

# Extraordinary Teachers — Differences that Make a Difference



International Center

for Leadership in Education

## **Acknowledgment**

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## Extraordinary Teachers — Differences That Make a Difference

This kit describes and illustrates in a practical manner the characteristics, both professional and personal, of the extraordinary teacher. The findings are intended to help individual teachers reflect on their own practices, assist peer- and buddy-mentoring of new teachers, help organize in-service and pre-service programs, and sharpen hiring practices to help spot a potential extraordinary teacher among all the applicants.

Specifically, this study is primarily concerned with the following questions:

- What are the differences between extraordinary teachers and good teachers?
- How might the findings of this study be used in the improvement of instruction?

This kit contains three types of information:

1. Videos of several extraordinary teachers at work in their classrooms and interviews with them as they explain what and how they want to accomplish within the instructional program

Also on video are interviews with students in the classes of these extraordinary teachers as they give their opinions and observations about what is important to them. In addition, the videos include interviews with an elementary school principal and a high school principal as they say what they look for in hiring potential extraordinary teachers and explain the professional development programs that support them.

2. Specific findings of the study, including the 10 characteristics that describe the extraordinary teacher and examples of how these 10 characteristics play out in the classroom.

## How to Use This Kit

The text of this kit provides detailed examples and illustrations of the 10 characteristics in the form of observations and anecdotes garnered by the visitors to 47 classrooms of extraordinary teachers. Interviews with these teachers, their administrators, and students also provide opinions and suggestions about how extraordinary teachers carry out their instructional responsibilities and interact with students and other staff in an effective manner. Three DVDs that include the videos mentioned above further reinforce the descriptions of extraordinary teachers.

3. Suggestions of how the findings of the study might be useful in the personal reflection of individual teachers, the guidance of new teachers by mentors and buddy teachers, the focus of in-service programs, and the hiring and support of extraordinary teachers

**Chapter 1** provides background information illustrating how the idea for a study to describe the characteristics of extraordinary teachers came about. Essentially this project grew out of the research and results of other studies concerning the factors influencing instruction and school organization that create higher rates of student academic achievement.

**Chapter 2** describes the 10 characteristics that were found to be essential factors influencing the work of all of the extraordinary teachers visited. These characteristics are discussed in a manner that illustrates to teachers and administrators how and to what degree they play a part in basic attitudes, behaviors, and classroom instructional practice.

**Chapter 3** recognizes the fact that students have the everyday experience of being in a classroom with an extraordinary teacher and are able to articulate their observations, feelings, and opinions about what works for them as learners. The information in this chapter

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is drawn from interviews with students that the visitors met in this study as well from students in previous visits to schools.

**Chapter 4** describes the content of the videos that come with this kit and suggests ways in which the material might be used with teachers for self-reflection and improvement through both individually and in professional development programs. Forms to assist in these efforts are provided. The videos also include interviews with an elementary school principal and a high school principal regarding the role they play in the selection of potential extraordinary teachers and how they support teachers in their work.

**Chapter 5** offers practical ways for teachers to work on the 10 characteristics in their own practice. Each characteristic is discussed in the context of the teachers studied. Several tools are provided to assist teachers in understanding the characteristics and relating them to their teaching.

**Chapter 6** contains material for school leaders on hiring and retaining extraordinary teachers. The suggestions are based on feedback from the teachers in the studies.

**Chapter 7** deals with the question of what makes the best pre- and in-service programs.

The **Appendix** provides explanations of two International Center tools for school improvement: the Rigor/Relevance Framework and the Learning Criteria. Included is an explanation of how the 10 characteristics outlined in this study relate and are intimately involved in the same purpose: improving instruction. Also in the Appendix are the organization, procedures, and interview questions used in this study; a summary of the demographic data describing the participants and schools visited; and a list of the resources and references that were useful in carrying out the study.

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They mentioned the following strategies:

- Ask the teacher to repeat the explanation or say it in another way
- Ask fellow students for help.
- Try again themselves.
- Leave examples and notes on the board that can be referred to later.
- Be taught memory devices.
- Be able to go to a teacher after class, after school, or during Saturday classes.

In summary, all students from grades 2 through 12, whether economically disadvantaged or privileged, high achievers or struggling, are able to articulate characteristics of teachers and classrooms that help them. They took the questioning seriously and provided consistent responses in describing their extraordinary teachers.

