How Comparable are the Perceived Challenges Facing Principals of Low-Performing Schools?

Daniel L. Duke, Pamela D. Tucker, Michael J. Salmonowicz and Melissa K. Levy

Abstract: *This study of 19 principals newly assigned to low-performing elementary and middle schools focused on the conditions that they perceived to contribute to inadequate student achievement. The conditions were organized into five clusters: (a) student achievement and behavior, (b) school programs and organization, (c) staffing, (d) school system concerns, and (e) parents and community. The conditions were analyzed to determine whether the principals, despite being assigned to high-poverty and low-performing schools, believed they faced sufficiently different conditions to justify some form of differentiated school leadership. The conclusion looks at the implications of the findings for the preparation of school principals.*

Introduction

In this era of far-reaching educational accountability initiatives such as the U.S. No Child Left Behind Act, it has become fashionable to speak in broad generalities about high-poverty, low-performing schools. The implication, whether intended or not, is that the challenges confronting educators in these schools are roughly the same, regardless of the school's location, size, make-up, or level. It is easy to understand why policy makers, politicians, and pundits might be tempted to paint high-poverty, low-performing schools with broad brushstrokes. Simplicity invariably trumps complexity when the public's attention is at stake. The assumption is that complicated descriptions of variable conditions are difficult for a pre-occupied citizenry to grasp. Gaining resources and support for generic prescriptions to address generic problems is far easier and more straightforward than trying to differentiate responses to troubling situations based on nuanced assessments of localized needs. Such thinking can even be seen in how those charged with preparing educational administrators approach their task. Principal preparation programs, for the most part, train individuals to lead schools in general, not specific schools facing particular problems.

An exception to the generic principal preparation program is the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP), the brainchild of former Virginia Governor Mark Warner. Warner's background in private industry convinced him that the challenge of turning around low-performing organizations, be they for-profit businesses or public schools, required a special set of skills, above and beyond what organizational leaders typically possess. The creation of the VSTSP required extensive collaboration between the

University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Darden Graduate School of Business Administration. Beginning in the summer of 2004, the VSTSP enrolled a select group of experienced principals in advanced training leading to a School Turnaround Specialist credential, the first of its kind in U.S. public education. The program has been described in detail elsewhere (Duke et al., 2005). What is pertinent for present purposes is the fact that each hand-picked principal was assigned to a high-poverty, low-performing school in Virginia. The VSTSP Research Team, supported by generous funding from the Microsoft Corporation, was able to study the extent to which these prospective School Turnaround Specialists perceived similar challenges in their individual schools.

Two questions guided the research reported in this article:

1. What conditions do new principals of low-performing schools perceive must be addressed in order to raise student achievement?
2. To what extent do these perceived conditions vary across schools?

The study begins with a brief discussion of the conceptual framework and the rationale for the research. The methodology for the investigation is then described. The findings are presented next, with each research question being addressed separately. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for school leaders and those who prepare them.

Can a case be made for differentiated leadership?

Studying variations and similarities in principals' perceptions of the conditions that must be addressed in high-poverty, low-performing schools is important because the findings can shed light on the extent to which organizational leadership should be differentiated in order to maximize the likelihood of organizational effectiveness. Differentiated leadership is based on the assumption that conditions facing leaders vary sufficiently to call for distinct skill sets and mental models. The conceptual underpinnings for differentiated leadership derive from Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) work on situational leadership. They posited that leadership was composed of two dimensions involving direction and support. The need for direction and support was presumed to vary across organizational settings, thereby necessitating different leadership "styles." The necessary levels of direction and support reflected the competence and commitment of subordinates. In one situation, the need for direction and support was high because subordinates lacked both competence and commitment. Three other situations were posited by Hersey and Blanchard -- those characterized by high need for support and low need for direction, high need for direction and low need for support, and low need for direction and support.

Hersey and Blanchard were not the only theorists to recognize the possibility that leadership might vary depending on the circumstances. Fiedler (1964) suggested that leadership style depended on three situational variables: the relations between leader and subordinates, the nature of the tasks to be accomplished, and the amount of power to reward and punish possessed by the leader. Fiedler referred to his work as contingency theory because a leader's effectiveness was contingent on how well their style fit the situation.

While the situational dimensions identified by Fiedler and by Hersey and Blanchard are important, they are also highly generalized and unanchored to specific organizational functions. Support from a leader that is intended to inspire commitment from subordinates, for example, can be provided in various ways, depending on the work to be accomplished and the organizational context and culture. The nature of the tasks facing educators in public schools is quite different from that confronting individuals in a fast food restaurant. We believe that the case for differentiated leadership cannot be made, or rejected, without highly specific information on the nature of conditions faced by actual leaders in particular types of organizations.

Over the years, students of educational leadership have identified other dimensions of the situations faced by principals. Glatthorn (1984), for example, developed the notion of differentiated supervision to highlight the need of principals to recognize that one type of supervision is unlikely to fit the requirements of all situations or all staff members. In order to investigate educational reforms in England and the U.S., Hopkins (2001, pp. 172-176) proposed a differentiated model of school improvement strategies. Type I strategies were needed to assist failing schools in becoming "moderately effective." The 19 schools in the present study clearly fit Hopkins' Type I circumstances. Type II strategies were those needed to assist moderately effective schools to become more effective, while Type III strategies were intended to allow effective schools to remain so. Hopkins did not suggest that there was much variation in strategies within a given type.

