

What Every Public School Physical Educator Should Know About the Hiring Process

WILLIAM F. STIER, JR.

ROBERT C. SCHNEIDER

For all physical educators seeking high school jobs, here's the scoop on what principals want and how the hiring process works.

It has long been recognized that securing the services of top quality physical education teachers is essential to establishing and maintaining a strong physical education program (Horowitz, 1999). Therefore, when attempting to develop and maintain secondary physical education programs of high quality, principals seek to attract and hire outstanding physical education teachers. Prospective physical education teachers need to understand the hiring process from the perspective of the school (i.e., the principal) if they are to put their best foot forward and become competitive and marketable for vacancies. In addition, candidates should be aware that although the actual hiring process and assessment strategies may differ somewhat from school to school and from district to district, there are many practices that are common to all or many of the schools seeking to hire physical educators.

This article explains the hiring process for the benefit of physical education teacher candidates, both new teachers and those who wish to change positions. The first part of the article discusses the general mechanics of the process based on selected references. The second part presents a research study conducted by the authors, which provides insight into how various aspects of the hiring process are perceived by principals of secondary schools. Teacher candidates will gain from reviewing how secondary school principals view the hiring and recruiting processes and how they proceed and operate in terms of seeking and assessing candidates for teaching positions.

Related Literature

The Search Committee and Job Description. The creation of a job description for a physical education teaching position is the beginning of the formal process of hiring for that position. Adams and Veruki (1997) advocated getting as many persons as possible involved at the start of the search, as a way of ensuring that the process is fair and equal for all candidates. Frequently, a task force is established to create the job description. The makeup of such a task force varies but often consists of administrators (usually the school's principal), teachers, and parents, as well as students and community members (Peterson, 2002).

The job description often formally details, in writing, the required as well as the preferred qualifications the candidates must meet to be considered for the physical education position. Peterson (2002) described job descriptions as more like working statements than blueprints for exact replication, because the job of a teacher is complex and open-ended, and even extensive descriptions cannot always capture its full nature. Wendover (1998) indicated that one purpose of the job description is to sell or present the job in the best light possible.

Candidates for any teaching vacancy should be aware that schools place a great

deal of emphasis on having both accurate and complete job descriptions. The job description typically includes a brief overview of the position; a list of job tasks, responsibilities, and objectives; an explanation of the reporting structure; necessary qualifications and training; what the candidate will be doing on a day-to-day basis; the background and personal characteristics required; and how performance will be appraised. Candidates should be aware that most physical education teaching positions also come with an expectation of some coaching duties (Adams and Veruki, 1997; Harvard Business School, 2002; Messmer, 1998; Stier, 1998; Wendover, 1998; Wenos, Koslow, & Wenos, 1996).

Recruiting. Physical education candidates should familiarize themselves with the common recruiting strategies that schools use in looking for qualified physical education teachers (and coaches). Typical candidate recruiting may take place through newspaper ads, referrals from colleagues, trade publications, professional associations, networking, campus announcements, and the Internet (Harvard Business School, 2002; Stier, 1998; Wendover, 1998).

Candidates for teaching positions may find themselves competing against a number of other individuals, some from outside the school system and others from within the school system, often referred to as “growing one’s own candidates” (Stier, 1999, p. 258). The promotion of people from within has become a popular form of hiring, because those involved in the hiring process are already familiar with the candidate and the candidate is familiar with the organization, plus the successful internal candidate is a proven worker (Smart, 1999). Another reason why schools like to hire and promote internal candidates is that doing so improves overall employee morale, because current employees realize that it is possible to advance within the organization (Wendover, 1998). This is especially true for coaching vacancies, as when an assistant is promoted to a head coaching post.

Evaluating Applications. Once the applicant has submitted the formal application, the next step in the hiring process involves an evaluation in which the principal and the search committee consider the qualifications of each candidate in an effort to arrive at a specific number to interview, perhaps initially by phone and then in person (Clement, 2000). This time-intensive evaluation process involves several steps.

The search committee typically reviews the applications and classifies them into three pools: (1) valid candidates, (2) possible candidates, and (3) those in which the school has no further interest. After reviewing all candidates, applications placed in the “possible” pile may be reevaluated to determine whether any of them should be moved to the valid candidate pile, or to the “no further interest” pile (Gagnon, 2003).

