

SELECTING HIGH-TALENT TEACHERS

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With more than half of U.S. teachers set to retire in the next decade, it's estimated that we will need roughly 2 million new teachers in this timeframe. Now is the time to evaluate whether different strategies and processes are needed to select this next generation of teachers. Organizations worldwide face similar challenges when it comes to hiring and challenging the status quo. On examining its hiring strategy, Google found that neither their traditional interviews nor the typical employee characteristics predicted job performance.¹

Similarly, teaching experience, degrees, and certification are usually required in applications and often serve as criteria to sort candidates for interviews and hiring.² However, research findings spanning the last two decades seriously call into question whether these characteristics truly help identify excellent teachers. Taking a deeper look at traditional elements of selecting and hiring teachers, the research indicates the following:

- **Teaching Experience** – Students of beginning teachers with fewer than three years of experience demonstrate lower learning gains than more experienced teachers. But most of the effect appears in the first year or two of teaching, and teacher experience beyond three years seems to have little or no effect on student achievement.³
- **Advanced Degrees** – The evidence suggests that degrees in the subject taught and content knowledge, particularly in math, affect student learning. However, little or no relationship between master's degrees and student learning is evident.⁴
- **Certification** – The majority of studies found no evidence of an effect on student learning between regularly certified, alternative certified, and non-certified teachers. However, some evidence exists demonstrating a relationship between math certification and greater student gains.⁵

As with Google, the easy-to-quantify and seemingly objective measures aren't useful metrics; yet, they are required in nearly every teacher application and used as justification for hiring one candidate over another.

Public sentiment and recent research suggest looking at more important teacher qualities, which this paper will explore.

WHAT STUDENTS NEED MOST

Teacher characteristics play an important part in describing teaching excellence for the public. In the 2012 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, roughly 1,000 U.S. adults were asked to “think about the teacher who has had the most positive influence in your life” and then to describe the teacher in three words or phrases. Table 1 compares responses in 2012 and 2010, when the same question was asked.⁶

Table 1

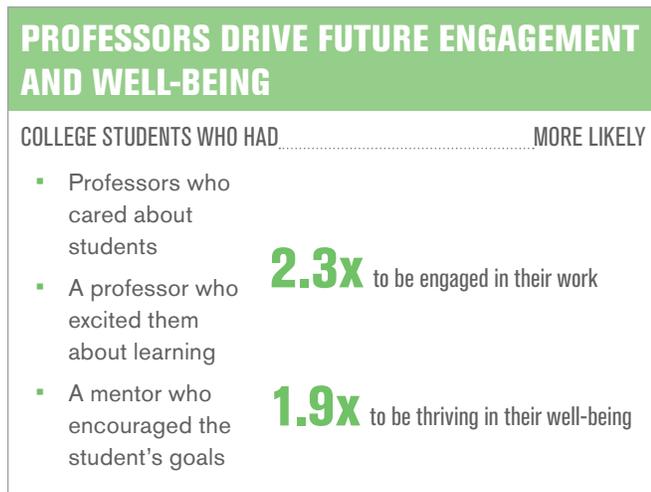
| National Totals 2012 | National Totals 2010 |
|--|---|
| (Responses in order of frequency of mention) | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring • Encouraging • Attentive/believed in me • Strict/tough/discipline • Challenging/demanding • Good/great teacher • Committed/dedicated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring • Encouraging • Interesting • Personable • Good/quality teacher/teaching • Helpful/dedicated/strict • Motivating |

The lists suggest similar experiences for these two groups of adults. Most obvious is the ranking of *caring* and *encouraging* as the most frequently cited descriptions both years. Additionally, these adults recalled teachers

who demonstrated dedication, challenged students, and maintained discipline while delivering effective instruction.

