

# ISSUE BRIEF

## How Do Charter Schools Get the Teachers They Want?



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*It's really challenging when we hire someone who's not a good fit as a colleague...There has to be kind of a click or a gel, because we can't do the work that we do if people aren't connecting.*

—California charter school principal

Like all school leaders, charter school leaders want to hire talented and passionate teachers. At the same time, they know talent and passion aren't enough. As the quote above suggests, charter school leaders want to hire teachers whose talents and passions *fit their schools*. A leader of a charter school with a project-based curriculum, for example, said he looks for teachers "who are passionate not just in their academics...but passionate about life...people with interests and hobbies that they can weave into the curriculum."

A leader of a community-oriented charter school serving primarily African-American students said she looks for teachers "who understand African-American history and social dynamics."

To be sure, both leaders say they need teachers with strong academic backgrounds and teaching experience.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In fact, a 2004 study shows that charter school teachers were significantly more likely to have attended selective colleges than were traditional public school teachers. See Burian-Fitzgerald and Harris (2004).



*People who are a good fit stick around.*  
—Texas charter school principal

But even as they talk about wanting to hire high-quality teachers, they take pains to say that what matters is finding high-quality teachers who can contribute to and succeed in their particular school—teachers who, in the words of the leader of the school in Texas, are “going to fit the model that we’re doing.”

It stands to reason that charter school leaders focus on hiring for fit as well as quality. More so than leaders in traditional public schools, charter school leaders often run mission-driven organizations, schools that are committed to a specific population of students, instructional model, or curricular approach.<sup>2</sup> They also tend to run small schools; like leaders of other small organizations, they can’t afford to hire a “bad apple” who might

threaten their school’s cohesion.<sup>3</sup> Bad apples are not the same as bad teachers. An experienced teacher with strong skills and knowledge might struggle in a charter school where collaboration is the norm if she or he is used to working alone with the classroom door closed. Making these kinds of distinctions during the hiring process can be difficult. Given the importance and difficulty of finding the right teacher, how can charter schools get the teachers they want and need?

This issue brief looks at that question by drawing on a recent multi-year field study of charter schools in six cities in three states conducted by researchers at the University of Washington (See the box, “Inside Charter Schools Study”). When it comes to finding the teachers they want

<sup>2</sup> See Finn, Manno, and Varounek (2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Felps, Mitchell, and Byington (2006).



and need, many of the charter schools in the study took a purposeful and careful approach to finding and identifying their teaching staff.<sup>4</sup> This issue brief highlights the most promising recruitment and selection practices from these schools.

## Recruitment

### Clarifying Who You Want

Organizations can set a strong foundation for recruitment and hiring by first clarifying the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics they are seeking.<sup>5</sup> Not all charter schools in our field study did this, but the most coherent schools—the ones with a unity of purpose, clear focus and shared values for student learning—did.

Some schools expressed what they wanted in their teachers in formal documents. For instance, a charter school in southern California developed a one-page description of what it means to be a teacher at the school. The statement included expectations for the types of working relationships teachers have with students, colleagues and parents; the statement also included expectations for how teachers work in the classroom, including the strategies and materials used.

Other schools lacked formal statements about what they wanted from teachers, but still had a clear picture of who and what they wanted that was tightly linked to the school's mission. A principal of a college prep, project-based school serving an ethnically and economically diverse student body described the school's

ideal candidate in terms of the school's educational philosophy. He explained:

"The ideal candidate comes to me well versed in [constructivist pedagogy], is able to design and work with a curriculum that is going to incorporate scaffolding and help kids at many different levels work in a manner that is very inquiry and project based."

A Texas charter school leader agreed: "When most people think about a teacher, they think about a certification process and school for four years. For me, those things just give me somebody who's interested in the field. It doesn't encompass what they need to be successful here." He went on to explain that to be successful in his school teachers needed subject-area expertise, fluency in the culture of his student population, connections to the community outside of the school and a commitment to self-development.

Regardless of whether schools codified what they were looking for in a formal statement or not, a clear starting point of finding the teachers they wanted meant thinking carefully and specifically about what they wanted and expected.

