frontline
Research & Learning Institute™

Repairing the Leak:

How "Cultural Fit" Rusts the Teacher Pipeline

Table of Contents

About the Institute

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute generates data-driven research, resources and observations to support and advance the educational community. The Institute's research is powered by Frontline Education's data and analytic capabilities in partnership with over 12,00 K-12 organizations and several million users nationwide. The Institute's research reports and analysis are designed to provide practical insights for teachers and leaders as well as benchmarks to inform strategic decision-making within their organizations.

Research, writing and design of this report was sponsored by the Frontline Research & Learning Institute.

With Gratitude

The authors are grateful for the insights shared by 594 hiring managers from schools, districts and networks across the United States. Without their generous contributions, this report would not have been possible.

Executive Summary

For some time, hiring trends have moved toward hiring for "cultural fit"—or what hiring managers describe as the alignment between an individual and the workplace they will be joining. In the report *A Leak in the Pipeline*, we discovered that perceptions of candidate quality are heavily influenced by the source of the candidates (even when those sources are self-reported by candidates) and that hiring managers are more likely to perceive candidates from word of mouth or local referral sources as desirable. We suggested that hiring for fit is a superior alternative to hiring based primarily upon word of mouth.

To better understand what hiring for fit might look like, we asked hiring managers from schools and districts across the United States to weigh in on how they organize their processes, their perceptions of their own candidate pipelines and quality, and their hiring preferences. We discovered three unexpected findings:

1. Hiring managers believe that more candidates come from local referral sources than actually do, and that is also reflected in the increased likelihood to hire from those sources.

2. While most schools and districts have adopted a process for systematically reviewing applicants, very few report having a quality rubric to ensure that evaluations of candidate quality and fit are measured against a consistent standard.

3. Above any other characteristic—including experience and training—**hiring managers believe that cultural fit is the most important element in making a hiring decision. Very few, however, have any clear, systematic way of articulating or measuring cultural fit.**

To understand these findings, *Repairing the Leak: How "Cultural Fit" Rusts the Teacher Pipeline* explores the specific findings from the survey and proffers a difficult but critical hypothesis: "cultural fit," by and large, is a shallow cover for the widespread practice of hiring based upon gut feeling more than upon standardized metrics. The result may be unintended bias in the hiring process that results in both a narrowing of the prospective teacher pipeline and—rather ironically—poor long-term fit that results in increased teacher turnover. To combat this problem, the report provides some recommendations for overcoming unintended bias with training and a move toward more standardized interview protocols—not just more standardized processes.

The result may be unintended bias in the hiring process that results in both a **narrowing of the prospective teacher pipeline** and—rather ironically—**poor long-term fit that results in increased teacher turnover.**

Introduction

Over the last century, we have made some progress toward better supporting teachers and leaders in their central role in helping students to learn. Formal training, while far from perfect, has evolved to incorporate content knowledge, principles of pedagogy and time spent practicing in classrooms with students. Professional learning is growing more targeted and personalized. Teaching and leading roles are even becoming more differentiated, including the development of pathways toward leadership that let great teachers stay in their classrooms. But one domain that has received relatively short shrift—at least until recent teacher shortages began making headlines around the nation—is recruiting and hiring.

It's easy to dismiss the processes of recruiting and hiring as mechanical and operational, and to underestimate their relevance to the actual practice of teaching. Yet these processes, the first of many that educators will experience when they enter an education system, are fundamental to every other element of a teacher's work experience. They are essential both because they help ensure that, as Jim Collins puts it, "the right people are in the right seats on the bus"[1] when it comes to matching educator talent with school needs—and because they set the tone for employees' (teachers') ongoing experience with their employers (schools and districts).

Effective recruiting and hiring can mean the difference between an educator who arrives, finds extraordinary challenge, and soon departs, and one who arrives, finds extraordinary challenge, and yet stays and works hard to overcome the challenges. It can make the difference between educators leaving before their sixth year in the classroom or staying for a decade—or a lifetime. An estimated 50% of teachers do not make it past their sixth year[2], which might be a result of shortcomings in the recruiting and hiring process. While there is not a perfect pathway to effective recruiting and hiring, increasing attention to the organization and implementation of the processes that support these parts of the human capital management system can make a difference in the success of a school or district's talent strategy.

