education.

Selection process elements generally include at a minimum:

- Written or online application
- Individual interviews (may be a series, beginning with an initial phone interview)
- Competency assessment tools (through interviews or online questionnaires)
- Performance tasks (e.g., teaching observation with feedback, role playing, situational response questions)
- Recommendations or reference checks

Leader development program providers frequently rely on partner districts to identify and recruit potential program participants. Some programs augment district recruitment efforts by establishing a recruiting network of district and school leaders (e.g. New York City Leadership Academy), or by providing guidance to districts on recruitment and selection criteria (e.g. University of Virginia School Turnaround Program). The University of Virginia School

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Turnaround Program also conducts district readiness assessments to analyze the systemic capacity of districts to support sustainable turnaround efforts.

3. Curriculum Content and Delivery. Curriculum content of leader programs is aligned to the program’s Leadership Framework, focused on applied (vs. theoretical) learning, and generally designed to address topics including:

- Instructional leadership
- Data and assessments
- School climate
- Human resource management (e.g. building teams, teacher evaluation)
- Operations management (e.g. budgeting, project management)
- Change management
- School design planning (e.g. root cause analysis, creative use of money, time, people, and technology)
- Communications and community relations
- Leader behavioral competencies

While many of these topics are likely present in regular school leadership development programs, turnaround programs ensure that the training content and field experiences are focused on conditions unique to schools and communities with a track record of low-performance and low-expectations for student achievement. For instance, the Florida Turnaround Leadership Program emphasizes an understanding of the school turnaround context, establishing a culture of high expectations, and action planning for managing the school turnaround process. Teachers 21 organizes summer institutes around problem-based learning events related to a hypothetical low-performing school and bases program residencies in low-performing schools.

Programs vary widely in the number of hours and days of training. Most programs run intensive multi-week summer programs with additional in-person training sessions over the course of one or two years. Online learning modules, and use of videos to highlight exemplary practice are utilized by several programs to supplement in-person learning.

Programs for aspiring leaders often ensure that participants receive administrative certification or licensure as a benefit of program graduation. Some programs directly award certification through authorization from the state (e.g. Teachers 21), or in partnership with a university or other certifying organization (e.g. New Leaders, Gwinnett County Quality Plus Leadership Academy, North Carolina Regional Academies). Candidates who complete leader programs operated in association with a university graduate program often receive a master’s degree upon program completion or with additional university coursework (e.g. Teachers 21, Teaching
Trust and Southern Methodist University’s Aspiring Leaders Education Program, Rice University Education Entrepreneurship Program, Relay Graduate School of Education) or a professional credential (e.g., University of Virginia Turnaround Specialist Program). Some non-university based programs (KIPP, New York City Leadership Academy) have established relationships with local or distant universities to award master’s degree upon program completion. Participants who complete some state sponsored turnaround leader programs receive certification endorsement (e.g., Louisiana School Turnaround Specialist Program for principals, Ohio Executive Principal Leadership Academy). Successful completion of Arkansas’ Master Principal Program results in a $25,000 annual bonus for five years to program participants who are selected to and subsequently serve in “high need” schools as defined by the Arkansas Department of Education. Feedback from Arkansas DOE administrators indicate that this incentive program was partly viewed as a strategy to place high-performing principals in high-need, rural schools where talent pools are limited and pay scales are often much lower than in urban school districts.

4. Clinical experience/Residency. Nearly all programs for “aspiring” or “emerging” school leaders include a residency period where participants assume real responsibilities in a high-needs/low-performing school setting and have the opportunity to apply theory to practice under the mentorship of an experienced principal. Leader candidates may also receive additional semi-regular coaching from leadership program staff or an external leadership coach. Most leader program incorporate a year-long residency, and in some cases include multiple, short-term rotations (weeks) in high-performing schools (e.g., KIPP, Gwinnet County Public Schools).

