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## **ACHIEVEMENT FIRST**

### **The Design and Implementation of a Highly Effective Teacher Recruitment System**

June 2007

## **INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOOL**

This case study was prepared by FSG Social Impact Advisors. FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm that provides guidance to foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and other public sector entities on issues of strategy, evaluation, and operations. FSG was commissioned by NewSchools Venture Fund to document “promising practices” of portfolio ventures in a format that could be shared across the NewSchools portfolio. To complete this case study, FSG conducted background research on Achievement First and interviewed Carla Seeger, Achievement First’s Director of Staff Recruitment, as well as several Achievement First teachers and principals. Beth Rabbitt of NewSchools Venture Fund provided additional context on Achievement First.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

We hope that reading this case study sparks conversations about how the practices highlighted here relate to your own organization. We have developed the questions below to help guide these discussions. We encourage you to keep them in mind as you read through the case study and to refer back to them as you reflect on the case study’s implications for your own organization.

1. What does teacher recruitment look like at your organization, and what are the areas for improvement?
2. Do you have measures in place to gauge the success of your recruiting strategies, such as the rate of return among previous years’ hires and the acceptance rate of offers extended to new teachers?
3. What are the primary messages you want to send to potential teacher candidates about your organization, and are these messages being delivered effectively?
4. How do you determine whether specific recruiting practices should be housed centrally or at the school sites?
5. What would you need to do to improve your own recruitment practices, and do you have, or could you put in place, the capacity to make these changes?

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

An extensive body of research shows that teacher quality is one of the most important factors related to increasing student achievement. Teachers who are committed, engaged, and skillful in their approach to instruction have a powerful, long-term impact on students' lives. Educational leaders recognize the critical importance of teacher quality, yet they struggle with the question of how to find and recruit the best and the brightest within a relatively limited talent pool. From an organizational standpoint, tapping into this talent requires a significant upfront investment of human and financial resources. This case study focuses on one particular organization, Achievement First, that has invested heavily in its recruitment process and focused intensively on putting in place systems and processes that yield the highest quality teachers. Achievement First is a charter management organization (CMO) that runs high-quality schools in New York and Connecticut. Its mission is "to deliver on the promise of equal educational opportunity for all of America's children. We believe that all children, regardless of race or economic status, can succeed if they have access to a great education." In 2006-07, Achievement First served 1,704 students in 10 schools. Its experience has relevance to many other CMOs for which teacher recruitment is an ongoing challenge.

*If we only took the simple step of assuring that poor and minority children had highly qualified teachers, about half of the achievement gap would disappear.*

- Kati Haycock, President,  
The Education Trust

### Unique, Replicable Approach

*One of the things I really admire about Achievement First's recruitment process is their ability to be transparent. They would say 'after you leave, we will talk about you and your positives and negatives and if you are a good fit. We will contact you in three days and let you know what the next step is.' They contacted me in two days and let me know what the next step was. This made me feel I could trust the organization.*

- Recent Principal Hire

Achievement First has identified teacher recruitment as an organizational priority which drives decision-making around staffing and allocation of resources. As a result, the organization is highly systematic and proactive in its approach to teacher recruitment. This case study will provide an overview of Achievement First's recruitment system, as well as specific forms and checklists that other CMOs can use as the basis to design similar processes aligned with their own unique school model and recruiting

goals (see *Toolkit for Recruitment Strategy Planning Checklist*).

### Key Success Factors

Achievement First has put in place a number of structures that underlie its effectiveness. These include:

- **Dedicated Staff.** Four full-time staff dedicated exclusively to teacher recruitment.
- **Centralization.** Achievement First's central office manages and coordinates recruiting activities for the network.

- ***Good Internal Communication Systems.*** Recruitment staff focuses on regular and systematic communication between the central office and school sites.
- ***Casting a Wide Net for Candidates.*** Staff employs a broad range of traditional and innovative outreach strategies.
- ***Investment in and Responsiveness to Candidates.*** Recruitment staff is committed to ensuring that candidates feel respected and treated as professionals. This commitment is integral to the way business is conducted at every stage of the recruitment process, from responding to calls and emails within 24 hours, to being clear about next steps, to providing in-depth feedback on sample lessons to prospective hires.
- ***Rigorous Evaluation and Selection Process.*** Achievement First uses a thorough process to assess a candidate's fit with the organization. Interview questions are designed to draw out a candidate's values, personality, style, and pedagogical approach in addition to testing their instructional skills and classroom experience.

