



# INFORMATION CAPSULE

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## HOW TO SELECT THE BEST PRINCIPALS

### At a Glance

*The effectiveness of the school's principal has a significant impact on the quality of education students receive. Therefore, rigorous and well-defined principal hiring processes are crucial for building and sustaining successful schools. This Information Capsule reviews guidelines school districts can follow to increase the likelihood that they will select the most capable candidates for the principalship. Because the process of turning around a failing school is very different from the process of incremental improvement, leadership in turnaround settings is also different. Even highly successful principals may not succeed in turnaround schools, where additional competencies and characteristics may be needed. Therefore, strategies for selecting the best principals to turn around failing schools are also discussed. The "School Turnaround Leaders: Selection Toolkit," describing the Behavior Event Interview process and including resources needed to conduct interviews and select optimal candidates, is also reviewed.*

The quality of the principal has a significant impact on the effectiveness of schools and their students' academic achievement. Of the many factors that effect student learning, research suggests that the principal is second only to teacher instruction. Therefore, the quality of education that is delivered to students rests on a school district's ability to hire highly effective principals. (Rammer, 2007; Schnur, 2007; Victoria Department of Education, 2007; LaPointe & Davis, 2006; The New Teacher Project, 2006; Kowal & Hassel, 2005; Blackmore & Barty, 2004; DiLullo, 2004; Normore, 2004a; National Association for Schools of Excellence, 1999). Holland (1997) stated that selection of "the right type of leader for the . . . school is crucial. Selection of the wrong person can represent the greatest obstacle to school reform."

Rigorous and well-defined principal hiring processes are crucial for building and sustaining high-performing schools. However, choosing the right principals is one of the most challenging human resource tasks educational organizations face. Selection processes are based on hypotheses about what skills and characteristics are important because researchers have yet to devise a method that predicts with 100 percent accuracy which candidates will succeed (Normore, 2004b; Pounder & Young, 1996). Schnur (2007) reported that the use of the best selection procedures for the principalship or any other job yield only an 80 percent success rate.

### Guidelines for Selecting the Best Principals

Researchers have suggested some guidelines school districts can follow to increase the likelihood that they will select the most capable candidates for the principalship.

- **Standardize the selection process.** The New Teacher Project (2006) investigated the methods urban school districts used to recruit, select, and hire principals and concluded that most principal selection processes lacked coordination and consistent implementation. Researchers agree that principal hiring decisions are strengthened when the selection process is highly structured. A written policy should be in place to validate the selection process. All candidates should be asked the same series of interview questions and be judged on the basis of the same criteria (Blackmore & Barty, 2004; Tekeste, 1996; Anderson, 1991; Jefferson County Public Schools, n.d.). White and White (1998) cautioned, however, that too many ground rules and too much structure can result in candidates' personalities being suppressed while the selection committee tries to adhere to a tight schedule and a rigid list of questions at all costs.
- **Identify specific selection criteria.** A lack of clearly defined selection criteria is reported to be one of the primary reasons school districts don't hire the best candidates (Schlueter & Walker, 2008; Rammer, 2007). Defining the specific skills and abilities successful principals should possess helps selection committees assess applicants objectively (Victoria Department of Education, 2007; Education and Manpower Bureau of Hong Kong, 2004; National Association for Schools of Excellence, 1999).

Skills and abilities principal applicants should demonstrate during the selection process include (Schlueter & Walker, 2008; Gordon, 2007; Schnur, 2007; Victoria Department of Education, 2007; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; National Association for Schools of Excellence, 1999; Anderson, 1991):

- strong educational leadership skills;
- clear focus on student learning;
- commitment to high levels of student achievement;
- capacity to institute change, not merely maintain the status quo;
- comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to high levels of student achievement;
- ability to work with teachers to facilitate continuous student improvement;
- willingness to provide staff with the necessary support so they are able to carry out effective instructional practices;
- capacity to develop constructive and respectful relationships with staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders;
- capacity to model important values and behaviors to the school and the community;
- ability to collect, analyze, and use data in ways that promote educational excellence;
- ability to communicate at highly proficient levels verbally and in writing and fluent in new technologies;
- management skills in the areas of budgeting, scheduling, student management and discipline, staff supervision, and facilities; and
- highly developed organizational skills.

