

Finding Good Teachers

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I listed the qualities that I think make a good teacher which is the most critical step in establishing an alternative that's going to succeed over time. See below.

As for actually locating them, one piece of advice is to go beyond reading resumes and interviewing candidates. Have them spend a day at the school/center, or preferably several, interacting with the children. This is obviously easier to do once your alternative is up and running, and you need to replace or add staff. But what the Brooklyn Free School did as part of its start-up process was to stage a couple of weeklong "camps" during school vacations during the school year prior to opening the school. Then ask your most promising applicants to participate in the camp so that you can observe them in action. This, by the way, is a great way to recruit families as well, much more effective than an open house. Or, when it comes time for you to form your initial staff, dream up some other kind of trial-run experience. I say this because, well, talk is just talk, and you're not looking for someone who is simply going to be performing a scripted role.

As for structuring the day, you and the others will be able to figure out what works best for your situation as you go along. Trial and error is a great teacher. In the case of my school, there never was much of a daily schedule. There were a handful of regularly scheduled classes and activities at any given time, and so we kept track of those in order to make sure that other activities didn't interfere with them. Ditto with guests coming in to do stuff with the children, and also with field trips planned in advance. In the preschool section, we began every morning with a sharing circle, and then we had two daily story times -- right before lunch to settle everyone down, and before it was time to go home. Also from 11:00 -12:00 every day, the 4 and 5 year-olds interested in practicing the three R's met in a separate room with the kindergarten teacher. And then we ate breakfast and lunch together at a set time too. Otherwise we just made it up as went along, and every day was unique unto itself.

Staff-to-student ratio: The important point to make about this is that you have to factor in the social, emotional, and cognitive maturity/needs of the children. And also the skill of the teachers, for that matter. In my school, a core piece of our mission was to take in students who for one reason or another weren't able to make it in conventional schools. This meant that we had to keep our ratio lower than we otherwise would've had to -- although this was where volunteers and interns were especially helpful because they could provide a lot of the one-on-one or small-group attention that the edgy children needed. The way it averaged out with us was that we had approximately 60 students ages 3-14 and 7 full-time paid teachers (I was one of them because we couldn't afford to pay me just to be the director). So that gives you about an 8.5:1 ratio, along with an average of 3-4 volunteers and interns in the building on a daily basis.

And given that we always had quite a few children who weren't yet ready to self-regulate and direct their own learning, the paid staff had to be on their game at all times.

Here's that list: All good teachers:

1. Genuinely like children and enjoy being around them. Just like parents with their own kids, they take pleasure and pride in their students' growth and development.
2. Genuinely enjoy teaching, too. This is a critical factor because teaching is essentially a modeling process and students learn much more readily when their teachers exhibit joy in what they're doing. And as a result, good teachers feel energized at the end of the day, not drained.
3. Are openhearted. They care about their students' lives, present and future, and they address their students' shortcomings and transgressions compassionately, not judgmentally.
4. Recognize that teaching isn't something they do to or for children; rather it's a reciprocal exchange of energy within a relationship. Good teachers also realize they are continually learning from their students too.

5. Trust in the innate wisdom of the learning process and in their students' intrinsic desire to learn. They don't try to force learning to happen by resorting to extrinsic motivators like rewards and punishments.
6. Are authoritative, not authoritarian. Authoritarian teachers are highly controlling, consider their authority non-negotiable, and maintain their control with punitive discipline. They feel threatened by a child's expressions of independence and individuality. Authoritative adults set firm, consistent limits on out-of-bounds behavior, but don't hem students in with restrictions. They maintain their natural adult authority while at the same time respecting the child's point of view and encouraging verbal give and take. As their students grow more responsible, they extend them increasing levels of independence.
7. Understand the fundamental role that emotions play in a child's complete development. They are emotionally self-aware and make sure the environment is welcoming and safe so that their students feel comfortable being themselves and don't feel they have to hide their vulnerabilities.
8. Continue to work on their own personal and professional development, because as Joseph Chilton Pearce once said, "Teachers teach who they are." Good teachers realize they can't guide their students to places they haven't already been themselves.
9. Are facilitators of learning, not taskmasters. "Facilitate" literally means "to make easier," and the most fundamental purpose of teaching is to help the student learn how to learn with ease and efficiency.
10. Acknowledge the individuality of their students and don't expect them all to be interested in the same things at the same time, or to learn in the same way.
11. Assume it's their responsibility to present things in a way that every individual learner can understand, and not the learner's job to adapt to the teacher's methods. Good teachers continue to try different approaches until they find the key that unlocks the door to the learner's understanding.
12. Are good communicators. They speak clearly, with honesty and respect; and they make sure that their criticism is constructive and always based on "I" messages. And then they listen carefully to what their students have to say, encourage them to speak freely, and value their opinions.
13. Understand that learning doesn't happen under duress. They make sure that anxiety and stress have no place in the learning environment.
14. Are flexible. Aware that a lot of important learning is serendipitous and synchronistic, they are able to shift gears quickly in order to stay in sync with their students' shifting moods and interests.
15. Know how important it is for children to take responsibility for their own education and their own actions, and so they share initiative, power, and control with them.
16. Respect a child's inalienable right to say "no." They don't force their students to do things they don't force their students to do things they aren't ready or willing to do. they aren't ready or willing to do.
17. Build strong relationships with each and every student. They also facilitate students doing the same with one another.
18. Recognize the deep developmental value of play. They provide ample free play opportunities for their students, and they also make sure there's enough play in their own lives because they know how much play re-energizes and restores them.
19. Understand that experience is the best teacher. They minimize the amount of instruction they do by creating a rich, resource-filled environment—with abundant connections to the outside world—that enables students to learn by doing and discovering.
20. Consider teaching to be a calling. They view their work as an authentic sharing of themselves and a way to make the world a better place, not a professional role that confers them status and a paycheck.