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Bridging and Buffering A Study of the Hiring Process in Wichita Public Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the bridging and buffering of information between the HR department and building principals in Wichita Public Schools. The researchers used a qualitative research and interviewed 22 principals from 10 elementary and K-8 schools, 5 middle schools, 5 high schools, and 2 special schools. The findings indicate there were both formal and informal examples of bridging and buffering. Overall, the findings indicate the principals have a high level of confidence in the HR department and their policies and procedures but there are gaps in those practices that individual principals use for the benefit of their school. The researchers recommend that HR continue its attempts to serve the needs of the principals through a focus on customer service. The research team recommends the continuation of the early hiring fairs where HR brings the best candidates to one location and allows principals to hire teachers on the spot. Second, the research team recommends that HR continue to review the length of the application and find ways to make the process simpler for applicants to complete and easier for the principals to sort through.

Keywords: Hiring; teachers; Public schools; Wichita; Bridging; Buffering

Finding high quality teachers in any setting is an increasing challenge as teacher shortages exist across the US (Pier, Junor, Thomas, & Vidakovic, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2019). Teacher shortages are occurring for several reasons. First, many teachers from the baby boom generation are reaching retirement age, therefore the number of teachers leaving the profession is outpacing those coming in. This is a result of the second reason: low wages. Teachers historically are paid less than professionals holding similar levels of degrees, therefore many college graduates choose more lucrative professions (National Education Association 2021).

Similarly, many people feel teachers receive little respect for such a difficult job, which also tends to suppress the number of people entering the profession (Gracia, Weiss, & Adams, 2021). Finally, teachers have a high turnover rate, with many leaving the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2003, Ingersoll and Smith, 2021). All of these problems are exacerbated in urban districts where working conditions are even more difficult (Howard, 2003). Urban school districts are seeking creative ways to address the problem of teacher shortages. Some states and districts are offering to pay signing bonuses, cover moving expenses, and/or pay off student loans (McDermott, 2005, Foster and Coughlan, 2021).

Many states offer student loan abatement for teaching in challenging rural or urban areas (Ingersoll, 2002, Federal Student Aid, 2022). The U.S. Department of Education, universities, and professional organizations have all begun public relations campaigns to tout the benefits of teaching and to encourage young people to join the profession.

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Research Problem

The demographic characteristics of urban school districts make achieving academic success on standardized testing difficult (Jacob, 2007, Gracia, Weiss, & Adams, 2021). Students of poverty often struggle academically because of poor health care, poor nutrition, less academically stimulating home lives, smaller vocabularies, and less exposure to spontaneous learning experiences (Rothstein, 2004, Levy & Fialkowski, 2021). Students of color in urban schools across the nation score substantially lower on standardized tests than their white counterparts (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010, Estrada & Moller, 2021). In addition, immigrant students and students who do not speak English as their primary language underperform on standardized tests (Jacob, 2007, Gandara & Hopkins, 2021).

However, Urban school districts often struggle to recruit and retain effective teachers who are able to succeed in challenging environments. This can lead to high levels of teacher turnover and shortages, which can in turn negatively impact student achievement and school outcomes (Jacob, 2007, Ingersoll, 2021). In addition, the sheer number of applicants forces Human Resources departments in urban districts to centralize much of the hiring process (Silva et al., 2018). One characteristic of a centralized process is the use of a screener which sorts applicants based on personality traits most often found in unsuccessful urban teachers (Metzger & Wu, 2008, Owen, Rooney, & Buckler 2021). Most principals focus equally on personal and professional characteristics so screeners may not be providing them with the information they desire (Harris, Rutledge, Ingle, & Thompson, 2010, Gagnon and Mattingly (2022).

Theoretical Framework

Urban school districts are large bureaucracies with complex organizational structures, therefore, organizational theory was useful in understanding the effectiveness of a school district (Rutledge, Harris, & Ingle, 2010, (Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson, 2017). In particular, Fuhrman (1993) focused on how the lack of coherence in educational policy produced competing demands and influenced school effectiveness. Traditionally, policy coherence has focused on objective alignment – either there is vertical policy alignment or not. Honig and Hatch (2004) refined and expanded this view to reflect the reality that policy coherence is a dynamic process. They used the term “crafting coherence” to explain the process of negotiation “whereby school leaders and central office administrators continually craft the fit between external policy demands and the school’s own goals and strategies” (p. 19).