In addition, researchers have suggested that it is important for principal candidates to possess the following personal qualities and convictions (Gordon, 2007; Hale & Moorman, 2003; National Association for Schools of Excellence, 1999; Klauke, 1988):

- determined, creative, and enthusiastic;
- believe all children can learn at high levels;
- high moral character and commitment to ethical behavior;
- personal flexibility;
- willing and able to confront problems; and
- demonstrate personal concern for staff members and students.

- **Create a diverse pool of qualified applicants.** In order to attract applicants to the principalship, most researchers suggest that districts identify and cultivate assistant principals and teachers working within

the district who show leadership potential. Opportunities should then be provided for these individuals to explore and develop their talents through internships, training programs, job shadowing, or portfolio development (LaPointe & Davis, 2006; The New Teacher Project, 2006; The Chicago Public Education Fund, 2005; Normore, 2004a; National Association for Schools of Excellence, 1999).

When there are an insufficient number of qualified internal candidates, school districts are encouraged to aggressively recruit external candidates, such as principals of schools in neighboring districts and graduates of school leadership programs (The New Teacher Project, 2006; Normore, 2004a; Tekeste, 1996). The National Association for Schools of Excellence stated that “a mix of administrators who have experience in other districts along with those who are ‘home grown’ can provide a healthy balance between continuity and new thought.” The Institute for Educational Leadership (2000) noted that non-traditional candidates, such as military officials and former business leaders, may also be considered for principalships, provided they receive special training and support. Nolan (2008) suggested that posting job vacancies on the district’s Web site that include the actual application and hiring timelines will help attract quality candidates.

- **Identify the specific school in vacancy announcements.** Vacancy announcements often don’t specify the particular school where an opening exists, but request applicants for the principalship in general. Experts agree, however, that individual candidates’ skills and leadership styles should be matched to the special needs and characteristics of each particular school. When job postings specify the school at which the principal vacancy exists, districts increase their chances of selecting the right person for the job (The New Teacher Project, 2006; Blackmore & Barty, 2004; DiLullo, 2004; Normore, 2004a; Whaley, 2002; National Association for Schools of Excellence, 1999; Tekeste, 1996; Anderson, 1991).
- **Include multiple stakeholders on selection committees.** Multiple stakeholders provide different perspectives on the candidates (Blackmore & Barty, 2004; Tekeste, 1996). As Anderson (1991) noted, when a small, close-knit group of senior administrators make all of the hiring decisions, they lose their ability to correct each other’s errors and judgment. Without the participation of a variety of stakeholders, the hiring process can easily lose its credibility. The New Teacher Project (2006) recommended including other principals, teachers, support staff, district administrators, parents, students, and community members on selection panels. When forming selection committees, consideration should be given to members who have (Victoria Department of Education, 2007):
  - knowledge of the school’s culture and desired future direction;
  - understanding of the expertise, knowledge, and attributes required to successfully assume the role of principal;
  - appreciation of the contributions principals make to the school system; and
  - understanding of the selection process.
- **Provide training to selection committee members.** Experts agree that individuals serving on principal selection committees should receive training in the overall selection process in order to help them understand their role and learn which personal and professional qualifications the candidates should possess (Victoria Department of Education, 2007; Winter et al., 1998; Tekeste, 1996; Jefferson County Public Schools, n.d.). Winter and Jaeger’s (2002) study of the principal selection process in four Kentucky school districts found that teachers who had not previously served on selection panels had difficulty making optimal principal selection decisions. The researchers concluded that teachers need training in the principal selection process to avoid bias and help them place a greater emphasis on important job qualifications, such as prior administrative experience.
- **Prepare candidates for the interview process.** In order to help the selection process run smoothly and to create a positive impression of the district, White and White (1998) suggested that districts mail an information packet to all candidates one or two weeks in advance of the interview. The packet should include:

