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Exploring the Hiring Process of K–12 Art Teachers:

Tips for the Job Search

Lisa LaJevic

Looking for a K–12 art teaching position can be a daunting endeavor. What do school district administrators and art teachers feel is important when hiring visual arts teachers and how do they carry out the job search process? This is a question I often hear from my preservice art teachers as they near the end of their college teacher preparation program. Although research about the job search process for K–12 art teachers is available (Bain, 2005; Buffington, 2011a, 2011b; Stephens, 2007; Tollefson-Hall, Bobick, Derby, & Villeneuve, 2012a, 2012b), information is outdated and/or limited, in particular for aspects such as the art teaching demonstration. Hence, to better answer my preservice art teachers' question, I invited administrators, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, vice principals, art supervisors, curriculum supervisors, and art teachers from public New Jersey school districts to complete an online Qualtrics survey that explores various aspects of the search and hiring process of K–12 art teachers.[1]

I narrowed my focus to New Jersey because it is the state where I am employed; however, any current job-seeking art teacher across the country may find the information useful. Of the survey's respondents, 40% assist in hiring at the elementary level and 30% assist at each the middle and high school level. There are three main components to the hiring process: the application, interview(s), and teaching demonstration. The rest of this article summarizes a few findings from the study and provides resources I hope will be helpful to any art teacher who is looking for a new K–12 teaching job.

The Job Application

The first step of the job search process is to seek out teaching opportunities. School districts publically post job openings online. The most common places include district websites, Frontline (formerly AppliTrack), the job section in regional newspapers (both online and in print), and other websites, such as K12JobSpot, that focus on teaching jobs in specific states.[2]

The posting contains directions for submitting an application. The majority of districts ask applicants to submit materials through Frontline (59%), but some require submission via email (20%), the district website (11%), or as a hard copy sent through the mail (10%). The most popular months to review applications include April, May, and June, but the hiring process, in particular for short- and long-term substitute positions, may continue throughout the year on a need basis. School districts receive an average of 43 applications for one art teaching job, although some postings may result in over 200 submitted applications. In most districts, the art supervisor and/or school principal reviews and screens the job applications, which generally consist of a résumé, cover letter, teaching philosophy, teaching portfolio, and letters of recommendation. What do the reviewers expect and look for in a candidate's application?

A Polished Professional Résumé

The résumé should include details about an applicant's education, grade point average, teaching and K–12 preservice field experiences, employment history (listed in reverse chronological order), and related skills and qualifications such as state, national, and substitute certification. Many respondents suggested highlighting accomplishments, unique qualities, leadership experiences, involvement with professional organizations, experiences with diverse populations and learners with varying abilities, and/or any work with youth outside of the K–12 school environment. If an applicant is a novice educator with little teaching experience beyond clinical practicum, they should

demonstrate their skills in other ways, such as non-teaching employment, volunteer work, and/or participation in college clubs. For example, one respondent stated they wanted to know if a novice teacher worked as a shift supervisor at Six Flags amusement park, as the role reveals qualities of responsibility and leadership, which may give an applicant the edge over a similarly certified candidate. If a résumé shows many jobs over a short period of time or gaps in work experience, it is important to explain the reason for the changes or gaps; a transient work history is a red flag. It is helpful for an applicant to include information about their artmaking specialization along with the variety of art media they can teach, and a link to a digital portfolio. A few respondents stated they prefer the one- to two-page résumé to look creative in addition to being properly formatted. For example, the use of color, borders, images, font, space, and columns can contribute to a well-designed, visually appealing, and easy to read résumé. Overall, the résumé should demonstrate strong written communication and organizational skills.

A Descriptive Cover Letter

The cover letter should introduce an applicant, convey a passion for students and art, and relate to the specific job. As an applicant explains why they are a good fit for the position (e.g., highlight unique qualifications to show why they are a strong candidate), they should demonstrate that they researched the district and job. When writing the letter, it is important to consider any successes in establishing relationships with students, innovative lesson ideas, and/or the ability to work well with others. If applying directly to a district, the letter should address the art supervisor, principal, and/or human resources representative by name, and not "To Whom It May Concern." Also, please refrain from making demands, such as salary expectations, desired grade level, classes, or school, and carefully check for grammatical or spelling errors throughout the application material.