### Finding Who You Want

The charter schools in the study faced different recruitment challenges. Some schools were flush with applicants and needed a way to more efficiently reach the most promising ones. Others had small applicant pools, and needed a way to build a larger group of applicants. Regardless of the nature of the challenge, being proactive is one of the keys to finding the teachers that schools want and need. In addition to beginning with a clear sense of the types of teachers they wanted to hire, the schools that are the most successful at recruiting candidates do four things:

**They always keep their radar up.**  
Successful recruiters constantly scan the

### Inside Charter Schools Study

Between 2007 and 2009, a team of researchers from the University of Washington conducted a field study of 24 charter schools in three states. Researchers visited each school three times, interviewing school leaders, teachers, and governing board members.

In the interviews, researchers asked about topics such as the school's mission and purpose, its approach to teacher hiring and development, and its approach to leadership and, in particular, leadership succession. During the site visits, researchers also conducted informal observations of classrooms and, in some cases, attended faculty meetings. In all, the research team interviewed 160 individuals and conducted a total of 255 interviews.

The schools in the study capture the experiences of schools operating in a variety of policy environments and labor markets, and encompass a variety of programs that serve a range of student populations. They provide information-rich cases for exploring staffing practices; their experiences are not, however, generalizable to the population of charter schools.

In some ways, broad generalizations about charter school staffing practices are beside the point. The way that individual charter schools approach staffing will and should differ depending on a host of factors, including local labor market conditions (are there lots of teacher candidates or few?), the school's attractiveness compared to other schools, hiring constraints and flexibilities—such as state-level certification policies or No Child Left Behind's "Highly Qualified Teacher" requirements. Charter schools also differ in their capacity for and knowledge about recruitment and screening practices; some schools that are part of networks or Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) can rely on the expertise of human resource professionals; others may have young leaders who have little experience hiring. With these differences in mind, the descriptions in this issue brief are not meant to represent the ways in which all charter schools (or even the best charter schools) hire teachers. Instead, they offer examples of the types of practices that charter school leaders and teachers engage in when they try to meet the demands of hiring for fit and quality, the bottom lines for who they want and need.

4 In contrast, traditional public schools are often criticized for passively waiting for candidates to submit applications, focusing too much on internal or local labor pools, and setting aside some important interview tools such as teaching demonstrations or interactions with staff and students that would provide both the interview committee and the candidate with valuable information. See DeArmond, Wright, and Shaw, (2009).

5 See Heneman and Judge (2006).



environment for potential teachers. One of the best examples of this comes from the principal of Atlas Academy charter school.<sup>6</sup>

Atlas Academy is devoted to serving at-risk African-American students. The school focuses on developing students' academic, cultural and social skills to help them succeed in school and adulthood. Given the school's ambitious mission, the principal wants to recruit teachers who can be academic mentors as well as social role models for students. That is a tall order, so he is constantly on the look out for young adults—particularly young

African-American men—who can fill it. For instance, he told a story of how he found his biology teacher at the public swimming pool where he took students to swim. After several positive experiences with the lifeguard at the pool, the principal said, "We're going camping for three days next week. If you want to go, I'll pay you. He [the lifeguard] has a degree in biology... that's how we started off."

Even in schools with large applicant pools, leaders constantly keep their radar up for potential candidates. They know that they—not a central recruitment service—are responsible for identifying strong candidates. If they spot someone who might fit their school, they do everything they can to convince this person to apply.

#### **They cultivate relationships.**

Successful recruiters don't just rely on their own radar to find candidates. They build relationships with outside organizations who can direct good candidates to their schools. Some of the most valuable relationships are between charter schools and teacher training programs.<sup>7</sup> A high profile example is the partnership between Hunter College and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), Uncommon Schools, Achievement First and the New York City Charter School Center. Together, these organizations designed a new teacher training program specifically to prepare teachers for teaching students in inner-city public schools.

In our sample, Young Leaders Charter School (YLCS), an urban high school in California, has forged an ongoing relationship with one of the most prominent teacher training programs in its region. Because the principal knew

<sup>7</sup> In 2007, Hunter College launched a teacher training partnership with KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Achievement First. The training program offered was designed specifically for the needs of schools in these management organizations. For more information, see the program description at <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/school-of-education/special-programs-and-centers/teacher-you>.



