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Hiring the Best Teachers

James H. Stronge and Jennifer L. Hindman

Research identifies six domains of teacher effectiveness that can help schools choose teacher candidates who will succeed.



From their résumés, Jill and Fran seem like comparable applicants for a 7th grade science teaching position at Longfellow Middle School. Both have master's degrees in education and undergraduate degrees in science. Jill has taught for five years and Fran for three; their previous employers have given them both positive recommendations. The school-level interview team notes that both applicants interviewed well for the position—but something about Fran particularly resonated with the team.

Administrators, other teachers, parents, and students know what it feels like to work with an effective teacher. The classroom has routines and procedures to ensure that it runs smoothly. The students know that the teacher genuinely cares about them, not only as a class but also as individuals. The teacher possesses a command of the curriculum content, matches strategies and resources to learners' needs, and creates a motivating learning environment built on trust and respect.

Perhaps the interview team recognized some of the qualities of an effective teacher in Fran, and those qualities made them feel that she was the best choice for the position. Feelings can play an important part in hiring preferences—but shouldn't we use a more definitive set of criteria to guide decisions for selecting effective teachers? What is an effective teacher, anyway? And, in the final analysis, does it really matter that we have effective teachers in our classrooms?

Do Teachers Matter?

Research suggests that curriculum, class size, district funding, family and community involvement, and many other school-related factors all contribute to school improvement and student achievement (Cawelti, 1999). But the single most influential school-based factor is the teacher (Stronge & Tucker, 2000).

In recent years, research focusing on the value-added connection between teaching and learning has found that teachers produce a strong cumulative effect on student achievement. For example, students placed with highly effective teachers for three years in a row, beginning in 3rd grade, scored 52 percentile points higher (96th versus 44th percentile) on Tennessee's state mathematics assessment than did students with comparable achievement histories who had three low-performing teachers in a row (Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997).

Further, the quality of the teacher has a powerful residual effect on student learning. Data from the Dallas Independent School District reveal that a student who has a high-performing teacher for just one year will remain ahead of his or her peers for at least the next few years of schooling. Unfortunately, if a student has an ineffective teacher, the opposite is true: The negative influence on student achievement may not be fully remediated for up to three years (Mendro, 1998).

A study of 3rd grade teachers in an urban Virginia school district found that students of teachers in the top quartile of effectiveness scored approximately 30 and 40 scale-score points higher than expected on the Virginia Standards of Learning state assessment in English and mathematics, respectively. (A scale score is determined on the basis of students' test performance; the range for these tests is 200–600 points.) Students of teachers in the bottom

quartile of effectiveness scored approximately 24 and 32 points lower than expected on the English and mathematics tests, respectively. These differences occurred after controlling for students' prior achievement; for such class-level differences as class size; and for such demographic variables as gender, ethnicity, free/reduced-price lunch, special education status, English-language learner status, and days absent (Stronge & Ward, 2002).

These and many other studies point clearly to one conclusion regarding the importance of teacher effectiveness: The common denominator in school improvement and student success is the teacher.

What Is an Effective Teacher?

Effective teaching is an elusive concept. Ingersoll noted that "there is surprisingly little consensus on how to define a *qualified teacher*" (2001, p. 42). Cruickshank and Haeefe (2001) found that good teachers, at various times, have been labeled *ideal, analytical, dutiful, competent, expert, reflective, diversity-responsible, and respected*. Some researchers define teacher effectiveness in terms of student achievement; others focus on high performance ratings from supervisors; and still others rely on comments from students, administrators, and interested stakeholders. Many variables outside the teacher's control influence each of these potential measures of effectiveness.

Despite the difficulty in defining effectiveness precisely, nearly everyone can recall a special teacher in his or her life. Descriptions of these teachers frequently include such words as *caring, competent, humorous, knowledgeable, demanding, and fair*.

If teachers do, indeed, have a powerful and long-lasting influence over their students, we can greatly improve student achievement if we come to an understanding of what constitutes an effective teacher and then seek out teachers who demonstrate those desired qualities and behaviors. We have no secret recipe for creating an effective teacher, but we do know that effective teachers possess certain characteristics. The following six broad domains synthesize the research on key attributes, behaviors, and attitudes of effective teachers (Stronge, 2002).

Prerequisites of effective teachers. Effective teachers obtain certain skills and qualifications before beginning to teach. Examples within this domain include verbal ability; coursework in pedagogy; knowledge about working with students with special needs; teacher certification; and content knowledge within the subject area to be taught.

The teacher as a person. Effective teachers exhibit caring and fairness; have a positive attitude about life and teaching; are reflective thinkers; and have high expectations for themselves and their students.

Classroom management and organization. Effective teachers possess skills and approaches that help them establish and maintain a safe, orderly, and productive learning environment. Effective teachers' classrooms commonly exhibit proactive discipline, multitasking, and efficient procedures and routines.

Organizing for instruction. Effective teachers set priorities, plan instruction, allocate time, and establish high expectations for student achievement and behavior. Research reveals that effective teachers differentiate instruction; develop clear goals for student learning and link classroom activities to them; make the most of instructional time through smooth transitions and limited disruptions; and create situations in which students can succeed and feel safe in taking academic risks.

Implementing instruction. Effective teachers foster higher student learning gains by providing instruction that meets individual needs through the use of such strategies as hands-on learning, problem solving, questioning, guided practice, and feedback.

Monitoring student progress and potential. Effective teachers monitor learning and use their findings to adjust instruction so that all students in the classroom achieve, regardless of the range of student abilities.

