

So You Want to Be a Teacher?

TIPS ON FINDING, GETTING,
AND KEEPING THE JOB YOU LOVE



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FOREWORD

From tips on starting your job search, to effectively using professional references, to preparing for interviews and beyond, we've got you covered. This ebook includes articles originally written by contributing writers for *Education Week* on the pressing issues prospective teachers face in the job hunt.

Many of the articles included in this e-book appear in Education Week TopSchoolJobs' Career Corner Blog, which is managed by the American Association for Employment in Education. AAEE is a professional organization for college career-center directors and school district recruiters that provides career advice and discusses developments in the education job market.

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PART 1

THE JOB SEARCH

Teaching Secrets: Find the Job You'll Love

BY HEATHER WOLPERT-GAWRON

Spring is in the air, and there's no better time to start looking for the teaching job you'll love. Maybe you're dissatisfied in your current position, or a newbie jumping into the field straight out of school. You're entitled to work in a place that "gets" you and wants what you have to offer. Your goal is not to take the first job offered, but to get offered the job that will make you happy.

Looking for a teaching position in March or April signals to a potential employer that you are not the bottom of the barrel. Avoid the last-minute job lottery and be in control of the interviewing situation. Start now.

This advice list is not for the faint of spirit, those compelled to follow the school district hiring system. These eight steps are reserved for you maverick job-seekers who are ready to hunt high and low for your dream position, leaving nothing to bureaucratic chance.

Step 1: Make Lists About Yourself

To help you narrow your school search, write down the activities, classes and electives that you've taught in the past—then make a separate list of activities, classes, and electives that you are interested in teaching. Create a master list you can pitch to a principal in an interview.

Step 2: Make Lists of Areas/Districts That You'd Want to Work in

Starting with your state department of education Web site, investigate the school systems in the areas you'd be happy live in. Look at maps of counties and draw circles around areas you are willing to commute to and from. Determine a list of districts based on drive time. Quality of life, after all, starts with downsizing your commute—whether you're fighting traffic lights all the way, or spending too many lonely hours on rural back roads.

Step 3: Target Certain Schools

Return to the Internet. I went to sites like greatschools.net that compile school data from many different sources. These sites were invented for school-shopping parents, but they are also great resources for savvy teachers searching for jobs. I searched out the middle schools in my circled districts and focused on certain criteria. Yours might be different, but here's what I zeroed in on:

- Demographics – I wanted a diverse population, so I made sure there were many slices on the subgroup pie charts. I've also had great success with English-language learning students in the past, and I wanted to continue teaching in a school with ELL populations.
- Teacher Turnover – Too much or too little? Too much turnover could be a sign of weak leadership. Too little could signal tiresome times ahead, with plenty of same-old same-old.
- School Awards/Recognition – I was coming from a California Distinguished School, and I figured that if I found another Distinguished School, I could use that as a pitching point.
- API/AYP – API is California's Academic Performance Index for schools. Most states have something similar. I know these indicators aren't the best ways to judge schools, but it would be irrespon-

sible of me to enter into a school interview without knowing the school's circumstances and likely goals. Each individual teacher must gauge honestly whether you are up to certain challenges in a school setting or whether those battles just aren't yours to fight. Remember, you want to be happy, not just employed.

Step 4: Scout the Territory

Drive around the areas of most interest to you. You will learn a lot about the community and school by just cruising the nearby streets. Walk into neighborhood restaurants or stores. Have a cup of coffee in a popular diner. Do your homework and pay attention to your gut reaction to the environment. Remember, if you love where you work, you might one day consider moving closer to it.

Step 5: Send Out Your Applications to Both the District HR and the Principals

Let me say that again: do both. School districts will tell you that the proper process for hiring is to send your application to their human resources office, then interview with HR, then let them recommend you to a principal, blah-blah-blah.

That method is too passive for my tastes. Here's what worked for me.