In their framework, crafting coherence negotiation occurs on a continuum from “bridging to buffering.” Bridging entails cooperative actions that increase the coherence between the district office and individual schools, whereas buffering are those strategies principals use to proactively deflect or take control of external demands for the benefit of their schools (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2005; Honig & Hatch, 2004, Reynolds and Farrell (2021)).

As managers of the boundary between the school and the district office, principals bridge in some areas while simultaneously buffering in another depending on the situation and what benefits their school most (According to Lugg and Gross, 2017). We used these constructs to examine how principals “bridged or buffered” the applicant information and resources the HR department provided. We further examined the coherence between what the HR department provided and what building principals said they needed in order to hire the best teachers for their schools. For effective coherence to occur there must be a good fit between the information and services provided by the district office and the needs of the schools (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012, Reynolds and Farrell 2021).

District offices must search out information that meets each school's goals and strategies rather than pursuing its own priorities. District office personnel then use that information as a guide to allocate resources and policies aligned to school goals. Meanwhile, schools identify and articulate their own goals and strategies so the district office has a clear understanding of what assistance the school needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004, (Liu, Zheng, & Li, 2021).

For purposes of this study, we defined the district office as the Human Resources (HR) department and the principal represented the school.

The HR Department established policies and systems intended to ensure the highest quality teachers were hired. Principals then employed bridging and/or buffering strategies when it came to hiring teachers for their schools (Bouta & Ben-Joseph, 2018).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to examine the bridging and buffering of information between the HR department and building principals in Wichita Public Schools. This involved interviewing members of the HR department and selected building principals. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What information and resources does the HR department provide building principals on teacher applicants?
2. What information and resources do building principals believe they need from the HR department during the hiring process to select high quality teachers?
3. How do building principals bridge and buffer the hiring process with the HR department?

Review of the Literature

What Principals Look for in Urban Teachers

Personal attributes. Teacher characteristics appealing most to principals are personal attributes such as high moral character and intellectual curiosity (Kelley & Meyers, 2022). The teacher must also possess the willingness and stamina to address the numerous challenges in an urban classroom (Orlofsky & Lu, 2021).

In a study conducted with Chicago principals, Engel (2013) found a difference in the trait's principals in high and low achieving schools most desired. In low achieving schools, principals listed classroom management, caring, and the willingness to do or give extra as valued traits. In the high achieving schools, principals valued content knowledge, caring, and teaching skills.

Professional characteristics. Other attributes that appealed to principals are professional skills. Professional skills include classroom management, the ability to differentiate instruction, curriculum expertise, and experience.

Principals who understand the latest trends in best instructional practices and who have a commitment to student achievement are at a distinct advantage in recruiting new hires (Kersten, 2008, (Raza & Starr-Glass, 2021). Novice teachers can be considered expert even though they do not have comparable years of practice (Amrein-Beardsley, 2012, Ertle & Bennett, 2021). Locating expert teachers continues to be problematic if experience is used as the guide, yet as noted above, principals tend not to highly value experience when making hiring decisions.

Characteristics of a Quality Teacher

Personal attributes. Effective urban teachers possess personal attributes such as enthusiasm, patience, humor, and caring (Miller, 2012, Morrissey & Daly, 2020). Each of these qualities is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Enthusiasm is showing genuine pleasure and enjoyment toward students and the subject matter (Mitchell, 2013, Weinstein & Fantuzzo, 2021). Enthusiasm is often rooted in the positive feelings teachers have for students, through praising them and providing positive feedback. Teachers display enthusiasm through their lessons and the classroom environment (Lanouette, 2012, Hamre & Pianta, 2021). Enthusiasm is one tool successful teachers use and positive associations have been found between enthusiasm and student learning (Mitchell, 2013). When a teacher shows patience, the students are motivated to be successful and respond by working harder and applying themselves (Miller, 2012, Chan & Elliot, 2020).

