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# Rethinking the Hiring Practices of a Small Suburban Chicago School District

Rob McElligott

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RETHINKING THE HIRING PRACTICES OF A SMALL  
SUBURBAN CHICAGO SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

In the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

April, 2019

A THREE-PART DISSERTATION

CHANGE PLAN:  
RETHINKING THE HIRING PRACTICES  
OF A SMALL SUBURBAN  
CHICAGO SCHOOL DISTRICT

PROGRAM EVALUATION:  
EVALUATING THE HIRING PRACTICES  
OF A SMALL SUBURBAN  
CHICAGO SCHOOL DISTRICT

POLICY ADVOCACY:  
TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN A  
PUBLIC SCHOOL SETTING

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Submitted for Approval

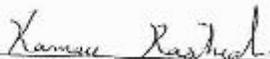
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April 22, 2019  
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## NLU Digital Commons Document Origination Statement

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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## **ABSTRACT**

This change plan was developed from the program evaluation centered on the teacher hiring processes in District 1, a small school district in north suburban Chicago. Following extensive interviews with those who do the hiring in District 1 and a review of relevant literature, recommendations were made to improve an already successful hiring process. This plan was developed around Tony Wagner's Four C's framework. The District 1 hiring process was analyzed for its context, culture, competencies, and conditions both in its current state and as it will be when the outlined changes are implemented. Strategies and actions for change were also discussed. This paper falls less under the heading of "if it ain't broke don't fix it," and more under the idea that change is important even for high performing organizations.

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## **SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Problem**

The purpose of this research is to outline a change plan for the practices of hiring new teachers in our studied school district: a small, suburban school district just outside of Chicago, Illinois. School District 1, being in an affluent suburb with a healthy tax base, tends to have a larger than average pool of applicants from which to pick when posting an opening. The district has high-performing students who are committed to attending quality colleges; a supportive, involved parent population; and significant resources to support teachers in their work. These factors create a situation where District 1 is a desirable place of employment for teachers.

During the first year of this research, all of those responsible for the hiring in District 1 were interviewed and shared their observations and reflections on the current state of hiring in the district. This included the three building principals and the assistant superintendent for personnel. While the hiring process did seem to be meeting the needs of the schools and was frequently producing quality teachers, there were places for improvement identified. Those places became the heart of this change plan.

The majority of teachers hired in District 1 achieve tenure after the state-required four-year non-tenure period. Those who do not remain employed often leave for personal reasons or because of fluctuations in enrollment causing a decrease in staffing needs, though there is an occasional non-tenure release; only four in the past five years. When looking at reasons for the high retention rate of teachers outside of having a deep pool from which to pull, District 1 also has a comprehensive two-year mentoring program. This program may also end up hiring a candidate who is relatively weaker than others

and support them to the point that their professional growth is substantial enough to develop them into a good teacher.

Based on the number of teachers who remain in District 1 for their careers and the minimal overall turnover, it would seem like this is a lack of a problem for District 1. Utilizing the Four C's tool that Tony Wagner (2006) discusses in his book, *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools*, the context, culture, conditions, and competencies all seemed to be in a good place. One primary issue identified in the previous program evaluation was a lack of consistency for each hire and minimal data collection around the process. Interviews with the principals of the three schools in District 1 revealed a lack of consistency with the process of hiring teachers across the district. These inconsistencies included the number of candidates screened, the selection of questions for the interviews, the makeup of the committees and the presence, or lack thereof, of a performance interview. As a byproduct of a lack of standardized questioning, there was little data tracked on the candidates as they flowed through this process, which created a void in data that could have been used in the future to filter out candidates of similar profiles to those who have proven not to work out. While the various components of the four C's that worked in favor of District 1 identifying and hiring a top-notch candidate were beneficial, there was room for improvement in the process, which would further reduce the number of candidates who do not stick with the district. Over the six-year period around which I interviewed District 1 administrators, 84% of newly hired teachers were still in their positions at the time of the interview. Definitely a good success rate, but also one around which there could be some improvement.

If even a semi-standardized process can be created, it will allow District 1 to narrow its candidate search to just those candidates whose profile matched that of teachers who have proven to be successful. Having consistent interview questions, at least at the early stage of the process, will allow for a more “apples to apples” comparison of candidates. Ideally, the major consequence of these changes will be a more efficient and reliable hiring process (Clement, 2000; Gagnon, 2003). This will save the district both time and money and minimize the frustration of having to re-post and re-hire the same position multiple times because of an unsuccessful hire. While that may not be a frequent occurrence in District 1, any frequency is too often. In the end, it would simply create a better learning environment for the students. Which is, after all, what it is all about.

### **Rationale**

As a young administrator, a mentor once shared with me that the hiring of quality teachers was far and away the most important job of a building administrator. Many weaknesses in the hiring process could be shored up with quality professional development or a good school improvement plan, but if the right people are not in your organization, it makes the principal’s job of ensuring high-quality instruction incredibly difficult. It is like Jim Collins (2006) has said, it is about “getting the right people on the bus” (p. 14).

Having served as a building principal now for several years, I have seen firsthand the disruption caused by bringing in a teacher for one unsuccessful year and then having to move on. The amount of time and resources it takes to support that teacher for even one year is massive. One attempt to quantify the dollar amount it takes to replace one

teacher with a new one estimates that it costs about 25% of the outgoing teacher's salary and benefits (Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, & Felsher, 2010). On top of the fiscal costs, teachers are usually a fairly tight-knit group and my experience is that they take the non-renewal of one of their own, even one with whom they may not be very impressed, as a slap in the face. Mentors feel like they did something wrong and seasoned teachers wonder if they will be next.

With these challenges in mind, I decided early in the process that I wanted to look at the hiring process for my dissertation. I have worked in six different school districts during my career, as either a teacher or administrator, and I have never seen two districts that go about their hiring in the same manner. There were many similarities to the steps followed, but also many differences. Acknowledging that any personnel director will have his/her preferences for this process, it seemed like there should be a "best practice" for this important task. What information is present in the application or the interviews that correlates to a higher potential for success in the district and what information tells us that the candidate will not be successful? If my plan can identify some of those traits and questions to ask, I feel the district will be in a good position to move forward with confidence that their process of identifying the best quality candidates is sound.

The suggestions outlined in this change plan can play an important role in improving the educational environment in District 1 because teachers are the adults who have the greatest amount of contact with students at school each day. Ensuring those people are of high character, well schooled in the best practices of educating children, and are content area experts is of the utmost importance to all stakeholders in an educational community (Liu & Johnson, 2006; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004).

