



Education

Can an interview determine if a teacher will be good?

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Since 1994, trainers at the Haberman Educational Foundation in Houston have been teaching the fine art of interviewing prospective teachers to more than 300 schools and districts. Martin Haberman's half-century of research in the field of teacher training has concluded that beyond content background, two things stand out as key characteristics of good teachers: certain core beliefs, and the ability to persist in the face of student resistance.

Delia Stafford, now CEO and president of the foundation, says, "Our questions are predictive of how teachers will perform in the classroom."

With a Harvard research study, 10 dissertations, empirical data and ongoing success, Haberman's training is very much in demand. Recently, they've trained the GreenDot and the KIPP charter-school networks, the districts of Guilford City, N.C., San Diego, Newark, Rochester and Memphis, just to name a few. They teach whoever will be doing the hiring — principals, teachers, school improvement and including parents on occasion. Stafford adds, "In one district we trained tons of people, including union representatives."

She explains, "Getting the right people in teaching positions in the first place makes all the teachers' lives much easier. Constant teacher turnover disrupts school communities, and costs the nation about \$2.6 billion a year."

I've been in touch with Stafford over the years, but her work only became relevant to Rhode Island now, as we're about to be mercifully liberated from hiring by seniority. In July 2010 the new Basic Education Plan (BEP) requires schools to hire staff only according to the best interests of children and educational quality. The BEP is law.

But for decades our schools have operated in a certified-is-qualified culture. All that mattered was the teacher's certifications and his date of hire to determine seniority. Yes, districts have always been able to hire a few new teachers, but most jobs have been filled by the most senior teacher who wanted the position, as though teachers were interchangeable piece workers.

Stafford says, "School districts always look at transcripts, tests and student teaching activities. But none of those say very much about an individual's beliefs about the arduous task of teaching 30 students from

different backgrounds, cultures, homes, levels of achievement. I'm not sure what test could define teacher quality. If educators had clearly defined 'what it takes,' a test would have been developed over the past 50 years. I think Dr. Haberman has come darn near to fleshing out what predicts a person will make a great teacher."

The "Haberman Star Teacher" interview takes about 25 minutes to root out key information. "For example, if we find they don't have the capacity to build relationships with the kids, the rest really doesn't matter. Relationships are a matter of life and death" educationally, that is.

And she is so right.

Stafford adds that an interviewee might answer a question with: "What do they expect of me? The parents don't show up and the kids don't bring homework.' If they tell us that kids are at risk because so many parents are not doing their jobs and the students aren't interested, they aren't going to work out. Some list everything outside of the classroom: 'The curriculum doesn't fit; we test them too much.' On the other hand, another person might say, 'I would never punish kids because their parents didn't show up.' These are basic, core beliefs."

Persistence is also critical. Interestingly, a recently released study of Teach For America data surprised many people by revealing that the main difference between great teachers and merely OK ones was their capacity to hang in with a kid when problems come up. Training, experience and even academic background matter far less than this kind of patience, or perhaps just stubbornness.

Stafford says, "We look to see if they're taking responsibility. If students misbehave, what will you do? We listen for workable solutions. They might say, 'I would ask them what's on their mind.' Okay, so either the student tells you something that could help the situation or he settles down. It works for a while, but then he's back up again. The [interviewee] might say, 'I'd whisper in his ear: if you work with me on this, I'll find something interesting. I'd try to make him a leader.' The prospect's answers reveal whether he or she has a big repertoire of ways to re-engage kids, and the obvious willingness to keep trying."

Educators in Rhode Island are under the gun to improve the schools' generally mediocre performance, and to do so fast. Mastering the arts of hiring would speed the plow. The sad fact is that, at this point, not all Rhode Island teachers share the belief that strong relationships or connecting with students is important. Many seem to feel it's just not their business. We need to be careful not to hire any more such teachers.

For more information, see www.habermanfoundation.org.

Julia Steiny, a former member of the Providence School Board, consults for government agencies and schools; she is codirector of Information Works!, Rhode Island's school-accountability project. She can be reached at juliasteiny@gmail.com, or c/o EdWatch, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.