

Screening Teachers And Substitute Teachers: Best methods for use in prescreening applicants to predict post-employment success

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Many would do well in the classroom but have never considered teaching, yet not everyone should be in the classroom. With the extreme cost of hiring permanent teachers with limited district resources, hiring the right person, at the right time, for the right position, is a challenge for districts from the largest to the smallest.

Substitute teaching is no different. Hiring the right individual for the right position at the right time is a key component of substitute teacher management. Who is the right person? What are the characteristics of the right person? What is the right position? When is the right time?

Can the same tools used to screen permanent teachers be used in screening substitute teachers? Should a substitute teacher be someone who is a perfect candidate for a permanent teaching position? Are the skill sets the same for substitute teachers as they are for permanent teachers?

Passing a screening tends to be more endurance than competency. For example, if a candidate passes a background check and attends a mandatory orientation, he or she may be placed in the classroom. Assessment of a substitute's ability to perform is not even a question.

This article addresses commercial screeners for permanent teachers and substitute teacher screening recommendations.

Commercial screeners

Currently, several common selection practices are being used in the United States. Available commercial screeners include:

- Distinctive Competencies of Successful Teachers
- The Haberman Model—The Star Teacher Interview
- The Gallup Teacher Perceiver—TeacherInsight
- Ventures for Excellence

Distinctive Competencies of Successful Teachers focuses on discovering 13 competencies that a teacher should possess. Trained interviewers can detect and rank candidates based on these areas:

1. *Commitment*—This teacher is committed to having a significant positive impact in the lives of students.
2. *Positive Associations*—This teacher has a high awareness of the power of positive relationships, whether it is for soliciting help or helping others.
3. *Role Impact*—This teacher remains consistently aware of the role modeling responsibility of a teacher.
4. *Performance Expectation*—This teacher has a high performance expectation of self and others.
5. *Organization/Preparation*—This teacher develops plans with the student in mind.
6. *Communicator*—This teacher is a listener.
7. *Sensitivity*—This teacher takes specifically designed steps to discover what others are feeling and thinking, and at the same time remains respectful of another's privacy.
8. *Imaginator*—This teacher is inventive and innovative.
9. *Stability/Objectivity*—This teacher's presence provides a calming, reassuring effect on students.
10. *Climate Focus*—This teacher's behavior, expectations, and thorough planning provide an environment where teaching and learning are most effective.
11. *Learning Activator*—This teacher is enthusiastic, energetic, and can work long hours.
12. *Opportunist*—This teacher uses every classroom situation, even conflict, as an opportunity to help the student grow.
13. *Student Focus*—This teacher sees each student as an individual, with many individuals making up a class.

The *Star Teacher Interview* from the Haberman Educational Foundation predicts which teachers will stay and succeed, and who will be unsuccessful or quit. Scenario-based interview questions are given to provide a clear picture of the candidate's beliefs about teaching at-risk students. It is intended to predict how a candidate will perform in the teaching profession. The Star Teacher Interview questions focus on finding a teacher who will be able to handle stress, discipline, unmotivated students, and those who learn differently. The assessment specifically includes (The Haberman Educational Foundation, 2003):

- *Persistence*—predicts the propensity to work with children who present learning and behavioral problems on a daily basis without giving up on them for the full 180-day work year.
- *Organization and Planning*—refers to how and why star teachers plan, as well as their ability to manage complex classroom organizations.
- *Values Student Learning*—predicts the degree to which the responses reflect a willingness to make student learning the teacher's highest priority.
- *Theory to Practice*—predicts the respondent's ability to see the practical implications of generalizations as well as the concepts reflected by specific practices.
- *At-Risk Students*—predicts the likelihood that the respondent will be able to connect with and teach students of all backgrounds and levels.
- *Approach to Students*—predicts the way the respondent will attempt to relate to students and the likelihood that this approach will be effective.
- *Survive in Bureaucracy*—predicts the likelihood that the respondent will be able to function as a teacher in a large, depersonalized organization.
- *Explains Teacher Success*—deals with the criteria the respondent uses to determine teaching success and whether these are relevant to teachers in poverty schools.
- *Explains Student Success*—deals with the criteria the respondent uses to determine students' success and whether these are relevant to students in poverty schools.
- *Fallibility*—refers to how the teacher plans to deal with mistakes in the classroom.