Don't totally dismiss the HR department. Send them their application package, then call them for an interview. (Don't wait for them to call you.) But the minute you have narrowed down the list of schools you want to pursue, start contacting the principals yourself. Make an appointment with the head honcho, even if it's just a handshake meeting or resume drop.

If a principal likes you, he or she will call HR and make sure you are theirs for the hiring. On the other hand, if all you've done is meet with HR and the interviewer there doesn't like you, you'll never get into the principal's office. In the vast majority of districts and schools, the principal has final say over the selection of new teachers. But principals can't insist they want you unless they meet you.

Also, don't despair if you meet a principal for a handshake and they end up not calling. Later, they may remember you as the teacher who took the time to meet with them. Sometimes a principal finds out in August that a teacher is not returning, so make yourself as memorable as possible.

Step 6: Make Nice With the Office Manager

The office manager is the person who puts your package on the principal's desk with an "I just met the nicest teacher!" or a "You'll never believe the doozie that just walked in." Watch out with office managers. They can be beautiful, loving, nurturing people or they can be incredibly "turfy." As Gump would say, "they're kinda like a box of chocolates...." You know the rest.

Step 7: The Actual Interview

The most important tip for interviewing is: don't BS. Yes, it's useful to insert certain words and philosophies ("student-centered," "multiple-intelligences," "collaboration," "differentiation") into the conversation, but if you don't buy into something, don't bring it up. It's like entering into a relationship with someone. Don't tell them you like romantic dramas if you really like sci-fi, or you'll be stuck watching "The Notebook" on Saturday night.

Remember, your interview is a pitch. Make sure you are sharing your successes, perhaps even the challenges you've conquered, but you're not there to confess your failures.

Keep in mind that a principal will want to know how you will work with colleagues, how you will interact with parents, how you will handle multiple types of learners in the classroom, and what your thoughts are on discipline and content. Be prepared for a panel of interviewers as well, perhaps even members of different departments.

Step 8: When You Get the Call...

Make sure the school district agrees to take all of your education units and teaching years. Sometimes a public system won't want to acknowledge years spent in the private sector, or they might say they're unwilling to accept college credits from certain programs. If you're a candidate who brings specialized qualities to the job, stand firm. Your future salary and benefits are at stake.

And if you've already earned tenure at your current district, I think that should always travel with you. You can decide if you want to insist on it, but don't avoid the question. Often it's just about asking. Don't shy away from these important career issues in the negotiations stage of the hiring process, only to have your hopes dashed later when your contract is put on the table.

Good luck with your search, and remember: You are interviewing a district and school as much as they are interviewing you. Keep your ultimate goal in mind: To love where you work and enjoy what you're doing every day. ■

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Want to Emerge Victorious in the Job Search Game? Begin with a Strong Game Plan

BY BRANDON STREET

For many years I have coached the game of football and, being the competitive person I am, loved celebrating a hard fought win with my team. During the post-game celebration, however, I would remind my team that it was what they did with the time in between games that ultimately contributed to the win. It was the investment that they, as individuals and a team, made toward drills, scrimmages, weight lifting, running, etc. What I didn't tell them was the investment we, as coaches, were making between each game; film reviews, team break down, and personnel matchups. It was knowing as much as we could about the other team, making the proper adjustments, and carrying out those adjustments on the field. An effective game plan was critical to any victory.

Similar to football, if you are going to be victorious in the job search game, it is what you do with the time prior to applying and interviewing for a job that will be most influential to obtaining the job you want. It will hinge on your game plan. Below are a few critical item to consider when putting together a strong game plan:

1. Know the employer

Just as a football coach would study film to learn everything they can about any opponent, you should study everything you can about the employer to whom you are applying. Learn information about their organization such as their mission, vision, when they were established, and their recent accomplishments. Understand what it is that they value in their current and future employees. Research their current reporting structure and how you would fit into that structure (who would you report to and who would be your colleagues).

You can learn about the employer using their web site, social media sites, newspaper articles, or by conducting informational interviews with current employees.

