



Department of Educational Administration and Secondary Education

Comprehensive Exam Handbook

General Information

All Master's in Educational Leadership candidates must pass a comprehensive examination (also known as the "comps") as a requirement for graduation.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the exam is to provide an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate knowledge of core leadership practices and dispositions and apply such ideas to a case situation. The exam is aligned with the [National Educational Leadership Preparation \(NELP\) Program Standards - Building Level](#). The exam evaluates:

- a. skill in organizing and expressing ideas in a logical, coherent, literate, and convincing fashion.
- b. ability to synthesize and apply knowledge of educational leadership
- c. facility in cogently analyzing the issues presented and generating recommendations for addressing them.

Dates, Registration, and Prerequisites

- The exam is offered three times per year, once during the fall, spring, and summer semesters.
- Candidates must register for EDAD 700, a 0-credit course.
- Prior to taking the exam, candidates must:
 - have successfully completed 30 hours of educational leadership coursework
 - be in good academic standing, as demonstrated by having a minimum grade point average of at least 3.0 for all courses completed at TCNJ as part of their master's program.

Exam Logistics

- Exams are completed in the computer lab on a date to be communicated to candidates at least 4 weeks in advance.
- Candidates have 4 hours to complete the exam.
- Candidates will be held to the standards outlined in TCNJ's [Academic Integrity Policy](#) and the work submitted must be the candidate's own original work.
- Candidates may not use print or electronic materials during the administration of the exam.

Evaluating the Exam

Throughout the examination process, the candidate's identification is protected. A number is assigned to each candidate and this number is maintained with strict confidentiality by office personnel. No one evaluating the responses knows the respondent's identity. Evaluation involves the following steps:

1. At least two Educational Leadership faculty evaluate each answer using the scoring rubric.
2. After all answers have been read and rated, the raters meet to consider the performance of each candidate. If there is an evenly split decision, a third party will be consulted evaluate the candidate's response and break the tie. The decision of the team is made as a single decision, pass or fail, for each question. Candidates who fail a question only need to retake the portion they failed. However, candidates must ultimately pass each question to pass the exam.
3. Candidates will be notified of their results via email within two weeks after the comprehensive exam has been completed.

4. If a candidate is judged to have failed a question, written summary comments describing the major reasons the team judged the response to be unsatisfactory will be forwarded to the candidate. Written notification is also provided to the candidate's advisor, the candidate's departmental permanent file, and is submitted into PAWS.
5. If a candidate has failed a portion of the exam:
 - a. Candidates who wish to appeal the decision should follow the [complaint procedures](#) outlined in TCNJ's policies and procedures for graduate candidates.
 - b. The candidate should meet with the advisor to review the questions, the candidate's answers, and the comments given by the evaluation team.

Retakes

A candidate may take the comprehensive exam a maximum of two times. The candidate is only required to retake the question that was failed. A candidate who has taken the exam on two occasions and has failed to pass on both occasions will be discontinued from the master's program. Candidates must pass the exam within six years of beginning their educational leadership program at TCNJ or face dismissal from the program.

Suggestions for the Candidate

The exam requires higher order thinking that goes beyond mechanical recall or reporting facts. Responses should demonstrate deep understanding of leadership concepts and theories and how they relate to the case presented. Underlying theories should be identified, elaborated upon, and connected to the case to provide an explanation and rationale for the actions, behaviors, and events described in the case.

Candidates should:

- Take a direct approach to each question. Identify the fundamental issues or central concerns and address them in their responses.
- Use precise terminology, simple direct sentence structure, and avoid redundancies and run-on sentences.
- Organize thoughts logically and use numbering, headings, and key words to enable the reader to locate the required elements.
- Emphasize specifics and avoid sweeping general observations.
- Provide specific examples from the case, course material, and expert readings to support the response

Master's in Educational Leadership Comprehensive Examination

Welcome to the Comprehensive Exam for the M.Ed. Educational Leadership (also known as the “comps”). Passage of this exam is a requirement for attaining the master’s degree. This exam requires you to analyze a case study of a school and prepare responses to four questions over the course of four hours.

Directions:

1. Do not include your name anywhere on your responses to this examination. Use the number on your envelope as an identifier by placing it in the header section of your response to each question.
2. Read the entire exam before you begin responding. Please respond to questions as they relate to the case study provided to you. First-time test takers must respond to **all four** questions, so **allocate your time wisely**. If you are retaking the exam, you need only respond to the questions you previously did not pass.
3. While emphasis is placed on your understanding of the scholarly knowledge base, you are expected to demonstrate higher order thinking that goes beyond mechanically recalling or reporting facts, concepts, or leadership theory. You must also demonstrate an ability to make logical, appropriate connections between theory and practice. Therefore, your responses should demonstrate deep understanding and **relate directly to the case presented**.