The *TeacherInsight* assessment takes about 40 minutes to complete and is based on Gallup's Teacher Perceiver. The report is based on an applicant's responses and includes a score that predicts the potential for teaching success based on talents. Some districts incorporate the scores into applicant tracking systems currently in place. Trained interviewers must interpret the candidate's scores. The following are the topics in which teachers are assessed using TeacherInsight (The Gallup Organization, 2005):

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- Achiever
 - Stimulator
 - Developer
 - Relator
 - Team player
 - Responsibility
 - Command
 - Input drive
 - Self-discipline

Ventures for Excellence has a 26-question screener that is administered and provides a probability of success for districts to formulate and confirm their own understandings of excellence in teacher attitudes, skills and behaviors. Trained interviewers are able to clearly identify the teacher's sense of purpose, human relations skills, teaching strategies, intended learner outcomes, and unique facilitator skills (Ventures for Excellence, Inc., 2004).

Research focusing on screeners

The RAND Corporation published a study in which six large urban school districts provided recommendations on teacher selection processes (Wise et al., 1987). Of the recommendations on screening applicants, RAND suggests placing priority on:

- High academic qualifications
- Interpersonal competence
- Potential for teaching performance

However, objective measures are imperfect indicators of teaching performance. A teacher must meet the needs of a particular school. Therefore, as school districts systemize and rationalize screening procedures, they should leave some degree of freedom for decision making at the school site.

One study carried out by Chesek (1999) supported the attributes of Haberman by comparing 12 teachers who are described as de-escalators or escalators by their school administrators according to school violence and the Urban Teacher Selection Interview also from Haberman. A high correlation is found between outstanding teachers in the interview and characteristics that administrators find common to teachers who de-escalate violence and aggression.

Brown (2004) performed a study focusing on the impact of the Gallup Teacher Perceiver Interview on hiring teachers as perceived by select administrators in the Alamo Heights Independent School District. His dissertation notes that a significant correlation was found between the Teacher Perceiver Interview (TPI) and

administrators' evaluation of teachers in overall effectiveness, which includes positive student relations, effective instructional practice, a desire to help all children, and overall effectiveness as a teacher.

He also reports that 96.7% of teachers who were "recommended" by the Teacher Perceiver Interview were asked to stay as an employee as compared to 64.2% of those who were hired, yet were "not recommended" for hire.

Choi and Ahn (2003) from Michigan State University concluded:

...Our conceptual analysis indicates that the different measures of teacher subject-matter knowledge yield inconsistent relationships between teacher subject-matter knowledge and student outcomes. Careful examination of research procedures is required in order to understand the findings on the relationship between teacher subject-matter knowledge and the quality of teaching. In particular, any meta-analyst needs to develop effective ways to synthesize findings yielded by different measures. Also, policy makers should determine educational policy in consideration of the various approaches.

In a similar study also conducted by Michigan State University, Metzger (2003) states:

...commercial teacher interviews are very problematic as a potential indicator of teacher qualification. Not enough instrument design data is available to the public to independently verify their validity, reliability, or effectiveness. Furthermore, their complete reliance on measuring a candidate's espoused beliefs and their avoidance of teacher subject matter knowledge calls into question their value for schools, which must also be concerned with teacher practice and content-area ability. On the other hand, commercial teacher interviews are certainly no worse than unstructured personal interviews that administrators conduct on their own. All administrators are interested in the espoused beliefs, personal motivations, and effective traits of the teachers they may hire, and they will certainly inquire about these issues even in an informal, unstructured interview. If commercial teacher interviews are limited exclusively to this function then they may provide hiring administrators with a standardized organization for identifying new teachers who express a certain pedagogical

orientation. Of course, there is a distinct possibility that commercial teacher interviews are no better than unstructured personal interviews that administrators conduct on their own—and commercial interviews cost a school district thousands of dollars to use. Until the validity and reliability of commercial teacher interviews are substantiated in studies made available to the public, schools are advised not to spend increasingly scarce funds on them.

