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Recruiting and Interviewing Teachers in Rural School Districts: Protocol or Potluck

Joe Nichols

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Through administrator and teacher surveys and interviews, this study examined recruiting and interviewing practices of eighty-three rural school districts located in, and between, the rural Ozark Plateau and Mississippi River Delta. Survey results indicated that districts with smaller student populations were far less likely to have an identified protocol in place to recruit and interview teachers. In addition, the study found that critical issues such as student achievement and qualifications of teachers were not addressed during the recruiting or interviewing phases of the employment process. Finally, this research brought to light questionable interviewing practices leading the author to make recommendations for rural schools' implementation of measurable interviewing protocol.

Each year, a multitude of rural school districts in the United States will invest millions of dollars in the construction of new facilities. To prepare for the details of the construction, they will follow a rigid protocol of forming facilities study committees and securing the services of attorneys, architects, and bonding firms. They will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to initiate and study this process and will spend millions in construction and maintenance over a structure's life. They will carefully screen potential contractors to ensure that they have a history of performing quality work. These same districts will also employ thousands of teachers each year. Over the span of each of these teachers' careers, districts will invest well over a million dollars in salary, benefits, and professional development to maintain them in the profession and make them effective instructors. Unlike the detail that will prevail in building and maintaining facilities, many, if not most rural school districts, will invest little or no time in securing or developing a plan or protocol to recruit and interview these teachers. To build new buildings, a rigid protocol is developed to create and protect the investment. To secure a district's most important resource, its teaching staff, little more than a one-sided conversation most likely will determine who will or will not be employed.

This study focuses on the recruiting and interviewing practices of eighty-three rural school districts located in, and between, the rural Ozark Plateau and Mississippi River Delta. The study also focuses on teachers who are employed by these districts and seeks to ascertain whether or not a protocol was followed in interviewing and recruiting them prior to their employment.

Need for Action Plan

It was estimated in the early 1990's that the United States would have a need for 87,000 teachers by decade's end. This dilemma was caused by several factors including class size reduction mandates, growth in enrollment, and attrition of the teaching profession due to retirement. Making matters worse is the fact that new teachers were

leaving the profession at an alarming rate (Ingersol & Smith, 2001).

Rural school districts have been especially impacted by the teacher shortage. Location is not the sole reason for this dilemma. A major problem that has permeated the rural school landscape has been an inability to offer salaries that were competitive with urban school districts. Teachers employed in urban districts have had salaries that ranged from twenty-one percent to thirty-five percent higher than teachers in rural districts (Gibbs, 2000). Many rural school districts have experienced an exit of qualified teachers over the past two decades who have left to teach in more affluent urban districts. Rebore (2004) observed that many of these exits have been the result of well organized recruiting efforts conducted by urban school districts which included enticements of substantial salary increases and job benefits. These recruiting efforts have impacted the staffing of many rural districts. Therefore, it is has become necessary for all school districts, irrespective of size or location, to engage in a well planned recruiting program:

Talent and skills are scarce commodities. School districts are ethically bound to find the most talented and skilled people available to achieve their mandate of educating children. The practice of overtly contacting and recruiting individuals who meet a given set of job requirements and encouraging them to become applicants should be emulated by school districts. It is recruitment in its purest form (Rebore, 2004, p. 94).

Rural school district personnel often assume that salary disparities place them at a disadvantage in employing competent personnel. Gibbs (2000) observed that other factors leveled the playing field between rural and urban districts recruiting. Factors such as community respect, low incidences of problem behaviors, and a culture that supported schools were considered by many rural educators to be a more than adequate trade off for lower levels of pay.

In an interview with Delisio (2001), Rachel Tompkins, president of the Rural School and Community Trust, stated that rural school districts often lack the political representation afforded to urban school districts. She emphasized that this lack of political clout impacts rural school financing which further impacts recruiting efforts in rural school districts.

Rural Policy Matters (2004) cited a Midwestern study completed by Hare and Heap which focused on teacher recruitment efforts by rural school districts. This study indicated that the two most attractive recruiting tools for rural school districts were offering teachers common planning time and restructuring attendance centers so they would be smaller in student enrollment. As many rural school districts are being forced to consolidate, the study team observed that prospective teachers were willing to forgo the enticements of larger salaries to teach in schools with manageable class sizes.

