

Public Education Teacher Selection Process Not So Simple...

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If you do a Google search for the “qualities of effective teachers,” 4,920,000 results come up within 15 seconds. Obviously, the placement of the best possible educators in our public schools is important to virtually everyone, but determining how that can be accomplished has been, and continues to be, the subject of much debate and, in West Virginia, the subject of some fairly complex legislation.

Prior to the 1990s, the selection of classroom teachers in West Virginia was required by statute to be based on qualifications. In turn, “qualifications” was not defined, allowing for fairly broad and varied interpretations of what made a teacher qualified. Some believed that the lack of specific criteria allowed for selection decisions based on politics or nepotism, rather than actual teaching skills. Therefore, in 1990, the legislature enacted W. Va. Code § 18A-4-7a, which to this day contains very specific rules for determining who receives both teaching and administrative positions in West Virginia public schools.

There are two sets of seven criteria which are applied to applicants for teaching positions, and the factors used depend upon who the applicants are. If all of the applicants are “new” to the particular county (meaning that they are not currently employed in the county or are substitutes, rather than full-time teachers), the seven criteria applied include:

1. certification for the position
2. teaching experience in the subject area
3. degree level
4. academic achievement
5. specialized training
6. performance evaluations
7. “other measures or indicators upon which the relative qualifications of the applicant may fairly be judged”

When using this so-called “first set of factors,” county administrators are not required to give any particular factor more weight than others, which allows a lot of discretion in determining which applicant is most qualified for the position. It may be the person who had the best interview, or it might be the teacher with the most relevant experience. As long as each applicant’s qualifications are assessed under each criterion, the board of education may hire whomever they want, absent a totally arbitrary decision that simply can’t be justified.

On the other hand, the “second set of factors,” which is used when any teacher employed in the county applies for a position, must be weighted equally. The second set of criteria contains some of the same categories as the first, including certification, degree level, training and evaluations. However, experience is considered in two separate categories:

1. total teaching experience (regardless of what subject or grade level)
2. “existence” of experience in the particular area of the posted position

Therefore, under the second set of factors, a teacher will be given credit for the entirety of his or her teaching experience, regardless of whether it was in the subject area of the position for which they are applying.

Another difference between the two sets of factors is that, when currently employed teachers apply, seniority is considered. There appears to be a common misconception among West Virginians and even among teachers that seniority is the only basis for awarding teaching positions, but this is simply not true. Seniority is only one of seven factors considered, and it must be equally weighted, just like the others. However, a possible source of some of the misconception could be that, in many counties, seniority is used as a tie-breaker when two or more applicants have equal qualifications.

Although school principals do have a statutory right to interview teacher applicants, if the second set of factors is in play, there is simply no legal basis to consider the results of interviews. Whether the legislature intended this or not is unknown, but it is a frustrating provision both for the administrators doing the hiring and for the applicants who may or may not be given the opportunity to demonstrate their attributes during an interview.

Also resulting from the requirements of the second set of factors, when both current employees and outsiders apply for teaching jobs, young or new teachers often have difficulty getting positions. Particularly within the field of elementary education, a very popular certification area for teaching students, young teachers often have to do substitute work for years before being able to “break into” the county system and obtain full-time employment.

While proposed changes to the teacher hiring process have been discussed by the legislature for the past several years, none have been successful to date.