

Interviewing for the Principal's Job:

The stakes are high when you decide to leave a tenured teaching position or an assistant principalship to interview for a principal's position. However, the stakes are high for your future employer as well. The school district needs to know that you are ready for a job that is very complex. As a new principal, you will be expected to assume leadership for every aspect of the school's operation, including student attendance, curriculum, personnel, facilities, busing, and extracurricular activities. How can a single interview determine if you have the necessary skills?

A BEHAVIOR- BASED APPROACH

Mary C. Clement

Past behavior is the best predictor of future performance.



The answer could be to use behavior-based interviewing (BBI). For several years, I have been teaching administrators and aspiring principals how to interview with the BBI model (Clement, 2008). Long used in the business world, BBI is built on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. By using this interviewing style, administrators gain more objective evidence about a new teacher's skills and abilities, and the BBI model is easily adapted for interviewing prospective principals.

Why Is BBI Different?

For years, principal applicants have been asked to tell about themselves at the start of the interview. At some point, they also are asked about their philosophy of teaching and leadership.

These vague, general questions are often paired with hypothetical ones that start with "What would you do if..."

In a behavior-based interview, the interviewer has taken the time to identify the skills needed to do the specific job, has pre-written questions related to those skills, and is searching for "fact-based information" (Fitzwater, 2000). An interview typically begins with phrases like "Tell me about a time when..." "How have you..." "Tell me about your experiences with..." and "Describe an experience when..." The interviewer is looking for relevant, successful experiences that relate to the topics of the questions.

As a candidate, you should not feel intimidated by an interviewer who asks questions from a prepared list and takes notes on your responses. In fact, that should be a good sign, indicating that the interviewer is asking all candidates the same questions and evaluating answers to provide objective data for consideration. After all, hiring should be much "more than a gut feeling" (Deems, 1994).

Ten Typical BBI Questions

What Questions Will You Be Asked?

Because the duties of a principal are myriad, the interview questions may range over a wide area and cover many topics, including knowledge of student behavior, classroom management and discipline, assessment, facilities management, public relations, and communications (see sidebar). Some interviewers will add additional questions based on local issues, such as changing demographic patterns, children in poverty, or opening a new school.

No one can be expected to have firsthand experience with all the issues of a principalship without having been a principal. So, how do you answer interview questions requiring you to explain your previous experience and work? If you have served as an assistant principal, a lead teacher, or a department or committee chair, you have gained leadership insights and experiences that you can share in an interview. Many states require internships before granting leadership certification, and your internship projects can be of tremendous help in answering questions.

For example, when asked about how you have organized curriculum to make it fit into a school year and meet state mandates, you can answer from your own classroom experience. A strong answer might include your work in developing curriculum maps with other grade-level teachers, or an assignment you did in your educational leadership program that required you to give a staff development workshop on curriculum mapping. A principal must be an instructional leader, and your experience teaching other teachers is a strong indication of your future success at leading teachers in curriculum and instruction.

Using PAR and STAR

PAR does not refer to your golf game, but is an acronym for *Problem, Action, and Result*. When asked a BBI-style question, PAR helps to guide your responses and give succinct, yet detailed, answers. For example, when asked about sharing assessment data with parents or commu-

- Tell us about your experiences with students of this age. What motivates them?
- How have you organized curriculum to meet state mandates, and how have you assisted others to organize the curriculum to make it fit into a school year?
- How have you been able to raise achievement in your classroom, grade level, or school?
- How have you shared assessment data with other teachers, parents, school board members, or the community?
- Describe any experiences you have had in hiring and preparing new teachers.
- Describe your experience with managing facilities and budgets.
- How have you involved parents and communities in the classrooms and schools where you have worked?
- Describe meetings that you have led.
- From your experiences, describe your vision for our school.
- How have you stayed current in the field of education?

nity members, a strong answer follows the PAR model:

Our benchmark fifth-grade math scores were ranked in the bottom half of our district's elementary schools last year (problem). As the lead fifth-grade teacher, I immediately scheduled a meeting with the teachers, and at that meeting I shared materials about how this test was different than ones in the past, and reminded them that this was the first year we had taught to the new standards that were tested (action). The teachers and I decided that we would invite parents to an open house, where we would walk them through what we learned from this year's test, and how that knowledge would help us with future students. Additionally, the assis-

tant principal and I worked on scheduling a two-week summer math institute for this year's students, and we secured funding to make it free for all students. The parents were pleased with the free summer school offering and that we were indeed working on the test score issues (results).

