

Preparing to be an Administrator and Securing Interviews

by Jim LeBuffe, EdD

Good leaders help mentor others into the profession. If you know a teacher with leadership potential, here are some ways to help them on their path to the principalship.

Decide

The first step in moving from a teaching position into administration is to decide that you will do so. But educational administration is a broad field; you need to identify one or at least two types of entry level administrative positions you will pursue.

The career path that you want should determine what administrative position you hunt. Is the final job that you want in education a principalship? If so, then becoming an assistant principal will best serve your needs. Is the final job that you envision for yourself a Director of Special Education? Then becoming a supervisor of special education may be a good career move.

Have a Plan

You need to determine what kind of first administrative job you want and then go after it. It is improbable, although it does happen, that a principal or assistant superintendent will stop by your classroom and plead with you to apply to become an assistant principal in the district.

More often, aspiring administrators need to identify the first administrative position they want and take steps to obtain it. Is the first job you want after teaching an assistant principal of an elementary, middle or high school? Is it a supervisor of special education or math? Openings are filled by

applicants who are prepared and ready to pursue opportunities when they occur. Your job is to be that person who is prepared, and to pursue opportunities vigorously.

Make a timeline, write it down and try to meet its goals. A good timeline for a teacher who wishes to become an assistant principal would be to obtain an assistant principal position within two years of fulfilling the requirements for the position.

It is also useful to set a goal concerning the final job you want in education. Do you foresee yourself as a principal at the end of your career? An assistant superintendent? A superintendent? Plans and goals can and often are revised as one's career progresses, but your administrative career may never begin without a plan of action.

Fulfill Requirements for Administrative Positions

Administrative positions in public schools almost always require several years of experience as a certified teacher as well as administrative certification. Research the state or states where you will be applying for administrative jobs and know what course work, degrees, years of teaching and certifications are required for administrative positions of interest to you. For example, several years ago the state of Texas consolidated several

administrative certifications into that of "Principal." This one endorsement, which requires a Master's degree, certain courses and passing a state Principal Certification exam, is what is now required for a myriad of educational positions in the state including supervisor, coordinator, specialist, assistant principal, principal, director and assistant superintendent.

You need to plan what courses you will take by when and how as well as when you will pass any required certification tests for your state. You need to attend a graduate level, accredited program and get started fulfilling requirements for administrative certification, with a goal of completing the needed courses and passing the required state certification exams within a few years.

Join Your District's Administrator in Training Cohort

Does your school district have an "Administrator-in-Training" cohort program? Such programs are common in large school districts and typically involve one to three years of workshops, meetings and presentations from key administrators in the district to the group. In-depth study on topics such as a campus budget or discussion of different scenarios facing school administrators may be part of a school district's administrator training program. Such programs may also involve

the assignment of administrative tasks to participants, such as doing the schedule for a middle school or monitoring how a campus is doing serving Special Education students. These programs are typically not as demanding as Master's programs in Educational Leadership from

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an accredited university, but do involve an extra commitment of time and study. Determine if your own district has such a program then apply to enter it. The contacts that you make in a local administrative training program or cohort can be invaluable in landing your first administrative position.

If you are rejected from entry into a district Administrator-in-Training program, do not take “No” for an answer! Find out who is running the program, and make an appointment. Tell him or her that you have heard it is a great program, that you are taking courses to become an administrator, and that you strongly desire to join the group. Ask again to be admitted to the “Administrator-in-Training” program or cohort, if not in this year’s group, then at least in next year’s cohort. Again, don’t take “No” for an answer!

Alternative Certification

Note this. Some districts, if they are extremely impressed by an applicant’s drive and skills, will hire a teacher to be a first time

administrator even before all of the requirements to receive an administrative certification are completed. Such hires, with “Alternative” or “Temporary” administrative certificates, are not uncommon in some districts. Therefore, if an administrative

opening occurs that is a great fit for you, you may wish to apply for it even before you have administrative certification in hand.

Do Not Wait

You have just completed or are in the midst of taking graduate level courses needed to be credentialed to secure your first administrative position. You have passed or plan to soon take and pass, the state test that is required to become an assistant principal or educational supervisor in your state. Now it is time to plan how to get interviews and the next job that you have been working so hard to obtain.

Be confident! Many of you have 10, 15 or even more years of experience as a teacher and know a lot about your profession. Others may have taught for as few as three or four years but feel ready to become an administrator. That is fine, too! You do not have to spend half of your career as a teacher before becoming an administrator. Successful teachers with a strong work ethic frequently move into administration after just several years of teaching.

Few people are ever fully prepared for a new job; most successful administrators have a skill set, an ability to learn and a work ethic

that leads to success. Smart, driven and talented people are that way at age 30 as well as age 40, and are able to learn a new job as it unfolds.

Do not wait until you feel that you thoroughly know a job to apply for it. One cannot really know what a job is like until one is in it; therefore, make the leap, trusting in your own abilities and drive. The coursework that you are taking in educational leadership should also be preparing you to make a successful transition into administration. And, women teachers, you especially might wish to read Sheryl Sandberg’s best-selling book *Lean In*, and rethink delaying your entrance into administration because you might be having a child in the next few years.

