

## The Inside Scoop: How Private Schools Hire Teachers by Anne Simon

### Description



One of the biggest concerns among prospective parents is the hiring of teachers in private schools: What are their qualifications? How are they hired? How can parents know they are the best teachers out there?

Private schools hire their teachers based on their own criteria and standards. Each school has its own process and expectations. Since private schools are *not* bound by any state licensing laws, it is up to them to determine whether an teacher applicant is qualified for the job and whether the candidate is a good fit for the school.

Just like finding the right match for your child and your family in a school, the school seeks to find the right match in its teachers. The two main areas for consideration are *teaching qualifications* and *ability to fit with the culture of the school*. The analogy to a student's readiness to learn and his fit with the style and culture of the school is appropriate.

Qualifications vary from school to school and grade to grade, and it is perfectly appropriate to ask the school to describe their teacher qualification standards as part your information gathering as you search for the right school. In the elementary years, there is generally more emphasis on teacher training and methodology. In the upper grades there is more focus on content (does the teacher know the subject being taught). Generally speaking, private schools require at least a B.A. degree and many are increasingly seeking teachers with M.A. degrees. At the high school level you will find a smattering of PhDs among the faculty in most good schools.

The other academic, as well as social qualification, relates to years of teaching experience. It is interesting to find out what the average years of experience is of the faculty at the schools you are visiting. It is also interesting to know the age span of the teachers. It is probably a good idea for a school to have a moderately high average number of years of teaching experience and a pretty broad age range among the faculty. This profile offers stability, while it also brings in new ideas that come with younger teachers.

Getting a sense of the cultural side of things is a little more ephemeral. You can ask an administrator what qualities they are looking for when hiring new faculty and see what they say. They will undoubtedly start with their standard qualifications and then talk about experience. From there they should say something about personal

traits that they feel best suit their particular style of school. An example might be that they look for well-prepared and experienced faculty who love their subject, or who have a gift for relating to their students. How they answer these questions should give you some idea about the nature of the faculty as a group.

My last school had a structural component that helped to ensure that our teachers became both academically and culturally acclimated. We had “assistant teacher” positions in our first four grades (PK-2). At least in these classes it was possible to have a teacher develop experience under the tutelage of an experienced lead teacher. Sometimes these teachers became lead teachers in other grades if there was an opening, and sometimes they graduated to lead teacher in the class where they had been an assistant. Of course, these assistant positions were less well paid and often part time, and they did not attract highly experienced teachers who wanted their own classroom. These highly qualified candidates also came along when opening occurred and were vetted extensively by both administrators and teachers alike. The biggest advantage of the assistant scenario was that teachers were able to become very familiar with the school’s curriculum before having to take complete responsibility for delivering it to a group of students. The biggest difficulty in this structure was that we had a very stable faculty and there was not always room for a teacher to move up when ready.

Qualifications, qualities, experience, fit – these are the questions you will want to explore as you learn about a school. Most private schools have their “legendary teachers”, their “problematic teachers”, and their “unknowns” or “newbies”. Talking with current parents will give you some idea of this. But it is important to remember that one size does not fit all. The kindergarten teacher who is a savior to both child and parent alike for one family can be a thorn in the side for another. It gets back to knowing your child, getting to know the school’s standards and style, and recognizing that your student, and you, will have a variety of experiences as the years pass by. Some will be treasured and hopefully few will be just endured.

*Anne Simon is co-author of “Beyond The Brochure.” She is the former head of Wildwood School and former dean of the Crossroads Middle School.*

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