*In short, good hiring starts well before candidates walk in for an interview....The schools most successful at recruiting realize that it is a year-round job that requires creativity and entrepreneurship to make sure the best candidates find their way to their schools.*

some of the professors in the program, he explained that he “was able to open some doors to recruit heavily within the program...[and] landed two really outstanding teachers [from the program].” His relationship with the program was mutually beneficial—the program’s students would often complete their student teaching at YLCS.

But charter schools didn’t just rely on teacher training programs to build their candidate pools. Some schools established relationships with community service organizations in which their students were involved or churches in the school’s neighborhood to develop their applicant pools. Others relied on less formal networks of community members to tap potential candidates.

#### **They build their own pipeline.**

Whether by opening their schools to student teachers, developing teacher aids into teachers or creating their own teacher certification programs, the schools most effective at recruitment found ways to develop and keep individuals who showed promise as future teachers. One charter school leader explained how he was able to draw candidates from within the school: “We have a lot of teachers that sub for us or...they’re willing to be a guided reading instructor...[because they] want jobs...” Another charter school teacher explained that she was hired after volunteering at the school for more than a year: “[The principal] knew what she was getting, it wasn’t going to be a gamble, because she knew me and saw me working with kids.”

Some schools took pipeline building to a new level by taking on the responsibility

of training and certifying teachers. The most notable of these efforts is the in-house teacher training and certification program developed and run by High Tech High (HTH), a portfolio

of eight charter schools in the San Diego area.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, HTH opened its own graduate school of education that offers both a credentialing program and a Master’s of Education program to prepare “practioner leaders to work with colleagues and communities to develop innovative, authentic, and rigorous learning environments.”<sup>9</sup> While this is not something an independent school could take on, it is certainly an effort that could be pursued as a joint effort with other schools.<sup>10</sup>

#### **They use the recruitment process to clearly demonstrate the school culture and the teachers it needs.**

A pool of 300 applicants is of little value if none of the candidates is a good match for the school. Schools effective at recruiting take care to send the right messages to potential candidates during the recruitment process. One charter school leader, for example, sent clear signals about her school to applicants by asking them to answer essay questions related to the school’s philosophy in the job application (“These are our three core principles...how do they relate to how you feel about teaching?”).

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see Implementing an In-house Approach to Teacher Training and Professional Development in a profile from the National Resource Center on Charter School Governance and Finance retrievable at [www.charterresource.org/.../An\\_In-House\\_Approach\\_to\\_Teacher\\_Training\\_HighTechHigh.pdf](http://www.charterresource.org/.../An_In-House_Approach_to_Teacher_Training_HighTechHigh.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://gse.hightechhigh.org>.

<sup>10</sup> In 2009, the Washington D.C. Office of State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) released a request for proposals for a charter school or a consortium of charter schools to develop and implement a charter school teacher training program. If fulfilled, this effort would be an example of an internal program for teacher training and development for a network of independent schools.





Before she added these essay questions to the application, she said the school was “spending a lot of time interviewing people who looked good on paper...but when we talked specifically about the nature of the school, there was a mismatch.”

In another school, the principal explained that she felt “it is important for me to let [candidates]...know who we are before they give me their resumes, so that they can see if this is something that they would want to do.”

In short, good hiring starts well before candidates walk in for an interview. Charter schools are small organizations that are often competing with large, well-known school districts for the attention of good candidates. Simply posting a vacancy and waiting for candidates to send resumes leaves too much uncertainty about who, if anyone, will apply. The schools most successful at recruiting realize that it is a year-round job that requires creativity and entrepreneurship to make sure the best candidates find their way to their schools.



## Selection

### Picking the Best

After recruiting a pool of candidates, schools then have to pick the best candidate—or at least offer the best candidate a job. Like most organizations, schools do so by narrowing the initial pool based on some basic assessments (e.g., resumes) and then forming a list of finalists based on more substantive assessments (e.g., interviews). Both types of screening are fundamentally about gathering information to assess a candidate's fit and quality. What are the candidate's qualifications? What kind of colleague might he or she be? What are the candidate's skills? Although it's not uncommon for school leaders to say that they answer questions about quality and fit based on a gut feeling, strategic charter schools do something more. They approach candidate screening with a systematic plan for gathering information about candidates so they can make a careful decision about making a job offer.

