

Administrator Priorities in School-Based Agricultural Education Teacher Hiring

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The shortage of qualified School Based Agricultural Educators is a persistent, well-documented problem nationally and in Missouri specifically (Eck & Edwards, 2019; Smith et al., 2024; Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024). In Missouri, less than half of first-year teachers completed certification through a traditional preparation program in 2023–24 (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024). Eck and Edwards (2019) attribute this shortage to program growth, retirements among veteran teachers, and difficulty recruiting into rural, subject-specific positions, while Ingram et al., (2018) similarly document a persistent gap between demand for agriculture teachers and the supply of traditionally certified candidates.

This gap has fueled growing research interest in alternative certification and nontraditional pathways into teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2016). In agricultural education, nontraditional candidates often bring industry experience that maps well onto program needs such as hands-on lab instruction and agribusiness partnerships, but this background also raises questions about pedagogical readiness and classroom management (Ingram et al., 2018; Eck & Edwards, 2019). Comparisons between traditionally and alternatively certified teachers show mixed effects on early classroom performance, with traditionally prepared teachers showing higher pedagogical skills and alternative teachers showing stronger content skills (Bowling & Ball, 2018). Pedagogical preparation and mentoring are identified as the strongest predictors of long-term success across entry pathways (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Claflin et al., 2024).

Research on school hiring shows administrators weigh formal qualifications alongside informal criteria such as interpersonal skills and community fit (Odden & Kelley, 2002; Campbell & Malkus, 2011), within institutional constraints that push toward trade-offs rather than ideal matches (Kowalski, et al., 2008). In rural districts, where agricultural programs are concentrated, community relationships and extracurricular leadership through FFA appear to weigh more heavily than in urban districts (Lyson, 2002). Application materials, such as resumes and cover letters, also shape early screening, and for nontraditional candidates may serve as compensatory evidence for missing certification (Britton, 2024).

Despite the dearth of literature on the teacher shortage, little research examines the perspective of school administrators, specifically how they prioritize varying industry experience, certification, and personal attributes when evaluating teaching candidates. This pilot study addresses that gap by pairing administrator interviews with a structured resume evaluation task designed to elicit concrete decision-making, rather than relying on stated preferences alone.

This study is guided by the Adaptive Decision-Maker Framework (Payne, et al., 1993), which holds that individuals do not rely on one fixed decision rule but instead shift strategies depending on the context, the information available, and the constraints they face. Rather than assuming administrators apply a uniform checklist when hiring, this framework treats hiring as an adaptive process shaped by the specific candidate pool, the urgency of the vacancy, and the local needs of the program. This lens is well suited to a hiring context where administrators are routinely choosing among imperfect candidates.

Methodology

This case study followed Merriam's (2009) approach to qualitative case study research. Administrators were recruited from rural high schools (less than 200 students) within a 100-mile radius of Columbia, Missouri. Data collection is ongoing and, to date, includes face-to-face semi-structured interviews with two secondary school administrators, observations of each of those school districts' communities, observations of one administrator professional development hiring workshop panel, written evaluations from two administrators of sets of seven fictitious researcher-generated resumes, and field notes and reflective memos. The fictitious resumes were constructed to represent realistic, contrasting candidate profiles so administrators could be observed making trade-offs rather than simply ranking candidates against an ideal standard.

We used Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method of data analysis, in which codes are identified, narrowed, and interpreted for relationships. Researchers included an undergraduate agricultural education student, a master's student, and two agricultural education faculty members. Emerging themes describe how administrators consider and make decisions about hiring secondary agriculture teachers.

Findings

Data collection and analysis are ongoing, but three themes have emerged consistently to date. First, administrators prioritized hands-on technical skills and real-world industry experience; candidates with strong industry backgrounds but limited classroom experience were generally viewed more favorably than strong classroom experience and little technical knowledge. Administrators felt they could teach candidates how to lesson plan but not foundational technical knowledge. Second, administrators consistently described the ability to connect with students as essential, calling it a "kid-magnet" quality that cannot be taught and rarely appears on a resume. "Kid magnets" could sometimes be sensed in an interview, and administrators linked this trait to longer-term retention. Third, administrators' standards shifted with the strength of the applicant pool: when desirable qualifications were absent across the board, administrators described being willing to settle. When several candidates shared similar qualifications, those qualifications carried less weight, and administrators compared candidates relative to one another rather than to a fixed external standard.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Preliminary findings suggest Missouri administrators value demonstrated industry experience and interpersonal fit as much as, and at times more than, formal teaching credentials, consistent with the wider hiring literature showing administrators weigh informal criteria alongside formal qualifications (Odden & Kelley, 2002). Teacher preparation programs may consider building in more hands-on, industry-based experience and help students develop experiences that distinguish them from other applicants, since shared qualifications tend to lose influence on decisions. Agricultural education faculty should help students understand the importance of drafting application materials in a way that highlights their strengths and ability to excel as an educator. As a pilot study with a small initial sample, these findings are preliminary and exploratory; additional interviews, observations, and resume evaluations are planned to confirm and extend these early themes. Future research should examine whether these priorities hold across a larger sample and vary by district size or geographic context.

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