- Driving directions to the interview and parking information.
  - Information about the school at which the vacancy exists.
  - Information about the interview procedure, such as: Is there a time limit to the interview? Is there a time limit on each question? Will the candidate be allowed to ask questions? Does the panel make the hiring decision or does it send a recommendation to the superintendent? When will a decision be reached?
  - An evaluation form that asks candidates if the selection process was handled professionally and courteously. The evaluation form should include a place for candidates to indicate if they would like to receive feedback on their performance from committee members.
- **Use multiple measures to assess candidates.** Selection decisions should not be based solely on interview results. Instead, multiple techniques should be used to evaluate each candidate's qualifications (The New Teacher Project, 2006; Blackmore & Barty, 2004; National Association for Schools of Excellence, 1999; Tekeste, 1996). Examples of techniques include:
    - The selection committee should schedule each candidate for an in-depth interview that asks focused and realistic scenario questions. Reh (2009) recommended that interview questions should determine whether candidates have the skills to do the job, how they function under pressure, and how well they will fit in with the existing team. The selection panel should listen to candidates' answers to see how quickly they respond, how complete and correct their answers are, and whether they actually answered the questions that were asked. Experts agree that panelists should ask questions that aren't filled with complicated sentences or acronyms (The New Teacher Project, 2006; White & White, 1998). Whaley's (2002) report on principal hiring, evaluation, and retention practices lists over 150 sample principal interview questions ([http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/1a/dd/89.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1a/dd/89.pdf)).
    - All candidates should complete a written exercise. Writing assignments allow the selection committee to assess candidates' written communication skills (The New Teacher Project, 2006; Anderson, 1991).
    - Performance assessments allow candidates to demonstrate a wide range of skills. Examples of performance assessments are discussions based on classroom observations; evaluations of instructional quality using videotaped classroom sessions; and role-playing as the principal with a variety of stakeholders (The New Teacher Project, 2006).
    - Tours of the actual school where the vacancy exists can be conducted as part of the selection process. School tours allows the selection committee to observe candidates' behavior, including their interactions with and reactions to the students, staff, and surroundings. Post-tour debriefing sessions, during which candidates describe their reactions to the experience, can help the selection committee determine the extent to which each applicant's responses align with the leadership qualities and skills required to perform the job successfully (Spanneut, 2007; Atlanta Public Schools, n.d.).
    - Assessment centers are testing sites where applicants spend several days engaging in a variety of exercises and taking extensive screening tests. These results can then be used to evaluate candidates' strengths and weaknesses based on their performance in different situations (Tekeste, 1996; Anderson, 1991).
    - Klein (2002) suggested that the selection process include an assessment of candidates' decision-making skills. Decision-making tests examine the process by which candidates evaluate several courses of action and select the best alternative. Klein (2002) found that in the first phase of the decision-making process, successful principals (based on supervisor ratings) placed greater emphasis on objective sources when making decisions, while principals rated as unsuccessful placed more importance on subjective sources of information.