## RECRUITMENT, APPLICATION, AND SELECTION PROCESS

### Communication System

- Regular phone communication between principals and the recruitment team
- Weekly half-hour phone calls with principals during the heavy recruitment season to discuss candidates in the pipeline
- A weekly email to principals with a list of "hot prospects" and notes about each candidate
- Site visits to the schools to assess recruitment needs

*If I have a question, Carla will email or send me a text message within minutes. She is always immediate in her response.*

- Achievement First Principal

### Recruitment Team Roles and Responsibilities

Achievement First's recruitment team oversees all aspects of teacher recruiting, including conducting outreach to potential candidates, processing and reviewing applications, communicating with school principals about hiring needs and candidate prospects, and shepherding candidates through the application process. One key component of the process is the ongoing communication flow between the central office and school sites (see sidebar).

The recruitment staff is very conscious of respecting principals' time, only sending strong candidates to principals and actively pointing candidates toward schools where they will be a good fit. One principal interviewed said she has hired 100 percent of the candidates referred by the recruitment team.

### Outreach Strategies

Recruitment staff invests a lot of time and energy raising awareness about Achievement First and generating interest in teaching positions. They employ a broad range of outreach tactics, from cultivating individual networks to implementing print and online advertising campaigns. They intentionally cast a wide net with the belief that a wider pool of applicants will ultimately result in the hiring of higher quality teachers. Primary outreach strategies include:

- Information sessions at colleges and graduate schools
- Partnership with Teach For America
- Advertisements through organizations such as the Peace Corps and Breakthrough Collaborative
- Newspaper and online advertising
- Cocktail parties and dinners with prospective candidates
- Staff networking with financial rewards for staff who recommend successful hires

### Teach For America Partnership

Achievement First invests heavily in its partnership with Teach For America (TFA), which it describes as its most effective recruiting source. Achievement First hires TFA corps members for their two-year commitment and also hires alumni of the program. Recruitment staff travels to as many TFA regions as possible and presents free professional development sessions to corps members who will soon complete their two-year commitment. Additionally, Achievement First recently began partnering with Teach For America around its School Leadership Initiative, which involves providing TFA alumni with leadership training and multiple pathways to take on central office or school-based leadership positions.

### Targeted Messaging

The recruitment staff is mindful of the specific audience they are targeting, and tailor their messaging to that particular audience. For example, when conducting an information session at a school of education in Connecticut, they frame the presentation around the achievement gap in that state to make the discussion more real and compelling.

*They really understand what it means to inspire someone. Achievement First was by far the most motivating of all the schools I considered. One of the reasons I chose them was that their process just swept me up. I had turned down other offers because I did not want to move, but I was willing to relocate for Achievement First.*

- Recent Hire

### Recruiting Yield: In 2006, five percent of applicants were hired.

- 2000 candidates submitted resumes and applications
- About 500 applicants got a phone interview
- About 250 of those who got a phone interview were invited for a school visit
- Ultimately, 103 applicants were hired as teachers

### Application and Selection Process

The central office staff manages the upfront end of the application and selection process, bringing principals in once strong candidates have been identified. They take an unusually “high touch” approach to working with candidates, which includes a policy of responding to applications within 10 business days and making themselves available to applicants at every stage of the process to answer questions and help them thoroughly understand Achievement First’s culture and approach to teaching. One recruit commented that Achievement First’s personal touch was paramount in her decision to accept its offer.

*One person takes you through the whole process, which is different from other schools. You start to feel like you have a relationship with someone. By the end of the month-long process, I really trusted Carla. She had done everything she had promised to do, and I was getting to know her. This really helped me decide on Achievement First.*

Achievement First has a rigorous and selective application process (see Toolkit for *Application and Selection Process Diagram* and *Teaching Candidate Selection Criteria*). The candidates begin the process by submitting a resume and an application (see Toolkit for *Employment Application*). The recruiting team reviews those documents and extends phone interviews to qualified candidates. Those who pass the phone screen are then invited to a school visit, which includes classroom observation, teacher meetings, teaching a sample lesson, and a group interview/feedback session (see Toolkit for *Teacher Interview Question*). The final step in the process is a reference check. Every step in the process is highly competitive and only a small portion of initial candidates are hired (see sidebar). While the recruiting staff is involved throughout the process, it is the principal who decides whether to extend a job offer to the candidate.