In our last report, *A Leak in the Pipeline*, we tapped into anonymized data from over 800 school systems across 45 states to investigate the ways that leaders are approaching their recruiting and hiring processes. We found strong evidence in the data that individuals responsible for hiring demonstrate a strong preference for educators who come from known sources such as word of mouth or local website referrals.
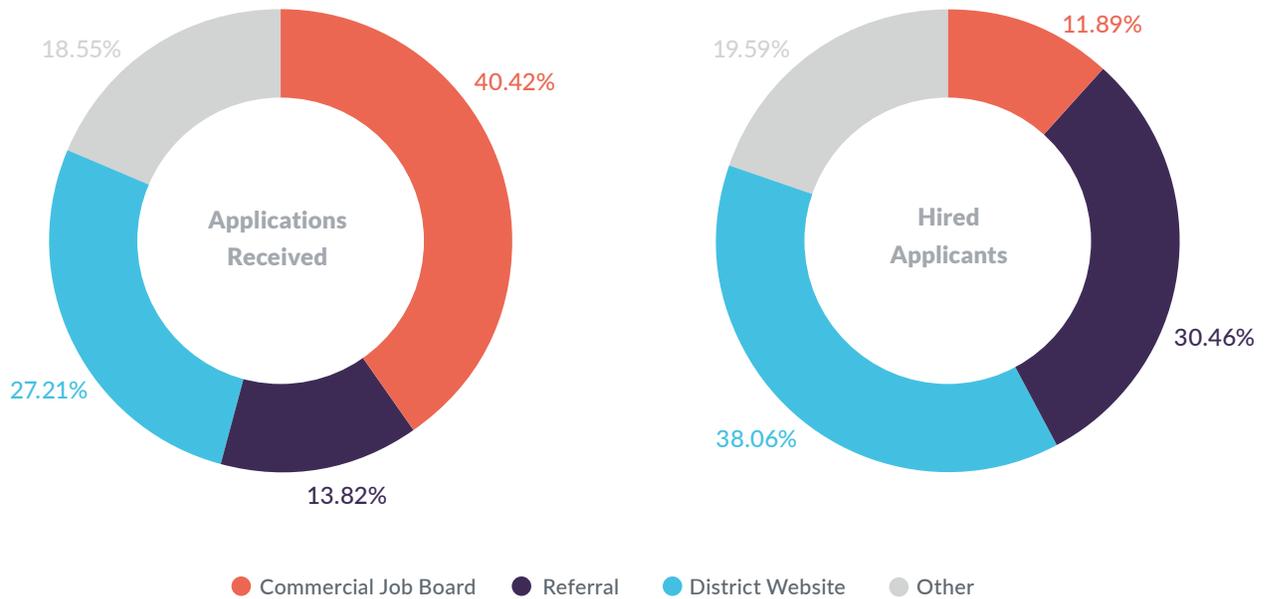
While the majority of candidates come from sources like commercial job boards, the majority of hires come through word of mouth and the local website. The nearly inverse proportion is striking because the trend is persistent across sample districts, whether they are large or small, rural or urban. In short, **hiring managers hold a consistent, measurable preference for people who seem to be known quantities.**

---

[1] Ben Casselman, "Enough Already About The Job-Hopping Millennials," https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/enough-already-about-the-job-hopping-millennials/, (May 5, 2015).

[2] Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, "How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement," https://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/Ronfeldt-et-al.pdf, (January 2012).

Figure 2:

Percent of Teacher Candidates with Active Certifications by Referral Source

Applications Received

40.42%
13.82%
27.21%
18.55%

Hired Applicants

11.89%
30.46%
38.06%
19.59%

● Commercial Job Board ● Referral ● District Website ● Other

In short, hiring managers hold a **consistent, measurable preference** for people who seem to be known quantities.

These preferences also seem to persist despite some recent trends in changes to hiring strategies. Some districts have decentralized hiring and negotiated with local teacher unions to accelerate the hiring process, to ensure that candidates don't receive their offers after the school year has already begun[3], when the pool of available candidates has shrunk and hiring for good fit becomes more difficult. Many districts have also granted schools more autonomy over teacher transfers, allowing principals to move teachers whose skills and dispositions are not well-aligned with the particular context of their school site. Recent research also indicates a benefit to encouraging teachers to announce their resignation, retirement or transfer plans in the spring, so that early outreach can connect schools with high-quality, in-demand candidates.[4] And while school districts may make moves to encourage these early announcements, existing contractual obligations to hire internally before looking externally for candidates may reinforce a bias toward known or local candidates, even while a qualified pool of other applicants is available.

To better understand the landscape from the perspectives of the leaders who are responsible for recruiting, hiring and ultimately working side by side with teachers, we asked school and district hiring managers from across the U.S. to share their beliefs, describe their processes and offer insights into how their recruiting and hiring systems have been optimized to meet their needs. In total, 594 leaders from 47 states provided a window into their experiences that lends color and texture to the findings described in *A Leak in the Pipeline*—and helps map a pathway toward more equitable systems and processes in any school district.

"In total, 594 leaders from 47 states provided a window into their experiences."