Using Six Domains to Guide Teacher Selection

The teacher selection process usually consists of two primary tools: the job application and related documents (including the résumé, letters of recommendation, and Praxis scores); and the selection interview. (In an ideal situation, administrators and selection teams observe promising applicants teaching; however, resource constraints, such as time and cost, typically prevent this type of intensive performance assessment.)

In the typical school district, the personnel department screens applicants, and the building-level administrator or team members interview applicants for specific positions—relying on their impressions and their professional

judgment to select the best candidate for each position. If we incorporate what research tells us about the qualities of effective teachers into these two steps of the selection process, we can increase the likelihood of selecting the best teacher applicants.

Even before meeting the applicants, personnel departments can "mine" the application for qualities of effective teachers. For example, consider two prerequisites of effective teachers—content knowledge and pedagogical preparation—which are both well supported in the research (see Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Stronge, 2002). A personnel department could screen applicants for characteristics related to content knowledge (for example, a major or minor in the subject area to be taught) and pedagogical preparation (for example, a sufficient number and variety of instructional methods courses taken). In essence, these and other prerequisites would become gatekeepers to the teacher selection process.

At the school level, interviewers should develop and implement an interview protocol that draws on these effective teacher qualities. Before the interviews begin, interview teams should examine the position description and associated responsibilities, discuss what qualities they particularly desire in a teacher for the position, and then consider how they will assess those qualities. Unlike the members of Jill's and Fran's interview team—who based their decision on "something that resonated with them"—interviewers should decide *before* the interview begins what they are looking for, how they will know it when they see or hear it, and on what basis they will make a decision.

Many teacher selection teams have a bank of interview questions that they use in teacher applicant interviews. Teams should consider where each question fits within the domains of effective teaching and design the interview protocol to best meet the needs of the school and staff that the prospective teacher may join. This approach increases the likelihood that the selection team will base its decisions on objective information rather than on intuition.

Figure 1 illustrates the application of the six broad teacher effectiveness domains to associated qualities and how the selected qualities can be translated into specific guidelines for teacher selection. Each domain possesses research-supported examples of characteristics to look for in the application and to listen for during the interview.

Figure 1. Using the Domains of Teacher Effectiveness to Select Candidates

Domains	Qualities	Application Packet	Interview	
		<i>Look for</i>	<i>Ask the applicant to</i>	<i>Listen for the applicant to</i>
Prerequisites of effective teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Verbal ability ● Knowledge of teaching and learning ● Certification status ● Content knowledge ● Teaching experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Certification status ● Major or a minor in subject area ● Praxis verbal scores ● Education coursework ● Work experience 	"Explain how your coursework and/or participation in professional development offerings has been useful in your instruction of students."	Integrate the actual experience with what was done in the classroom in a clear and logical explanation.

The teacher as a person

- Caring
- Fairness and respect
- Interaction with students
- Enthusiasm
- Motivation
- Dedication to teaching
- Reflective practice

- Letter of interest in the position
- Comments in letters of recommendation alluding to evidence of the qualities

"Share with me an experience dealing with students that teaching or other professional development opportunities had not prepared you for. What did you do, and what would you do differently now?"

Share a substantive issue, examples of resources used, and reflection in dealing with the experience.

Discuss ways and means of demonstrating sensitivity, caring, and respect for students.

Classroom management and organization

- Classroom management
- Organization
- Disciplining students

- Letters of recommendation addressing the qualities with specific examples
- Appearance of the application packet materials (complete; legible)

"Describe how you establish a positive and productive learning environment in your classroom."

Explain how the applicant uses time at the beginning of the school year to establish routines, communicates and reinforces classroom expectations, and introduces new students to classroom procedures.

Organizing for instruction

- Importance of instruction
- Time allocation
- Teacher expectations
- Instructional planning

- Writing sample about the applicant's education philosophy or beliefs
- Positive comments from references about time management

"Tell me about how you plan and organize substitute lesson plans."

"Describe the key components in your development of a lesson on the topic of

Incorporate a description of continuity of instruction and how lessons accommodate individual abilities.

beginning with the lesson planning and moving through student assessment."

Implementing instruction

- Instructional strategies
- Content and expectations
- Complexity
- Questioning
- Student engagement

- Specific examples noted in the letters of recommendation
- High ratings from references on effective instruction

"Describe a specific instructional setting in which you differentiated instruction."

Discuss why individual student accommodations were needed (such as for gifted, a learning disability, or a physical limitation), the instructional strategies used, and the outcome of instruction.

Monitoring student progress and potential

- Homework
- Monitoring learning
- Differentiation

- Courses and/or professional development on assessment strategies
- Positive comments about professional qualifications in letters of recommendation

"Tell me about the homework you assign and what you do with the students' work."

Explain the alignment of learning objectives to the assignments given, the variety of work assigned, the appropriateness of the task to the students assigned it, and feedback given on the homework.

Think back to Jill and Fran in the interview at Longfellow Middle School. Team members chose Fran, but they couldn't articulate the "magic something" on which they based their decision. Perhaps the deciding factor was Fran's answer to a particular question, her voice, her ability to establish rapport with the interviewers, or simply the fact that she smiled more often. Although these factors may be worth considering, research-informed screening protocols and interview questions enable an interview team to form objective, job-relevant judgments—and not just impressions—in making difficult and important hiring decisions.

Examining what research has ascertained as the qualities of effective teachers gives decision makers a solid foundation for evaluating applications, résumés, and interviews. A well-constructed selection process helps schools hire teachers who have the qualities that enhance student achievement. And by selecting the best teacher candidates, schools take the first crucial step in ensuring an effective teacher for every classroom.

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James H. Stronge (757-221-2339; jhstro@wm.edu) is Heritage Professor and **Jennifer L. Hindman** (757-221-1707; jhind@wm.edu) is a doctoral candidate at the School of Education, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

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