### **Hiring Timeline**

Candidates are hired on a rolling basis. Some are hired as early as November or December, but most are hired between March and May. Achievement First strives to complete all hires by the end of its summer academy in late July (see Toolkit for *Hiring Timeline*).

### **Measuring Results**

Achievement First reports that its recruiting system is producing positive outcomes, including increases in the number and quality of applicants. Other indicators of success include a high rate of return among previous years' hires and a high acceptance rate for extended offers to new teachers. The recruitment team recently developed measurable performance objectives that will enable it to more precisely evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts (see Toolkit for *Team Recruit Metrics*). The team is also developing a principal survey to capture qualitative data about the level of satisfaction with the recruitment process at individual school sites.

### **Challenges**

Some of Achievement First's key challenges include:

- **Managing volume.** It is very hard to keep up with all of the candidates, especially during peak recruiting season.
- **Diversity.** Hiring more people of color is an ongoing challenge. In Connecticut, 30 percent of Achievement First's teachers are people of color. Given that only eight percent of teachers in the state of Connecticut are people of color, the CMO feels it is doing well but it wants to do better.
- **Managing competition.** In New York, Achievement First is in direct competition with other CMOs with which it has very positive relationships. It can be difficult to balance the desire for collaboration with the fact that the organizations are vying for a similar and relatively limited talent pool.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND ADVICE TO OTHERS

Over the course of the past several years, Achievement First has learned a lot about what makes teacher recruitment work. For other organizations thinking about ways to increase the effectiveness of their recruitment efforts, the following pieces of advice may be helpful as they consider replicating aspects of this model:

- Hire a dedicated recruitment person
- Ensure principals and recruiters have consistent standards
- Good communication is key
- Cast as wide a net as possible
- Invest heavily in networking
- Be careful about not ramping up too quickly
- Make sure candidates feel valued and respected

*Any CMO that wants to do this should make sure that principals and recruiters are on the same page about what makes a candidate a 'yes' and what makes them a 'no'. If the recruiters flag something that a principal might not, you can miss a group of people that might actually be a good fit for the school. Part of our training was to literally go through applications and say yes or no and see where we aligned.*