---

[3] Simon, N.S., Moore Johnson, S., & Reinhorn, S. (2015). The Matchmaking Process: Teacher Hiring in Six Successful, High-Poverty, Urban Schools. Working Paper. The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

[4] Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
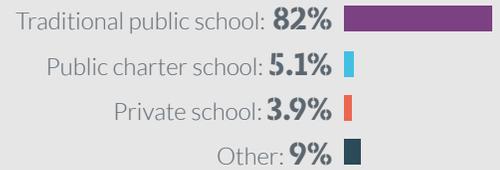
A Survey of Hiring Managers' Views

During the summer of 2018, we reached out to leaders across all states and from school districts large, medium and small, suburban, urban and rural. We asked them where their teacher candidates come from, whether their candidates are well qualified and how they go about selecting the next science, social studies or English Learner teacher. We also asked them what matters most when it comes to choosing among qualified candidates, and whether and to what extent they rely upon sample lessons and review protocols.

In total, we received responses from 594 individuals from mostly traditional public schools, across all U.S. states except for Maine, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. Slightly more than half the respondents were involved in recruiting and hiring decisions at the school level (including principals and assistant principals), and the remainder served at the district level (primarily in human resources). The broad majority of respondents identified their roles as human resources personnel, assistant principals or principals. The school districts served by the respondents ranged in student body size from fewer than 600 to more than 10,000. While several rural respondents shared their views, insights came mostly (78.5%) from urban and suburban school and district leaders.

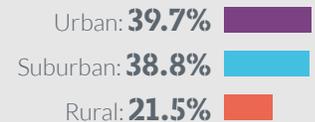## Responder Demographics:

ORGANIZATION TYPE

Traditional public school: **82%**
Public charter school: **5.1%**
Private school: **3.9%**
Other: **9%**

ROLE

Human Resources: **28.2%**
Assistant Principal: **21.6%**
Principal: **20.2%**
Curriculum/Instruction: **13.8%**
Assistant Superintendent: **7.8%**
School Director: **5.3%**
Superintendent: **3.1%**
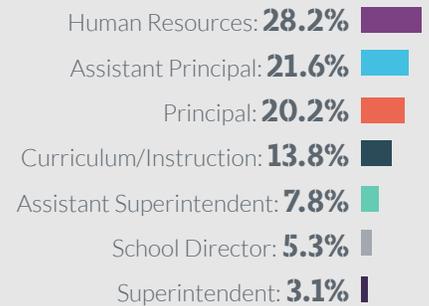
ORGANIZATION SIZE (STUDENTS)

10,000 or more: **28.9%**
2,500 - 9,999: **27.7%**
600 - 2,499: **26.2%**
Fewer than 600: **17.2%**

ORGANIZATION LOCALE

Urban: **39.7%**
Suburban: **38.8%**
Rural: **21.5%**

Our survey focused on perceptions of the size and quality of educator pipelines, as well as the strategies that schools and districts currently use to recruit and hire teachers. We asked respondents to share their reflections on the perceived effectiveness of their process—but we did not ask them to compare it to the data we reported in *A Leak in the Pipeline*. We discovered three things that should inform every hiring manager's approach to recruiting and hiring.

1. Hiring managers believe that more candidates come from local referral sources than actually do, and that is also reflected in the increased likelihood to hire from those sources.

2. While most schools and districts have adopted a process for systematically reviewing applicants, very few report having a quality rubric to ensure that evaluations of candidate quality and fit are measured against a consistent standard.

3. Above any other characteristic—including experience and training—hiring managers believe that cultural fit is the most important element in making a hiring decision. Very few, however, have any clear, systematic way of articulating or measuring cultural fit.

We unpack each of these findings using the data we collected from the survey, comparing it to findings from *A Leak in the Pipeline* (which relied upon anonymized data from over 800 school districts nationwide), and relevant research on recruiting and hiring. Taken together, the findings suggest that while hiring practices in schools and districts may be vulnerable to unintentional bias, hiring managers and leaders have already laid the foundation for reducing bias and expanding high quality pipelines.

When it comes to teacher candidate pipelines, wider is not necessarily better. If a pipeline is widened, but many of the additional candidates are being ignored because of implicit bias in the hiring process, then that widening not only fails to open the door to more educators—it also creates the illusion that the problem has been solved when in fact it has not. Increasing the number of well-qualified candidates who are likely to succeed with students in the district or school environment—in other words, a wider pipeline that is also filled with great candidates—is the gold standard. But to evaluate whether the increase in candidates is in fact resulting in a wider pipeline of quality candidates, we must understand how respondents are measuring the quality of their candidates and, by extension, their pipelines relative to what the data suggest.

Hiring managers believe that **more candidates come from local referral sources than actually do**, and that is also reflected in the increased likelihood to hire from those sources.