You should identify and elaborate on course content and major authors to support your explanations while being selective in what you choose to include in your response. The material you cite should explain and illuminate the actions, behaviors, and events described in the case.
4. Please organize your response in such a way that it is clear you have addressed each component of each question.
5. After you have completed your response to each question, save your work on the flash drive provided in the envelope. Save each question in a separate, clearly labeled file and check to confirm that your number appears as a header on each page of each question.
6. Since this comprehensive examination is an assessment of your personal knowledge, any form of inappropriate assistance (e.g. notes from study sessions, accessing the internet, etc.) will be grounds for failure.
7. When you have finished, put all of the materials (notes generated during the exam, flash drive, and examination copy) back into the envelope.

After reading the assigned case, prepare responses to each of the following questions and prompts.

1. Identify **three major areas of strength** and the **three most urgent issues of concern** at the school that represent key issues and problems. Cite evidence from the case **and** at least one expert source to justify why these issues are likely to have a significant impact on students (NELP 2.2)

Your overall response must address each of the following areas:

- a) The extent the school in the case provides a **quality instructional program** (e.g. curriculum, effective instructional practices and technologies, student supports). (NELP 4.2; CAEP A.1.1.e)
 - b) The extent the case provides evidence of a **positive school culture**. (NELP 3.1)
 - c) The extent that all students were offered **equitable access** to resources, quality instruction, and/or educational opportunities. (NELP 3.2; CAEP A.1.1.c)
2. Analyze how **theories of leadership** employed by school or district leaders (past or present) influenced the situation in the case. As part of this analysis you must apply at least **one** of the following theories, as appropriate to the case. Your response should show that you fully understand the theory and go beyond merely invoking its name.
 - Transformational leadership
 - Transactional leadership
 - Situational and Contingency leadership
 - Theory X and Theory Y
 - Motivation Hygiene Theory
 - Instructional Leadership
 - Decision Making: Classical, Comparative, Singular, Satisficing, Bounded Rationality
 - Four-Frame model
 - Systems Thinking
 - Organizational Culture model
 - Power (critical analysis of power structures)
 - a) Explain the extent school leaders cultivated **positive behaviors** in others. (NELP 2.3)
 - b) Explain how conditions in the school facilitated or undermined professional/prosocial **norms or ethical practices** among teachers and/or students. (NELP 2.1; CAEP A.1.1.f)
 - c) Explain how school personnel facilitated or undermined **collaborative engagement with families and community members**. (NELP 5.1; CAEP A.1.1.d)
 3. Describe how the effective or ineffective use of **organizational structures and resources** have influenced the situation positively or negatively.
Address **each** of the following areas in your response:
 - a) How the school's use of financial, physical, and/or temporal **resources** (e.g. budgets, schedules) contributed to school effectiveness. (NELP 6.2).

- b) How the school's approach to **policy** (federal, state, OR district) has contributed to or undermined the efficient and effective functioning of the school. (e.g., loose implementation, lack of policy guidance) (NELP 6.3; CAEP A.1.1.f)
 - c) How **communication** processes or patterns facilitated or impeded information flow and positive relationships among stakeholders (internal and/or external). (NELP 6.1)
 - d) How **personnel** processes contributed positively or negatively to student learning (e.g. hiring, staffing, work assignments, supervision, professional development, and/OR teacher evaluation). (NELP 7.2)
4. Assume that you are the school principal identified in this case. Based on your analysis of the situation as presented in questions 1 through 3, generate **a short-term plan** (1 to 2 semesters) to further investigate or address what you perceive to be the **most urgent** problem. Include the following
- a) A purpose and **rationale** for your plan. Ensure you have a clear vision for improvement that is connected to one of the most urgent issues of concern from question 1. (NELP 1.1)
 - b) The leadership actions and behaviors that will be necessary to enact this plan. Be sure to describe the leadership actions and behaviors that are aligned with **change theory** and are likely to engender the support of the school community for your proposal. (NELP 5.3; CAEP A.1.1.b)
 - c) How you will go about gathering further information to better understand the problem OR how you will know that your planned changes resulted in improvement. You plan should collect **sufficient unbiased data** to further investigate the problem or to determine whether the planned actions produce the intended effects. (NELP 1.2)