Applications should be prepared so that a candidate’s prior experience, areas of responsibility, and accomplishments are

emphasized. This is because search committees and school administrators often focus on these areas rather than on the attitude or potential of the candidate (Peterson, 2002). Committees want to know how well candidates have done in the past, since past performance is often a good indicator as to how well one will do in the future (Horowitz, 1999).

The Interview Experience. Being selected for an interview is an all-important achievement. The initial in-person interview takes place after the field is narrowed to between four and seven candidates for a single post (Harvard Business School, 2002). The interview is the critical step in the employment

process, and the candidate should prepare for it carefully in order to leave a proper impression in the minds of the search or interview committee. Interviews can last from 30 minutes to several hours, and in some instances take place over several days (DeMitchell, 1990).

During the interview, candidates are asked questions dealing with specific knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for the position, with a focus on teacher behaviors (Peterson, 2002). According to Barrett (1998), candidates should expect interview questions to focus on interpersonal or technical skills as well as organizational fit. Questions that attempt to reveal character traits should also be expected, since such abilities and characteristics do not necessarily show up on a resume, or in ordinary interview questions (Hopp & Swedburg, 1996).

At some schools the questions will be given to the interviewees ahead of time, while at others the interviewees will not know what questions will be asked until the actual interview session. The questions asked of the candidate may be the same for each person being interviewed or may be different for each candidate. The reason why principals often prefer to ask all candidates the same questions is that this allows for a better comparison of the answers given by those being interviewed.

References and Recommendations. Prospective employees should expect that their references, as well as the information provided on the application form, will be carefully checked by the school authorities (Gagnon, 2003). Therefore, applicants must be very careful about providing accurate information on the application as well as in the letter of application. Significant errors (deliberate or not) can be cause for elimination from the search process or even dismissal from the position once one has been hired (Stier, 1998).

Securing appropriate references is a very important task for the applicant, because the caliber of the person serving as a reference will have influence, as well as how this person presents information and responds to questions asked by the search committee. The purpose of checking references is to verify the applicant’s work experiences and stated achievements, and to learn about each applicant’s successes, failures,

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work habits, strengths, and weaknesses (Harvard Business School, 2002).

Notification of Candidate Status. As the candidates enter the final stages of a job search, they are typically notified of their status. Usually there are three categories of candidate status that call for different notification procedures: (1) the candidate who will be offered the position, (2) candidates who are qualified but not being offered the position, and (3) those candidates who do not meet the criteria and will not, at present or in the future, be considered any further for the position.

Offering the Position and Negotiating the Contract. When schools offer a position to a candidate, the actual job offer is often extended in person (Adams & Veruki, 1997; Harvard Business School, 2002; Peterson, 2002). Of course, a follow-up letter or written confirmation should be expected from the personnel office (Harvard Business School, 2002; Peterson 2002).

It is sometimes (but not always) possible to negotiate with the school on any number of factors, including, but not limited to, salary, benefits, job title, responsibilities, and perks, as well as whether assistants will be available (if one is to be a head coach). The act of negotiation is directly tied to the type of position one is being offered and how much the school wants the services of the candidate. When a candidate has certain specialties, skills, or experiences (or can coach certain sports), he or she may be in a position to negotiate a higher salary and other benefits (Stier, 1998; Wendover, 1998).

Notifying Rejected Candidates. Once the position has been filled, the school should notify the unsuccessful candidates via mail or email within one or two days, and definitely within 10 days of their last interview (Peterson, 2002). In terms of explaining one's decision not to hire a candidate, Peterson (2002) noted that school districts are under no obligation to do so. In fact, Wendover (1998) supported the notion of not being obligated to explain the reason for rejecting a candidate and commented further by stating that volunteering such information may actually have negative legal consequences.

A National Survey of Hiring Practices and Procedures

In an effort to determine the extent to which high school principals agree or disagree with certain practices and procedures used to hire high school physical education teachers, the authors conducted a survey of selected high school principals. A review of literature revealed that no recent study or investigation dealing with the content of this survey has been published. The results of this survey provide an overall identification and understanding of the various hiring practices and procedures that high school principals find effective

in their search for quality physical education teachers. Such information can be very helpful to the teacher candidates who are seeking a first-time job and to experienced teachers seeking to move from one teaching situation to another.

Methods

Subjects. A survey was sent to randomly selected high school principals in the United States. *The National Directory of High School Coaches* (Athletic Publishing Company, 2003-2004) was used to find the names and addresses of the schools. Given that the survey attempted to determine the practices

and policies used by secondary school principals to hire physical education teachers, it was fundamental to the study that each respondent was, in fact, a current secondary school principal. The internal review board of the authors' institution confirmed that the procedures to ensure subject and school anonymity were appropriate.