Jack Crews (2002), a superintendent in the rural Lake Havasu City, Arizona schools, took a proactive approach to recruiting teachers to his district. Plagued by teachers leaving and not being interested in teaching in his rural school district, he arranged a partnership with universities in Utah and Montana. In this partnership, student-teaching opportunities were made available to the teacher education programs in both universities. As a result, six student-teachers who completed their internships in the Lake Havasu City School District were employed for teaching positions. Crews noted that a factor in the district's ability to recruit these teachers was to have face-to-face contact with them.

The problems of recruiting staff for rural school district do not end in the classroom. Loveland (2002) observed that consolidation of rural school districts and decreases in enrollment have had a significant impact on recruiting administrators for both the principalship and superintendency. Administrators in the rural districts impacted by these situations often find themselves working in dual or multiple capacities that were previously staffed by a single individual.

Ineffective Practices, Effective Strategies, and Legal Compromises

Time is an important factor in the process of recruiting and interviewing personnel. Districts must be cognizant of the time required in posting a job vacancy, disseminating information about the position, the school district, and the community, and in arranging and conducting an interview. Sirbask (2002) suggested that the actual time the interviewer has with an applicant is forty-five minutes and that brief amount of time should be used effectively if it is to result in employing the best person for the position available.

According to Caggiano (1998), many rural school administrators confuse the roles of recruiting and interviewing. During the brief time allocated to

interviewing teachers, many are discussing details that could have been provided during a recruiting phase of employment. Issues such as district goals, employee expectations, salary, benefits, and community offerings are ones which could have been provided to an applicant in a portfolio prior to the interview and would have assisted in expediting the entire process. When the recruiting and interviewing are not approached as separate functions, applicants are provided with little opportunity to verbalize and reveal the skills they bring to the profession. The interviewer often dominates discussions during the interview by articulating the district's strengths, philosophies of teaching, and discipline. Sirbask (2002) described the pitfalls to this approach to interviewing:

In most job searches, those responsible for doing the hiring sell the job before they select a candidate. This approach is backwards. Why sell the job to someone who isn't a candidate? After all, a savvy applicant may be a good "interview"--well-groomed, friendly, professional, enthusiastic, interested, a good listener, etc. What happens in this case is the recruiter starts doing the talking, telling about the job requirements before the interview starts. It's the candidate who's doing the listening, learning how to appeal to the recruiter. The result is that, since most individuals can mask their true tendencies for at least 45 minutes, the interviewer rarely gets an accurate picture of the job candidate. Alternatively, why not learn profiles of interviewees before taking the time to sell the job? (p. 32).

An interview protocol "assures that important, core matters are covered with all respondents, and provides for a more consistent, easy-to-use recording of respondent information" (Marchese & Lawrence, 1988, p. 40).

Once the interviews have been conducted, decisions must be made on the final applicant to be recommended to the board of education for employment. Just as important as having a process for the interview is having one for selecting the best person for the position that provides a standard comparison of each applicant interviewed (Long, 1998; Messmer, 1995; Rebores, 2004).

School districts should not venture into the process of recruiting and interviewing personnel without considering the legal ramifications involved in the process. The detection of bias or illegal questioning by an applicant can have significant ramifications for school districts. In an interview with Human Resource Magazine (Society for Human Resource Management, 1997), John Montoya, an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) consultant and former deputy director of the United States' EEOC Seattle office, said poor practices in applicant testing, constructing interview questions, and maintaining interview

notes often will prompt the agency to scrutinize an employer's recruitment efforts:

1. Any kind of tests that an employer uses whether they're written tests or tests for agility or performance-should be tested for job validity. If the EEOC questions a test, the commission will want proof of its validity-not just an employer's word that a validation study has been done.
2. Because complaints of disparate treatment are common in hiring cases, employers must try to ensure that all applicants are treated the same. Prepared questions, and the consistent use of those questions with each applicant, are critical. The advantage of prepared questions is that it gives some assurance that the same questions are being asked of each applicant, so that there's a consistency in the questions at the interview.
3. If candidates are being interviewed by a panel, rather than one-on-one, employers should consider the composition of the panel. EEOC will look at the composition of an interviewing panel in terms of race, sex, age, national origin perhaps, and maybe even disability status. While a panel composed solely of middle-aged white males is not necessarily evidence of discrimination, it could induce the agency to take a closer look at the employer's practices if there are other indications of discrimination (p. 60).