Students described the kind of teacher they can learn with and respect. Good teachers care; students feel a personal connection. They have rules, but they are fair. They know their subject matter, make learning fun and interesting, and use a variety of learning activities. Students feel this is important because it leads to choices they can make to find out how they learn best.

Students desire and expect extra help when learning becomes difficult, without put-downs. They can learn more easily in small classes.

## What Was Learned from the Students



## Chapter 4

# Using the Videos for Professional Development

**T**he videos included on DVDs with this kit feature extraordinary teachers in action in their classrooms, as well as interviews with them and some of their students. Interviews with two principals who work with these teachers are also on video. For reasons of economy, the filming of teachers in action was done in two schools in upstate New York, where the International Center for Leadership in Education is located.

### Overview of Videos

These segments were filmed at Broadway Elementary School, Elmira, New York.

### DVD 1 Elementary Education

Grade 2 – Mrs. Melissa Brayman. The class is heterogeneously grouped. A spelling lesson shows a highly kinetic exercise, as well as several learning stations that reinforce such skills as alphabetizing, memorizing, handwriting, and others.

Grade 4 – Miss Amanda Mace. Students from an urban setting are heterogeneously grouped. A literacy strategy of “making connections” is the major focus of instruction. A later application of this skill is seen in Mr. McPartlin’s secondary history class.

### DVD 2 Secondary Education

Music Ensemble – Mr. Gerald Zaffuts. Students enter the room, unpack their instruments, and begin warm-up just as professional musicians would. They rehearse a musical elegy that emphasizes the musical concepts of tone, color, and character.

Forensic Science – Dr. Greg Panzanaro. The topic is fingerprinting. Students work with partners in a hands-on lab setting to take their fingerprints and analyze them. Dr. Panzanaro also gives an example of the kind of support that he received to improve instruction.

These segments were filmed at Averill Park High School, Averill Park, New York.

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- Sharing with the staff and others of new information stimulated by the videos is encouraged.

It is assumed that a group of several or many teachers is participating in response, discussion, and action planning under the guidance of a leader who has read the contents of the kit. Leaders can adapt the following suggestions for using the videos to fit the needs and interests of the specific group.

### Warm Up

Ask participants to think back over their educational experience and identify the best teacher they ever had. Allow a few seconds and then ask participants to jot-list the characteristics that made the teacher special.

Distribute copies of the sheet titled **Evidence in the Video for a Given Characteristic**. Allow time for participants to read over the characteristics and their definitions. There may be some questions. Share the examples of each characteristic from Chapter 2 as needed.

Ask participants if any of their personal best teachers demonstrated one or more of the characteristics on the handout. Allow some discussion.

### Exercise

Show one example from the video. For instance, begin with the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, Melissa Brayman. This is appropriate for all audiences, not just elementary teachers. During the showing, ask teachers to take notes on places where they see evidence of one or more of the characteristics listed on the handout. Not all of the 10 characteristics

## The 10 Characteristics

**Evidence in the Video for a Given Characteristic**

<b>Characteristics of the Extraordinary Teacher</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
<p><b>1. Student-Teacher Relationships:</b> The teacher creates an atmosphere of mutual respect where students and teacher are involved together in the learning process.</p>	
<p><b>2. Commitment to Student Success:</b> The teacher believes and acknowledges that all students will succeed and works to accomplish this success.</p>	
<p><b>3. Passion, Enthusiasm, and Competence:</b> The teacher demonstrates an infectious interest and passion in the subject matter and relays that attitude to students, staff, and other adults.</p>	
<p><b>4. Awareness of Time:</b> The teacher provides bell-to-bell instruction in the classroom and plans time to ensure that the curriculum is covered within the semester or school year.</p>	
<p><b>5. Exceptional Organization:</b> The teacher has systems (often self-designed) for maximizing instructional time.</p>	
<p><b>6. Seamless Use of Tools and Opportunities:</b> The teacher has at hand a full complement of instructional strategies and is able to take advantage of classroom opportunities to extend discussion and understanding.</p>	
<p><b>7. Highly Verbal – Articulate – Clear Voice:</b> The teacher has a widely developed vocabulary, a clear voice, and the ability to explain concepts well.</p>	

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<p><b>8. Sense of Theater:</b> The teacher holds the students' attention through a style that includes a sense of theater, an awareness of audience, and an atmosphere of liveliness.</p>	
<p><b>9. Experienced:</b> The teacher demonstrates maturity gained through several years of teaching.</p>	
<p><b>10. Pleasantly Neurotic:</b> The teacher is likely on occasion to bend rules or change procedures in order to benefit students but is at the same time a team player and not a rabble-rouser.</p>	

may be identified. Allow time for discussion in small groups. Finish with time for questions and responses from the entire group.