A Strong Teaching Philosophy

The one-page teaching philosophy should reveal an applicant's approach to teaching and learning. While showcasing a passion for the arts, students, teaching, and lifelong learning, it is important for the essay to flow and demonstrate strong writing skills. When writing the teaching philosophy, the articles "Moving Past Bumper Stickers: Writing a Teaching Philosophy" (Buffington, 2011a) and "Writing a Philosophy of Art Teaching" (Stephens, 2007) may be useful guides.

An Art Teaching Portfolio

The art teaching portfolio is a collection of items that demonstrate the teaching and artmaking abilities of an applicant. It should include written documents from the application such as the résumé and showcase their creative work as an artist, K–12 student work, and lesson plans. The reviewers expect to see that an applicant is familiar with and can teach a variety of art mediums (e.g., 2D art and 3D) and has a firm understanding of lesson planning (e.g., standards and assessment). When selecting one's creative work, a candidate may want to consider the content and include work that is appropriate for a K–12 audience. Having both a digital and hard copy of the portfolio is an asset; an online portfolio shows proficiency with technology. For additional tips on creating an art teaching portfolio, the articles "How to Make a Teaching Portfolio for Your Next Interview" (Borel, 2015) and "Preparing a Professional Teaching Portfolio for an Art Teaching Position" (Buffington, 2011b) may be helpful.

Supportive Letters of Recommendation

The application should include favorable letters from cooperating teachers, art supervisors, principals, professors, and/or employers. Districts may also request contact information to conduct reference checks. These checks typically comprise employment or schooling verification and inquiry into the

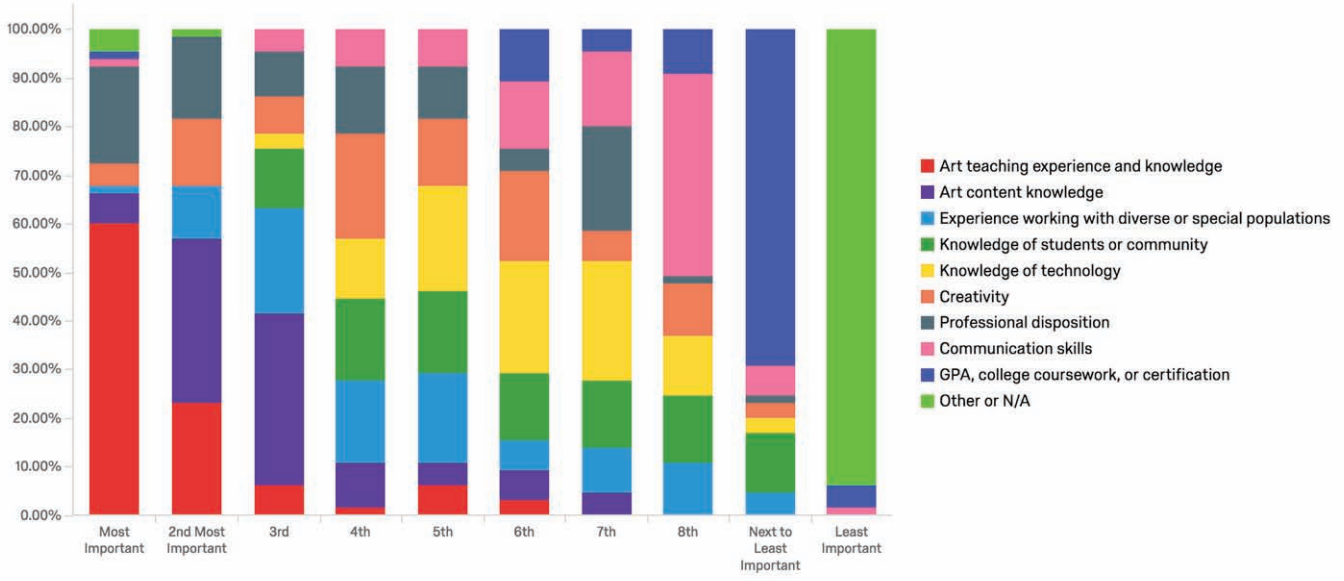


Figure 1. What do administrators and teachers expect or look for when reviewing an art teacher candidate's application? Qualtrics chart created by LaJevic.