**Master's in Educational Leadership Core Comprehensive Examination
Scoring Rubric**

Candidate Number _____

Reader/Rater _____

Question 1			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
<p>a. Areas of strength and concern. (NELP 2.2)</p>	<p>Areas of strength and areas of concern that represent the key issues and problems from the case are weak or missing.</p>	<p>Three areas of strength and three areas of concern that represent the key issues and problems from the case are present and reasonable developed.</p>	<p>Three areas of strength and three areas of concern that represent the key issues and problems from the case are present and well developed. Cites research or expert sources to justify why the chosen areas are likely to have a significant impact on students.</p>
<p>b. Quality instructional program (NELP 4.2)</p>	<p>The extent the case provides evidence of a quality instructional program (e.g. coherent curriculum, effective instructional practices and technologies, adequate supports) is weak or missing.</p>	<p>The extent the case provides evidence of a quality instructional program (e.g. coherent curriculum, effective instructional practices and technologies, adequate supports) is present and reasonably developed.</p>	<p>The extent the case provides evidence of a quality instructional program (e.g. coherent curriculum, effective instructional practices and technologies, adequate supports) is present and well developed.</p>
<p>c. School culture (NELP 3.1)</p>	<p>The extent the case provides evidence of a positive, supportive, and inclusive school culture is weak or missing.</p>	<p>The extent the case provides evidence of a positive, supportive, and inclusive school culture is present and reasonably developed.</p>	<p>The extent the case provides evidence of a positive, supportive, and inclusive school culture is present and well developed.</p>
<p>d. Equity (NELP 3.2)</p>	<p>The extent that all students are offered equitable access to resources, quality instruction, and/or educational opportunities is weak or missing.</p>	<p>The extent that all students are offered equitable access to resources, quality instruction, and/or educational opportunities is present and reasonably developed. Most student subgroup disparities are noted.</p>	<p>The extent that all students are offered equitable access to resources, quality instruction, and/or educational opportunities is present and well developed. All student subgroup disparities are noted.</p>

Question 2			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
a. Leadership theory (NELP 2.3)	Understanding of leadership theory is weak or missing.	Understanding of leadership theory as demonstrated by reflection on the efficacy of leaders in the case and assessment of their ability to cultivate positive behaviors in others is present and reasonably developed.	Understanding of leadership theory as demonstrated by reflection on the efficacy of leaders in the case and assessment of their ability to cultivate positive behaviors in others is present and well developed.
b. Norms and ethics (NELP 2.1)	Explanation of how conditions in the school facilitated or undermined professional/prosocial norms or ethical practices among teachers and/or students is weak or missing.	Explanation of how conditions in the school facilitated or undermined professional/prosocial norms or ethical practices among teachers and/or students is present and reasonably developed.	Explanation of how conditions in the school facilitated or undermined professional/prosocial norms or ethical practices among teachers and/or students is present and well developed.
c. Collaboration with families and communities (NELP 5.1)	Explanation of how school personnel facilitated or undermined collaborative engagement with families and community members is weak or missing.	Explanation of how school personnel facilitated or undermined collaborative engagement with families and community members is present and reasonably developed.	Explanation of how school personnel facilitated or undermined collaborative engagement with families and community members is present and well developed.

Question 3			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
a. Use of resources (NELP 6.2)	Explanation how the school's use of resources (e.g. time, finances) has contributed to school effectiveness is weak or missing.	Explanation how the school's use of resources (e.g. time, finances) has contributed to school effectiveness is present and reasonably developed.	Explanation how the school's use of resources (e.g. time, finances) has contributed to school effectiveness is present and well developed.
b. Policies (NELP 6.3)	Explanation of how the content, implementation, or lack of policies have contributed to or undermined the functioning of the school is weak or missing.	Explanation of how the content, implementation, or lack of policies have contributed to or undermined the functioning of the school is present and reasonably developed.	Explanation of how the content, implementation, or lack of policies have contributed to or undermined the functioning of the school is present and well developed.
c. Communication patterns (NELP 6.1)	Description of how communication patterns facilitated or impeded information flow and positive relationships among stakeholders is weak or missing.	Description of how communication patterns facilitated or impeded information flow and positive relationships among stakeholders is present and reasonably developed.	Description of how communication patterns facilitated or impeded information flow and positive relationships among stakeholders is present and well developed.
d. Personnel (NELP 7.2)	Explanation of how personnel processes have contributed positively or negatively to student learning is weak or missing.	Explanation of how personnel processes have contributed positively or negatively to student learning is present and reasonably developed.	Explanation of how personnel processes have contributed positively or negatively to student learning (e.g. hiring, staffing, work assignments, supervision, professional development, and/or evaluation) is present and well developed.

