

# Hiring Good Teachers: The Interview Process

Autumn Tooms and Alicia Crowe

The small nuances of how you and your school are perceived in the interview process can make the difference in attracting high-quality teachers.

*“Hello, Mrs. Thomas. This is Kim Jones. I just thought I’d call and let you know that I was really pleased that you offered me the teaching position. I really liked your school, but I’m going to take a position at Jefferson instead. I just think I’ll fit better over there. So, thank you for the interview and the offer, and have a nice day.”*

## IN BRIEF

The authors emphasize the importance of the interview process in “selling” your school to desirable teacher candidates. They recommend that principals thoroughly prepare for each interview, make the candidate feel welcome, ask thoughtful questions, listen carefully to responses, and show off their schools with post-interview guided tours.

Historically, the teacher hiring process has always been pressure-filled because of the large pools of applicants and short hiring windows. Too often, interviews were (and in some cases continue to be) hasty rituals squeezed between other administrative tasks. With today’s shrinking candidate pools, principals are being challenged not only to identify the best candidates, but in many cases to convince them to accept teaching positions.

Here are some insights on the interview process

**H**ow would you like to receive a call like this the week before school opens? It’s happening to more and more principals. In a time of teacher shortages, it’s a candidate’s market and those with the hottest credentials can afford to pick and choose.

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that can help principals select and hire highly qualified candidates that not only meet No Child Left Behind requirements, but are critical assets in turning around failing schools.

## Be Prepared

Part of leadership is knowing how to “fake it”—like giving an off-the-cuff speech to a group of parents. But don’t try to fake it during the teacher interview process. Candidates notice all sorts of things about you and your school during their visit. Did you spend any time at all reviewing their resumes and cover letters? Is your office messy and disorganized? Did you make them wait while



you rushed to complete some last-minute task?

Principals have, on average, only about 20 minutes to determine a candidate's potential, and it is important to recognize that the candidate has the same amount of time to size up you and your school. You will look more prepared, concerned, and articulate in the interview if you have prepared by carefully reading the candidate's file. Did you see anything

**“Thoughtful questions allow candidates to demonstrate their strengths, admit their weaknesses, and reveal their beliefs...”**

interesting that you might want to ask about? Maybe a candidate knows one of your colleagues or shares one of your interests. By commenting on what you have read, you demonstrate that you are detail-oriented and thorough, characteristics that reflect well on you as a leader. If you are using a team approach for the interview, be sure to brief all those involved about the process and appropriate questions that can be asked.

## Create a Welcoming Environment

Pay some attention to the interviewing environment. What a messy office shows to a candidate is a messy and disorganized leader—and perhaps a disorganized school as well.

Consider how the room is arranged. You don't want your candidate seated at the end of a long conference table and you don't want to squeeze a team of interviewers into your small office. Arrange the room to make the interviewee feel comfortable and welcome.

Instructing your office staff to greet candidates cordially is a small effort that reflects positively on your school culture and eases a candidate's nerves. Even if they are conducting business on the phone or with a fellow employee, your office staff can still make eye contact, smile, and greet a visitor.

Make every effort not to keep the candidate waiting. But be realistic. A principal rushing into the front office

from a meeting makes a poor impression on a candidate. If necessary, allow yourself a two-minute "time-out" to regain professional composure.

## Ask the Right Questions

Thoughtful questions allow candidates to demonstrate their strengths, admit their weaknesses, and reveal their beliefs about curriculum, classroom discipline, school culture, collegiality, and commitment to the profession. Consider questions like these:

- Why did you want to become a teacher?
- Are you willing to teach subjects and grade levels that require you to stretch professionally?
- If you and a colleague are not getting along, what would you do to seek a more collaborative relationship?
- In your view, what is the purpose of discipline in the classroom?

■ What activities would you like to participate in or lead that are outside of your classroom responsibilities?

■ What curriculum assessments or standards are you familiar with?

■ Why did you choose to apply for this position?

■ What was the most creative lesson you ever taught?

■ What was the most inspiring thing you have done as an educator?

■ What do you think will impede your ability to contribute to our community?

■ What sort of assessments do you use in the classroom?

■ What is your favorite lesson to teach?

■ If you are hired, in what area do you think you would require the most support?

