

Are You Thinking of a Career in Secondary Schools? A Supervisor's Perspective on Which Candidate to Hire

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The Good News

The good news for history graduates looking for teaching positions at the secondary level is twofold. First, the largest increase in student enrollment at the precollegiate level in a generation, combined with the ongoing retirement of the baby-boom generation, has created an expanding job market for prospective teachers in almost all subject areas, including history and the social sciences. Second, the educational reform movement of the last two decades has created an increased demand for teachers with a strong academic background in the subjects they teach. Thus, state education departments and college/university schools of education are requiring prospective candidates for teaching positions not only to maintain a higher grade point average, and to score higher on the Praxis examination, but they are additionally requiring more extensive preparation in the academic disciplines, including history. Thus, there are an increased number of positions at the precollegiate level for graduate students.

Also, teachers at the precollegiate level are enjoying pay and benefits packages far superior to the past. It is not uncommon in high-paying districts in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, for example, to earn upwards of \$80,000 at the top of the teacher's guide. A teacher's salary guide normally lists a teacher's salary based on the number of years teaching experience and the particular credential and credits one has earned. Most guides contain anywhere from 12 to 18 steps (based on years teaching) listed down the left hand column and a row at the top of the guide listing particular credentials such as a BA/BS (for bachelor's degree) a BA+30/MA an MA+30 and an MA+60. The numbers equal the number of credits a teacher has earned beyond a bachelor's degree (BA+30) or master's degree (MA+30). For each year of experience in teaching the individual will earn additional money. This is called an increment and is granted yearly until one reaches the top of the guide in year 12 or 15 or 18, depending on the number of steps on the guide. However, a teacher can also move across the guide and earn additional money for improving her credentials and earning additional degrees and credits. The first credential is usually designated as B.A., meaning the highest education achieved by the teacher is a bachelor's degree. Subsequent increments would be given for earning 30 credits beyond a bachelor's degree (BA+30), a master's degree (MA), 30 credits beyond a master's degree (MA+ 30), and 60 or more credits beyond a master's degree. Thus a teacher's salary guide in a high paying district might look something like this (only up to Step 5 and then skip to Step 12, in the example):

Anytown School District, 2002–2003

Step	BA	BA+30/MA	MA+30	MA+60
1	\$37,000	\$38,000	\$38,700	\$40,000
2	\$37,500	\$38,700	\$39,400	\$41,000
3	\$38,000	\$39,400	\$40,100	\$42,000
4	\$38,500	\$40,100	\$40,800	\$43,000
5	\$39,000	\$40,800	\$41,500	\$44,000
12	\$60,000	\$68,000	\$78,000	\$87,000

Also, teachers with an earned doctorate (PhD or EdD) might in addition be paid a differential of, for example, \$2,000 extra each year. In reading the guide, a teacher can quickly determine where s/he will be for each year of experience teaching and based on the particular credential and credits s/he has earned.

What I Have Learned from My Experiences

Outstanding teachers exhibit unique characteristics that set them apart from their peers and colleagues. They are the educators fondly remembered by former students and the subject of laudable reminiscences whenever “old grads” get together. I began my career fresh out of college as a history teacher and assistant football coach at a small public junior-senior high school in New Jersey. My first year was hectic and I had little time to pursue graduate studies. I was also about to be married and could ill afford the cost of graduate school. However, in my second year of teaching and coaching I was accepted into a graduate program and eagerly pursued my studies as time and money allowed. It took me four years to earn a master’s degree in social studies education. Meanwhile, I had moved to another secondary school where I taught U.S. history and modern European history and coached football and wrestling. I was elected to the teachers’ negotiating team (only later did I discover I ran unopposed) and mentored several clubs and activities after school. I also became a new father and had to balance career, coaching, and family responsibilities, as did many of my colleagues.

I loved history and always wanted to go on for an advanced degree. The problem was that many of my undergraduate professors had changed jobs, forgotten me, or moved on to their final reward. It was hard to obtain letters of recommendation—everyone always wants three, one is never good enough. After nine years of teaching, I had an opportunity to take a year’s sabbatical. I applied to graduate school at the University of Notre Dame and was accepted. I took an additional year’s leave of absence and finished my graduate studies, passed my comps, and had my dissertation topic accepted in two years. I returned to teaching at the secondary level, but was now promoted to head football coach. During the fall, I suspended work on the dissertation research, but for the remainder of the year I spent two evenings a week and most weekends in libraries at Princeton and Yale. During vacations I did additional research at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Library of Congress, and the Aldeman Library at the University of Virginia. I

completed my dissertation and defended it successfully three years after leaving Notre Dame and as a newly crowned PhD now earned a whopping salary of \$19,000 a year.

