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**ARKANSAS EDUCATION REPORT**  
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**WHAT DO SCHOOLS LOOK FOR IN PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS?  
AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER APPLICATION DOCUMENTS**

**September 13, 2012**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Across Arkansas, it is safe to say that districts are interested in hiring the best teachers; but how do district leaders attempt to recruit and hire the most effective teachers? How do district leaders attempt to identify which teacher candidates will be the most effective? Recently, a number of school districts have an even greater reason for their new hires to be excellent teachers, because these districts have schools that have been labeled as focus or priority schools, resulting from poor academic performance.

In order to find the most effective teachers, districts must employ a screening process that identifies the teacher candidates that have the greatest potential to be effective. The first step in seeking and identifying potential teachers is the advertisement and application process. Next, the teacher candidates go through the screening process, whereby district officials attempt to distinguish the best teachers from the applicant pool.

This report examines a straightforward question: *What do district leaders seek in teacher applicants?* In order to get a clearer picture of 1) what districts value in teachers and 2) how they hire teachers, this report examines those qualities among the teacher workforce districts consider when reviewing applications for new hires. In this report, the information requested by school districts on their application materials is analyzed. Although districts use a variety of methods to screen potential teachers, the application is the first step to employment in a district. The application allows districts to collect important information on applicants, which, in turn is information used to determine which teachers will be subject to further screening (notably in an interview). Although we do not capture the entirety of what schools are looking for in applicants, we can draw some conclusions from the information they gather from potential teachers via the application materials.

Of all the characteristics requested on teacher applications, we focus on two in particular that many observers believe are strongly associated with future teaching effectiveness: prior academic achievement and prior teaching results. Prior academic achievement of a teacher includes past test scores (ACT, SAT, GRE, etc), college GPA (and masters GPA, if applicable), and scores on the PRAXIS teaching exams. Prior teaching results might include student test score growth for each teacher, principal evaluations, or other highlights from a teacher's classroom work (e.g. projects a teacher did with a class). Some states, such as Tennessee, report a value-added measure for every teacher, which considers student test scores and principal evaluations for each teacher. Because Arkansas does not report a value-added or similar measure for teachers, it would be difficult to succinctly report this information. However, Arkansas teachers could report their student test score growth, or their principal evaluations could be made available to the new school to assist school administrators when hiring new teachers. Changes are on the horizon as Arkansas is developing the new Teacher Excellence and Support System (TESS), making the reporting of this information more convenient.

Of course, we cannot firmly conclude that a teacher's past academic achievement will lead to a successful teacher, but we do recognize that many consider the academic ability of teachers to be quite important. Moreover, in teaching as in any field, past effectiveness is a strong predictor of future of effectiveness!

## II. LITERATURE

The question of hiring preferences for teachers has been examined numerous times. Unfortunately, it is not easy to draw definitive conclusions from the array of studies because many use varying scales, many use various numbers of items, or the items listed in the survey instruments are simply not comparable.<sup>1</sup> The commonalities that bring much of this literature together are the broad categories of professional and personal traits.

Professional traits are skills or background characteristics that tend to be easier to observe objectively. These might include grades, degrees, or areas of certification. On the other hand, personal traits, like sense of humor or enthusiasm, are nearly impossible to measure objectively. As Mason and Schroeder note, "professional attributes provide more defensible grounds for the acceptance or rejection of a candidate."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, without the proper qualifications, teachers may not even make it past the review of applications phase in the hiring process.

Applications for employment focus primarily on professional traits. Of the 142 principals surveyed by Kersten in Illinois, roughly 82% required applicants to submit a resume, while 77% required college transcripts.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, however, it can be said that personal skills are often more valued than professional qualifications and skills. Using open-ended responses, Rutledge et al. note the teaching candidate's performance in the interview was the most influential factor in the hiring process.<sup>3</sup> During the interview, principals evaluate the personal traits of a candidate and decide how well the teacher would fit with the current teaching force.

