Benjamin Marcovitz, Principal of Sci Academy and CEO of Collegiate Academies in New Orleans, LA, on what he does to assess teachers' mindsets when hiring.

“This school is designed to move ninth graders, who average a fourth-grade level performance coming in, to the college level by graduation. We’re going to be asking them to grow at a rate you’ve probably never been asked to yourself. There’s no way we’re going to get away with this without being obsessed with our own growth as educators.”

In establishing a growth mindset at Sci Academy, I’ve found that being all about the kids means being all about the teachers. So I say the above to teacher applicants in their first interview. In doing so, we hope to ignite an application process that screens in the adults with the greatest growth-mindsets, increases that mindset, and politely shows the exit sign to those without it. Teachers need to view teaching as a process of constant improvement, and I find this tragically rare in a field where, if you’re not amazing at something in 2-3 years, you figure you should probably stop doing it. This is the opposite of what works at our school. Teachers at Sci Academy discover new avenues for great performance every day. They use them. The kids see this. They do the same.

So here’s our application process.

In that first screener interview, I try to share openly what people might like and not like about our school, based on the opinions of current and former staff.

Might like: if you like setting a goal, hitting it, setting a higher one, hitting that, and so on, and never plateau-ing, you’re going to love it here.
Might not like: if you don’t like constant feedback, incessant professional development, changing the school on a dime when we find a better way to do something, you’ll probably cry yourself to sleep every night after checking job-listings on craigslist.

I finish this initial chat by saying, “I’ve just dropped a lot of info on you. I’d like you to take a couple of days to mull it over. After that, if you’re still really pumped to work at this school, drop me a line. Ball’s in your court.”

Only about thirty percent get back to me.

But that thirty percent has already made a strong statement to the school—and themselves—about how much they believe in growth. So we move ahead with them. Further interviews probe even deeper into mindset:

“Tell us about something you used to stink at, that now goes really well.”

“You’ve just had your worst day ever at school, you get in the car with your best friend-colleague to carpool home. What do you say about it?”

“What kind of feedback do you not like?”

But the real work comes when we watch sample lessons. I learned early on that seeing a teacher actually teaching children provided a glimpse into what no paper or talk-interview could: the comfort level with kids and material, the capacity to make split-second decisions with ease, the drive and urgency towards an objective.

What I learned quickly, though, was that this single data point provided little that helped us develop teachers after hiring. Indeed, for too many teachers I’d hired—in this school and at others before—the quality we saw in the sample lesson, however high, was the quality we were stuck with for years, despite our best attempts at coaching.

Realizing this, we started requiring two lessons instead of one, with coaching in between. I’d watch a teacher teach, write down everything I’d want to improve about her practice, then sit down with her for over an hour afterwards and lay it all on her. The usable data was incredible. Did she seem excited by the feedback or defensive? Did she take notes? Did she ask for the feedback before I could even offer it? Did she seem skeptical when I told her about big changes that needed to happen fast? Exasperated?
But here was the key: I’d return for a second sample. We tell candidates this could be later that day, or even weeks later, their choice. Either way, we get a sample of growth instead of current ability, and, just like a slope on a graph, we can adjust our standard based on how much time has elapsed. This nearly doubled the amount of time put into each hire, but we came to hold it as sacred for three important reasons:

First, the lesson-feedback-lesson loop provides three opportunities for candidates to opt out if they do not fit with our demands for growth. Plenty of folks who might have crashed and burned in our future PD self-identify and save everyone some headaches.

Second, we found that fixed mindsets in adults are most often not in full view, and frequently hide behind the appearance of an inspiring growth mindset. Every year, there are more than a handful of candidates who light up in our feedback session. They’re inspired by the coaching and seem fully committed to the growth process. Yet walking back into the classroom with them, we see absolutely no changes at all. I’ve theorized that these are often bright, ambitious folks who harbor the secret worry that teaching isn’t for them, simply because they didn’t see success early on. This thorny combo of fixed-mindset with growth-surface is the one common trait of all teachers who did not work out at our school. We learned that it has to be teased out early. When it is, it can be defeated. I’ve had teachers to whom I’ve said it plainly and seen changes. For some, the changes would take too long for the pace of our curriculum. Instead of simply ending the process for these folks, we offer them the chance to have us come back even a third time, or even more. It can become a benign game of chicken, where we pit our belief that they can grow against their execution of growth.

Third, and most important, some of the best teachers have lackluster first lessons and killer redo’s with coaching. In fact, discussing this process with new staff, I once pointed to our current team and said, “Stand up if your first sample lesson for us was terrible.” Standing up were an English teacher who’d since won Louisiana Charter School Teacher of the Year, a science teacher who’s been filmed close to ten times for Doug Lemov’s Teach Like a Champion research, two teachers who’d just been given school leadership positions in our network, and a host of folks who—year-after-year at minimum—have garnered the highest scores in the district on the state exam. Truthfully, some of their rooms were complete disasters at first, some even dangerous. But seeing them after feedback showed us a whole new teacher.

Without this particular process samples, I wouldn’t have hired those teachers. A tragedy all the more since, as it turns out, these are the folks who succeed the most: regardless of how low their first point, they have the steepest slopes. This is the heartening living-proof in a school where we must look every child in the eye and say, “It doesn’t matter what you’ve done in the past. Here, you will succeed.”