I was in my tenth year as a teacher at the secondary level and I still had eight years to go before I reached the top step on the guide. Meanwhile, I was actively involved in the local teachers' association, serving on its executive board, as a member of the negotiating team, and eventually two terms as president. With my experience and graduate degrees I gradually moved up the ladder to become a department chair and later supervisor of social studies in my third secondary school. I now supervised teachers at the middle school and high school and coordinated the elementary social studies program in six schools. Sure, I applied for college/university positions, but I soon realized that even if I was fortunate enough to secure a position in a tight job market the salaries were often less than I was making at the secondary level. New teachers can now reach the top of the guide in 12 years and in northern New Jersey earn as much as \$80,000 to \$90,000 at the MA + 60 level. Schools often pay a differential of \$2,000 to \$3,000 additional money to a teacher with an earned doctorate. Assistant football and wrestling coaches can now earn \$4,000 to \$9,000 a year in addition to their teaching salary.

In the 36 years I have spent as a social studies teacher, department chair, and supervisor, I have interviewed many candidates for teaching positions and gained much experience along the way. My time as a teacher, coach, department chair, supervisor, coordinator, mentor, and club advisor taught me many things, especially the kind of characteristics that make someone a first-rate teacher. What characteristics, both professional and personal, do I look for in a candidate?

Preparation of Successful Teachers

There are three important components to the preparation of most successful teachers: (1) academic preparation in the content disciplines; (2) pedagogical knowledge and skills; and (3) field experience. For me, the most important is a candidate's academic preparation, particularly in history, as I strongly believe that history is the core of the social studies program. Candidates without a strong academic preparation in history will not succeed in the classroom because "you can't teach what you don't know." You can watch television news shows and visit various web sites and hand out a variety of worksheets and supplementary materials and engage students in "critical thinking" activities and so on, but sooner rather than later your students and everyone else realize your shallow preparation in what you are teaching. Candidates with a strong academic background, but lacking the pedagogical knowledge and skills and field experiences, can acquire the latter with the proper mentoring and support.

Personal Qualities

The next important area I look at is a candidate's personal qualities. Does the candidate like working with young people, want them to be successful, and is someone that students in turn are going to like and respect? How are other staff

members going to react to the candidate? Does the candidate exhibit a love of learning, enthusiasm for the subject, and provide some indication of turning young people on to the subject? A Candidate who is otherwise well qualified but lacks the appropriate personal qualities will be a poor choice for the job.

A Passion for the Subject

In addition to a strong academic background in history and the social sciences and humanities, successful candidates exhibit a concern and almost intuitive understanding about how students learn history and comprehend past events. They recognize that the students' schema for making sense of the new data they learn do not always reflect what historians know about the past. Successful teachers are sensitive to assisting their students to look at past events in a different way. Effective teachers have a passion for the subject and an ongoing desire to learn more. They enjoy reading and learning new things and sharing their ideas with their students and colleagues. They exhibit an intellectual curiosity that is contagious; they ask questions that provoke thought and a deeper understanding. They motivate and challenge their students and stimulate them to ask new questions, and to achieve at a higher level of proficiency. Such candidates may be a minority, but they are out there and they become the kind of teachers kids deserve.

The Interview Process

The interview format varies from district to district and frequently involves different criteria and even perspectives depending on the needs and goals of the school and the make-up of the interviewing committee. The best advice for a potential candidate is to expect a variety of formats and questions. Questions may range from the candidate's philosophy of education and classroom management to recapitulations of experiences working with young people and a discussion of future goals. It is becoming increasingly common for a candidate to undergo a more rigorous interview process of two to three stages in which the academic preparation, personal characteristics, and pedagogical knowledge and skills of a potential candidate are carefully scrutinized. The subject area supervisor or department chair will review all applications and résumés and select for an interview the candidates who appear most promising and interesting for the position.

The initial interview will usually be with the supervisor/department chair and perhaps one or two additional teachers or administrators. The supervisor/department chair will usually provide some information on the type of community and school the candidate will be working in, the specific position to be filled, additional potential demands or duties to be assumed, the size and character of the student population (i.e., what percentage attend a four-year college), and the timeline expected to be followed in filling the position.