Respondents believe that the majority of their candidates are coming through their local district websites, and that the next greatest sources are commercial job boards and word of mouth. By contrast, job fairs, social media and conferences are believed to yield the fewest applicants. Very few respondents believe that word of mouth candidates are any less qualified than other applications, but most (93%) believed that word of mouth candidates are as or more qualified than peers from other referral sources.

Figure 3:

Word of Mouth Candidates Are...

7.24%

20.67%

72.09%

- ● More Qualified
- ● As Qualified
- ● Less Qualified
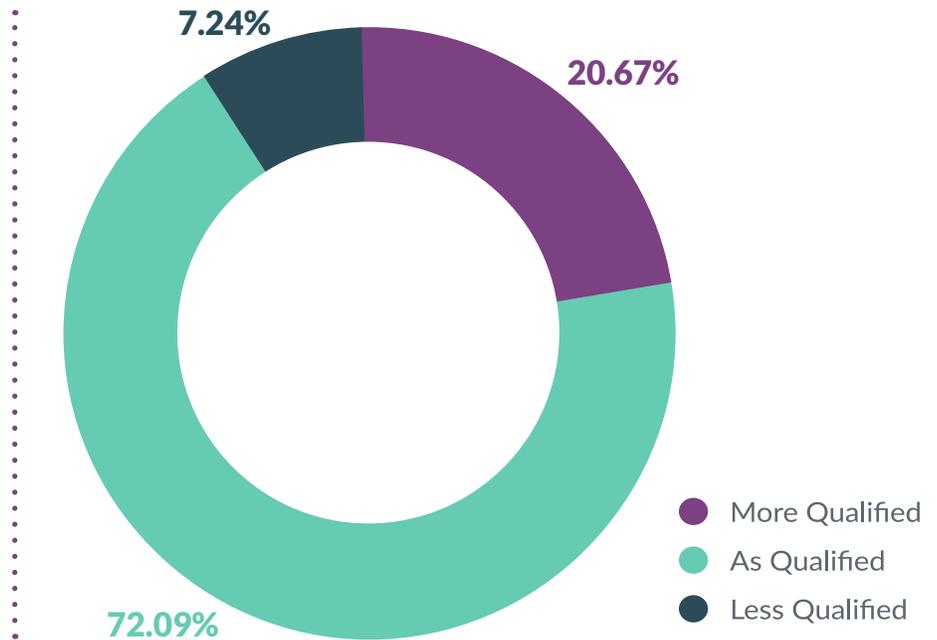
In comparison to findings from aggregated school district data, most respondents hold beliefs about the sources and quality of teaching candidates for their own districts that match with the national data. They describe the sources of candidates and their perception of qualification in ways that largely align with a landscape that includes mostly online referral sources.

Figure 4:

Top Sources of Applicants Reported by Applicant Tracking Systems

| 40% | 14% | 27% | 19% |
| Commercial Job Board | Referral | District Website | Other |
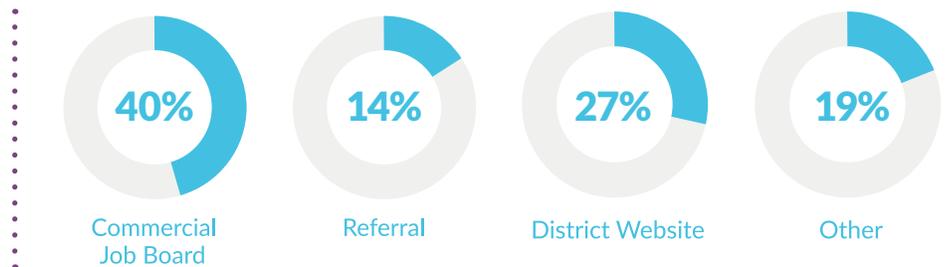
Figure 5:

