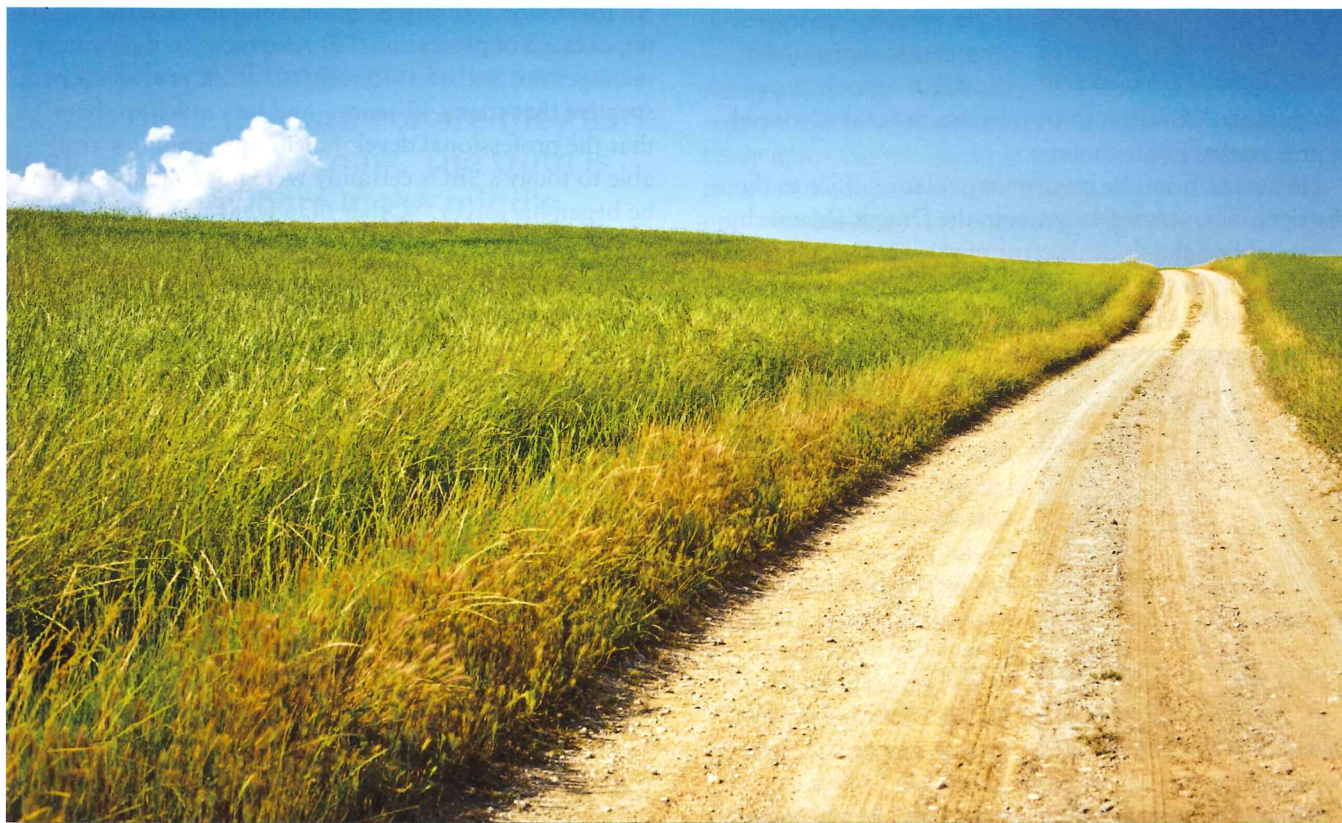


Oh, The Places They Went— SBOs Share Their Career Paths

By Patricia George



You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes

You can steer yourself

any direction you choose.

You're on your own. And you know what you know.

And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.

—DR. SEUSS

O*h the Places You'll Go!* That Dr. Seuss book is a standard gift for graduates as we send them out into the world—whether it's off to college or into the world of work.

“You can steer yourself any direction you choose.”

What direction did school business officials take to get where they are today? The most recent ASBO International membership survey gives us some insight into the journey from graduation to the school business office.

According to the 2012 survey, 37% of the respondents came from a background in business before joining the school business profession. Only 12% followed the “traditional” route of moving up from the classroom into administration and school business. Increasing numbers of members also report coming out of other areas of government or were attending college immediately prior to entering school business.