You might also want to try a behavioral interview, a non-traditional approach that helps gauge a candidate's

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## You know

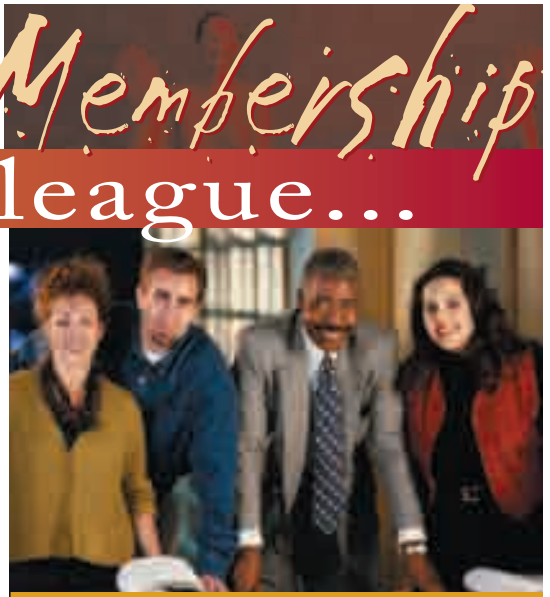
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potential (Kretovics 1996). This technique is based on the idea that the best predictor of a candidate's future performance is his or her past achievements. Kretovics suggests using questions such as "Give me an example of a time when..." and "Tell me about a situation in which you..." Even if you are interviewing a freshly graduated teacher, you can still ask such questions, based on their student teaching experience. Unexpected questions allow you to see how candidates think on their feet and are creative in their answers. However, make sure that your questions are contextually appropriate to the interview and that the candidate is able to see the connection.

In their answers, you'll also be able to tell if candidates did their homework. Are they able to express to you that they took the time to learn about your school through district office newsletters, board meetings, or community members? If so, you have just learned that the person answering your questions is thorough and serious about winning the position.

### Listen and Focus

Even if you are tired, discipline yourself to look people in the eye when they are talking to you, and acknowledge that you are listening by nodding occasionally to demonstrate that you are interested in their responses. Another cue to let candidates know you are listening is to replicate their non-verbal communication. For example, if they are leaning forward, you might want to do the same.

Pay attention to the speed of your speech. Speak clearly and slowly, and fight the temptation to interrupt. Give candidates as much time as possible to answer your questions. Rushing them makes them feel you are uninterested in what they have to say. But if they ramble, feel free to redirect the conversation. The important thing is to stay focused on what you are hearing, taking notes if necessary, and to ask quality follow-up questions.

A great way to end an interview is to ask the candidate if he or she has any

## "Even if you are tired, discipline yourself to look people in the eye when they are talking to you..."

questions. Be prepared to answer specific as well as general questions about the school, teaching load, student body, community, and school culture. Your ability to clearly answer the questions leaves the candidate with a positive impression of your level of involvement and concern.

In talking about your school, share your own passion for education. Nothing helps people understand more about a school community than the principal bragging a little. How you convey your love of your school may very well end up being the deciding factor for a stellar candidate.

In the interview, you may be tempted to say "Every day is a good day at Central Elementary!" Don't. Broad statements like these will be seen through by savvy candidates. Do share specific details about the school's strengths and areas of pride. Take the time now to brainstorm a list of what your school has achieved in the last year. These details are what get candidates excited about a school.

### After the Interview

Give your candidate a tour of your campus after the interview. This is a great job for student council members or other students, and demonstrates your school's commitment to student leadership. After the tour, bring the candidate back to the front office, inquire again if there are any more questions, thank the candidate for his or her time, and walk the candidate to the door.

If you say you will call with an answer by a certain date, be sure to do so. But before you offer even the most promising candidate a position, make sure you conduct a thorough reference check. Many principals have left inter-

views excited about a candidate, only to discover poor or falsified references.

Your attention to the small nuances of how you and your school is presented in the interview process can make the difference in attracting high-quality teachers. A professionally conducted interview builds a cultural dynamic that may eventually result in larger and stronger candidate pools because you have set the tone for a school environment in which people want to work. ■

### Reference

Kretovics, M. "How to Respond Effectively in Behavioral Interviews." *National Business Employment Weekly*, November 17-23, 1996: 17-18.

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### WEB RESOURCES

About, an online information service, describes how to prepare for a behavioral interview, with sample questions.

<http://careerplanning.about.com/library/weekly/aa101702a.htm>

The Purdue University Career Center offers a list of teacher interview questions related to potential relationships with students, colleagues, and parents, as well as instructional techniques and background information.

<http://purdue.placementmanual.com/education/education-02.html>

The Shenandoah County Public Schools in Virginia posts a guide to the teacher interview process, including representative questions.

[www.shenandoah.k12.va.us/interviewbrochure.PDF](http://www.shenandoah.k12.va.us/interviewbrochure.PDF)