Rebore (2004) described the interviewing process as one that is "essentially a conversation between two or more individuals to generate information about the candidate; it also has profound legal implications" (p.131). Rebore continued to discuss common inquiries that have legal implications.

1. Name: It is lawful to inquire if an applicant has worked under a different name or nickname in order to verify work or educational records; it is unlawful to ask questions in an attempt to discover the applicant's ancestry, lineage, or national origin.
2. Age: For a minor, requiring proof of age in the form of a work permit or certificate of age is lawful; it is unlawful to require adults to present a birth certificate or baptismal record to a district.
3. Race: To request information about distinguishing physical characteristics is legal; to ask the color of the applicant's skin, eyes, etc., is illegal if this indicates directly or indirectly race or skin color.
4. Religion: All inquiries are illegal.
5. Sex: Inquiries regarding sex are permissible only when a bona fide occupational qualification exists.
6. Ethnic Background: It is illegal to ask which languages the applicant reads, writes, or speaks fluently; inquiries about the applicant's national origin are illegal.

7. Marital and Family Status: Questions to determine if a man or woman can meet specific work schedules are lawful; inquiries about being married, single, divorced, etc. are unlawful.
8. Credit Rating: All questions about charge accounts or credit rating are unlawful.
9. Work Experience: It is lawful to ask why an applicant wants to work for a particular company or institution.; asking what kind of supervisor the applicant prefers is unlawful.
10. Life Style: Asking about future career plans is lawful; asking an applicant if /she drinks alcoholic beverages or takes drugs is unlawful (p.128).

Whether questions are simply asked or they are asked and recorded, interviewers should use extra caution in following legal guidelines throughout the process. According to EEOC's Montoya (1997), "The strength in hiring cases has come primarily from extraneous comments that are made on interview sheets. It's amazing what some people will write in the margin" (p. 60). To summarize what could be considered a best practice in the interviewing process which addresses efficient use of time and an ethical framework from which to operate, Messmer (1995) offered the following advice:

Write out a list of questions before the interview. Prioritize them by category by budgeting a reasonable amount of time for the entire interview. While you may not have time to ask every question, this approach will keep you focused. Give candidates ample time to respond. Thoughtful silence does not mean indecision. Don't rush in with another question to fill that silent period. Remember, the interview is a time for you to listen, not talk (p. 35).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent rural school districts were following protocol for recruiting and interviewing teachers. The school district administrators surveyed and teachers interviewed were each employed in rural settings in public school districts with student populations of less than 1,500 pupils in grades kindergarten through twelve. The study was conducted by surveying superintendents from one hundred six school districts located in a three-state region located between the Ozark Plateau and the Mississippi River Delta for the purpose of determining the extent to which they followed an organized program when recruiting and interviewing prospective teachers. Eighty-three school districts responded to the survey. Additionally, nine teachers (three from each state represented in the study) who were employees in these districts were randomly selected and interviewed to determine the format of their interviews prior

to being offered employment. The teachers interviewed had been employees of their districts for less than three years and none were employed in the same district. Of the nine interviewed, one asked that information provided from the interview not be published. The survey contained four questions which guided the researcher to determine the district's student population and extent to which districts engaged in a formal program of recruiting and interviewing professional staff. The survey was pilot tested for content validity by graduate students participating in a course in personnel administration in a university's educational leadership program. Once content validity was established, the survey was disseminated to the administrative personnel of the school districts. The survey contained the following four questions:

1. Does your district have a protocol that is consistently utilized to recruit professional staff? If yes what are the components of the protocol?
2. Do you have a district interviewing protocol with a format that is used consistently when interviewing for professional staff positions? If yes, what is included in the protocol?
3. Which personnel roles are involved in the process of conducting interviews in your district?
4. What is the size of student enrollment in your school district in grades kindergarten grade twelve?