The inaugural Gallup-Purdue Index in 2014 suggests similar descriptors explain the impact of higher education on graduates' later lives. In analyzing the interviews of more than 30,000 college graduates, three factors emerge as crucial to graduates' well-being and their engagement with their jobs after leaving college. As shown in Figure 1, graduates who cite having professors who cared about them, at least one professor who excited them about learning, and a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals doubled the odds of being engaged in their work and thriving in their well-being.⁷ Great teachers, regardless of the grade level, significantly impact students' lives both immediately and in the long run. But, do principals look for these qualities when hiring teachers?

Figure 1



PRINCIPALS NEED TO LOOK BEYOND JUST SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

A study by Richard Mason and Mark Schroeder suggests that principals seek different teacher characteristics at two points in the selection process.

1. Principals decide which candidates to interview on the basis of professional qualities, such as teaching experience, college degree, certification, GPA, and letters of reference.

2. Then, principals use face-to-face interviews to assess personal qualities such as appearance, caring, enthusiasm, and communication skills.⁸

This perspective suggests that the “professional” and “personal” teacher qualities are separate categories. An exploratory study by Douglas Harris and his colleagues focusing on principals in a mid-sized Florida school district found that principals tend to look for a combination of professional and personal qualities.⁹ The professional and personal categories, and the minimal examples of teacher qualities, only begin to explain what outstanding teachers do in their classrooms.

Great teachers, regardless of the level, significantly impact students' lives both immediately and in the long run.

COMBINING KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND TALENTS

Gallup's selection work expands these concepts and makes some important distinctions between elements within the professional and personal categories. Gallup's qualitative interviews and quantitative studies of outstanding performers in a variety of fields support the principle of excellence developing through a combination of role-specific personal qualities and professional characteristics. Research specific to teachers confirms that personal qualities — such as the talent to teach — are critical to outstanding teaching. Student success comes from combining personal teaching talents with the right knowledge and skills. However, confusion often exists when knowledge, skills, and talents are assessed in teacher selection. Clarifying each may help differentiate the elements.

- **Knowledge** can be acquired through life experiences, independent learning, or in formal settings. Consequently, knowledge for a 1st grade teacher could include the framework for the reading text or when and how to respond to students experiencing reading

difficulties. At the middle and high school levels, knowledge most often means fully understanding the subject matter.

- **Skills** involve completing the basic steps in a process or task. Skill development results from breaking down a task into a sequence of steps. Excellent questioning skills, for example, include framing a question, calling on a variety of students, and providing wait time. Once the steps are practiced and internalized, the skill can be performed without much conscious thought.
- **Talents** represent a person's innate capacity for excellence. Talents emerge as recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. Teaching talents are the seemingly intangible personal qualities like caring for others, being motivated, showing enthusiasm, demonstrating creativity, being organized, and collaborating well with others that Gallup researchers measured in quantitative studies and heard in focus groups with outstanding teachers.

Talents can be developed when present, but attempts to teach a talent — such as caring for others — in its absence, result in little or no return for the effort.

In understanding knowledge, skills, and talents, the first of two common errors is believing that one or two of the elements alone assures excellence. Most of us have had teachers who were considered knowledgeable, and perhaps even experts, in their field. But some, perhaps many, were not gifted at communicating their knowledge in ways that fostered student learning. Similarly, great teachers use a wide range of skills learned and developed over time. But, if learning skills were enough, the abundance of skills training on a variety of classroom management strategies would have eliminated student discipline problems by now. At the same

time, teaching talent — without role-specific knowledge and skills — is unrealized potential. Teaching excellence only develops by combining talents with the appropriate knowledge and skills.

The second error assumes that all three elements of teaching excellence can be taught. Knowledge can be gained through classes, independent reading, interacting with others, and life experiences. Skills are teachable and usually improve with practice. But teaching talents come from innate predispositions. Talents can be developed when present. However, attempts to *teach* a talent — such as caring for others — in its absence, result in little or no return for the effort. A search for teaching excellence is most successful when we first find candidates with the natural talents we seek who have either: a) the knowledge and skills for success for the specific teaching position or b) a principal willing to invest in the teacher's development by encouraging him or her to acquire and master the necessary knowledge and skills.