**Wrap Up**

Ask participants to identify one characteristic they would personally like to work on with their classes over the next week or two and report on to the group when it reconvenes.

**Warm Up**

Distribute blank copies of the **Venn Diagram**. If teachers are not familiar with this graphic organizer, explain that it is a way of visualizing similarities and differences between two objects, concepts, or in this case, teacher characteristics.

**Similarities and Differences**



## Chapter 5

# Self-Reflection on Instructional Improvement for Teachers

The suggestions in this chapter are intended for teachers who see their classrooms as potential settings for informal research with the goal of improving student achievement and success. In other words, the suggestions here are for experienced teachers working as researchers in their classrooms. Other chapters offer suggestions for administrators and in-service and pre-service professionals.

The 10 characteristics extraordinary teachers (Chapter 2) will be revisited. Each characteristic will be examined as it applies to teachers already at work in classrooms. None of the teachers who were part of this study considered themselves “extraordinary.” However, most teachers in most classrooms would like to improve for the sake of the students and for their own satisfaction.

### 1. Student-Teacher Relationships

The teacher creates an atmosphere of mutual respect where students and teachers are involved together in the learning process.

“Students learn what they care about from people they care about and who, they know, care about them.”  
- Barbara Harrell Carson

Relationships are not simply good or bad; they exist on a continuum. Furthermore, relationships can change over time. Once teachers make relationships important, they can begin to reflect on current practices and discuss how to improve relationships with students. The following chart describes the degrees of student support at each level of the framework.

## 9. Experienced

The teacher demonstrates maturity gained through several years of teaching.

“The teachers who get burned out are not the ones who are constantly learning, which can be exhilarating, but those who feel they must stay in control and ahead of the students at all times.”  
- Frank Smith, author and literacy specialist

A reexamination of the demographic data related to the experience of extraordinary teachers shows that the 47 teachers included in the study had an average of 15 years of experience. The most experienced have 36 years in the classroom, and the neophyte has four years. She, however, is a product of the school where she is employed, so the environment is not totally new to her, and she is mentored by people who knew her as a student. The median years of experience is 17, so it appears that the range of experience is equally distributed along the experience scale. The conclusion: Extraordinary teachers continually grow over time into their roles.

What sort of “constant learning” do extraordinary teachers undertake? Being in a classroom for 17 years means that the teacher has become familiar with contemporary educational approaches, such as rigor, relevance, and relationships; Madelyn Hunter’s Anticipatory Set; Essential Questions; and other innovations. Experienced teachers are conversant with and absorb these ideas and fashion them into a pattern that suits their particular styles. They frequently attend conferences and take courses at local colleges. They often teach a course or two at the college level and mentor beginning teachers. Over time, they have seen, observed, and learned from a host of students who exhibit all manner of behavior problems, exceptional talent, and unusual family structures. They have seen and learned from a large number of students.

Extraordinary teachers expand their knowledge base beyond the boundaries of their specific disciplines. A French teacher plans to take piano lessons partly because it will be an entirely different learning experience for her, and she wants to know “what the learning process will be like.” No doubt her observations about her own learning will influence in some measure the way she plans for her students’ learning.



## Chapter 6

# Suggestions for Hiring and Retaining Extraordinary Teachers

“Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another. It is the only means.”  
- Albert Einstein

### Recruiting and Hiring

It is widely acknowledged that good teachers need the support of administrators who are strong, visionary, and, for lack of a better word, *inspiring*. This chapter examines the role of the building leadership team in support of extraordinary teachers.

School leaders know that recruiting, hiring, and retaining the best teachers are necessities. Student achievement is highly correlated with teacher ability. Furthermore, federal legislation now requires highly qualified teachers in every classroom. The administrators in this study typically do not rely on advertising to recruit candidates. They are more likely to use more personal connections.