- Achievement First Principal

## **ACHIEVEMENT FIRST RECRUITING TOOLKIT**

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### **Toolkit Contents**

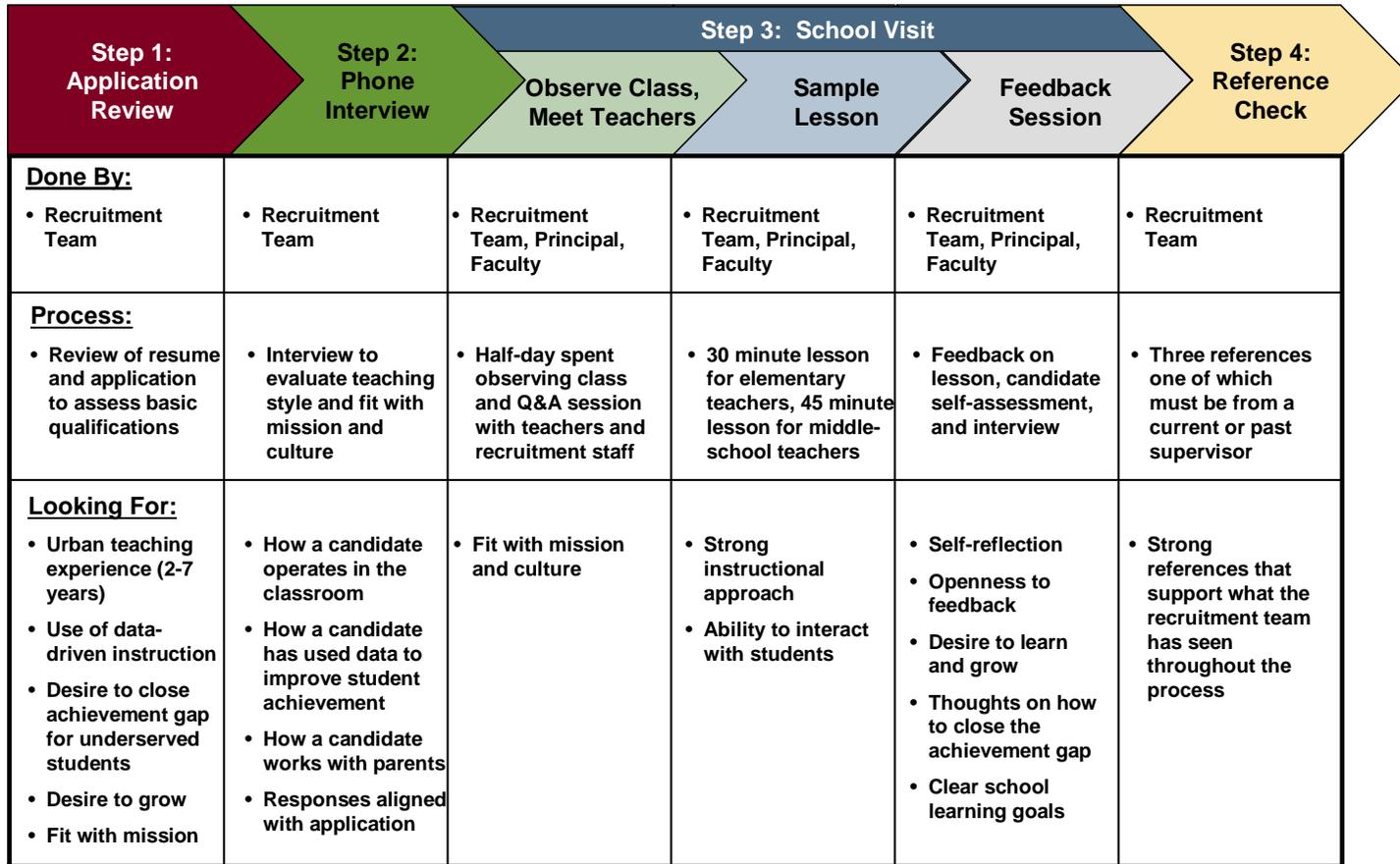
- **Recruitment Strategy Planning Checklist (Synthesized by FSG)**
- **Application and Selection Process Diagram (Synthesized by FSG)**
- **Teaching Candidate Selection Criteria (Synthesized by FSG)**
- **Employment Application (Achievement First Document)**
- **Teacher Interview Questions (Achievement First Document)**
- **Hiring Timeline (Achievement First Document)**
- **Team Recruit Metrics (Achievement First Document)**

# Recruitment Strategy Planning Checklist

Achievement First has identified the following elements as key to its recruiting efforts.  
*Does your organization have these elements in place, or are they being developed?*

Key Success Factors					
Planning Checklist Items	Yes	No	In Progress	Not Required	Comments
<b>Dedicated Staff:</b> Do you have a full-time Recruitment Director or recruitment team dedicated exclusively to teacher recruitment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Centralization:</b> Have you centralized the recruitment function so that the home office is responsible for managing and coordinating recruiting activities for each school in its network?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Good Internal Communication Systems:</b> Do you have the systems in place to ensure clear, ongoing communication between the central office and school sites? Information about hiring needs and teacher candidates shared regularly and in a systematic fashion?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Casting a Wide Net:</b> Are you reaching prospective candidates through a wide range of outreach strategies? In addition to common approaches (e.g. info sessions or recruiting fairs), other tactics might include advertising campaigns, networking events, and strategic partnerships.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Investment in and Responsiveness to Candidates:</b> Does your staff work to ensure that each candidate feels respected and treated as a professional? Are they responsive to calls and emails, clear about next steps, and consistent about providing feedback to prospective hires?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Rigorous Evaluation and Selection Process:</b> Does your organization use a systematic process to assess a candidate's fit with the mission and culture of the organization? Are selection criteria clearly established and aligned throughout all steps of the application process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

## Application and Selection Process Diagram



**If a candidate makes it through the entire process, a job offer will be extended by the hiring Principal**

## Teaching Candidate Selection Criteria

Achievement First uses the following evaluation criteria to assess prospective teaching candidates at each stage of the process. *What criteria does your organization use?*

<b>Characteristics of a Strong Teacher Prospect</b>				
<b>Selection Criteria</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Potential for Growth</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Initial Screen – Application and Resume</b>				
2 - 7 years of teaching experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Urban teaching experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Commitment to teaching in underserved school systems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Demonstrated use of data-driven instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Demonstrated passion for closing the achievement gap	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Alignment between vision of ideal teaching and execution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Phone Interview, Sample Lesson, and Feedback Session</b>				
Openness to feedback	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Desire and commitment to personal and professional growth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Demonstrated ability to be self-reflective	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Strong connection with kids	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Rigor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Strong execution of lesson	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	



## Employment Application

In our application process, we look for both skill and fit. That is, we want smart, talented, caring, passionate, skilled teachers and administrators, and we also want candidates who will be comfortable and successful at Achievement First schools.