Like most schools, the charter schools typically review paper materials, such as resumes, transcripts, personal statements and teaching portfolios, as an initial screen. These materials give leaders a general sense of the candidate's experience and preparation that allow them to winnow down the pool of candidates. In addition to looking for formal qualifications, some schools use the initial screen to look at questions of fit. As one leader said: "The cover letter is the most telling, even beyond the resume...If there's no mention of the mission in the cover letter, then it's a really tough sell. Unless there's something in their resume where...they've worked with our population, there's something else that's showing us that, yes, they understand what we're doing here in some way... [The mission is] the biggest piece."

After an initial paper screen, schools move on to face-to-face assessments. Although there is no 'best' way to approach this phase of selection, the charter schools in our study distinguished themselves from traditional public school screening practices in two ways. First, they involved a range of people from the school community in the selection process. Second, they required candidates to teach a sample lesson.

Research on traditional public schools suggests that job candidates interact mainly with the school principal and screening activities are generally limited to formal interviews with little opportunity for a more natural interaction between the candidate and the school's staff or students.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, many charter schools in the study created opportunities for candidates to interact not only with administrators but also teachers, students and parents. As a teacher explained when asked about her hiring experience: "The people who interviewed me were made up of different parts of the school. There were the principal, two other faculty members... there was a parent rep... a community rep."

Importantly, these interactions were often organized around watching candidates teach sample lessons and other demonstrations of practice (e.g., teaching mini-lessons to actual students during the school day). Of the 24 schools in the study, half said they asked candidates to teach a sample lesson. School leaders explained that sample lessons were a chance to "see how [candidates]...interact with our students...what they look like in action." Often, schools structured sample lessons to reflect real-world conditions: "When they come and do the sample lesson," noted one school leader, "it is during the regular school day and they're in a real

### Joining Others for More Influence

Charter schools are relatively small players in local teacher labor markets; accordingly, they can struggle to get the attention of teacher candidates. In addition, charter schools often don't have the "back office" human resource support and systems that school districts rely on to stay on top of hiring timelines and efficiently process applications and make offers (when done well, these human resource operations inspire confidence in candidates; when done poorly, they can dissuade candidates).

Even though charter schools are small organizations they can still find strength in numbers. The burgeoning charter management organization (CMO) sector, for example, has produced a small number of "brand name" schools that have regional and sometimes national profiles that help attract candidates. These organizations also often provide human resources support that facilitates some of the more transactional and procedural aspects of the hiring process. A principal in one of the most nationally recognized charter school CMOs explained that the national profile of her "brand" not only improved the number and quality of candidates applying for her school, but it also meant that applicants already had a pretty clear idea of what the school was about—she called it "the Oprah effect" (after the CMO leaders were profiled on the talkshow). A teacher at the school noted that he first found out about it from an article about the school's founders in *U.S. News and World Report*.

A principal at another smaller CMO used the support of the CMO office not only to process payroll and benefits, but also to attend job fairs, conduct initial paper screens of candidates, develop the applicant pool and generally help manage the application process.

Schools do not need to be part of a CMO to get outside assistance for hiring. Some stand-alone charter schools benefit from joining informal networks and consortia with other stand-alone schools. These consortia can provide organizational support for human resource efforts. A consortia of schools in Texas, for example, pool their resources to support an office of accounting and payroll.

<sup>11</sup> Liu and Johnson (2006).



