Tough Interview Questions and Answers
by Candace Davies

Equipped with a stunning resume, you are ready to secure that perfect teaching position. Now it is time for the next step: the dreaded interview. This step, however, does not have to be an intimidating or nerve-racking experience. By taking some time to prepare, you can achieve the successful results you want.

There are many questions that will be asked during the interview. Most interviews last 45 minutes or longer. Be prepared for a variety of questions. Recognizing that situations for every candidate will vary, the responses to questions mentioned in this article will provide you with some general guidelines. First and foremost, it is important to conduct extensive research on the district's or school's needs in order to respond to interview questions thoroughly and competently.

What are your biggest weaknesses?

Your response could include something that may have been a challenge in the past, but is now rectified. It is also important to be honest; they will be testing your honesty. They also want to see what concerns they should be aware of. The key to answering the question is to turn a negative into a positive.

I don't suggest using that traditional, "I'm a perfectionist." It is overused and will tend to sound phony. It is also important that you don't get defensive and try to justify why you are weak in a particular subject area, such as social studies. This would make a bad impression because it may be relevant to the position that you are seeking. Whatever you decide to use, ensure it is not one of the key skills of the position you are seeking. In other words, don't pinpoint classroom discipline and management or subject area as weaknesses.

Think of this question as an opportunity to sell yourself. Here is an example: You wouldn't say, "I have a difficult time organizing my day." Instead, rephrase the answer by saying, "There are so many creative activities I plan for my students and class time is limited. It is difficult to incorporate all of the activities that I would like my students to learn from. Over time, I have realized that I need to prioritize so as to best enhance my students' learning. I now realize that I can't do everything I would like to."

The above example shows you are excited about designing new and creative lessons for your students. In the interviewer's mind, this will not be a negative. It will position you that much closer to getting a job offer.

How do you handle classroom discipline?

For obvious reasons everyone will have a different answer; it will depend on your teaching style, grade interviewing for, and past experiences. The interviewer wants to know if you have a plan, you know how to implement it, and if you think that discipline is an important part of the position. What I have found from coaching clients is they fail to provide a clear action plan that
can be backed up with examples. It is also important to know ahead of time the philosophy of the school or district. This will give you some additional information. A few things to bring up when answering this question are as follows:

It is important to develop ground rules the first week of class; this allows the students to understand what is and isn't acceptable behavior. These rules are discussed and agreed upon with the students. This makes the students accountable and responsible.

You may want to touch on your philosophy of classroom discipline. This of course would depend on your style; you need to be honest with yourself. Do you, for example, believe that you reduce negative behavior by offering the students an intellectually stimulating, organized, and respectful environment?

You will want to be able to give examples of your plan. Use a real situation to show your expertise in this very important area. Whether you use the red light/green light, time-outs, or removing the student from the classroom, it is important that you can back up why it is effective and use examples. You will want to explain why you feel the discipline action is effective and why you use it.

It is also important to indicate there are always two sides to every story, so if the action involves discipline of two students, you must listen to both sides. Indicate that you try to get the students to resolve their own disagreements, which may involve compromise. As the teacher you would ask the students, "How will you handle the situation next time?"

Again, you must be honest when answering this question or any other question during the interview. By organizing your thoughts and examples, you will be able to respond concisely and truthfully while at the same time showing your skills to the district.

Let's imagine an interview for a grade one teaching position wherein the interviewer asks: "Describe your classroom's physical appearance." Having prepared ahead of time, you understand the interviewer's attempt to determine:

- Your teaching style
- Your ability to effectively manage the class
- The level and quality of student interaction
- Your teaching philosophy

Within this context, you might respond: "Upon entering my classroom you will find a lively and colorful room wholly centered upon children and active learning. Sight words, the alphabet, numbers, and inspirational quotes cover the walls while large bulletin boards proudly display student's work. A large area contains a carpeted reading or group corner specifically for storytelling, show-and-tell, weather discussions and calendar and day-of-the-week conversations. This classroom includes an abundance of age appropriate reading materials as well as student mailboxes wherein children place personal journals, home reading books and workbooks in the morning, and then collect newsletters or other parent communication at the end of the day."
NOTE: Presenting floor plans that you successfully used in the past demonstrates strong organization and preparation skills. Indicate various potential seating plans used throughout the year and offer pictures of your old classrooms as a way to provide the principal and interviewing board a first-hand view of your potential classroom. As the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words."

Remember, each person's answer will vary depending upon teaching style and philosophy. The district is looking to see if your style is compatible with their needs; thus, thoroughly researching each specific district provides the key to successfully meeting those needs.

