



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 your assigned number 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. 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.

After reading the assigned case, respond to each prompt.

1. Reflect on the case and consider how the school **supports the success and well-being of each child**. Cite evidence from the case and draw on your knowledge of educational leadership to explain how the following factors are likely to have a significant positive or negative impact on students.
 - a) A school's core mission is to provide a **quality program of learning and instruction**. What evidence presented in the case suggests that the school is providing high-quality, technology-rich curricula, programs, and academic supports for students? What is missing?(NELP 4.1; AAQEP 1.b)
 - b) **Positive school cultures** are beneficial to student wellbeing. Draw upon your understanding of the factors that define a school's culture to evaluate the extent the school adults in the case are cultivating a supportive and inclusive school environment for students. Describe specific strategies school leaders are using or share strategies they should be using to promote a positive culture. (NELP 3.1)
 - c) Schools must provide **equitable access** to resources, quality instruction, and educational opportunities for all students. Refer to specific data presented in the case to assess the extent equitable opportunity and outcomes are happening at the school. Note all substantial student subgroup disparities present in the data. (NELP 3.2; AAQEP 1.c)
2. Use **theories of leadership** to critique the actions of school or district leaders in the case for each of the areas that follow. Your responses should show that you fully understand the theories and go beyond merely invoking their names.
 - a) Effective school leaders work with their colleagues to develop **collaborative professional cultures** that promote the success and well-being of each student and adult in the school. Explain the extent the leaders in the case fostered a working environment that was likely to result in both continuous school improvement and the retention of capable teachers. Use one of the following theories to provide insight into the leadership practices at the school.
 - a. Bolman & Deal's Four-Frame Model (use all four frames)
 - b. Transactional v. Transformational Leadership
 - c. Theory X v. Theory Y
 - d. Situational/Contingency Theory(NELP 7.2; AAQEP 1.f)
 - b) Successful school leaders cultivate, model, and communicate **ethical behavior and prosocial norms** within the school community. Provide an example of ethical or unethical behavior from the case. Explain how the actions of school leaders promoted or failed to promote the development of prosocial norms. Use a theory of motivation (e.g., extrinsic/intrinsic, Motivation-Hygiene Theory) to explain how school leaders did or could facilitate positive behavior. (NELP 2.1; AAQEP, 1.f)
 - c) Collaborative **engagement between schools, families, and community** members can benefit students in multiple ways. What strategies did school adults in the case use to engage

families or community members in supporting student learning and wellbeing in or out of school? What key factors were missing? In what ways did the school personnel in the case present deficit- or asset-based orientations toward students and their families? (NELP 5.1; AAQEP 1.c)

3. Describe how the effective or ineffective **organizational management** has influenced the school in the case positively or negatively.
 - a) How has the school's use of resources (e.g. **time, finances**) supported school improvement and student development? How did school leaders allocate time and/or money? What were the effects of these choices? (NELP 6.2; AAQEP 1.a)
 - b) How has the school's approach to federal **law**, state **regulations**, or district **policy** contributed to or undermined the efficient and effective functioning of the school? Evaluate the extent a law or policy described in the case has been applied consistently, fairly, equitably, and ethically to promote student and adult success and well-being. Point out any potential violations of state or federal law. (NELP 6.3; AAQEP 1.a)
 - c) Use your understanding of Instructional Leadership to evaluate how the leader in the case used **personnel processes** to ensure a favorable environment for student learning. In what ways did the leader use systems of hiring, mentoring, induction, supervision, professional development, or evaluation to promote school improvement and student success? What should they have done differently? (NELP 7.2; AAQEP 1.a)
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** one urgent problem.
Include the following:
 - a) Ground the improvement plan in a clear and focused **vision for improvement** that is explicitly connected to core values and priorities that are relevant to the case. (NELP 1.1; AAQEP 1.f)
 - b) Describe specific leadership actions and behaviors that you will use to enact **collaborative improvement** that engages diverse constituencies. Demonstrate your understanding of change theory by outlining the processes you would use to facilitate sustained commitment to shared goals. (NELP 5.2; AAQEP 1.e)
 - c) Explain how you will go about gathering **sufficient data** to better understand the problem OR how you will know that your planned changes resulted in improvement. Your plan should:
 - Explain what questions the data should answer
 - List the specific types of data you will collect
 - Explain the actions you will take to ensure the information you collect yields trustworthy information(NELP 1.2; AAQEP 1.d)