Professional characteristics

Content knowledge is the clear understanding of the subject being taught (Ward, Ayvazo, & Lehwald, 2014). Understanding specific content takes time and experience. Effective teachers look to grow through professional development of specific content while adapting and altering lesson plans (Ingersoll, Jenkins, & Lux, 2014).

Classroom management is the set of methods a teacher uses to facilitate and direct a classroom while being proactive about behaviors (McDaniel, Yarbrough, & Ruma, 2014, Wong and Wong, 2021). Effective classroom management is a difficult skill for teachers to learn and master. When implemented correctly it can minimize disruptions, reduce suspensions, and create more instructional time, all of which promote positive student outcomes (McDaniel et al., 2014, Simonsen et al. 2020).

District Hiring Process

Recruitment. For several reasons, urban districts have difficulty recruiting quality teachers. They tend to have poorly designed recruitment plans because they fail to balance extrinsic and intrinsic factors (Levin & Quinn, 2003, Feng & Sass, 2021). Recruiters in urban school districts tend to emphasize economic factors, such as cheaper housing and higher pay, rather than intrinsic motivations like moral purpose and making a difference (Stotko, Ingram, & Beaty-O'Ferrall, 2007, Hunt, 2021).

Hiring process. There are some challenges to hiring good teachers in urban school districts. Challenges Levin and Quinn (2003) reported were late dates of offering contracts and candidates finding the application process complicated and cumbersome to complete. This gives the priority to suburban districts, which can issue contracts faster than urban districts. The lengthy process from recruitment to hiring offer encourages candidates to look for alternative jobs. Union policies also complicate the process of attracting new candidates (Levin & Quinn, 2003, Ingersoll et al., 2020).

Agreements negotiated with the teachers' union allow some teachers to postpone their resignations or retirement decisions until the end of summer, which makes it difficult to predict available vacancies. Mobility of students also makes it difficult for urban school districts to predict the actual need for teachers. Urban districts are usually much larger than suburban districts so the sheer volume of applicants and openings delay the hiring process. Large urban districts tend to have more layers of bureaucracy, which further slows the process (Levin & Quinn, 2003, Ingersoll et al., 2020).

Methodology

For this study, the WSU researchers identified three research questions focused on the information the HR department provides to principals, the information principals desire from the HR department, and how principals bridge and buffer that information. The context of our study was Wichita Public Schools (WPS); a large, urban district located in Wichita, Kansas, which employs approximately 100 building principals (Wichita Public Schools, 2021). The researchers determined that to successfully address the research questions, we needed to obtain at least some information from all the principals. As a result, this was a mixed methods study, which combined quantitative and qualitative methods of collecting and analyzing data (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, we used an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design, a two-phased design that used the results of the quantitative survey to inform who was selected in the qualitative phase and the interview questions (Creswell, 2013).

Research Site

With 51,169 students, WPS is the largest school district in the state of Kansas and the largest school district between the Mississippi River and Denver and between Dallas and Canada (Wichita Public Schools, 2021). Serving Kansas' largest city and 11% of all its students, WPS fits the typical profile of an urban school district (Jacob, 2007). That is, 77% of its students receive free or reduced lunch, compared to the state average of 50%, and 65% of its students are non-white, compared to the state average of 33% (Kansas State Department of Education, 2014). In addition, its students speak over 88 different languages, are often recent immigrants, and are highly mobile (Wichita Public Schools, 2021).

Participants

Study participants were WPS HR personnel and principals at every school level. The researchers first interviewed seven members of the HR department who dealt directly with recruiting, screening, interviewing, and placing teachers. Next, we administered an online survey to 84 principals of elementary, middle, K-8, high schools, and special schools. Once those results were analyzed, the researchers selected 22 principals to interview; eleven elementary and K-8, four middle, five high, and two special schools. This provided the depth of insight and rich, thick descriptions that only qualitative research could provide (Merriam, 2014).