A top-notch principal can lead a building to many places, but if the teachers who work with the children each day are not highly qualified, the caliber of teaching will only be so high. Additionally, you can have the most innovative, engaging curriculum in the country, but without quality teachers to deliver it, it is almost worthless.

I worked closely with the building principals and the assistant superintendent to come up with a standard process that worked across all buildings. We had multiple conversations about the district values and how we could develop interview questions that vet candidates for possession of these values. A rubric was also developed to track performance in these interviews over the long term. As it is realized what scores during the screening round equates to the quality of teacher for which the district is looking, it will allow those doing the hiring to narrow their focus even sooner. While it may take several years to amass enough data to make meaning out of the interviews, the mere presence of that data will start to become useful almost immediately.

### **Goals**

The end goal of this change plan is simple: to provide District 1 with high quality, student-centered, and long-lasting teachers through an efficient, consistent, and reliable hiring process. Assimilating new staff members into the building and training them on how a school district goes about its delivery of curriculum, along with the rest of its culture, is a time-consuming and expensive process. By shoring up any weaknesses in that process, it will make it less likely that the hiring process for any given position will fail and the job needs to be reposted.

From a more tangible perspective, I would like to find a manner to implement a more consistent hiring process. Research shows that school districts that have the most

success with hiring new teachers have an organized and documented process (Liu & Johnson, 2006; Loeb, Kalogrides, & Beteille, 2012). One possible way to accomplish this would be the creation of a hiring handbook. This handbook would break down the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the hiring process from job posting to job offer and acceptance. The handbook would also delineate the interview process from paper screenings, phone screenings, in-person interviews and any desired performance interviews. It will clearly outline how many rounds of interviews are used and who is present for each of those rounds. Guidance would be provided for the questions posed at these interviews based on the needs of the district but would be agreed upon ahead of time, not as the interview was approaching. The handbook could also contain a means to evaluate a candidate's answers so that a score(s) could be generated, allowing for historical tracking of data for later use. Training on the contents of this handbook would become a part of initial training for all new administrators.

A formalized process would seemingly make the hiring process easier to rely on for building leaders. There will be fewer unknowns like those uncovered during my interviews with the principals. With a set list of standard questions, at least for the early round interviews, hiring teams will be accustomed to hearing different candidates answer the same questions and it will allow for an easier comparison of candidates. Finally, it is crucial that District 1 leadership stays in tune with new developments in the hiring process across the area. Wagner and Kegan (2006) discussed a district whose motto was, "Isolation is the enemy of improvement" (p. 113). District 1 would be wise to keep that in mind. These changes will likely take time but can prove to be valuable tools over the long term.

## Setting

District 1 is an elementary school district located in an affluent village in suburban Chicago. Three grade-level center buildings make up the district: a primary building serving kindergarten through second graders, an intermediate building serving third through fifth graders, and a junior high school with sixth through eighth grades. Each building serves about 400-450 students for a total population of approximately 1,300 students. There is a student mobility rate of four percent in District 1, as compared to a twelve percent mobility rate statewide.

According to the Illinois State Report Card for District 1, the students attending those schools are almost 80% white, with Asian students being the only other subgroup represented by a double-digit percentage (14%). Only three percent of the students come from low-income homes, six percent English Learners and 17% percent receiving special education services. On the required state PARCC tests in ELA and math, 82% of District 1 students met or exceeded the standards on the reading test, and 78% met or exceeded standards on the math test, as compared to 36% and 31% statewide on the respective tests.

There is no denying that District 1 is an exceptionally high-performing school district with much going for it. The hiring processes have been serving them well, but any organization should always be looking for ways to improve upon itself. Our world is changing at a pace unlike any other generation, and all organizations need to do what they can to keep up. Harold Wilson, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s once said, “he who rejects change is the architect of decay” (Platt, 1992, p. 40).

## **SECTION TWO: AESSING THE FOUR C’S (AS IS)**

Tony Wagner and Robert Kegan (2006) discuss the importance of analyzing in graphic form the current state of an issue and the desired state after an applied change. The idea is that by visualizing the differences, it will make the process more concrete. This diagnostic tool is one of the many ways an organization can assess its effectiveness in a given area. Appendix A contains a graphic representation of the “As-Is” state of District 1. The diagram in Appendix A breaks out the context, conditions, culture, and competencies in regard to the environment currently present in the district and surrounding the hiring processes they utilize. These are the areas Wagner and Kegan feel an organization would be wise to focus on to best identify potential areas of growth.

### **Context**

As mentioned earlier, the “As-Is” context in which District 1 operates is in a pretty good place. District 1 is fortunate to be located within an affluent community and has had sound financial management for many years. Over the past decade, the State has not been able to fund schools to the degree that they should. For many schools, this has led to the cutting of programs and activities or a decline in the quality of their resources due to their inability to purchase replacements for older materials. Not only has this district not had to deal with cutting back, but they have also been able to move into a one-to-one laptop learning environment and have added multiple STEM courses.

Parent expectations in District 1 are exceptionally high. Almost all parents have earned college degrees, and many have achieved positions of high esteem in their fields. They expect that their children will be well educated and challenged to a degree that will allow them to reach the lofty goals their parents have for them. If a parent in District 1

feels that a teacher is not doing right by their child, either by being too restrictive or too lenient, they will let the teacher or an administrator know about it. Teachers who are hired and enter into this environment need to have a thick skin and the ability to have difficult conversations with parents and children.

Another factor that District 1 teachers need to deal with is the fact that many students in the district receive outside tutoring or even attend private schools at night. This is often not traditional tutoring meant to help a student keep up with the class, but outside schooling meant to aid in the student achieving honors placements or even grade level acceleration. This will often create a situation where the student is in a classroom where he or she has already mastered the content being taught. Finding ways to work constructively with those students and families can be difficult.

### **Conditions**

The current conditions around the hiring practices in District 1 are excellent but still have room for improvement. The students in the district are coming primarily from supportive, two-parent homes where success in school is a primary expectation. Students are highly supported by their home in their academic work and generally come to school with the goal of being successful, matriculating to a major university and moving into a profession that brings them the affluence their parents have enjoyed. Because of that level of student focus, and the financial stability mentioned earlier, District 1 is seen by many as a highly desirable place to work. This leads to deep candidate pools from which to find future teachers.

