

Interview Questions

From Teacher-Coach to Head of School

Henry Smyth—Head of School, Gilman School, Baltimore, MD

1. Path to Leadership

Your career began in the classroom and on the field as a teacher-coach. Looking back, what specific experiences from that dual role first made you think, "This is preparing me to lead a school"?

I spent the first eleven or so years of my education career primarily teaching history and coaching soccer and basketball, ranging from middle school to high school varsity teams. As I became intentionally interested in administrative work in schools, I quickly recognized the value of being a teacher-coach. That dual role exposed me to so much: the operation of two different parts of a school day, the compatibility or incompatibility of the academic and athletic philosophies and practices of the school, how a good number of students go through their day, and—importantly—long hours. Being in both spaces also allowed me to get to know more people within a school and to appreciate what they contribute to the community.

2. Acquired Leadership Skills

Coaching requires you to read individuals, build team culture, and perform under pressure — all in real time. How have those instincts shaped the way you lead faculty, staff, and the broader school community today? What skills were acquired as a teacher-coach? Which do you use the most in your day-to-day job?

Time management and making transitions from one aspect of school life to another are skills that I'm sure I started to develop as a young teacher-coach and that I employ regularly in my current role.

3. School Culture & Vision

Independent schools are defined as much by their culture as their academics. How has your experience as a teacher-coach informed the kind of school culture you've worked to build, and what does that look like in practice?

(Some uniformity is emerging in these responses) Being a teacher and a coach both motivated me to know and resulted in my knowing students outside of any one school setting. The ethos of the teacher-coach model is involvement in school life, and that is the kind of culture I want Gilman to have. Fortunately, that type of environment flows from our mission, which calls us to develop the whole body in mind, body, and spirit. I firmly believe that all adults at the school, whatever their roles, are working to support that mission.

4. Why Coaches Make Great Teachers

There's growing evidence that teacher-coaches bring something distinctive to the classroom — accountability, adaptability, and relationship-building. Do you agree, and what qualities do you believe the coach mindset uniquely develops in a school leader?

I do agree with this idea that teacher-coaches are well equipped to be successful in the classroom, assuming that they buy into the classroom part of their role as much as they do the athletics coaching side. In addition to the traits you have already mentioned in the question, I would lean on Ted Sizer's mantra that good teaching is good coaching. When you think about games being summative assessments, the elements of good course and class design—skill development, application of skills to a bigger picture, chunking lessons, effective transitions, working toward a common goal—are all at work with good coaches just as they are with excellent teachers.

5. Hiring Philosophy

When you're evaluating candidates for faculty positions, what do you look for that a résumé alone can't tell you? And does a background in coaching factor into how you assess potential?

A background in coaching absolutely factors into an assessment of a candidate. For one, Gilman is a school that places a high value on teacher-coaches. More broadly I am/we are looking for people who want to be fully engaged in school life, and people who have a strong track record of coaching and teaching have typically demonstrated that level of engagement.

One thing we remind ourselves when hiring for a certain position is that it is a school hire and not just a departmental hire. If we are searching for a high-level varsity coach, we are asking ourselves what a candidate can contribute to school life beyond coaching expertise. If we are filling a classroom vacancy, we are asking ourselves what a candidate can contribute beyond teaching expertise. The strongest candidates present good answers to those questions.

6. Leading Educators as a Former Educator

Heads of school are most effective when faculty trust that their leader understands the classroom and the cadence of a school day/year. How does your teacher-coach background influence the way your faculty relates to you — and how you relate to them?

Admittedly, it has been a while since I was in the classroom and on the court or field, so I am sure that some faculty are skeptical of my ability to relate to their work lives. That said, I do think that I understand the academic and athletic arenas in which teachers are working. I have had parents mad at me about playing time, I have had to cut really good kids from teams, and I remember writing comments until midnight on a Saturday night. Even if I am not still doing those things, one thing I can do is show up at others' games and performances, and I try to do that as much as possible.

7. Legacy and Vision

If a young teacher-coach came to you today asking you for advice on how to grow into a school leader, what would you tell them — and what do you hope your own career models for the next generation of independent school educators?

I would tell them not to be in a rush to leave the classroom and field/court and, at the same time, to get involved in school life in formal and informal ways. People who aspire to school leadership need to know if they really like being enmeshed in a school community. The

chances to be around the students—to watch their games and performances—are what give me fuel, even if they make for long hours. If I did not love being fully involved in Gilman life, this would not be a good job for me.

8. Message to Fellow Heads of School

If you could speak directly to other heads of school about the value of hiring teacher-coaches as faculty, what would you want them to know — and what might they be overlooking when they pass over a candidate whose résumé leads with coaching?

Sometimes the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. An excellent educator is someone who has a strong combination of skills and traits that are needed in the school. Individually, each skill set or trait may not be the best in the application pool (one person might have better academic pedigree, another might have stronger athletic credentials), but collectively they add up to make a candidate great for the holistic development of students.