

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: June 2, 2011

Districts Scrutinizing Teaching Applicants' Potential

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#)

Click on the link to the listing for “Ms. O,” and up pops a video with the 1st grade teacher leading a lesson on units of measurement using yellow strings of yarn: It takes one student in the video six steps to walk to the end of one strand, eight steps to the end of the second.

Near the end of the class, the students repeat a chant Ms. O has devised: “When you want to measure, you have to remember—it can be longer, it can be shorter.”

Click on another link and find a high school math teacher, whose geometry lesson draws on the District of Columbia’s notoriously hard-to-navigate traffic circles.

A third link takes the viewer to a high school history teacher putting students into groups to discuss the causes of the Revolutionary War—and analyze alternative courses of action.

All three 30-minute clips are actually teacher auditions, a key part of an online database premiering this summer in the District of Columbia school system that helps principals make determinations about which teacher-candidates to ask in for a formal interview.

The system is part of the 45,000-student district’s ambitious attempt to overhaul the process for hiring teachers to make it both rigorous and more useful.

“It signals to candidates that DCPS is a special place to work and takes teaching very seriously,” said Benjamin Lindy, the manager of teacher-selection design. “All of this is designed so that we present useful and distilled information to principals so they can make the final decisions about who teaches in their buildings.”

A handful of urban districts, such as Denver, Pittsburgh, and Tulsa, Okla., are taking similar steps to reorient their central human-resources offices toward what’s being called “strategic hiring.” The efforts consist of collecting a more-robust set of information on candidates, developing stronger relationships with teacher-preparation programs, and tracking new hires to determine their success in the classroom. Foundations are playing an important role in the efforts, too: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s teacher-quality funding is providing support for the work in Pittsburgh, the District of Columbia, and Tulsa. Denver’s overhaul builds on local funding from the Janus Education Alliance, a public-private partnership, and from national players, such as the Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation, among others. Although research indicates that there is no foolproof way to tell on the front end who will make a stellar teacher, human-resources officers contend that being more deliberative about hiring reinforces a message about the value placed on high-quality teaching, they say.

“You can’t afford to bring just anyone in. Every single hire is important to bring into the workforce individuals with the potential to raise the level of effectiveness,” said Jody Bucheit Spolar, the chief human-resources officer for the 26,000-student Pittsburgh district.

Raising the Bar

For many of the districts, putting an eye on hiring practices also has entailed a fundamental shift toward

serving schools' personnel needs and away from transactional work, like processing licensing renewals and determining "highly qualified" teacher status.

"In the past, the HR mandates came out of the 5th floor of the office, disconnected with what was going on in the schools or what the needs were," said Shayne Spaulton, the chief human-resources officer for the 80,000-student Denver district.

Teacher hiring is an object lesson in that disconnect, a peremptory exercise frequently consisting of a background check and a review of transcripts, licensing test scores, and a resume. Teachers that pass those benchmarks are then placed in the pool of candidates principals can select for interviews.

Such mechanisms generally don't take into account a prior record of success—or for novices, provide an indication that they have the potential to be successful teachers given the right supports, according to Elizabeth Arons, a New York-based human-resources consultant for school districts.

Ms. Arons, who headed New York City's human-resources department between 2004 and 2010, said many districts don't collect even basic data about hiring patterns—such as ratio of applicants-to-open-teaching position—and that the data they do have aren't directly related to teaching skills. She recalled recently asking one district's HR officers what they could say definitely about their hires.

"They said, 'Well, we can say no one has a criminal record,'"

Ms. Arons recounted. "And I said, 'That's our criteria? Can we up the stakes a bit?'"

No Silver Bullet

If the idea of strategic hiring makes sense, it's complicated by the fact that predicting who will go on to be an excellent teacher is a relatively imprecise science.

Researchers have studied a variety of teacher characteristics for their effects on achievement, but most of those characteristics have fairly weak correlation to student performance.

One 2009 study by a team of teacher-quality scholars found that New York City teachers' performance on the Haberman

Pre Screener, a commercial instrument, and on a test of math pedagogical content knowledge, appeared modestly correlated to student outcomes. It also found that teachers with a specific set of cognitive or noncognitive skills appeared to be somewhat more effective, on average, than their peers.

Research has yet to identify any one "silver bullet" feature that strongly predicts which teachers will go on to do well or poorly, noted Jonah Rockoff, an associate professor of business at Columbia University and one of the authors of the 2009 study.

Nevertheless, Mr. Rockoff argues that it makes sense to use the measures that are available, primarily because the tools are a relatively inexpensive way to improve overall quality, compared to mechanisms

HIRING PROCESS

The District of Columbia's new teacher-hiring model contains several distinct phases.

1. Online application: Candidates submit a variety of information, including responses to two essay prompts.
2. Pedagogical content-knowledge test: The candidate must analyze a student's work (on an essay question or math problem, for instance), determine where the student is falling short, and devise a strategy for improving the necessary skills.
3. Interview and model lesson: The candidate has a 30-minute interview and teaches a short model lesson, during which district officials look for certain skills and traits. A candidate can also submit a 10-minute video of his or her teaching.
4. Teaching audition: The candidate teaches a 30-minute lesson, in a District of Columbia public school, geared to an objective provided by the host teacher. The audition is video-recorded and made available to principals.

