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EDUCATION

At a Southside School, Kids Hire Teachers



Teachers shake hands with Fenger students after the group interview.

Students at Chicago’s Fenger Academy high school are helping to hire their teachers. The district is firing all Fenger staff at the end of this school year in an effort to improve the struggling school. Officials hope that giving kids a say-so in who’s hired helps them connect with their new teachers, counselors, and office clerks. After school on a Friday, in a meeting room at the end of a deserted hallway, a dozen Fenger students sit behind a long table.

STUDENTS: Hello everyone. My name is Robert Walker. I’m a junior here at Fenger. Hello. My name is LaToya Norman. I’m a sophomore.

Facing them are a dozen adults, each hoping for a job.

ADULTS: Good evening, my name is Henry Wilborn. I’m applying for the culinary arts position. My name is Ryan Kirney. I’m interviewing for the social science teacher

position.

The teachers sitting here have already made it past a phone interview, a group interview, and a sample lesson they taught at Fenger. Next year, these same adults might be in charge here. But today, these kids are their final exam.

GIRL: What are you hoping to bring to the new Fenger?

TEACHER: As a theater teacher I love having kids up and active....

Students say they're looking for teachers who'll transform the school. Students Marco Reed and Brianna Lawrence say they want teachers who'll care about them in class and out of class.

MARCO: You have to step in a position that you have to either fulfill or become great in or you have to make it better. So that's what I hope for... for the school name to be out of the category of "bad."

BRIANNA: It's a lot of people that's going through so much at home. And I know personally. I will need you to be there for me. Period.

The students have interviewed more than 200 job candidates since February. Their questions are practiced: How much time will you be willing to dedicate to Fenger? What draws you to the school?

A soft-spoken young English teacher offers idealism:

TEACHER: There's no limit to the time that I want to put in because this is the most important work, I feel, going on in the nation at this moment.

Other candidates don't mind adding a little sweetener to their spiel. One teacher says he's willing to do what many teachers feel they have to in these tough schools.

TEACHER: What I'm gonna give is my cell phone number, my house number, my e-mail address—that is open to you 24 hours a day.

Another candidate offers prom dresses:

CANDIDATE: Because I know sometimes financially your parents don't have it. I have NINE bridesmaids dresses and all of them are HOT, to give to somebody!

The teachers these students help select will have their work cut out for them. Just 2 percent of students at Fenger met standards on state tests last year. That's one reason

CPS is taking the radical step of completely re-staffing the school—what the district calls a “turnaround.”

FRAYND: We know that a turnaround is a pretty intense change for kids.

Donald Fraynd is the CPS official overseeing the changes at Fenger. He knows students often resent that their old teachers are being fired.

FRAYND: Even if the teachers that they had weren’t effective, they still knew those teachers, and they still had relationships with everybody in the building. So we wanted to make sure we were doing everything we could to incorporate student voice.

Fraynd oversaw the re-staffing of another school—Harper High—last year. Kids were not involved in hiring there. Fraynd says Harper ended up with highly qualified teachers, but some of them had trouble connecting with students.

FRAYND: The kids can see things and feel things and hear things that we can’t as adults.

ambi of kids: She talks too low. If she’s in class, if she’s talking so low the kids might talk over her or....

When the interviews are over, the students meet behind closed doors. You might think they’d fall fast for gimmicks, but they don’t. One of their favorite teachers is a spunky, genuine-sounding culinary arts teacher.

STUDENTS: She was so enthusiastic, I love her! She had energy and she’ll bring excitement. She’s gotta get this job! If she don’t get it I’m pulling my hair out!

The students were trained in how to interview teachers by the Mikva Challenge—that’s a nonprofit that tries to engage kids in civic life. The students were paid \$400 for their time.

A Mikva facilitator jots down kids’ reactions to the teachers.

FACILITATOR: So is that a thumbs up? A thumbs down or a thumbs sideways?

Turnaround officer Donald Fraynd says he’s willing to reject teachers he thinks are impressive if these students give them a thumbs down.

kids: Boring!