What has been relatively scarce in the literature on school leadership is empirically-based research on the situational variables that newly assigned principals perceive they must address in order to raise performance in their schools. Reeves, McCall, and MacGilchrist (2001, p. 134) are persuasive in contending that a leader's perception of a situation –what he or she attends to in their school and the wider environment– exerts a substantial influence on their actions. From their perceptions are derived the sense of direction that is so crucial in school improvement efforts.

Rather than covering all kinds of schools, the present study zeroes in on one type of school -- high-poverty and low-performing schools. If the perceived conditions in these schools vary considerably, the next question is, do conditions vary enough to support the need for differentiated leadership? Furthermore, if a case can be made for differentiated leadership, is it practical to train individual principals who are capable of adjusting their approach in order to effectively address different sets of conditions? Or is it more reasonable to consider separate preparation programs in order to train leader specialists who are equipped to handle particular school-based situations? The present study cannot answer these important questions in an authoritative manner, but it can take a first step by determining the extent to which newly assigned principals in ostensibly similar schools perceive different sets of challenges.

Methodology

The first two cohorts of the VSTSP involved 20 high-poverty, low-performing schools, 10 that joined the program in June of 2004 and 10 that joined in June of 2005. Tables 1A and 1B provide an overview of the schools in terms of grade level, size, percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, and status (as of the date of selection to participate in the VSTSP) regarding Virginia state accreditation and adequate yearly progress (under the No Child Left Behind Act). Passed soon after President George W. Bush took office, this piece of legislation addressed a variety of concerns, including how school performance data were to be analyzed, teacher qualifications, and what was to be done with consistently low-performing schools. With regard to the latter, local education authorities (school districts) were given the option of replacing principals as one step toward school improvement. This option was the one addressed by the VSTSP. The term "adequate yearly progress" refers to the standards all schools are expected to meet under the No Child Left Behind Act:

The NCLB accountability system requires all schools and students to meet a single mean proficiency level in reading and mathematics. Accordingly, by applying uniform annual measurable objectives in reading and mathematics to all students, the adequate yearly progress requirements are intended to create strong incentives for schools to improve the achievement of underperforming students. (Kim & Sunderman, 2005, p. 4)

Table 1A: Demographic and Achievement Data for 10 Low-Performing Virginia Elementary Schools[1]

	Acres	Bell	Chapel	Denby	Easton	Folsom	Gatewood	Hirsch	Island	Jordan
Student Enrollment[2]	352	519	199	319	602	469	237	359	456	226
% Students Economically Disadvantaged[2]	33	77	81	96	76	92	67	68	78	59
State Accreditation Status[3]	AW	AW	AW	FA	AW	FA	FA	AW	AW	AW
AYP[3]	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
% Students Proficient on State Reading Test[4]										
Grade 3	32	52	79	77	32	63	50	44	49	69
Grade 5	64	63	43	94	61	76	76	71	50	70
% Students Proficient on State Math Test[4]										
Grade 3	71	68	69	91	67	73	68	58	76	90
Grade 5	42	49	43	90	45	85	66	37	44	57

[1]All data were gathered from Virginia Department of Education's "School Report Card" Web site (http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/src) with the exception of the percentages of students economically disadvantaged, which were gathered from http://www.schoolmatters.com.
[2]Demographic data reflect student populations in the fall of schools' first year of involvement with the VSTSP.
[3]Accreditation and AYP status reflect state test scores from spring prior to schools' first year involvement with VSTSP. AW = Accredited with Warning; FA = Full Accredited
[4]Proficiency data reflect state test scores from spring prior to schools' first year of involvement with the VSTSP.

Table 1B: Demographic and Achievement Data for 9 Low-Performing Virginia Middle Schools[1]

	Kroft	Laurel	Mosby	Newton	Orion	Prince	Queens	Ralston	Spellman
Student Enrollment[2]	498	533	410	120	835	711	543	366	555
% Students Economically Disadvantaged[2]	78	95	66	47	67	78	60	73	63
State Accreditation Status[3]	AW	AW	FA	AW	AW	AW	AW	AW	FA
AYP[3]	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
% Students Proficient on State Reading Test[4]									
Grade 5	NA	NA	73	NA	61	NA	NA	NA	NA
Grade 8	43	56	66	53	67	56	53	66	81
% Students Proficient on State Math Test4									
Grade 5	NA	NA	75	NA	64	NA	NA	NA	NA
Grade 8	54	52	80	65	73	79	78	68	68

[1]All data were gathered from Virginia Department of Education's "School Report Card" Web site (http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/src) with the exception of the percentages of students economically disadvantaged, which were gathered from http://www.schoolmatters.com.
[2]Demographic data reflect student populations in the fall of schools' first year of involvement with the VSTSP.
[3]Accreditation and AYP status reflect state test scores from spring prior to schools' first year involvement with VSTSP. AW = Accredited with Warning; FA = Full Accredited
[4]Proficiency data reflect state test scores from spring prior to schools' first year of involvement with the VSTSP.

All data in Tables 1A and 1B refer to the point at which the school joined the VSTSP. Since only one high school was involved in the program, it was dropped from the study. The sample represents 10 elementary schools (grades K-5) and 9 middle schools (typically grades 6-8). Two of the middle schools achieved both full state accreditation and adequate yearly progress prior to joining the VSTSP, but both schools were judged to be "at risk" because the student pass rate in one subject fell below Virginia's benchmark of 70 percent.

