

CONDUCTING A TEACHER INTERVIEW

by Rabbi Maccabee Avishur

WHY WE INTERVIEW

Meeting a teaching candidate face-to-face is an important part of the hiring process. As a school leader, you use that occasion to learn several things about the candidate, including an especially important area often referred to as “soft skills.” This includes a set of personal qualities, habits, attitudes, and social graces that make someone a good employee and good to work with.

You value soft skills because you know (and research backs you up) that they can be an important indicator of future success on the job, just like hard skills. Soft skills include things like work ethic, positive attitude, good communication, time management, problem solving, acting as a team player, self confidence (not hubris), flexibility/adaptability, and the ability to accept and learn from criticism.



By looking out for these tendencies, schools leaders can identify candidates who would most likely be good matches for the school.

Of course, soft skills aren’t the only things you want to learn about in an interview. You also want to learn about what research reveals are the most important pre-requisites to becoming a successful teacher including experience, content knowledge, education credentials (pedagogic preparation), and verbal communication ability. It is important to consider a candidate’s teaching philosophy, disposition, and technique. Asking overly-broad or perfunctory questions won’t help you gain the inside knowledge of a candidate you need to make a good hire. Be mindful about choosing carefully-crafted questions, and prepare a list of them in writing in advance of your interview.

Research shows the following are important factors in teacher success. Designing interview questions that allow you to gauge a candidate’s approach to them will help you predict the candidate’s future success in your school.

- Disposition

- Strong commitment to serving parents as well as students
- Willing and eager to experiment
- View themselves as life-long learners
- Care about their students
- Believe all students can learn
- Believe in their own abilities
- Work collaboratively with others
- Continuously self-reflect and self-critique
- Mission-aligned
- Teaching Practice
 - Identifies clear objectives
 - Incorporates real-world learning opportunities
 - Focus on higher-order thinking skills
 - Communicates high expectations to students
 - Uses active learning strategies
 - Uses multiple strategies to reach students
 - Uses good questioning techniques
 - Provides praise and reinforcement
 - Provides lots of feedback
 - Uses graphic organizers, outlines, and note-taking guides
- Classroom Management
 - Establishes and communicates clear routines and procedures
 - Orchestrates smooth transitions
 - Consistently follows through on established rules and procedures
 - Exhibits emotional objectivity

In addition to all the above, the more candidates you meet, the more they will blend together in your mind into one indistinct candidate. Take notes during the interviews and keep a scorecard of sorts to help you keep track of the candidates you meet. See our suggested template below for one example of this.



TIPS FOR THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

1. Practice your interviewing techniques on your leadership team and several of your trusted teachers.

2. Choose questions that will assess the qualities you seek in your candidate. We recommend using a similar set of questions for every candidate for a single position so that you can compare and contrast them properly. Use the template below as a guide. Some schools develop a set of questions specifically for each opening they'll be interviewing for.

Leave room and time for spontaneous, candidate-specific questions.

3. Share with your candidates the topics you plan to ask about during the interview. Some leaders might even choose to share the actual interview questions with candidates prior to the interview. Hearing a candidate's considered thoughts on the issues you most want to know about will give you important information about the candidate. We also believe that "natural" conversation with a candidate is important; that's what spontaneous questions are for.
4. Know the questions that are "off-limits." Don't ask about age, family, health history, or politics, for example.
5. Use a variety of question types to keep the interview interesting, but emphasize with the candidate that you want to hear examples that illustrate the behavior.
6. Work methodically and stick to your interview plan, adding in spontaneous questions when appropriate.
7. Follow the 20/80 rule: talk 20% of the time (or less) and listen 80%.
8. Don't approach the interview as a "Gotcha!" opportunity. Sometimes great candidates, like great students, need guidance as they answer questions in the heat of the moment. Remember, the candidate is nervous. Under those conditions, she might forget something important until you remind her of it. Plus, your support during the interview establishes a healthy culture of vulnerability and coaching that will be helpful in the long term. Most candidates don't want to "trick" you into hiring them by answering questions falsely or giving you the responses they think you want to hear. Although any interview will engender a certain amount of inauthenticity, candidates for teaching positions prefer to be as authentic as possible when speaking with you. Most interviewees are subject to hyperbole and highly positive perceptions of their own work, but more are not dishonest or disingenuous.
9. Be ready to define esoteric terms or acronyms, especially those that are specific to your school.