Principals vary in the exact traits they are looking for in a new teacher. One quarter of the 60 principals interviewed by Mason & Schroeder cited excitement as a highly desirable trait among applicants, followed closely by appearance (20%) and confidence (20%).<sup>1</sup> Many principals desire teachers that care, know their subject material, are enthusiastic, and have strong communication skills.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say, the interview is a prime opportunity to explore these traits and gather valuable information when considering applicants.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, D. N., Rutledge, S. A., Ingle, W. K., & Thompson, C. C. (2010). Mix and match: What principals really look for when hiring teachers. *Education Finance and Policy*. 5(2). 228-246.

Kersten, T. (2008). Teacher hiring practices: Illinois principals' perspectives. *The Educational Forum*. 72(4). 355-368.

Mason, R. W. & Schroeder, M. P. (2010). Principal hiring practices: Toward a reduction of uncertainty. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*. 83(5). 186-193.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Rutledge, S. A., Harris, D. N., Thompson, C., Ingle, W. K. (2008). Certify, blink, hire: An examination of the process and tools of teacher screening and selection. *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 7(3): 237-63.

<sup>4</sup> Harris, D. N., Rutledge, S. A., Ingle, W. K., & Thompson, C. C. (2010). Mix and match: What principals really look for when hiring teachers. *Education Finance and Policy*. 5(2). 228-246.

The evidence suggests personal references are the ultimate dealmaker or breaker for teaching applicants.<sup>5</sup> If endowed with the time and opportunity, principals might observe every teacher applicant in the classroom. For obvious reasons, this simply is not possible. Thus, principals do the next best thing: call references. References allow principals to gauge how well applicants have performed in the classroom, how well they get along with colleagues, and a host of other important information.

The distinction of professional and personal traits is becoming prevalent in the literature, yet there is significant overlap between the two. For instance, having good references might be thought of as a professional trait, while at the same time, one has those references because of his personal traits. Similarly, having good interview skills is considered a professional trait, but it takes good personal traits (personality, sense of humor, communication skills) to possess this professional skill.

Our analysis is limited to only the application materials, not the ideal source for capturing personal characteristics. Thus, our analyses should be understood as a detailed account of what information districts request from applicants via the application process; but it should be noted that it is important to take into consideration that the application is not the only component of a candidate's application process.

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<sup>5</sup> Rutledge, S. A., Harris, D. N., Thompson, C., Ingle, W. K. (2008). Mason, R. W. & Schroeder, M. P. (2010)

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The first screen in the hiring process is the initial application phase. A principal gathers information about a candidate's professional traits and qualifications from the school's application. Typically, a school district will employ the same application for all prospective teachers. Arkansas has 258 school districts, including charter schools. We have selected 50 of these school districts using a random number generator (see Appendix 1 for the school districts).<sup>6</sup> As displayed in Table 1, the randomly selected sample of school districts closely resembles the average Arkansas school district in terms of measurable characteristics.<sup>7</sup> The 50 districts represent 20% of Arkansas' total student population.

We visited the website of all 50 districts to retrieve an application. We were able to download 38 paper applications and access eight online applications, for a total of 46 applications. We used a binary coding scale to analyze what information was requested on the applications. As expected, most of the items identified fit in the professional characteristics category (college attended, teaching experience, references, certification, etc.).

*Table 1: Comparison of state and randomly selected school districts (represent 20% of Arkansas' student population)*

Descriptive Trait	State Average	Sample Average
Enrollment	1,826	1,874
Percent minority students	27%	23%
Percent female students	49%	49%
Percent FRL students	63%	61%
Disciplinary infractions per student	.32	.32

<sup>6</sup> Arkansas' only virtual school was removed prior to randomizing, because virtual schools may not reflect the same values as brick and mortar schools.

<sup>7</sup> A t-test reveals none of the differences are statistically significant at any conventional level.



## IV. RESULTS

The information requested on the application indicates the district's *stated* preferences when hiring teachers. Principals may actually have quite different preferences when surveyed. As we know from the literature reviewed above, the application primarily contains professional information. It serves as a screen and conduit to check references, transcripts, resumés, and other formal documents. Interestingly, most of the characteristics that would identify someone as an excellent teacher are not as prevalent on applications as many other items.