Interviewers expect candidates to draw from their prior experience and provide evidence of how they do the things they claim.

candidate's character and performance (e.g., strengths and weaknesses) that can aid in the hiring process.

Reflecting on the overall application, the respondents ranked art teaching experience and knowledge as the most important, followed by professionalism and art content knowledge (Figure 1). They typically look at the résumé and cover letter first, followed by the teaching philosophy and portfolio (Survey, 2018). Stressing the importance of organization and proofreading, they reiterated that materials should not be "sloppy," but free of spelling and grammatical errors.

The Interview(s)

The Phone Interview

Some school districts conduct phone interviews as the next step. Of the districts that do, they offer typically less than 10 applicants a phone interview. The art supervisor, principal, or a hiring team that includes administrators and/or art teachers perform the phone interviews, which can last anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes. What do the interviewers want to hear or experience during the interview? They want to hear enthusiasm as a candidate conveys a passion for art and teaching students, an ability to articulate thoughts and ideas, and a high level of professionalism (e.g., a positive and mature attitude). The expectations and questions asked during the phone interview are similar to the in-person interview outlined below.

The In-Person Interview

Most districts invite three to eight applicants for an in-person interview. Each candidate should bring copies of their résumé and teaching portfolio, dress professionally, and arrive on time. During the interview, which lasts approximately 30 minutes, it is important for an interviewee to positively convey who they are as a person, educator, and artist, and what impact (using examples) they will have on the educational community. Respondents stated they prefer when an applicant conveys enthusiasm and clearly communicates their dedication to students, education, and art. The interviewers often focus on an applicant's personality to gauge whether they will be a good fit for the school and function as a member of the team. Here is a list of commonly asked questions during the interview:

- Why do you want this particular position? What made you interested in applying?
- Why would you be a good teacher for this school/district (i.e., what can you offer this school community)?
- What can you add (i.e., your strengths and interests) to our program that we do not already have?
- What should I expect to see when I visit your class on a typical day?
- What is your educational philosophy, and how do you bring it to life in your classroom?
- How do you ensure that students feel successful in the art classroom?
- How do you make your passion for art contagious to your students?
- How do you work to promote a positive and cohesive school culture and/or make connections to the larger community?
- How does your art teaching support interdisciplinary learning and the district's learning goals?
- How do you differentiate lessons for students with varying abilities and address the needs of all learners?
- How do you get a student who is not interested in art or defiant to become motivated in your class?
- What strategies would you try to gain and maintain control of a rowdy class?

During the interview, an applicant should pay close attention to making eye contact with the questioner(s) while conveying strong interpersonal skills, such as verbal communication and confidence. It is important to demonstrate the ability to engage in a conversation and "follow a train of thought" (Respondent, 2018) when answering questions. Interviewers expect candidates to draw from their prior experience and provide evidence of how they do the things they claim. The responses should show they have researched the district, school, the student population, and art courses offered. The interviewers do not want to hear any hesitation, indecisiveness, shyness, or complaints. They find applicants who seem unprepared, incompetent, inflexible, or arrogant (i.e., more focused on themselves than on their students) unimpressive. Although they may not directly ask to view the portfolio, an applicant may refer to specific pages, images, and/or lesson plans as they answer the questions. They should refrain from showing a portfolio (e.g., images of student artwork) on a cell phone as it is too small of a format.

