

# From Charter To Independent – *Elaine Chao's Journey To Her Dream School*

## CANDIDATE PROFILE

Elaine Chao

Brentwood School, Los Angeles, CA

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Elaine Chao

### Fishing For The Right Career Path

Elaine Chao never planned to become a teacher. Growing up in Seattle, Washington she loved going fishing regularly with her family. They actually moved to the area from Houston, Texas when she was six years old to take advantage of the amazing spots for catching fish like lingcod and digging for huge geoduck saltwater clams.

Elaine also had a natural passion for learning as a child and loved school. She especially excelled in science and math. Her decision to study Chemical Engineering in college was predominantly because of the chemistry and math involved. However, while at the University of Washington she was feeling less than enthusiastic about her experiences interning at a research lab for two summers. It felt like homework. But when she worked on her actual homework for school, she loved it!

Throughout her years in school, Elaine was always a kind of “peer teacher.” She was passionate about helping her friends learn by privately tutoring them or working together on learning new material in study groups. She explains, “I realized that half of my love in learning was loving how I can help others learn as well.”

After finishing her research lab internship, moving into a Chemical Engineering job just didn't seem like a good fit. Elaine realized it would be best to continue fishing for new areas of work. Teaching still wasn't on the top of her list yet but the clues were there. She explored possibly going into medicine and the Peace Corps but they did not align with her needs.

Around the same time, a friend contacted her and talked about his positive experiences working with Teach For America (TFA). Their mission is to place recent college graduates as teachers for two years in under-resourced urban and rural public school systems throughout the U.S. Elaine never heard of it before but was intrigued with the idea of helping to make a difference through education. She was hooked!

### Moving To Vegas With Teach For America

Elaine was placed by TFA in Las Vegas, Nevada and taught Chemistry and Honors Physics at a public high school for three years. She worked hard to inspire and motivate her students to not only learn the basics, but to invest in themselves and their own learning. Working through TFA helped her fall in love with education and the way it can uplift young lives and open their minds to possibilities for a brighter future.

“In terms of being an actual teacher, I realized I loved all of the different hats that you wear. You're a mentor, you're a mom, and you're a nurse.” She could see how the process of teaching unfolds over time, “When it comes to working with students, I've realized there's no definitive answer. You just have to have perseverance. Try a solution, if it doesn't work, try another one. As a teacher, we have to keep trying different things until we find what works best for our students.”

During her three years in Vegas she plugged herself into the local community through her hobbies – playing volleyball and sculpting pottery. Elaine committed to two years with TFA but stayed an

extra year at her school because of her strong connection with the students and her time with good friends. During that year her parents helped her realize that she could find opportunities to support others in any city where she chose to live. She could move back to Seattle and live closer to family.

Elaine decided to move back home and applied to charter schools instead of public schools because it was essential for her to work with faculty that had a similar mindset as her school in Vegas. "Charter schools are really small and when you interview with a charter school and you talk with a team, you get a gist of the whole school. I thought that would be the best way for me to find a team that I resonated with."

She accepted a position teaching Science at a public charter school in Seattle and worked there for one year. It was a pleasant experience but the connection with the faculty members on her team wasn't as solid as she had hoped. Even though living close to her family was enriching, Elaine was ready to try life in a new city once again. Many of her best friends had moved away from Seattle and she thought it was time for her to follow suit. A good friend moved to Los Angeles and convinced her to pursue teaching in southern California.

### **The Search for Charter Schools in California Brings Her to CalWest**

With the experience of working with high-risk students in Las Vegas and a charter school in Seattle, Elaine visited LA in spring and looked at several charter schools with similar demographics as schools she's worked for in the past.

There was a high school Physics opening through a charter school but it required a California Physics teaching credential that she didn't have. Without a credential she wouldn't have a chance of getting an interview there until June, which would have been at the end of the hiring season.

Once again a good friend stepped in with advice. This particular friend works for an independent school in West LA and suggested she contact CalWest. Elaine had never heard of CalWest or seen any advertisements but she was intrigued about the possibility of getting help with her job search. She hadn't thought of working at a private school before. Hearing about independent schools from her friend made them seem like environments where she could work with students who are motivated to learn and passionate about Math and Science.

"My long term vision for education is to change the platform so that it's not something where students

just learn the material and spit it out. I actually envision this opportunity where education is a platform where students can solve problems to help the world and they're not just working for one class project. They're actually actively engaged in problem solving with the rest of society to make positive change or push a movement forward in connection with corporations, government and academic researchers."

### **Connecting with CalWest Speeds Up Her Search Process**

After completing her application and talking with her Recruiting Advisor, CalWest began sending her portfolio to independent schools throughout southern California. This was at the end of April and Elaine was concerned that positions would be unavailable at this point in the hiring season. To her surprise, one week after her portfolio was sent to Brentwood School, an administrator contacted her via email.

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Brentwood is a K-12 day school in Los Angeles and was the first to contact her through CalWest. After a Skype interview, she flew down for a school visit. Elaine immediately connected with the faculty and mission, "I interviewed and loved, absolutely loved the school. It just felt like family. It was bizarre. Even on the Skype interview I felt like I had interviewed with people who I felt truly valued me as an individual contributing to the community. I could hear through their ideas that the way I problem solve and my long-term goals really resonated with Brentwood. I felt absolutely supported, even during the interview."

Although Elaine was excited about her connection with Brentwood School, she wasn't sure if they felt the same way about her. There's often a delay in hearing back from a school after an interview. Fortunately, it only took a week and a half for them to come back with an offer for an Algebra and Chemistry position in their high school. She was ecstatic and accepted right away.

It took exploring different career paths to find just the right waters where Elaine could cast her line. She found the right place to settle down in the city of Los Angeles at Brentwood School. CalWest helped advocate for her needs and connect her with an institution where she can do the deep work of educating and inspiring future leaders of the world through Algebra and Chemistry.