FINDING FIT in TEACHING

11 tips for the job seeker

a resource from myEDmatch
Fit Matters

On December 12, 2012, Rhode Island teacher Stephen Round quit his job in a seven-minute YouTube video that quickly went viral.

“I can no longer work for a school district that is so structured. It allows no room for alternative methods of teaching and learning,” he said.

Round’s resignation attracted lots of attention. But his story is similar to nearly half a million teachers who won’t return to their classrooms in the fall. Half will find another teaching job. The other half will quit teaching altogether.

And unlike Round, most of these are newer teachers just about to hit their stride in the classroom.

Why do teachers quit?

It’s rarely because of pay, or prestige, or not liking teaching. So, what’s the problem?

We think it has to do with fit.

Because the thousands of teachers who work in schools with missions and cultures aligned to their beliefs and goals report high levels of job satisfaction and student achievement. These teachers love their jobs, and therefore, inspire their students.

All teachers deserve a job they love.

So, whether you’re looking for your first or next teaching job, we encourage you to focus on fit. That’s what these 11 tips are designed to help you do.

Even if you only do a handful of things suggested in this guide, you’ll increase the chances that you’ll end up at a school that’s just right for you.
7 Ways to Think About Fit

No two teachers and no two schools are exactly alike. In fact, everyone has different beliefs about education. When those beliefs conflict, problems arise. But, when they align, fit happens.

The 7 Core Areas of Education

1. **Mission** is a set of beliefs regarding goals and aspirations for students. *What does the school say is its mission? Do you believe in that mission too?*

2. **Instruction** is a specific approach to teaching and learning. *What kind of approach does the school encourage? Does it align with your style of teaching?*

3. **Planning** is preparation for the core tasks of teaching and learning. *Does the school give teachers a role in planning curriculum & assessments? If so, is it done collaboratively or individually? Which do you prefer?*

4. **Professional Development** is how the school supports teachers in their growth and development. *How does the school approach professional development (i.e. frequency of observation and types of feedback)? What kind of support do you want?*

5. **Staff Culture** is the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors of a school’s staff. *How do the adults at the school interact with each other? How should they interact—strictly as professionals, or more like family? Where does holding each other accountable come into play?*

6. **Student Culture** is the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors of a school’s students. *What core beliefs and values does the school seek to instill in its students? What do you believe a school should do to build & sustain student culture?*

7. **School Environment** is how a school organizes time, people, and resources. *How does the school invest time, money and energy around goals of education? In your opinion, are these wise, meaningful investments?*
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Survey five people.

Half of the “fit” equation is knowing yourself. (The other half is knowing the school.) But research suggests that others actually know you better than you know yourself.

Your wishes, fears, and motives create blind spots in how you see yourself, which is why it’s good to get an alternate point of view on your personality, strengths, and yes, even your weaknesses.

So, ask five people whose opinions you value—colleagues, superiors, professors—to respond to just one question via e-mail:

*Based on what you know about me, what kind of work environment do you think would best fit my personality and also help me develop my strengths and understand my weaknesses?*

Once you have this information, use it.

For example, if you hear that you’re the kind of person who needs space to create without fear of judgment, look for a school that offers lots of autonomy in planning and instruction.

If, on the other hand, you hear you need a fair amount of guidance and support when starting something new, find a school that takes a hands-on, collaborative approach to planning and professional development.

Note: While the thought of soliciting honest feedback may make you cringe, take heart: research shows that you’re hardest on yourself; others are more generous.
Make a list of your must have’s + can’t stands.

Others can provide valuable insight, but that doesn’t mean you’re clueless about yourself.

Just the opposite, really. You’re the expert when it comes to your “internal” traits, like what feels right (and wrong) for you, what motivates you, what bothers you, and what keeps you up at night. In other words, all the things that can help you create a list of must haves and can’t stands.

What should be on your list?

Use the seven ways to think about fit as a guide. For example, consider school environment:

**What must the school have in order for you to do your best work?** Alternatively, **what can’t you stand about the way certain schools operate?**

Ask yourself the same questions regarding staff culture, professional development, and other areas that are especially important to you.

