

# Hiring for Mindset

**TOOL:** Hiring for mindset

**GOAL:** A teaching team of collaborative, student-centered, equity-minded, lifelong learners who design rigorous and engaging projects and champion innovation.

**BREAK THROUGH MODELS:** [Da Vinci Schools](#)  
[Generation Schools Network](#)

## 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.**

*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:*

- **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.

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:

- The process centers on a performance-based experience.
- Students have a strong voice in the selection decision.
- A candidate's fit with the school culture has at least equal weight with the individual's performance and content knowledge.

Applicants participate in a phone interview as the first step. It varies by school, but typically school leaders select candidates for phone interviews with input from teachers as their time allows. This step, like all others, screens for candidates who are inquisitive, community-minded, student-centered, and comfortable with ambiguity and

innovation. Merritt explains why: "Many candidates are new to PBL and personalized learning, so we are not necessarily looking for that specific expertise. We are looking for teachers who are comfortable thinking outside the box and want to learn and improve."

The most critical step, however, is the Symposium, a day-long event involving two groups of four-to-six candidates each.

As a group, the candidates are asked to plan the first two days of school. During this activity, the school team looks for candidates who focus their plan on building culture. They observe which candidates actively collaborate. "We tend to know right away from the group activity who is or is not a fit," shares Merritt. "Someone who takes over and wants to prove he or she is a leader most likely won't collaborate well. That person might be a great teacher but wouldn't contribute, collaborate, or compromise."

Candidates then give a 30-minute lesson to a group of students. The school looks for hands-on activities and how the candidates engage students. The team also looks for lessons that involve solid, rigorous content. As Merritt remarked, "We combat that stereotype about project-based learning; rigor is important."

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.”

*Hiring at Generation Schools Network is similar with a phone interview and traditional interview as well as a **collaborative exercise** and **sample lesson**. GSN emphasizes **involving teacher teams** in the process as the candidate will be joining a team of teachers. New recruits need a shared understanding of the four mindsets, their related responsibilities, and their team members.*

In return, students are active participants in the decision-making. They are taught how to give positive, thoughtful feedback based on the school tour and the lesson and they use that skill with veracity in their recommendations for hiring.

“*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**

## 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.

# NEXT GEN TOOLS

Strategies and Innovations for Implementing Breakthrough Models

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 are the challenges?

It's a time-consuming process and requires much of the school

community and all candidates to be available on a given day. The collaborative and highly participatory process adds a layer of challenge when mid-year hires are needed.

**Hiring for mindset** may mean that a really excellent teacher, perhaps even someone referred by a member of the school community, may not be a good fit for the school culture, may not be the best fit for their project-based learning model, and may not be who the students need the most.

## 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."

## VIDEOS



Teacher Perspective



Teacher Perspective



Student Perspective



## ARTIFACT:

Symposium schedule, group activity, and assessment prompts for counselors, teachers, and resource specialists

### Hiring Symposium - Friday, March 18

Morning, 9:30am to 12:15pm					
	Candidate A (English)	Candidate B (Math)	Candidate C (English)	Candidate D (Science)	Candidate E (Math)
9:30 - 10:00	Group Activity				
10:05 - 10:45	Parent Interview / Tour	Assessment	Parent Interview / Tour	Assessment	Parent Interview / Tour
10:55 - 11:30	Lesson (Donald)	Parent Interview / Tour	Lesson (Laura)	Parent Interview / Tour	Lesson (Noel)
11:40 - 12:10	Assessment and Debrief	Lesson (Donald)	Assessment and Debrief	Lesson (Laura)	Assessment and Debrief

Afternoon, 12:30pm to 3:00pm					
	Candidate F (Math)	Candidate G (English)	Candidate H (English)	Candidate I (Resource)	
12:30-1:00	Group Activity	Group Activity	Group Activity	Group Activity	
1:05-1:40	Lesson (Donald)	Parent Interview / Tour	Lesson (Laura)	Parent Interview / Tour	
1:45-2:20	Parent Interview / Tour	Lesson (Donald)	Parent Interview / Tour	Lesson (Adam)	
2:20-3:00	Assessment and Debrief	Assessment and Debrief	Assessment and Debrief	Assessment and Debrief	

### Group Activity

Imagine the school year starts in 30 minutes.

Your job is to plan the first 3 days of school at Da Vinci Communications. Many traditional constraints and restrictions are not in place here. You can change the schedule, you can group students however you want, and you can use classrooms, fields, outdoor space, etc. We have access to a gym, the field behind campus, and the park next to campus. Enjoy the process.

#### Deliverable:

- Sheet of paper outlining the plan for the first 3 days of the upcoming school year

#### Constraints and background information

- Students in grades 9 through 12 will be present on campus
- There are approximately 270 students and 13 teachers at the school
- The school day runs from 9:00am to 3:55pm for students. Teachers and staff arrive at 8:00am.
- Students in grades 10 through 12 have very low turnover – perhaps a dozen total new students in those grades
- Students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade come from a variety of middle schools, with one school likely sending around 20 students, and no other sending more than 5 students.

## 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:

**Da Vinci Schools**  
<http://davincischools.org/>

**CONTACT:** Kim Merritt  
[kmerritt@davincischools.org](mailto:kmerritt@davincischools.org)

**GENERATION SCHOOLS NETWORK**  
<http://generationschools.org/>

**CONTACT:** Katie Peyton, Knowledge Manager  
[kpeyton@generationschools.org](mailto:kpeyton@generationschools.org)

Name of Candidate: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Subject Area Project Planning

The Da Vinci Schools have a focus on Project Based Learning and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Explain, in the template below, a relevant and real-world interdisciplinary project where you could incorporate your subject area content (you may choose the grade level you are most comfortable with) with another subject area. Please include the project objective, a brief overview of the project, the content you would cover in the project and the final deliverable or products that the students would have to create or complete.

#### Project Objective

#### Project Overview/Description

#### Subject Area Content Covered

#### Student Deliverables