Teachers interviewed for the study were asked to describe their interview sessions and whether or not a protocol was used in recruiting them. The teachers' interviews were guided by the following questions:

1. Did you receive any information from the school district with which you were interviewing prior to your interview that provided you insight into district policies, procedures, expectations, or student achievement? If yes, what did you receive?
2. Who were the district personnel who interviewed you?
3. Was there evidence of a format used by the district personnel in interviewing you? What is the basis for your response?
4. Describe the dialogue between you and the interviewer.
5. How many students are in grades kindergarten through grade twelve in the district?

Results of the Study: District-Wide Incidences of Recruiting and Interviewing

Survey results indicated that districts with smaller student populations were far less likely to have an identified protocol in place to recruit and interview teachers. While a majority of the districts with larger student populations

indicated a plan was in place for recruiting teachers, only one-third reported that they had an organized interviewing protocol. Recruitment efforts generally consisted of a set of guidelines that included newspaper advertising for position needs and the use of state department of education websites to post position openings.

Of the fifty-seven school districts with student populations of less than 500 students, eight (14%) had a recruiting protocol, while two (less than 1%) had an interviewing protocol. Of the seventeen school districts with a student population range of 500 - 999 students, two (1%) had a recruiting protocol and two (1%) had an interviewing protocol. Of the nine districts with a student population range of 1000 - 1500, seven (77%) had a recruiting protocol, while three (33%) had a recruiting protocol. For the entire study of all districts, seventeen (20%) had protocols for recruiting while seven (less than 1%) had protocols for interviewing.

Districts in the study utilized various personnel to interview prospective teachers. Districts with smaller student populations utilized principals, superintendents and boards of education in the interviewing process while districts with larger populations tended to utilize principals and superintendents in the process. None of the districts indicated that other personnel such as teachers or parent organizations were involved in the interviewing process.

In the fifty-seven school districts with less than 500 students, seven (12%) indicated that the principal was the sole interviewer; eighteen (31%) indicated that the superintendent was the sole interviewer; two (less than 1%) indicated that the board of education was the sole interviewer; twenty four (42%) indicated that both the principal and superintendent were involved in the interview; and, six (11%) indicated that the principal, superintendent, and board of education were involved in the interview process.

In the seventeen school districts with a student population range of 500 - 999 students, two (1%) indicated that the principal was the sole interviewer; one (less than 1%) indicated that the superintendent was the sole interviewer; twelve (70%) indicated that both the principal and the superintendent were involved in the interviewing process; two (1%) indicated that the principal, superintendent, and board of education were involved in the interviewing process. None of the schools in this student population range reported that the board of education exclusively interviewed personnel, nor did they report that persons who were not associated with the district in an official capacity were included in the interviewing process.

In the nine school districts with student populations ranging from 1000 - 1500 students, all participants reported that both the principal and superintendent conducted interviews.

Table 1.

District-Wide Incidences of Recruiting and Interviewing

Student population	Number of school districts in population	Number of school districts with recruiting protocol	%	Number of school districts with interviewing protocol	%
Less than 500	57	8	14.0	2	<1
500 - 999	17	2	11.7	2	11.7
1000 - 1500	9	7	77.7	3	33.3
Totals	83	17	20.4	7	8.4

Table 2.

Personnel in School Districts Who Conducted Teacher Interviews

Student population	Number of schools in P range of population	Principal only	Superintendent only	BOE only	Principal Superintendent	Principal Superintendent BOE	Other
Less than 500	57	7	18	2	24	6	0
500 - 999	17	2	1	0	12	2	0
1000 - 1500	9	0	0	0	9	0	0
Totals	83	9	19	2	45	8	0

Results of the Study: Teacher Interviews

Of the eight teachers interviewed for the study, the dialogue was consistent among each. None perceived that a consistent or organized effort was in place to either recruit or interview them for their current positions. Most found out about position openings from other teachers or acquaintances and none discerned that their interviewers were working from a set of notes or consistent set of questions.

Of the eight teachers, six were interviewed solely by the superintendent, one was interviewed solely by a principal, and one was interviewed primarily by the board of education in the presence of a building principal and superintendent. One discussed legal compromises that took place in his interview and most indicated that the interviews were one-sided conversations with the interviewer doing most of the talking and engaging in little discussion regarding teaching philosophies or strategies. When questions were asked, they were usually in regard to discipline strategies.