Those aspects of the conditions in the district are positive and remain consistent. It is the structure of the actual hiring process that could use some refining. The district

follows a general process when posting a job and hiring a new teacher, but that process is not documented anywhere, which sometimes leads to steps being combined or skipped altogether. Many of those times, every member involved in the hiring of that new teacher are not on the same page, leading to confusion about the current stage of the process.

One of the greatest strengths regarding the conditions in District 1 is the environment into which any new hire will assimilate. Most of the faculty in the district are tenured, experienced staff open to supporting any new member welcomed into the fold. There is a high degree of professionalism in the buildings, and teachers take their work very seriously. When new teachers enter into the district, strong role models and professionals willing to support them in their professional growth surround them.

### **Culture**

The positive aspects of the working conditions within District 1 create an extremely positive culture in the district. On the biannual satisfaction survey, teachers report positive feelings about the working environment, the level of collaboration among colleagues, and the relationship between teachers and administration. Doing what is right for student learning is not just an empty promise, but at the forefront of decisions made regarding instruction. There is a strong culture among District 1 educators that student learning needs to be the primary focus of their work, and teachers commit to doing their part in that mission. Teachers have a clear understanding of the expectations set by the families in the district. When the district hires new teachers, those teachers are surrounded by a veteran staff with a high degree of professionalism and collaboration that helps them develop into quality educators.

One aspect of the culture that can pose a challenge to new teachers is related to the seniority and tenure level of the current faculty. Because so many of them have been doing this for a long time, a moderate number of the teachers are fairly set in their ways. While the district does have a culture around keeping up with changes and using professional development to assist teachers with embracing new advances in teaching and learning, it is often hard to teach an old dog new tricks. Some veteran teachers will hold on tightly to older methods as they are more comfortable with what they used as they grew as educators. This can create a challenge for new teachers as they bring their new ideas to the fold.

### **Competencies**

Fortunately, District 1 has many competencies. The experienced, veteran staff is one of the primary strengths of the district, even if that experience does pose some challenges as described above. The Illinois School Report Card indicates the student success that comes from the quality curriculum and the instruction that takes place each day around that curriculum. There is no denying that a tremendous amount of top-notch teaching and learning is happening in District 1 classrooms.

The two-year mentoring program supporting new teachers is also a strong competency within District 1 practices. Any new teacher, with or without previous experience, participates in a three-day academy before the start of the school year. This academy focuses primarily on policies and procedures unique to that district, but also includes time for new teachers to work one on one with their mentor on items specific to their teaching position. Mentors and protégés meet weekly to check in and have a list of topics, broken down by month, that they talk about to ensure the new teacher understands

all of the different road marks throughout the year. This support is a strength when it comes to attracting quality teachers looking for an environment that will nurture them and help them to grow as educators.

## **SECTION THREE: RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design Overview**

While evaluating the processes surrounding the hiring of new teachers in District 1 in the program evaluation phase of my work, I interviewed the building principals and assistant superintendent for personnel to learn from them about the hiring process in the district. While that information informed my work in the creation of a change plan, I needed to conduct follow-up interviews with them to gather information for the “To-Be” vision and the strategy and action plan created for this change. It was important to learn if the vision I had in mind would fit the needs of the district and if they saw the same potential benefits.

### **Participants**

In his 2008 work, Michael Patton endorsed the benefits of “purposeful sampling” when working with qualitative inquiry (p. 458). When looking at quantitative data, larger sample sizes produce more reliable results as individual differences become minimized. In this case, an analysis of the hiring practices in District 1 led us to a simple, purposeful sample of those who do the hiring for the district. The primary participants were the same as those involved in the program evaluation. The assistant superintendent for personnel, Dr. Susan Frederick, who oversees the hiring process for the district, provided valuable feedback on the benefits of any change to the current processes. Her input guided the vision I had for change and ensured that any changes made improved the hiring process. Conversations with the building principals were also vital to ensure they felt the changes would improve the standardization of the process and benefit their buildings in the long run.

### **Data Gathering Techniques**

The interviews of the District 1 administrators asked for their thoughts on the suggested changes to the hiring practices. The interview questions centered on the As-Is and To-Be diagrams located in Appendices A and B, and on the Strategy and Action Plan in Appendix C. It was important to know if the changes outlined in those appendices seemed like valuable additions to the hiring practices in District 1 and what additional areas could use some adapting. The questions asked during these semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix D for the principal interviews and in Appendix E for the interview with the assistant superintendent of personnel.

While additional methods of data collection were initially explored, a decision was made to focus on the experiences of those who do the hiring in District 1. This direction led the research into more of a case study of District 1 than a large-scale research project. The other data used in addition to the administrator interviews was found in historical records from the administrators and the district and centered on teacher retention.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

For the interviews of District 1 administrators, I looked for common responses to the suggested changes that could lead my work to explore those areas. If there were concerns in similar areas or support for a certain element of the strategies and action plan, that information guided me to focus on those items. Especially in such a small district, it was important to have support of any potential changes across all administrators involved in this process.

To effectively analyze the interview responses, I looked for common themes, such as interview committee makeup, the number of rounds of interviews, and the effectiveness of performance-based interviews. Finding areas where the administrators had differing opinions guided the conclusions toward areas that needed further alignment within this change plan. Areas around which there was uniform agreement were also considered as current strengths and items that should remain a part of the District 1 process.

## **SECTION FOUR: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Importance of Teachers**

The one common theme in much of the literature reviewed for this change plan was the acknowledgment that there is not much in the way of definitive guidance about the best way to go about hiring new teachers (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt, & Wyckoff, 2011; Jacob, Rockoff, Taylor, Lindy, & Rosen, 2016; Liu & Johnson, 2006). Jacob and his colleagues stated, “establishing rigorous methods to select individuals likely to become successful teachers has proven difficult” (p. 2). They go one step further later and stated that, “no nationally representative study on methods used for teacher hiring exists” (p. 8). Truthfully, it is hard to find studies that provide definitive guidance on identifying the best method of hiring teachers. There is a good deal of information from school districts outlining what they do and how it works for them (Sargent, 2003), but little hard research on what works best. There are so many variables in each situation that a “best practice” for all may not be out there.

The other common acknowledgment was that selecting high-quality teachers to work in classrooms has a significant impact on student learning (Stronge & Tucker, 2000; Rockoff, 2004; Nye et al., 2004). Often, educators will point to a student’s socioeconomic status as a major factor in their learning. Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) found that the quality of the teacher is the primary factor on student achievement, well ahead of the background of his/her family. Sanders, Wright, and Horn (1997) came up with similar results. This dichotomy between the importance of hiring new teachers and the lack of research-based guidance is one of the things that drew me to this topic for research. How can something so important, with so much at stake, not be intensely

studied? One possible answer, as stated in the first paragraph, is that there are just so many variables that change from candidate to candidate and district to district. It is hard to generalize practices that work in one school district to other dissimilar school districts. Rivkin et al. (2005) also pointed out that it is hard to apply measurable data points to the education of a student. For any given data point, there are other explanations outside of that teacher's control that may have an impact on the student's ability to demonstrate learning.

