



The Game Has Changed: Tips for Finding a New Teaching Position

Get up to speed with the latest online tools and interviewing techniques. by Mary C. Clement

Ask teachers how they got their first job, and you may hear comments like these:

- "I student taught in the district, so the administration knew me."
- "I wanted to teach near where I grew up, and a family friend told me about a job opening. Fortunately, my friend knew a school board member too."
- "I read the bulletin board outside the office of student teaching and applied for jobs in my field."
- "I went to the teacher placement day on campus, handed out a dozen résumés, and got called to interview with the district that hired me."

Traditionally, teachers found job openings by "word of mouth" and often were hired with a rather informal set of interview questions. The old standard "tell me about yourself" was a question that started the interview, and it probably ended with "and where do you see yourself in five years?" Research supports the assumption that many teachers "went home to teach" and that in the past as many as half to three-fourths of teacher-education candidates attended college within 100 miles of their home, seeking their first jobs in the same geographic proximity (Cushner 2004; Zimpher 1989). As teaching has long been considered a family-friendly profession (Parkay and Stanford 2003; Wiseman, Cooner, and Knight 2002), many teachers tended to stay in one geographic area throughout their careers because of their families.

This traditional picture of a teacher's career is not always the case today. Ingersoll's (2003, 147) research informed us, "Teaching is a career with chronic and relatively high annual turnover." Additionally, Ingersoll and Smith (2003, 31) indicated, "Total teacher turnover is fairly evenly split between two components: *attrition* (those who leave teaching altogether); and *migration* (those who move to teaching jobs in other schools)." Many teachers are forced to change jobs because of family obligations (a spouse with a higher-paying job, aging parents, or needs of children). Others may change jobs for better working conditions and benefits.

For teachers who haven't job searched in the last few years, the game has changed. Online job searches and behavior-based interviews have made a teacher's job

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search more competitive, formal, and businesslike. The updates and interview questions provided here will help experienced teachers complete a successful job search, as well as provide helpful hints for teachers at any stage of their career who are job searching.

Important First Steps

If you are moving to another state, the first step is to research how to get certified there. Start your search at www.professionalteacher.com. This comprehensive site allows you to select any state and then directs you to the appropriate certification offices. Complete the paperwork for certification as early as possible; even if your state's licensure is reciprocal, this part of the process may take weeks.

With the certification paperwork completed, update your cover letter and résumé. The cover letter should be only one page—even if you have ten years of experience. For examples, turn to Kappa Delta Pi's *The ABC's of Job-Hunting for Teachers* (Clement 2003) or your college career center. You don't even have to visit your alma mater; just go to the university's Web site and look for the career center's page! Yes, things have gotten a lot easier because of technology.

While you may use the cover letter to explain why you are job searching at this stage of your career, you do not need to tell anyone about your marriage, divorce, children, or other personal reasons for changing jobs. In fact, providing too much personal information is not professional. You can share a brief comment such as, "After 18 years in the Midwest, my spouse's career is taking us to Atlanta, where we plan to make our permanent, professional homes." Convey one or two teaching successes in your letter, such as how your past

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classes achieved high standardized test score gains, and let the potential employer know how to reach you. Keep it short and simple, but highlight your experience and success.

Your résumé needs updating as well. As an experienced teacher, eliminate high school and college awards, unless they are truly unique and relate to your teaching or coaching skills. The employer needs to know about your career as a whole, so don't leave gaps. If you were out of the teaching force raising a family, fulfilling National Guard duty, or working in the business world, indicate it. Include skills you may have developed in these positions, such as organizing and teaching children's clubs, working with scouts, or training new employees. Even if you have years of experience, keep in mind that a two-page résumé is all busy employers have time to read. (For résumé examples, see Anthony and Roe 1998; Warner and Bryan 2003; and Career Assistance in the Membership section of www.kdp.org.)

You may not have taken a portfolio to your first job interview, but teaching portfolios are common now. A good portfolio is short and clear, with six to eight artifacts that showcase your work. Include a lesson plan, a classroom management plan, some student work (with names removed), a newsletter sent to parents, an outline of a unit plan or syllabus, a few pictures that will help you explain how you set up a classroom, and perhaps a certificate or award you have received. Employers don't say, "show me your portfolio," but you should use it as a visual aid when you answer questions.

What Your Alma Mater Can Do for You

As an alum, your college's career center is still open for you. You can go back to campus and attend workshops on finding a teaching job, writing a résumé, and interviewing. Some college career centers provide individual counseling sessions for their alumni and the opportunity for a mock interview. Most will invite you to attend their teacher job fair, which is an excellent way to meet potential employers.

Some college career centers still offer the service of a credentials package for teacher education majors and alums. A credentials package makes getting out letters of recommendation to employers much easier. You ask three to five people each to write one letter that is sent to the career center. The career center then mails copies of these letters to potential employers as you apply for jobs. Knowing that you may have to apply to dozens of districts to secure a job, you don't want to have to ask people to write dozens of letters on your behalf. Using the credentials package service, if it is available to you, is a great time-saver.

The services of the career center may be online now. If so, just get on the Internet, locate the Web page, and get started. Start by going to your alma mater's Web site, and search from there. Also consider using the career center of a university near where you are moving.

