

Recruitment of Teachers for International Schools in Thailand: A Paradigm Shift for Principals

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Abstract

The role of the principal has been well defined in literature and has been extensively documented in terms of responsibilities, effectiveness, accountability and leadership. The role of the international school principal has many of the same components with one additional area of accountability added: teacher candidate recruitment. In the absence of large human resource or government departments, international schools must add the burden of teacher recruitment as a key responsibility. These schools must remain flexible, using recruiting firms, electronic marketing and job fairs to attract candidates. The recruiter must possess a solid background in pedagogy and have diverse experience including interpersonal and technical skills that allows him/her to obtain not only the educational 'fit' but also the overall 'fit' that meets the school's needs. In Thailand issues related to politics, floods and market fluctuations add a component that further burdens the role of the principal recruiter.

Keywords: International schools in Thailand, teacher recruitment, principal's role



Introduction

There are tremendous pressures placed upon principals in all schools. The issues of assessment, accountability, visioning, staff development, supervision, and sustainability of staff are often at the forefront. The role of the principal is articulated in literature to be primarily concerned with the day-to-day operations of the school and the view is that principals are mostly focused on the areas of general school management and concomitant duties (Ontario Education Act, 2014, section 298). Literature often refers to the changing roles of the principal mostly pointing to increasing burdens in areas of professional development, leadership styles, and the support provided to principals. The Wallace Foundation conducted a survey of the United States 67 largest public school districts focusing on what it considered to be the changing role of Principals. In no part of the survey or report did the issue of teacher recruitment or retention become an issue that was identified as a priority for principals (Wallace Foundation, 2013). Literature on the role of the principal in International schools is scarce or non-existent. The assumption seems to be that the skills, attributes and responsibilities are comparable. This is not the case.

Principals who are foreign trained and have spent most of their careers practicing in a domestic situation have been trained to deal and respond to the ever changing pressures of leadership. When the principal accepts a position in an International school outside the jurisdiction where he/she has practiced or trained, the assumption is that the burdens of leadership will be the same. While it is true that many of the responsibilities will be similar there are other new responsibilities and pressures for which the principal is often ill equipped and

lacks sufficient raining or practice. The principal in this situation must quickly adapt and refocus. This requires a paradigm shift.

The international school principal must add the following burdens to the role. Issues of culture and intercultural competence become paramount (Moodian, 2009). This is further exacerbated by the variety of levels and types of training the teachers in the school possess. It is difficult to imagine how so many of these schools continue to do an effective job of preparing students for an uncertain future; a future where many jobs that our pre-high school students will obtain do not yet exist. The fact that many of these schools are profit driven and must respond well and quickly to market pressures places a push and pull on the administration that can often be overwhelming. Why and how do international schools still continue to be a dominant choice for education in many parts of the world, Thailand being no exception? The answer lies in the most important role any school leader has in order to maintain viability in a competitive market: recruitment of quality candidates. For principals whose key roles have been focused on other areas more related to teaching and learning, this represents a huge paradigm shift as Human Resources becomes not only an additional area of responsibility, but a critical component of school success and sustainability.

Current Status of Market

At a job-alike held in Manila in 2009 at the annual East Asia Regional Council of Schools (EAR-COS) Leaders Conference the question was put to a group of twenty assembled heads of schools, 'What do you think is the most important aspect of your role as a head of schools?' Overwhelmingly, the

answer was recruit teachers. Sustained discussion ensued and the issue of retention was added to it thus creating a two-fold response. Today quality teacher recruitment remains at the forefront of educational trends and issues. Traditionally, many countries such as Thailand have often thought of recruitment as an issue of attracting teachers from other countries to support the educational system in Thailand. In fact, most countries in the world are desperate for qualified teachers and in a very competitive market. A United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) figure puts the demand for new teachers needed worldwide at 18 million by 2015 (Importing Educators, 2009). Hence, the world demand has created a 'buyers market' for prospective teachers. This in turn forces the education system into creating a system where the richer schools and markets can attract the greater and often, better qualified, teachers. Add to this the inability of countries to provide enough spaces and training for those interested in a teaching career, and suddenly there is an inability by the education field to meet labor market demands. For the recruiter this issue of training is further exacerbated by the lack of training for the International market. Most pre-service institutions ignore the international job-market all together.

One of the major issues that have caused concern is the lack of a set of standards or accountability for international teacher recruitment. Too often teachers are not held accountable to a specific standard. This is often due to the wide range of training centers from which the candidates are recruited. How can one set of standards be agreed upon? And, more pointedly, what agency exists at an international level to oversee this and

provide feedback to recruiting schools, (Dunn,2013).

Recruitment Factors Choosing an Approach

A variety of approaches exist when nearing recruiting season. The most important task is to narrow the focus and establish criteria for the school recruiting process. This is determined by a number of factors. The primary factor depends on the nature of the curriculum for which the school is searching: American, British, Australian, Chinese or other. Also, the type of school and level: primary, secondary, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate or other can determine the recruitment focus. In addition the school may require specific denomination or perhaps secular hiring will suffice. And, in many cases, ethnicity will come into play.

