

# ILLINOIS PRINCIPALS' PRACTICES IN TEACHER SELECTION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSORS OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP\*

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## Abstract

If you meet with almost any group of school administrators and ask them what the most critical factor in improving schools and increasing student achievement, they would most likely say having an outstanding faculty is the key. Common wisdom among principals is that nothing is more important to the overall success of the school than selecting excellent teachers. This perception is well supported by a growing body of research which has established a direct link between effective teaching and increased student achievement (Tucker and Stronge 2005; Stronge 2002; Marzano Pickering, and Pollock 2001; Fullen 2001; Danielson and McGreal 2000). This manuscript will begin with an overview of the current and projected teacher employment market in the United States. After identifying this market data, the results of a research study of 142 Illinois principals' common practices in teacher selection processes will be reported. The manuscript will conclude by discussing the implications of the study results for professors of educational administration.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

In fact, if you speak with many principals, you will likely hear that they believe that the success of the school is largely dependant upon the quality of faculty members. This perception is indeed supported by a growing body of research which has confirmed a direct link between effective teaching and increased student achievement (Tucker & Stronge, 2005; Stronge, 2002; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Fullen, 2001; Danielson & McGreal, 2000).

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The connection between effective teaching and increased student achievement has also become a federal-level focus through the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In addition to mandating increasing student achievement, NCLB also includes provisions designed to raise the quality of teaching by requiring school districts to employ “highly qualified” teachers, that is, only those who are fully certified and have demonstrated subject area competence (Mosley, 2006; Beyer & Johnson, 2005).

Given the pressures principals feel to improve student achievement and the mounting evidence that effective teachers make a substantial difference in student learning, is it any wonder that one of the most, if not the most, important responsibility of principals is faculty selection?

#### Employment Outlook for Teaching

As part of the teacher selection process, an important first step for any administrator is to develop an understanding of the projected teacher employment market. Principals who understand both current and projected trends can use this information to enhance their recruitment and selection processes, especially since the teacher employment market can vary widely depending on content area or grade level of the vacancy and type and location of the school district.

What is the employment outlook for teaching? In general, those seeking a teaching position will find a favorable market. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2007) reports that teaching opportunities throughout the United States are projected to range from good to excellent over the next ten years with variances in some localities, at certain grade levels, and in particular subject areas.

Several factors are driving the overall teacher employment market. One of the most significant is population growth primarily in the western states. According to the BLS (2007), states such as Arizona, Alaska, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah are adding teaching positions in response to population growth as more people move into these states (BLS, 2007). In fact, Clark County School District officials in Nevada report that they began the 2006-2007 school year short 400 teachers and as of spring 2007, teacher applications were down approximately one-third from the same period last year (Richmond, 2007). Similarly, Utah opened the 2007-2008 school year still needing 173 teachers (Schencker, 2007).

In many southern states enrollments are growing similar to the west but at a slower rate (BLS, 2007). However, both Florida and North Carolina are experiencing particularly strong demand for teachers. In Florida, the Department of Education reported a projected teacher shortage of 22,000 for 2007-08, which represents 12% of the classroom workforce (Dorsch, 2007), while the need for teachers in almost all areas of North Carolina was particularly high (Schultz, 2007).

In contrast, both the northeast and Midwest are experiencing little if any population growth, while some areas are actually seeing declines as more people move south and west. As a result, fewer additional teaching positions are being added. However, it is interesting to note that some increase in teaching vacancies is expected, though, in specific subject areas. However, these are the result of other factors rather than enrollment growth (BLS, 2007).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) also reports that the majority nationwide teaching vacancies will actually result from the anticipated retirements of a substantial numbers of teachers through 2014. This high attrition rate is further fueled by some state individual early retirement provisions, such as Illinois', which allows teachers who have completed 35 years of public school service to retire with full pension benefits as early as age 55 (Illinois Teacher Retirement System, 2007). When state early retirement plans coincide with the large numbers of teachers presently in their 40s and 50s, the demand for additional teachers over the next several years will grow (College Grad, 2007).

In addition to increased employment opportunities driven by enrollment growth and retirements, the turnover of teachers who leave the profession after just a few years is contributing to increased vacancies. Graziano (2005) reports that over 200,000 teachers are hired nationally, and that approximately 14% leave the profession after their initial year. The attrition rate climbs to 33% after three years and 45% after five. It is important to note, though, that the greatest percentage of turnover is primarily in urban and rural areas where half or more of the students receive free or reduced lunches (Graziano, 2005).

#### Market Supply and Demand

Even though the overall demand is positive, actual vacancies are grade level and subject area specific.