2. Know yourself

As important as it is for a coach to know the opponent they must also know their own team to create an effective game plan. Understand the skills and accomplishments which you are bringing to the table that make you the most qualified candidate for the job. This could include your education, past work experience, awards, volunteer work, evaluations, and your unique skills. Learn how to communicate your skills and accomplishments both verbally and written.

3. Make unique adjustments

Just as a football coach would not approach every opponent with the same game plan, ensure that your job search game plan is unique to the employer for which you are applying. Create a cover letter and resume which is unique and targeted to the employer. These documents should reflect back to the employer that you have the skills and accomplishments which they are seeking (hint: the job

ad will give you great insight to exactly what they are looking for). Also, ensure that you prepare for interviews based on each employer uniquely. Again, reflect back to the employer the skills and accomplishments you have that correlate with the skills and accomplishments they are seeking.

4. Create the game plan

Now that you know all that you can about the employer, yourself, and the importance of targeting your information based on this knowledge, you can create an effective game plan. An effective game plan comprises of bridging the gap between what the employer is seeking and what you have to offer (skills and accomplishments) using the unique and target documents for application and communication for interviewing.

Bridging this gap on your documents (resume, cover letter, and application) enhances your opportunity to be interviewed. Bridging this same gap for your interview allows you to more effectively answer each interview question. For example: when the employer asks you to tell them a little about yourself you can effectively answer with the skills and accomplishments you have that correlate with those which the employer is seeking.

Remember, it is what you do with the time between the “games” that ultimately contributed to the “win”. Spend the time to properly prepare a game plan for each job you apply. Doing such will greatly increase your chances of tackling the job you desire. ■

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Student Teaching – Advance your career before it starts!

BY VALARIE JACOBSEN

For most undergraduate Education majors, student teaching will be your most in-depth teaching experience, one that will be featured prominently on your resume and from which you will share numerous examples of your work impacting and educating students. And while student teaching is an incredibly busy, stressful, amazing experience, consider the following to set yourself up for a successful job search:

- *Update your resume throughout your student teaching.* Certainly it is important that you always submit your most up-to-date version of your resume for any position, but as you progress through your student teaching, the things you did early on will become harder to remember. Even if your bullet points are not fully developed, at least note the key accomplishments and experiences to be fine-tuned later. As student teaching winds down, be sure to ask your cooperating teacher for feedback as well, as he/she will be able to remind you of any key experiences you forgot to include.
- *Really get to know your cooperating teacher.* He/she could be one of your strongest references, so be sure to give student teaching your all, seek out advice and feedback, and consider asking for a letter of recommendation. Ask for coaching on the job search and inquire about the opportunity to connect with members of their professional network for informational interviews and additional advice.
- *Connect with other teachers at your school.* Schedule informational interviews to gain insight as to their paths to their current positions, advice for the job search, and what skills and experiences are most valued in qualified candidates.
- *Schedule a meeting with your principal.* Ask if he/she would be willing to review your resume and prepare some questions to inquire about the application and interview process at that school, the skills/experiences/qualities of greatest value, and advice for the job search. If you are invited to interview at that school, you'll have great advice to help you prepare, but even if not, you'll get some helpful insight for other opportunities.
- *Reconnect with your campus career services office.* They may offer an Education career fair, panels, workshops, or the Job Search Handbook for Educators which can all be integral parts of your job search. Don't forget that they can also offer resume feedback, coaching on building a personalized cover letter, and help you prepare for that first professional interview. ■

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Why Consider Substitute Teaching (I'm Talking to You, December Grads!)

BY AMANDA MACHONIS

Some years ago, I was in your shoes. After graduation, I chose to serve as a building substitute beginning in January when there were no nearby, open positions. In the beginning, I was terrified. Over time though, the experience I gained proved invaluable. I am certain the months I spent as a substitute made my application stand out the following fall when compared to May graduates with no classroom experience outside of student teaching. It helped to get me hired full-time in August! Some days were long and tiring while others flew by (generally the ones when I got to teach in my certification area!), but all in all, I learned what it was like to be a successful teacher.