Top Referral Sources Reported by Hiring Managers

Source	Percentage
District/School Website	75.89%
Word of Mouth	44.64%
Job Fair	44.20%
Commercial Online Job Board	38.84%
Local Sources	28.13%
State/Regional Online Job Board	25.89%
Social Media	20.98%
Conferences	5.36%
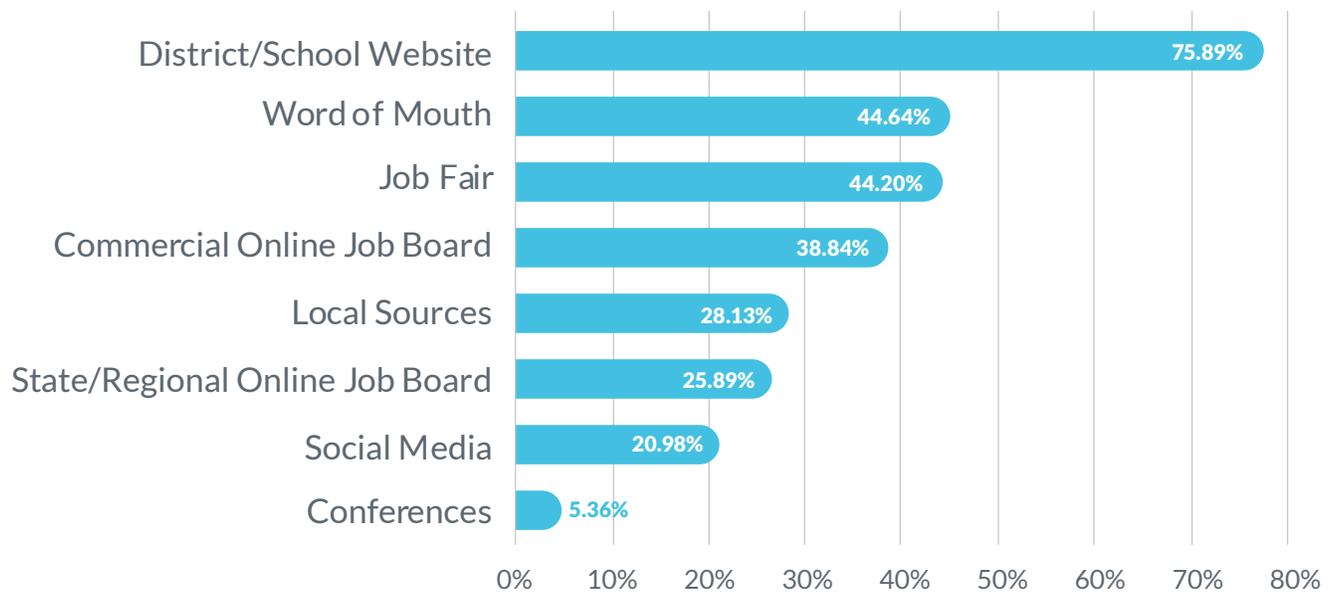
However, hiring managers' perceptions and the data diverge in one key area: respondents are far more likely to identify word of mouth as a top source of referrals than is actually reflected in the data. As a result, many hiring managers may be surprised to learn that they are hiring many more word of mouth candidates than their pipeline of such candidates would predict. By ratio, about twice as many word-of-mouth candidates are hired relative to any other source. So while respondents report that their perception of word of mouth candidate quality is about the same as the quality of candidates from other sources, their hiring preferences demonstrate that they prefer local sources over less direct, personal sources.

Respondents are far more likely to identify word of mouth as a top source of referrals than is actually reflected in the data.

While only 58% of respondents track applicant referral sources proactively, a large percentage distinguish between candidates from their state or regional job board versus a commercial job board site—a distinction that was not clear in the national data. While the distinction may be a subtle one, it suggests that commercial job boards are either considered more reliable or indeed yield more candidates than state and local job boards. Despite these differences, candidates from these sources are less popular than word of mouth or the local website.

Figure 6:

Hiring Managers' Perceptions of Top Online Referral Sources

75.89%

District/School Website

38.84%

Commercial Online Job Board

25.89%

State/Regional Online Job Board

The many sources of teacher candidates ought to yield a rich diversity of experiences, backgrounds and potential fits for the open jobs that schools and districts find increasingly difficult to fill. Unconscious preferences for candidates from certain referral sources coupled with limited use of candidate evaluation protocols, however, may cause perceived fit to outweigh actual fit when it comes to teacher hiring.

Fewer than 10% of respondents expressed full confidence that their current recruitment strategies are yielding the best available applicants, and about 50% said they were only somewhat confident.

While most schools and districts have adopted a process for systematically reviewing applicants, **very few report having a quality rubric** to ensure that **evaluations of candidate quality and fit are measured against a consistent standard.**

Figure 7:

