

MISSION & MOTIVATION

A Time To Stay and a Time To Move

Transitioning into a new school can be challenging but worthwhile, especially when you have confidence that key relationships will work.



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What defines professional success and creates the optimal balance of challenge, recognition, satisfaction and opportunity differs for everyone.

“I’ve just made the biggest mistake of my life.” These were my words to my wife a few weeks after I started my first job at an independent school. With a background in real estate development and neighborhood organizing in Baltimore, I was not familiar with the dynamics of an independent school, including the governance, school culture or decision-making process.

Two weeks in, the head gave me the news that she had accepted a position at another school. Although new, I understood this was probably not a good development. In addition, I had been pouring over past board minutes and financial statements and saw that things were not in good shape. I called my old job to see if it was still open. Fortunately, my wife talked me off the ledge, and I agreed to give the school a few months.

Something clearly clicked for me, since I stayed at that school for 27 years. Looking back, I think I stayed for two primary reasons. First, an interim head arrived who challenged me to work with him for just one year to help the school. Second, I started to appreciate the dedicated, passionate and talented people that work in independent schools.

Nearly thirty years after that adjustment, I was looking for a new opportunity. Why? What defines professional success and creates the optimal balance of challenge, recognition, satisfaction and opportunity differs for everyone. Possible variables that factor into a career move may include your relationship to the head of school, board tensions, lack of growth, insufficient compensation, better opportunities elsewhere, a bad fit. The calculus can include both negative factors and positive ones.

For me, I knew it was time. Board and head changes prompted me to think about other possibilities. Although closer to the end of my career, I wondered what more I might do, where else I might contribute and make a difference? Lengthy reflection generated some conclusions: I didn’t want to move physically, I wanted to continue using my knowledge of schools, and I would have to carefully consider my next step. While I was mindful to not go public with my search, I put the word out to my friends and colleagues.

In truth, I was ambivalent. I didn’t entirely want to leave the school I had worked at for so long. The openings I heard about involved moving or taking on unwelcome challenges. And then a friend called. She knew about a recently announced retirement from a strong school with a long-term head. Because the school was close to home, I was able to attend several board committee meetings, some strategic planning sessions and a year-end administrative retreat as well as engage in many conversations with the head, board members and school administrators. In short, I was able to do my homework and was fortunate to have ample time to assess the fit. Very different from the school I left, my new school has offered many new, exciting dimensions to explore. I am now in my third year.

Change entails gains and losses. As Thomas Wolfe famously wrote, “you can’t go home again.” I wasn’t looking to go back home, however. I knew that I would simply not have the years to develop the long-term friendships I had at my old school, some of which spanned three decades. I could start new ones, however, with the truly dedicated, talented and compassionate people that tend to work in schools. I have found a number of these colleagues at my current school, and I haven’t looked back.

When making a career transition, if time allows, investigate critical relationships and develop a balance sheet that weighs the potential losses against the gains to truly assess where you are about to land. There are no guarantees.

Once you’ve made the decision to join a new school, these points of focus may help you transition smoothly:

- Determine key relationships and focus on people who are positive about the school and their work. Who will be your allies? Listen to them.
- Analyze the culture of the school and your biggest challenges. Be mindful of the timing of change.
- Start building trust with the head of school. If that doesn’t start well and build over time, it will be extremely difficult to succeed.
- Locate the sources of joy in your new school. **N**

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