At the end of the interview, the hiring committee/person may offer the applicant an opportunity to ask questions. They recommend preparing one to two questions in advance. The questions can explore topics such as professional development support, average class size, access to technology, the art budget, duties beyond teaching, and potential for new initiatives such as an art club. At this stage of the hiring process, the respondents stated that a professional disposition is the most important, followed by communication skills, and art teaching experience and knowledge (Figure 2). Additional helpful resources for interview preparation include "The Secret to Obtaining the Keys to the Art Room: Preparing for a Successful Interview" (Bain, 2005) and "Getting Hired, Part 2: Tips for Interviewing" (Tollefson-Hall et al., 2012b).

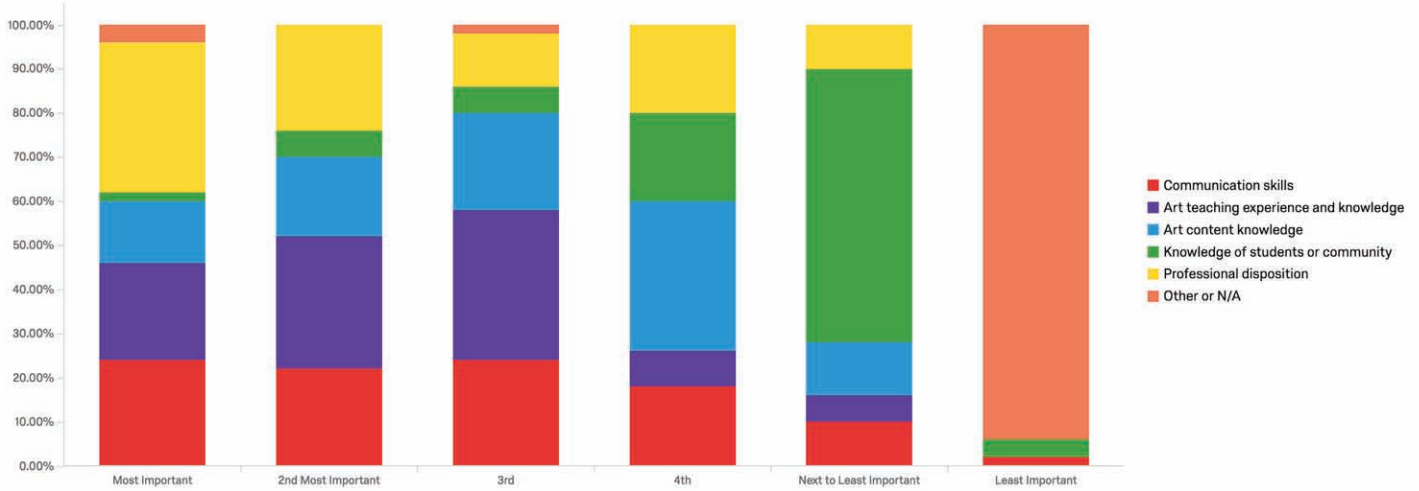


Figure 2. What do administrators and teachers expect or look/listen for when conducting an in-person interview with an art teacher candidate? Qualtrics chart created by LaJevic.

The Art Teaching Demonstration

After narrowing down the pool, most districts ask two to four candidates to return for a teaching demonstration lesson. The demonstration may last 30–60 minutes and typically includes administrators, supervisors, and art teachers, although some districts ask K–12 students to serve as the audience. When students participate in the process, there are often 15–25 pupils in the class; the hiring committee/person collects feedback about the teacher and lesson from the students to aid in the decision-making process. After an applicant receives an invitation to conduct a teaching demonstration, it is helpful to inquire about expectations in terms of lesson content and age level, and what materials or technology are available. Some districts may provide a standard or objective that serves as the focus for the teaching/lesson. When preparing to teach, remember to bring copies of the lesson plan and any needed materials, and prepare for unexpected circumstances such as a technology failure.