One of the more widely reported statistics you will hear about new teachers entering the profession is that half of them will leave the profession in the first five years. This is presumably due to the current challenges of being a classroom teacher being too difficult to manage in exchange for the salary. Even a quick Google search of "how many new teachers quit in the first five years?" will produce a reference to a Department of Education study stating that 50% will quit. A 2015 report published in the *National Center for Education Statistics* (Gray & Taie, 2015) debunked that statistic. A longitudinal study of approximately 2,000 new teachers across the country found that only 17% of those teachers left the profession in those first five years. The vast majority continued teaching after that time. Loeb, Kalogrides, and Béteille (2012), not entirely surprisingly, found that the more successful the school was at helping students achieve expected growth targets, the more successful they were at retaining their teachers. So, while the turnover of teachers may not be as grave as some believe, there will still always be a need to bring in new teachers. Knowing the best way to do this, or at least a proven way to do it well, is important for all educators to understand

## **Process of Hiring**

As a district looks to attract the best possible teacher candidates and to determine which of those candidates to hire, there are many things they will need to keep in mind. Edward Liu (2003) talked about the importance of “fit” for a teacher and a school. Not every teacher will be the right fit for every school. That same individual can be highly successful in one building and not successful at all in another building. I have seen this first hand in my own experiences in education. One way to help ensure a good fit between candidate and school is to ensure the hiring process allows for enough time for both parties to get a feel for one another. In Liu’s (2006) work with Susan Johnson, it was shared that many teacher candidates reported being involved in a one-step hiring process. The entire evolution only consisted of one interview, followed by a job offer. While this structure does not seem standard, the authors shared that the average number of interviews the candidates they worked with went through was 1.49 (p. 331). To get a number that low, there must have been a decent number of single interview processes. The teachers that did report having only one interview felt like that was not enough time to get a good feel for the district and how they would fit in that district. Those candidates wanted a longer process to better get to know those staff members with whom they interacted.

It has also been suggested that one thing standing in the way of improving the hiring process is simply the lack of an avenue for districts to share what it is they do successfully with other educators (Clewell, Darke, Davis-Googe, Forcier, & Manes, 2000). This paper is one example of trying to put an end to that factor. There are certainly others, many of them cited at various places in this research.

As any district reflects on its practices, part of the issue is that they do not always know exactly why a candidate may have turned down a job offer or taken a different offer over the one they presented. Gagnon (2003) pointed out that the reason could be completely unrelated to the process itself. It could have been the fact that the parking lot contained litter that day or possibly the tone used by the receptionist when he was greeted that morning.

### **Interviews**

When it comes to the actual conducting of interviews, Balter and Ducombe (2005) surveyed 684 districts across the State of New York and determined that a typical school district uses between two and three interviews during their process. Larger school districts tended to be toward the higher end of the spectrum. The results of the survey also showed that each of those interviews is approximately 30-40 minutes long. This number is well above the 1.49 interviews that Edward Liu (2003) uncovered in his work.

While many parts of the interview process are consistent across most districts: paper screening, phone screening, face to face interviews, one area that has a large amount of variability is the performance interview. This is when the candidate(s) actually teach a lesson in front of the hiring committee, followed by a debrief with the committee on how the lesson went. Some like to utilize this form of interview as it allows the team to view the teacher doing what they will be hired to do, teach children. The obvious negative is that a classroom teacher will have to give up class time in order to create the environment needed for the interview. Researchers Balter and Ducombe (2005) found that approximately half of the surveyed districts did make use of a performance interview as a part of their process. That is much higher than the ten percent

who made use of that type of interview in Liu's (2003) four-state study. The highest percentage Liu came up with for using performance interviews as a part of the process was in Massachusetts, where almost 20% of districts conducted them.

As far as what interviewers are looking for during these interviews, Rockoff et al. (2016) determined "these analyses generally indicate that principals place greater weight on personal traits (e.g., "honesty," "good character," "ability to work with peers," "respect" or "compassion" for students) that may be more difficult to assess than credentials like academic achievement or years of prior teaching experience" (p. 8). This is in line with what the principals interviewed for this study reported, strong personal character traits being of greater import than the content knowledge or pedagogy, which can be more readily taught. Susanna Loeb (2001) went one step further. Her work showed that years of experience, years of schooling, and graduate degrees were not significant factors in predicting the impact of a teacher. Teaching is such a complex evolution that it takes more than learning about the process to do it well. This information seems to point toward the best teachers being born, not made.

Stronge and Hindman (2003) talked about the need for interview teams to have a "bank" of pre-determined questions, and the answers for which they are looking to go with those questions, before ever starting the process. This will eliminate some of the less important characteristics that may impact the likability of a candidate from swaying the committee to see something which they really do not see.

One item that has not shown to carry much value in the interview process is the teacher portfolio. For a while, in the early part of the century, all teacher candidates showed up with a physical portfolio to share with the interviewer or team. Students

learned this during their teacher preparation programs. As years went on, those portfolios moved online and are now shared through online applications via links (Ntuli, Keengwe, & Kyei-Blankson, 2009). Ronald Theel (2002) surveyed school principals on their thoughts about these portfolios, finding that the vast majority did not give them much weight when it came to making a final hiring decision.

### **Recommendations**

Much of the limited literature on the hiring process goes as far as making recommendations on how school districts should go about hiring new teachers. One key item appeared in several of the works reviewed: have a clear, well-defined, and documented process for this important work (Balter & Ducombe, 2005; Clement, 2000; Gagnon, 2003). Whether it is an internal website or a hiring handbook from the personnel office, several studies mentioned the importance of having this important process delineated.

There is some literature comparing a centralized hiring process versus a decentralized process (Liu, 2005; Wise, 1987). In a centralized process, used more extensively in larger districts, the district office does the majority of the interviewing and hiring, sharing the new hires strengths and experiences with building principals to determine to which building these candidates will be assigned. In a decentralized process, the district office may do some of the initial screening, but the building principal conducts the majority of the interviewing and completes the final hiring steps. The work of both Liu and Wise shared that the decentralized hiring process tended to be more effective and produced teachers who were a better fit in their building. These new

teachers have a better chance of lasting longer in their building than those hired by the district office.