Hiring Managers' Confidence in Current Recruitment Strategies

9.95%	**50.52%**	**26.7%**	**9.95%**	**2.88%**
Fully Confident	Somewhat Confident	Neither Confident Nor Unconfident	Somewhat Unconfident	Not Confident
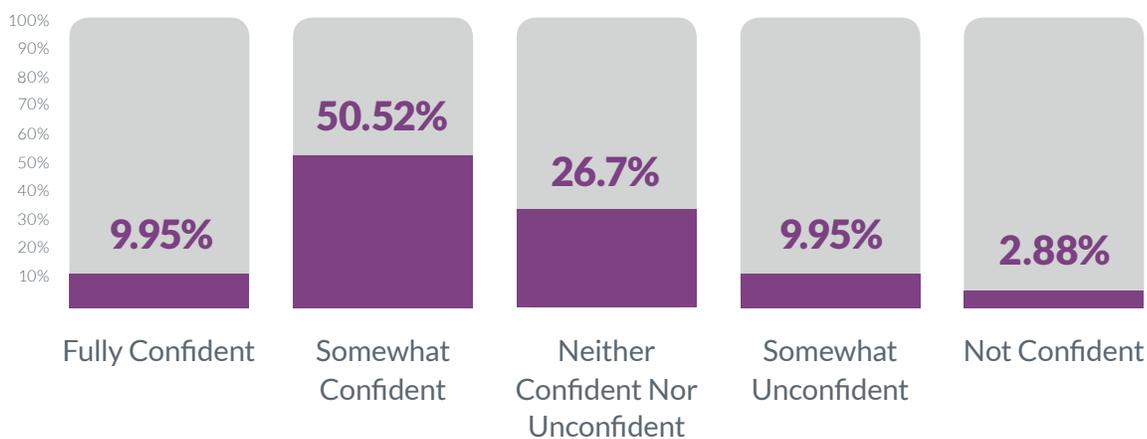
Further, while over 80% of respondents indicated that their school or district had standardized the hiring process to ensure that all individuals responsible for hiring interact with candidates in a consistent way, only 70% of those with a standardized process indicated that their school or district uses a specific protocol to ensure consistency. When asked to describe protocols, fewer than 5% of respondents reported using a quality protocol. The remainder described hiring processes that focused on standardizing the elements of the hiring process.

These findings held true even in cases where school leaders defined cultural fit as "very important" in their hiring decisions. Respondents who strongly valued cultural fit also reported a standardized hiring process about half the time, whereas only 1.5% of those who rated it "Somewhat" or "Not at All" important reported having a standardized process. These findings suggest that standardization of process may be a strategy for increasing cultural fit among hired candidates. There is no apparent statistically significant relationship between the use of a standardized process and the reduction of teacher turnover—which might be expected if candidates are indeed being hired for better fit of any kind. Because respondents who did not have a hiring protocol were equally likely (about 64%) to described cultural fit as "very important" as those who did, no relationship between the two could be measured. Further investigation of the contents of the protocol might reveal important differences in their ability to predict cultural fit (or not).

While hiring managers demonstrate increased confidence in their hiring processes as a result of standardization, many are still not fully confident that their efforts are yielding the very best candidates for their classrooms. The distinction between a step-by-step process that is the same for every candidate and a rubric or measurement tool that provides consistent benchmarks for quality may seem fairly straightforward, but responses to the survey demonstrated that it is a distinction very few make. Nevertheless, it is a distinction that could make an enormous difference in hiring managers' confidence that their processes—including tools and protocols—are effective at yielding the best candidates and ultimately the best hires. Findings from the survey demonstrate a weak, inverse relationship between the presence of a protocol and turnover rates, but too few respondents employed protocols to enable a measurement of statistical significance.

One clear way to assess quality, including ability to match instruction to students' needs as well as ability to thrive within the school or district culture, is to ask prospective educators to teach a sample lesson. And yet, only 30% of respondents require a sample lesson as a part of a prospective teacher's hiring process.

For those who did require a sample lesson, use of data from those sample lessons to inform the hiring process was unclear. Again, too few respondents required the use of sample lessons to meaningfully differentiate between outcomes for teachers who provided samples lessons and those who did not.

Hiring managers might consider a strategy that includes, as much as possible, "information-rich" hiring.[5] In a recent study of six successful, high-poverty urban schools, hiring committees (comprising administrators, teachers and parents) followed a multi-step process beginning with targeted screening by informed readers of the cover letter, resume and other application materials.[6] One site extended the sample lesson teaching demonstration to include a post-lesson reflection designed to "help [the hiring committee] understand whether candidates possessed the 'growth mindset' required to thrive at their school." By clearly articulating the district's commitment to growth mindset in advance, district leaders made evaluating candidates for their alignment with such a mindset a clear "fit" guidepost for everyone evaluating the candidate.

Research focused on hiring practices of principals and district hiring managers has frequently asked education leaders to rank key skills (e.g. communication, enthusiasm) they seek when making hiring decisions. Our survey focused not on the discrete skills that matter most to instructional quality, but on the domains that hold the most weight in hiring decisions.[7] Specifically, we asked respondents to rate cultural fit, teacher training program, teacher experience, racial and ethnic diversity (both to diversify perspective of the teaching force and to match with student population) and geographic diversity.

Above any other characteristic— including experience and training—hiring managers believe that cultural fit is the most important element in making a hiring decision. Very few, however, have any clear, systematic way of articulating or measuring cultural fit.

[5] Cannata, M., Rubin, M., Goldring, E., Grissom, J. A., Neumerski, C. M., Drake, T. A., & Schuermann, P. (2017). Using Teacher Effectiveness Data for Information-Rich Hiring. Educational Administration Quarterly, 53(2): 180–222.