If you feel that you have the knowledge and skills to be an Achievement First team member *and* feel that you would fit well with the mission, curriculum, and systems of the school, please take the time to complete an application.

Because we know that it takes time to thoughtfully answer the questions in this application, we promise that we will thoroughly read your application and get back in touch with you via email, phone, or letter within ten days of receiving your application. We would ask that you not call before this ten day period is over.

Thank you so much for your interest in Achievement First!

### PART I – Candidate Information

For which position are you applying? \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_

Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate college: \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate degree: \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate major: \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate G.P.A.: \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate school (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate degree: \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate major: \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate G.P.A.: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years of full-time, in-the-classroom teaching experience (not including student teaching, internships, tutoring, or volunteer work) \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years of in-the-classroom *urban* teaching experience: \_\_\_\_\_



## Employment Application

Are you a certified teacher or administrator? \_\_\_\_\_

Please list the states and subjects for which you hold or will hold certification:

**State** \_\_\_\_\_ **Subject** \_\_\_\_\_ **School Level** \_\_\_\_\_

Have you applied to work at an Achievement First school in the past? \_\_Yes\_\_No

For which location are you applying? \_\_Connecticut\_\_Brooklyn\_\_Either

How did you hear about Achievement First? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a current corps member or alumnus of Teach For America: \_\_Yes\_\_No

If yes, please enter: Corps year \_\_ Corps region \_\_\_\_\_

Are you, or have you been, a New York City Teaching Fellow? \_\_Yes\_\_No

Have you ever been convicted of or plea bargained a felony? \_\_Yes\_\_No

\*If yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever been discharged from any employment or resigned under threat of discharge after being accused of misconduct or poor job performance? \_\_Yes\_\_No

\*If yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Please include the names and phone numbers of three professional references.
- Please include at least one supervisor who has seen you teach.

Name	Relationship	Area Code & Telephone Number



## Employment Application

### PART II – Questions

**Please prepare short written responses for the following questions. Cut and paste your answers below. We will use these responses as the basis for further interview questions.**

- Why are you interested in working at an Achievement First school?
- What are your pet peeves about the educational system? What drives you crazy about schools, school districts? What about schools or school districts would you like to change with a magic educational wand?
- Rank the following (1 being the most important, 7 the least important) in terms of what you think are the most important aspects of a great urban school. Please explain your rankings. Please use each number only once.

- \_\_\_\_\_ A comprehensive approach to the needs of the whole child
- \_\_\_\_\_ A relentless focus on standards and having students meet them
- \_\_\_\_\_ Very high expectations for student behavior
- \_\_\_\_\_ Multi-modal, hands-on lessons to appeal to multiple intelligences
- \_\_\_\_\_ Use of technology in the classroom
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prioritizing each child's interests and passions in designing a curriculum
- \_\_\_\_\_ A focus on college and the skills and knowledge to get there as the ultimate goal

- How have you ensured high student achievement in the past?
- Describe how you would teach 20 students to line up and walk to lunch (on the first day of school).
- How has your classroom management evolved since becoming a teacher? Would your students consider you strict?

I hereby certify that the answers to the foregoing questions are true to the best of my knowledge.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Achievement First is committed to a policy of equal treatment for all individuals applying to work at all of our schools. Achievement First does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender, handicap, age, religion, sexual orientation, or national or ethnic origin.*



## Teacher Interview Questions

### **DEBRIEF OF Amistad / Elm City Visit**

- What did you see? Was it what you expected?
- Why is Amistad/Elm City a successful school? What works?
- What isn't working?
- What are school culture plusses? Areas for growth?
- Do you have questions about anything you saw?