Shirk (1997) concludes that “When discrimination is used with a continuum of groups, forced into two groups, then the conceptual model falls short.”

Young and Delli (2002) have the most rigorous, yet very limited study on teacher screening. Using the Gallup Teacher Perceiver Interview (TPI) or a shortened TPI to predict success as a teacher, and a 10-point scale for rating teachers in each by the principal’s observations (subjective) and absenteeism records (objective). Even though results are limited, they do provide a foundation for further research. This research also validates a relationship between pre-employment decisions and post-employment outcomes. They state that until further research has been conducted to find correlation between pre-employment decisions and post-employment performance outcomes, using the TPI may be the best choice available. Perhaps the biggest reason is because it forces interviewers to be consistent between potential teachers.

STI’s Philosophy

From the beginnings of the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University (STI/USU) in 1995, the focus of study has been on the skills of substitute teaching. Should the focus be on *educating* substitute teachers, or *training* them? Training might imply skill labor as opposed to professional labor. Notwithstanding that comparison, STI/USU chose to *train* substitute teachers; taking educated individuals who have not been teaching and train them to temporarily replace a permanent teacher in the classroom.

The roles of the permanent teacher and the substitute teacher are so different. Even though the permanent teacher is absent from the classroom, he is not released from his responsibility for his class. Substitutes however, should only do what the permanent teacher expects, not what they would do if it was their classroom. Perhaps many permanent teachers would rather not have an individual with teaching experience because they tend not to follow the lesson plan.

So, perhaps a well-trained, skilled individual will succeed better in the classroom.

Popularity of commercial screeners for permanent teachers might indicate their effectiveness in assisting districts to choose competent teachers. However, the effectiveness of any screener is a challenge to pinpoint based on whose perception substitutes are being judged against. A SubCaller for example, might want a substitute teacher to always be available for employment, a principal might want a substitute teacher to not send students to the office, a teacher might want a substitute teacher to only substitute for them and no one else. Sometimes these needs are conflicting. Screening could become more subjective based on one's opinion.

"What's best for the students?" is possibly the best question to ask during the entire process. Major categories found in most substitute teacher application processes include educational/professional background, personal background, and specific competencies. An employer needs to understand these specific skills to be able to screen for them.

Skills based approach to screening substitute teachers

Skills screening could be similar between permanent teachers and substitute teachers. Substitute teachers name their greatest challenges as classroom management and worrying about being sued. Administrators desire substitute teachers to be available to arrive early, be prepared (which includes being flexible), and act and dress professionally.

Permanent teachers identify their favorite substitute teachers as those who have a SubPack or a resource kit that they can pull something out in a moment's notice. Students claim that they really want someone to teach them and not waste the day (*Substitute Teacher Handbook K-12*, 2004).

Therefore, five basic skills that substitute teachers need to possess to be successful in the classroom are (*Substitute Teacher Handbook K-12*, 2004):

1. Manage a classroom and create a learning environment
2. Teach effective lessons
3. Be prepared and professional
4. Understand legal, educational, and special education issues
5. Use fill-in activities appropriately from a SubPack or resource kit

Classroom management has more to do with self-management, which greatly increases the probability that students will act appropriately. The five distinct skills of classroom management are the ability to:

1. Get and keep students on task by starting the learning immediately and managing by walking around the room, monitoring students
2. Maintain a high rate of positive teacher to student interactions and risk-free student response opportunity
3. Teach expectations
4. Respond noncoercively
5. Avoid being trapped

Teaching effective lessons comes from the ability to implement successful strategies such as brainstorming, concept mapping, and the appropriate use of questioning skills. The more a substitute teacher can present stimulating lessons, the less chance students will get off task.