Another important point touched upon in several places in the reviewed literature was the importance of having an efficient process. In their 2003 study, Levin and Quinn noted that hiring processes that extend out into the summer dramatically limit the quality of candidates available. A separate 2004 study surveyed 152 newly hired teachers, asking them questions about their job search process. The results of that study showed three significant factors that created a negative experience for candidates: a difficult application process, a long hiring process, and a lack of timeliness for screening interviews (Winter, Ronau, & Munoz, 2004). Factors may come up for the personnel office or building principal during the hiring process that could slow down the process. The lesson learned from these works is to do everything possible to stick to a clear timeline for the hiring process.

The final area that received some clear recommendations was the inclusion of teachers in the interview process. Candidates themselves reported that having teachers on the interview team allowed them to get a better feeling for the culture of the building and helped them to determine if that school was right for them (Liu & Johnson, 2006). In Thomas Kersten's (2008) study of teacher hiring across Illinois, he found that 79.5% of all interviews included teachers on the committee. As far as who is involved in the interview process, the building principal was the only other member with that high of a level of involvement. William Gagnon (2002) seemed to agree with Illinois schools as he recommended that teachers should be a part of the interview process.

To summarize, the guidance is clear that the hiring process needs to be clearly outlined and documented in some manner to clarify the process for all involved. That process needs to take place in a timely manner, out of respect for the candidates. The majority of the hiring process should take place at the building level, not the district office, and teachers should be a part of that process. Based on the literature above, it seems like well less than half of school districts make use of a performance interview as a part of their process.

## **SECTION FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

Interviews of the three building principals in District 1 and the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel took place over one week. All three principals were asked the same core questions during the interviews. As these were semi-structured interviews, each principal interview diverted into slightly different directions but centered around the same eight questions. The interview with the Assistant Superintendent of Personnel was also centered on the same eight questions, with a slightly different context in the framing of the questions, given her position.

### **Lack of Consistency**

One of the most important factors in developing a process that consistently results in the hiring of top teaching candidates is consistency (Mason & Schroeder, 2010). The program evaluation conducted showed that a lack of consistency existed in the District 1 process. When asked, “What is it that you feel would improve this inconsistency?” all three building leaders had similar answers: “I don’t feel like we have a process right now,” “it just seems that there’s a lack of a system of how it works,” and “right now it is a little fluid.” They shared that there were some variables that changed from year to year and even from job posting to job posting. One principal shared that for one job posting there was a paper screening round, phone screening round, small group interview, larger group interview, and then a performance interview. For a similar position in the same year, the process went straight from phone screening to final interview, without a performance interview. A different principal shared how it was unclear whether or not teachers should be a part of the process as sometimes they were included in the process and other times they were not.

As they elaborated, they each talked about a lack of consistency in the process and how more consistency would make their involvement in the hiring process easier, or at least more efficient. Dr. Frederick seemed to see both sides of the coin: “I kind of pride myself on customizing each search depending on the needs of the team.” She added that she puts a good deal of thought into the process for each job and considers the aspects of each role for which the district is searching to identify the most appropriate process.

Dr. Frederick also shared that, as she approaches retirement, she has a personal goal to try to create a more documented process to leave for the assistant superintendent who follows her. In this way, the lessons she has learned in her role can be effectively passed down to the person who follows her. When the idea of a “Hiring Handbook” was mentioned, she felt that it would be a good addition to the Personnel Department.

### **Building vs. District Office Roles**

There was also symmetry among the building leaders about the balance between how many of the responsibilities the district office takes on versus what happens at the building level in regard to hiring. The principals expressed gratitude that the district office took on some of the initial work as it allowed them up to work on other things. When asked, “How do you feel the hiring process should be balanced between the district office and the specific building in which the candidate will work?” All three principals felt that having the district office handle the posting of the job, the paper screening of applications, and the initial phone screenings was a big help to them in regard to freeing up their time for other responsibilities. This was the way the initial stages of hiring were handled the vast majority of the time. One principal mentioned some involvement in the

initial phone screening process, but Dr. Frederick generally handled those first steps. All principals also agreed that they needed to be highly involved after those initial screening steps.

Two of the three principals felt that one reason this process works so well is the longevity of Dr. Frederick, giving her excellent insight into the type of teacher for which District 1 is looking. This **is** another piece of evidence in support of tightening up the process of hiring in District 1. With Dr. Frederick nearing the end of her career, the district is challenged to find a way to preserve that wealth of historical knowledge. A clearly defined process for the hiring of different types of staff members will ensure at least some of that knowledge lives on. Dr. Frederick stated that the main reason she takes on those initial responsibilities in the process was to free up the principals to do other aspects of their jobs. She mentioned that some of her human resources colleagues in other districts are surprised that she takes that on herself, but she thinks their districts, being larger, make that effort too much of a burden for one person to handle.

### **Clear Timeline**

Another item that came up during my work around the program evaluation was the lack of a clear timeline for the process. Interestingly, this is one of the items that spiked up often in the above literature review: candidates being put out over how long the process took for a job or for how long it took to get an update on whether or not they were moving forward in the process. All four administrators interviewed were asked if there needed to be a tighter timeline from job posting to job offer and what they felt was a fair amount of time for the entire process. The comments from the principals on this topic were not necessarily critical of the current state in District 1, acknowledging that

there are a lot of factors at play that could cause the process to be delayed. All four District 1 administrators mentioned the importance of timely notice to applicants. Dr. Frederick stated, “The important thing is that the candidate knows the timeline.” She also mentioned that once you have decided to not include a candidate in the pool moving forward, it is important to notify them as soon as possible. The building leaders expressed similar thoughts, though there was one comment that shed light on a need for a more clearly constructed timeline. One principal stated, “From a timeline perspective, right now it seems – it feels haphazard, it’s when we get to it.” Certainly, it would benefit all involved to have a clear outline of when each phase of the process would take place, allowing for potential time constraints of the team or the candidate that may delay the process.

### **Performance Interviews**

As noted in the literature review, there is a good deal of variance in the importance of including a performance interview in the teacher hiring process. While there is certainly some benefit to seeing a candidate work with students, it is not a very natural setting given the candidate has no working knowledge of the students. The performance interview also causes a disruption to the flow of teaching and learning in the host teacher’s classroom. Over the past six years, District 1 has made some use of the performance interview as a part of their hiring process. This consists of a candidate being contacted by a current teacher and given a topic for a lesson, decided upon with consultation with the building principal. The classroom teacher will give the candidate some background on previous lessons and the makeup of the class, but allow the candidate to come up with their own lesson. Then, on the prescribed date, the candidate

comes in and teaches the lesson. The interview team observes this lesson and then meets afterwards to discuss what they saw. There have been occasions, especially in the summer when school is not in session, that a teacher may run a small group lesson instead. This performance interview has often, but not always been a part of the hiring process in District 1.