The central assumption guiding the research design was that the conditions newly assigned principals perceived were associated with low performance would be the conditions most likely to receive attention during the early stages of the school turnaround process. We recognized that principals might overlook certain conditions for various reasons, but we believed that these unacknowledged conditions were unlikely to be addressed. Our focus on principals' initial perceptions was limited to those made over the course of the first semester of each principal's participation in the VSTSP. This decision later was modified to cover the first year in the program after we discovered that some principals, in the spirit of positive thinking, consciously refrained at the outset from labeling certain issues as problems. Eventually, when these matters did not resolve themselves and the principals were compelled to address them, they admitted to having privately been concerned about them from the beginning or soon thereafter.

Rather than assuming what kind of problematic conditions principals might perceive, a deductive approach that could have led to the use of a survey or questionnaire, we adopted an inductive research design in which we relied on the principals to describe the conditions in their own words (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This qualitative research strategy necessitated some effort to sift through responses for related or comparable conditions.

Principals' perceptions of conditions associated with low performance were collected at several points during the first year of each cohort's participation. First, principals were required, as part of the VSTSP, to present a baseline assessment of their school's conditions to their peers and to members of the Research Team. These presentations occurred during the summer when the principals received their initial training. During the first five months of Year 1, Research Team members visited each school and conducted a structured interview with the principal. Principals were asked to supplement their summer presentations with additional problematic conditions they encountered once the fall semester commenced. A third data point occurred in January when principals returned to the University of Virginia for additional training. At this point, each principal provided a mid-course report, including information on new conditions as well as progress in addressing pre-identified conditions. The principals were contacted in person, by phone, or by e-mail during the spring semester to determine whether additional conditions required their attention. All principals' responses were transcribed and reviewed for compatibility with previous responses. When ambiguities and unclear responses were encountered, Research Team members contacted the principals and requested clarification and confirmation of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis initially entailed a review of all responses in order to cluster conditions by type. Five clusters were identified: conditions associated with (a) student achievement and conduct, (b) school programs and organization, (c) school personnel, (d) the school system, and (e) the local community. These sets of conditions are best thought of as nested, moving outward from (a) to (e). At the same time, however, it must be recognized that each cluster is reciprocally related in that it influences and is influenced by other clusters.

The second step in data analysis involved data reduction and the condensing of specific conditions listed for each of the five clusters (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example,

conditions associated with the daily schedule, such as lack of extended learning time and lack of time for teachers to plan, were combined under the heading "ineffective scheduling." The result was 24 conditions identified by one or more principals as contributors to low school performance. Each of these conditions is discussed in the next section.

Perceived conditions in high-poverty, low-performing schools

Addressing the 24 conditions identified by the first two cohorts of the VSTSP occupied a substantial portion of their initial year as turnaround specialists. Tables 2A and 2B provide a composite picture of the conditions perceived to affect school effectiveness in the 19 VSTSP schools. In this section, each of the conditions will be discussed.

Table 2A: Conditions Associated with Low Performance in Virginia Schools

	Acres ES	Bell ES	Chapel ES	Denby ES	Easton ES	Folsom ES	Gatewood ES	Hirsch ES	Island ES	Jordan ES
Student Achievement & Behavior:										
Low Reading Achievement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Low Math Achievement	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓			
Attendance Problems		✓		✓						✓
Discipline Problems				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
School Programs & Organization:										
Lack of Focus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Unaligned Curriculum	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Ineffective Instruction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Data Deprivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Lack of Teamwork	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Inadequate Infrastructure	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			
Ineffective Scheduling			✓	✓	✓					
Dysfunctional Culture	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	
Ineffective Interventions	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Lack of Inclusion					✓	✓	✓	✓		
Inadequate Facilities		✓		✓	✓				✓	
Inadequate Materials	✓				✓					
Ineffective Staff Development										
Staffing:										
Personnel Problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of Specialists					✓					
School System:										
Central Office Instability			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Technical Difficulties					✓					✓
Lack of District Support							✓			✓
Parents & Community:										
Low Parent Involvement	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Negative Community Perceptions	✓	✓	✓		✓					

Table 2B: Conditions Associated with Low Performance in Virginia Schools

	Kroft MS	Laurel MS	Mosby MS	Newton MS	Orion MS	Prince MS	Queens MS	Ralston MS	Spellman MS
Student Achievement & Behavior:									
Low Reading Achievement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Low Math Achievement	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Attendance Problems			✓				✓	✓	✓
Discipline Problems	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
School Programs & Organization:									
Lack of focus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Unaligned Curriculum			✓		✓		✓	✓	
Ineffective Instruction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Data Deprivation	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lack of Teamwork		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Inadequate Infrastructure				✓	✓	✓	✓		
Ineffective Scheduling	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Dysfunctional Culture		✓			✓	✓			
Ineffective Interventions	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		
Lack of Inclusion			✓		✓		✓	✓	
Inadequate Facilities									✓
Inadequate Materials									✓
Ineffective Staff Development					✓		✓	✓	
Staffing:									
Personnel Problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lack of Specialists		✓		✓	✓	✓			
School System:									
Central Office Instability	✓	✓	✓						
Technical Difficulties	✓		✓						
Lack of District Su pport			✓				✓		
Parents & Community:									
Low Parent Involvement		✓	✓		✓		✓		
Negative Community Perceptions	✓	✓			✓				

Student Achievement and Behavior

The first cluster of conditions can be regarded as primary conditions in that they relate directly to the outcomes that needed to be improved in order for the VSTSP schools to be fully accredited and/or meet adequate yearly progress under NCLB. These outcomes include performance in reading and mathematics, conduct in school, and attendance. Regarding the last two conditions, most educators agree that students are less likely to learn when they are misbehaving or absent from school.