Both the BLS (2007) and the AAEE (2007) report a teacher shortage in special education, bilingual/English as a Second Language, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. These shortages are driven primarily by a small candidate pool. In addition, the AAEE (2007) notes an increased nationwide demand in general science, biology, reading, languages particularly Spanish and Japanese, and speech pathology. This candidate shortage occurs even in the Midwest and northeast where overall demand is weaker.

While school administrators must often select teachers from a small candidate pool in certain subject areas or grade levels, in others the number of candidates exceeds the demand. The AAEE (2007) identified an oversupply of candidates in social studies, physical education, and primary elementary grades. Other subject areas are projected to remain relatively balanced with most differences primarily a function of local factors. For example, urban and rural school districts will have teaching opportunities even in subject areas where nationally the supply of candidates either meets or exceeds the demand (BLS, 2007).

Two other factors impact candidate marketability. The National Education Association reports that the number of male teachers in the United States is at its lowest point in 40 years and that men comprise only nine percent of elementary teachers (Chmelynski, 2006). Similarly, the BLS (2007) projects that as minority enrollments surge, school districts will intensify their efforts to recruit minority candidates. Both groups can expect to find a candidate friendly employment market.

#### Problems and Purposes

As demands for school improvement and increased student achievement continue to grow, principals will need to recruit and select teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and commitment to excellence necessary to meet these demands. Given the realities of the teacher employment market, principals who understand the latest practices in the teacher selection process will be at a distinct advantage. Failure to make the hiring process a high priority or the use out-dated faculty recruitment and selection practices may result in the employment of teachers who are not prepared to respond to the challenges inherent in the educational improvement process.

Through a thorough understanding of hiring process best practices, principals will be better prepared to develop teacher selection processes which lead to the employment of outstanding teachers, especially those with the knowledge and skills to make a significant difference in student learning. This study was designed to identify Illinois principals' insights into the latest practices in teacher employment. As a result, this study seeks to answer the following questions: What recruitment strategies do principals employ in their teacher selection processes? What candidate application materials do they require? What components do they include in their selection processes? Who makes the final hiring decision?

In addition to the selection process components, both principals and teacher candidates would benefit from understanding what principals have observed about both successful and unsuccessful candidates. This study also seeks to investigate the following questions: What qualities do principals look for in successful teacher candidates? What do candidates do that hinders their chances for selection?

#### The Research Study

##### Context

Illinois is a state characterized by large numbers of school districts and a diverse population. Approximately 2,111,706 Illinois public school students are served by 873 school districts configured as K-8 elementary, 9-12 high school, or K-12 unit districts in rural, suburban, and urban settings. These include 44.6% minority students (Ruiz & Koch, 2007).

This study, which was conducted from February through May, 2007, surveyed 398 Illinois principals who were randomly assigned to the research sample from all public school principals in the state. A state-wide versus local study was selected to provide richer, more useful data reflecting greater school district diversity.

##### Participants

A one-stage simple random sample was chosen for the study (Fowler, 2002). Of the 398 principals surveyed, 142 participated which represented a 35.7% response rate. This included 84 elementary, 30 middle school, 23 high school (9-12), and 3 K-8/K-12 principals. These principals averaged 7.24 years of experience with a range of 1 to 44.

##### Questionnaire

A three-part self-administered survey was developed and tested with a panel of school administrators, all

of whom are either practicing principals or former principals now serving as central office administrators. After modifying the instrument and procedures, the questionnaire was approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

Part I asked principals to provide demographic data including position, type of district, years of principal experience, enrollment of the school and district, and percent of free/reduced lunch students.

In Part II, principals were asked to identify their teacher recruitment strategies, required application materials, and selection process components.

Part III included three items. Principals were asked:

- Who makes the actual hiring decision;
- What qualities do they look for in successful candidates; and,
- What do candidates do to hinder their selection?

### Data Collection

A web-based survey method was used for data collection. Principals who were randomly selected from list of all principals in Illinois were emailed a survey and cover letter, which included the contact information of the researcher.

#### Data Analysis

Data were entered into Microsoft Excel 2002 to obtain frequencies and percentages of closed-end responses. Data were analyzed to identify any trends that might appear within the categories (Maxwell, 1996). Through an inductive analysis (McMillan & Wergin, 2006) “data are gathered first and synthesized inductively for understanding. Conclusions are grounded from the bottom up” ( 94). In the results section, any unique differences attributable to one of the underlying demographic characteristics are reported.