Subbing is be a bridge to full-time employment for many educators. All of us who have ever filled out a standard application with a question about whether or not we'd be willing to substitute have paused to consider the option carefully. (Perhaps you're remembering back to your own days in school when having a sub meant not having to do any work and/or you'd get to watch a video....) However, I encourage you to check "yes" and give substituting a try, even if it makes you nervous. Classroom experience helps to build a far stronger resume than working full-time in another industry while you're job searching.

As a former teacher, I can tell you: good substitutes are hard to find! You can't imagine the gratitude teachers feel when a substitute not only follows the plans they have left, but they've also written notes about how the day went.

In addition to gaining more experience with teaching itself, you'll develop skills that can be even more beneficial to educators.

- **Thinking on your feet** - you're substituting for a family/consumer science teacher and realize there isn't enough of a certain ingredient for the food the students are making...
- **Picking your battles** - saving your energy to deal with bigger issues than just someone who doesn't ask permission to sharpen her pencil...
- **Classroom management** - using developmentally appropriate methods and learning what works for you and what doesn't for when you have your own classroom....
- **Flexibility** - a fire drill interrupts a test and some students don't finish in time...
- **Accountability** - when you have to tell the classroom teacher about something that happened or a mistake you made....
- And countless more!

Landing a position as a building or district substitute can be even better than working in many different districts through a substitute teaching service. You'll make connection with teachers, and the students will know you, too. Reputation is everything in substituting. Establish yourself as someone who is there to make sure the plan is followed and to assure things remain orderly, and word will spread. Pretty soon, teachers will request to have you in their classrooms!

Think about it. If you do good work and other teachers (and administrators) see that, you could be next in line when a position you're qualified for opens up. ■

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Professional References: Who, Why, and How to make them work for you

BY VALARIE JACOBSEN

As you begin your job search, you may find yourself wondering about references, letters of recommendation, and how to most effectively use both throughout the process. Following are some tips to help you better understand the purpose of each and how to use them most effectively.

Letters of Recommendation

Who: While your references can write letters of recommendation, it is not necessary for every reference to do this. Consider asking 2-3 professionals who have observed you in a teaching/educational role to write a letter of recommendation.

Why: When submitting applications to various schools, you may have the opportunity to upload letters of recommendation as a portion of your application packet. While the letter won't get you the job, it can provide an overview of the qualities and skills someone else has recognized in you which can only help you as applications are being reviewed.

How: Be sure to provide the writer several weeks to write your letter, and provide the writer a copy of your most up-to-date resume and information about the types of positions you are specifically targeting so he/she can tailor the letter as much as possible. Ask your writer to sign the letter and put it on letterhead if possible, then convert the final copy to a pdf for submission to employers. When submitting your application materials, select the 1-2 letters most connected to the position for which you are applying and include them. Quality and relevance are more important than quantity.

References

Who: Consider those who have seen you in action either teaching or in an educational setting. Those who have supervised you and witnessed your work ethic, creativity, dedication, interaction with students, and heart for teaching firsthand are especially good potential references. While it is important to have references who can speak to your teaching abilities, additional references can include faculty, supervisors, advisors, coaches, and more. Ultimately you will want 3-5 references with at least 2 connected with Education. Focus more on those who can say great things about your abilities in the classroom and less on their title. For example, it may sound impressive to have your principal as a reference, but if he/she can't speak in depth about your abilities in the classroom, they won't be a strong reference for you.

Why: Employers like to have a conversation with someone who has worked closely with or supervised you in a previous role to gain additional insight as to your qualifications for the position and fit within the

school. It is common for reference checks to occur toward the end of the selection process, after interviews have taken place. Sometimes a reference check will help an employer to decide between two excellent candidates, while other times the reference will help them confirm their choice to select you for the position.

