

The Impact of Talent in Our School Districts

By Richard Harding, Ph.D., Kenexa

The Oxford American Dictionary of Current English defines talent as a “special aptitude or faculty.” If you are ever in a room with 10 or more people, ask them to take out a piece of paper and a pencil and take a quick pop poll of sorts. Ask them to write the name of the first person that comes to mind when you say the word “talent.” Usually eight or nine of the people will name an athlete, musician, singer, author or someone with high visibility. Very few people will name a teacher. Now ask that same group to name a person who has had a significant impact on their life. Now chances are good you may get several people who will actually name a teacher. When asked what that teacher did to stand out in his or her mind, the person is likely to describe someone who fits the definition of talent. Wouldn't it be great if every student who goes through your school systems would list at least one teacher as having a significant impact on their life?

The question then becomes “how do you identify those teachers who can really impact a child's life?” The best predictors are more than experience, college grade point average, credentials, and the school they graduated from. The answer lies in what great teachers have within them that not only allows them, but also compels them, to teach with such effectiveness.

By early spring, school districts usually have a pretty accurate idea of how many teachers they need to hire and in what disciplines for the next school year. For some districts, this is a stressful time that causes many challenges, particularly if the school district is located in a less than desirable location or has openings in hard-to-fill teaching areas. With the number of available teachers lacking, compounded by the need for school districts to find quality teachers, replacement can be even more taxing.

There is no immediate indication that the school district hiring problem will let up. In a study completed by the National Center for Education Statistics, the projection for teacher replacement over

the next 11 years is as high as 2.7 million due to teacher attrition, retirement, increased student enrollment and efforts to reduce class sizes. The normal flow of teacher replacement is also impacted by the federal requirements to place a “highly qualified” teacher in every classroom by 2005.

Finding highly qualified teachers is difficult, but keeping them is arguably just as difficult. The annual turnover rate of most professions is 11 percent, while the annual turnover rate for teachers is 16 percent; much of the turnover is due to job dissatisfaction, as well as poor salaries according to a number of studies. As a result, many school districts are challenged to make sure they find the best teachers and then use best practices to keep them in the profession. Statistics show that almost one third of teachers leave the teaching field after three years and almost forty percent leave after five years, as cited in a study by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Resumes help to ascertain if the teacher holds the right degree, the appropriate endorsements, and relevant experiences; however, resumes only hold part of the answer in teacher selection. The resume will not answer questions, such as whether the candidate will fit well in the district, work productively with other teachers and administrators, relate positively to parents, and provide a superior learning experience for students.

It is at this time that the school district has an opportunity to look beyond the resume and seek partnerships with other organizations for help in pre-employment assessment of future candidates. There are many tools available that will help the recruiting team determine who, among the many hundreds of applications it receives, has the highest potential to provide that superior learning experience and stay with the district. The screening process determines if a candidate has the high performing traits that the school is looking for to contribute to the overall needs

of the district as well as other traits that match the school culture. This process has been proven to match the right applicant to the right job and schools benefit by increasing the probability of their success and increased retention in the school district. Such a tool will help the district choose the right applicant who will provide a superior learning experience and advance the overall goals of the school district. By finding and hiring the right candidate, school districts may be able to weather the exodus of truly great teachers and increase the exodus of the poor teachers.

Consider Wake County Public Schools in Raleigh, North Carolina, which utilizes an automated web-based system to help identify potential in teacher candidates. Kenexa-Wake County Selector™ consists of questions that are designed to elicit responses that help the district understand the personality of the teacher, their biographical history, their problem solving ability and their responses to the various situations they may encounter in the school. Responses to the assessment help the district determine who should be brought in for interviews, and allow for a cost effective and efficient means of screening a large number of candidates.

The Selector was developed by studying some of the top teachers in the district and holding focus groups to understand more about who they are, how they work with students and what makes them exceptional teachers. Through this research, a blueprint was designed to test various hypothesized traits to learn what traits actually constitute an outstanding teacher. The tool was pilot tested on a large group of teachers within the district and norms were then calibrated to provide a comparison for candidates as they complete the Selector. Once the candidate successfully completes the Selector, they are then moved through the remaining steps in the selection and hiring process. The results of this Selector are part of the decision making process of which candidate to hire.

The Selector tool employed by Wake County Public Schools has undergone a rigorous research developmental process. It provides the district with evaluations of the candidates' work motivations, beliefs, relationships, values, situational judgment responses, and their orientation to the student. By understanding the candidate's talent prior to hiring, the district can make a more informed decision about those 'intangibles' that make up truly great teachers. They know in advance if the candidate has the appropriate endorsements, the appropriate degrees and more, which gives them information beyond what can be found in examining the resume and work histories. Finally, by identifying the "right" teacher early in the process, the district can cut the time to hire as well as the obvious costs of hiring teachers and the hidden costs of a "poor" hire. ■

About the Author

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Richard E. Harding, Ph.D., is an executive consultant, director of research and principal at Kenexa. Dr. Harding has more than 24 years of experience specializing in validity and reliability of assessments, selection and development of associates, associate surveys, multi-rater surveys, and business outcomes modeling and linkages. He has consulted with numerous Fortune 500 companies in the United States and Europe. Before joining Kenexa, Harding was director of research for The Gallup Organization for almost 17 years. He also taught science and mathematics at the secondary school level, is an adjunct professor for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and has taught numerous research and statistics classes at the graduate and undergraduate level. Dr. Harding is the author of over 300 proprietary validity studies and has offered affidavit support and testimony for clients in legal venues.

Dr. Harding is a licensed psychologist, and a member of the American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychologists and Sigma Xi Research Society. He holds a Doctorate degree in psychological and cultural studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with an emphasis in statistics, research and program evaluation.

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