Being prepared and professional is what many screeners call “with-it-ness.” Substitute teachers need to arrive early, get to know the school, and be prepared for any situation that might arise.

The *legal aspects* of teaching, including substitute teaching, have become of great interest in recent years. Teachers do not want to get sued for something that they did not know they were not supposed to do. Districts are also very concerned that substitutes do not get a school into trouble. Common sense might not be so *common*. Also, substitute teachers need to know how to meet the challenges of multicultural classrooms and those students with special needs.

Fill-in activities need to be used appropriately and in a timely manner. Substitute teachers need to have an adequate supply of these fill-in activities for students who finish early, as five-minute fillers just before the bell rings, or as whole class activities when no lesson plans are available.

Interview

Live interview questions are an excellent way to determine a substitute teacher’s ability and understanding of successful skills. With open-ended questions that allow a candidate to express her own teaching experience or what she would do if a certain situation arose.

For example, by asking the candidate to describe what she would do if two students were off task, the interviewer can numerically rank the candidate’s response whether they responded in a noncoercive

and positive manner, or a forceful way. Or better yet, if the candidate describes the difference between consequential behavior and inconsequential behavior that can be ignored. A candidate that has not had any experience might need to be instructed concerning some skills and techniques then asked how to apply them in the classroom during the interview. Even though these situations are hypothetical the interviewer will be able to determine if the candidate has the desired “with-it-ness.”

Dr. John Nolan (personal communication, June 1, 2005) of Millburn Township School District in New Jersey uses a 40-minute interview time with each substitute teacher as a personal one-on-one training to help the substitute teacher succeed. The interview is more than a screening, it is an opportunity to instruct.

Online Screening

Since September 2004, Boston Public Schools (BPS) has required training, an online assessment, and a SubDiploma (Substitute Teaching Institute, 2005) prior to a candidate picking up an application for employment. Regardless of prior experience, each substitute teacher must complete the training, take the online assessment, and present his diploma to the personnel office. The school district has set a passing score of 85% on the SubAssessment. This assessment is an addition to the screening practices currently being implemented by Boston Public Schools and not replacing any step.

Barbara McGann, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources at BPS, claims that there is “...definitely a reduction in complaints, terminations, etc.,” since the program was implemented (personal communication, August 11, 2005). This screening is required by BPS, yet paid for by substitute teachers.

The *SubInstructor* quizzes applicants on the skills presented in the *Substitute Teacher Handbook* (2004), *SubInstructor* CD, and any live training based on the five basic substitute teacher skills presented earlier.

In September 2005, STI/USU began field-testing an online screening tool for districts to use. This screening, entitled *SubStrength Finder*, is a pretest to the *SubInstructor*. Questions are based on the five skills, but are asked without using terminology presented in the training. The *SubStrength Finder* was developed using a committee of HR directors, SubManagers, and administrators from around the country.

Focus for the *SubStrength Finder* was placed on the skills of

substitute teachers, leaving the aptitude-type commercial screeners to play a significant role in providing feedback for districts as well.

The *SubStrength Finder* pilot phase will gather information from participating school districts to determine if the screener helps predict the candidate's success in the classroom. Results from this study will be completed in the fall of 2006.

Conclusion

Paper screening is valuable in obtaining background information to ensure the candidate meets the educational degree requirements and does not have a criminal record. Commercial and district specific interview questions to determine "with-it-ness" by candidates, and a focus on skills training provides an added layer of screening prior to candidates entering the classroom.

The use of online screening tools is also an excellent option to assess skills required by substitute teachers. Online screening provides districts the opportunity to screen hundreds of applicants prior to a district spending precious funding on criminal background checks, personnel time in personal interviews, and training.

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