### **OVERALL / GENERAL**

- What was/is your greatest challenge in teaching? What is your greatest success?
- What excites you about Achievement First?
- Are there any education thinkers who have influenced you? Who and why?
- What are your pet peeves about the educational system? What drives you crazy about schools, school districts? What about schools or school districts would you like to change with a magic educational wand?
- What are your strengths as a teacher? What are your areas for growth?

### **TEACHING**

- What was/is it like to be in your class?
- Describe a typical day for students in your class (elementary)?
- Describe a typical lesson from start to finish?
- What sort of measurable student achievement gains have you posted? How could they have been even better?
- Go over rankings of 1-6 on application
- Why are a common, sequential curriculum and common instructional strategies important for a successful school?
- How have you ensured high student achievement in the past?
- Tell me about your experience with standards-based curricula. What does a standards-based curricula mean to you?
- How have you used data to drive instruction? What do you think the best ways to use data are?

### **CLASSROOM MANAGER**

- How do you rate yourself as a classroom manager? Would your students consider you strict?
- Why, in many public schools, some teachers run tight classes and others are off the chain? What are the differences between successful and unsuccessful teachers?
- How do you build powerful, meaningful relationships with students?
- Marva Collins, a respected educator, believes that children don't fail, teachers fail. How do you respond to this statement?
- At Achievement First schools, students walk from class to class in quiet lines, sit with legs under their desks, and raise their hands to speak. There is also a high degree of supervision throughout the day. Why would we think this structure is important or necessary? Does this structure mesh with your style and philosophy?



## Teacher Interview Questions

### **SCHOOL CULTURE**

- Describe for me your vision
- How would you ensure a lunch duty that you ran was tight and structured?
- How would you ensure all teachers are on the same page?

### **PROFESSIONAL VALUES**

- How do you solicit and receive feedback? Give an example of feedback you've received that has made you a better professional or person.
- How do you handle a disagreement (i.e. another teacher is allowing behaviors in the class before that you don't like, a teacher isn't following through on committee tasks) with a teacher or administrator? Give a concrete example from your professional life of how you have handled such a situation.
- At Achievement First schools, we talk about working harder and smarter. The hard work part entails a work day from 7:30 until 4:00 (with two prep periods). Most of our teachers find that to do the job well for the students, they need one to two additional hours a day on top of the regular work day. Are you willing to work this hard? Why?
- What do you want to learn in your next teaching job? How do you want to grow professionally?

### **ARE YOU COMFORTABLE WITH...**

- Open doors ... very visible principal who helps kids in line, asks kids to sit up, helps out
- Walk-in-lines, sit up straight, sweat the small stuff school culture
- Clear scope and sequences and interim assessment system
- Direct Instruction reading (K-1) and Decoding program (5)
- Being the person responsible for the results of the kids in your class
- Following a proven curriculum ... not a close-your-doors-and-do-your-thing school

### **AT THE END OF THE DAY**

- Describe back the AF model and mission to me ..
- Why do you think the AF model and mission are right for kids?
- Why do you think the AF model and mission is right for you?



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Hiring Timeline

**Timing of Hires for 2004-05 School Year**

Sept/Oct/Nov	0
Dec	0
Jan	0
Feb	0
<b>Mar</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Apr</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>May</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Jun</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Jul</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Aug</b>	<b>3</b>

**Timing of Hires for 2005-06 School Year**

Sept/Oct/Nov	0
Dec	0
<b>Jan</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Feb</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mar</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Apr</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>May</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Jun</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Jul</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Aug</b>	<b>3</b>

**Timing of Hires for 2006-07 School Year**

<b>Sept/Oct/Nov</b>	<b>1</b>
Dec	0
<b>Jan</b>	<b>5</b>
Feb	0
<b>Mar</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Apr</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>May</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Jun</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Jul/Aug</b>	<b>15</b>



## **Team Recruit Metrics**

- 100% of positions filled by the last day of summer academy
- 95% of previous year's hires get returning offer letters for a second year with AF (measure of principal satisfaction with the teachers that Team Recruit attracted and screened)
- 85% of offers made to candidates are accepted
- Applications received from 80% of Teach for America regions (excluding the expansion sites)
- Receive resumes equaling at least 50 times the total number of open teaching positions (ex – at least 5000 resumes received for 100 open positions)
- 100% of principals rate Team Recruit as a '5' or a '4' in terms of effectiveness on an annual survey to be given in September/October