A breakdown of teacher characteristics and the number (and percent) of districts from our sample that required the applicant to submit information on each characteristic is listed below in Table 2.

*Table 2: Teacher Characteristics Requested by Sample District Teacher Employment Applications*

Characteristic	Number (%)
College	45 (98%)
Teaching experience	45 (98%)
References	44 (96%)
Certification areas	40 (87%)
Felony	33 (72%)
High School attended	31 (67%)
Non-Teaching experiences (work, clubs, organizations)	31 (67%)
Reason for leaving current position	27 (59%)
Student teaching experience	25 (54%)
College GPA or request for transcripts	24 (52%)
School related and special interests	18 (39%)
Capability of sponsoring a club or coaching	18 (39%)
A written teaching statement (e.g. philosophy of teaching)	17 (37%)
Ability to perform job (health)	15 (33%)
Failed to be rehired by a previous employer	13 (28%)
Prior salary	12 (26%)
Professional development	12 (26%)
Foreign language abilities	11 (24%)
Honors (College or otherwise)	10 (22%)
Handwriting sample	8 (17%)
Praxis Scores	6 (13%)

All but one of the 46 applications reviewed requested information about the applicant's college degree and prior teaching experience. Three of the top five most-requested items were related to teacher certification: a college degree, certification area, and not being a felon. This is to be expected in light of state licensure requirements. The other two traits in the top five, teaching experience and references, might assess the candidate's prior work experience. These five traits are all reasonable screens for hiring teachers.

Of all the information requested from school districts, college grade point average, honors, and Praxis scores (the state licensing exams) are the best indicators of prior academic achievement. Yet this information was requested at much lower rates than otherwise seemingly less important information. For instance, the applicant's high school was requested by 67% of school districts, while college GPA was requested by only 52%, honors 22%, and Praxis scores only 13%. Not one school district asked applicants for their scores on common tests of academic aptitude like the SAT and ACT. The requests for Praxis scores may not have even been an attempt to gauge intelligence, rather another way of verifying appropriate licensure. In comparison, 17% of districts requested a handwriting sample. The ability of potential teachers to coach or sponsor clubs appears to be a more influential trait than academic ability, as indicated by the 39% of districts requesting information regarding school-related or special interests and the ability of the applicant to sponsor a club or coach a sport.

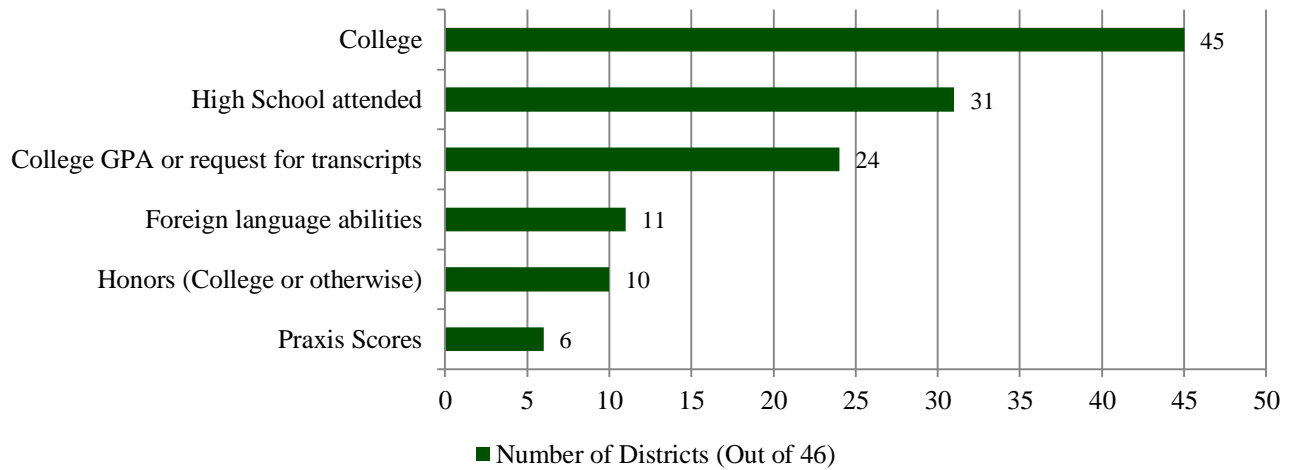
Numerous items appear to gauge the applicant's reason for applying for the position. Indeed, 59% of districts asked why the applicants were leaving their current position. In a similar vein, individuals were asked whether they had failed to be rehired from a previous job on 28% of the applications. A comparable number of applications (26%) asked what the salary was at the candidate's prior job. It seems reasonable to believe a teacher who is taking a pay cut to change districts may have had some issues with their prior employer that may have precipitated the move.

