



How DREAM Charter Schools Build Authentic Teams

Building Trust in Hiring Through Human-Centered Candidate Vetting

Managed hiring to support

1,800+

students

Across

7

schools



Flexibility for the hiring team



Background

Seven schools. Multiple campuses across New York City. One mission: developing the whole child. For DREAM Charter Schools, scaling their people operations while maintaining hiring integrity has become increasingly critical—and increasingly complex.

Carissa Mueller, Director of People Operations at DREAM, manages recruitment and hiring across the network with an intentional, multi-layered approach that goes far beyond a standard applicant tracking system.

But in an era where candidate fraud is on the rise—from AI-optimized resumes to placeholder application documents—DREAM couldn't afford to trust that every application was genuine. They needed a hiring process that would separate authentic candidates from those trying to game the system.

From Dream to Reality



At scale in the next two years, DREAM will continue to grow beyond the 7 schools they operate to serve 2,800 students



Legends alumni numbers will grow from 500 currently to over 1,000 by 2030.



In order to realize these strategic objectives, DREAM's annual operating budget will grow from \$45M to \$98M over the next decade.



"We have a really explicit focus on creating a strong employee value proposition for our staff members. We want it to be a real two-way relationship, where we're both developing each other."

— **Carissa Mueller**

Director of People Operations, DREAM Charter Schools

A Process Built for Substance, Not Surface

DREAM's solution wasn't to throw more technology at the problem—it was to design a hiring process where each phase has a clear purpose, building toward greater vetting at each stage. Recruiters leverage Lever to screen candidates for specific competencies. Phone screens assess interpersonal fit and critical thinking. But the real innovation lies in their performance task strategy.

"We intentionally incorporate performance tasks in our selection process," Carissa says. "It's pretty difficult to perform well on those without really using your own brain. [It's] difficult to be a fraudulent applicant and do well on a performance task."

What makes this approach powerful is the layering. Candidates complete a virtual task independently and submit it. Then, during the in-person interview, they must explain and build upon their work in real time. Candidates who hired someone to complete their task, relied on AI to generate responses, or simply guessed their way through the virtual portion quickly exposed themselves in conversation.

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You can make your resume sound and look like whatever you want, but ultimately, if you're on the phone with a recruiter who's asking you for an example of a time you did something, you have to ultimately have some kind of substance in your answer,"

— **Carissa Mueller**

Director of People Operations, DREAM Charter Schools



Recognizing the Bigger Picture

Interestingly, DREAM's team doesn't approach candidate fraud with judgment. They recognize it within context.



"Candidates are also struggling because the acceptance rate is lower. They are just doing everything they can to put applications in front of the employer."

— **Carissa Mueller**

Director of People Operations,
DREAM Charter Schools



In a job market with high application volumes, both employers and job seekers are trying to optimize their efforts.

This understanding shapes DREAM's approach. They've even noticed specific patterns in fraudulent applications—blank resumes, placeholder documents, one-word answers to open-ended questions, and consistent selection of the first radio button on multiple choice questions. Rather than treating these as anomalies, they've built their screening process to identify and filter these patterns early, saving time and resources for both the organization and qualified candidates.

Technology Supporting, Not Replacing, Human Judgment

What's particularly notable about DREAM's approach is how they intentionally balance automation with human judgment. As an organization, DREAM believes that AI is an important resource for its students and allows candidates to use it during the hiring process. "Whenever we ask additional questions that are open-ended, we explicitly say you're free to use AI," Carissa explained. In exchange, DREAM expects candidates to be able to speak to their answers, and invites them to upload the prompts and conversations they had with GPT models as part of their application.

Pairing human judgment and technology are also critical to the final stages of the hiring process. In a close-knit sector like charter schools, reference checks often reveal essential context about a candidate's capabilities and integrity. For roles working with students, background checks provide an additional layer of assurance. But Carissa emphasizes that these aren't about distrust—they're about building a team with genuine capability and alignment to DREAM's mission. "The human element in the process still goes a long way, and it allows you to pick up on things in conversation or in tasks that the candidate can't fake," Carissa said.

The Result: Building a Team, Not Just Filling Roles

By pairing thoughtful process design with human judgment, DREAM has created a hiring approach that catches fraud early, respects genuine candidates, and builds a team that truly can "develop the whole child." DREAM's multi-layered approach offers a template for organizations looking to hire with integrity but still scale effectively.



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