**TALENT + KNOWLEDGE + SKILLS =
TEACHING EXCELLENCE**

If knowledge and skills serve as additional categories for a teacher's professional attributes, what are the teaching talents that provide a better description of the personal attributes of outstanding teachers?

HOW STUDENTS AND PRINCIPALS SEE THE TALENTS OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS

For more than 40 years, Gallup interviews have provided an assessment of teacher talents. Those interviews have used student and principal ratings¹⁰ and student achievement gains¹¹ as the basis upon which the interviews were developed. Most recently, Gallup researchers had the opportunity to gather students' and principals' views of teachers. In total, 8,900 students and 57 principals rated 238 teachers from three U.S. public school districts. The goal of this study was to examine and compare students' and principals' perceptions of outstanding teachers' talents.

Because very little research on the students' perspective exists, exploring their perspective could contribute to a better understanding of teaching talents.

Assessing Students' Perspectives

Why should we consider the student perspective? Principals' views of outstanding teachers most often inform research studies of teacher selection.¹² Researchers' reliance on principals is understandable since principals make the final decisions on hiring and evaluating teachers. Student perceptions are largely ignored in K-12 schools, even though students possess the greatest breadth and depth of knowledge regarding teachers' performance.

The Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project, sponsored by the Gates Foundation, provides the largest and most comprehensive study of student ratings of teachers currently available. Encompassing more than 1,300 teachers and 44,500 students in six urban school districts,¹³ the MET study found student surveys were predictive of student achievement gains. Furthermore, student surveys were more reliable than principal observations and value-added measures.¹⁴

Previous research by Gallup and others¹⁵ demonstrated the strong relationships between student achievement, engagement, and hope. Consequently, a team of researchers used the Gallup Student Poll items and added items previously proven effective, for a total of 33 items. The final survey item asked students to agree or disagree with the following statement: "This teacher is an excellent teacher." Students were asked to respond using a 1 to 5 scale with 1 as Strongly Disagree and 5 as Strongly Agree.

Researchers calculated average student responses to each item by teacher. They then ran correlations between the summary student rating of the teacher and the average of the individual item scores to determine which descriptors identified what the best teachers did in their classrooms.

Assessing Principals' Perspectives

The principal survey forms used in previous teacher-research studies were reviewed and items were added and deleted

by researchers experienced in teacher selection. The final survey contained 23 items and an overall rating. The final item asked principals to compare individual teachers' performance to other teachers she or he had known on the basis of "among the best," "similar to the majority," or "more like the below average" teachers with whom they had worked. Similar to the student items, the principal items for each teacher were correlated against the highest rating of "among the best" to identify the behaviors that distinguished the best teachers.

The Results: Comparing Students' and Principals' Perspectives

The decision to use two different surveys makes comparing the perspectives of students and principals more difficult; however, previous Gallup studies suggest that survey items reflective of the students' and principals' unique perspectives were required. While students see teachers for 180-plus school days, principals' views mainly come from periodic formal and informal observations in the classroom and the school-at-large. Students simply have more information upon which to draw conclusions about the teachers, and students have a deeper and more intimate understanding of teachers' work.

Important similarities and differences emerge in an analysis of the talents correlated to the "excellent teacher" assessment by students and the "among the best" designation for principals. The talents students and principals identified highlight specific teaching qualities for use in teacher selection, and they can be grouped into the following five areas.

Expectations. Perhaps the most striking similarities between students' and principals' responses are the expectations excellent teachers have. Students clearly know that excellent teachers have higher expectations of them. These teachers expect students' best effort, ask students to think rather than prepare for a test, and do not allow students to waste time in class. Principals also recognize the excellent teachers' high expectations for students, but they also note the high expectations these teachers set for themselves

in assuming responsibility for student learning and being able to influence resistant students.