A key distinction in the design of the residency model is whether the residency placement is an existing school leadership role (e.g. assistant principal), or a new, principal-in-training type position that is specific to a school, but supplementary to the school staffing plan (and budget). Many aspiring leader programs utilize the “supplementary” model which increases the overall cost of the training program, since participants are typically provided full-time salaries and benefits during the course of the training program. These costs are usually covered by the partner districts or CMOs, and are frequently funded by federal, state, or private grants. While this model is more expensive, it allows programs to serve a wider range of participant experience levels and be more flexible with residency placements. It also allows the resident to focus on learning the principal role instead of adding this responsibility on top of a full-time job with other responsibilities. Regardless of the model design, residency programs consistently emphasize the importance of mentorship with a high-performing principal and authentic leadership responsibilities that provide opportunities to apply training content.

Training programs for seated leaders (principals, teacher leaders, etc.) sometimes include stipends to compensate for additional time required to participate in training sessions (Teach
Plus), or in the case of the Denver REDDI program, to compensate for the extended day and year of the charter schools that host residents.

5. **Post-graduate placement and ongoing support.** Although most training programs do not directly place graduates into school leadership positions following program completion, generally all programs have relationships with partner districts that help to facilitate placement in high-needs schools.

Many turnaround leader programs continue to provide ongoing support to graduates in school leadership positions. Typically, leader programs provide support to program graduates for a year after placement in a school. Some programs offer a second year of support but for additional cost (e.g., NYC Leadership Academy; Teachers 21: Turnaround Leadership Academy). Ongoing program support may include:

- Coaching and mentoring
- Cohort or peer group collaboration, problem solving, and learning
- Professional development or ongoing training on high priority topics
- Access to tools and resources from the program network
- Review/assessment of the school where program participant will be placed to inform leadership priorities

6. **Evaluation.** Most turnaround leader programs evaluate effectiveness based on performance data of their graduates. Common metrics used by programs to evaluate success include:

- Student achievement (growth/achievement scores on standardized tests, graduation rates, state accountability ratings) at schools where program participants are placed
- Percentage of program graduates placed in leadership positions within a certain time from program completion
- Percentage of high needs students served by program graduates
- Percentage of graduates retained in leadership positions beyond the period of post-training support
- Satisfaction surveys of program participants

Program designers should also consider data from recently re-designed state and district principal evaluation systems. These evaluation systems are typically aligned to state leadership standards and could provide comparable data across multiple programs in a state.
7. **District support for school turnaround.** States are increasingly focused on building district and CMO capacity to support school turnarounds. Districts may provide training and resources but can also support school turnaround by removing barriers to change and creating conditions that give turnaround leaders autonomies necessary to effectuate change. Specifically, districts and charter school boards can provide support by:

- Providing school leaders with autonomy over critical school operations, such as hiring and firing, scheduling, and budgeting.
- Holding principals accountable for results. Successful turnaround leaders set a few high priority goals and use “early wins” to stoke enthusiasm and momentum for change; monitoring results through effective and regular data analysis informs the effectiveness of turnaround efforts.
- Facilitating effective and timely recruitment, hiring, placement, and retention of teachers and staff in turnaround schools.
- Coordinating a public communications strategy that aims to engage public support for school turnaround.

Most programs do not explicitly address district support for school turnaround. As previously discussed, most leader programs generally offer ongoing support for program participants following completion of the leader program. A notable exception is the School Turnaround Specialist Program at the University of Virginia that focuses on building district capacity to provide ongoing support to turnaround leaders. Participating districts are required to appoint a district liaison with access to the district superintendent as well as a two to three person district turnaround leadership team that works with turnaround school leaders to support change, remove district barriers to effective change, and coordinate all district turnaround efforts.

8. **Turnaround Teams.** Principal turnaround leader programs typically emphasize team building and the critical role of leadership team to drive transformative change. Notably, Teach Plus selects, places, and trains teams of teacher leaders in high-needs schools where they receive one-on-one school based teacher leader coaching and team training. Teach Plus recently added a Principal Induction component to the initial summer training to increase school leader understanding of the Teach Plus program, expectations, and vision. Results of Teach Plus participant surveys indicate that the team training model is key to participant satisfaction with the program.