The figures below divide the teacher-applicant characteristics into two categories: academic ability variables and past teaching experience variables. There were six academic ability (Figure 1) and 16 past teaching experience (Figure 2) variables requested by district applications shown from most to least frequently requested.<sup>8</sup>

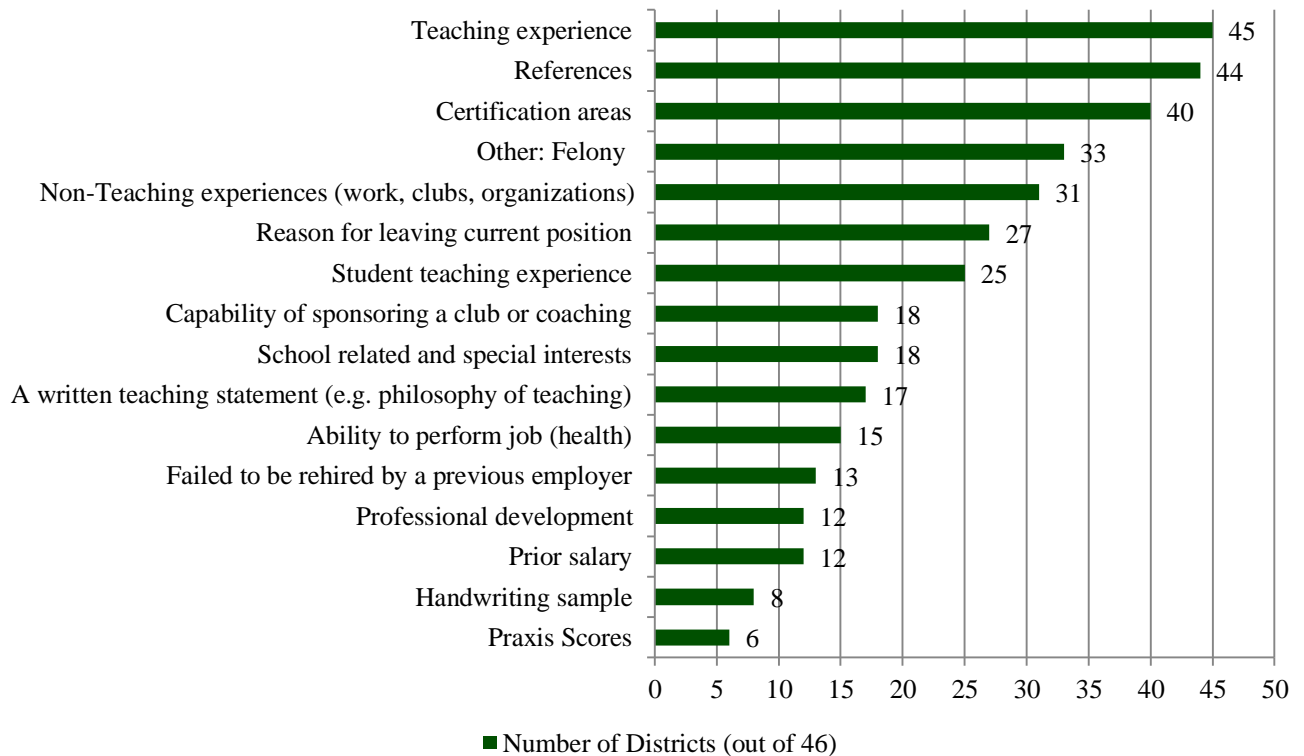
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<sup>8</sup> The variable "Praxis Scores" was listed in both categories.