Reading problems

It came as no surprise that the only condition reported for all 19 schools involved problems associated with reading and literacy. The reason why the schools were classified as low-performing in the first place concerned the pass rate on state reading tests of one or more groups of students. Principals recognized that their schools could not improve unless and until reading performance was raised.

While several principals singled out a particular grade-level or sub-group of students that needed to raise their reading scores, only one principal pinpointed particular elements of the reading process that required special attention. In other words, most principals generalized about reading problems, rather than singling out particular aspects of reading,

such as comprehension, word recognition, vocabulary, and decoding. It is worth noting that reading tests in Virginia address different elements of reading, based on the Virginia Standards of Learning, and test results can be broken down by reading element, thereby providing principals with a more precise picture of student strengths and weaknesses.

Mathematics problems

Another key element of the Virginia Standards of Learning is mathematics. Like reading, students in 2004 and 2005 were tested in mathematics in the third, fifth, and eighth grades. Five elementary and five middle schools failed to attain adequate pass rates on mathematics tests, either for the student body in general or for particular sub-groups (as designated by NCLB).

Attendance problems

Educators and educational researchers agree that students are less likely to learn when they are absent from school. Attendance is one of the elements of the formula by which adequate yearly progress is determined. Getting students to attend school regularly has become a key component of many school turnaround initiatives. Of the 19 schools in the VSTSP, two elementary and three middle schools were characterized by their principals as having attendance problems.

Discipline problems

Agreement also exists concerning the relationship between student learning and an orderly learning environment. The more time teachers spend on discipline, the less time is available for instruction. Students also are less likely to focus on learning when they do not feel safe in school. Four elementary and six middle school principals perceived discipline problems to constitute an obstacle to their school turnaround efforts. In most of these cases, principals based their perception on the number of disciplinary referrals and/or suspensions for the year or years preceding participation in the VSTSP. One middle school principal characterized the school's problems in the following way:

> School Discipline and ends roam the building was non-existent. The school had 10,000 referrals over the past two years, with an enrollment of 925 kids. That breaks down to almost 30 a day, every day, based on 180 school days. Students looked forward to being assigned in-school suspensions. They were allowed to do nothing and, on occasion, roam the building.

School Programs and Organization

The second cluster of conditions perceived to undermine school effectiveness involved school programs and organization. Consisting of 13 items, this cluster was, by far, the largest. Items ranged from lack of programmatic focus and unaligned curriculum to ineffective staff development and inadequate instruction.

Lack of focus

It is tempting to believe that the focus of attention in a low-performing school is obvious and well understood. Yet, time and again, in the literature on school improvement admonitions to clarify the mission, narrow the focus, and "stick to the knitting" are found. Apparently, many staff members in low-performing schools are uncertain about where to concentrate their energies. Perhaps they are bewildered by how much needs to be done. Everything seems to be a high priority. Whatever the reason, lack of focus -- the absence of a clear sense of priorities -- was perceived to be a problem by six elementary and four middle school principals.

Unaligned curriculum

When what is taught is not aligned with what is tested, the likelihood of low test scores increases. Public schools in Virginia are required to administer standardized tests based on the Virginia Standards of Learning, curriculum guidelines covering virtually all subjects. Six elementary and four middle school principals identified unaligned curriculum as a condition requiring attention. As one middle school principal put it:

> My school and ends because of it needed to develop a system for addressing learning problems. The key elements of this system were curriculum alignment, so that we can be certain to teach what students will be tested on; diagnostic tests that tell us whether students are learning what they need to learn to pass state tests; remediation and reteaching to help students who didn't get it the first time; and follow-up testing to make certain they got it. These things were not happening on a routine basis…and our students were disadvantaged because of it.

Another middle school principal described the curriculum alignment problem with reference specifically to reading:

> The Direct Instruction model was being used to work with the struggling students to help their reading abilities, but this program was not being implemented correctly or fully. DI has two components, decoding and comprehension, but only decoding was taught last year.

Ineffective instruction

The preceding comment suggests that inadequate instruction compounded the impact of unaligned curriculum. Efforts to expose students to material on which they eventually will be tested are of little value if teachers employ ineffective teaching methods. Seven elementary and four middle school principals cited ineffective instruction as a contributor to low performance in their schools. This condition sometimes reflected other, more subtle, problems such as inadequate materials and data deprivation.

Data deprivation

Another frequently mentioned condition associated with low performance concerned lack of information regarding student progress. If educators are unclear about what students are and are not learning well, they obviously are not in a good position to provide timely assistance. Without ongoing efforts to monitor student achievement, the first indication that students have not mastered state standards may be their score on the end-of-year standardized test. By this time it is too late to take corrective action. Eight elementary and six middle school principals identified data deprivation as a serious problem. In many cases, no system of "benchmark tests" was in place to provide periodic formative data on student progress. Benchmark tests are commercially or locally developed assessments, based on state curriculum guidelines, that are administered on a regular basis, typically every nine weeks, in order to reveal content areas where students need additional help prior to sitting for state tests in the spring. In several instances, new principals discovered that no effort had been made by their predecessors to share student scores on state tests with teachers. One elementary principal did not realize how in the dark her teachers were until an October inservice day:

> When I first arrived…and started to do some initial data analysis, I made an assumption that teachers were at a certain place on the professional learning curve based on the fact that the Standards of Learning tests had been in effect for a number of years. I prepared a huge presentation on test data for the team leaders…. Thankfully, I am blessed with a few individuals who are not shy about speaking the

> truth. They said, "You don't understand. You're way beyond us…" I first needed to do some really basic SOL data interpretation because my staff had never reviewed student test data or received training on how to do so.