When the question was posed to the District 1 administrators, “Do you feel that performance interviews should be part of the process of hiring classroom teachers?” the building principals interviewed for this plan had inconsistent feelings about the performance interview. Not just among the group, but even individual principals felt like sometimes it was nice to see a candidate interacting with students, and other times it seemed so staged that it was uncertain whether or not the interview team was seeing the real candidate. One principal told the story of a teacher who seemed hyper-organized and completely on top of her instruction in the performance interview, but once in the role on a day-to-day basis, this person was controlling, not a team player, and had a personality that could “rub people the wrong way.” That individual did not last in the district. Another principal also reported having mixed results and not being sure the benefit outweighed the interruption to instruction it caused. The third principal had a slightly less “on the fence” opinion and stated, “I don’t think it’s effective.”

The assistant superintendent also had stories showing mixed results with the use of a performance interview. She told the story of two music teachers hired recently in the district. Both did well in their performance interviews, but one is still doing very well in her position, while the other did not last past her first year. In regard to this part of the process, Dr. Frederick stated, “I think the important part of a performance opportunity,

though, is the debrief.” Two of the three building principals made similar statements during their interviews. In the end, Dr. Frederick did come across as being a supporter of having a performance interview:

I would like to move toward always doing some kind of performance on a consistent basis. Even if it is not perfect, it still lets your candidate know how seriously you take this and it sets a tone of what you are expecting.

### **Documented Procedure**

When questioned about the idea of having some sort of manual or handbook that outlines the hiring process, it was pretty clear that something along those lines would be well received. The first noteworthy item that came out of these interviews was some level of surprising self-reflection that there is not already a document like that. One principal mentioned:

I also think that as a district, we are all about processes in almost everything that we do. This crucially important process should also have a clearly documented process for all involved parties to follow. This is especially important for when new administrators join the team.

The assistant superintendent for personnel shared, “I often think it should be more structured and systematic.” She also discussed how the other departments in the central office all have clearly documented procedures, from the district’s strategic plan down through each of the departments. She mentioned how the district leans on the Baldrige Framework for many of their processes, and maybe that would benefit the personnel office as well.

It did seem like all involved parties felt that the hiring process should have some sort of guiding document. One administrator stated, “I think you have to have some sort of framework and guiding philosophy.” Another said, “There is a benefit to having a document that says what sort of procedure it is that we follow,” and “whatever the process is, it just needs to be laid out.” It was also stated, “I do think documenting the process would be beneficial.” These comments lead directly to the idea that many, if not all desire a documented hiring process.

Dr. Frederick expressed pride in her ability to customize job searches for the specific teaching position and also to determine fit within the team of teachers surrounding the new hire. All administrators, while expressing their feelings about a need for a clearer process, also expressed a desire that nothing is created that takes away the level of flexibility that they enjoy as a small district that can customize the process for them. It was shared that a documented process should not “get caught up in the minutia,” or “create an overly rigid, limiting structure.”

## **SECTION SIX: A VISION OF SUCCESS (TO BE)**

Appendix B contains a graphic representation of a vision of what life could be like in District 1 with clearer hiring procedures and the creation of a Hiring Manual. Since the hiring process in its current state is still quite successful, the change will likely not have a significant impact on the process but will allow for greater clarity for its users and create a more efficient protocol. Any created documentation of the hiring process should contain a clear list of delineated responsibilities, a set timeline for each of the phases of the process, and address the need for a performance interview.

### **Context**

No matter how you look at it, there is little that influences the academic growth of a child more than having a great teacher (Gray & Taie, 2015; Sargent, 2003; Stronge & Tucker, 2000). While District 1 does have a solid track record of hiring and retaining high-quality teachers, the feedback from all of the administrators involved in the process showed that there is certainly room for improvement in the process.

By having a documented process for hiring, District 1 will have less of a need for attention on the process and will be able to focus on the candidates themselves. This should lead to an even greater likelihood of finding the best candidates and, therefore, providing District 1 students with an even greater chance of academic success. Fiscally speaking, retaining teachers is much more cost-effective than going back into the applicant pool and starting over. A clear process will, presumably, lead to a greater retention rate and save the district money over time.

## **Culture**

There are many reasons why having an efficient and well-documented hiring process can have a positive contribution to the culture of a district. First, among the administrators, having a clear understanding of who is responsible for doing what and when will alleviate any potential uncertainty or concern about tasks not getting done. If everyone knows whose job it is to coordinate the next step, then no one feels like they may be dropping the ball. Second, if a clear process can create an environment where even fewer teachers leave after a short time, it will add to a culture of stability and a feeling of consistency among the staff. The longer teachers work together as a group, the greater the collaboration between them, which will directly benefit students.

As represented in the satisfaction surveys given to teachers, parents, and students biannually, District 1 has an excellent culture. This is not an area that needs extensive attention, nor is it the goal of this change plan. It is the “cleaning up” of a process that is used each year to hire new teachers that will indirectly lead to a positive shift in culture, both within the administrative ranks and the teacher ranks.

## **Conditions**

It is my experience that teachers, regardless of the building, always seem to have a tight-knit community among them. This has been true, to some degree, in every building in which I have worked over my career. By finding the best teachers available for any posted vacancy, and helping to support that person so they end up achieving tenure, District 1 can make a great contribution to the working conditions in their schools. Any time a teacher is let go or non-renewed, it has a negative impact on the community of teachers. Even if there is a teacher who is struggling to meet the expectations of the

job, the other teachers will connect and bond with that teacher and seeing them leave can have an adverse effect on working conditions. It goes a long way toward maintaining strong working conditions to find quality candidates and to help them to last. Having a clear hiring process will also be a plus for the working conditions of the administrators. If they all have a clear understanding of the flow of the process, there is far less room for any confusion or concern that one member or the other is not on top of their responsibilities.

### **Competencies**

District 1 does so many things well; it allows them to choose with relative freedom in what area they would like to improve because there is little that is in dire need of attention. By cleaning up a process that is already working well, it will only add to competencies in student performance and the existing two-year mentoring program. Student learning will be helped by ensuring high-quality teachers get hired into the district. Another advantage that cannot be discounted is the time created in the schedules of administrators with a clearly defined efficient process.