A Snapshot of Charter School Teachers Today		
	Charter	Traditional Public
<b>Total # of teachers</b>	65,659	3,098,552
<b>Age of Teachers</b>	%	%
20 to 29	28.65	14.95
30 to 39	29.74	26.78
40 to 49	20.09	23.52
50 to 59	15.44	26.49
60 to 69	5.34	7.87
70+	0.74	0.38
<b>Average age of teacher</b>	37.9	42.3
<b>Years as Full-time Teacher</b>	%	%
Less than 4	43	20
4 to 9	34	28
10 to 14	11	16
15+	12	36
<b>Total years of experience</b>	9	14
<b>Years at Current School</b>	%	%
Less than 4	62	36
4 to 9	31	32
10 to 14	6	13
15+	2	19
<b>Certification</b>	%	%
Regular or standard state certification	69.49	88.91
Satisfied all requirements except probationary period	7.36	3.79
Need some additional coursework or student teaching	7.76	4.11
Certification issued to continue teaching - emergency certificate	3.28	2.19
Don't hold certificate	12.11	1.01
HQT	80.00	90.00
Alternative certified	19.00	13.00
NBPTS	18.00	19.00
Working on NBPTS	10.00	4.00

A Snapshot of Charter School Teachers Today		
	Charter	Traditional Public
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	%	%
White, non-Hispanic	82.68	90.43
Black, non-Hispanic	14.93	7.68
Hispanic, regardless of race	9.35	7.01
American Indian/ Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	1.33	1.21
Asian, non-Hispanic	3.57	1.41
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	0.37	0.28
<b>Average Compensation</b>		
All teachers		
Experience	\$	\$
1 to 2 years	35,489.17	37,212.46
6 to 10 years	41,196.08	45,658.20
21 to 30 years	46,177.63	56,714.23
BA only		
Experience	\$	\$
1 to 2 years	33,898.81	36,050.76
6 to 10 years	38,574.47	41,313.22
21 to 30 years	43,197.80	50,780.00
MA only		
Experience	\$	\$
1 to 2 years	39,632.71	41,418.02
6 to 10 years	46,951.88	49,658.53
21 to 30 years	49,658.53	60,740.21
<b>Additional Salary Incentives</b>	%	%
Excellence in teaching	20.52	5.31
Fields with shortages	11.13	17.50
National Board Certification	17.90	27.67
Location incentive	6.28	5.35

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 2007-08.



deal classroom with students.” Another principal explained, “So during the second interview we’ll let them know that there’s a possibility that we’ll be calling them back, that we’d like to see them in action. If they’re already in a position—maybe a long-term subbing position or if they’re in an internship at the time—then I’ll go and watch them at their site.”

Although sample lessons are uncommon in traditional public school hiring, most of the charter school teachers appreciated the opportunity to teach a sample lesson. As one teacher said, “I had to come back and teach a model lesson, which in my opinion is a great thing. A lot of times, most schools, you don’t get a chance to do that. But here, they actually want to see what do you have to offer. They let you know you’ll be teaching a 45-minute lesson in this class[at] this grade level. ‘Be prepared. Come in with everything you need.’ This gives you a chance to kind of let them know: ‘okay, this is what I’m able to do.’ And then they get a chance to look and ask, will this person actually fit in to what we have designed here at the school?”

Personal interactions between the candidate and teachers, students and administrators, allow schools to take stock of a candidate’s personality and rapport with the school community. Classroom teaching demonstrations give schools a glimpse of the skills that candidates bring to the job, skills that are hard to capture in structured interviews. Together, these activities create a rich exchange of information between the school and the candidate so both can assess matters of quality and fit. Consider the amount of contact and interaction included in this principal’s summary of her school’s application process after an initial paper screen: “First, we do an initial interview... If that goes well, then I usually check references... If that goes well, we have

them come in and do a sample lesson where they’re in the classroom. After the sample lesson, they spend some time with their team teacher, so whatever team we’re hiring them in, the team teachers have a chance to spend time with the candidate. And then there’s a final interview with me.”

The rich hiring experience also builds the confidence of teachers being hired. As one teacher said, “[The selection process] was really inspiring to me. It made me have a lot more faith in the school and also I had more faith than I ever had in any interview that, if they chose me, they were choosing me for the right reasons and if they rejected me they were rejecting me for the right reasons...in other interviews it’s so artificial.”