What should an applicant concentrate on when planning and teaching an art demonstration? First, conveying a love of teaching and artistic exploration. It is important for an applicant to teach toward their strengths and show how they do things as claimed in the teaching philosophy and interview. Second, engaging and connecting and interacting with students. It is recommended that an applicant refers to audience members by their names (i.e., use name tags), motivates them to learn, and establishes rapport. Third, designing a well-planned, creative lesson. As one respondent (2018) stated, "Wow your audience with something different, fun and interesting." The lesson should include a clear and measurable learning objective and standard and be appropriate to the age and ability level of the learners. A candidate should consider including an introduction (i.e., a hook to motivate students), background knowledge about the lesson topic, demonstration (i.e., modeling), hands-on activity, formative assessment, and a closing activity. They can also include samples of completed work, and if it incorporates technology, it is a bonus. Fourth, successfully teaching and delivering art content knowledge. A candidate's instruction should build excitement, engage students in learning, and promote creativity and risk-taking as students learn something

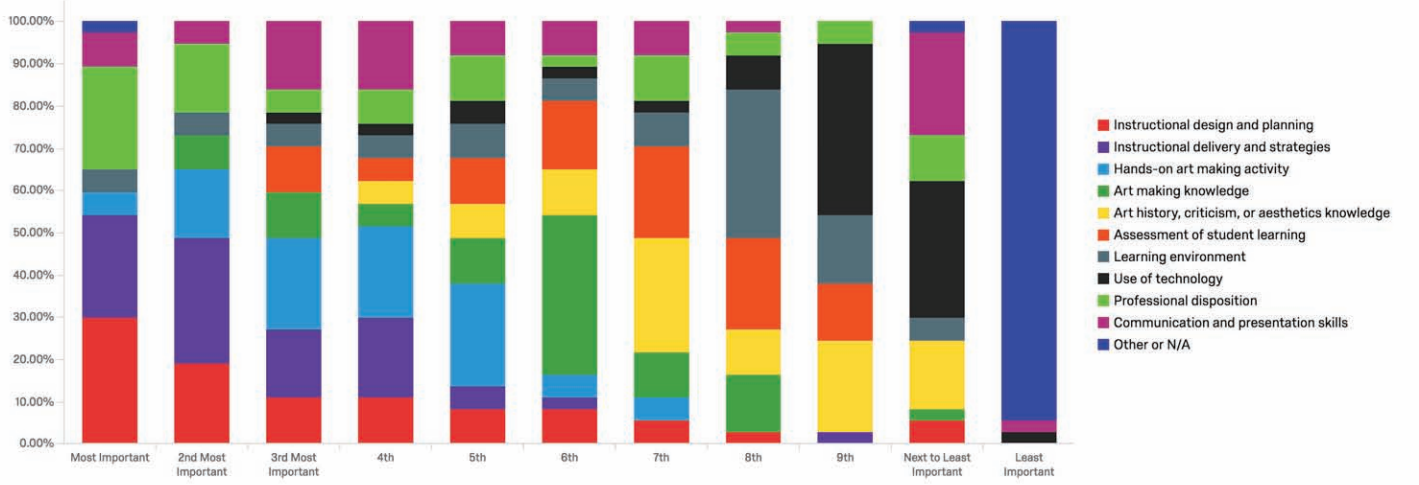


Figure 3. What do administrators and teachers expect or look/listen for during a candidate's art teaching demonstration? Qualtrics chart created by LaJevic.



Figure 4. Deciding factors for selecting a final K–12 art teacher candidate: important characteristics, skills, and abilities. Word art created by LaJevic.

new. It is important to include clear directions and convey a deep understanding of art and art history (e.g., use vocabulary terms). They should differentiate instruction and scaffold learning by using various instructional techniques that push beyond a lecture style, such as discussion, questioning, student interactions, critiquing, and artmaking. Additionally, the hiring committee/person expects the candidate to monitor learning, check for understanding (of the learning objective), provide feedback to students, and praise their efforts. Fifth, incorporating effective classroom management strategies and maintaining positive student behavior. A candidate may review rules and expectations for students at the beginning and then positively reinforce them throughout the rest of the lesson. Last, displaying a professional disposition. A candidate should showcase strong communication skills, confidence, enthusiasm, sincerity, maturity, positivity, and passion. A few survey participants emphasized the importance of smiling and conveying a "dynamic" personality. One respondent (2018) stated, "If something goes wrong, please do not make excuses—show you are flexible, able to adapt, and can think on your feet. Again, be sure to be prepared and organized."