Since not all questions will be about problems, STAR can guide you in talking about the *Situation, Task, Action, and Result* of a topic. For example, if asked about how you have improved student behavior in your school, your answer can follow the STAR formula:

My current school has seven sixth-grade sections, and all of the teachers had heard stories about how tough the upcoming new class was going to be (situation). So, I recommended that we read a book over the summer, Fred Jones' Tools for Teaching, and then discuss it during our back-to-school inservice days (task). I had become aware of the book in one of my graduate courses at the university. The teachers all felt that the ideas presented in the book were helpful, and we decided to implement some of the strategies (action). The results have been quite good, as referrals of sixth graders to the office are down, and each teacher feels the support of the other teachers. Now, we want every teacher in the school to read the book and use the strategies (result).

How BBI Interviewers Evaluate Answers

Interviewers who have been trained in BBI evaluate each answer based on the candidate's evidence of past experience, skill, and knowledge of the question topic. Most interviewers make a note of each answer, rating it as unacceptable, acceptable, or on target. Some interviewers prefer to rate answers on a numeric scale of 1 to 5 or 1 to 7. Either way, interviewers gather concrete data for their final selection.

Even if your interviewer is not asking BBI-style questions, you should try to answer them with evidence of your previous experience, using PAR and

STAR as guidelines. Even if asked the age-old “Tell me about yourself” question, you can talk about your current teaching and leadership situation, tasks you have completed to improve student learning opportunities, actions you have taken to improve your classroom and school, and positive results of your actions. Stop and take an inventory of the following before your next interview:

- Teaching experiences where you have raised student achievement;
- Leadership experiences where you have guided other teachers in curriculum, management, or assessment issues;
- Experiences where you have met with parents, community members, or other school constituents;
- How you have learned about school facilities, school safety, extracurricular events, and budgets;
- Your vision for schools, with concrete examples;
- Your professionalism—readings, formal study, conferences attended, and presentations made; and
- How you can inform a potential employer of your work ethic, dependability, and commitment to the community.

Be prepared to share something that you have read recently about school leadership. Administrators want to know that their new principals are learners themselves, and are familiar with recent theories, books, and articles.

Preparing for BBI

You can prepare for a behavior-based interview by applying the same criteria to the pre-interview paperwork, which should be well-written, complete, and received on time. When you ask for a letter of recommendation, or ask an administrator to serve as a reference, you should provide a copy of your résumé and a cover letter that briefly explains some of your most recent successes. With this paperwork in front of them, they can more clearly explain your work to others.

By reviewing your successes and relevant leadership experiences before your interview, you will be prepared to talk about how they can predict your future performance. Short of a crystal ball, behavior-based interviews can be the best predictors of future success. 

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References

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Deems, R. S. (1994). *Interviewing: More than a gut feeling*. West Des Moines, IA: American Media Publishing.

Fitzwater, T. L. (2000). *Behavior-based interviewing: Selecting the right person for the job*. Boston: Thomson.

WEB RESOURCES

Mary Clement has also written “Improving Teacher Selection with Behavior-based Interviewing,” published in *Principal* magazine, which discusses how principals can use BBI to interview potential teaching staff.
www.naesp.org/Principal2008J-F.aspx

In “Been There, Done That—and Won’t Do It Again,” the author offers some practical advice to newcomers to the principalship.
www.naesp.org/Principal2006S-O.aspx

This *Ed Week* online forum addresses “Prepping for Principal Interviews.”
http://resources.topschooljobs.org/tsj/articles/2007/12/07/principal_interviews.html



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