Questionnaire. The content of the questionnaire was based on and developed from the existing literature, consultation with experts in the area of hiring physical education teachers, and the authors' own experience and expertise in hiring physical education teachers. (A copy of the survey instrument can be obtained from the authors [bstier@brockport.edu].) After developing the questionnaire, the authors tested the survey instrument by disseminating it to five experts in the area of hiring physical education teachers in order to help establish the content validity of the questionnaire and to obtain feedback. The five experts were high school principals who had at least 10 years of experience in hiring secondary school physical education teachers. After making minor formatting and content changes based on the suggestions of the experts, the final survey instrument (questionnaire) consisted of 29 questions. These primarily consisted of closed-response items, including yes/no questions, related to various facets of the hiring process.

Procedure. An initial mailing was sent to 400 randomly selected principals and was followed by a second mailing five weeks later targeting those principals who had not responded to the initial mailing. The response rate was 53.5%, with 214 useable surveys returned out of the 400 that had been mailed out.

Findings

Unsolicited Applications. Some would-be physical education teachers seeking employment submit an unsolicited application to one or more schools in an effort to determine whether a suitable position presently exists or might open up in the future. This practice appears relatively uncommon, since 88.5% of the principals reported having received fewer than 25 unsolicited applications a year from male applicants looking for possible physical education jobs, and 96% of

School administrators typically contact other people who are not provided as references by the candidate.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Male and Female Applications Versus Size of Application Pool

	Number of Applications			
	1-25	26-50	51-100	Over 100
% of All Male Applications	73.5	17.5	6.9	2.1
% of All Female Applications	79	15.8	4.3	0.9

the principals reported receiving fewer than 25 unsolicited applications a year from female applicants.

As to the effectiveness of applicants sending unsolicited applications, 18.4% of the principals revealed that such applications were not retained at all if no vacancy existed. However, slightly more than 59% indicated that the applications were indeed retained for a period of time before being destroyed. In addition, 22.2% followed the practice of keeping the applications indefinitely in case a vacancy might develop. If vacancies did exist, the vast majority of schools (90.2%) required that candidates for all physical education positions complete a formal application form.

Job Vacancies. Table 1 shows the distribution of applications versus the number of applications received in those instances in which a school advertised a vacancy. At 43% of the schools, the job description for a physical education vacancy is created by the high school principal. The physical education director or chairperson does this at 14% of the schools, a committee at 15% of the schools, and the office of human resources at 28% of the schools.

In terms of *where* (geographical area) the notice or announcement for the physical education vacancy is “posted” or advertised, all respondents (100%) reported posting the vacancy notice within the school itself and 91.6% reported posting notices within the school system itself. Sending notices or announcements within a local geographical area was reported by 68.8% of the principals, while 64.5% of them expanded the area to include regional announcements, 63.2% sent notices statewide, and 23.5% went national with their announcements.

Schools with vacancies always face the challenge of *how* (through what medium) the vacancies should be advertised or announced. For physical education openings, 80.0% of the responding schools utilized the World Wide Web, 73.3% of the principals reported sending the announcements to selected college/university placement bureaus, and 62.4% placed paid advertisements in newspapers. Only 35.5% of the respondents notified other schools and districts. Word-of-mouth was a planned method in 5.8% of the schools, and 2.5% attended recruiting fairs. It is interesting that 2.1% of the principals revealed that they used no public advertisement at all for the physical education vacancies.

When advertising a physical education vacancy, 42.3% of the schools stated a closing date after which no application would be considered, while 20.1% provided a closing date even though, in reality, late applications were nevertheless reviewed and considered. A large percentage of the

respondents (37.6%) provided for an open-ended application deadline—that is, applications were accepted and reviewed until the position was filled.

Search-and-Screen Committees. A search-and-screen committee was established in 60.7% of the schools to facilitate the search for a qualified physical education teacher to fill a vacancy in the school. At those schools using search-and-screen committees, the principal was a member in 63.7% of the schools, the physical education director and the athletic director were members in 46.1% of the schools, and physical education teachers were members in 44.0% of the schools. Other members of such committees included other teachers (29.0%), representatives from the personnel office (23.9%), representatives from the superintendent’s office (18.1%), and students (2.6%). Additional individuals who sometimes participated as members included school board members, principals from other buildings, assistant principals, curriculum directors, and other administrators (all less than 1%).