For example, many administrators who are aggressive about recruiting potentially extraordinary teachers maintain strong relationships with local colleges and universities that train teachers. Because they can assure teacher preparation institutions that student teachers will have good experiences at their schools, these principals are in a position to ask for the best candidates to interview. Principals visit the campus very early in the recruiting process to seek out strong students and encourage them to apply to their schools.

Another frequent source of potentially extraordinary teachers is graduates of the school itself. In some excellent schools, one third of the staff are homegrown. The advantages are clear: The potential candidate knows the school, the school culture, the neighborhood, and many of the families. It is advantageous for administrators to keep track of their graduates, especially those training to be teachers, as a source of recruits.

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Teachers themselves often recommend potential candidates. If a student teacher impresses the 5<sup>th</sup> grade team, the team will make their favorable impressions known to the administration, which will likely produce a promising candidate.

Once potential candidates for a position have been identified and their paperwork has been vetted by the leadership team and perhaps a committee of teachers, the interview process begins. Usually 45 minutes to an hour is allotted to each interview. Principals in this study place more value on information gleaned from an interview than they do on the dossier the candidate presents. They are able to assume academic quality and content knowledge. In the interview process, they are looking for such qualities as passion, interest in children, and enthusiasm. They prefer to ask open-ended questions that pose a problem and require a solution.

Sometimes, the potential candidate will be asked to teach a short lesson. In some cases, students are recruited to act as, well, students; but in other cases, the interview team is the audience. The attention is less on the content of the lesson than on the ability of the candidate to relate to the students in the lesson.

In all kinds of schools in all parts of the country, there appears to be consensus among teachers about what they need to be successful in developing students who achieve at high levels. In interviews with teachers during International Center's study of high-poverty successful schools, the following items emerged as pivotal:

- Time to Plan
- Professional Development
- Recognition and Support
- Increased Instructional Time
- A Leader Who Sets the Tone

**Retaining and  
Providing Growth  
Opportunities**

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- Professional development days were focused and efficient. Three and one-half days were given to district needs and five and one-half days to school-based needs. If someone was absent from a staff development day, the time and material had to be made up.
- Success was assessed by principals and others who developed skills in teacher observation and evaluation.
- A network of in-house teacher leaders was created.

Another example of comprehensive staff development based on data-driven decisions occurs in a small, economically poor rural school with an enrollment of 325 students in grades K through 12. Several years ago, student academic achievement, especially in the core subjects, was very low. Intensive professional development efforts have corrected this situation, resulting in the school being named a model school by the state for the last four years.

The school's reading specialist, an extraordinary teacher, has been credited with being the leader of the data-driven staff development that resulted in student gains. Her superintendent says, "She's a 'bulldog' in dealing with fellow teachers about the new literacy program leading to success. Her leadership in installing the literacy program K–12 has been instrumental in the academic successes of students."

Success in this school is measured by the superintendent, who keeps extensive data on student progress, especially in the federal- and state-required examinations. In recent grades 3 and 8 state testing, 62 students of 124 scored 3 or 4 on state English language arts (4 being the highest grade). Five or six years ago, only one or two students scored a 3. The rest were at level 1.

In interviews, teachers say they want opportunities to learn strategies for dealing with instructional and management issues, up-to-date information in their content areas, and new instructional programs.

For more information about data-driven professional development plans, see the interview with elementary Principal Pam Davis-Webb on the DVD.

Refer to Chapter 4 for ways to use the videos of the seven teachers and two administrators for in-service programs.

### **Pre-service Preparation**

The change is attributable to a number of steps:

- Staff teams of English language arts and math teachers study test data and use item analysis to pinpoint areas of strength and weakness.
- On the basis of their study, they suggest appropriate changes in instructional strategies.
- A committee of teachers, along with the reading specialist, studied various programs for expediting change and after careful consideration chose the America's Choice program.
- The reading specialist wrote grants to pay for extensive classroom libraries to support the reading program.
- The entire staff had intensive training and almost all are now using the system.
- Each day in all classrooms, three hours are spent on reading, writing, and mathematics.

It appears that professional development that is well planned, comprehensive, and based on examination of data can have a demonstrable positive effect on student performance and is well worth whatever time, logistics, and money are necessary.

In their first year, teachers interviewed for the studies identified gaps in their teacher preparation programs and made the following comments and suggestions for improving teacher preparation:

- They were not prepared for the enormity of teaching.