[6] R Simon, N.S., Moore Johnson, S., & Reinhorn, S. (2015). The Matchmaking Process: Teacher Hiring in Six Successful, High-Poverty, Urban Schools. WorkingPaper. The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

[7] Harris, D. N., Rutledge, S. A., Ingle, W. K., & Thompson, C. C. Mix and Match: What Principals Really Look for When Hiring Teachers. (2010). Education Finance and Policy, 5(2): 228-246.

By far the most important indicator—even above skills—was cultural fit. While survey responses clearly demonstrate that the term is resonant with virtually everyone—60% rated it "very important" and another 28% rated "somewhat important"—the specific meaning of "cultural fit" is far less clear.

Figure 8:

Perceived Importance of Hiring Factors
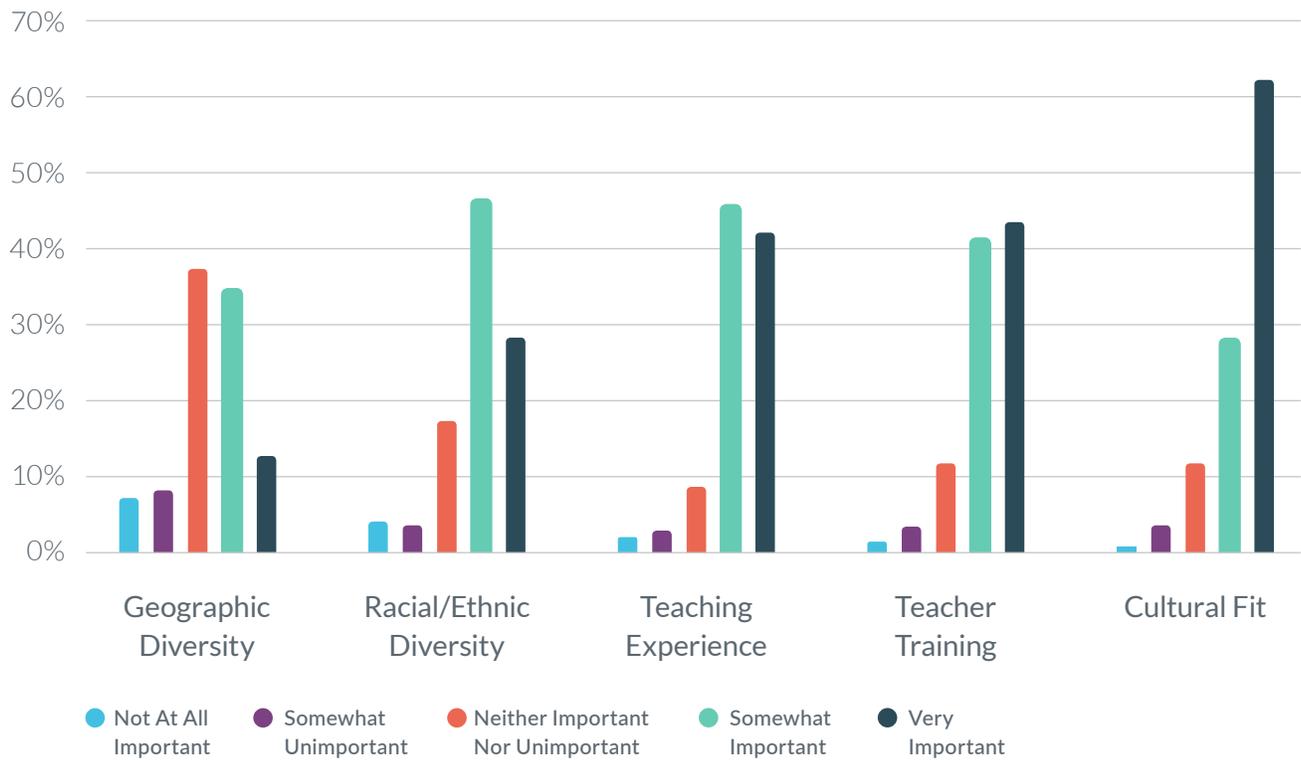
Those hiring managers who describe cultural fit as very important to their hiring decisions are even more likely to believe that candidates from word of mouth referral sources are more qualified than candidates from other sources; 78% of those who described word of mouth referrals as more qualified also rated cultural fit "very important," suggesting that word of mouth referrals might be a common proxy for cultural fit.

