

SEVEN QUESTIONS WITH....

LEAH MUSICO, HEAD OF SCHOOL, THE HARBOR SCHOOL

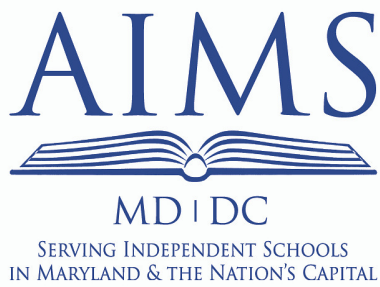


What's your first memory of being a Head of School?

Well, I suppose it was last week! I've had a lot of memorable moments as I've geared up to begin my new role as Head of The Harbor School, as well as after July 1 when I officially began, but the first day of school is always significant. For every teacher, administrator, and student that I have ever met, the first day is full of anticipation - and of course that nervous/excited feeling we all know so well. For me, September 4 was no exception! How would I remember everyone's names? What sort of impression will I make? What if I "mess up" (whatever that means)?

I didn't sleep much the night before, I couldn't eat in the morning, and I got to school in my new yellow dress earlier than usual. I do love that beginning-of-the-year feeling - everything in the building is fresh and organized and ready for the students. Through twelve years in the classroom, and eleven years as an assistant/associate principal, it was always a moment to relish. This time, however, was different - I was greeting students on the first day as the Head of School!

As soon as the first family walked up, I relaxed. I smiled. And I felt like myself. As more and more students arrived, with all of those excited/nervous feelings written all over their bodies, I connected with each family, and realized that I already knew many of them from interactions since being announced in February. These were my people, and this was going to be an amazing year! We're two weeks in, and so far it definitely is!



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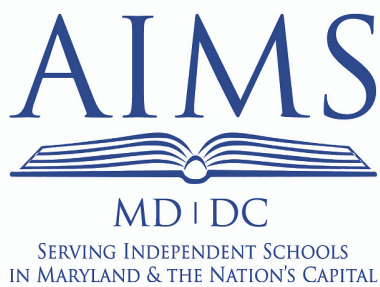
Why did you decide on a career in education?

I was not one of those kids who always knew I would be a teacher someday. Despite frequently hearing that question adults are famous for - "What do you want to be when you grow up?" - I'm not sure I really thought about it much. So when I went to undergrad, I majored in a subject that was really interesting but wasn't the most lucrative - anthropology. (Let me tell you, there were loads of "anthropology jobs" waiting for me upon graduating in 1996!) Luckily my parents supported me with this decision as long as my minor was mathematics. So in my senior year, I decided that I would continue my education with a Master's in Education. And this, quite unexpectedly, turned out to be my lifelong passion. I fell in love with teaching right from the start.

What I didn't realize then was that anthropology, the study of humans and culture, was actually much more relevant to my future career than I thought it could be. It's what teaching is about, isn't it? In learning the craft of teaching, I honed my skills to develop classroom cultures of learning. Now as a Head of School, my role is entirely about school culture. Anthropology turned out to be the right choice for me for a lifetime of learning (and that math minor helped out as well).

What experiences and preparation helped you become a Head of School?

First things first. For many years, I taught. I worked long hours planning ways to differentiate learning for each student in my classroom. I engaged in careful study of research-proven best practices in teaching core subject areas of reading, writing, and math. I collaborated with colleagues to plan units and lessons that would be authentic and relevant to my students. I meticulously prepared bulletin boards, provided feedback on students' writing, and wrote long narratives on report cards. I lost sleep over finding the best way to reach a child who was not quite getting it.



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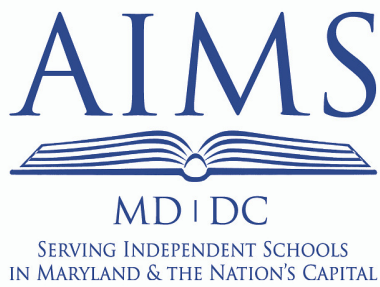
I developed centers, read stories, prepared investigations, supervised recess, worked one-on-one with students - celebrating each success and pushing learning to the next level in big and small ways.

This is the work of an educator, and I can't imagine being a school leader without having had these experiences. And then, for many more years, I was an assistant principal, then an associate principal. In these roles, I organized professional development. I set goals with teachers, observed classroom learning, and provided feedback. I engaged in strategic planning. I dealt with the car line, arrival, and dismissal. I led student assemblies and met with students in small groups. I listened, supported, and problem-solved with teachers. I coordinated curriculum development. I worked with faculty to revise report cards to reflect the development of curriculum. I planned and facilitated parent sessions. I participated in and facilitated important conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I engaged in my own professional learning, reflection, and goal-setting. Just to name a few...

Who was your best teacher?

She was a writing teacher in high school, Ms. Morris. I remember working really hard in her class - writing, revising, receiving feedback, and rewriting, over and over before finally reaching final form. She taught writing as a personal, individual process, and also paid careful attention to the development of specific skills. I learned grammar structures, built my bank of vocabulary, and discovered the origin of words - while learning about voice, organization, and development of ideas.

Ms. Morris provided clear expectations and held each of us to high standards. She gave frequent and detailed feedback. She was approachable but not a friend. She encouraged us to set goals and self-reflect on our learning. She was consistent and fair. Through her, I learned the value of seeing writing as a learning process in itself. And as I write this, I am realizing that many of the traits I admired in her are those that I aspire toward as a teacher and leader myself. How interesting.



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What parts of the work are the most difficult?

When parents and teachers don't see eye to eye, it's not easy for anyone. Even when goals are aligned and focused on the student's learning and success, sometimes differences in perspective can hold us back as the responsible adults in a child's life. Educating children is highly personal, and as a result, passions can be high and emotions can escalate. Ego can get in the way. Trust can sometimes be damaged. I find these situations to be very difficult. They happen rarely, but when they do, they require lots of attention and, at times, difficult decisions.

If you weren't serving as a Head of School, what would you be doing instead, or what would your life be like?

I'd be a teacher, of course! The classroom is where the most important and rewarding work happens. It's a highly motivating and challenging profession, where every decision of every day is purposeful and has great meaning. Not to mention, developing a classroom community, and connecting with each child within it, is an awful lot of fun.

What lessons have you learned about leadership?

Listen. Build relationships with all constituent groups. Work harder than your teachers. Listen. Recognize accomplishments, large and small. Laugh. Set boundaries. Keep your office door open whenever possible. Dress the part. Listen. Be visible every day. Communicate often. Have fun! Listen. Take time for your personal life, health, and well-being. Plan ahead. Be flexible when needed. Listen.