Teacher Hiring Practices Survey

Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method studies utilize surveys to gather quantitative data that can be used to shape the qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2013). For this study, the researchers used SurveyMonkey to administer a Teacher Hiring Practices survey with 84 WPS building principals. The survey was administered in person during a principal meeting and took about 15-20 minutes to complete. Online survey tools allow for rapid collection of information (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The survey gathered what information principals received from Human Resources, what characteristics they used to determine the best candidates; how they selected which candidates to interview, and how they conducted an interview (Orwa et al., 2018).

Interviews

Human resources personnel interviews. The researchers wanted to understand the perspectives of HR employees who provided applicant information to building principals. Therefore, we conducted interviews with 7 HR department members. These participants were purposefully selected because they worked directly with the hiring process and had the

best perspective on the process at the district level (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Because several HR employee roles overlapped and involved supervision of each other, we determined interviews would be more suitable than a focus group where different roles and responsibilities could cause interference. The interviews were conducted at the offices of the HR department and lasted about an hour.

Principal interviews. The researchers interviewed 22 principals from 10 elementary and K-8 schools, 5 middle schools, 5 high schools, and 2 special schools. We chose these numbers because they were proportionate to the overall number of buildings and because this number was manageable within the researchers and resource constraints.

Review of Documents

Documents are written or electronic publications (Merriam, 2014). They provide valuable data by confirming or illuminating information found in other parts of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The researchers collected and analyzed all HR documents regarding screening, interviewing, and hiring candidates. These included the district application and Board of Education policies related to the hiring process.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The preferred way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it alongside the data collection itself (Merriam, 2014). In order to organize and analyze data collected from the interviews the first step was transcribing the interview recordings. In qualitative studies, data analysis is an ongoing process where each interview alters the analysis and hones the next interview so that the analysis is continually being refined (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Therefore, data analysis began with the first interview.

Findings

This section first presents the results from the Teacher Hiring Practices Survey. These results are followed by the findings from analysis of the interview data collected from HR staff involved with the hiring process and selected principals.

Human Resources

The HR hiring division is a strategic part of hiring WPS teachers and serves the district in recruiting, qualifying, and offering applicants positions. The division consists of a director, two coordinators, two full-time and two contract recruiters, and two administrative specialists of the seven HR personnel interviewed, four had past human resources experience and two were former principals. On-the-job training was the primary means of preparation, as no formal training was provided. This division oversees the process of receiving 5000 applications annually, narrowing this down to a manageable number, and getting qualified candidates in front of the principals in whose buildings they would be most effective. "I think principals at times are overwhelmed in the amount of information and the number of applicants," stated an HR staff member. This mantra drives the work done by the hiring team to ease time constraints on principals when looking for quality candidates. August is the busiest time for this team with the finalizing of hires and closing on the remaining openings. HR staff was focused on reducing the time it takes for principals to recruit, screen, and select teachers to fill their vacancies. Emails and phone calls back and forth from buildings and HR staff are

the main vehicles of communication that get things accomplished when hiring 350- 400 teachers every year. “Once their application is in AppliTrack and it’s been vetted then Human Resources will clear or approve that app and all principals have access to view that application,” commented an HR staff member.

A Qualified Applicant: Application Process

To attain the status of qualified, an applicant must complete an online application, attain a passing score of 69 out of 100 on the TeacherInsight, and have at least two professionals return digital confidential reference checks. When the applicant becomes a qualified candidate, principals receive his or her name in the pool of available applicants via the district’s online application management system called AppliTrack. The HR staff perceives the information on AppliTrack as useful and believe it is accessed frequently. “I think principals use information from AppliTrack quite a bit,” cited an HR staff member. HR staff member perspectives on the application process are described in the sections that follow.

Online Application

HR staff believed answers to open-ended questions, experience, and references were the sources that provided the most useful information about an applicant. “It gives me a little insight of what that person is wanting, what their passions are, and it allows me to determine what kind of fit and what team they would be best suited for,” stated an HR staff member.