The path to school business is as diverse as the backgrounds of those who now dedicate themselves to ensuring students have the resources they need to be successful in school and beyond.

We asked three school business officials to share with us how they got to where they are today, what they learned, and where they see themselves five years from now. Here are their stories about the places they have been, where they are, and where they're going.

Before They Were SBOs



Prior to entering the field of school business, **John Crafton**, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO), worked for several years as a teacher and guidance counselor. “I also worked for a short period of time in the private sector as a psychotherapist under the direct supervision of a

psychiatrist,” Crafton shares. He has several advanced degree credits in psychology.

He moved from the classroom/guidance office to the district office, serving 15 years in the Dracut (Massachusetts) Public Schools as director of personnel and business services and for 10 years as assistant superintendent for finance for the Methuen (Massachusetts) Public Schools.



Interestingly, psychology gave **Erin Green** her start as well. Green, director of business services for Wisconsin’s Greendale School District, majored in psychology in college, which has helped her understand human behavior. “This knowledge helped me navigate organizations where the relationships people have in and outside the

organization are key in moving forward,” she says.

After obtaining an MBA focusing on human resources management and organizational leadership, Green began her career as the human resources director for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. She then moved on to become business director for a state institution. She has been a school business director for 20 years—first working for a small rural school district to learn the



education ropes. Her most recent move was to a high-achieving suburban school district, where she’s been for 12 years.

“A love for education and a desire for a rewarding career” brought **Susan Harkin** to school business management. Harkin, CFO of Community School District 300 in Illinois, explains that her parents

were involved in education when she was growing up. Her mom was a school secretary and her dad served on the school board.

“Through role modeling, I combined my parents’ involvement by serving on many school district committees and even becoming a school secretary for a year and a half.” The central office then offered her a position in the school business office. “I have been working in a school business office for more than 10 years,” she says.

Perpetual Learning

All three school business officials emphasized the importance of professional development to their career management and advancement. Crafton provides a perspective that spans 40 years—and he’s quick to share that the professional development opportunities available to today’s SBOs certainly were not available when he began his career. “Other than what was offered at colleges and universities, professional development opportunities were rare,” he says.

“Fortunately, thanks to the state affiliate organizations and indeed ASBO International, this situation has improved significantly. Nevertheless, in retrospect I believe my most valued professional development experiences were found in the relationships I’ve developed with the superintendents that I’ve worked for and my school business administrator colleagues,” he says.

Recommended Reading for Career Management

When asked if they have a favorite book that has helped them navigate and manage their career, our school business officials recommended:

Fearless at Work: Timeless Teachings for Awakening Confidence, Resilience, and Creativity in the Face of Life’s Demands by Michael Carroll.

Erin Green says she hasn’t read the book yet, but it addresses how people can navigate the ups and downs and natural course of their careers, which is the most challenging thing we do.

ASBO International Professional Standards and Code of Ethics. Susan Harkin considers this to be a valuable reference guide that has helped her manage her career—especially when she jumped in the deep end of school finance at the start of her career. (Visit www.asbointl.org/ASBOsProfessionalStandards.htm).

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen R. Covey. John Crafton says, “This book emphasizes interpersonal leadership and creative cooperation, both of which are essential for an administrator to be a success in today’s educational work environment.”

Crafton shares one particular example from his years as a new and inexperienced school business administrator in Dracut. "I will never forget the lesson my superintendent impressed upon me during those early days," he says. "He would frequently praise and encourage my efforts, but he also very often took the time to explain and to show by example, that correctly dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's is meaningless unless the end result is the betterment of education for the children of the school district. He taught me that my role in accomplishing this is to strive to allocate as many resources as possible directly to the classroom—where learning originates."

Good advice: Things are never as bad as you think they are nor are they as rosy as you might think. The truth is usually somewhere in the middle.

—ERIN GREEN

That role entailed being "very frugal and efficient in those areas of the district budget that are not directly related to learning," Crafton says. "He taught me also that the school business administrator contributes directly to the process of education by ensuring that an environment conducive to learning is established and maintained—that the air exchange in each classroom is appropriate, that no student goes through the school day hungry, that children are transported to and from school safely, and that the school house represents a safe haven for children." He adds, "Sadly, as recent events attest, this has become perhaps our greatest challenge."