*Figure 1: Teacher-Applicant Academic Ability Variables Requested by Sample Teacher Employment Applications*



*Figure 2: Teacher-Applicant Past Teaching Experience Variables Requested by Sample Teacher Employment Applications*



Of the 46 applications, 45 districts ask for past teaching experience. The districts, however, do not ask for past teaching scores. While 10 years ago this would have been difficult to report, due to the ACTAAP Benchmark and EOC exams, teachers can now report their student's achievement. This information might be gathered in an interview of a teacher's previous principal, but it could also be reported on an application.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examines the information requested by school districts in Arkansas on their application materials. Although schools use a variety of methods to screen potential teachers, including interviews, the application is the first step to employment in a district. The application allows districts to collect important information on applicants, at a relatively small cost. This information is used to determine which teachers will be followed up with for further screening. Although we do not capture the entirety of what schools are looking for in applicants, we can say what information they gather from potential teachers via the application materials.

In short, school districts tend to request information regarding the prospective teacher's professional background, including teacher preparation, licensure, and prior teaching experience. School districts tend to request information that could identify the prior academic achievement of applicants much less frequently. Districts also do not explicitly gather the prior teaching achievement of a teacher. We understand that this information may be gathered in an interview or follow up procedures; however, if ever there were an opportune time to ask for an individual's scores on standardized exams, their GPA, or the honors they have received and their students' past achievement, the application phase seems to be that time.

Recently, many scholars and policymakers have been hailing the Finnish education system because of the Finns' success on international comparison tests of academic achievement. Many believe Finland's success is largely a function of high-quality teachers. In Finland, teaching is a highly desirable profession, allowing universities to be selective in admitting teacher applicants. In fact, prospective Finnish teachers are typically among the top 20% of all high school graduates in terms of academic achievement.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Korea, the top 5% of high school graduates enter college level teacher training programs. Furthermore, when teachers are selected, it is an even more rigorous process.<sup>10</sup> In the United States, on the other hand, the top graduates typically seek out other fields, such as medicine, business, and law.

Most agree that we want to attract teachers with strong academic credentials to the classroom. Yet, for whatever reason, the best and the brightest do not seem to be selecting into teaching. Indeed, the historical trend indicates the most academically-capable, or at least those with the highest standardized test scores, are going into teaching at lower rates now than they were in years past, possibly due to expanded opportunities in the workforce.<sup>11</sup> Some observers and commentators want to reverse this trend and entice high performers into the teaching field.

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<sup>9</sup> Auguste, B., Kihn, P., & Miller, M. (2010). Closing the talent gap: Attracting and retaining top-third graduates to careers in teaching. *McKinsey & Company*

<sup>10</sup> [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

<sup>11</sup> Corcoran, S. P., Evans, W. N., Schwab, R. M. (2004). Women, the Labor Market, and the Declining Relative Quality of Teachers. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 23(3). pp. 449-470.

Of course, if we want excellent teachers in front of a classroom, then it is important that these excellent teachers are hired. Yet, at least on our sample of Arkansas districts, the current practices do not appear to place a high priority on evidence of past teaching effectiveness or on academic ability of teacher candidates. Some districts, however, are engaging in the following practices which may be useful strategies to attract the most talented applicants.