A secondary factor is related to the method chosen; self-advertising, recruitment firms, electronic (Skype etc.), or job-fairs. Each of these has pro's and con's. Self-advertising has the benefit of complete ownership by the recruiter and allows the recruiter to control the timing. Unfortunately it is time-consuming and labor intensive. This method also limits the recruiter's market presence. Using recruitment firms is an excellent method for reaching a wide base of candidates and the initial screening is done for the recruiter. The danger for the recruiter is to remember that these are for profit companies that make money based on volume of candidate turnover and that the recruiting firms have many clients who are competing for the same candidates. Electronic methods for recruiting are becoming more popular as a supplement to either the self-advertising or recruiting firms. The use of Skype, Google Chat or other forms of electronic communication that is



interactive allows recruiters that necessary step of establishing human contact with the potential candidate. The issue is that many elements can be falsified and the situation can be contrived or manipulated. The most common approach has been the job-fair. This is an incredibly intense experience that allows access to a large number of candidates with prerequisites of the candidates being pre-established by the job-fair organization. It has the benefit of allowing both parties to see if the job is a good fit, as Pete Hall argues in *Education World* (2009). A major drawback to this technique is the high cost of the recruiter travelling and the time the recruiter spends away from the home school. For many schools a combination of these methods is most effective, as recruitment has now become a year round component of international education.

Recruiting Stages

According to Barber (1998) as cited in Cox (2012), there are three distinct stages in the recruitment process; creation of the candidate pool, attracting candidates, and candidate selection. Each of these has basic steps and components. It is the leaders' ability to utilize different recruiting techniques that leads to the creation of a stable process.

Stage one. The recruiting process involves a degree of decision-making that is often financially based. Schools must determine the possible openings based on indicators given by staff. Recently, this has become even more difficult as the timeline has become such that teachers are asked to indicate their desire to remain or non-renew as early as the first month of the last year of the existing contract. The demands by schools and the registration at

job-fairs and with recruiting firms, and credential verifications have become so involved that schools, recruiting firms and candidates have all been forced to make decisions much earlier than in the past. For this reason, many candidates and schools have turned to recruiting firms to manage this labor and knowledge intensive system. The use of a recruiting firm allows for teachers to use a company to focus the target area for job-hunting at the same time allowing recruiters to tailor the candidates sent to the prospective school based on a few factors that allow for an initial screening. Recruiting firms are also used to develop a pool of candidates in anticipation of future labor needs.

Stage two: the attraction of candidates. Increasingly, schools have been required to become accomplished marketing firms as well as educational institutions, (Cox, 2012). The attraction of candidates becomes a combination of web-based factors, satisfaction websites and the skill of the leaders three core competencies; knowledge, interpersonal skills, and technical skills. This also has the side effect wherein the school receives a multitude of unsolicited applications, the processing of which can become overly time-consuming. The second phase requires a combination of multiple methods of recruiting. While electronic communication is important for early stage of recruitment, it is here that the job-fair becomes critical. These fairs are rife with high stakes pressure and considerable risk-taking. They come at great expense to both the candidate and the school. It is at these job-fairs that the skills of the recruiter are most tested. The competitive nature of the market, while significant, is less significant than the recruiter's ability to know his/her own school, school culture and culture of the community, which he/she serves.

It is often not about the most qualified or most experienced candidate; it is about the right fit. Finding that candidate who most suits the school and has the greatest chance of success is crucial. It is at this stage that the process becomes more art than science. For example, does one powerful member of a couple negate or diminish the value of two individuals?

Stage three, the candidate selection. Because of the increasing competitiveness of the market and the varying nature of that market, this is often the trickiest part of the process. It involves convincing the candidate that their concerns can be met. Essentially, it means projecting the job such that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be met. For recruiters this means being able to respond to all needs ranging from physiological to self-actualization. Effective recruiters must plan to answer or address all these areas if they are to remain effective and competitive.

Thailand Context

The formation of the ASEAN Community in 2015 has created an even greater demand on the education program in Thailand. The ASEAN community has established English as its key language for business and commerce. The International College of Economics and Finance (ICEF) Monitor (2013) points to the need for Thailand to address this issue among others in order to prepare itself for the future. The current level of English is very low and Thailand traditionally does not score well on standardized tests, as reported in a daily newspaper in Thailand, (The Nation, December, 23, 2013).

At the national level in Thailand (non-international), there is a demand to overhaul the recruitment process, (Sassiwuttawit, 2014); in many

ways echoing the challenge that face international recruiters. There are a variety of factors that must be addressed that are in many ways, Thai-specific. Thailand's international schools are defined by three specific factors: curriculum, IB, AP, not-for-profit, and profit focused. These variables are further defined by language decisions and more importantly, target student market. An overarching theme to all these is the lack of one-unifying national standards board that supervises all areas of accountability. (It has been argued that the Office for National Education Standards and Assessment (ONESQA) is one such governing body; however, the reality is that this is not currently effective). Each of these factors has a direct impact on the recruitment of candidates. A school that follows an American Curriculum is more likely to target its candidate market to North America, while the British Curriculum schools will target candidates from Europe and each curriculum defined school behaves in such a manner. Another factor may be the existence of a school style such as an advanced placement program or an international baccalaureate program. These factors again help to narrow the candidate pool, in some cases, based solely on qualifications.