“I always look at work experience as well especially when we’re hiring teachers,” admitted another member of HR. Regarding references, one HR staff member mentioned, “For me, references are quite a useful tool. We use reference surveys, so we request - require - candidates to include an email address for each of their references.”

Teacher Insight

When candidates complete the online application, they must then take the Gallup TeacherInsight Perceiver, an online assessment that assigns a score to the answers given during the screener and takes about 45-60 minutes to complete.

The district has set the cut score at 69 out of 100, which is lower than the Gallup recommended score of 72. The district has tried using the 72 cut score but struggled to have a large enough pool for principals to select from. According to HR staff members, Gallup insists the teachers in the Wichita area have a lower than average teaching ability. Some do not agree with that assessment. “They continue to tell us that Wichita has a lower than average teaching ability. I have huge issues with that. Having been a teacher I don’t feel lower than average,” contended one HR staff member. Special Education teacher applicants can have an even lower score due to the challenge of filling those positions. This cut score has been set at 62. Many of the HR employees interviewed expressed mixed opinions whether the TeacherInsight score predicted quality candidates. One HR staff member commented, “I have mixed emotions. I think Teacherinsight is a very valuable tool. I think it is a valuable tool if it’s used as a tool.” However, candidates can be hired if they have a score lower than 69 if the principal has the approval of the assistant superintendent.

Candidate Qualities

The HR hiring division works with principals to find the best fit for each school. The qualities each principal values may differ in some areas, but it was clear to the HR staff which qualities translated into successful candidates. For example, one staff member observed that

principals were “looking for passion for the kids. That is the number one quality they mention.” Passion and enthusiasm for students echoed throughout all HR staff interviews as the number one quality principals were looking for in candidates. Furthermore, there was mention of the importance of applicants having urban and culturally diverse experience.

Principals

Application Process

The majority of the principals expressed mixed feelings about the application process. Some of them believed it was lengthy and cumbersome, but necessary to select the best candidates. Others liked it because they were able to find a variety of helpful information about the applicants such as references and resumes via the Applitrack system. Some newer principals revealed concerns about how to use all of AppliTrack’s features.

Strengths of AppliTrack. AppliTrack provided principals with a vast amount of information about the applicants. AppliTrack allowed principals to access the application and review all applicants’ responses, references, and any attachments, such as resumes. Principals appreciated the HR staff’s vetting of applicants.

This information helped principals to determine the best candidates through other attachments they found in the application such as the cover letter and references. Principals also liked having all the information contained in AppliTrack, “Where all these items are in one place,” noted a principal.

Disadvantages of Applitrack. Other principals believed the application was too long. In addition, these principals believed the long application may discourage some applicants from completing their applications and could result in losing some of them.

Teacher Insight

Like HR staff members, many principals expressed mixed opinions about the Teacher Insight’s (principals referred to it as TI) ability to predict the quality of teachers. Nonetheless, all principals used it as one indicator when sorting potential candidates. Most principals recognized they could not rely on the TI score alone, as several principals shared experiences with having hired excellent teachers who scored low on the TI.

Hiring Practices

The principals provided numerous statements about the hiring practices, process, and policy within the district. When interviewing for a position, the number of candidates typically ranged from 3-8. Principals generally interviewed candidates one time unless there was a special situation. Principals had and used interview teams within buildings. Principals felt they were in control of the hiring process, especially the final selection.

Teacher Qualities

Principals looked for a variety of qualities in effective teachers. Passion, a willingness to learn and try new things, past experience, and the ability to build relationships were the most important qualities that principals looked for in a teacher.

These principals first and foremost wanted candidates to have a passion for teaching. Principals were looking for energetic teacher candidates. Other principals were looking for enthusiasm. A principal stated, “I look for excitement about teaching and excitement about their subject.”

Bridging

HR Bridging with Principals

Most notably, HR staff members and the principals lauded the increased amount of communication that came with a recent decision to assign one HR coordinator to each building. A principal said, "One of the nice things they have done recently is they have given us a single contact person now, so I no longer have to worry about who do I call for such and such."

