

Advice from the Professionals on Obtaining a Teaching Position

The following advice and tips were shared with WIU students by **Lonny Lemon** (Superintendent of Schools for Quincy Public Schools), **Rick Parker** (a History teacher at Brown County High School), and **Brock Bainter** (a Social Studies teacher at Macomb Junior High School) at a program sponsored by the WIU Associated Students of History in March 2009.

What school boards and principals are looking for, in general:

- smart people who have demonstrated that they are student-centered in their approach to education;
- students who have done outstanding work in college classes – employers pay a great deal of attention to candidates' GPAs, and having C's (or lower) in History or social studies classes is a significant red flag to school officials;
- additional endorsements (middle school or reading endorsements, for example);
- being able to speak a foreign language;
- active participation in community and college volunteer service activities, which is seen as an indication of "character";
- good role models for their students, which means, among other things, having no criminal record.

How to write an effective resume and pitfalls to avoid in resumes and cover letters:

- a comprehensive, well-organized, truthful, neat, and impeccably formatted and spelled resume and cover letter;
- nothing gets an application thrown in the "rejection" pile faster than being messy or containing spelling errors;
- include community and college service activities;
- give specific information about course projects and undergraduate research projects completed;
- list clubs, service activities, civic organizations, and other extra-curricular activities;
- include study-abroad experiences, involvement in Peace Corps, and military service or other national service activities,
- list all paid jobs held while in college, even when the job(s) are unrelated to one's degree, as working one's way through college demonstrates dedication and organizational skills;
- networking: it helps to get to know the superintendents, principals, and teachers who might know of hiring opportunities;
- more networking: attending conferences

How to prepare for a job interview:

- do your research first: know who the school board members, district superintendent, and school principal are;
- learn about the school or district's approach to education;
- check out the school's report card for the last 5 years to discern trends (the web sites of

both the Interactive Illinois Report Card (IIRC) – <http://iirc.niu.edu/> – and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) – <http://isbe.net/> – contain useful information on individual schools and their districts for those preparing for interviews);

- think through your philosophy of education before the interview;
- always be conscious of the impression that the outgoing message on your voice mail or answering machine gives to potential employers calling to make interview appointments;
- be careful as well about what you may have posted on Facebook, My Space, or similar on-line networks or elsewhere on the web, which might turn off potential employers.

During a job interview:

- demonstrate to those who are conducting the interview that you have a student-centered (not teacher-centered) approach to education;
- indicate that you want to make a difference in students' lives;
- stress that you are eager to collaborate with other teachers, administrators, and parents to help the school do the best possible job educating its students;
- always be honest in answering questions and always look them in the eye;
- be aware of the values and expectations of the school district with which you are interviewing;
- point out that you are an alum of the district, if that is the case
- be prepared to respond to specific “scenarios” about classroom management issues, how to deal with angry parents, etc.

On-line recruiting and on-line applications:

- be concise when answering questions in on-line forms;
- attach a resume electronically, when possible;
- after completing on-line applications, send a resume through the mail with a cover letter which refers to the on-line application already submitted;

Earning a graduate degree:

- it doesn't hurt you to obtain a graduate degree before going on the job market (it means you will be much better prepared academically);
- as far as the school district is concerned, the added value of the stronger academic credentials outweighs the additional cost to the district of hiring someone with an advanced degree;
- it also demonstrates that you have goals and are able to achieve them;
- it is less difficult to do the graduate work when not also working full-time as a teacher;
- however, if a teaching position is available upon graduation with the BA, take it and work on the MA later;
- pursuing an advanced degree while teaching allows you to apply in your own classroom the knowledge gained from the MA, as well as allowing you to bring your classroom experience to bear on your graduate studies.

Experience with or ability to lead extracurricular activities:

- in many cases, experience or ability with coaching will get applicants an interview;
- in some small districts, coaching ability is often more important than teaching credentials when making hiring decisions;
- however, schools also need people to advise Quiz Bowl, Student Council, various clubs, and the school paper, as well as coach athletic teams;
- getting to know students outside the classroom in these different venues also helps teachers connect with them inside the classroom and can help you become a better teacher.

Advice for new teachers in their first year:

- “Expect to be overwhelmed!”;
- establish your classroom discipline from the first day of class;
- be tough from the start and don’t worry about trying to get the students to like you;
- set a routine for the classroom and stick to it – that helps the students adjust and know what to expect;
- be honest with your students – if you don’t know the answers to their questions, don’t try to pull the wool over their eyes;
- be prepared for your lessons – if you are not, the students will see right through you;
- remember that high school students are not adults and “you can’t be their buddy”;
- find ways to separate yourself from your students;
- be honest not only with the students, but with their parents, as well as with your colleagues in the schools and the community which employs you;
- find a peer you can trust to talk with regularly, whether it is someone you went to school with, someone in your school or district, or someone you met through professional development opportunities.

And remember – there is no better or more gratifying profession!