Open-ended qualitative responses were analyzed through data reduction, display, conclusion creation, and triangulation to identify trends (Berkowitz, 1997). Both the researcher and a school administrator independently completed data reduction, display, and triangulation to develop conclusions. They shared their data identified themes with each other following this process. While this does not guarantee reliability and validity, it does provide “dependable results” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 146) which can be replicated and retested to increase reliability and validity (Merriam, 1998).

#### Results

For each of the survey items, results represent all participants. Principal responses are reported as a percentage of total respondents for each item rather than of total responses. Since participants often provided multiple responses, the higher the percentage; the more frequently it was mentioned. In instances in which unique differences were identified after inter-data analysis based on demographic figures, these are noted.

#### Recruitment Strategies

Principals reported that the school district website (68.0%) and job fairs (63.1%) are the most often used recruitment vehicles (Table 1). Rural and school districts under 1000 students, in particular, were the least dependent on the district website as a recruiting tool. Urban and suburban as well school districts with 4,000 or more students relied most heavily on job fairs. Similarly, middle and high schools and school districts with free and reduced student populations greater than 50% advertised vacancies most frequently through university career centers. Over a quarter (27.9%) of the respondents identified the local newspaper as a recruitment tool; however, this was primarily in rural districts and those with 4,000 students or less. National publications such as Education Week (0.8%) and search firms (0.8%) were rarely used to recruit teachers.

#### Table 1.

#### Recruitment Strategies

| Strategy   | Responses of Principals |
|--|-------------------------|
| District Website                                 | 68.0%                   |
| Job Fairs  | 63.1%                   |
| University Placement Center                      | 43.4%                   |
| Local Newspapers                                 | 27.9%                   |
| Other Websites                                   | 22.1%                   |
| Solicitation Calls to Other Districts/Colleagues | 23.0%                   |
| Solicitation Calls to University Professors      | 18.9%                   |
| Professional Associations                        | 14.8%                   |
| Solicitation Letters to Other School Districts   | 1.6%                    |
| National Publications                            | 0.8%                    |
| Recruiting Firms                                 | 0.8%                    |

**Table 1**

#### Required Application Materials

School districts most often require candidates to submit their resumes, transcripts, and credential files or letters of reference. Online and paper applications are still widely used; however, online applications are most prevalent in suburban and urban school districts with paper applications still widely used in rural areas (Table 2). One unexpected result was the extent of use of credential files, particularly at the high school level. School district administrators clearly do not see portfolios as integral to the selection process since only 3.3% required traditional portfolios and only 0.8% asked for digital versions. Of the items added by principals, the most often mentioned were teaching certificates and criminal background checks.

Table 2.

#### Required Application Materials

| Strategy               | Responses of Principals |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Resume                 | 82.0%                   |
| Transcript             | 77.0%                   |
| On-line Application    | 55.7%                   |
| Cover Letter           | 52.5%                   |
| Credential File        | 46.7%                   |
| Paper Application      | 44.3%                   |
| Letters of Application | 41.0%                   |
| Paper Portfolio        | 3.3%                    |
| Digital Portfolio      | 0.8%                    |

**Table 2**

#### Selection Process Components

Overall, school districts continue to employ traditional selection process including multiple interviews with various stakeholders ranging from phone (20.5%) and regular screening (65.6%) to building-level administrative (82.0%) and central office (28.7%) interviews (Table 3). However, of particular interest was

the high percentage of school districts which include teachers in interviews (79.5%). Their inclusion may reflect the growing prevalence of decentralization and collaborative leadership. Principals also reported that central office administrator participation in the interview process was most common in smaller and rural school districts.

In contrast, principals noted that parents or community members (2.5%), school board representatives (2.5%), or students (0.8%) were minimally involved in faculty selection. The reality is that hiring decisions are primarily the responsibility of the professional staff.

A very small percentage (7.4%) reported the use of demonstration teaching lessons as part of the selection process. At this point, candidates are only occasionally expected to complete a demonstration lesson.

Principals who offered additional comments most often indicated that they utilized one of the two most well known structured interview tools: Ventures for Excellence or Gallup's the Teacher Perceiver. A few referenced the use of site-based interview teams and candidate site visit observations. Others said that they employ on-line interview screening questions to sort candidates prior to the screening interview stage. Finally, in a few instances, candidates are expected to complete an on-site writing sample.

Table 3.