In addition, every fall the HR coordinators reported visiting each principal to discuss the recruiting process. One principal indicated he met with an HR coordinator "at least two or three times a week" throughout the year regarding openings. Principals universally applauded this change, and one added, "During crunch time...I was calling her every day."

This increased communication was seen as a positive step in bridging the connection between HR and the building principals. Another benefit of the increased communication and collaboration is that HR staff members were better equipped to find candidates who fit the exact culture of a particular school.

Principals agreed that having one point of contact, constant communication, and good collaboration resulted in better quality candidates. One stated, "I think we're seeing more quality candidates coming in with the recruiting process they use to get candidates here."

Bridging Between Principals

A second level of bridging was the bridging that went on between principals; the ways in which principals worked together for the betterment of the entire district. Interviewees indicated three ways in which this collaboration occurred. The first was sharing information with each other about quality candidates. The second was selectively choosing when to hire internal candidates, and third was honesty on reference checks.

Several principals mentioned if they had several good candidates or a great candidate who was not a good fit for their school, they would email other principals about that candidate. Another mentioned that he enters his interview notes into Applitrack so "the next principal who is interviewing that person can look and see I have interviewed them and they can look at my notes or call me on the phone it allows for a little bit of collaboration."

Bridging with Universities

The third type of bridging was examples of principals building connections with universities. Four principals mentioned that co-op students and student teachers were hired at a higher rate than other candidates. The principals at special education buildings took it one step further.

They have created opportunities for university students to complete their residency programs or mandatory hours in their building. This connection between universities and individual schools was an invaluable bridging tool for finding quality candidates, especially in difficult to staff schools.

Buffering

Buffering, as defined by Honig and Hatch (2004), occurs when members of an organization either work in competition to each other or manipulate the intricacies of the system to their advantage. Interviewees indicated three scenarios where parts of the organization were working against each other: the ability to hire on a first come, first serve basis, internal candidates moving to more "desirable" schools, and limitations to hiring their desired candidate.

Interviewees also indicated two examples of how they worked the rules of the system to benefit themselves: hiring a teacher with a low Teacher Insight score and hiring teachers without the required number of interviews.

Organizational Buffering

While both HR staff members and principals indicated that in many ways they worked together to make sure all the schools found high quality candidates, in the end, it often came down to first come, first serve. The more proactive principals inevitably hired who they thought were the best candidates.

One situation where this played out was with the transferring of internal candidates. Schools designated as Title I are often considered more difficult and there tends to be a move of quality teachers from these schools to schools with higher socioeconomic status families.

Individual Buffering

The first example of individual buffering occurs when principals find and hire teachers with below standard Teacher Insight scores. If a candidate does not score at least a 69 on the Teacher Insight their application is not supposed to be viewable by principals. However, if a principal knows the candidate personally, or the person applied directly to the school, the principal can request access to that candidate's application.

If a principal wants to hire a candidate who has a low Teacher Insight score, she or he is required to ask for permission from one of the assistant superintendents. Some principals appreciated this check.

Conclusions

Based on our theoretical framework, the researchers focused on how principals utilized bridging and buffering with each other and HR during the hiring process. Bridging is a school's full acceptance and adoption of a program while buffering occurs when a school strategically decides to engage in a program in an extremely limited way (Rutledge et al., 2010). The findings indicate there were both formal and informal examples of bridging and buffering. Overall, the findings indicate the principals have a high level of confidence in the HR department and their policies and procedures but there are gaps in those practices that individual principals use for the benefit of their school.

Formal Process of Bridging and Buffering: Crafting Coherence

Crafting coherence is the process of negotiation "whereby school leaders and central office administrators continually craft the fit between external policy demands and the schools' own goals and strategies and use external demands strategically to inform and enable implementation of those goals and strategies" (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Effective coherence occurs when there is a good match between the HR and the needs of schools (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). In recent years, HR leadership has made efforts to align external policy demands with the school's goals and strategies via bridging with principals. One way HR became more responsive to principals' needs was by taking the initiative to contact principals and inform them of quality candidates who could fit positions available in their schools. Another effort to craft coherence was to assign a coordinator to each building which facilitated better communication. In addition, recruitment efforts to craft coherence include hosting a hiring fair and starring top candidates. Overall, principals were satisfied with the proactive role HR members have taken to bridge and be responsive to their hiring needs.