Question 4			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
a. Vision (NELP 1.1)	A clear vision for improvement that is connected to one of the most urgent issues of concern from Q1 is weak or missing.	A clear vision for improvement that is connected to one of the most urgent issues of concern from Q1 is present and reasonably developed.	A clear vision for improvement that is connected to one of the most urgent issues of concern from Q1 is present and well developed.
b. Change theory (NELP 5.3)	Leadership actions and behaviors that demonstrate an understanding of change theory and are likely to engender the support of the school community are weak or missing.	Leadership actions and behaviors that demonstrate an understanding of change theory and are likely to engender the support of the school community are present and reasonably developed.	Leadership actions and behaviors that demonstrate an understanding of change theory and are likely to engender the support of the school community are present and well developed.
c. Data collection (NELP 1.2)	Collection of sufficient unbiased data to further investigate the problem or to determine whether the planned actions are producing the intended effects is weak or missing.	Collection of sufficient unbiased data to further investigate the problem or to determine whether the planned actions are producing the intended effects is present and reasonably developed.	Collection of sufficient unbiased data to further investigate the problem or to determine whether the planned actions are producing the intended effects is present and well developed.

Rating of Comprehensive Individual Exam Questions

3	Strong pass	Majority of responses are 3s.
2	Moderate pass	Majority of responses are 2s or above.
1	Fail	2 or more elements in 1, indicating insufficient knowledge and skill

Candidates must obtain a strong or moderate pass on each question to obtain a passing score on the exam.

SAMPLE CASE

Class Placements and Competing Priorities

Context

Justine Finley was appointed to the position of Principal of Northside Elementary School in September when the former principal unexpectedly resigned. Northside Elementary was in its 15th year, situated in a mostly middle class, suburban neighborhood. However, the number of economically disadvantaged students had increased from 12% to 31% in the 3 years prior to Justine's arrival. Part of a large, diverse district, Northside's demographic information at the time of Justine's appointment was as follows:

Total enrollment	634 students
Asian	3.5 %
Black	14.4 %
Hispanic	28.2 %
Indian	0.2 %
Multiple	10.4 %
White	43.4 %
English Language Learners	14.1 %
Students with Disabilities	11.4 %
Free and reduced lunch	31.0 %

At the time of Justine's appointment, the superintendent of the district identified two priorities for the new principal. The first was to increase the school's state standardized test scores. Northside's scores were at the state average the previous year. The second priority was to keep neighborhood families from choosing to enroll in the charter school that had recently opened four blocks away from Northside.

Observing, Asking, and Analyzing

As Justine was beginning her new role in September, she decided to spend the first 90 days learning as much as she could about the processes and procedures currently in place. She quickly realized that classes were largely homogeneous, with most of the high achieving students placed together. The school district had no set policies for placing students in classes in the elementary grades, so Justine asked several staff members about the process that had previously been used to place students in classes at Northside. The guidance counselor, Mrs. Dixon, who had been at Northside for several years, explained that highly involved parents often met with the principal to request specific teachers. This was not publicized; yet, it had become a standard practice for some families every year. Therefore, the students whose parents were strong advocates often ended up with the teachers perceived by parents as most effective.

Justine also decided to spend a significant amount of time analyzing Northside's student achievement data and discussing that data with teams of staff members. Her data analysis revealed many concerning trends. Among these was the discovery that high performing students were not making the learning gains expected on annual standardized tests. Justine decided to meet with Mrs. Lee, the teacher who served students identified as gifted. Although many of these students came from the class in which parents had requested the teacher, some came from other classes. Because the school had only one teacher to serve these gifted

students, they were often pulled out of their classes for one hour each day to receive enrichment from Mrs. Lee.

Justine realized that the same pull-out model was being used for exceptional students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Although the previous principal had placed most of the students with IEPs in the same class, they were all being pulled out for support services. The data also revealed that students with IEPs were not making learning gains. Often, these students had been placed with the least experienced teachers. Although some of these new teachers had solid instructional skills, their repertoire of strategies was limited.

Planning for Change

To identify needs, Justine began to examine available data. She pulled student achievement data by teacher from the past 3 years to look for trends. She also used her own classroom observation notes as an additional data source. As Justine examined the student achievement data by teacher, she began to see that the some of the teachers perceived as most effective by parents were not the most effective according to the data.

One fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Barkley, had been highly requested by parents. She was experienced, friendly, and sponsored multiple clubs. Mrs. Barkley had been at Northside since the school opened. She enjoyed her positive reputation among the parents, and fear of losing this reputation made her resistant to change. However, data and observations revealed that she was the least effective member of the fifth-grade team in terms of instruction.

As winter break approached, Justine was certain that she could accomplish the first task the superintendent had given her, to increase the school's grade under the state accountability system. To accomplish this task, she needed to find a more effective way to place students in classes and a better way to provide support to students at both ends of the continuum. She believed that cluster grouping students in classes and purposefully selecting the teachers for these classes would better ensure differentiation and engagement throughout the day rather than just during pull out periods. She believed higher levels of differentiation and student engagement were key to increasing student achievement.

Unveiling New Procedures and Practices

At a faculty meeting in late February, Justine presented information about Total School Cluster Grouping (TSCG). Justine explained that TSCG would involve all students and all teachers. TSCG was designed to meet the needs of all students by targeting teacher training and resources to the particular group of students being served. Therefore, Northside students who got enrichment services or support services would be served in the classroom with grade-level peers and with a teacher who has received training to meet their needs. In this way, students' particular needs would be addressed all day long. Justine also shared empirical data supporting the use of TSCG to increase student achievement.

Justine then described how Northside would use TSCG to not only maintain a degree of heterogeneity in classrooms but also reduce the span of ability to some degree. She revealed that beginning in March, grade-level teams would use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources to identify student achievement levels. Based on relative performance for Northside, students would be placed in five levels. Students identified as High Achieving excelled in math and reading when compared with their peers. Above-Average Achieving students performed better than their peers at either math or reading. Average Achieving students performed in a way that is typical for the school population. Low-Average Achieving students struggled with math or reading, were slightly behind their peers, and need some extra help from their teachers. Low Achieving students struggled in both math and reading and would continue to fall behind their peers without support.

Justine explained that once the teams collaboratively determined criteria for levels, data cards would be completed for each student to determine his or her appropriate level. Data cards included quantitative and qualitative data regarding math and reading performance as well as any other information pertinent to placement. Students with special services would be placed in clusters first to provide accommodations throughout the day; then, the rest of the class would be placed around them. Students in the High Achieving range and students in the Low Achieving range would not be placed together so that teachers could effectively differentiate and tailor their training and resources to their specific students. Justine emphasized that every effort should be made to balance gender and ethnicity across classes and to evenly distribute students with behavior challenges. To clarify the procedures, Justine shared sample data cards and the example of classroom configuration for one grade level below:

Student level	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5
High	10	0	0	0	0
Above-Average	0	5	6	6	7
Average	9	5	6	7	8
Low-Average	3	4	2	4	6
Low	0	6	6	4	0
Total	22	20	20	21	21

Justine explained that the assignment of a teacher for each class would be based on input from teachers about their preferences and the types of training they would like to receive as well as teachers' strengths. Data trends would also be considered when assigning teachers to classes, specifically how teachers have performed with different groups of students.

Competing Priorities

At the conclusion of her explanation of TSCG and the process that would be used to place students and assign teachers at Northside, Justine welcomed any questions or concerns from the staff. Many teachers expressed concerns that their Student Growth Percentiles (and therefore, their summative evaluation scores) would be affected by the way students are assigned to their classes. They felt that the TSCG model would not guarantee an even playing field for teachers. Justine agreed to get more information about this concern.

Mrs. Barkley asked if parents would still be able to request a teacher. Justine responded that parent requests would not be honored in the TSCG model at Northside. She wanted to ensure effective implementation of the plan as well as equity among groups of students. She explained that she would be presenting the model to parents during the Parent Teacher Association meeting at the end of the month.

The apprehension of the faculty was greater than Justine had predicted. She assumed that their commitment to student growth would transcend their concerns over potential decreases in evaluation scores. She understood that there may be potential resistance from parents, but she had discounted the power that parent requests gave teachers like Mrs. Barkley. Those teachers were not eager to change a system in which they were benefiting.

Change Derailed

When Justine arrived at school the next morning, several parents were waiting for her. They had heard from Mrs. Barkley that they would not be able to request teachers, and they threatened to move their students to

the charter school across the street. As Justine was trying to reassure the parents, a representative from the teachers' association arrived. Some of the teachers had called the association concerned about the impact of the TSCG model on their SGPs. It seemed that the two priorities the superintendent had given Justine might be competing priorities, and she suddenly felt that she was in an impossible situation.