

Teacher test questioned



SPOKANE (AP) — A test that grades potential teachers on their patience and caring rather than traditional

teaching methods may be dropped by the Spokane School District, an official said.

The district probably will quit using the 32-question EMPATHY — Emphasizing More Personalized Attitudes Toward Helping Youth — test because too many applicants know the questions, assistant superintendent Rick Chisholm said.

The questions and some of the answers are available through a database of educational research available at local libraries.

More than half of the district's 1,800 teachers have been hired since 1986 based in part on how they did on the test.

But supporters of traditional teaching methods criticize the test, which deducts points for answers that indicate too much discipline, too little desire to be liked by students or a lack of organization.

"We're doing warm and fuzzy to the exclusion of expectations, accountability and learning to respect the academic world," said one teacher, who asked not to be identified.

A sample question: "What are the most important ways a teacher can help his/her pupils?"

The preferred answer is: "To understand, listen, trust, communicate with pupils," or "Help pupils build a positive self-image."

Applicants are given one point for each response that is similar to the preferred answer.

Dropping the test from hiring interviews would please the Spokane Education Association, the union representing most of the district's teachers.

The test — which makes up 31 percent of the "composite rating" for applicants

that is sent to principals looking to fill a position — may be biased against men, minorities and experienced teachers, union president Jerry Hopkins said Wednesday.

But Gloria Morris, an elementary school principal who is black, disputed the suggestion that the test puts minorities at a disadvantage.

"It's nothing one has to study for," she said of the test. "It gets at natural characteristics of an individual, the humane qualities so necessary for people to have if they work with children."

Minority applicants actually tend to score a half-point higher than whites, Chisholm said.

Middle school teacher Mary Langford, hired before the district began using the EMPATHY test, said she probably would not have scored well because her teaching style is more businesslike.

"I feel it's a job for students to come to school," Langford said. "I have some empathy for them, but when you come to work, nobody is going to ask how you feel, how you're feeling. When you come to work, you have to be prepared."

The EMPATHY interview, developed in the 1970s by the Omaha, Neb., public schools, reflects the theory that the best teachers are those who are open, patient and caring and want students to like them.

Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and a national Educator of the Year in 1990, agreed that warm people make good teachers, but does not support selecting teachers based on EMPATHY interviews.

A teacher with a traditional approach could be more effective than a progressive, student-centered teacher who is insecure and uncertain, Boyer said.

The notion of right and wrong answers to open-ended questions also drew his scorn.

Grant President driven by memories

PORTLAND (AP) — Vu Pham had been at Grant High School for just two months when he was elected student body president.

Students who voted for him after hearing his electrifying speech probably didn't know about his difficult past.

"I'm not here to make you feel like you belong to Grant High School," he shouted to them. "I'm here to make you feel like Grant High School belongs to you."

Vu urged the students to take responsibility for improving Grant, a large urban school that some say gets more attention for its flaws than its virtues.

"You are the power," Vu told them. "He blew everyone away," junior Jason Scott remembers. "He was the only one there."

Vu is driven by a powerful force — his memories. He preaches individual responsibility because it allowed him to survive running from Communist soldiers in his native Vietnam, escaping at sea on a tiny boat, establishing himself at one high school only to be removed from office, and, worst of all, witnessing his mother's murder.

Vu remembers Vietnam in snapshots. He was born in 1975 just outside Saigon, six months after the North Vietnamese army invaded.

Vu remembers fleeing with his mother and his half-uncle when he was five. He says they were pursued all the way to the beach. The small boat drifted for almost a week. Miraculously, a German ship found them and took everyone aboard.

The three of them settled in Beaverton.

About a year later, Vu's mother, Lehong Nguyen — Hong to her family — began seeing a man named Khu Van Le. He moved in with them.

But during a trip to California with Vu, Hong fell in love with a different man.

On June 5, 1983, about 7 p.m., a friend dropped seven-year-old Vu off at their apartment with his mother.

They were just outside the door when Le bolted out of the apartment, holding a meat cleaver in his hands.

"All I remember was watching it happen and jumping up and down like a little baby," Vu said. "I couldn't do anything."

Hong collapsed on the cement walkway. She died hours later at a hospital.

Le was convicted of first-degree manslaughter and was paroled after less than five years in prison. Vu doesn't know where Le is now.

Vu now lives with his half-uncle, Tam Nguyen, who survived a prisoner of war camp to come to America.

When they moved to Portland his sophomore year, Vu learned to temper his strong views and impatience. He was elected junior class president at Madison High School, but he had several run-ins with the administration and was impeached.

After his junior year, he transferred to Grant and decided to give student government another try.

So far, he's been a big success.

"Vu is one of the best things that happened to Grant High School in a long time," said senior Jay Frank. "He brings a lot of energy to everything he does."

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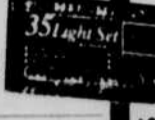


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