The point here isn’t to pen an exhaustive list—must haves are different than nice to haves—but instead to help you draw a line in the sand on a few key issues. Ultimately, this will simplify your decision-making.
While you’re considering what motivates you, it might help to know what motivates most people in their work.

In his bestseller *Drive*, Dan Pink identifies three factors that spur us on even in times of extreme challenge—like your early years in the classroom.

They are: **autonomy**, **mastery**, and **purpose**.

So, when you’re trying to determine which school will lead to job satisfaction and keep you motivated when times are tough, ask school leaders and teachers the following:

- How much autonomy, or decision-making power, will I have?
- What kind of support will I get as I work to master the craft of teaching?
- What’s this school’s purpose, and how do you see me contributing to it?
Talk to people who have the job you want.

People are your best resource. So, reach out to those who know a little something about the journey you’re about to take.

Ask them about their greatest challenges and breakthroughs—and how they’ve navigated both.

Most importantly for the job search, ask them what they wish they’d asked (or, what they’re glad they thought to ask) before accepting different jobs throughout their careers.

Ask questions about what has mattered most to them when it comes to a school’s mission, culture, environment, and its approaches to things like instruction and planning.

Try to talk to at least three teachers so you get a variety of perspectives and insights, and so you can identify any trends in their answers.

Pay attention to those, “I wish I’d known...” comments. Learn from them so you don’t end up expressing the same regret.
Or, even just a “lurker” will do. You’ve been warned to think twice before posting pictures of last weekend’s festivities because savvy principals will review your digital footprint, but social media “research” can go both ways.

According to Tracy Brisson, former Director of Teacher Recruitment, Selection, and Hiring for NYC Dept. of Ed., you can get a sense of a school’s student and staff culture by following it on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social channels.

For example, a charter school she follows posted on its Facebook page photos of students who went on a trip to the theater, news of one teacher’s fellowship for a summer study program in Singapore, and a YouTube video of their cheerleaders.

While it’s true a school’s social media channels are likely to be more...well, controlled...than your own, they’re still good places to discover more about the day-to-day and/or more casual activities of the school than you’d find on its website.
Learn as much as possible about the school leader.

“What’s the reason so many new teachers quit the profession or move to a different school? They heavy workload? Low salary? A paucity of classroom resources? An absence of autonomy? The “always-on,” continually demanding nature of the work? None of the above. The main reason is their principals.”

This quote is from a Nov. 2012 Atlantic article citing research that confirms—not surprisingly—that school leadership matters. A lot.

He or she will set the tone around staff culture, professional development, and school environment.

Just as important as avoiding leaders who don’t embody your beliefs and goals, is finding those who do. The right school leader can inspire you, your students, and the entire school community to succeed.

Find school leaders on LinkedIn. Use Google Alerts to learn what the leader has done, is doing, and plans to do in his or her tenure at the school.

Do you like what you find? Do you agree with what she stands for? Would you be proud to work with him?
Connect with people who work at the school.

And not just the obvious ones, like the principal and teachers. Also, seek out the librarian, the custodian, the secretary.

No need to schedule anything formal, simply strike up casual conversations while you’re at the school for your visit, interview, or demonstration lesson.

If you get the chance, ask them why they work there and what they see as the school’s purpose.

Katherine Merseth, senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says this is a question everyone at the school should answer in a similar way. She observes:

“If all the individuals—the teachers, the students, the parents, the administrators, the community—have different ideas about what the purpose is of the school...down the line, you’ll run into trouble. So a fundamental first step is to create a common culture of coherence where the individuals in the school, anyone you run into, you say, ‘What’s the school about? Why are you here?’”

Find out how people at your potential school home answer this question. If what you hear resonates with you, that’s a good sign you’d be a mission-and-culture fit at that school.
Get to know the community.

Some communities made headlines this year for strikes and school closures, while others in less sensational fashion were highlighted for their work to foster innovation in education.

The education climate within a particular community is likely to affect your experience teaching there, so take some time to get a read on the situation.

Answer questions like: What’s going on with the schools here? What’s the tone of the conversations? How supportive are people of x, y, and z in education? Who are the education influencers?

