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UP

RECRUITMENT

Georgia school
streamlines hiring
strategies as enrollment
surges by more than 100
students per year



By Cleave “Bivins” Miller III

In August 2015, the Bryan County (Georgia) School District opened its first-ever K–5 elementary school, welcoming roughly 800 students. Within the first year, McAllister Elementary School would grow exponentially, adding more than 150 students and a multitude of faculty and staff members. The trend continued, and this year, the school boasts an enrollment of more than 1,300 students and nearly 140 staff members.

With an increase in student enrollment in double digits (12 percent) annually, it was important to not only support new students, but to also successfully fill staff vacancies. The disproportionate growth was hard to handle, given the dwindling applicant pool of qualified teaching candidates coming out of colleges today, but it presented challenges that all hiring directors face in public education.

The first question that came to my mind was how to support the school’s vision—“Committed to Excellence & Success in All We Do”—while finding the best possible candidates for each position. During that short time, we hired 33 additional new certified staff members to facilitate the learning process for our students.

The ability to recruit, retain, and hire quickly became a challenge while still seeking to employ the best of the best. To recruit and hire the best teacher candidates while also focusing on the retention of current staff members, we would need to get creative—and sell the institution as a place to create and pursue a worthwhile career.

Out in Front

To boost recruitment, we needed to get out in front of surrounding districts in the hiring process. Most importantly, we needed to seal the deal on employment before a competing institution could make another offer.

First, our administration made college career fairs and early application review a priority, often beginning at the start of each current school year to prepare for the next. We did this by reviewing applications early and often and projecting growth based on prior years' data. In doing so, we were able to project vacancies in a school that had seen year-over-year growth of more than 150 students, while continuing to plan meaningful programming to stay on course with current students.

Our recruitment process included not only college fairs and online applications, but also publication of projected vacancies via social media outlets, including Facebook, Twitter, and website publications. Once a pool of interested applicants expressed interest in the school, it was our job to schedule interviews in which applicants could highlight their skills and share their potential contributions to McAllister Elementary School.

Speedy Screening

Interested applicants used a Flipgrid pre-interview video to answer four questions: (1) What makes you unique or distinctive as a teacher? (2) What is it like to spend a day in one of your classrooms? (3) What would visiting educators learn by watching you teach? and (4) Why do you want to be a part of McAllister Elementary School? These questions quickly gave us insights into each prospective candidate prior to a face-to-face interview, expediting hires.

Many leaders do not want to “waste” time checking references prior to an interview. However, we were able to secure many candidates prior to their next interview by employing pre-reference checks. These checks gave us additional insights into the candidate’s ability while also expediting the hiring process, because reference checks become a challenge when things get busy and timelines are tight. When recruitment is your focus, timing is everything.

In addition to the Flipgrid video, applicants were asked to prepare a lesson for our hiring committee that highlighted their strengths while showcasing how they would be a contributing member of our school. Applicants who were hired through this process later indicated that the exercise made them aware of McAllister Elementary’s high expectations and helped them highlight their skills outside the standard résumé and verbal interview.

Since we promote our school through social media, we tend to get applicants from outside of

the county and state. As a result, we had many applicants who were unable to make an initial in-person interview, so we used Google Hangout and Skype to facilitate interviews with remote candidates. Online interviews also allowed the hiring committee to see applicants in their current settings while eliminating the need to travel.

Accommodating such candidates indicated to them that we were flexible in our approach and committed to the use of technology. The hiring committee was also able to conduct the interviewing and hiring process faster than if they had waited weeks to arrange travel. This flexibility has allowed McAllister Elementary to add gifted educators who have fulfilled and exceeded our expectations.

Onboarding New Hires

Now that we have recruited new staff, what are we doing to retain them—and current staff members, too? While the hiring process is important, it is equally important to ensure that new and current staff members feel supported, challenged, and connected. Retention begins when everyone feels validated in the work they’re doing to move an organization forward.

To accomplish this, it was imperative that we included all staff in our most recent annual back-to-school barbecue. Everyone had an opportunity to mingle and mix outside of the pressures of daily, job-embedded expectations. Additionally, we formed mentor-mentee groups to support our new hires and acclimate them for success. Monthly mentor breakfast meetings included “just-in-time” topics to ensure that they felt supported in the onboarding process.

When someone is new to a school, it can be hard for them to feel connected, appreciated, or even celebrated. As a school leader, I knew it was vital for our new staff members to feel a sense of family at McAllister Elementary. Before the new school year began, leaders communicated with new hires through emails, phone calls, and handwritten letters throughout the spring and summer months. During their first full day of on-site new teacher orientation, mentors and mentees participated in icebreaker opportunities, joined in a tour, broke bread at a catered meal, and had some fun on a 30-foot water slide. This kind of engagement gave new hires a glimpse into the expectations of our organization, while also showing them that having fun is at its center.

New-hire orientation was an event that our staff will not soon forget. I called the spouses and/or parents of all new hires at the



STAFFING TIPS

- Recruit and hire early. Begin recruitment efforts at the start of the current school year to prepare for the next based on projected growth.
- Be innovative in your approach. McAllister Elementary uses Flipgrid video discussions to pre-interview candidates about their teaching style and professional goals.
- Support new hires by creating a positive work environment and sense of community. Group fitness classes at the local YMCA offer a familial outlet for staff.

midyear point to let them know just how much I appreciate the work they do for McAllister Elementary School. These short conversations proved beneficial; teachers now know that their good work is noticed beyond the walls of the school. This is an impactful practice I will continue for years to come.


Celebrating Staff

When addressing retention, it's important to consider all members of your staff. Throughout the year, we stage events to maintain staff morale, support professional learning opportunities, and celebrate all of our great accomplishments. When maintaining an organization of more than 140 staff members, it is important to preplan events, solicit support from school-level committees, seek feedback from all stakeholders frequently, and provide opportunities that support a positive work environment.

One example that has created a positive work environment and a sense of community is our partnership with the local YMCA, which gives staff members the opportunity to participate in group fitness classes after school with their peers.

The classes not only help build a sense of family and community, but they also furnish an outlet to reduce any stress generated by the school day.

At McAllister Elementary, we also offer professional learning that meets the needs of all employees and provides opportunities for them to engage and be supported in ways that are unique to their jobs. Staff members with varying assignments, strengths, and weaknesses get professional learning opportunities through "lunch and learns," department-level learning opportunities, professional learning programs, and off-site opportunities.

Recruitment and retention ultimately go hand in hand. With a defined school culture and an organizational plan that keeps the end goal in mind, it is possible to attract and keep good teachers and other staffers. Education is a "people" business, and by effectively focusing on the recruitment and retention of employees, we can better focus on the students in our school. And just as we support our students, we must be willing to support our staff to maintain our institutions' high expectations and achievement. 

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