Leading to Change / New Ways to Hire Educators

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Two variables that profoundly influence student achievement are the quality of instruction provided by teachers (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Education Trust, 1998) and the quality of leadership provided by school principals (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Clearly, hiring teachers and principals who will promote high standards for all students is essential in improving achievement and equity in our schools. The question is, How can we select the most effective teachers and principals?

Those who make hiring decisions are frustrated with the limitations of interviews, which often become nothing more than sterile exercises in exchanging platitudes. For instance, Buckingham (2007) found that more than 90 percent of interviewees claim that they "like people." Most candidates magically transform their weaknesses into strengths. One candidate admits reluctantly, "I guess I am a bit of a perfectionist"; the competing candidate's weakness is a tendency to work too hard. How could any interviewer resist candidates with such alluring flaws?

My fieldwork in the past few months has included discussions with district senior leadership teams, principals, and teacher leaders, all of whom have been involved in the selection process for new teachers and principals. Their work suggests three promising practices that can help schools avoid interview hype and transform the selection process into a thoughtful analysis of the candidates' attitudes, beliefs, and professional practices.

Classroom Observations

Seattle Public Schools Chief Academic Officer Carla Santorno provided a brilliant example of performance assessment for adults when she arranged for all principal candidates to observe several different classrooms and then tell her what they saw. These direct observations allowed for multiple levels of analysis, from the objective (Did the candidate notice important characteristics of instruction and classroom environment?) to the subtle (Did the candidate appear comfortable around students?).

When leadership candidates spend time in authentic classroom environments, such claims as "I
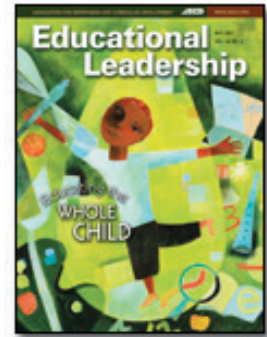
like people" meet the test of reality. A patient interviewer can also learn a great deal about the candidates' attitudes about student learning. Rather than ask, "Did you notice Mr. McRae's open-ended questioning?" the wise interviewer will simply ask, "What did you notice?" Inevitably, the conversation will take one of two directions. Some candidates will talk about instructional practices, the classroom environment, and variables that teachers and leaders can control. Others will focus more on the characteristics of the students: With the best intentions and most sympathetic feelings, they might say, "The children in this school really need our understanding, and they are doing the best they can." Although such a statement sounds like an expression of empathy, it raises a red flag about these candidates' beliefs about student potential. With the second interview technique—data analysis—the interviewer can probe such beliefs further.

Data Analysis

One thoughtful midwestern superintendent invites every teacher and principal candidate to arrive at interview appointments an hour in advance. He then provides them with a rich array of data on student achievement and demographic characteristics for two different classrooms, one low performing and one high performing. He begins the interview by asking them for their analysis of the two classrooms. Many candidates start the conversation with, "Well, the first school must be a Title I school," or "I understand that the first school has many second language students and ethnic minorities; it must face extraordinary challenges." Only a few candidates look deeply into the data and pursue questions about differences in instruction, curriculum, and assessment in the two schools.

Interviewers who wish to hire teachers and principals committed to equity will note which candidates focus on teaching and leadership practices instead of student characteristics. Every interviewee will dutifully declare that "All children can learn" and swear that he or she believes in equity. But the candidates who are likely to be the most effective teachers or school principals will focus their attention on the actions of schools rather than demographic characteristics of students.

Student Work Analysis

Researchers have long extolled the virtues of looking at real student work (Mitchell, 1996). We should give every interviewee for a teacher or principal position anonymous pieces of student work and ask him or her to evaluate that work compared to the school, district, state, provincial, or national standards for academic quality. This practice is analogous to asking a candidate for restaurant inspector to look at hygiene factors in a sample kitchen and then to render an accurate judgment. Such a common-sense performance assessment is, incredibly, absent in most teacher and principal interviews.

But interviewers need not stop there. New research by economists Levitt and Dubner (2006) suggests that our analysis of people and their work is often colored, to use precisely the correct term, by our perception of their ethnicity. If you want to find teachers and principals who not only care about students, but also hold them to high expectations regardless of their ethnic or social backgrounds, then try this innovative interview technique. Give the interview candidates

samples of student work, all from the same anonymous student but marked with different fictitious student names such as Ted Hunter, Shaneequa Coleman, Jennifer Chen, and César Martinez. Ask the candidates to grade the work and make narrative comments about each sample. Levitt's research suggests that some candidates will attribute low ratings to the work of students whom they perceive to be from black or Latino backgrounds. Others may offer evidence of an opposite, but no less harmful, bias: As they look at student work that they would not regard as acceptable from Ted or Jennifer, they might strive mightily to find virtue in the same work submitted by Shaneequa or César. Both responses reflect the same problematic thinking dressed up in different clothing.

A First Step

Putting the right people in positions of classroom and school leadership is an important first step in our efforts to improve student achievement and equity. In addition to the interview strategies described here, your school or district may want to explore other innovative approaches that identify those candidates who have both the will and the understanding to implement high standards for all students.

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