Hiring for Mindset

Why was this strategy developed?

Teachers matter. They are the single most important school-based factor for student success. That means hiring matters. For Da Vinci Schools and its project-based learning (PBL) high schools, the hiring strategy emphasizes mindset and the process embodies the school's values.

Da Vinci has found that hiring for mindset feeds the school's fun, open, learning-oriented culture. “The talent of our staff begins right there,” notes Kim Merritt, director of Da Vinci Extension. “In your interview, you see the value placed on community and you find yourself already beginning to love Da Vinci.” The hiring process enables Da Vinci to execute its vision and deliver on the promise of its learning design.

How is it different?

Three elements of Da Vinci’s hiring for mindset practice distinguish it from other approaches:

- **Collaboration.** Teachers at GSN collaborate daily using structured protocols and reporting decisions in Google docs for reference school-wide.
- **Whole-child Mindset.** In addition to content expertise, GSN teachers make an investment in the social-emotional growth of students during a daily “Advocacy” time.
- **Growth Mindset.** GSN teachers appreciate each child’s ability to learn and organize instruction to help students not only master content but plan and prepare for their future.
- **Cultural Relevancy.** Teachers at GSN utilize culturally relevant curriculum and instructional strategies that resonate with students’ diverse experiences.

Generation Schools Network also hires for mindset. Cultural relevancy, collaboration, and a focus on the whole child take precedence. “It’s easy for a teacher to say that every child can succeed,” says co-founder Jonathan Spear, “but it’s very different in practice.” GSN aims to hire teachers who practice the following:

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Candidates also participate in a parent interview and a school tour led by students. “We learn a lot from how a candidate acts on a school tour,” shares Merritt. “Some people won’t let students talk and instead press them for information about the hiring process. Some dismiss students. Some demonstrate racist actions. We look for candidates who ask great questions of students and respect students as important to the hiring process and to the school community.”

**What is the advantage for students?**

First and foremost, students have an equal voice to influence the school community. Their perspective is valued because they are valued community members who are directly impacted by the hiring decisions.

The school believes that its culture of casual yet respectful interactions where communication is injected with lots of humor and positive, light interactions derives from its hiring strategy. This culture among adults bleeds into both the style of communication with students and the environment for learning that’s established. “How we work with each other is how we work with students,” explains Merritt. And students recognize this; they often remark, “You talk to me like I am an adult.”

**How does it improve learning?**

Participation in hiring could be understood as another real-world project for Da Vinci students. By participating in the decision making, they develop 21st century skills and practice “look fors,” gathering evidence, supporting personal observations, discerning quality of information, discussing complex issues, and making group decisions. Students develop confidence in their personal viewpoint. At the same time, they come to appreciate the school’s values and priorities.

**Hiring for mindset** allows Da Vinci to find educators who are comfortable and proficient with a flexible, informal, collaborative, project-based learning environment. They have found their strategy results in teachers who trust students to handle hands-on deeper learning activities and provide students with solid rigorous content.

It also creates an opportunity for greater personalization. Students understand they have input on a variety of issues, not just their classwork.

**What is the advantage for instructors and administrators?**

New teachers know the school culture and what is expected of them before their first day. **Hiring for mindset** sets the stage for a positive, collaborative working environment with colleagues who become excellent project-based teachers.

*It starts us off strong. With a structured and complex hiring process in place, it’s a whole group decision who comes in the door. We hire great teachers. We hire caring, talented people. Education is a people business; hiring well is a priority and an all-important input for achieving our vision.*

**Kim Merritt, director of Da Vinci Extension**
Because of their involvement in hiring, teachers develop a collective sense of ownership for the decisions that are made. Over the long term, they share accountability for each other’s success.

“Each educator is so important to the whole, and to our shared community’s success, so these decisions matter a ton. We have very high engagement and very strong bonds at all levels,” reports Merritt. “People want to stay.”

Professional learning builds upon the hiring strategy rather than supplementing it. Celebrations occur weekly in a one-hour meeting every Friday morning. In-service days are active project planning and design time. A retreat at the start of the school year focuses on culture and project planning.

**What’s next?**

The **hiring for mindset** strategy has evolved into the strong process it is today, and Da Vinci staff continue to change small aspects to improve it. The organization is now working to bring the same level of purpose and collaboration evident in its hiring strategy to other areas of its school model.

And as Da Vinci works with various industries, including education, to provide career opportunities for their students, they are looking to Da Vinci students to help fill the teaching pipeline with individuals who have an innovative, student-centered, collaborative mindset. “By engaging promising talent in content-coaching positions,” Merritt explains, “we can support students through school and help them develop the skills they need to be amazing teachers and educational leaders of the future.”
**USE IT:**

Da Vinci Symposium Resources

**GSN Collaborative Exercise Template,** one of the templates, tools, and practices in the Teacher Hiring Guide, available to participants in Generation Schools Network’s Turnaround Leadership Program. “The value of the collaborative exercise cannot be overstated,” according to Wendy Loloff Piersee, CEO. “Since collaborative practice is critical to our model, it’s a necessary step and surprising to see which candidates excel and which struggle.”

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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