1. For applicants with prior teaching experience, application materials can request evidence of test score growth of past students. (While Arkansas does not collect a rating or score on teachers like Tennessee, Arkansas teachers could report their students' test score growth. For example, in Tennessee, teachers receive a value-added effectiveness rating that includes student achievement and growth data (50%) and principal observations and conferences (50%).)<sup>12</sup>
2. For applicants with prior teaching experience, application materials can explicitly ask for a past principal reference with past evaluations of the teacher.
3. Ask for college transcripts. Or at the least, ask what coursework the applicant has completed that is relevant to the position for which they are applying.
4. Ask for copies of scores for the Praxis I and II as well as college entrance exams like the ACT or SAT.
5. Ask applicants to list what honors or awards they have received, particularly with respect to the content matter that the applicant would be teaching.
6. Ask for references that can attest to the candidate's academic capabilities, particularly with respect to the content matter that the applicant would be teaching.

Of course, it is not conclusive that teachers with strong academic backgrounds or excellent test scores are better teachers. Indeed, some have suggested schools value other traits, especially character traits, more than they value intelligence.<sup>13</sup> Harris et al. report that principals ranked "intelligence" low on a list of desirable characteristics; however, they often ranked content knowledge high.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it seems intuitive that both past teaching success and a strong mastery of the content that the candidate will be teaching are important pieces of information that would be useful to school officials in the hiring process. Perhaps district leaders should seek such information in a systematic way to both signal the importance to future applicants and to aid human resource officers in their hiring decisions.

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<sup>12</sup> See [http://www.tn.gov/education/assessment/test\\_results.shtml](http://www.tn.gov/education/assessment/test_results.shtml) for more information on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System.

<sup>13</sup> Ballou, D., & Podgursky, M. (1997). Teacher pay and teacher quality. Kalamazoo, Michigan: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, D. N., Rutledge, S. A., Ingle, W. K., & Thompson, C. C. (2010). Mix and match: What principals really look for when hiring teachers. *Education Finance and Policy*. 5(2). 228-246.

## APPENDIX

*Appendix I: School Districts used in this study (selected using a random number generator).*

School District	County	District Enrollment	No. of Schools
Prairie Grove School District	Washington	1,741	4
Mena School District	Polk	1,901	5
Lakeside School District	Garland	3,037	4
Hillcrest School District	Lawrence	415	2
Ouachita School District	Hot Spring	452	2
Hermitage School District	Bradley	468	2
Lee County School District	Lee	995	3
Bradley School District	Lafayette	390	2
Stephens School District	Ouachita	355	2
Lead Hill School District	Boone	370	2
Star City School District	Lincoln	1,653	3
Rector School District	Clay	592	2
Sloan-Hendrix School Dist.	Lawrence	668	3
Dover School District	Pope	1,383	3
Atkins School District	Pope	968	3
Bay School District	Craighead	558	2
Dollarway School District	Jefferson	1,525	5
Hector School District	Pope	613	2
Jessieville School District	Garland	890	3
Carlisle School District	Lonoke	758	2
Hackett School District	Sebastian	611	2
Cabot School District	Lonoke	10,052	16
Concord School District	Cleburne	452	2
Armored School District	Mississippi	457	2
Genoa Central School District	Miller	932	3
Jasper School District	Newton	896	6
Midland School District	Independence	522	2
East Poinsett Co. School Dist.	Poinsett	720	3
Mayflower School District	Faulkner	1,054	3
Marmaduke School District	Greene	715	2
Hot Springs School District	Garland	3,658	8
Newport School District	Jackson	1,440	3
Drew Central School District	Drew	972	3
White Hall School District	Jefferson	3,034	7
Helena/ W.Helena School Dist.	Phillips	2,267	6
Paragould School District	Greene	2,919	6
Nemo Vista School District	Conway	494	3
Valley View School District	Craighead	2,346	2
Searcy County School District	Searcy	938	3
Searcy School District	White	4,007	6
So. Conway Co. School District	Conway	2,222	5
Watson Chapel School District	Jefferson	3,114	5
Eureka Springs School District	Carroll	650	3
Elkins School District	Washington	1,151	4
El Dorado School District	Union	4,646	8
Poyen School District	Grant	532	2
Imboden Charter School Dist	Lawrence	67	1
Bentonville School District	Benton	13,530	15
Conway School District	Faulkner	9,256	15
Estem High School	Pulaski	367	1