## **SECTION SEVEN: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS FOR CHANGE**

In their book, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (2009), Ronald Heifetz et al. offered that “many organizations get trapped by their current ways of doing things, simply because these ways worked in the past” (p. 51). District 1 has not done much in the way of formalizing their hiring processes because what they are doing is working for them. Generally, they have a high retention rate with their teachers and principals reported working with a collection of high performing teachers. Jim Collins (2006) work with “Good to Great” would say that is a great way to sustain an organization’s “goodness” and hold it back from becoming great.

One key strategy to move District 1 toward an even higher functioning hiring process would be to promote transparent, effective hiring practices by involving the teaching staff in helping to define the characteristics desired in a District 1 teacher. An action to support this strategy would be the formation of focus groups. These groups could be formed to not only identify the desired qualities of a new staff member but in helping to design interview questions that could be used to mete out the qualities teachers would want to see in a future colleague. By involving teachers in the development of any documented hiring protocol, the administration is fostering a highly collaborative relationship with the teaching staff and making smart use of their most valuable resource: the teachers.

The second important strategy would be creating a hiring manual that documents the philosophy of the district regarding hiring, as well as the step-by-step processes that are to be followed from the posting of the job to the job offer. Dr. Frederick mentioned during one of her interviews how she had always thought there should be a handbook or

something to document the hiring process, especially considering how it was standard for the district to document all of their various processes. Having a manual to guide the work of the personnel department would bring it in line with the work of the curriculum department, the business office, operations, and the strategic plan of the superintendent's office. It will also have a positive impact on the work done by building level administration by creating some clarity on their roles in this process, making it easier for them to plan their work more efficiently. A final action in support of this strategy, which would also be included in the handbook, is the development of a framework that would help guide the District 1 administrators in their hiring decisions. Both the teachers and administrators would have a hand in developing this framework.

While it has been mentioned multiple times that all indications point toward the hiring process at District 1 working well, it is also important to note that all administrative members of the District 1 hiring team acknowledged that this was an area of potential improvement. All members also pointed toward inconsistencies and assumptions in the process. Holding some important conversations and documenting the entire process can only help District 1. While the improvement in teacher quality or longevity may not show a marked change, it seems like there is a cry for a more clearly documented process. Maybe this change will swing District 1 even further into the "great" area about which Jim Collins liked to speak.

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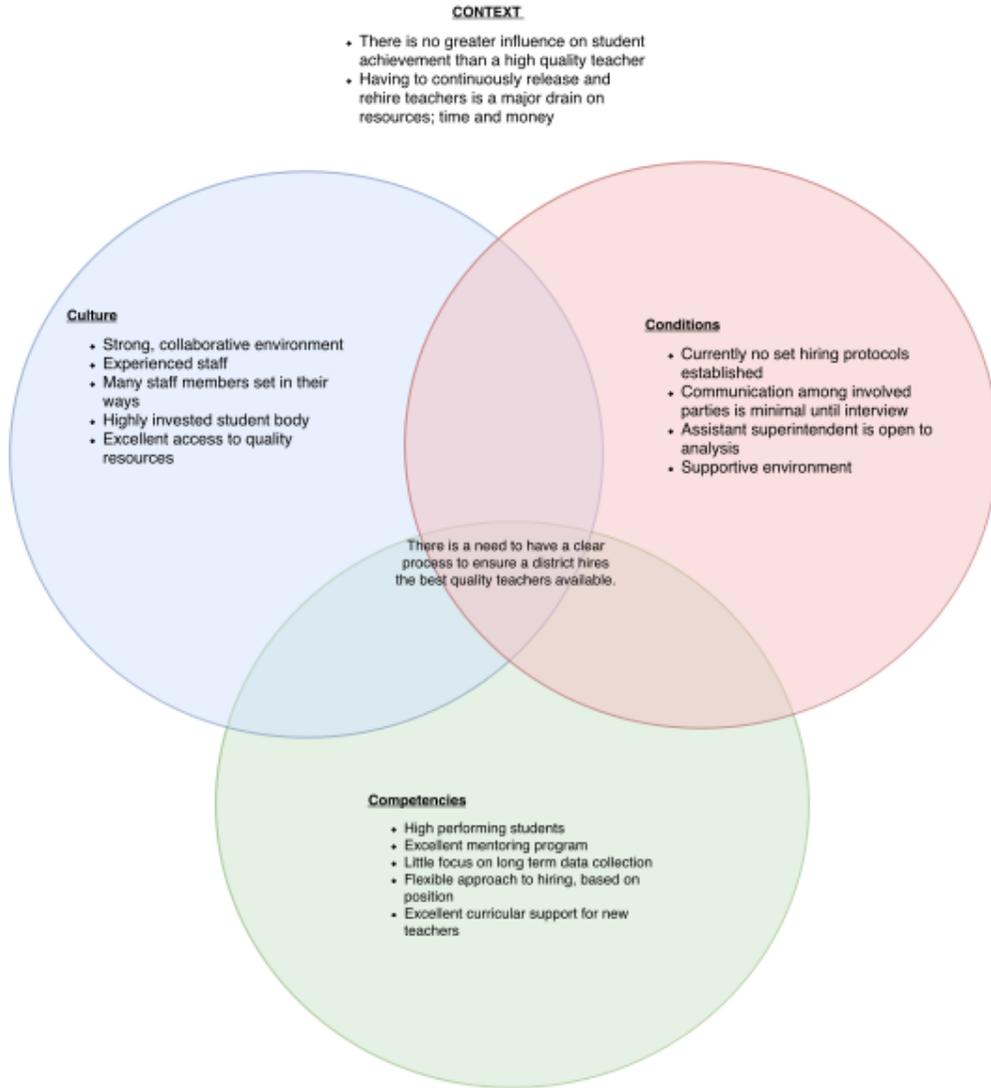
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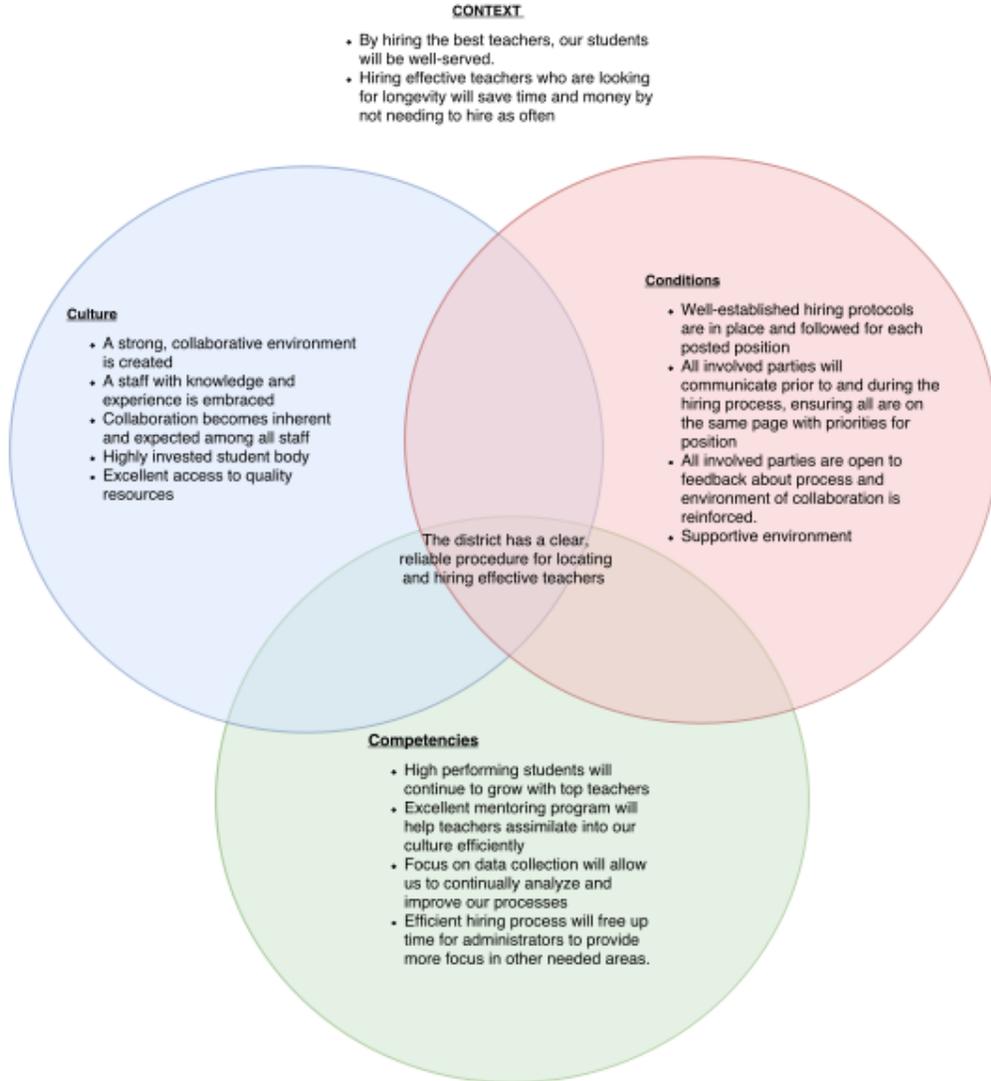
# APPENDIX A: FOUR C'S AS-IS DIAGRAM

