Without exception, the foremost of all decisions a principal must make involves the hiring of new classroom teachers, which is why an exemplary principal’s epitaph should read, “I hired well.”

Positive, well-thought-out hiring decisions can bear long-lasting, life-changing fruit. Every child under a principal’s care deserves to be in a classroom headed by a well-educated, child-loving professional who deeply cares about the whole being of that child.

How can principals find and hire such teachers? These five tried-and-true practices can help:

**Screen meticulously.** Only the very best potential candidates should make it to the formal interview stage. Eliminate “courtesy” interviewees and candidates you have no intention of hiring. Screen applicants’ resumes closely, looking for omissions, errors, and oversights. Informal phone screenings often provide great insights, and a couple of reference calls before asking a candidate to interview also might provide useful information.

**Ask the right questions.** Interview questions must reflect the heart of a school’s or a principal’s vision and mission. Consider what is essentially important to you and to your team and design questions around those elements. Pose most questions in an open-ended fashion that avoids rote responses. Take the liberty to ask questions that may make interviewees uncomfortable, such as presenting scenario situations where they must take a stand or make a quick decision.

**Go beyond the interview table.** Ask candidates to respond to a broad question in writing, or to produce a sample grant application letter for a classroom project. Get parents involved by having candidates conduct mock parent-teacher conferences. If possible, have the candidate teach a sample lesson in front of a real class.

**Interrogate references.** Reference calling must be more than a process of hearing what you want to hear. Any question is fair game when calling a reference. Be sure to listen to what is being said and to what is not being said. If a reference skirts your question, ask it again. Also, try to call references beyond those listed by the candidate.

**Don’t be afraid to start over.** Although starting again from scratch might seem exhausting, it often can be the best course of action when the principal or the interview team is not completely satisfied with a candidate. Remind yourself that a bad decision will guarantee long-term, negative implications. On the other hand, starting over will at worst set your timeline back a couple of weeks and the short-term inconvenience can reap the long-lasting benefits of hiring the perfect candidate.

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