How: Always ask someone to be a reference before listing them on your reference sheet, and be sure to ask what contact information you should list for them. It is recommended that you list your reference's name, title, employer, phone number, and email address on your reference sheet, and to list your references in the order in which you would hope that they be called - in other words, your strongest reference should be listed first. While anyone you ask to be a reference should decline if he/she cannot say glowing things about you, never list a questionable reference. If you are not confident that they will say great things, don't list them. Be sure your references get a copy of your most updated resume as well so they will have a good grasp of all of your experience, accomplishments, and activities at their fingertips. Finally, keep your references updated on your job search progress, including the jobs for which you have interviewed and when you secure a position. Keeping these relationships strong throughout your job search and after will serve you well as you enter your first professional position! ■

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PART 2

INTERVIEWS AND EARLY CAREER SUCCESS

Find a Mentor

BY BECKY FABER

Sometimes at dinner parties, I've asked my guests to name every teacher they had during their K-12 experience. I'm delighted when people can do that--and some can name all of them without any hesitation. Remembering these names proves that my guests' teachers were memorable. My guests are generally spontaneous in sharing the reasons why.

When I work with education students and ask them about the decision to become a teacher, they often mention a favorite teacher from their past who influenced their career choice. What I think that students sometimes miss is the opportunity to utilize these favorite teachers as mentors. As Career Service professionals, we may also miss suggesting this practice.

What can these teachers do for their former students?

- A mentor is a good sounding board for student teaching issues. They can lend a sense of reality. As a student teacher, I often wondered if what I experienced on certain days in the classroom was "normal." Were other teachers having similar struggles and successes? A mentor can provide a valid overview to the ups & downs/ins & outs of teaching.
- A mentor may alert them to potential job openings. They may hear of a job opening long before it is advertised. This concept of networking is proven to be beneficial.
- A mentor can be another set of eyes to peruse the early draft of a resume. The mentor can make suggestions to help the student teacher begin to think about what the resume might reflect before going to a Career Services professional for further review.
- A mentor may be a reference who will write a detailed letter about the applicant's interest and knowledge of the field of education.
- A mentor is also a valuable resource in preparing for an interview. Most applicants dread the interview part of the job hunt, but a mentor is a person who can sit down and talk about what the important issues are that a hiring agent will ask about. Sometimes an applicant will know what issues will come up, but he/she may not realize why the issue is important. An experienced teacher can provide good input about "the big picture."

A good mentor has experience, wisdom, patience, and the desire to watch a fledging teacher take off and find the way to success in the classroom. I would encourage education students to seek one out and ask for that person's cooperation in developing this critical professional bond. The communication may be in person, by phone, or by e-mail. Whatever the mode, it will be a valuable association. ■

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Interviews But No Offers?

BY PAM FOLGER

Getting plenty of interviews but not getting job offers? It's time to evaluate what might be going on. Did you:

- Do your interview preparation by researching the school/district? This helps to ensure a good job fit and helps you to do better in the interview.
- Prepare and provide access to (electronic or hard copy) an excellent portfolio that clearly demonstrates the kind of teacher you are/will be?
- Obtain strong letters of recommendation?
- Dress appropriately/professionally for the interview?
- Offer a solid handshake, smile, and make eye contact?
- Discuss how the job is a good fit for your unique skill set? And convey what value you would add to the school/district?
- Prepare your "stories" that best illustrate your skills as a teacher? Including your philosophy of teaching?
- Answer all questions thoroughly? This includes understanding behavior-based interviews - the questions that ask "Tell me about a time when...." - and responding with specific answers that best demonstrate when you have put your skills into action. Remember, the interviewer will be listening for EAR - event, action, result.
- Send a follow-up/thank you communication to reiterate your skills and interest in the position?

Still not getting the job? Consider seeking out a mock interview with your alma mater's Career Center or a professional in the field whom you trust to give you honest feedback.