Erin Green agrees that the ASBO International and the state affiliates offer valuable professional development opportunities. "They allow a person to connect with the best in the profession, learn from them, network, and grow," she says. "These organizations allow you to try out leadership skills and gain confidence along the way." The programming these organizations provide keeps school business officials current and keeps them building their skills, she says. But, she cautions, "What you gain from these organizations depends on what you put into them."

Professional development opportunities for Susan Harkin have come from an unexpected source. "My most valuable professional development opportunity is being married to a school business official," she says. "My husband and I both have a strong passion for our profession and there are many dinner table conversations discussing the latest issue in school finance."

Harkin and her husband have different professional contacts, which, she says, provides them with different viewpoints, which they share and consider when talking about issues that come up. "Being a 20+ year business official, my husband has been an invaluable resource to me," she says.

All About the Skills

The profession of school business management has evolved during the past century, thanks to technology and ever-changing legislation and regulations. Effective school business officials know their success requires a toolbox of the tried and true as well as new and innovative tools and resources.

What skills are most important to today's school business officials?

Knowledge of accounting is necessary, John Crafton says, but today school business officials also need to develop "the creative side of their brains. They need to be able to accommodate the political, cultural, and technological changes that continually affect the education enterprise," he says. Crafton adds, "In order to effectively apply this creativity in a manner that enhances the educational process in a school district, school business officials must have the ability to work with diverse people and groups. This involves gaining the trust and respect of the public."

Susan Harkin agrees that trust is critical. "Understanding the importance of trust in your school district relationships is the most important skill of an SBO," she says. "Although it is very important to understand the technical pieces of the job, a business manager needs to be trusted and well-respected by the school district constituents in order to have true success."

Good advice: In every decision you make, remember it is about the kids first. If you remember that part of your job, everything else falls into place. —SUSAN HARKIN

The ability to make things happen is vital, Erin Green says. She also cites the ability to find opportunities for your organization; to make connections; to guide and participate in effective strategic planning; and to support your faculty, administration, and parents in the mission of the organization. Leadership skills and the savvy to negotiate in often treacherous waters are also important, she says. "Everyone has an opinion about public education," Green continues, "and that's why political skills are a must, not a 'nice-to-have'."

In the past, having technical accounting skills may have seemed enough to do a "bookkeeper" job, she says. Today the school business official is part of the district's core leadership team. Susan Harkin agrees: "In today's challenging times, the school business official needs to be a well-respected leader. Whether we are presenting at a school board meeting, communicating the district's finances at the bargaining table, supporting the team we work with, or answering a taxpayer's question about their property tax bill, our success is determined by

our ability to present school finance information as the leader of the school district finances.”

Good advice: I love baseball so this is a baseball quote about finding fulfillment in your career as well as in your life. It's taken from a Dennis Lehane book: "Don't think because you were born on third base, that you hit a triple. Do something with your life that makes a difference for someone beside yourself. Otherwise you'll never score, you'll just die on third base." —JOHN CRAFTON

As education leaders, school business officials also need to develop a thorough understanding of the educational process, Crafton says. “One simply cannot contribute to achieving the mission of a school district without this knowledge—without knowing what good teaching is and how it is nurtured and retained in a school district. The effective school business administrator can then use his or her creativity and ability to win the public trust as tools to gain political and financial support for the school district’s educational needs and priorities.”

The Places They'll Go

Where do our school business officials see themselves in five years? Susan Harkin hopes to continue in the field of school business. “My favorite story is the fact that I started out running the fall fundraiser for my kids’ school and 20 years later I am the CFO for the sixth largest school district in Illinois,” she says. “My hope is to continue to pursue my passion and commitment for providing excellence in education and will be open for wherever my career path takes me.”

Erin Green, on the other hand, is looking forward to a brand new chapter: retirement. “After 35 years of challenging but rewarding work, it is time to change it up,” she says. “I enjoy the outdoors and physical activity, so I hope to be living part of the year in Colorado, skiing, biking, and hiking in the mountains.” Green is ready to let the next chapter of her life unfold as it will.

John Crafton simply wants to continue to serve the needs of school business administrators in the state of Massachusetts. “It’s truly rewarding to work with one’s colleagues toward the accomplishment of a specific mission: the betterment of education throughout the Commonwealth.”

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