McElligott's As-Is  
4 C's Chart



# APPENDIX B: FOUR C'S TO-BE DIAGRAM

McElligott's To-Be 4 C's Chart



**APPENDIX C: STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN**

**BIG Assumption** - District 1 is a desirable enough destination to attract a quality teacher that all that needs to be done is to post a position and it will lead to a high number of highly qualified candidates, which will lead to the hiring of an excellent teacher.

Strategy	Action
Promote transparent and effective hiring practices across the District.	Convene a focus group of teachers to help formulate interview questions regarding values and basic instructional qualities, which we value.
	Develop a system of questions for interviews, isolating the key qualities we determine as desirable in a new hire.
Standardize the hiring protocols to allow for a more clearly understood process.	Define the roles of each position involved in the hiring process.
	Create a flowchart of the hiring process from beginning to end, referencing the person responsible at each step.
	Write and publish a handbook for the hiring of new staff members with interview questions and the duties and responsibilities of all administrators from beginning to end.
	Develop a framework around which to make hiring decisions so that all voices involved in the final decision feel valued.

**Test of Big Assumption:** Create and document a set protocol to follow when posting a new job, clearly outlining the timeline and administrative responsibilities.

## **APPENDIX D: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Please state your name, title, and years of service at this District, please. Remember, neither you nor the District will be identified by name in this research.
2. One of the primary findings of my previous round of interviews was a lack of consistency in the process of hiring new teachers. What is it that you feel would improve this inconsistency?
3. Do you agree that there needs to be a tighter timeline from posting to job offer? Why or why not? What do you think is a fair amount of time for this process?
4. Do you agree that there should be a more consistent make-up of the interview team at the various stages? Should that process include teachers? Why or why not?
5. Do you feel that performance interviews should be a part of this process for classroom teachers? Why or why not?
6. How do you feel the hiring process should be balanced between the district office and the specific building in which the candidate will work? How close is this district to achieving that balance?
7. Do you think the addition of a handbook, outlining the process of hiring new staff members from beginning to end, would be beneficial for this district? If so, what would you like to see contained in that handbook?
8. Outside of the handbook and the exclusion/inclusion of performance interviews, is there anything you can think of that could be changed that would benefit the hiring process in your school district?

## **APPENDIX E: ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Please state your name, title, and years of service at this District, please. Remember, neither you nor the District will be identified by name in this research.
2. After my first round of interviews, it was unanimous across the three buildings that the principals feel the hiring process is working for them as it is now constructed. One item that came out of those discussions was that the process of hiring seems to look different almost every time a new teacher is hired. From your perspective, what area(s) do you think a greater level of consistency would be desired, if any?
3. Some of the research I reviewed solicited feedback from job applicants on positives and negatives they experienced during their job search. The item that was most consistently listed as a negative was the length of the process from beginning to end. What do you think is a fair amount of time to conduct the hiring process? About how close to that time do you think your standard process takes?
4. Do you feel that performance interviews should be a part of this process for classroom teachers? Why or why not?
5. How do you feel the hiring process should be balanced between the district office and the specific building in which the candidate will work? How close is this district to achieving that balance?
6. Are teachers currently a part of your interviews? What are your thoughts on the importance of their inclusion?
7. Do you think the addition of a handbook, outlining the process of hiring new staff members from beginning to end, would be beneficial for this district? If so, what would you like to see contained in that handbook?
8. Outside of the handbook and the exclusion/inclusion of performance interviews, is there anything you can think of that could be changed that would benefit the hiring process in your school district?