Lack of teamwork

Eight of the 19 principals (five elementary and three middle school) noted that teachers were accustomed to working in isolation. Academic and behavioral problems were rarely addressed collectively. It was unclear whether teachers simply preferred to "go it alone" or whether no organized effort had been mounted to develop teams. One middle school principal quickly identified the need for teamwork as a critical objective in turning around his school:

> A second objective was to build a spirit of teamwork among staff members. They were accustomed to working as individuals. I don't tell you what or how to teach, and you don't tell me. It was hard to imagine how we could undertake the curriculum alignment and remediation necessary to raise performance without a healthy dose of cooperation among the faculty.

Inadequate infrastructure

Infrastructure refers to the organizational arrangements, such as teams, committees, and planning processes, that enable a school to accomplish its business efficiently and effectively. As noted above, if teachers are working in isolation, it may be due to the absence of structured, formal opportunities for collaboration. Such opportunities may include leadership teams, school improvement groups, grade-level teams, subject-matter teams, and staff committees devoted to identifying and assisting struggling students. Eight principals cited inadequate infrastructure as a problem. It is worth noting that six of the eight were elementary principals. One elementary principal described her situation as follows:

> As I started to assess and ends organization plans analyze my new school, I discovered that there was no obvious organizational structure. I found no evidence of committees, lead teachers, school improvement plans, school safety plans, or any type of organizational plans.

Ineffective scheduling

Data analysis, planning, and other collaborative endeavors require time. So, too, do curriculum alignment and supplementary instructional programs designed to assist struggling students. Whether or not time is available for these and other important aspects of the school turnaround process is a function of the school schedule. When schedules are not designed to provide opportunities for teacher collaboration and additional learning time for low-achievers, school improvement efforts may be jeopardized. Seven principals (three elementary and four middle school) indicated that the schedule they inherited posed problems for their efforts to raise student achievement. In some cases, the problem with the schedule was insufficient time for reading instruction. In other cases, the existing schedule was seen as a source of disruption. A middle school principal focused on the school schedule's contribution to discipline problems:

> Of all the changes that we made to reduce behavior problems, perhaps the most important one involved altering the school schedule. The old schedule had students spending too much time passing each other in the halls. Times between classes became occasions for disruption and misbehavior. Students left their teams to go to one elective in the morning and one elective in the afternoon. Add going to and from lunch, and students were in movement six times each day. That was just too much.

Dysfunctional school culture

Schools frequently are characterized by distinctive cultures. These cultures are embodied in shared beliefs and common ways of addressing concerns. Low-performing schools have been described as having cultures of low expectations and defeatism, cultures in which educators devote more time to making excuses for inadequate student achievement than to finding ways to improve the situation. In some cases, so much attention is given to preventing discipline problems that the school resembles a prison and students do not feel cared about. Seven principals, including five elementary principals, felt that the school culture presented a major obstacle to their improvement efforts. One elementary principal, for example, determined that the school turnaround process needed to dismantle the existing Montessori program and the culture it spawned. This culture was described as one in which students were expected to learn at their own pace, where students were "invited" to participate in lessons, and where classroom structure was virtually non-existent. For students who already were underachieving academically, more structured instruction was needed to develop foundational skills in reading and mathematics.

Ineffective interventions

In each of the 19 schools, efforts had been made prior to the appointment of the new principal to provide assistance to struggling students. In many cases, instructional interventions focused on after-school programs staffed by volunteers. Most of the schools also had Title I programs in place. Despite these interventions, performance remained low. Twelve of the 19 principals (seven elementary and five middle school) concluded that they would need to address ineffective interventions in the course of their school improvement efforts. Several principals expressed their skepticism, for example, regarding the ability of volunteers to provide the skilled assistance needed by their students. Others pointed out that the focus of the interventions they inherited was not aligned to the specific Standards of Learning with which students were struggling.

Lack of inclusion

Seven principals (four elementary and three middle school) cited the lack of a complete inclusion program for special needs students as an obstacle to improved performance. The poor achievement of special needs students was one reason many schools in the VSTSP did not meet adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act. These principals believed that greater inclusion in the regular instructional program with the support of special education teachers working in tandem with general education teachers would ensure a more challenging academic experience for special needs students.

Inadequate facilities

The quality of the learning environment is believed by many educators to be a factor influencing student achievement. It is difficult to learn in classrooms that are cramped, unattractive, poorly lighted, and inadequately ventilated. Schools that are unclean and poorly maintained convey a message that no one cares about what goes on in them. Three elementary principals and one middle school principal reported that inadequate facilities posed a problem for their turnaround efforts. One elementary principal expressed the problem as follows:

> After spending time at my new school, I realized that the first project to undertake was more basic than what is typically taught in graduate school. The school was dirty and cluttered, and I was determined to get it fixed before students and staff arrived in August. A child's environment has a direct impact on his or her behavior.

Inadequate materials

Instructional materials that are outdated, in poor condition, inappropriate for the ability level of students, or in short supply present another potential obstacle to school improvement. Two elementary principals cited inadequate instructional materials as a problem.

Ineffective staff development

In order to address many of the conditions above, staff members may require additional training. Such training is especially important when implementing new reading and mathematics programs, launching school-wide discipline initiatives, and adopting data-driven decision making. One middle school principal noted the lack of staff development as a problem that needed to be addressed:

> While there had been and ends was implemented a lot of staff development, it had not been connected. There was no follow-up to see that what was taught in staff development was implemented.