The Search for Job Openings

The search for job openings may begin at your college career center, but it most likely will be continued online. Many states now have a state Web site that lists the jobs available in all public schools within the state. See, for example, www.teachgeorgia.org for Georgia, www.iasaedu.org for Illinois, or www.moteachingjobs.com for Missouri. One of the easiest ways to find your state's site is to type the state name and "teaching jobs" into a search engine. You also can use www.professionalteacher.com, www.rnt.org, or www.teachers.net to find information about each state. Check the site every day, and apply for jobs as they are posted. Large school districts post their openings on their own sites. Use any search engine, such as Google™, and type the district name as your search string to find this information.

Another approach is to use a national job search Web site, such as www.teachers-teachers.com or www.k12jobs.com. These sites are free to job seekers and work to pair the seeker with a job posted by an employer. Not all jobs will be listed there, because districts must pay fees to list openings on commercial sites. Teachers-Teachers.com offers tutorials on cover letters and résumé writing, and lets you record a phone interview as well.

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Once you find an opening, do your homework, and go to the district's Web site to find out about the student population, teacher salaries, and other facts. As a candidate, you are expected to be knowledgeable about a district before your on-site interview. The Web is a great place to do your research.

The Behavior-Based Interview

Behavior-based interviewing (BBI) has been used in the business world for decades and is based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance (Deems 1994; Green 1996). Behavior-based interview questions are designed to ascertain whether a candidate has the prerequisite skills and experiences to do the assigned job. Each question asks about previous experiences and seeks to determine the candidate's behaviors with past tasks, situations, and problems. Therefore, many BBI-style questions begin with "tell me about a time when . . .," "describe a situation where . . .," or "share an example of" Questions in a BBI-style interview (see the sidebar below for samples) are about the tasks of teaching—such as methods, management, and communication with parents.

BBI-Style Interview Questions

Curriculum

1. Give an example of a national or state standard in your field and how you have taught a lesson incorporating that standard.
2. How have you supplemented the textbook in your classes?

Planning/Methods

3. Describe the steps of teaching a class for a one-hour time period.
4. Which methods do you most frequently employ in teaching?
5. Describe any project or group work that has been successful with students.
6. How have you prepared students for standardized tests or graduation tests?

Student Motivation

7. What kinds of stressors do today's students face, and how have you helped them cope with their concerns?
8. How have you met the needs of gifted, talented, and advanced students in your classes?
9. How have you helped at-risk students achieve academic success in your classes?

Assessment and Management

10. Explain your grading scale to me as though you were explaining it to your class.
11. Explain your classroom management plan to me as though you were explaining it to your students.
12. Describe a time when your authority was challenged or a class rule was broken, and how you reacted.

Communication/Professionalism

13. How have you communicated long-range plans to students and parents?
14. How have you stayed current in your subject matter and in the field of teaching?



How to Answer BBI Questions

The acronyms of PAR and STAR can guide your answers, allowing you to "teach" the interviewer what you know about the task specified in the question. PAR stands for problem, action, and result. When you are asked a question, the interviewer is listening to discern whether you have experienced the problem, whether you have learned what actions to take in that situation, and what the results of your actions were. For example, when asked how you have encouraged students to read, you will want to phrase your answer in an organized manner, as in the following example:

In my fifth year of teaching, I learned that we had to build in some reading time in class, similar to the 'drop everything and read' programs at elementary schools [problem]. I incorporated this into my sophomore classes, and it worked well. I learned that I have to give some time in class for reading, with specific tasks for the students to do about what they read, and time limits [action]. I also learned that I can't allow too much time



for in-class reading, or it will discourage reading outside of class, and slow the coverage of topics **[result]**. It's about finding balance.

STAR—representing situation, task, action, and result—is a similar guide for answering questions. An interviewer may ask about your experiences with standardized or end-of-course testing. You would be expected to describe the situation and your experience with it, and then describe the task of preparing students for the assessment, without simply teaching to the test. You can describe some productive review strategies that you have used in the classroom (action), and then discuss the positive results yielded when a teacher knows how to reinforce learned material and guide student reviews.

When you use PAR and STAR to answer questions, your responses are succinct and organized. The better you articulate an answer, the higher the interviewer will rate your response. You should expect an interviewer to have a list of questions and to take notes on your answers. This process ensures

that employers are asking each candidate the same questions.

Final Preparations

As an experienced teacher, you want to highlight your past successes to assure the employer that you are a qualified, competent, caring teacher. Whether your experience is a few years or many, you also want to assure the interviewer that you can change and adapt to the new district. Stories of “we did that in my last district and it didn’t work” are not what employers want to hear. They want to hear how you have organized the classroom for optimum student achievement, how you have met the needs of diverse students, and how you have worked professionally with parents, colleagues, and administrators.

Of course, you will dress for success. You will shake hands, make eye contact, and arrive a few minutes early. You will have one or two questions ready when the employer says, “Do you have any questions for us?” Sample questions include, “What professional development opportunities are available for teachers in this district?” and “What technology is available for use in the building?”

After the on-site interview, be sure to send a follow-up note of thanks to the interviewer, which may be sent via e-mail. Be ready to accept an offer when called, and find out when new teacher orientation begins.

Closing Thoughts

While online job searching and behavior-based interviewing have made teacher interviews more sophisticated, the excitement of being hired and of walking into a classroom for the first day of school remain the same. Teaching is a wonderful profession, with tremendous opportunities for jobs in rural areas, suburbs, and big cities. Experienced teachers have job mobility, which offers infinite possibilities, and that is another reason to choose teaching. ■

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