10. Use active listening. Nod when the candidate is talking, make eye contact, and give verbal cues that you are listening. Occasionally summarize candidate statements.
11. Keep the interview time and space sacred. Shut off your phone, tell your assistant to hold all calls, and don't allow people to interrupt.
12. Don't forget to use the template below, or create your own, to record data during and immediately after an interview. Data will help you make the best hire.

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INTERVIEW OUTLINE AND WORKSHEET

Below is a suggested outline and worksheet for conducting a teaching candidate interview. Typically, an interview should last between 30-60 minutes. We recommend that the interview should include the candidate, the future supervisor (Judaics or general studies principal, for example), and one other person (head of school, the other principal, or another school leader). We don't recommend including any more than two staff from the school in any one interview. If there are more than two people in the school who need to interview the candidate, break the interviewers into groups of two and divide the interview questions between the groups.

Use the outline and worksheet on the next several pages, and fill it out as you go along (or immediately after the interview, if you prefer) for a data-rich interview. In any given section, you won't have time to ask and get answers for all the questions. Choose the questions that you most want to hear the answers for and add your own.

Section One: Ice-Breaking and Rapport Questions (approximately 5% of questions and time)

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS (record key ideas and phrases from the candidate's responses in the space beneath each question)

1. How did you hear about this job?
2. How was your commute to the school today?
3. What clubs and activities did you participate in when you were in high school and college?
4. What are some things you do for fun when you're not teaching (hobbies, volunteering, sports, etc.)?
5. What are you currently reading for enjoyment?
6. Who were some teachers in your past that made a big impression on you, and what did they do that was special?

7. Spontaneous, Candidate-Specific Questions that you ask

A. Question 1:

B. Question 2:

RATE THIS CANDIDATE, 1-5 (five is best), on overall quality for this section: _____

Section Two: Introduction Questions (approximately 5% of questions and time)

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS (record key ideas and phrases from the candidate's responses in the space beneath each question)

8. Can you describe a moment when you realized that you loved teaching?

9. What were some of the best parts of the training you received in your masters degree or teacher training program?

10. What professional development, community of practice, or industry-related reading do you currently engage in?

11. What are some specific attributes of a workplace that allow you to do your best work, and what do you know about our school that seems to align with those attributes?

12. Tell me about a time when you had to go above the call of duty to get a job done.

13. Tell me about a time you set a goal for yourself and how you went about accomplishing it.

14. What are some ways in which you build rapport with your students both in the classroom and out?

15. Tell me about some personal interactions you've had with students outside the classroom?

16. What kind of problems do colleagues and students bring to you?

17. What's a current challenge in the education world that you care deeply about, and what are some ideas you have to address that challenge?

18. Spontaneous, Candidate-Specific Questions that you ask

A. Question 1:

B. Question 2:

RATE THIS CANDIDATE, 1-5 (five is best), on overall quality for this section: _____

Section Three: Core Questions (approximately 75% of interview time)

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS (record key ideas and phrases from the candidate's responses in the space beneath each question)

19. Walk me through a typical day in your current role.

20. Can you describe a lesson that you taught that went really well?

21. What would a visitor to your class expect to see?
22. How do you like to organize the physical space of your classroom?
23. Give me an example of a key idea in your model lesson and how you developed your lesson to teach it.
24. What are some things you've built into your model lesson to differentiate instruction for students with different abilities?
25. Can you give an example of how you've supported a student who needed extra help?
26. Can you give an example of how you've supported a student who had exceptional ability?
27. What are some tools or tricks you use to encourage student participation?
28. What are two of your favorite technologies to use in the classroom? How do you use them?
29. What might be some things you write in your "back-to-school" letter that you send home to parents?
30. Based on your experience, how does classroom management and discipline differ in the beginning of the year and the middle of the year?
31. Tell me about a time in a school you worked in when you demonstrated that you were a team player.