The Application Process

The application process was flexible enough to allow for coherence between HR and schools, but some parts of the application exhibited more coherence than others. For the most part, AppliTrack was viewed as an effective system for managing teacher applicants and exhibited coherence between HR and principals.

The system provided principals with necessary information to determine the best candidates utilizing information such as references, resumes, and constructed response questions. Moreover, it saved the principals' time and gave them a clear picture about the applicants. The web-based tool helps the school district to quickly screen large numbers of applicants and identify the best possible candidates (Regan & Hayes, 2011).

Where there was less coherence, not all principals use Applitrack to its full capacity. Some newer principals could not utilize all the basic elements of AppliTrack effectively.

Some principals demonstrated coherence by utilizing the full application, while others demonstrated less coherence by only using selected parts. For those who liked the lengthy application, they felt it provided them with detailed information about the applicants and was a good tool to help them make the right decision. However, for others, reviewing the entire application consumed too much of their time, which invited them to review only preferred parts like the resume.

The most coherence was found in the use of confidential reference checks as demonstrated in both the survey and the interviews. For most principals, confidential references are the first thing they look at to determine the best possible candidates.

Unlike the personal references, principals trusted confidential references when they came from previous employers. There was some lack of coherence as it concerned the number and quality of confidential references.

HR staff and principals believe a screening tool is necessary, even though they had mixed feelings about the efficacy of Teacher Insight. In the survey, 75% of principals said the Teacher Insight was "important" or "very important." However, they seemed to struggle with the use of the Teacher Insight score.

Many principals admitted they use the Teacher Insight as a tool but not as the only component to decide if candidates were qualified for a position. In their study, Metzger and Wu (2008), found the Teacher Insight seemed to measure some effective attributes associated with quality teachers but could not substantiate a relationship to effective teaching.

Several principals expressed their worries about some poor teachers who scored high on the Teacher Insight. In contrast, they experienced having outstanding teachers who scored low on the Teacher Insight.

Informal Processes of Bridging and Buffering

In addition to the formal interactions between HR and the principals, the researchers identified examples of informal bridging and buffering. Informal bridging occurs in the context of principal to principal as well as between principal to HR personal relationships.

Informal buffering was manifested when principals found ways to work the system to their advantage. There were many examples of informal bridging and buffering taking place among HR personnel, principals, and outside groups.

Principals felt they worked well with the HR department during the hiring process. The principals interviewed indicated satisfaction with their designated HR contact persons. The principals showed appreciation for the ability to reach the HR contacts with questions or concerns. Each of the HR contacts appeared to work diligently, knowing and understanding each of their schools wants and needs. Along the same lines, principals felt their designated HR contact knew the type of candidates they were looking to hire. The personal relationship between principals and HR contacts was positive, and equally important principals worked well with each other.

Principals relied on one another and utilized bridging district-wide. For example, principals consistently checked references with each other and trusted they would get honest feedback. Principals showed no hesitation in sharing personnel concerns, and if principals spoke highly of a candidate, this increased the candidate's chance of being hired. Buffering occurs when a principal or school decides to engage in a program in a limited way (Rutledge et al., 2010). Many principals throughout WPS used informal buffering. Some principals knew how to effectively "work" the hiring system to their advantage in order to get the best candidates and avoid the difficult ones.

Many principals crafted their own informal policies to meet the needs of the school. Principals brought up the policy of interviewing at least three candidates and in some situations, there were not enough candidates to interview especially at the more challenging schools. In other scenarios, if principals liked the first candidate they interviewed they would find a way to offer them the job right away instead of finishing the other two interviews.