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For programs designed to develop “aspiring” leaders for turnaround schools, success is typically defined by placing trained leaders in principal positions as well as assistant principal and teacher leader roles. This reflects the importance of building a pipeline of qualified principals, as well as the value of establishing leadership teams that are prepared to lead dramatic change in schools. Developing leadership teams requires additional collaboration with partner districts and potentially some flexibility within collective bargaining agreements if leader teams are newly placed in a turnaround school.

9. Leader sustainability. The long-term success of turnaround leader development programs will depend on the quality of candidate selection and training, as well as the extent to which participants are placed and retained in leadership positions at high-needs schools. There are several design elements from the training programs which support the sustainability (retention) of trained turnaround leaders.

- Establishing expectations/requirements that participants commit for several years (typically three to five) to serving in a high-needs school upon completion of the program.
- Providing ongoing leadership support (coaching, training, etc.) provides one of the most direct mechanisms for training programs to support leadership retention.
- Requiring post-training support to be funded directly by the district, CMO, or school (vs. grant funding) promotes financial sustainability and district/school commitment.
- Establishing relationships with districts in order to increase placement and retention rates as an integrated component of a district’s talent pipeline.
- Selecting candidates that are already employees of partner districts to increase likelihood that participants will be placed and remain in local, high-needs schools (vs. recruitment from outside states and communities).
- Building district capacity to support pipeline development (e.g. leader support, improvements in human relations practices, creating conditions for turnaround success).
- Providing training for future assistant principals and teacher leaders, in addition to the school principal, provides a pipeline of talent within schools to support leadership effectiveness and a viable succession plan for principal turnover.

Summary of organizational models and program participants
As previously noted, the leadership development programs included in this review represent a variety of organizational models including some programs that specifically focus on leadership in low-performing, turnaround schools, and/or schools that serve a high-percentage of low-income and minority students. The organizational models for training providers include:

- District sponsored and operated leadership development programs; for example, Gwinnett County Public Schools and Denver REDDI.
State or district sponsored leadership development programs that include partnerships with external organizations (universities and non-profit organizations) to design and deliver key elements of the program; for example, NYC Leadership Academy, North Carolina Regional Academies, and Florida Turnaround Leadership Program.

University operated programs that frequently include partnerships with school districts to train school leaders; for example, Rice University Education Entrepreneurship Program, University of Virginia Turnaround Specialist Program.

Single organizations, generally, nonprofits or CMOs that have networks of partner districts or schools and attract national audiences of aspiring leaders; for example, KIPP, New Leaders, and Teach Plus.

Several multi-partner organization models that include collaboration between universities, non-profit organizations, and SEA or LEA partnerships and some combination of state, district and grant funds; for example, Teachers 21 in Massachusetts, Teaching Trust and SMU, and Relay Graduate School of Education.

Collectively, these leader programs target a range of potential participants, including aspiring principals (e.g., assistant principals or teacher leaders), seated or newly assigned-principals in low-performing, turnaround schools, and leadership teams. Frequently, regionally based programs focus on aspiring or current leaders from a program’s partner district(s). Nearly all programs seek commitments from program candidates to serve in partner districts or CMOs for a period of time upon completion of the program.

Most of these programs serve schools and districts in urban areas, though some programs (e.g., North Carolina Regional Leadership Academies) specifically target rural communities. The University of Virginia program establishes partnerships with districts in both urban and rural communities.

Although we did not collect detailed information about program costs for this analysis, we determined that program costs vary significantly based on a variety of program design features, including:

- Underlying cost structures of training providers
- Intensity and frequency of training sessions
- Duration of program training (i.e. from one to three years in length)
- Design of residency of program (i.e. use of existing or supplementary positions)
- Travel costs required of local vs. national or regional training programs
- Intensity and duration of post-training leadership support
Appendix: Leadership Training Programs Reviewed for this Analysis

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