### **Don’t Just Hire a Teacher. Build a Team.**

It is difficult to find everything a school needs in just one candidate. The most thoughtful schools understand this challenge, and so when they make a hiring decision they don’t just hire a teacher, they hire a member of a team. Ideally, school faculties include a healthy mix of skills, knowledge and ability; they include a range of experience (to avoid both the constant turnover that can happen with only young teachers and the resistance to change and innovation that can happen when everyone stays too long). A leader of a technology-focused charter school, for example, said she looks for a mix of candidates with traditional backgrounds and candidates who were “engineers and then decided that they wanted to go into teaching... they can bring that professional industry experience into the classroom... I think that [mix] is healthy for the school.”

It is not enough, however, to simply bring varied backgrounds together. Schools need to consider how a candidate

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will complement the rest of its faculty members. Does a candidate offer a unique set of experiences that the staff does not already have? Does a candidate have skills or training that would be of use to others on the faculty? And, because small, young schools are constantly shifting their organization and work as they mature, will a candidate be flexible and able to fill different and changing roles in the school?

Principals in the most strategic schools deliberately build a diverse teaching staff. Nowhere is such a staff more apparent than at YLCS. YLCS is a high school serving primarily low-income Latino students. The school's leader said that he needed teachers who could closely relate to the experiences of his students—ideally individuals from the community—but also expose them to the outside world and use state-of-the-art teaching practices and curricula. Knowing the difficulty of finding one individual who could fulfill all of these needs, he strategically matched new teachers who had recently graduated from a top training program with teachers from the neighborhood who were smart and energetic, but who had less formal training. In the following extended quote he explains his staffing approach in the English department: “The English department here is the absolute perfect blend of skills that this school needs. The department chair is actually an intern teacher. He’s going through an intern program right now and it’s not a very good intern program...But he’s a wonderful human being who cares deeply about the kids and who has a presence about him that is remarkable....[the students] love him and they love being in his class. He certainly has tremendous innate skills in teaching, but he doesn’t have a whole huge body of knowledge about how to teach. We hired two young, first-year teachers...to teach English this year.

They both come from the program that trains young teachers, the best in the country,...they come really equipped with a whole bag full of wonderful ideas and wonderful methods...their bag of pedagogical tricks, blended with [the intern teacher’s] persona—the three of them are all becoming better teachers because of that dynamic.”

By creating a team that includes both strong connections to students with strong connections to teaching and curricula, the school made the most of teacher selection. Now it has the teachers it wants and needs, developing and growing together.

## Conclusion

Like other schools, charter schools recognize that teachers are at the center of the performance challenge in public education. Getting the right teacher isn’t something that can be done in a vacuum—a teacher can be more or less ‘right’ depending on the school’s mission and work culture, current student population and talent or skills already on staff.

Schools that hire teachers for fit tailor their approach to the kind of teacher they want and need. Schools interested in young teachers, for example, can build pipelines to teacher training programs. Schools interested in teachers with a community connection can recruit in local community organizations. Schools interested in a specific instructional philosophy can design interview instruments that assess candidates’ approach to teaching, learning and student-teacher interaction. The first step in designing a hiring approach is deciding what your needs are and the kind of teachers who will fill them.

A hiring process that matches your school’s needs means approaching teacher selection in ways that are seldom seen in traditional public schools. For

example, the schools in this study took a more proactive and ongoing approach to recruitment, rather than posting advertisements and waiting to see who applies; the most successful schools constantly searched through formal and informal networks for candidates and had their radar up for opportunities to connect with potential candidates. To help identify high quality and well-matched candidates, the schools created many opportunities for candidates to interact with the school community—not just administrators but also teachers, students and parents. They also went beyond structured interviews and asked teachers to perform sample lessons and often to spend an entire day at the school, interacting with everyone from students to the custodial staff.

Getting the right teachers will help your school keep its teachers too. When teachers have strong skills and a passion for the school's mission, they fight through the inevitable days of frustration and bouts of burnout to stay with the school. As one principal said, "[Teachers in this school] really need to be motivated by the mission; people don't last very long here if they're not really motivated by the mission. If they're just purely interested in 'I want to be in a small school,' or 'I want to really work on the craft of teaching,' that's not enough. It's a great value-add but it's not enough." As this last quote suggests, perhaps the most critical step in *getting* the teachers a school wants and needs is having a clear picture of *what* types of teachers and leaders it needs and *why* those qualities are the best choice for the students and mission it has set for itself.





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