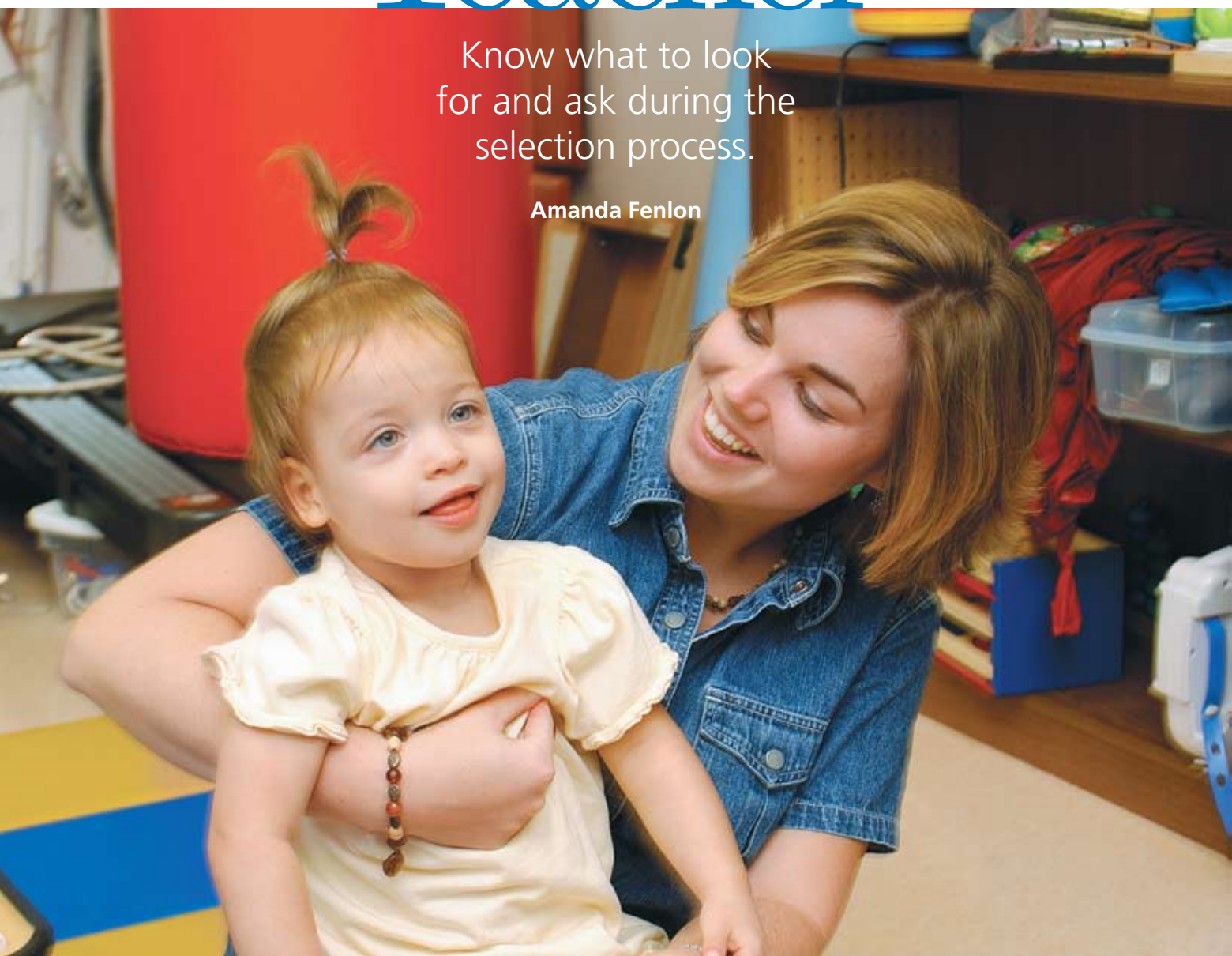# HIRING AN EFFECTIVE
Special Education Teacher

Know what to look
for and ask during the
selection process.