Goal Setting. To reach their expectations, these teachers rely on their future orientation to encourage students' goal setting. Students describe excellent teachers as people who care about their future and that they make it clear how the learning content and/or activities can be applied in the future. This approach lays the foundation for student goal setting, supports students in finding pathways to the goals, and assists students in resolving problems. Principals perceive only the most visible parts of the goal setting and follow up, involving teachers in talking about their goals for student success, and using measurement systems to check students' progress.

School Work. Students and principals see differences between the excellent teachers and others on the basis of the school work and how it is presented. Students note that excellent teachers make the school work seem important and provide reasons behind the learning activities. Students also indicate they receive more frequent recognition for doing good school work from the teachers they rate as excellent. Students and principals describe the learning activities in the best teachers' classrooms as fun and exciting. Students note that excellent teachers encourage them to complete work by doing what they do best. Principals indicate that the best teachers use a variety of instructional practices, make allowances for individual needs, create a fun and exciting classroom, and are more knowledgeable in the subject matter or content.

Caring. As with the public-at-large and college graduates, students and principals recognize the ability of excellent teachers to demonstrate that they care about students. One means of conveying this sense of caring is through listening to students. Principals provide greater detail about the relationships. They indicate that the best teachers create positive relationships with students, appear friendly and approachable, and treat students with

respect and dignity. Moreover, principals contend that students gravitate to these teachers. Principals view the positive relationships that these teachers create extend beyond students to other staff members and parents.

Classroom Climate. The excellent teachers' classrooms appear to differ from other teachers' classrooms, particularly for students. Students indicate that they feel safe to ask questions, smile and laugh, and regularly learn something new in the excellent teachers' classrooms. Students note that excellent teachers express confidence in their abilities and appear to be happy when students learn something new. Students also claim these teachers help them when asked and particularly when the content is difficult for the students. Principals focus on a bigger picture, noting the organization, lack of student discipline problems in the best teachers' classrooms, and the teachers' responsiveness to new ideas for teaching.

Almost as a summary, students and principals comment on two other talents seen in the excellent teachers. Students maintain that they worked harder for these teachers than for others, and these teachers earned the respect of their students. Principals note that the best teachers work harder than other teachers, and these teachers contribute to the school outside of the classroom.

At first glance, the groupings used — expectations, goal setting, school work, caring, and classroom climate — appear to be mostly professional qualities. However, if we look at them through the lens of trying to teach or learn these characteristics, we find that these qualities are actually talents. These are qualities that can be developed, if the teacher already possesses the particular talent. Attempts to develop the talent in its absence may result in movement from poor to average, but rarely, if ever, to excellence. And even then, this gain comes only from extraordinary efforts by the teacher and principal.

The teacher talents in the five areas highly correlate to students' and principals' summative ratings. That is, the

higher students or principals rate the teacher the stronger the mean scores for the talent items. However, this does not mean that all teachers with an excellent rating have the highest mean scores for all of the student or principal items. Each teacher displays a different pattern of talents. Measuring teacher talents requires assessing and understanding the intensity and the pattern of the talents.

While we more clearly understand what outstanding teaching looks like from the perspectives of students and principals, it may not be clear how principals or human resources administrators can use this information. There is more to the story about Google, and the next steps for Google are similar to what school districts should be doing with regard to teacher selection.

A TEACHER SELECTION STRATEGY THAT YIELDS POSITIVE RESULTS

As a consequence of finding “zero relationship” between the interview recommendations and performance, Google initiated new approaches to employee selection. First, structured interviews were introduced in which the same questions were asked and the responses evaluated similarly by all interviewers.¹⁶ Second, Google developed interview questions that assess “soft skills” — such as emergent leadership, humility, collaboration, adaptability, and learning ability — which were predictive of performance.¹⁷

The findings from teacher effectiveness studies suggest that similar steps are necessary for many of America’s school districts. Large studies in Tennessee, Texas, and California found student performance varied dramatically teacher-by-teacher *within the same school*.¹⁸ Quite simply, the teacher selection decisions failed to differentiate candidates who would improve student learning. As a result, some students were fortunate to have a high-performing teacher, and other students suffered because of the luck (or lack thereof) of the draw.