School Staffing

Efforts to turn around low-performing schools ultimately depend on the quality of the individuals that staff the schools. The principals in the VSTSP encountered two general kinds of staffing concerns: (a) problems with the competence of staff members and (b) lack of specialists in key academic areas.

Personnel problems

New principals rarely have an opportunity to build a staff right off the bat. For the most part, they initially must work with the staff with which their predecessor worked. Since all of the schools in the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program are low-performing schools, it is reasonable to believe that some of the responsibility for low performance must be borne by teachers and other staff members. All ten elementary principals and six of the nine middle school principals cited personnel problems as a condition contributing to low performance at their schools. In some cases, they felt that individuals lacked the proper qualifications to carry out their duties. In other instances, they believed that individuals could be more effective at a different grade level or with a different group of students. Two principals complained about incompetent assistant principals. Another principal was especially concerned about special education staffing. As she put it:

> I have had difficulty finding highly qualified TMD and Cross-Categorical teachers. I know my school is not the only school with a shortage of trained special education teachers. The school division has to find better ways of recruiting individuals with the skills to run effective self-contained special education classes.

Lack of specialists

While most of the principals perceived problems with some of their staff, one elementary and two middle school principals also noted that they needed additional staff members with special expertise. The desired specialists covered the areas of reading and mathematics. The principals recognized that these individuals were needed to provide intensive coaching and boost teachers' competence and confidence with regard to instructing low-achieving students.

School System

The problems perceived by the VSTSP principals were not confined to their schools. In a number of instances, they believed that their schools were adversely affected by matters

related to school district administration. These matters included instability, technical difficulties, and lack of support.

Central office instability

It is hard to imagine that a low-performing school could be turned around without the blessing and active support of top school system officials. When these individuals are pre-occupied with internal struggles or when there is a lack of leadership continuity due to turnover, principals can find themselves in an awkward position, unsure of who they can count on for support and uncertain about the wishes of their superiors. Six elementary and three middle school principals cited central office instability as an impediment to school improvement efforts. In three instances, principals had to work with interim superintendents. In the case of three other principals, their superintendent was under fire locally. The last three principals experienced the departure of a superintendent and the arrival of a new district leader.

Technical difficulties

Today's school system is the hub of support for a number of technology-based services to schools, ranging from e-mail networks to computer-based testing. Two elementary and two middle school principals registered concerns related to technological support. In two instances, the school system's computers were unable to access the portal set up by the VSTSP to facilitate communication among program participants. The other two principals complained about problems with the computer-based system by which students were tested to determine their progress. Students would complete half the items on a benchmark test, only to discover that all their answers had been erased. Principals became frustrated when these glitches could not be corrected quickly by central office specialists.

Lack of district support

Two elementary and two middle school principals mentioned inadequate support from the central office as a factor inhibiting their school improvement efforts. One principal believed that school system officials held her in low regard because she had been appointed by an unpopular superintendent who had subsequently left the school system. Two principals associated lack of district support specifically with personnel issues. In one case, the principal was not permitted to hire teachers to fill vacancies. These decisions were made at the central office without the principal's input. In the other case, the principal did not receive the go ahead to transfer several faculty members who were perceived to be a poor fit for the turnaround initiative. The principal believed that the teachers association dictated what was done in the school system. The remaining principal felt that his turnaround efforts were stymied by the district's failure to adopt specific curriculum guidelines.

Parents and Community

When asked to specify conditions that needed to be addressed in order to effect improvements in their schools, principals included low levels of parent involvement and negative perceptions in the community.

Low parent involvement

While educators must take the lead in turning around low-performing schools, they cannot accomplish the job alone. Parental support and participation are viewed by many observers as crucial components of school improvement initiatives. Seven elementary and four middle school principals expressed concerns about the low level of parent involvement in their

schools. Their specific issues entailed poor attendance at Parent-Teacher Association meetings and other school-sponsored activities, reluctance of parents to volunteer at school, and failure of parents to support efforts to improve student attendance.

Negative perceptions

One possible explanation for low levels of parent involvement is a pervasive lack of faith in the school's ability to provide a good education. Since school performance data is now readily available and frequently the focus of local news coverage, it is virtually impossible for educators to hide the fact that their schools are not meeting expectations. Once a community loses faith in its schools, it is very difficult to restore it. Four elementary and three middle school principals indicated that negative perceptions of their schools presented a major obstacle to school improvement.

Similarities and Differences in Perceived Conditions

The second research question for this study involved the extent to which perceived conditions inhibiting school improvement were comparable across schools. The set of perceived conditions for each school can be thought of as the school's turnaround profile. In other words, the turnaround profile represents the conditions that the principal, in the present study, believes must be addressed in order to effect significant improvement in student achievement. When the turnaround profiles for the 19 schools are compared (see Tables 2A and 2B), several conclusions can be drawn. First, no two schools in the VSTSP have exactly the same profile. Second, schools vary considerably in their number of perceived conditions. Third, certain conditions are mentioned more frequently than other conditions. Fourth, a cluster of particular conditions are mentioned in a majority of the turnaround schools. Each of these findings merits a brief discussion.

The fact that no two schools had identical turnaround profiles indicates that low-performing schools vary in terms of the conditions perceived as problematic by their principals. How much they vary is a separate issue, as is the practical significance of their differences. No effort was made in this study to give weight to particular conditions, but it stands to reason that certain conditions probably play a greater role in accounting for low performance than other conditions. What's more, the key conditions for one school may not be the same as the key conditions for another school. What can be said of the present study is that new principals do not identify the exact same set of conditions when asked to account for their schools' low performance.