Todd, a physical education teacher and football coach, had been encouraged by several of his fellow coaches to pursue a position of high school physical education instructor and football coach in a neighboring community. The interview that followed was one that not only caught him by surprise, but also placed him in an uncomfortable situation:

I interviewed at a school for a physical education and head football coaching

position. The school district had about seven hundred fifty students with about three hundred students in grades seven through twelve. I really wanted the position because it seemed like a nice community and it would have also provided me with a raise of about five thousand dollars annually. The superintendent and high school principal met me for the interview in the superintendent's office. After we shook hands and exchanged greetings I was shocked by the first two questions of the interview. The superintendent asked me if I was a Christian and the principal followed by asking me if I attended church every Sunday. I am a Christian and am in church most Sundays, so I answered yes to both questions, but was caught totally by surprise. The rest of interview is a blur. Nothing was asked about my teaching philosophies or coaching strategies, but there were a few questions about how I managed discipline. After the first two questions, most of the time in the interview was spent with the two of them discussing the previous person who had vacated the position for which I was interviewing and the need for a strong disciplinarian in that position. As

I look back on the interview, I continue to wonder about those first two questions. I found out that the superintendent and principal were both pastors of rural churches in the area. Did I go to the “right” church? Did they call the superintendent or principal where I was working at the time to inquire about me? I really don’t know the answer to either question, but when I left the interview all that they had really heard from me was information regarding my spiritual life and my feelings on discipline. The remainder of the time was spent with them telling me about their school and the expectations of the person taking the position for which I was interviewing. I really didn’t take the time to ask them questions. I was just caught off guard by the whole thing.

Yvonne, a high school instructor in the area of social studies, entered the field of education with alternative certification. She had an undergraduate degree in psychology and had been a grant writer prior to entering teaching. She had wanted to pursue teaching out of high school, but had attended a college where her husband was getting a specialized degree. The college she attended didn’t have a teacher education program. She was concerned about having a nontraditional teaching certificate, but was encouraged about job possibilities with her background in writing and securing grants:

My situation is somewhat unique in that my family was well known in the region as educators. My mother is a teacher and my dad a superintendent. Most all the school districts where I interviewed knew my dad. He was in a larger school district, but had helped many of the rural districts around the area with budget issues and other issues involving the management of their schools. I interviewed in three rural school districts including the one where I now teach. In each of the three interviews, I did not have one question asked of me regarding my teaching philosophy, my views of classroom management, or my success in writing grants. Instead, most (interviewers) went into a great deal of detail telling me how much they liked my dad and what he had done for their districts and then went into great detail telling me about their districts. In each case, it was the superintendent who interviewed me. Since all this took place in the summer, I guess that the principals

were either on vacation or not under contract when I was interviewed. In two of the districts, the superintendents offered me a job before I left the campus. This really surprised me, because I had talked with my dad about what to expect in the process, and he told me that I would be interviewed and then recommended to the board of education for employment. This wasn’t the case in these two districts. I guess those boards of education gave their superintendents the latitude to hire on the spot. I didn’t take either job that was immediately offered, because I wanted to consider all my options. I am, however, teaching in one of the two schools that offered me the contract the day I interviewed. They couldn’t have known anything about me from references, because I had not filled out an application until I completed the interview. I don’t know if they thought I was a good risk or they were just desperate.

With each of these teachers and others who were interviewed for this study, the scenarios were similar. Very little time was afforded to the interviewees regarding their thoughts and practices regarding teaching. Discipline was frequently discussed, but never within the context of it being a classroom management skill. While only one encountered what would be considered an illegal line of questioning, all encountered a similar routine...the interviewer did the talking.

Conclusions

Rural school district administrative personnel who participated in this study did not engage in a thorough process of recruiting or interviewing prospective teachers. Most school districts that were included in the study indicated that no formal protocol for recruiting or interviewing potential teachers exists. While most applicants appeared eager to discuss their competencies in teaching and their personal platforms regarding the educational process, few were given the opportunity. School districts that could have supplied pertinent information regarding their schools prior to interviews, selected instead to discuss the information during the interview in lieu of utilizing this time to learn about the teachers they were attempting to employ. For the most part, the interviewers did most of the talking.