Tip on how to get more feedback: Video tape yourself during a mock interview (your alma mater may be able to help you with this, or just have a friend tape you answering the questions you were asked at your last interview). Play it back and pay close attention to your mannerisms and body language. Also, remember it's not always what you say but how you say it. Seek feedback from others about what you might be doing wrong. ■

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Financial Aspects for New Teachers

BY SHAUN FEINBERG

Educational philosophers have said teaching is a mode of living because teachers are so passionate about their craft and students. This passion can lead new teachers to forget that teaching is also a profession. Like all other professionals teachers should consider several financial aspects when determining which school or district is the best fit for them. In addition to salaries there are three key areas that must be considered before accepting a position.

The first area that should be considered is total compensation. Total compensation includes the value of salary, stipends, bonuses, retirement, and employer contributions to health insurance. Stipends and bonus can vary as much as 20% of total salary between districts and schools. Many public school districts participate in state pension plans which can be very generous in retirement. Employer contributions to health insurance premiums can vary by thousands of dollars and can make a huge difference in actual take home pay.

The second area new teachers should consider is professional development. Ongoing professional development is required to maintain teaching certification. Some districts provide professional development in house or pay expenses for teachers to attend conferences and seminars. Some districts even pay teachers additional stipends for attending professional development outside normal work hours. Other districts require their teachers to pay for all professional development themselves. Registration to a seminar could cost as much as \$700.

The third area that should be considered is funding for classroom materials and supplies. This also can range from where a teacher gets any funding needed for instructional supplies including a laptop to use for planning at home to having to buy all instructional supplies out of pocket.

New teachers should be clear about the financial expectations and benefits associated with any job offer and should even begin asking these questions during the interview process. ■

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10 Tips Guaranteed to Bring You Success Early in Your Teaching Career

BY ERIKA BILENKI

1. BREATHE

Everything is going to be okay. When stress is all you feel, remember to take it one step at a time and take care of yourself. Mapping out what you need to do now and what other things can wait will help. Time management is a critical skill for teachers.

2. REMEMBER YOU ARE HUMAN

Understand early in your career that you are human and not perfect. You will make mistakes; a lesson or two may fail. This does not make you a failure. In fact, you can become very successful by simply allowing yourself to learn from failure.

3. SET A TIME TO GO HOME

Let's be real, the work never stops for a teacher. You could just keep going and going. In order to be successful and feel successful you need to go home at a reasonable time, enjoy time with family, and rest for the next day. You cannot run yourself into the ground day in and day out.

4. KNOW THAT TOMORROW IS A NEW DAY

Your messy classroom, piles of papers to grade and stacks of copies to be made will be there tomorrow. Understanding this will help you achieve tip #3.

5. BE POSITIVE

It's super easy to get lost in the stress and begin to focus on the negative. Make it a habit of only allowing yourself to think positive. All you need to do is focus on one part of your day that went well (some days it's a very small part, but that's okay!). After doing this, all of a sudden everything gets better and you begin to believe you CAN do it. You ARE successful.

6. REMEMBER WHY YOU BECAME A TEACHER

Focusing on this aspect will allow you to see you have probably already accomplished the reason why you became a teacher. You ARE successful.

7. FIND A MENTOR OR WORK BUDDY

You will need someone who understands the life of a teacher to confide in, talk to, and de-stress with at times. Chances are they will show you that you are doing a great job and that you ARE successful. I like to call this person my "personal pumper-upper." Also, use this mentor or buddy to plan with. It will help lighten your workload!

8. UNDERSTAND YOU ARE A LIFELONG LEARNER

The world of education never stops changing. There will be times when the change seems to be impossible. Just remember you yourself are learning.

9. BE CONFIDENT

Remember you went to school for this stuff. You know what you are talking about. Despite your young age in this field, your words and ideas are valued. I highly recommend joining a committee at your school. This really helped to build my confidence.

10. ASK QUESTIONS

If you feel you need help, don't be afraid to reach out and ask for it! Asking questions helps us to learn, and therefore we become more successful. ■

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