- Lunenburg (1990) found a relationship between responses on the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (a self-report inventory designed to assess major personality dimensions) and principal performance. Principals rated as successful by their supervisors and peers rated themselves as more assertive, imaginative, self-sufficient, and warm-hearted.
- Selection committee members should consider all other sources of information, such as resumes, transcripts, and references. For example, omissions or confusing narratives on a resume can be a warning sign regarding the candidate's prior job history or communication skills. References should be questioned in a way that allows the selection committee to assess the real value of the information provided (Education and Manpower Bureau of Hong Kong, 2004; Tekeste, 1996; Anderson, 1991).
- **Identify principal vacancies as early as possible.** Late hiring decisions can result in the elimination of critical elements of the selection process and limit districts' ability to select the best candidates. The New Teacher Project (2006) investigated the methods urban school districts use to recruit, select, and hire principals and found that many districts didn't make principal hiring decisions until June or July. One of the main reasons hiring decisions were delayed was late notification by principals that they intended to vacate their positions. The New Teacher Project (2006) urged districts to identify principal vacancies as early as possible by engaging in the following activities: making early decisions regarding promotions, transfers, and terminations; creating incentives (not always monetary) to encourage early notification; and communicating frequently with principals to determine their future plans.

### **Choosing Principals for Turnaround Schools**

Most experts believe that successful school turnarounds usually require the installation of a new principal. Studies have confirmed that selecting the right principal to lead school turnaround efforts is a critical determinant of schools' future success (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008; University of Virginia, 2008; Kowal & Hassel, 2005).

Research suggests that successful turnaround principals share several characteristics with principals of already high-performing schools, but also possess many qualities that make them uniquely well-qualified to lead turnaround efforts. Because the process of turning around a failing school is very different from the process of incremental improvement, leadership in turnaround settings is also different. Even highly successful principals may not succeed in turnaround schools, where additional competencies and characteristics may be needed (University of Virginia, 2008; Public Impact, 2007; Kowal & Hassel, 2005).

#### Competencies of Successful Turnaround School Principals

Research suggests that certain competencies distinguish between high-performing and lower-performing principals in turnaround settings. These competencies include (Public Impact, 2008a; University of Virginia, 2008; Public Impact, 2007; Kowal & Hassel, 2005):

- Willingness to make unpopular decisions;
- Strong interpersonal skills;
- Ability to influence the perceptions, thinking, and actions of others;
- Engage in analytical thinking, making clear, logical plans that staff can follow;
- Use a hands-on approach to problem-solving;
- Engage in conceptual thinking, seeing patterns and links among seemingly unrelated events;
- Confidence in their own ability to accomplish tasks, despite personal and professional attacks that are common during turnarounds;
- Motivation to set challenging goals and improve performance, despite existing barriers;
- Initiative and persistence, doing more than is expected or required in order to achieve the school's goals;
- Ability and willingness to assume the role of team leader;

- Organizational commitment (work toward the school's goals even when they are in conflict with individual preferences and make personal sacrifices to achieve the goals); and
- Ability to plan ahead;

Public Impact's (2008a) *School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success* guide provides detailed definitions of turnaround leader competencies and discusses the characteristics of leaders most likely to succeed in the turnaround setting. The guide is available at [http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround\\_Leader\\_Competencies.pdf](http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Competencies.pdf).

### Action Steps Used to Turn Around Failing Schools

Research on principals who have been highly successful in turnaround situations suggests that they take a common set of actions, including (Brinson et al., 2008; Institute of Education Sciences, 2008; Public Impact, 2008a; University of Virginia, 2008; Kowal & Hassel, 2005; Waters et al., 2003; Chirichello, 1999):

- Immediately introduce a culture of change, sending the message that many aspects of instructional delivery and school operations will be transformed;
- Concentrate on a few changes that produce quick improvements and act as a catalyst for additional positive change;
- Implement practices that have previously succeeded with low-performing students;
- Set high expectations and goals and hold others accountable for their performance;
- Communicate a positive vision of future school results, convincing staff that the low-performing status quo is not inevitable;
- Make an action plan based on data so all staff understand exactly what they need to do differently;
- Spend time and money on successful practices and halt unsuccessful practices;
- Collect and personally analyze school and student performance data to identify high priority problems that can be fixed quickly;
- Measure and report progress frequently and publicly, while keeping the school focused on the attainment of high goals;
- Acknowledge failures openly;
- Require staff to share data and problem solve;
- Motivate others and influence their thinking and behavior to obtain results;
- Establish a cohesive and collaborative culture within the school;
- Encourage professional development, as well as collective and independent reflective study;
- Insist that change is mandatory, not optional, for all staff;
- Demonstrate a willingness to make the same types of changes asked of staff;
- Make limited but necessary staff replacements when individuals are unwilling or unable to make the required changes; and
- Share leadership and authority, emphasizing collective governance.