32. Can you give an example of how your teacher training (masters degree, professional development, etc.) left you unprepared for what you faced in the classroom and how you dealt with that situation? What would you do differently now?
33. What do you stand to gain from being mentored by a veteran teacher or paired with a “peer coach” in our school?
34. Can you describe a time when you reflected with a colleague on a lesson you taught and how that reflection impacted your teaching?
35. If most of the kids in your class did really poorly on an assignment or test that you gave, how would you respond?
36. Can you describe a situation in your teaching experience with a student, a colleague, a supervisor, or a parent that was challenging for you and how you dealt with that challenge?
37. Describe for me a time when you learned something about teaching or an individual student by listening to a parent.
38. Describe an interaction you’ve initiated with a parent related to a concern you had about her child.
39. Give me a specific example of when you followed a policy that you didn’t quite agree with.
40. Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with someone at work and how it was resolved.
41. If I were your principal, and we were setting goals together for your work next year, what might some of them be?

42. In what ways might you challenge the current thinking at our school?

43. Spontaneous, Candidate-Specific Questions that you ask

A. Question 1:

B. Question 2:

RATE THIS CANDIDATE, 1-5 (five is best), on overall quality for this section, then multiply by 15:

Section Four: Confirmation/Clarification Questions (approximately 5% of time)

Use this time to clarify and allow the candidate to elaborate on anything you heard in the candidate's answers to questions in the previous sections.

44. Spontaneous, Candidate-Specific Questions that you ask

A. Question 1:

B. Question 2:

C. Question 3:

D. Question 4:

RATE THIS CANDIDATE, 1-5 (five is best), on overall quality for this section: _____

Section Five: Closing Questions (approximately 5% of questions and time)

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS (record key ideas and phrases from the candidate's responses in the space beneath each question)

- 45. What do you hope to get from this school that will help you become a better teacher?

- 46. How will this job help you move along your career trajectory or fit into your long-term career plan?

- 47. If you weren't teaching, what would you be doing?

- 48. What's been a helpful piece of advice about teaching that you've received?

- 49. When I call your references, what are they likely to tell me in regards to your work ethic? What examples might your references cite as evidence of this?

- 50. What do you think makes you stand out from other candidates for teaching positions? In other words, what makes you unique?

- 51. Spontaneous, Candidate-Specific Questions that you ask
 - A. Question 1:

 - B. Question 2:

RATE THIS CANDIDATE, 1-5 (five is best), on overall quality for this section: _____

Section Six: Candidate Questions (approximately 5% of time)

Use this time to allow the candidate to ask questions about the school and the position. Use the space here to record the candidate's questions and any main ideas you focused on in answering the questions.

52. Spontaneous, Candidate-Specific Questions that the candidate asks

A. Question 1:

B. Question 2:

C. Question 3:

RATE THIS CANDIDATE, 1-5 (five is best), on overall quality for this section: _____

After the Interview: Overall Impressions

- Add up the ratings you gave for Sections One through Six: _____
- Rate this candidate's verbal communication ability, 1-5 (five is best): _____
- How satisfied were you with this candidate's answers to your questions?
- What stands out about this candidate?
- What gaps, issues, or concerns do you have about this candidate?
- Overall, how does this candidate compare with other candidates for the position?

- What follow-up steps will you take with this candidate?

In addition to adding up points and answering the above questions, using the following checklist to assign an overall rating for responses during the interview can provide more important information about your impressions of each candidate.¹

RATE THE CANDIDATE FOR EACH ATTRIBUTE (YES; MAYBE; NO)

- Has a “can-do” attitude.
- Can identify with diverse populations.
- Believes that all students can learn.
- Believes that students are able and worthy.
- Sees the larger, long-term goals of teaching and learning.
- Is people- rather than thing-oriented.
- Believes that building relationships is a key to learning, teaching, and collegiality.
- Has the “right stuff.”

Our work has shown that filling out this worksheet can help streamline the process of candidate interviewing and hiring. It can be especially useful when colleagues fill out the forms separately and compare notes afterward to create a more nuanced portrait of each candidate.

We wish you success in your hiring process. We are here to support you in your search for the best teachers for your students. If you have any questions about placement and recruitment, please contact us at the YU School Partnership.

¹ Wasicsko, M., & Chirichello, M. (2014). Hiring “Gruntled” Educators. *AMLE Magazine*, Vol. 1:8, 20-23.