Candidate Qualities

The qualities that principals look for is consistent throughout the district. It is apparent that principal training and coaching has established a focus for the best candidates in an urban district. HR staff along with principals at every level mentioned the personal attribute of an applicant having passion. This supports Miller's (2012) study expressing the importance of caring and enthusiasm (passion) as an important attribute for effective urban teachers. Furthermore, there is a positive association between enthusiasm and student learning (Mitchell, 2013).

The one exception was nearly all principals and HR staff valued classroom management as a primary quality of a successful urban teacher. The principals believe because urban students face many challenges outside of school, it is important for teachers to be able to effectively manage what happens in their class. Behavior can often be a distraction to learning. Understanding this and managing a class of diverse learners is an ability that principals in this urban district are looking for in new hires.

Recommendations

The researchers recommend that HR continue its attempts to serve the needs of the principals through a focus on customer service. Almost every principal interviewed indicated that they were pleased and thankful for the recent changes HR had implemented. Specifically, we recommend that HR continue assigning each school a specific coordinator.

This provides a personal contact for each school and allows for greater bridging between HR and the principals. The research team recommends the continuation of the early hiring fairs where HR brings the best candidates to one location and allows principals to hire teachers on the spot.

While this is still a new initiative, all of the principals that mentioned it spoke highly of its potential. These fairs allow principals to hire early, a key indicator in getting the best candidates. It allows them to save time, the biggest concern they have in the hiring process. And it allows them to interview candidates that meet their specific requirements and have already fulfilled all the requirements for HR. The third initiative that the researchers recommend HR continue is the star ratings. Principals indicated that they were desperate to have some way to sort and rank the hundreds of applicants they have for a position. If HR recruiters continue to star their best candidates in AppliTrack it will provide principals with some guidance. The findings of both the survey and interviews indicate that principals focus on personal attributes like passion and a desire to work in urban settings.

Principals believe the district has many programs in place to help teachers develop professional skills, but training cannot address passion and desire. As a result, we recommend recruiters keep these criteria in mind when they are ranking candidates. Not all principals were aware that recruiters had begun starring candidates or did not know where to find that information in AppliTrack. Some principals openly questioned what criteria the recruiters were using; therefore, it is necessary for HR to communicate the details of this policy of identifying start teachers to all principals. The research team recommends that HR consider conducting a systematic review of three items. The first is the use of the Teacher Insight screener. Most principals stated they put little stock in the Teacher Insight score as a determining factor in their decision, and many doubted its veracity, but almost all indicated they used it to presort candidates because they had nothing else to go on. Based on this, the team recommends the district continue to utilize a screening tool to provide principals with a starting point to sort through the many candidates. However, the literature we reviewed did not provide enough information to recommend any particular screener.

Second, the research team recommends that HR continue to review the length of the application and find ways to make the process simpler for applicants to complete and easier for the principals to sort through. Study participants offered the following suggestions:

- Eliminate applicant submission of letters of recommendation because principals only look at the confidential ones,
- Eliminate the overlap between information on the application and the resume because both are not needed,
- Allow applicants to download their application from other programs and/or other districts so they do not have to retype all,
- Consolidate the building level questions so applicants do not have to answer the same question for multiple buildings.
- Chunk the application so first the applicant enters basic demographic information, references and takes the Teacher Insight. If they clear those hurdles, then they complete the rest.

Third, the researchers recommend HR consider reviewing the internal transfer policy for equity and consistency. While there were no patterns or trends, several principals indicated frustration with the timing of the internal transfer date, the ability for principals to change their mind on transfers, and being forced to hire subpar internal candidates when better external candidates were available.

In addition, principals at Title buildings expressed concern over losing their best teachers and potential candidates to non-Title schools. Some suggested Title schools get priority in hiring new candidates possibly by having a Title school hiring fair a week before the normal hiring fair.

Also, while the principals respected teachers right to transfer schools when necessary, they would like some consideration to prevent good, young teachers whom they hired and trained from transferring at the first opportunity. Finally, the researchers recommend HR consider expanding three programs. First, we recommend HR expand the university partnerships in Title I and Special schools. These partnerships seem to address the problem of Title schools retaining the best candidates and Special schools filling their difficult openings. The success of these programs warrants finding ways to expand this program.

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