One way of assessing how much the conditions varied across the 19 schools is to count the conditions. The number of perceived conditions ranged from 7 to 20, with a median of 13. The mean number of perceived conditions per school was 12.3. If the elementary and middle schools are examined separately, the differences are slight. The range of conditions for elementary schools was 7 to 20, and for middle schools 7 to 18. The medians were 13.5 and 12.0 and the means 12.2 and 12.3, respectively. Assuming for the moment that principals' perceptions are reasonably accurate and thorough, it appears that some low-performing schools require considerably more intervention than others. A principal who must address 20 conditions presumably has a much greater task than a principal dealing with 7 conditions.

Figure 1 presents the 19 VSTSP schools organized by the overall number of conditions perceived by principals in each school, from a low level (7-9 conditions) to high (17-20 conditions). The number of conditions identified in each category of (a) student achievement and behavior, (b) school programs and organization, (c) staffing, (d) school system, and (e) parents and community are indicated respectively with a darkened circle, empty circle or

dash. The darkened circles indicate a majority (greater than 50%) of the conditions in that particular category was listed by the principal; the empty circles indicate that a moderate number (25% to 50%) of the conditions was noted by the principal; and the dashes indicate a low number of the conditions (fewer than 25%) was mentioned by the principal.

Figure 1: Frequency of Problematic Conditions Found in Low-Performing Schools

School	Student Achievement & Behavior	School Programs & Organization	Staffing	School System	Parent & Community	Overal Number of Conditions
Easton	•	•	•	•	•	
Orion	•	•	•	-	•	High
Queens	•	•	○	○	○	17-20
Mosby	•	•	○	•	○	
Laurel	○	•	•	○	•	
Acres	○	•	○	-	•	
Chapel	○	•	○	○	•	Medium
Denby	•	•	○	○	○	11-15
Gatewood	○	•	○	•	○	
Bell	•	•	○	-	○	
Kroft	•	○	○	•	○	
Prince	•	•	•	-	-	
Ralston	•	○	○	-	-	
Island	○	○	○	-	-	
Jordan	○	-	○	•	○	Low
Hirsch	○	○	○	-	-	7-9
Newton	○	○	•	-	-	
Folsom	○	-	○	○	○	
Spellman	•	○	-	-	-	

Key • High number of conditions (more than 50%) identified in the category
○ Moderate number of conditions (25% to 50%) identified in the category
- Low number of conditions (less than 25%) identified in the category

The visual reduction of the data on problematic conditions found in the schools suggests a number of observations.

1. Even among this group of low performing schools, there was wide variation in the number and breadth of problems perceived by principals. This variation may be a reflection of the diagnostic skills of the principal or a fairly accurate assessment of the variations among schools that have been characterized by this monolithic moniker.
2. The range and intensity of conditions found in the VSTSP schools suggests a highly discrepant level of challenge faced by the principals.
3. The schools with a high level of conditions also tended to have severe problems across all five categories as compared to the schools with a low level of conditions which had moderate problems in just a few categories.
4. All schools noted difficulties in the student achievement and behavior category, which should be expected given that achievement was the basis of their identification as low

performing. Most schools, however, noted problems in (a) school programs and organization and (b) staffing. Thus, while the severity and variety of challenges in these categories may have varied, there were distinct commonalities to the conditions of work faced by the VSTSP principals.

When conditions are examined individually, it is clear that some are more prevalent than others. Low reading achievement, not surprisingly, was identified as a problem in all 19 schools. Personnel problems ran a close second (18 schools). The 24 conditions perceived by principals to be associated with low performance are listed in Table 3 in order of frequency.

Table 3: Frequency of 24 Identified Conditions

Condition (24)	Elementary (10)	Middle (9)	Total
Low reading achievement	10	9	19
Personnel problems	10	8	18
Ineffective instruction	8	8	16
Data deprivation	8	7	15
Discipline problems	5	8	13
Lack of focus	7	6	13
Lack of teamwork	6	6	12
Low math achievement	5	6	11
Unaligned curriculum	7	4	11
Ineffective interventions	6	5	11
Low parent involvement	7	4	11
Inadequate infrastructure	6	4	10
Ineffective scheduling	4	5	9
Dysfunctional culture	4	5	9
Central office instability	6	3	9
Lack of inclusion	4	4	8
Attendance problems	3	4	7
Negative community perceptions	4	3	7
Inadequate facilities	4	1	5
Lack of specialists	1	4	5
Technical difficulties	2	2	4
Lack of district support	2	2	4
Inadequate materials	2	1	3
Ineffective staff development	0	3	3

When the conditions are considered in order of frequency, 12 conditions are found in more than half of the 19 low-performing schools. When the schools are divided by grade level, 11 conditions are found in six or more elementary schools and 11 conditions are found in five or more middle schools. The conditions most likely to be identified by elementary and middle school principals are listed below:

Elementary School Principals		Middle School Principals	
Low reading achievement	(10)	Low reading achievement	(9)
Personnel problems	(10)	Personnel problems	(8)
Ineffective instruction	(8)	Ineffective instruction	(8)

Data deprivation	(8)	Discipline problems	(8)
Lack of focus	(7)	Data deprivation	(7)
Unaligned curriculum	(7)	Lack of focus	(6)
Low parent involvement	(7)	Lack of teamwork	(6)
Lack of teamwork	(6)	Low math achievement	(6)
Ineffective interventions	(6)	Ineffective interventions	(5)
Inadequate infrastructure	(6)	Ineffective scheduling	(5)
Central office instability	(6)	Dysfunctional culture	(5)

The most frequently cited conditions for elementary and middle school principals are quite similar in content and sequence. Low parent involvement, unaligned curriculum, inadequate infrastructure, and central office instability appear on the elementary principals' list, but not on the middle school principals' list. Discipline problems, low math achievement, ineffective scheduling, and dysfunctional culture appear on the middle school principals' list, but not on the elementary principals' list.

