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FEATURE

Find, keep, cultivate the best teachers

A guide to recruiting and nurturing successful teachers

By: Deborah Yaffe

Teacher quality is crucial to the success of schooling, yet the teacher-hiring process is sometimes rushed and ad hoc.

A late-summer flurry of activity in which subjective factors—from where a candidate went to high school to how many resumes an exhausted principal has already reviewed—can weigh as heavily as meaningful evidence of academic achievement or instructional effectiveness.

“With all the challenges that we have, interviewing just doesn’t get the training time that it needs,” Jennifer L. Hindman, assistant director of the School-University Research Network in the College of William & Mary’s School of Education, told DA. “Yet if we hire the right folks, it makes everything else easier, from getting the instructional gains in student achievement that we need to evaluation of the employees that we hire.”



[New teachers in the first semester at the Wright City School District near St. Louis spend one day every month in PD. Teachers learn about assessment, teaching strategies and classroom management.](#)

[Teacher-hiring](#) mistakes can saddle districts with problem employees for years—decades, if tenure is granted quickly—and, even in the short term, can deprive students of irreplaceable learning opportunities.

“If you hire a new employee at McDonald’s restaurant, and we realize, three weeks in, this was a mistake, we release them,” says Mary C. Clement, professor of teacher



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education at Georgia's Berry College. "In teaching, we pretty much give people a year to prove themselves."

The unsystematic nature of teacher hiring may also contribute to turnover: Research has found that more than 41 percent of [new teachers](#) leave the profession within five years, a higher rate than for such fields as nursing, law and architecture.

"There's some pretty good evidence that teachers who are successful in the classroom are more likely to stay," says Dan Goldhaber, the director of the Center for Education Data and Research at the University of Washington Bothell. "Everybody wants to feel satisfied with the job that they have. And one of the ways you feel satisfied is it feels like you're doing a good job."

Shaping the hiring team

Improving hiring requires sharpening every stage of the process: ensuring that hiring teams are well-trained, finding ways to detect hidden gems in tall stacks of resumes, and tailoring interview questions to elicit key information about teaching ability.

Although researchers say just a few hours of training can make a hiring team far more effective, many principals never get even that much help. In a 2009 study, Hindman found that nearly three-quarters of principals had never been taught how to conduct legal, effective interviews.

"They learn it from other administrators," said Hindman, the author of a recent book on teacher hiring, *Effective Teacher Interviews*. "They're perpetuating practices that may be highly effective or not effective, depending on the skill level of the folks from whom they're learning."

Too many school districts still leave hiring entirely up to principals, rather than adding such people as department heads or instructional coaches to the hiring team, say those in the field. And while it's common in

Tips for an effective hiring process

Here are some tips to find and keep successful teachers:

Prescreen large applicant pools at the district level, so principals can concentrate on a manageable number of semifinalists.

Some districts winnow their pools using commercially developed electronic questionnaires of varying cost, such as Gallup's TeacherInsight, the Haberman Educational Foundation's Star Teacher Pre-Screener, or TeacherMatch's Educators Professional Inventory, all of which claim to base their approach on research into teacher effectiveness. Other districts use homegrown screening rubrics.

In interviews, **use "behavior-based" questions**, which ask candidates to describe what they've done successfully in the past, rather than hypothesize about what they might do in the future.

higher education for instructors to help hire their future colleagues, few K12 district leaders involve teachers in the process.

In the 29,000-student Spokane Public Schools, Washington state's second-largest district, the union contract mandates teacher involvement in hiring. It's a requirement that Tennille Jeffries-Simmons, the district's chief human resources officer, applauds. "We really make our best decisions when multiple people are part of giving someone the stamp of approval," she says. "I think it's a best practice that you involve people who are going to be a part of the work team."

Needles in haystacks

But given teaching vacancies in well-regarded districts that bring in hundreds of applicants, even the best-trained hiring team will face a dauntingly tall stack of resumes. To winnow the pool to a manageable number of semifinalists, some district leaders use commercially marketed screening tools.

Such tools include electronic questionnaires designed to identify the attitudes, beliefs or knowledge base that make for the best-qualified needles in a haystack of possibilities.

Spokane's homegrown process includes a prescreening in which central office human resources employees use a 21-point rubric to rate candidates' skills and experience. The highest-scoring candidates are passed on to building principals, who use a more detailed 60-point rubric that zeroes in on such areas as classroom management, interpersonal skills and cultural competence.

A recent study headed by University of Washington researcher Goldhaber found that teachers hired through Spokane's process were more likely to stay on the job and raise student test scores than those candidates who were hired elsewhere after Spokane rejected them.