Amanda Fenlon

Principal Linda Jones just received a letter of resignation from her most senior special education teacher. This was definitely not the news Jones wanted because this teacher had been a great asset to the school for many years. She seemed to have all the necessary skills and knowledge and she worked well with students, parents, and other staff. How would Jones find someone else with all those characteristics? How would she wade through the huge pile of applications from human resources? What questions should she focus on during the interview and what should she expect to see in a professional portfolio?

The task of hiring special education teachers may seem daunting because they serve in what is undeniably the most complex of teaching roles. This article provides some guidance and suggestions for identifying key competencies that any viable special education teacher candidate should possess.

What Are You Looking For?

When searching for a special education teacher, it's important to consider the model of service you currently use or want to move toward within your school. Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act emphasize the necessity of students with disabilities having access to the general education curriculum within the least restrictive environment. Multiple research studies on successful inclusive education practices suggest the importance of collaborative teaming structures (Fenlon, 2005; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2004; Jackson, Ryndak, & Billingsley, 2000).

Special education teachers must have a sincere willingness to collaborate and share their knowledge, skills, and energy with other staff and families to benefit the students they serve. According to Wright (2005), "The collective wisdom and expertise of groups of educators far outstrips that of any one person." An example of a collaborative team may include a special education teacher, a first- and second-grade teacher, a teaching assistant, and a part-time speech pathologist. Pooling their resources and expertise, this team could easily serve two classes with a majority of "typical" students as well as a number of students with a range of disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, autism, and mental retardation).

Key Competencies of Special Educators

Effective special education teachers possess both similar and unique professional knowledge and skills that distinguish them from general education teachers. Some examples of their key competencies include:

- Maximizing literacy learning;
- Implementing positive behavior supports;
- Teaching students who have significant disabilities;
- Using technology to support curricular access, participation, and learning; and
- Helping teams implement effective practices for diverse learners in general education classrooms.

According to Toomes and Crowe (2004), principals have an average of 20 minutes to "read" a candidate's potential for a particular position. You should carefully check a candidate's transcripts and résumé, ensuring that his or her preparation program has included specific courses, field experiences, and student teaching in special education roles specific to key competencies (e.g., literacy clinic/tutoring and hands-on training in serving students with significant disabilities and those requiring positive behavior supports).

You also should review grades in education and methods courses. A grade below a B in any of these courses should raise concerns about a candidate's capability to teach. Instead, select candidates who have a strong academic record. Look for letters of recommendation from college faculty and student teaching supervisors who can speak to the candidate's teaching skills.

Maximizing Literacy Learning

Because the majority of students receiving special education services have individualized education program (IEP) goals in literacy, special education teachers must bring a strong foundation in effective classroom practices for diverse literacy learners and know how to design and implement intensive supplemental instruction. When special education teachers have experience with research-based practices (Allington, 2005; Wilson & Schumack, 1997; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), they can teach struggling learners to read and serve as an important resource for the entire building.

Special education teachers must be prepared to collaborate with general education partners in designing and providing appropriate literacy instruction and supports for students with IEPs. They must also bring strong clinical knowledge and be able to conduct in-depth individual assessments to design and provide research-based ongoing instruction to ensure that students with disabilities make maximum progress as literacy learners.

Some of our most promising literacy instruction occurs when general and special educators team on behalf of all of the students in a classroom (Schnorr & Davern, 2005). When students with disabilities increase their literacy levels, standardized test scores improve.

A strong special education candidate should be able to articulate what a quality literacy program should include for a student reading two to three years below grade level.

Providing Behavior Support and Intervention

To be truly effective, special education candidates must possess skills in functional behavior assessment and positive behavior support and intervention, defined as "a collaborative, assessment-based process to develop effective, individualized interventions for individuals with challenging behavior. Support plans focus on proactive and educative approaches" (Horner & Sugai, 2005). Many educators know how to observe and gather data on challenging behavior, yet few know how to analyze data and develop plans that are proactive and educative.