Often, districts are required to choose among applicants who have not led whole-school turnaround efforts. They may instead have led smaller reform efforts within schools, perhaps not from positions of formal leadership. When candidates who have successfully turned schools around are not available, Kowal and Hassel (2005) advised districts to look for potential leaders who demonstrate:

- A history of bringing about significant and rapid change, even when barriers to success existed (not just incremental improvements to existing policy);
- A history of influencing others and introducing new practices inconsistent with current policy;
- A history of using some or most of the actions common to successful turnaround, as described above;
- A high level of team leadership; and
- An understanding of the research on effective schools and the ability to describe how it applies to children who have not been successful learners in the past.

## The Behavior Event Interview

Public Impact's (2008b) report on selecting school turnaround leaders stated that traditional interview techniques rarely uncover competencies that predict future performance differences. Too often, job candidates speak in generalities about what they should or would do, not about what they have actually accomplished. Public Impact advocates the use of the Behavior Event Interview (BEI), a specialized interview technique that allows selection committees to learn about the actions and thinking processes candidates engaged in during their past work experiences. In a BEI, the interviewer asks candidates for a brief summary of past events when they felt successful or dealt with specific situations at work, including critical milestones, key actions, turning points, and how the situation was resolved. The candidate is then asked to describe exactly what he or she did, said, thought, and felt at the time and how others who were involved responded. The interviewer is permitted to interrupt frequently to elicit pertinent details. Only responses about the candidate's past experiences are accepted. Current thoughts about what the candidate would do the next time are not as accurate at predicting what he or she will do in the future. Public Impact (2008b) recommends that the BEI be used as part of a longer interview process that includes additional candidate screening techniques, such as writing exercises and performance simulations.

Public Impact's (2008b) *School Turnaround Leaders Selection Toolkit* includes a full description of the BEI process; an interview script; instructions for deciding which questions to ask in interviews (to screen for critical competencies); a list of recommended questions; guidelines for comparing and selecting candidates; competency rating sheets; and candidate scoring sheets. The full report is available at [http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround\\_Leader\\_Selection\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Selection_Toolkit.pdf).

### **Summary**

Choosing effective principals is one of the most challenging tasks school districts face. Although no principal selection process can predict job success with 100 percent accuracy, researchers have suggested several strategies school districts should consider when designing and implementing their principal selection process. This Information Capsule summarized guidelines school districts can follow to increase the likelihood that they will select the most capable candidates for the principalship, such as identifying the specific selection criteria to be used, creating a diverse pool of qualified applicants, including multiple stakeholders on selection committees, and using a variety of measures to assess the candidates.

Research indicates that principals who are hired to turn around failing schools need additional skills and abilities. Common actions taken by successful turnaround leaders, as well as competencies shared by these individuals, were reviewed. This report summarized Public Impact's *School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success*, a guide that provides a detailed discussion of turnaround leader competencies. The guide is available at [http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround\\_Leader\\_Competencies.pdf](http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Competencies.pdf). Public Impact's *School Turnaround Leaders: Selection Toolkit* was also summarized. The toolkit describes the Behavior Event Interview process and includes an interview script, recommended questions, guidelines for comparing and selecting candidates, and candidate score sheets. The full toolkit is available at [http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround\\_Leader\\_Selection\\_Toolkit](http://publicimpact.com/publications/Turnaround_Leader_Selection_Toolkit).

*All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at <http://drs.dadeschools.net>.*

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