"The rigor and carefulness that goes into hiring in Spokane is something that ought to be replicated," Goldhaber says.

Beyond Q&A

Once the pool of teacher candidates has been narrowed to a few finalists, it's crucial that principals and their interviewing teams know how to ask the right questions—and avoid the wrong ones.

Use rubrics or simple scoring systems, such as proficient/satisfactory/unsatisfactory, to judge prospective teachers' answers against objective criteria.

Arrange for groups of teacher candidates to interpret student data or to discuss short reading assignments while hiring teams observe their interactions.

Ask candidates to teach a sample lesson to students in a classroom to get a sense of how they may go about teaching.

Learn how to interpret reference letters, looking for subtle indications that a prospective hire is a less-than-stellar performer.

Once new teachers come on board, **provide mentoring and targeted professional development** during the first year and beyond.

Even innocent inquiries about such forbidden topics as religion, pregnancy or age can risk discrimination complaints from rejected candidates. And woolly, value-laden questions—such as “What is your educational philosophy?”—waste precious interview time without eliciting useful information.

Instead, say those in the field, interviewers should ask “behavior-based” questions, which encourage candidates to describe what they’ve done in the past rather than hypothesize about what they might do in the future.

“The days are gone when you say, ‘Oh, tell me about yourself.’ You don’t ask that anymore. It doesn’t get at the experience and expertise you bring to this job,” says Clement of Berry College, whose newest book is *10 Steps for Hiring Effective Teachers*. “A better first question is, ‘Tell me about the best teaching experience you’ve had in your career.’ And then you follow up with specific questions about curriculum and planning and method, questions like ‘Tell me about a lesson plan that went well, and why it went well.’”

In evaluating the answers that candidates give, members of the hiring team should use rubrics—or less detailed proficient/satisfactory/unsatisfactory scoring systems—to judge prospective teachers against consistent and objective criteria.

“You don’t have to make these things up,” says Hindman, of William & Mary. “They’re in the research literature, in terms of what highly effective teachers do differently.”

Some districts are also moving beyond traditional question-and-answer interviews, arranging for groups of teacher candidates to come together to interpret data or to discuss short reading assignments; hiring teams observe the sessions, looking for signs that prospective teachers can work in teams, communicate effectively and understand data.

In the 7,000-student School District of Elmbrook in suburban Milwaukee, teacher candidates not only sit for a Q&A interview but also teach a sample 45-minute lesson and tackle an “in-basket exercise,” such as answering a parent’s email or using student data to devise a course of action, says Dan Pavletich, the director of human resources.

The whole process can take three hours—but it’s a worthwhile investment, Pavletich says. “We know that this is an incredibly important decision for our students,” he says. “We want to make sure we have all the information that we could possibly generate to make the best choice that we could make.”

Reference letters are among those crucial pieces of information. Spokane reads references carefully, says chief HR officer Jeffries-Simmons, looking for subtle indications that a prospective hire is a less-than-stellar performer.

After years of experience, she says, she can recognize the patterns: letters for great candidates may say, “I’m sad to lose this person,” while letters for mediocre candidates just list positions held. Mediocre candidates are described as showing growth, but rock-star teachers are “lifelong learners.” “When you are advocating for

someone that you believe will make a difference for kids, you can see that in a letter,” Jeffries-Simmons says.

Investing in retention

The teacher-hiring job doesn't end with the signing of a contract, educators say. Mentoring and targeted [professional development](#) should continue throughout the first year, or even longer. In the 1,500-student Wright City School District, near St. Louis, new teachers in their first semester spend one day a month in professional development sessions, covering such topics as assessment, teaching strategies and classroom management.

School-year sessions, in a real classroom environment, work better than having them during summer workshops, according to Assistant Superintendent David Buck, who designed and leads the program.

“We felt teachers needed a little exposure to the classroom, so they can get a foundation of what is working and not working,” Buck says.

Buck credits the program with helping to decrease turnover rates and vault Wright City's test scores—once among the lowest in the state—to 166th out of Missouri's 522 districts.

“On-boarding is time-consuming, but it actually is probably one of the most enriching and most formative times,” Buck says. “I think just doing it quick to get it done is the wrong thing.”

Ultimately, however, retaining teachers requires more than careful hiring and supportive induction. It requires providing teachers with good working conditions, a sense of autonomy and opportunities for professional advancement.

“Today's teachers have to work harder than ever to be certified,” concludes Clement of Berry College. “When they enter the job market, they want to feel like they're going into a school that will support them and support their work.”

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