#### Selection Process Components

| Components                                      | Responses of Principals |
|---|-------------------------|
| Interview with Building Administrator(s)        | 82.0%                   |
| Interview with Faculty                          | 79.5%                   |
| Screening Interview                             | 65.6%                   |
| Interview with District Office Administrator(s) | 28.7%                   |
| Phone Interview                                 | 20.5 %                  |
| Demonstration Teaching Lesson                   | 7.4%                    |
| Interview with School Board                     | 2.5%                    |
| Interview with Parents/Community                | 2.5%                    |
| Interview with Students                         | 0.8%                    |

**Table 3**

#### Open-Ended Responses

In Part III of the study, principals were presented with several open-ended questions. First, they were asked who makes the final hiring decision. For the remaining two items, principals were asked to identify what teacher candidates typically do to either enhance or hinder their employment success. The higher the percentage; the more often it was mentioned by respondents.

#### Final Decision-Maker

Since teacher selection processes often include multiple interviews and a variety of stakeholders, an important consideration is to understand who actually makes the final hiring decision. As Table 4 shows, the primary responsibility for teacher selection remains with the principal; however, in over 40% of the searches, someone other than the principal either selects the teacher or shares in the employment decision. This level of increased delegation of responsibility for teacher selection is a trend which will warrant additional monitoring over the next several years, particularly as school administrators continue to bring other stakeholders more frequently into school-based decision-making.

Table 4.

#### Responsibility for Hiring Decision

| Strategy  | Responses of Principals |
|---|-------------------------|
| Principal   | 57.9%                   |
| Superintendent                                    | 10.3%                   |
| Board of Education                                | 10.3%                   |
| Principal with Superintendent /Personnel Director | 8.4%                    |
| School-Level Team                                 | 8.4%                    |
| District Personnel Director                       | 2.8%                    |
| Teacher Team                                      | 1.9%                    |

**Table 4**

### Qualities of Successful Candidates

Principals were also asked to identify what candidates do to enhance their success in the employment market. The most frequently identified quality was the ability to demonstrate during the interview that they were knowledgeable and up-to-date in the field (22.3%). Principals seek to hire teachers who know the latest research, trends, and best practices in the field and can explain how they have used this knowledge in either their student teaching or regular classroom experience. Principals mentioned that they ask candidates about educational issues such as balanced literacy or standards-based instruction to understand not only their knowledge but to see if they are able to link their understanding to their personal experiences. The best candidates have a strong grasp on best practice instructional methodology and the subject matter most effective at their respective levels. In addition, these candidates also understand successful classroom management and can explain how they have incorporated strategies into their teaching experience.

Teachers who present themselves as hard working and express a strong work ethic are valued. Principals (15.7%) said that they prefer candidates who are highly self-motivated, enthusiastic, and energetic as well as willing to invest the time and energy necessary to make a difference both with students and in the school. As one principal noted, they will do whatever it takes to get the job done including accepting extra duties.

In addition to being well prepared and invested, principals want to employ teachers who have strong interpersonal skills. Ten and one half percent said that candidates who appear friendly, caring, tactful, and empathetic as well as show a sense of humor are desirable. During the interview process, these individuals tend to be outgoing, people-centered, and personable. Often, they are self-reflective and eager to be part of the school team.

Mentioned, almost as often as people skills, was the importance for candidates to be student versus self-focused (9.4%). Those who discuss how much satisfaction they feel when they help students succeed and express a commitment to children and an unwavering belief that all children can learn were highly valued by principals. The strongest candidates truly respect children and enjoy being around them.

Principals also value team players (7.2%). They are looking to hire teachers who see themselves as part of the school team and have the positive personality necessary to collaborate with colleagues. Not only must they exhibit a willingness to work in a team setting, but also must see themselves invested in the best interests of the school.

Nearly as important as a team perspective are communication skills. Seven percent of the responses referenced the value of strong verbal and written communication. Candidates who are articulate, show that they can express themselves well with adults and children alike, and can focus their responses during the interview enhance their candidacy.

Finally, two other qualities emerged. Candidates who present themselves as having a passion for and commitment to children (4.6%) and those who appear to be self-learners (4.3%) are valued.

### Hindrances to Success

While some candidates enhance their chances, others hinder their selection. Personal appearance (16%) was identified as one of the two most common reasons that candidates were unsuccessful. More specifically,

casual or distractive dress, unkempt clothing and appearance, gum chewing, and revealing clothing were cited as substantial deterrents.

The same percentage of comments indicated a lack of preparation hindered employment success. Candidates who do not research the school district or position, are not prepared to answer even the most basic questions, have little to say, provide vague or “cookie cutter” answers, or tend to ramble are often quickly dismissed from consideration. Similarly, individuals who do not answer the questions asked or fail to elaborate on their responses are screened out early.

Almost as frequently mentioned as a hindrance was a candidate’s lack of knowledge (15.1%). Those who are not up-to-date on the latest best practices and emerging trends, provide shallow responses to instructional methodology, curriculum, or assessment questions, are unfamiliar with how to work with student diversity, and have a poor undergraduate academic record are undesirable.