At this stage, the candidate will normally be provided an opportunity to summarize credentials, background and training, prior experiences working with students, future goals and reasons for seeking the present position. Those conducting the interview will then zero in on specific questions they would like the candidate to

address, including professional affiliations, classroom management and discipline, what courses and books have been most memorable or interesting, and what specific strengths and benefits the candidate will bring to the school. While answering such questions, the candidate will usually provide additional clues as to personal characteristics, mannerisms, self-confidence, articulateness, and friendliness to assist those conducting the interview in making a decision about whom to recommend for further consideration.

After the initial round of interviews, two or three candidates will be invited back for a second session, usually with the principal and supervisor/department chair. At this stage the candidate can be certain that she is being considered very seriously for the position and needs to present herself in a way that demonstrates her aptitude and fit for the position. Normally, the second round of interviews will focus on follow-up questions to matters discussed at the earlier session or specific questions relating to the position to be filled and additional needs of the school. Candidates might be asked, for example, if they would be willing to assist the Mock Trial Team or the Model United Nations Club, or coach the softball team. To ensure that a useful contribution can be made and that there will be job satisfaction, the candidate should clarify the specific duties and responsibilities attached to the position, the salary (and any additional compensation) being offered, and the benefits package included as part of employment in the district.

Often, the candidate will have to attend a final interview with someone from the district office, usually the superintendent. At this stage the candidate normally is the finalist for the position, and the interview will primarily focus on a general overview of the candidate's qualifications and philosophy and a review of the credentials, including certification, transcripts, and any test scores required by the state. The salary and benefits package will be reviewed and the contract authorized and signed.

Continuing Educational and Research Opportunities

After obtaining a position, how can one maintain it and pursue further graduate studies or research objectives? Far more opportunities for high-level professional development are available now than in the past and it is quite easy for social studies teachers today to remain current in the field. In addition to the annual conferences sponsored by the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, National Council for History Education, and National Council for the Social Studies, there are a growing number of regional, statewide, and local conferences, workshops, and institutes dealing with a variety of content-specific and pedagogical issues. The Gilder Lehrman Institute, for example, sponsors several highly acclaimed weeklong seminars for social studies teachers in the summer. Many state affiliates of the National Council for the Social Studies and the National Council for History Education sponsor annual or semiannual conferences. For example, the New Jersey Council for History Education has sponsored annual fall conferences at Princeton University over the past nine years featuring presentations by renowned historians in U.S. and world history, as well as spring conferences

dealing with topics such as teaching about the Holocaust, teaching New Jersey history, preparing students for the Advanced Placement exam in U.S., European and world history, and teaching history in elementary schools. Professional journals, periodicals, and Internet resources continue to abound and also provide a smorgasbord of additional valuable resources for social studies teachers. The primary difficulties teachers face in attending conferences is a lack of monetary support and a problem in getting substitutes to replace them in the classroom. However, enlightened administrators tend to be very supportive of allowing faculty members to attend professional meetings and conferences, recognizing the contributions such activities present in improving and extending teachers' knowledge and expertise in the subject area and the ultimate benefits accruing to students.

The various professional organizations also provide numerous opportunities for precollegiate teachers to remain actively involved in the profession and to pursue the historian's craft, by serving on various committees, organizing conference sessions, preparing panels and presentations at conferences, and publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals and newsletters. To teach at the precollegiate level does not necessitate being "less scholarly" than at the college or university level. In fact, depending on the school, teachers may be dealing with the kind of student who will subsequently be attending the most prestigious and competitive colleges and universities.

There is also increasing support for high-level professional development at the precollegiate level. The so-called Byrd Act, named after Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, has provided \$50 million in its initial year and \$100 million in the second year to support efforts of local educational agencies to improve the teaching of American history in the schools. The districts receiving grants are partnered with college/university history departments, historical associations, museums, and other organizations to bring abundant new resources and opportunities to their teachers in order to enhance the study of American history at the precollegiate level. Thus, while teaching history on the secondary level may not meet every graduate's career goals, it provides many rewarding opportunities to make a difference in the lives of younger students, to remain actively involved in the historical profession, and even to earn a salary substantially above what teachers have earned in the past.

Source: <http://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/professional-life/are-you-thinking-of-a-career-in-secondary-schools>