Special education candidates should be able to demonstrate these skills by highlighting functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans they have developed and implemented for specific students with behavioral challenges. A good positive behavior intervention plan includes strategies to prevent the behavior from occurring, the teaching of new skills to replace the negative behavior, and appropriate consequences for desired behaviors (Janney & Snell, 1999). For example, recent studies have identified the use of visuals (Gray & White, 2002) as a successful, proactive strategy in dealing with challenging behaviors. Special education candidates who demonstrate use of such practices will be effective in serving a range of students with disabilities and serve as a resource to other staff.

Teaching Students With Significant Disabilities

When special education teachers have knowledge and experience teaching students with significant disabilities (e.g., multiple disabilities, mental retardation, or significant autism), they can make the difference between simple classroom presence and substantial learning for those students. These candidates also will have an understanding of technology available to enhance learning and the proper use of assessment and instructional strategies (i.e., task analysis, appropriate prompts and cues) to maximize participation and independence. They will be able to lead team planning, coordinate supports, and provide instruction to address individual curricular and IEP goals, including functional skills, within the context of general education classes and school routines.

Using Technology

The most effective special education teachers know how to use technology to support the participation and progress of students with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities in general education classes and other school contexts. For example, word-prediction software programs such as Co-Writer, screen-reader technology such as Kurzweil, visual/graphic organizers such as Kidspiration and Inspiration, and visual learning programs like Boardmaker can greatly enhance the participation and success of students with disabilities in literacy, content area subjects, and school routines. Special education candidates who have had experience with computer hardware such as Alphasmart (a small portable word processor), Dynavox (a sophisticated communication device with pictures and voice output), and Intel-likeys (an adapted computer keyboard for students with motor or cognitive limitations) will embrace technology and be able to teach the students, their parents, and school staff how to use it on a daily basis to enhance learning.

Effective Practices for Diverse Learners

A primary role of special education teachers is ensuring access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities and other diverse learners. An important set of principles to ensure access to curriculum is Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002). It implies making the curriculum accessible for all students from the beginning, not adding adaptations after lesson planning is done. When special education teachers co-plan units of instruction with general education partners, they can share teaching practices, flexible tools, and materials that accommodate and support curricular access for students with and without disabilities.

Examples of universally designed instruction might include: providing books at different reading levels; having all text available in digital format with screen-reader software installed on classroom computers; grouping students in partners or heterogeneous cooperative groups with specific roles and tasks to accomplish; and broadening students' background knowledge and motivation about a topic by using closed-captioned video clips available online. In an interview, prospective candidates could be asked to show unit plans they have developed to meet the needs of diverse learners in a general education classroom, particularly for a student with significant disabilities.

See Them in Action

When feasible, many school districts are moving to an interview process that involves the special education candidate teaching an actual lesson to students, usually in the final stage of the selection process. The candidate is prepared with certain information about the students and the topic he or she will teach. Candidates are required to bring materials and a lesson plan, and then teach the lesson in a location with students predetermined by district administration. The lesson allows the interview team to observe valuable aspects of a candidate's performance not possible during a typical interview. Rapport with children, use of materials, pacing, and instructional and management techniques can all be observed during a 20- to 40-minute lesson.

We need the best and brightest teachers to teach students with the greatest learning challenges. Although many building leaders may still subscribe to gut instinct when hiring teachers, the information provided here can strengthen their decision-making in finding and hiring effective special educators. **P**

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WEB RESOURCES

"Hire Well," from *Principal*'s September/October 2007 Best Practices issue, offers five tried-and-true hiring practices from which principals can benefit.
www.naesp.org/principal

Behavior-based interviewing uses specific questions based on teacher candidates' skills, background, and experience to determine if they can do the job. Learn more by reading "Improving Teacher Selection with Behavior-based Interviewing" from the January/February 2008 issue of *Principal*.
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