In addition to a lack of knowledge, principals reported that communication skill problems exclude a candidate (10.7%). Examples of common mistakes are:

- Poor use of written and oral language;
- Limited vocabulary;
- Immature language choice;
- Inability to create a positive dialog with the interviewer or interview committee members;
- Inarticulate responses;
- Over talking; and,
- Poor body language.

Finally, principals noted that those who make unprofessional comments during the interview stage are rejected (3.4%). Examples include:

- Speaking negatively about former students, teachers, administrators, districts, or student teaching;
- Commenting that they do not like to work cooperatively;
- Presenting a negative attitude and being critical of authority; and,
- Expressing inflexibility.

#### Limitations

Since this survey which was distributed to a random sample of Illinois principals, generalizations are limited to Illinois. Caution should also be exercised in drawing conclusions from the study data which had a 35.7% response rate. Those who did not complete the survey may have responded differently to particular items. Also, qualitative responses may be somewhat inconsistent. Only through replication of this study in other states and with broader samples may transfer of findings be possible.

#### Summary

The primary purpose of this study was to understand Illinois principals’ perceptions on practices in teacher selection. Results of the study may be useful for both school administrators who seek to employ outstanding faculty members, teacher candidates, and professors in educational leadership programs who prepare school administrators. As the employment market data have indicated, the need for teachers varies substantially depending upon grade level and subject as well as the type and location of the school district. With principals under great pressure today to improve schools and increase student achievement (Kersten & Israel, 2005), the selection of faculty members in this highly competitive employment market is crucial to their success, particularly in certain areas of the country and at grade level or in subject areas where candidate demand exceeds supply. Both employers and candidates must recognize and weigh these market factors if they are to be successful in the employment market.

In addition, this study was designed to identify the latest practices in teacher selection. Principals who hope to attract and employ outstanding teachers must not only know the employment market but also understand how best to recruit and select faculty members if they hope to build a highly competent, professional faculty. A thorough understanding of best practices in teacher hiring, including recruitment strategies and interview process components, can facilitate faculty selection.



The wisdom offered by experienced principals will provide valuable information to both those hoping to find a teaching position but other administrative colleagues. Understanding what candidates do to either enhance or hinder their selection is useful information for those preparing to enter the job market as well as hiring administrators.

#### Implications for Professors of Educational Leadership

This section includes ideas which professors in educational leadership may want to consider as they design graduate coursework and prepare educational leaders whose personal success as well as that of the school may often linked to the quality of the teaching faculty. Since school administrators may need a thorough understanding of the overall employment market if they are to recruit and employ highly skilled faculty members, educational leadership professors may want to consider including research data on the employment market as essential content, particularly in personnel management courses. In addition, they may want to structure assignments and class activities to require leadership candidates to study employment market data at both the local and national levels. This information will be very useful for administrators to consider as they delineate their teacher selection processes including timelines.

In addition to the understanding the employment market, it is also important for future administrators to recognize the recruitment practices and selection processes regularly employed in the field. Data from the study show that teacher selection processes are growing in complexity and sophistication. Future leaders need to be cognizant of the most up-to-date information on all aspects of the teacher selection process. Since successful practices vary somewhat from district to district, graduate students should be exposed to a variety of approaches ranging from the traditional to commercially developed structured interview models such as Ventures in Excellence from Ventures in Excellence, Inc. and the Teacher Perceiver from the Gallup Organization (Kersten & Pauli, 2007).

In addition to researching how other school districts design and implement their selection processes, professors might invite practicing administrator to share their experiences and wisdom on both their selection processes and their knowledge of successful and unsuccessful candidates. These practicing administrators could be invited to conduct include in-class teacher interview simulations to demonstrate their knowledge and experience. This information would be invaluable to beginning administrators who, even during their first month in an administrative position, may find themselves responsible for one of the most important decision they will make - selecting faculty members. In addition, internship experiences, whether linked to a specific graduate course or as part of a full-time internship program, could include opportunities to observe and hopefully participate in all aspects of the teacher selection process.

Finally, the employment of teachers is more than a mechanical process. As with almost any aspect of school leadership, a myriad of social, political, and legal issues may become intertwined throughout the teacher selection process. Professors may want to provide students with the content knowledge necessary to minimize legal and political employment pitfalls. A particularly effective instructional approach would be to include case study activities designed to expose school level administrators to common employment selection issues they are likely to face. By addressing these situations before they actually assume a building-level administrative role, future administrators can develop an understanding of the issues and leadership strategies they need to succeed before they encounter their first selection process.

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