Master's in Educational Leadership Core Comprehensive Examination

Scoring Rubric

Candidate Number _____

Reader/Rater _____

Question 1			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
b. Learning and Instruction (NELP 4.1)	Demonstrates little knowledge concerning how to evaluate, develop, and implement high-quality, technology-rich curricula, programs, and other supports for academic and non-academic student programs.	Demonstrates some knowledge concerning how to evaluate, develop, and implement high-quality, technology-rich curricula, programs, and other supports for academic and non-academic student programs, as appropriate for the case	Demonstrates knowledge and theory concerning how to evaluate, develop, and implement high-quality, technology-rich curricula, programs, and other supports for academic and non-academic student programs, as appropriate for the case.
c. School culture (NELP 3.1)	Demonstrates little knowledge of how to design and cultivate a supportive and inclusive school culture, develop strategies for improving school culture, and advocate for a supportive and inclusive school culture.	Demonstrates some understanding of how to design and cultivate a supportive and inclusive school culture, develop strategies for improving school culture, and advocate for a supportive and inclusive school culture, as appropriate to the case.	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of how to design and cultivate a supportive and inclusive school culture, develop strategies for improving school culture, and advocate for a supportive and inclusive school culture, as appropriate to the case.
d. Equitable access (NELP 3.2)	An analysis of the extent that all students are offered equitable access to resources, quality instruction, and/or educational opportunities is weak or missing.	Analyzes data and describes the extent that all students are offered equitable access to resources, quality instruction, and/or educational opportunities. Most student subgroup disparities are noted.	Analyzes data and thoroughly describes the extent that all students are offered equitable access to resources, quality instruction, and/or educational opportunities. All student subgroup disparities in presented data are noted.

Question 2			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
a. Collaborative leadership (NELP 7.2)	Knowledge and understanding of leadership theory is weak or missing.	Demonstrates some knowledge and theory concerning how to engage staff in a collaborative professional culture designed to promote school improvement, teacher retention, and the success and well-being of each student and adult in the school, as appropriate to the case.	Demonstrates thorough knowledge and theory concerning how to engage staff in a collaborative professional culture designed to promote school improvement, teacher retention, and the success and well-being of each student and adult in the school, as appropriate to the case.
b. Ethics and professional norms (NELP 2.1)	Fails to explain the role and importance of professional/prosocial norms and ethical practices in supporting the success and well-being of each student and adult.	Explains the role and importance of professional/prosocial norms and ethical practices that support the success and well-being of each student and adult, as appropriate to the case.	Thoroughly explains the role and importance of cultivating, modeling, and communicating professional/prosocial norms and ethical practices that support the success and well-being of each student and adult, as appropriate to the case.
c. Collaboration with families and communities (NELP 5.1)	Fails to demonstrate an understanding of how to collaboratively engage diverse families in strengthening student learning in and out of school.	Demonstrates an understanding of how to collaboratively engage diverse families in strengthening student learning in and out of school, as appropriate to the case.	Demonstrates an understanding of how to collaboratively engage diverse families in strengthening student learning in and out of school and the importance of approaching family engagement from an asset-based perspective, as appropriate to the case.

Question 3			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
a. Resources (NELP 6.2)	Demonstrates little understanding of how the school's use of resources (e.g. time, finances) supports school improvement and student development.	Demonstrates some understanding of how the school's use of resources (e.g. time, finances) supports school improvement and student development, as appropriate for the case.	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of how the school's use of resources (e.g. time, finances) supports school improvement and student development, as appropriate for the case.
b. Policies (NELP 6.3)	Analysis of how law and/or policy have been applied consistently, fairly, equitably, and ethically within the school to promote student is weak or missing.	Analyzes how law and/or policy have been applied consistently, fairly, equitably, and ethically within the school to promote student wellbeing. All violations of state or federal law are noted.	Analyzes how law and/or policy have been applied consistently, fairly, equitably, and ethically within the school to promote student and adult success and well-being, as appropriate to the case. All violations of state or federal law are noted.
c. Personnel (NELP 7.4)	Fails to demonstrate an understanding of the importance of and how to evaluate, develop, and implement systems of supervision, support, and evaluation designed to promote school improvement and student success.	Demonstrates some understanding of the importance of and how to evaluate, develop, and implement systems of supervision, support, and evaluation designed to promote school improvement and student success, as appropriate to the case.	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the importance of and how to evaluate, develop, and implement systems of supervision, support, and evaluation designed to promote school improvement and student success, as appropriate to the case.