Critical issues such as student achievement and qualifications of teachers were not addressed during the recruiting or interviewing phases of the employment process. Interviewers focused most of their discussions on student behavior, parental support, administrative support,

and facilities. Student achievement and the school districts' accreditation status with their respective state departments of education were not discussed with applicants during the interviews.

As instructional leaders, the administrative personnel conducting interviews provided little insight to applicants as to their leadership roles in that capacity. It appeared that a greater effort was focused on ensuring the applicant that the school district was well equipped, that students were well behaved, and that the administration would be a strong advocate for the teacher in managing student behavior. Little or no mention was made about instructional expectations nor was there evidence of educational leaders determining whether or not the applicants were qualified to perform in the educational settings for which they were being interviewed. Evidence of rural school educational leaders seeking highly qualified teachers were not evident based on the interviews conducted in this study.

Professional literature indicates that rural school districts have much to offer teachers. While salaries may be lower in rural school districts, other factors such as low teacher to pupil ratios, fewer discipline problems, and parental involvement are enticements for teachers to pursue employment in rural school districts.

Would any of the rural school districts involved in this study consider securing a contractor to construct one of its buildings without conducting a thorough background check of the builder's competencies? Would they select an architect who presented building plans sketched on the back of a napkin? Though these questions were not asked of respondents to the study's survey, the thought of securing either of these entities in these fashions would be considered to be beyond usual practice. Should the thought of employing teachers, with little or no knowledge about their instructional competencies, be approached with similar vigor and planning as involved in employing builders? It would seem reasonable for rural school districts to make personnel decisions regarding employment decisions that are based on good information as opposed to luck.

Recommendations

While it is understood that there is a shortage of qualified teachers available to the nation's school districts, both rural and urban, rural districts should step up their efforts to recruit and employ the best who are available. Although it is a reality that rural school districts may have limited applicants for positions, they should seek to determine the competencies of each applicant they are considering for teaching positions. Competencies are hard to determine when the applicants are not provided the opportunity to engage in dialogue during the interviewing process.

University preparation programs for school leaders should pave the way in emphasizing the importance of recruiting and interviewing teachers. In lieu of treating

recruiting and interviewing as an activity that is generic to all school districts (rural, suburban, and urban), consideration should be given to preparing future school leaders to customize this process to fit the needs of individual school districts. This will enable future leaders to recognize the relationships of recruiting and interviewing to making responsible employment and staff development decisions.

Rural school districts would be well served to construct a plan to recruit personnel. The plan should include designing a portfolio that details pertinent district information and demographic information about the area in which the district is located. This information should be sent to each applicant who is going to be granted an interview. By doing this, excess time will not be spent during the interview on issues that are not instructional in nature.

The interviewing process should provide school personnel with a sufficient amount of information in regard to the applicants they are considering. Not only should the interview be utilized to determine instructional competencies, it should also be used as a mechanism to determine the professional development needs of those teachers who are offered employment. By engaging in a well thought out, organized interviewing process, interviewers will determine whether specific professional needs are articulated for a potential employee.

Constructing an interviewing protocol could be an outstanding professional development tool for existing staff. Teachers and administrators could learn volumes from one another about teaching strategies, classroom management, and local needs by collaborating and developing recruiting and interviewing protocols that are unique to their respective districts. It would allow all collaborators to think about teaching practices that are essential to student achievement.

Districts should develop an interviewing protocol that includes a measurement tool to compare applicants. When a document is constructed with a set of questions for applicants, a scoring rubric should accompany it. By making this a process that can be measured, each applicant is scored by using the same standards for each question. This is especially important when interviewing team members vary. Though different individuals may be conducting interviews, the questions and standards remain constant.

Rural school districts should seriously consider developing a detailed protocol to recruit and interview prospective teachers. A wide range of implications exists within the recruiting and interviewing phases of employment. Every effort should be made to conduct a process that is legal, ethical, and culminates with the employment of the best candidate for a position. Employing a teacher is truly a million dollar investment and should be approached with the same seriousness as any other investment made by a school district.

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