A major issue in recruitment is the financial component. For the most part recruitment schools offer one of two things; lifestyle or financial reward. Very few international schools worldwide can offer both. In Thailand, international schools have a wide range of compensation packages making the market even more competitive. Two schools, literally within a kilometer of each other, offer the same curriculum at significantly different compensation packages for candidates. This will often limit the less financially attractive schools a



limited pool of teachers. These schools are often recruiting one of two types of teachers, the relatively inexperienced and therefore less costly or, the veteran teacher who is financially sound and looking for a new adventure before fully retiring. This also impacts the demographics of the school causing an imbalance where a school might have disproportionately high numbers of teachers at either ends of the career longevity spectrum. It is at this point the other factors often become the selling point and the knowledge, interpersonal skills and technical skills of the recruiter become critical if quality candidates are to be considered.

An area that has had little attention in recruitment is the existing diversity in regions within Thailand. While Bangkok has had plenty to offer in the past and indeed still does, the media or ‘CNN’ effect has had a great impact on the ability to recruit. Constant political upheaval, flood threats and the unstable capital market have made Thailand a difficult sell in many instances. Teachers who are familiar with and veterans of the international circuit are able to keep this in perspective. Unfortunately, those teachers who are new to the idea are scared away either by themselves or by stories and cautions from friends and families. At a recent hiring fair at Queen’s University in Ontario, Canada, a principal reported he spent a greater amount of time convincing the mother of a candidate that her daughter would be safe, than he actually spent interviewing the candidate, (Faulkner, 2013). A lack of understanding of the geography of Thailand will often lead potential candidates to believe that the violence in the three southern provinces is endemic to the whole country. This is a matter with which all Thailand recruiters have to deal. Recruiters must also possess certain analytical skills, based

on both experience and the “gut feeling” that will allow him/her to eliminate a candidate who may be applying for the wrong reasons; running or escaping from something, following a “grass is greener” approach, or being more interested in the adventure than in education.

One of the most difficult issues facing international schools in Thailand is the choice of the primary recruiter. A lack of understanding of the process or clear understanding of the educational system has led many schools to not use the principal or head of schools as the primary recruiter. Instead, an owner or a board member, usually untrained or inexperienced in education, will decide that it is his/her responsibility to recruit. While this speaks loudly to governance issues, it speaks even more highly to the understanding of education and its complexities. Using a business model is, in this case, ineffective. In situations where this happens, schools often fall into a pattern of year round recruiting due to teacher retention issues.

Additionally, the recruiter in Thailand must always be aware of Thai regulations regarding work permits and recognition of the licensing process. Recruiters must work closely with government liaison personnel to avoid difficult situations. Ensuring that licensing is correct and maintained is an additional responsibility for the recruiter.

Recruiters in Thailand generally fall into three distinct areas that are most easily defined by their financial abilities. In Thailand recruiters must use all strategies to be effective in the recruitment field. The international schools generally fall into three categories based their financial resources.

The first group mostly relies on self-generated means through their own marketing department. This involves extensive use of Skype and the

web-page advertising. It relies heavily on referrals from existing teachers. Schools in this situation are often smaller and have fewer resources with which to recruit.

The second group is mid-range schools that use a combination of self-advertising, recruiting firms and job-fairs. These are often schools that have considerable resources. They use all types of recruiting strategies; but, philosophically, they have the candidates seek them out and the job-fairs they attend are in Thailand.

The third group of schools use all types of recruitment strategies; self-generated, recruitment firms, and job-fairs. They differ from the first group in that they attend job-fairs at both the local level in Thailand as well as abroad.

The use of recruitment firms helps narrow the field and establish a focus for the recruiting. These are for-profit agencies (Roth, 2014), they are in it for money and using them requires a great deal of secondary vetting to ensure the quality and qualifications of the candidates. It is a 'buyer beware' approach to recruiting. This is usually an expensive process and requires great technical skill on behalf of the recruiter. Small, not for profit schools are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to this method. The use of self-advertising

and electronic methods is perhaps the most commonly used technique by these smaller schools, where the budget for recruiting is limited.

Conclusion

The variety of factors that international school recruiters have to deal with requires extensive training and experience and is evolving and devolving on a regular basis. Little research has been done of a non-empirical manner to investigate factors that affect a school's ability to attract candidates. The principal remains the key cog in establishing school effectiveness, (Walsh, 2013). This task of recruiting is extremely time intensive. With the good teachers come good schools and thus recruiting is probably the most important job of the principal in international schools. Other areas of interest for further research include understanding the candidate's profile and perspective, which are indeed immense. The concept of teacher retention is also closely linked to recruiting and bears further examination. If international schools are to remain competitive in the area of candidate recruitment they will need to keep current with the evolution of recruiting and be sure to designate a recruiter who has extensive educational training and experience. The principal is best suited for this role.



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