Both the research and popular literature on cultural fit strongly suggest that the fundamental ambiguity in the term "cultural fit" has made it a shroud for unspoken, and perhaps unrecognized, hiring biases. Former Netflix Chief Talent Officer, Patty McCord, recently wrote about the problems with hiring for cultural fit: "What most people really mean when they say someone is a good fit culturally is that he or she is someone they'd like to have a beer with."[8] She goes on to explain that some of the best employees and leaders are not those who are just like everyone else—or even those who seem to complement others in terms of skills or personalities. Rather, they are the people who have the requisite skills, passion and connection with the specific requirements of the job—including, in the case of schools, preparedness and commitment to meeting the needs of students and families. Major employers outside of education have already moved to reduce or eliminate the use of cultural fit as a hiring metric and instead are investing in resources like anti-bias training in an effort to improve the size and quality of their candidate pipelines.[9]

For educators, the ability to meet the shifting demands of teaching an evolving population of students with diverse needs is both an essential qualification and one that has proven difficult to measure. But while a perfect assessment of candidates' ability to thrive in a community or school environment may be impossible, attending to its importance remains critical. As a result, it is incumbent upon hiring managers in particular to doggedly manage bias while evaluating prospective candidates on any metric—"fit," which is a consistent victim of unintentional bias, chief among them. If hiring managers believe that cultural fit is indeed an essential element of hiring decisions, then they must carefully define what is meant by cultural fit and establish clear and consistent methods for measuring and evaluating fit. Without such metrics, "cultural fit" may fall victim to use as a justification to almost any hiring decision.

---

[8] Ca McCord, P. (January-February, 2018). How to Hire. Harvard Business Review. 90–97).

[9] The End of Culture Fit, Forbes Magazine, March 21, 2017.

Conclusion

Schools and districts have made great strides in developing systems and processes to manage and track applications, including systematizing the ways in which applicants are recruited and ensuring that all prospective applicants move through their systems in a consistent way.

Despite these gains, however, many systems retain practices that could lead to unconscious bias in hiring decisions, and therefore fail to result in selection of the most qualified new hires.

Because hiring managers are likely to overestimate the supply of word of mouth referrals in their pipeline, they may believe that word of mouth does not reflect an undue advantage while our data strongly suggest it does. One immediate way to measure and curb such a bias is to track sources of candidates and identify instances where ratios are misaligned. And if specific sources are consistently low-yield, consider investigating why and potentially better exploring—or avoiding—them.

Finally, research and experience strongly suggest that "cultural fit," in its current form, is an empty construct devoid of sufficient meaning to be helpful. And, in fact, cultural fit may simply be a term used to justify practices that are not aligned to anything but idiosyncratic gut feelings. Although hiring managers undoubtedly approach the term with good intention and sensitivity to the specific needs of their schools and districts, a commitment to cultural fit without a clear definition or evaluation scheme is simply a commitment to likability bias. Rather than dropping cultural fit from evaluation altogether, leaders can remediate the problem by first gathering together core members of their team to name and benchmark the core tenets of their school culture—and then clearly explain how everyone will work together to evaluate them.

A commitment to cultural fit without a clear definition or evaluation scheme is simply a commitment to likability bias.

About the Authors

Elizabeth Combs

is Managing Director of the Frontline Research & Learning Institute. She began her career as an elementary school teacher and Director of Administrative and Instructional Technology at Patchogue-Medford School District before moving to Imperial Software Systems, a professional learning services company, where she eventually served as President. She then held positions at My Learning Plan, Inc. as President and Chief Strategy Officer. Her professional affiliations include memberships with Learning Forward and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Ms. Combs holds a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from State University of New York at Geneseo, a Master of Arts in Technology in Education from Teachers College, Columbia University and a professional diploma in Education Administration from Hofstra University. She also holds certifications and licenses to serve as a teacher, school administrator and supervisor.

Sarah Silverman

is Vice President at Whiteboard Advisors where she advises on education, workforce and wellness policy. She has assisted with development of state policies that transform teacher and leader preparation, evaluation and training; led development of a national birth-through-workforce data dashboard; and facilitated coalitions to advance bipartisan policy solutions. Her prior work includes managing the Pre-K-12 education portfolio at National Governors Association Education and consulting with states and districts on performance management and teacher evaluation policy reform at TNTP as well as serving as the Director of Evaluation & Assessment and Chief Information Officer for See Forever Foundation. Dr. Silverman holds a master's degree in educational psychology and a doctorate in educational policy and leadership from The Ohio State University. Her research and writing have focused on the impact of state and national policy on social justice activism, teacher beliefs and ethics of education.

Learn More

For more insights into K-12 education, visit

FrontlineInstitute.com

About the Institute

The Frontline Research & Learning Institute generates data-driven research, resources and observations to support and advance the education community. The Institute's research is powered by Frontline Education data and analytics capabilities in partnership with over 12,000 K-12 organizations and several million users nationwide. The Institute's research reports and analysis are designed to provide practical insights for teachers and leaders as well as benchmarks to inform strategic decision-making within their organizations.

frontline
Research & Learning Institute™