The role of the search-and-screen committee varied. Their tasks, in descending order of frequency, were as follows: 63.7% actually interviewed candidates, 54.7% determined which candidates were to be invited for an interview, 54.4% developed interview questions to ask candidates who were interviewed, 47.9% made recommendations for employment, 18.8% developed a job description, and 9.4% recommended advertising strategies relative to the vacancy. In those instances in which candidates were recommended to the superintendent for employment, 70.1% of the schools followed a practice of ranking the candidates as part of their recommendation report.

Job References. The principals indicated that it was school policy to accept a variety of references from physical education applicants, including generic (“to whom it may concern”) college placement papers (79.5%), personal phone calls (83.8%), and individualized/personalized written references (100%). However, 25.2% of the principals indicated that their district required personal, individualized letters of recommendation on behalf of the candidates and that so-called generic “to whom it may concern” letters of reference (placement papers) were unacceptable.

In terms of the principals’ personal preference relative to references sent on behalf of candidates, 46.6% indicated that they preferred personalized references, while 45.3% had no preference. Only 6.4% preferred generic “to whom it might concern” references and an even lower rate of principals (1.7%) preferred generic references as part of the college

placement papers.

As to whether the references provided by the candidates are ever contacted by school officials, an overwhelming percentage of respondents (95.3%) indicated that such contacts and follow-ups are indeed made. In fact, 81.2% of the principals revealed that the school administrators, search committee members, or others *typically contact other people who are not provided as references by the candidate* in an effort to find out more about the physical education candidate.

Interviews. Almost half (45.3%) of the schools typically select five or more individuals to interview. Slightly more than a quarter (27.8%) of the schools interview four candidates, 24.8% interview three, and only 2.1% typically interview only two people.

Interview questions are *predetermined for all candidates to be interviewed* in 88.5% of the schools, and 99.6% of the schools share these questions with the candidates before the actual interview date. Phone interviews are conducted in only 17.5% of the schools surveyed, while 82.5% have the policy of conducting only in-person interviews. Very few schools (2.1%) pay all or part of the travel expenses of the candidates invited to be interviewed. The remaining schools (97.9%) have a policy or practice that prohibits such payment.

Keeping Applicants Informed. Only 35.5% of the schools have a policy, during the search process, of notifying candidates with rejection letters once the individuals are no longer under consideration. Slightly less than half (46.6%) of the schools notify all candidates when the position is filled or the search is cancelled. An even smaller percentage (17.9%) of the schools notify all candidates of a change in their status relative to the vacancy throughout the search process.

Slightly more than a third (37.2%) of the schools have a policy of limiting the number of years of prior teaching experience that can be transferred to the new school's salary schedule by a new hire. The limitation ranges from as low as three years to as high as 15 years. The most frequently cited number of years of prior teaching experience that may be transferred is seven (in 31% of those schools that limit credit for prior teaching). Just over a quarter of the schools (25.2%) that limit credit for prior teaching cap the maximum credit at five years, while 9.2% have a cap of 10 years, and 8% have a cap of eight years.

The principals were asked whether they would prefer a physical education candidate to be *a new graduate or an experienced teacher*. More than half (51.3%) indicated no preference, saying that it depended on the individual candidate. However, 48.7% did express a preference for a candidate with prior successful teaching experience, with two to three years being mentioned most frequently.

The principals were also asked whether they had a preference regarding whether candidates for physical education vacancies should have an undergraduate or graduate degree. The vast majority (76.5%) of the respondents indicated that they had no preference at all. A small percentage (15.4%) indicated a preference for a candidate with a graduate degree, while 8.1% preferred an individual with only an undergradu-

ate degree. Commenting about why they preferred candidates with only an undergraduate degree, some principals said "an advanced degree doesn't mean a better teacher" or "advanced degrees cost the district more; we want less expensive teachers."

Certification for Swimming and Coaching. For those schools with swimming pools (73% of the responding schools had a pool or access to a pool), 74.8% of the principals expressed the preference that *any successful physical education teacher candidate for their school be certified in aquatics and qualified to teach aquatics*. The principals were also asked whether they had a preference for having physical education teachers in their high school *who also coach* (i.e., who are qualified and certified to coach). Less than half (47.9%) felt that it is *highly desirable* to have physical educators who also coach, *but that it should not be mandated*. However, 18.8% felt that such candidates *should not be hired as a physical education teacher unless they do coach*. In addition, 21.4% felt that it is *moderately desirable* that such teachers actually coach, but that coaching should not be mandated. However, 11.9% felt that such candidates should be *allowed* to coach, but that it should not be mandated. No respondent indicated that physical education teachers should be prohibited from coaching or discouraged from coaching.