How good do superintendents think their districts are at selecting talented teachers? A 2014 Gallup study asked that question of 1,800 superintendents. Fifty percent indicated “very effective,” and another 43% rated their

respective district’s performance as “somewhat effective” and the remaining seven percent of respondents said “not too effective” or “don’t know.” Principal selection doesn’t fare much better — only 54% of superintendents say their district is “very effective” in this regard.¹⁹ The future well-being of millions of students, the U.S. economy, and America’s competitiveness in the world depends on more than a bare majority of superintendents claiming to be very effective at selecting talented teachers and principals.

The individual teacher is more important to student success than higher standards, improved curricula, better tests, and more technology.²⁰ Teachers account for the greatest effect on the academic performance of students attributable to the school. Collectively, individual teacher selection decisions determine the performance capacity of the school and ultimately the school district before the school year begins. Consequently, with the exception of hiring principals with the talent to lead, improving teacher selection is the most important reform a district can make to increase student achievement.

Here are some points to improve the teacher selection process:

1. **Certification alone is not a good predictor.** Efforts by some districts have resulted in waivers for teaching roles in which role-specific abilities are needed. The available evidence suggests that experience does make a difference in the first three years. But which candidate best serves the interests of students, given the choice of a beginning candidate with outstanding potential or an experienced teacher with a track record of average performance? College hours and advanced degrees in the subject matter appear to affect student learning; other advanced degrees do not.
2. **Use an assessment to make the critical decision of who is interviewed.** School districts most often attempt, through a combination of paper screening and screening interviews, to identify the applicants who are sent to principals for interviewing. In

other situations, the initial screening is a free-for-all activity in which principals screen those who come to them or sort through files doing their own paper screening. In either case, paper screening and most screening interviews by the district or principal are marginally effective, at best. On one hand, the teacher characteristics found on résumés or in applications rarely prove predictive of teacher effectiveness. On the other hand, screening interviews by district administrators and principals lack clarity regarding the teacher talents desired or uniformity in measurement, and often overlook teachers' talents altogether.

The assessment used to decide who principals interview should be structured, grounded in objective research, Web-based, and most importantly, able to measure teacher talents. However, teachers' talents can be an elusive. The importance of the talents cited earlier appear self-evident, but assessing them can be difficult. An instrument with the following three attributes makes measuring teacher talents not only possible, but worth the effort.

- A structured interview treats all applicants the same by asking identical questions while using the same standard to evaluate all applicants' responses.
- A research-based assessment, developed with students' and principals' perceptions in mind, increases the likelihood of successful teacher selections by identifying applicants with the talents to positively impact student learning and well-being.
- Providing every applicant an opportunity, Web-based assessments ensure that potentially high-performing applicants aren't missed. In addition, nearly instant feedback on applicants' responses allows principals and district leaders to move quickly on the applicants principals should interview first. Also, a Web-based instrument

reduces the time required of human resources administrators and principals to screen a large number of applicants.

3. **The best teacher-selection decisions emerge from collaborative efforts by a principal and district representatives.** A structured, research-based, online instrument that measures teacher talents will reduce the often high volume of applicants to a number that can be realistically interviewed. Given a manageable group of applicants who possess the talents to teach, a principal's interviews should assess the combination of each applicant's teaching talents, knowledge, skills, and fit with the school.

The future well-being of millions of students, the U.S. economy, and America's competitiveness in the world depends on more than a bare majority of superintendents claiming to be very effective at selecting talented teachers and principals.

Principals' selection decisions don't just affect a particular school, they also have a direct effect on the school district. This is because a teacher may complete a 30-year career in the district's schools, but the odds are low of the teacher remaining with the same principal at the same school throughout his or her career. This is especially true in fast-growing and larger school districts. Consequently, two votes should be necessary in teacher hiring: one from the principal and one from the district.