The district can "fast track" to the fourth stage those candidates who have a track record of success in other systems, documented by references and student-achievement data.

SOURCE: District of Columbia Public Schools

such as teacher dismissals.

“If you have a set of indicators that are easy to administer, they can give you a small edge about who to put at the front of the line,” Mr. Rockoff said. “Once the teacher is in the system, to get them to do anything is costly.”

The basic idea reflects hiring practices used by popular training programs, such as Teach For America. By analyzing student-achievement information from its teachers’ classrooms, the New York City-based organization has refined its selection process to identify attributes associated with its most successful teachers. At the top of the list: prior success as leaders and high achievement in previous academic or work experiences.

The New York City-based New Teacher Project, another alternative teacher program, has a similar system, drawing on interviews, writing samples, a short model-teaching segment, and a group discussion.

“We know we’re not going to figure it all out through selection, but we continue to focus on how we can increase the odds of the folks we’re bringing in being highly effective,” said Gregory L. Vincent, the group’s partner for program support and development.

An emerging body of empirical **research** also suggests that observations of teachers do correlate with student achievement, Mr. Rockoff noted, so auditions that give a sense of a teacher’s skills, such as those being tested in the District of Columbia, appear to be a promising addition to the mix.

Auditions of that type appear to be comparatively rare in current district practices. Nationally representative data on teacher-selection methods are hard to come by, but what information exists suggests that fewer than a third of new hires are observed teaching during the hiring process, Mr. Rockoff said. The District of Columbia’s 30-minute taped teaching auditions are the capstone of a four-part hiring process. They are paired with teachers’ scores on several other measures, including an “error analysis” exercise meant to highlight pedagogical content knowledge. (See chart.)

A Wider Net

For school districts, the move toward strategic hiring extends beyond collecting better information for principals, but also in ensuring a pool flush with applicants year round—something that has required a greater cultivation of talent pipelines.

Leaders in Denver have worked to increase the number of pipelines to teaching, which now include traditional education programs, a district-sponsored teacher “residency” program in which teacher-candidates have a yearlong apprenticeship before entering an urban school, and alternative routes through the Denver Teaching Fellows program and TFA.

“By broadening our pool, we provided a community of exchange for best practices in teacher preparation, beyond simply providing a pool of talent for schools to draw from,” Ms. Spaulton, the HR director, said. Both Denver and Tulsa have moved up their teacher-hiring timelines earlier in the year to recruit promising applicants early and to reduce the number of positions left unfilled before school starts.

In Tulsa, officials have tried to clear out some of the administrative hurdles facing principals by creating four “HR partner” positions directly responsible for meeting school administrators’ needs, such as an unexpected vacancy.

“It used to take six to eight weeks to fill a vacancy because it took so long for a principal to articulate the

need through the bureaucracy,” said Roberta Cole Ellis, the chief human-capital officer for the 41,000-student Tulsa school system.

Under the new system, new hires are a phone call away, and the partners also attend associate superintendents’ meetings so they can anticipate upcoming needs.

The changes in Tulsa have spread beyond the central office. For example, a major supplier of teachers to the district, Oklahoma State University, will begin using the same teacher-disposition instrument as an entry bar to a new urban-teaching program to debut this fall—a change that will bring it into alignment with the district’s hiring process.

And in Pittsburgh, officials are casting a wider net by sending “recruitment ambassadors” to education schools at the top of national rankings. The district has had good results with science teachers prepared at a local university, so it plans to increase its recruitment efforts at that campus, said Jessica M. Brazier, the recruitment coordinator for the district.

Challenges Remain

One of the pieces most districts still hope to improve is making sure that their hiring systems continue to improve over time by using student-achievement data in the mold of TFA to isolate parts of the process that most seem to indicate classroom success.

Many of the districts have plans to connect their hiring systems to their teacher-evaluation systems, but those are largely still under development. Still other districts have adopted pieces such as the prescreening instruments, but are not tracking to see how well the results correlate with outcomes.

“People are buying Haberman and Gallup [Teacher Insight] without the capacity to externally validate the measures,” Mr. Rockoff said, referring to those screening instruments.

Finally, he said, the systems are dependent on mutual trust between principals and the central office—not always an easy task.

“It takes leadership on the part of a central administration and buy-in from the principals to respect those choices,” Mr. Rockoff, the Columbia University professor. “The principal has to trust the district that they’re going to send a good pool of candidates based on a bunch of information that’s reliable.”

Ms. Spaulton, in Denver, also highlighted that tension.

“It’s really geared at providing information and resources to schools,” she said. “We heard back from schools saying, ‘We don’t want an extremely culled-through list of candidates we’re allowed to interview; we want to see the complete list.’ ”

Mr. Lindy of the District of Columbia schools said that principals provided some of the most important feedback for the development of the new hiring criteria, one possible solution.

Finally, there is the teacher labor market to consider: The ability to be choosy about candidates works only when there is a surfeit of talent looking to enter the profession.

“You can be very selective right now in who you’re picking in some of these urban districts,” concluded Ms. Arons, the consultant, “but that’s certainly not the case in all areas.”

Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education.