Implications

The findings of this research have significant implications for physical education teachers seeking teaching (as well as coaching) positions at the high school level. It is important for candidates to be aware of how schools and principals—*today*—view the different elements of the hiring process, specified in the foregoing findings. Examples of the implications that the findings of this national study might have for applicants for physical education teaching positions will be discussed next.

Sending in unsolicited applications might be a wise strategy, as a great majority of schools keep such applications on file (for various lengths of time) in the event of a future vacancy. In contrast to anecdotal stories regarding the extremely high number of applications received in response to each and every advertised opening for physical educators at the high school level, the survey reveals just the opposite, with the large majority of the males and females competing against fewer than 25 such applicants for each advertised vacancy.

Vacancies are announced statewide by a majority of schools. But if an out-of-state candidate wishes to find out about a job opening, it is more of a challenge since less than a quarter of the schools "go national" with the announcement of their vacancies. The World Wide Web, sending announcements to college/university placement bureaus, and placing advertisements in newspapers seem to be the preferred methods of disseminating information about vacancies. Applicants should pay particular attention to the advertised closing date for applications, as the majority of schools state a closing date, *although a surprisingly significant*

percentage of schools do not adhere to the date.

Interviews are usually conducted by a search-and-screen committee, typically made up of the principal, the physical education director, the athletic director (if coaching is involved), and other members of the teaching faculty. Students are rarely members of such committees. The committee makes recommendations to the principal in almost half of the schools surveyed, and if there is more than one recommended candidate, the candidates are usually submitted in rank order.

Candidates should pay particular attention to the type of references that they provide, because a sizeable percentage of principals prefer personal, individualized letters of recommendation, and only a very small number prefer the generic "to whom it may concern" type of recommendations. Almost all of the schools take the time to personally contact the references provided by candidates.

A finding of great significance for all applicants is the fact that a tremendously large number of principals actually *contact other individuals as references, which the candidates did not submit as references*. Candidates will therefore want to cultivate a large number of people as potential "references," whether or not they are formally used as such.

In the vast majority of schools, candidates are not notified of their status during the term of the search, even if they are no longer being considered for the position. Surprisingly, very few schools notify all candidates even when the position is filled or cancelled. Therefore, applicants will probably need to contact the schools that they apply to in order to learn of their status.

Would-be applicants with a number of years of teaching experience under their belt need to be alert to the fact that a sizeable number of schools in a different district will not grant them credit for all years taught. Teachers typically are allowed to transfer from five to 10 years. The number of years most frequently cited as being the maximum allowed to be transferred into the new school (on the salary schedule) is seven. This might account for the fact that more experienced secondary school teachers (more than 7-10 years on the job) do not frequently move to jobs in a new district.

Prior teaching experience was of no consequence to slightly more than half of the principals. However, the remaining principals definitely had a preference for experienced teachers, typically with two to three years of experience. Teachers without an advanced degree are not discriminated against by principals in the hiring process, as most of the respondents expressed no preference one way or the other in reference to an advanced degree. However, a significant percentage of the respondents indicated a clear preference for a candidate *without* an advanced degree, citing the additional salary as an undesirable expense for the district.

Candidates applying to schools with a swimming pool (73% of schools had access to a pool) would enhance their likelihood of being hired if they were certified in aquatics and qualified to teach aquatics. Similarly, being able to coach increases one's likelihood of being hired, as a vast majority

of the principals felt that it is moderately or highly desirable that candidates be capable of coaching. In fact, a significant percentage of principals felt that no candidate for a physical education position should even be hired unless that person were able and willing to also coach.

Being aware of the findings of this study should help physical education candidates in their search for a new teaching position. Knowing how the search process is conducted and what the principal expects and prefers in searching for a new teacher will place the physical education candidate in a much stronger position to be a serious, more marketable prospect for teaching positions.

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William F. Stier, Jr. (bstier@brockport.edu) is a distinguished service professor, and Robert C. Schneider (rschneider@brockport.edu) is an associate professor, in the Department of Physical Education and Sport at the State University of New York at Brockport, NY 14420.