Question 4			
	Unacceptable 1	Acceptable 2	Target 3
a. Vision (NELP 1.1)	A vision for improvement is missing, disconnected from the case, or lacks clarity.	Grounds the improvement plan in a vision for improvement that is relevant to the case.	Grounds the improvement plan in a clear and focused vision for improvement that reflects core values and priorities that are relevant to the case.
b. Collaborative Improvement (NELP 5.2)	Demonstrates little understanding of how to collaboratively engage diverse community members, partners, and other constituencies for the benefit of school improvement and student development.	Demonstrates an understanding of how to collaboratively engage diverse community members, partners, and/or other constituencies around shared goals for the benefit of school improvement and student development.	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the importance of and how to collaboratively engage diverse community members, partners, and other constituencies around shared goals for the benefit of school improvement and student development.
c. Data collection plan (NELP 1.2)	Collection of unbiased data to further investigate the problem or to determine whether the planned actions are producing the intended effects is weak or missing.	Presents a basic plan that includes the collection of unbiased data to further investigate the problem or to determine whether the planned actions are producing the intended effects.	Presents a well-developed plan that includes the collection of sufficient unbiased data to further investigate the problem or to determine whether the planned actions are producing the intended effects.

Rating of 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 are 1s, 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

[The actual exam will use a different case.]

Navigating the Challenges of School Leadership as an Early Career Principal

Introduction

You are the principal of Brigadoon Middle School and are in the second year of your appointment. Over the past three academic years, diversity in your school's student population has increased (see Table 1). Although your students' state standardized tests scores in English language arts and science have stabilized around the state average, this year's data shows an overall decline in the NJSLA scores for mathematics (see Table 2).

This decline in math scores is especially troubling because the district central office allocated a considerable amount of funds last year to implement a new district-wide math intervention program. The assistant superintendent has scheduled a meeting with you tomorrow morning at 8:00 a.m. in your office to discuss this turn of events.

Table 1. Population of Brigadoon Middle School for the Past 3 Years Listed by Accountability Groups.

Group	Year 1	Year 2	Current year
Total students	1,054	1,043	1,019
Black/African American	63	83	112
Hispanic/Latino	21	42	143
White	864	824	724
Other	106	94	40
Students with disabilities	41	49	67
Limited English proficiency	53	60	102
Economically disadvantaged	253	303	377

Table 2. Percent at Each Proficiency Level in Secondary Mathematics for the Past 3 Years

Group	Year 1				Year 2				Year 3			
	I	2	3	4/5	I	2	3	4/5	I	2	3	4/5
Whole school	7	26	34	33	10	31	31	28	15	32	29	24
Black/African Am.	11	27	41	20	10	50	24	17	20	57	18	5
Hispanic/Latinx	26	35	32	7	25	36	33	6	24	37	32	7
White	4	38	33	25	10	29	31	30	6	19	31	44
Other	18	37	32	13	4	17	47	22	6	19	45	24
St. w/ disabilities	17	25	58	0	17	18	65	0	17	14	69	0
English Learners	55	35	8	2	53	40	7	0	35	50	12	4
Economically disad.	27	28	14	30	35	16	17	31	40	27	23	10
Total enrollment	506				526				550			

In addition to your concerns about this impending meeting, you are worried about how the decrease in ratings has affected the climate on your campus, especially teacher morale. The increased pressure from the district's roll out of the intervention program had already weighed heavily on the math instructional coach, resulting in several difficult conversations throughout last year.

You felt that you did an adequate job encouraging the math teachers to implement the new intervention despite the lack of professional development support and had assured them that the program would eventually show results in student achievement. Although the teachers were beginning to express optimism toward the end of the prior school year, you see how deflated and defeated the teachers now feel after receiving the results. The math instructional coach spent a good part of the afternoon in your office trying to figure out what went wrong.

Community and School Contexts

Recently, middle class families that have had roots in Brigadoon for several generations have begun to move away. New families have moved into the district due to the historically positive reputation of the schools. These new students and their families are often primary speakers of languages other than English. The majority speak Spanish, but there is also a sizable number whose primary language is Haitian Creole.

