

Well, it is that time of year again.

No, not spring, though the robins which filled the trees of Mitchell in the past several weeks do bring that promise. As does the calendar.

No, not St. Patrick's Day, though I will admit to hoisting a Shamrock Shake last Saturday in a toast to my Hibernian father who so loved his Irish heritage that he left us in the wee hours of that very day 12 years ago.

No, not the coming of Easter, though that highest feast of the Christian calendar will soon be happily upon us.

But I speak of none of those but rather of what is arguably the most important time of the year for school administrators everywhere: teacher hiring season.

Due to the peculiarities of the academic calendar and the foibles of history, this time of year is when teachers announce their retirements or their plans to relocate, leaving schools with vacancies for the subsequent school year. In great or even good schools, such news brings with it a call to arms among principals and those who support them, a rush to the barricades or, better, to the fencerows, in search of teachers to replace those who are leaving. Why the mustering, why the alacrity?

Because great, or even good, principals know a poorly-kept secret: it is not possible to have a great school without great teachers. Putting the very best people in front of classrooms and on the sidelines of practice courts and beneath the batons of auditoria and nestled on the gathering rugs with a gaggle of Kindergartners is an incredibly important, if not the most important, job of a school principal.

Thus, this is the time of year when principals issue vacancy notices and advertise their positions, review applications and sit in on interviews. It is also the time of year when I am lucky enough to sit in at least one of our hiring processes, the teaching episode. For at least the past 50 years, industrial psychologists have demonstrated through their research that employment interviews are an incredibly ineffective means to determining the likely success of a candidate for the job for which they are applying. To sum up that research succinctly, interviewing a candidate tells you whether or not that candidate interviews well. If you happen to have a position in which the person will be interviewed all day, this is an effective procedure. If you want to know whether they can be a great teacher, not so much.

It is for this reason that we utilize, admittedly in addition to interviews, teaching episodes, situations in which we assign the candidate a specific lesson objective, as well as a classroom full of students to which to teach it. Then we—principals, teachers, etc.—gather in the back of the room and watch them do what they went to school to do and have expressed a loving intent to spend their life doing: teach.

It is not a perfect procedure. After all, the candidates know little about the students they are teaching. Likewise, with the principal sitting in the back of the room along with a bunch of other sometimes intimidating adults, classroom management is typically less of an issue than it might otherwise be. Plus, the candidates typically bring their best, not their average, game to the classroom that day. There is always the potential for a ‘dog and pony show.’

Still, I know a couple of things about the teaching episodes. If a candidate can’t put forth a great lesson and genuinely engage students in it when the stakes are this high, well, when could they? And what is wrong with seeing someone’s best game? I love watching great teaching. I’d rather spectate in an upper elementary classroom as a brand-spanking new teacher takes children through the difference between a metaphor and a simile and then guides them--like Beatrice guided Dante from the spot just beyond the best end of purgatory all the way to the glories of highest Heaven, to the wonderful ways in which such literary devices can elevate even the most pedestrian writing--than peer from the finest seats in the stadium at any Super Bowl or World Series game. No, that’s not hyperbole, I genuinely mean that. To watch a great teacher immersed in her craft and a classroom of children is a joy to behold.

It is also the best way to find the very best teacher or coach or sponsor to put in front of our students and athletes and performers. What a truly lovely time of year.