The respondents stated that instructional design and planning is the most important aspect in this stage of the hiring process, followed by instructional delivery and strategies, and then professional dispositions (Figure 3). When evaluating a candidate's performance, a few survey participants stated they use rubrics such as the Marzano (2013) evaluation to rate teaching effectiveness. One respondent stated they prefer to see a simple and complete 1-day stand-alone art lesson. While they acknowledged the challenges, they suggested the candidate clarify the intentions before teaching the lesson by explaining, "I know the students will not finish this class period, but I hope they can continue working on the project during free time or the next class meeting."

Reflecting on the teaching demonstration, another respondent (2018) wrote:

> When we invite a candidate to a demo, that means we are comfortable with what they have said about their knowledge of art and their philosophy of teaching. In the demo, we want to see that come alive. The comfort level of the students is important. After a recent demo at the high school, the students went to the candidate and shook his hand—we were already impressed, but that sealed the deal for us!

Wrapping It Up

After the interview(s) and teaching demonstration, an applicant may send a follow-up email or handwritten note thanking the interviewers for their time. In select districts, the superintendent conducts an additional interview with the recommended candidate before offering the job. All respondents stated they conduct a reference check during the hiring process, and more than half also conduct a search of the applicant online. One respondent (2018) stated, "I often take candidates off my initial list because of their social media accounts. Even if you are set to private, we can still see things." It is important for an applicant to clean up their social media accounts and ensure their online presence is professional and suitable for a K–12 audience. For example, they should delete any postings that contain inappropriate content, language, or behavior. It is also a good idea to remove photographs that involve alcohol or smoking since administrators aim to hire candidates who are positive role models for their K–12 students and school community.

Although all the candidates may be impressive, the hiring personnel looks for a combination of skills and characteristics (Figure 4) based on the intended grade level, art classes, and/or student population. When selecting the final candidate, many respondents stated that the teaching demonstration is the most important factor, as it shows a combination of things—whether they connect with and inspire students, enthusiastically convey art content knowledge, have experience with teaching, and above all, have a personality that is a good fit with the school community.

The superintendent or principal typically offers the job via phone. During the conversation, they discuss related topics such as salary and benefits. Salary steps for teachers in public school districts are public information and found online or in local libraries. The survey results indicated that candidates have approximately 4 days to accept or decline the offer. After a candidate accepts a position, the superintendent or principal forwards their name to the district's Board of Education for final approval. If a candidate does not receive a job offer, they can reach out to the interviewer(s) and ask for feedback about what they should work on for future interviews.

A few of the respondents acknowledged that the job search is a challenging process, and it is important not to become discouraged. Engaging in the process and securing an art teaching job can be overwhelming, but finding the right match can have lasting rewards for both the hiring district's community and the art educator. Good luck with the job search!

Acknowledgment

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Endnotes

[1] I sent the Qualtrics survey at the end of spring 2018 to approximately 3,000 email addresses for New Jersey K–12 public school district superintendents and principals as found on the NJ Department of Education website. The email asked them to complete the survey and/or forward the email to anyone who participated in the art teacher hiring process. I also invited visual arts supervisors, curriculum supervisors, and art teachers for whom I had email addresses on file and found on district websites to take part in the study. The survey had a completion rate of 50% with 99 responses recorded.

[2] Such as https://k12jobspot.com. Although the survey respondents did not specifically mention the online National Art Education Association Career Center, it is a great resource for job listings. Some of the more common websites that school districts in New Jersey use to post jobs include https://njschooljobs.com and www.njhire.com.