When principal and district assessments of an applicant differ, there are a variety of steps they can use to select outstanding teachers. The immediate remedy is to interview more applicants until a mutually agreeable person is found. If additional applicants are not available, this indicates a recruitment problem at the district level, which needs

to be addressed by the district's human resources staff. While teacher recruitment and selection are sometimes thought of as one activity, they are actually two vital, but separate, steps in hiring great teachers. We focused on the selection process here, but great selection decisions require outstanding recruitment of the appropriate volume of quality applicants for specific content areas, which is a topic deserving further exploration at another time.

Finding a limited number of applicants or chronic late-hiring by individual principals, or the district as a whole, often leads to a rush to judgment and an urgency to just "fill the position." Unfortunately, principals and human resources representatives are rewarded for having all positions filled at the beginning of school, rather than having excellent teachers in all the positions that are filled. A long-term substitute, until an excellent applicant is found, often presents a better resolution for students than just filling the position. A recent study helps make the point.

A Gallup client recently studied the relationship between teacher talents and principal evaluations of more than 1,600 teachers. Given a four-point summative evaluation that takes student achievement into consideration, researchers focused on the teachers receiving the highest rating of "4," and calculated an odds ratio based on the TeacherInsight score received before hiring. As shown in Figure 2, the analysis showed that teachers who scored in the top quartile of TeacherInsight were 2.5 times more likely to receive a "4" evaluation than teachers who scored in the bottom half of the TeacherInsight results distribution. Teachers who scored in the top half of TeacherInsight were 2.1 times more likely to receive a "4" evaluation than teachers who scored in the bottom half.

Figure 2

TEACHER TALENT DRIVES PERFORMANCE

Teachers with TOP QUARTILE TALENT were

2.5x

MORE LIKELY

to be a top performer (4.0), than teachers with bottom half talent.

Teachers with TOP HALF TALENT were

2.1x

MORE LIKELY

to be a top performer, than teachers with bottom half talent.

This suggests that it is often best to hold out for teacher talent. The extra work, and perhaps the wait, is worth it when you can more than double the odds of finding a high-performing teacher.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Like Google, reasons exist for all school districts to evaluate their selection processes. The wide variance of teacher effectiveness within schools indicates that the prevailing selection methods are not successful. Moreover, only a narrow majority of superintendents assert that their respective districts are very effective at teacher selection. Neither of these findings is acceptable because that means thousands and perhaps millions of students are not learning at the level they could. Instead, improving a district's teacher selection process may be the most important step in delivering improved student achievement and well-being.

Finding a limited number of applicants or chronic late-hiring by individual principals, or the district as a whole, often leads to a rush to judgment and an urgency to just "fill the position."

This effort focuses on students' and principals' perceptions of excellent teachers. The results indicate that students have a clear picture of what an excellent teacher is and can describe the predominant talents, while principals tend to see less detail when describing one of the best teachers with whom they have worked. The findings also identify a framework and descriptors of teacher talents that may be useful as a yardstick when considering the teacher talents districts desire. The descriptors of the best teachers parallel the teacher talents from prior Gallup research and align well with a comprehensive teacher-selection strategy.

The mission is straightforward: a process that results in a teacher in every classroom whom students can look back upon and say, "_____ was an excellent teacher." School districts will come closer to achieving this goal by adopting a teacher-selection strategy that:

- Recognizes the lack of evidence for traditional teacher selection methods, and values teacher talents, which predict student and principal ratings as well as student performance.
- Adopts a structured online assessment to identify applicants for principal interviews that provides research-based evidence of its utility.
- Emphasizes and supports site-based teacher selection that includes collaborative decisions that meet the needs of the principal and the district.

Improving the teacher-selection process represents a big step for principals and districts alike. However, a comprehensive strategy will dramatically improve their odds of identifying talented applicants for principals to interview and select. Our students deserve nothing less.

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