Talk to real residents to get the best information, but supplement their opinions with local and national newspaper coverage on the issues and education-focused publications in the area you’re considering. Some of these include Gotham Schools (NYC), Catalyst Chicago, Southern Education Desk, EdNews Colorado, LA School Report, and The Notebook (Philly).

Also check out Getting Smart’s Smart Cities series, an interesting collection of mostly edtech-related innovation happening in communities like Raleigh/Durham, Milwaukee, Austin, San Diego, LA, San Francisco, Chicago, NYC, Boston, and others.
Get clear about feedback styles.

Researcher and bestselling author Brené Brown says that organizations that make feedback a priority and a practice are much more successful than those that avoid it, ignore it, or do it poorly.

And yet, feedback is tricky. It can be delivered with compassionate concern or a hard edge, and it can be received with stubbornness or an open mind.

Incompatible feedback styles cause problems.

The key is to find a school that not only has a clear, strong feedback culture, but also trains teachers and staff on how to become a part of it.

So ask school leaders to describe the feedback culture at their school, because as Brown points out:

“People are desperate for feedback—we all want to grow. We just need to learn how to give feedback in a way that inspires growth and engagement.”

It’s quite likely that the feedback culture at your school will determine, at least in part, the trajectory of your career. Will you grow as a teacher or leader—or, will you struggle to develop without the proper guidance?
Recognize red flags—and checkered ones, too.

In racing, red flags communicate danger and warn drivers to stop their cars, while checkered flags mark the end of the race. Yes, sometimes the job search feels a little like the Indy 500. All you want is to cross the finish line. You’ll make it there, but pay close attention to the flags along the way.

**Red Flags**

- The school leader denies your request to speak with other teachers.
- You’re trying to talk yourself into a job because you’re afraid there’s nothing else out there.
- You’re bothered by something you see or hear during the interview or while visiting the school.
- You can’t picture yourself in the school, classroom, and/or community.
- You feel rushed, or like something to cross off the to-do list, in your interactions with the school leader and others.

**Checkered Flags**

- You notice a clear, positive school culture and you want to be a part of it.
- You get the answers you were looking for during interviews and other communication.
- You get ideas for your own teaching after having conversations or observing other teachers.
- You’re inspired just by walking the halls and observing classes.
- You appreciate and can apply any feedback you were given during the hiring process.
Trust your gut.

Sure, it’d be nice if a flashing, bright neon sign led you directly to the school that’s right for you. But, like most things in life, the right choice is not always so obvious.

The first 10 tips in this guide are meant to help you gather enough information and insight that you can make an educated, thoughtful decision about where to take your talent.

This is important because as it turns out, much of the reason teachers leave is because they didn’t have enough information before they took the job.

But, a word of caution: Sometimes in our attempt to make the right decision, or to avoid the wrong one, we end up in a state of analysis paralysis. And this is when it’s best to listen not to others, or read books, or scroll through social media accounts, but instead, to listen to your gut.

As Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* says, “There are moments, particularly in times of stress when haste does not make waste, when our snap judgments and first impressions can offer a much better means of making sense of the world.”

Keep in mind that those who make the best gut decisions are also well informed about their choices—but ultimately, trust your gut to lead you to that right-fit teaching job.
Do you have your own tips for teachers?

We’ve created a special forum on myEDmatch’s Facebook page for teachers to help each other find the right-fit job. Go there now [link] to get other tips and share your own ideas with a community of like-minded educators.

We’re in this together because #FitMatters.
myEDmatch is a revolutionary job-matching site for educators. We connect schools and teachers with shared missions, beliefs, and goals. We help great teachers and great schools find each other, leading to great outcomes for kids. It’s completely free for teachers.

1. **Build an online profile**
   School and teacher profiles provide information that the other side really wants to know. Profiles include basic facts as well as multi-media elements like video and photos.

2. **Get matched**
   A special algorithm matches schools and teachers based on beliefs in seven core areas: mission, instruction, professional development, planning, student culture, staff culture, and school environment.

3. **Search for jobs**
   Schools post current job openings so that teachers, whether matched or not, can search and discover opportunities.

4. **Communicate with schools**
   Teachers and schools pick their favorites and communicate with each other to gauge mutual interest. Once both parties have all the information they need, the application and interviewing process can begin through the school’s normal HR processes.
#FitMatters