



THE FIRST 100 DAYS

Setting Yourself Up for Success in a School Leadership Position

Perhaps nothing is more important to the success of a school administrator than getting off to a good start. As the expression goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. So what should be done in order to achieve success when starting a new administrative job? Do we rely upon others, perhaps our predecessor or superintendent to direct us towards success? Do we rely upon our past experience, interpersonal skills or charisma?

While there are many factors outside of our control, most of how we start a new job can be proactively planned. This article explores the first 100 days in a new position in which the predecessor has left the post with an amicable departure. In cases such as termination or other unfortunate circumstances, there will likely be alternative or additional considerations for success.

Before You Get the Job

Success in the field of education begins before you get the job. Most successful administrators research their prospective employers and know, at a cursory level, what type of district they may be working for in the near future. You may choose to attend a finance committee or board meeting before applying. Given the time and investment in resources to apply for a job in education, it is good to identify early on if there are any red flags.

CHECKPOINT:

Seek Out Red Flags Before You Apply.

Answer these questions to identify any potential red flags that could prevent you from applying for or a position. Look for concerns in these areas:

- ☐ Does the board of education seem to function professionally and appropriately?
- ☐ Are administrators treated respectfully?
- ☐ Could I see myself working for this superintendent and/or board of education?

Doing your homework online, including reviewing board minutes and financial reports, is important. In some cases there may be presentations or videos of work done by the superintendent or other key administrators that lend a clue as to the philosophy and culture of the district. During the interview process, it is in the candidate's best interest to come with relevant questions that may bring insight towards the strategic direction of the district and how your job will be a part of that plan.

Make a Transition Plan

Getting the job offer is an exciting moment. You have worked hard to prove your skills and now you have done it! After that, pride and accomplishment fades a bit, reality will set in and you will likely realize that for the next two to four months, to some degree, you will be working two jobs. Working on a plan to maximize your opportunity to learn the new job while ensuring you respectfully conclude your current job is extremely important.

The best plan for success should begin with a conversation with the person you will be replacing. Trading days with your current employer and your future employer can be seen as a win-win strategy. Finding time to train for the new job will help ensure a great start. Nothing can replace the value of having time with the person currently doing the job. Of course it is best to offer the same opportunity with whomever replaces you as well.

Start with People

Before starting the job, consider taking your soon-to-be administrative assistant to lunch. Do not do this with an agenda or with any motive. Just go with the objective of getting to know the person. Getting to know your new team takes time and once you are on the job, finding time to get to know people on a personal level will be more difficult.

Begin to make contact with colleagues who live or work in the area. Take the opportunity to get their perspective on the current state of the district. Don't believe everything you hear but take in their perspective and seek out the facts.

CHECKPOINT:

Establish Expectations from Day One.

- ☐ Prepare a list of questions for your new supervisor to establish expectations.
- ☐ Negotiate an exchange of days.
- ☐ Learn about the philosophy of the superintendent and/or board of education.
- ☐ Attend at least one committee and board meeting.
- ☐ Set up a lunch with some or all of your key department heads and focus on simply getting to know them.
- ☐ Begin to make contact with colleagues who live or work in the area.

✓ The Real Work Begins

Your first day on the job is the first chance to give the staff a first-hand impression of who you are. Presume everyone from the cabinet members to the business office has been talking about you at their family dinner table since the offer was extended. They may have tried to imagine your sense of humor, your knowledge base, your experience, your leadership style and even how you dress. But what about the initial conversations or moments during the district office or community meet and greet? What can you share during your first meeting that will help them feel comfortable around you and let them know that you are looking forward to working with them?

As the weeks progress, make sure to connect with others in some way. This includes school-based administrators, district office administrators, department staff, external partners and board members. If you have not yet, try to figure out how and when you can accomplish this huge effort. Keep in mind, this may be accomplished by simply having a chat at the water cooler and does not have to be complicated. You would hate to leave anyone out and have them think that you do not care to meet them. If you have

not had the chance to spend time with your department staff, you may consider a lunch to get to know them better. Remember to ask lots of questions and do lots of listening. Staff members want to show you what they know and how they do it. Allow them to help you along the way as you learn the culture and try to find out exactly how you can help within their systems.

Your first team meeting will be a big one. Leaders have their own style and format for team meetings but you will want to bring your team together to set the tone for the coming year. One resource you may consider utilizing is William Bridges' *Phases of Transition* model. The concept behind this is to acknowledge that an "ending" has taken place as your predecessor has moved on. This change should not be taken lightly as it may impact your staff's ability to do their work if they worry about your perception of them. Allow your team to discuss what they like about their job and what ideas they may have for a better environment moving forward. Don't react; listening is most important at this point.

Hit the Ground Running

While getting to know people is very important, you cannot forget about the tasks. Chances are good that at this point you know about big initiatives like a referendum or new construction, but make sure you know what lies ahead. Is the tentative budget complete yet? Or has the process even been started? How will you prepare for the annual audit? Is a TIF coming off in a few months, if so, what does that mean? What are the expectations for the first board meeting? Make sure you know what steps you may need to take now in order to hit your marks down the line. Having a short term plan to get you through the start of the school year will be a necessity.

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Find Your Go-To People

You will not know the skill set of your staff yet, so it will take additional time to figure out whom to go to for what. It would be wise to take some time to review your staff personnel files to get a sense of what their strengths and weaknesses are. Of course each of your staff members should earn the opportunity to prove themselves as time goes on. The assumption should be that you would not be comfortable with the financial software program, so pulling reports and getting familiar with the finances at a more micro level will take you longer than you think. Even if you know what you are doing from a technical perspective, most everything will be new.

✓ Time to Re-evaluate

100 days in, where should you be? It is quite possible that something unexpected may have occurred in your first 100 days that you did not expect to come up. Perhaps an employee unexpectedly resigned to take a new job. It is possible that negotiations have lingered on and you are expected to finish off the work of a predecessor. Situations like these are part of the job but certainly challenge one's ability to transition seamlessly. *Assuming you have handled the land mines and curve balls thrown at you over the first few months, here is where you would ideally be:*

You have a positive working relationship with your boss — Knowing your boss' preferences and work style along with setting clear expectations of what your first year will look like. Ideally goals will have been developed that are reasonable. You should have a clear sense of what priorities are and have outlined additional areas of focus for year two and beyond. Consider asking for an informal evaluation to get direct feedback.

You have a sense for how your board of education operates — and how they will look to you as a leader in the district. If you do not know by this point you will need to invest some time and effort in this area to help forge relationships to support the superintendent.

Your peers feel comfortable coming to you with questions —

and know that even if you do not have the answer you will try your best to be a resource they can count on. Your direct reports will know that you value them as people first and employees second. They will begin to understand your expectations for them and have started to see you as not just a boss but a leader committed to the district and community.

You have a feel for what strengths you will bring to the district — and what areas you may need to develop. For development areas you should have a well thought out professional development and networking plan to develop the necessary skills.

Success as an educational leader is not an accident. The first 100 days are an opportunity to prove that the decision to hire you was the right one. A foundation that focuses on both the technical and relational components of the job will yield dividends over the course of your tenure at the district.

CHECKPOINT:

During Your First 100 Days:

- ☐ Develop a plan to visit or call all principals and key administrators.
- ☐ Deepen relationships with your team and with your direct reports.
- ☐ Learn how to support your supervisor and department.
- ☐ Know the priorities of the job and responsibility for board meetings.
- ☐ Learn the processes and systems; identify key training opportunities.
- ☐ Create annual department and staff goals.