The clusters of perceived conditions that were found in more than half of the elementary schools and middle schools serve as indicators of the kind of problems principals are most likely to encounter when they undertake the challenge of turning around low-performing schools. It is possible, of course, that principals have been trained or socialized to "see" certain kinds of conditions and not others that could be associated with low performance. For example, none of the 19 principals cited low student motivation or class size as problematic conditions. Still, anyone familiar with low-performing schools would be hard-pressed to argue against the relevance of either cluster of conditions.

Implications

The paper began by questioning the extent to which low-performing schools are characterized by comparable conditions. The suggestion was made that the preparation of principals could be influenced by the results of such inquiry. If each low-performing school embodies unique conditions, a case can be made for customizing a substantial portion of the training of turnaround specialists. On the other hand, if conditions across low-performing schools are largely the same, more generic training of principals may be justified.

According to Leithwood and Duke (1998), a contingent leadership model "assumes that what is important is how leaders respond to the unique organizational circumstances or problems which they face as a consequence of, for example, the nature and preferences of coworkers, conditions of work, and tasks to be undertaken" (p. 39). Given the dire straits of the schools in the study, the foci of the principals in this study were the conditions of work and tasks to be undertaken. As indicated in Figure 1, the conditions of work for these principals varied considerably in terms of the types, number, and complexity of conditions they encountered. On the other hand, there were consistencies across settings that suggested a core of fundamental problems in the areas of student achievement and behavior, school programs and organizations, and staffing. The consistencies in conditions argue for an emphasis on a common set of challenges in turnaround leadership, and the variations in conditions suggest the need for additional specialized skill sets for use in specific school settings. The artful integration and orchestration of the necessary skill sets for any given school setting with its own unique combination of conditions continues to support the saliency of contingent leadership; however, we argue the implications for training can be more parsimonious.

The findings support some degree of generic training for principals of low-performing schools based on the nature of the 24 conditions identified by the VSTSP principals and the

prevalence of these conditions as depicted in Figure 1. Over half of the principals identified a high number of conditions in two categories: (a) school achievement and behavior and (b) school programs and organization. Even though no principal perceived all 24 conditions to be present, we cannot imagine preparing principals without devoting ample attention to each of the conditions, especially those in the two categories noted above. We recognize, of course, that many graduate programs do not provide principals with a solid foundation of knowledge regarding, say, the characteristics of good reading programs or how to facilitate data-driven decision making (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001). There is a recognized need for both pre-service and in-service preparation programs to address these fundamental challenges that are found in all schools to varying degrees (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2002; Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003). The severity and prevalence of the conditions argues for the use of the conditions identified by the 19 principals in this study as a foundation for organizing the core content of advanced leadership preparation programs.

Our assessment of the findings also suggests that the preparation of principals for low-performing schools should involve a degree of customization. Customization is warranted because each school in the VSTSP had a different turnaround profile. In other words, no two principals perceived exactly the same set of conditions. Based on our field work and case studies of the first 10 schools, we suspect that the uniqueness of each low-performing school may lie in the interactions between particular conditions. For example, three principals reported both personnel problems and lack of district support, but in only one of these cases did lack of district support mean that the principal had no control over which staff members were hired and fired. If a principal perceives certain staff members to be incompetent, but lacks the authority to remove them, he must exercise leadership in a different way from another principal who is empowered to dismiss and hire staff members. In another case, one principal who cited dysfunctional school culture as a problem failed to perceive lack of teamwork as a problem. In other words, teachers at Denby Elementary were perceived to pull together as a team, but the school culture was not regarded as conducive to effective teaching and learning. In this particular case, our fieldwork revealed that teachers' collaborative efforts focused on making excuses for low student achievement.

Besides implications for the preparation of principals, the present study suggests new directions for research on the leadership of low-performing schools. The U.S. obviously is not the only country having to grapple with under-achieving schools. What do school heads in other countries regard as the conditions that must be addressed in order to raise performance? Do their perceptions vary depending on local culture and the nature of their training? How do the effective and very effective schools? Is there support for Hopkins' notion that school improvement in each of the three types of school entail distinct strategies?

The present study focused on principals' skill as diagnosticians. Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) have suggested that accurate diagnosis of school conditions is a critical element of effective school leadership. What remains unclear is how principals arrive at their diagnoses and the accuracy of their diagnoses. Research is needed that compares the diagnoses of successful and unsuccessful principals working in comparable school situations. Are some principals unsuccessful because of what they do to address perceived problems, or are they unsuccessful because they mis-perceive the problems in the first place? Such questions call for a more thorough understanding of the cognitive dimensions of school leadership. Each of the 19 principals in the present study identified a somewhat different configuration of challenges that needed to be addressed on the road to a better school. Observers of low-performing schools are advised to be cautious about assuming that all such schools are similar.

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Author details

Daniel L. Duke, Pamela D. Tucker, Michael J. Salmonowicz and Melissa K. Levy
All of University of Virginia
Contact Information:
Daniel L. Duke
University of Virginia
405 Emmet Street
Charlottesville, VA 22904
dld7g@virginia.edu
434-924-3979
434-924-3866