**Why do you want to work for our school district?**

Your preparation and research is imperative to successfully answer this question. Provide a few reasons why you're interested in the school or district, and what in particular sparked your interest. What is your personal experience with the school or district? What do you know about its student body, faculty members, industry reputation, community involvement, educational goals and objectives, upcoming initiatives, demographics, or extracurricular activities? This information will help you to accurately respond to the above question. The word accurate is important—don't answer the questions by using old information.

The interviewer is looking for evidence that you really know why you want to work there. (Or did you just send out applications and hope for the best?) This research will also help immensely when answering other questions throughout the interview, so plan to dedicate some time and energy doing this homework. Effective research will help you tailor your answers, without being deceiving, to the question above.

**How would you describe a successful principal?**

By asking this question, the hiring committee is attempting to assess the following:

- Do you understand what traits contribute to the success of a principal. As a teacher, what traits do you value most?
- Your response may indicate or suggest possible conflicts with the current principal.

Responses to this question may include:

It is important that a successful principal . . .

- has a vision and a plan to reach that vision . . . combined with the ability to bring faculty members together to form a cooperative team and motivate them to reach district goals and objectives.
- be visible . . . the principal's presence should be evident on a continual basis. He or she must be easily accessible to both students and teachers.
- has a great sense of humor, and can relate well to a diverse group of individuals.
• genuinely cares about the students, teachers, parents, and the district.

**What are your thoughts on team-teaching?**

I am sure many of you have participated in team-teaching and realize the benefits of this strategy. The interviewer who asks this question wants to discover if you are flexible, enjoy working in a team environment, have experience in this area, and what your viewpoints are on the subject.

It is always wise to speak about some of the positive aspects of team-teaching, such as:

It is an effective strategy for teaching large groups of students. It is a method for teachers to collaborate in generating ideas . . . two heads is always better than one! Talk about team-teaching experiences you have had, and the positive results that transpired.

If you haven't had any hands-on experience, you may explain that you enjoy working in a team setting and are excited about the possibility of participating in this approach. Or, maybe you have done some reading on the subject and can share some of the insights you gained with the interviewer. This will definitely be impressive!

**Do you have any questions for us?**

An interview isn't just about responding to the prospective employer's questions; it is an opportunity for you to impress the panel with examples of your foresight regarding the position they are offering. By asking questions, you can also determine if the fit is right. It shows your interest in the position, and helps to develop rapport. If you feel comfortable, and the interviewer seems amenable, you may ask questions at appropriate times throughout the interview. Once you have been in the interview for a few minutes, you will start to get a feel for your comfort level in this regard. If you don't ask questions during the interview, you will most likely be given the chance to do so at the end of the interview. Be sure to take advantage of this great opportunity!

So what questions should you ask? First, only ask questions about which you cannot get answers to through your research. For example, by investigating, you may easily determine how many students attend the school. Be sure you think carefully about what questions you would like answered. Make them genuine—and recognize that it is always advantageous to ask questions. Remember, don't try to dominate the interview with your questions; keep in mind your position as the interviewee. A good idea is to practice asking the questions you created in front of a mirror the day before the interview. Then, write your questions down on a professional pad of paper or an index card and bring them to the interview.

Some suggestions of appropriate questions are provided here. Ask them only if they are not addressed in the interview and if you don't have access to the answers. If the questions are structured correctly, you will provide yourself with a further opportunity to sell yourself, for example: "I am very interested in team sports. What extracurricular activities are available for
teacher participation?" What does this show the interviewer? You are a team player and are willing to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Other potential questions are:

- I have always been successful with getting parents involved in the classroom, how active are parents at this school?
- I am well-versed at integrating computer technology into the classroom, what kind of resources does the school have available?
- Do teachers work in teams? If so, how is this organized?
- I consider myself a life-long learner, what professional development opportunities will be available?
- What is the student/teacher ratio?
- I have been instrumental in developing new programs in previous positions I have held. Will the school be implementing any new programs this year, or require input to develop programs already in place?
- Will the school be addressing any major issues this year?
- If you are new to the industry you may ask, "Is there is a mentor teacher program available?"
- When do you hope to reach a decision as to whom the successful candidate will be?

This is just a sample of the many types of questions that may be asked in an interview. Be sure you don't overwhelm the interviewer with questions—three or four questions is usually sufficient.

Finally, as previously mentioned, it is important to be honest when answering all questions during the interview. Organizing your thoughts in advance will serve you well in delivering truthful and concise responses, while illustrating your skills and compatibility.