You know that parent involvement is important, but you mostly see parents when their kids are being disciplined. Fortunately, the kids are pretty well behaved. Typical of many middle schools, your parent-teacher organization meetings are attended by a handful of dedicated volunteers who diligently raise money to support field trips and other “extras.” You send a monthly email newsletter out for families to highlight what is happening and provide some tips that will help parents make sure their kids do their homework and show up to school on time. You suspect only a few people are reading them, but who knows? You’ve been experimenting a bit by putting some photographs of school events on Twitter and you are getting some followers.

All 52 teachers in your school are highly qualified. Of the 52 faculty members, 50 identify as White, with the remaining 2 identify as Hispanic or African American. There are two ESL teachers, three guidance counselors, and three special education teachers who are located full-time in the building. Most of your faculty have 10 or more years of experience, but three of the six novice teachers hired in the last two years are math teachers.

You teachers seem friendly with one another. For years, the sunshine committee has celebrated staff birthdays with a monthly lunch and they hold a holiday party every December. While experienced teachers seldom leave the school, you have noticed more turnover among early career teachers. Four teachers with less than five years of experience have moved on since you arrived. Although each individual gave a different reason for leaving, you suspect that new teachers feel isolated and unsupported. The school has never used a teaming structure and the new teacher mentoring program that you inherited seems to consist mainly of experienced teachers showing their mentees where things are and how to use the copier.

One of your biggest headaches is finding class coverage on Fridays. You’ve never seen a school where so many teachers call in sick at the end of the week. You do not have enough teachers with free time in their schedules to cover classes for teachers who are out, and it is tough to get substitutes on Fridays. Sometimes you have to cover classrooms yourself. When you asked around to find out if the spike in Friday absences is new, people tell you that it has been that way as long as

they can remember. Some teachers just like taking long weekends. Others have learned that Fridays are miserable for the teachers who show up, so they look for reasons to stay home.

More Problems

You enter the school's main lobby shortly after the end of the school day, heading to your office after a meeting with the special education teachers. They expressed concern that special education students are not being served well and perceive the larger faculty to be resistant to inclusion efforts. Andrea, a special education teacher, pulls you aside after the meeting to discuss some of her more pressing issues. The content area teachers are not getting lesson plans to her with enough time to modify activities and assignments effectively. This oversight makes it difficult to implement the accommodations in students' IEPs. Andrea also believes that the special education students are being ignored by the content teachers.

"Apparently," Andrea says to you, "they assume it is not their responsibility to teach these students when we are in the classroom with them." You try to assure her that this is not the case, but she challenges you. She claims that in more than a few classrooms, the teacher isolates the students with disabilities in the back of the room and practically ignores them, choosing to focus on the rest of the class.

As you leave Andrea and cross the lobby, Nathan, a veteran English Language Arts teacher stops you to have a discussion (and to vent some) about the effects that low math performance is having on your campus. He tells you that the faculty is highly demoralized, saying, "Honestly, I think you mean well but the messages that you and the district staff send us saying that you know we can and will do better just leave us all feeling flat. No one appreciates or understands how hard we work all year."

"I do understand how hard all of you work," you say, "and I appreciate the effort you put into your students and your jobs. What do you mean by feeling flat?"

"People are frustrated!" Nathan exclaims. "The district is spending all of their time and money on math and the rest of us are not receiving equal resources. It's as if no one cares about ELA or any of the other subjects. What about the rest of us?"

"What do you mean?" you respond.

"Math gets all of the money. Every year they get new supplies— textbooks, supplemental teaching materials, technology upgrades—and our budget gets cut to fund it," Nathan began. "We are being asked to do more and more with less. And nobody seems to notice that our scores haven't declined! Maybe they would even improve if we had some of what the math department gets."

You try to offer Nathan some reassurance. "I have noticed the remarkable job you have done without resources. I apologize for not showing my gratitude more often. But the math teachers are really struggling."

Nathan ignores your comment. "That's the thing. Some people are saying, 'Why should we all suffer because the math teachers can't get it together?'" He continues, "We want the students succeed, but the message we are constantly getting is that we're not working hard enough and we're not good enough. Some of us really don't like coming to work anymore!"

Nathan continues to describe how all the talk about accountability is damaging the morale of the teachers, and something needs to be done—and soon. You tell Nathan that you appreciate him coming to you and that you will think about everything he said.