It is time to begin your search for job openings.

Mobility: Decide Where You Will Work

Where will you look for a job? While many teachers land their first administrative position in their own district, perhaps even in the school where they have been teaching, many do not. Think about two things that can greatly increase your odds of getting your first leadership position: the length of commute to a potential job and whether you and your family are willing to relocate.

Let’s look at length of commute. Refer to a map showing the school districts in your area. Pinpoint where you live and then calculate or even make test drives to determine how long it would take you to commute to nearby districts. Remember that “going against the traffic” can make what might seem

at first to be a daunting commute into something quite manageable. By doing this exercise, you may realize that there are several school districts where you could work without moving from your present home. And don't forget that sleepy little school district out in the countryside 30 miles from your home, you might be a most appealing candidate.

Next, decide if you are willing to relocate in order to attain your first administrative job. If you are willing to move, the number of opening positions for which you fulfill requirements skyrockets. How badly do you want to become an administrator? Being willing to make a longer commute or even to relocate, whether within the same state or out of state, is often a key factor in landing a first administrative position.

Start Looking

Check for new openings at least every 48 hours. Some jobs are posted only for a few days, then the posting is withdrawn. Also, realize that some openings may never be posted publicly; the only way to find out about them is through contacts at the school or district.

In addition to applying for openings through the internet or the postal service, use the telephone! Relatively few applicants make phone calls to contacts, campuses and Human Resource departments; calling will set you apart. Call or tell educators you know, in any district or school where you would like to work, about the kind of administrative position that you are seeking. For example, call that teacher who taught at your school two years ago but has moved to a nearby district and tell him or her that you are looking for a new job as an assistant principal.

Tell People You Are Looking

Be assertive; ask administrators in your own district or any district that is interesting and accessible to you if you could meet them briefly in their office, at a coffee shop or for lunch in order to find out more about the district and potential jobs for which you may qualify. Be complimentary about their district and the job they are doing and ask if they have any tips or leads for you as you are trying to start your own career in administration.

Know that many applicants are brought in for an interview simply because a staff member says something like, "I know her. She wants to become an administrator. We should give her an interview."

Key leaders in your own district may not know that you are interested in becoming an administrator. They cannot read your mind; let them know the kind of positions you are looking for and when you will be available.

Try to schedule a meeting with the director of your district's Human Resources department and let him or her know about your career goals. Ask for advice on ways that you can improve your chances of becoming an administrator in your own district.

Your Principal

Tell your own principal about your plans; he or she is going to find out anyway! You can be certain that your principal will be contacted about you when you apply to become an administrator,

whether you list him or her as a reference or not. Principals often choose teachers from their own staff to fill assistant or supervisor vacancies; try to be that person if you wish to stay in the school where you are teaching.

“The contacts that you make in a local administrative training program or cohort can be invaluable in landing your first administrative position.”

Try to develop a good working relationship with your principal. It is helpful if your own principal supports you in your quest to become an administrator. Some principals enjoy developing teachers into administrators and may do things like ask you to accompany them to a central office principals' meeting or give you an administrative assignment to help you grow professionally.

Résumé

Get your résumé in order and keep it updated. It should be clean, crisp and one, or at most, two pages in length. It must not contain factual or grammatical errors. It need not be flashy, colorful or lengthy. Start with your college experiences; do not include information about your high school triumphs. Have a second party, preferably a school administrator, read your résumé critically. Remember that résumés need to make a positive impression, but most of all they should not eliminate a candidate from consideration for a job. Some aspiring administrators also

write and make available an online personal webpage that contains a résumé, career accomplishments, graduate level coursework and career goals.

“Successful teachers with a strong work ethic frequently move into administration after just several years of teaching.”

References

Ask two or three people to be professional references for you. Be certain that they will be very positive about you. Know that even if you do not select your current principal as a reference, districts investigating you for an administrative position will be calling your current principal anyway to talk about you. It is not unethical to provide your references with highlights of your career; even though they know you, they may not know the awards you have won, the organizations to which you belong, the progress your students have shown, and other details that will look good on a letter of reference.

Facebook and Social Media

How many people do not get interviews due to information discovered when prospective employers scroll through Facebook or other social media sites looking for information about them? Many, we guess. Therefore, closely examine your own accounts and edit or shut them down if needed. “Google” yourself to be sure that negative information is not appearing and that might discourage school districts from interviewing or hiring you.

Teaching Assignments and Awards

Applicants may have a better chance of getting an initial administrative position if they have had several kinds of teaching experiences. You may wish to ask

for a different teaching assignment if you have always taught the same subject or at the same grade level. In these times of testing emphasis, never having taught

a subject or at a grade level that is involved in mandated testing may hurt one’s chances of becoming an administrator.

Consider becoming Department Chair or Grade Level Chair. Such positions provide beginning administrative experience and look good on résumés. You may wish to also quietly lobby to be “Teacher of the Year” on your campus or even in your district. “I was chosen as Teacher of the Year” has a nice ring to it when applying to become a supervisor or assistant principal.

Read Professionally

Read widely in your profession. You should be doing this anyway from a desire to grow professionally. But, if for no other reason, begin to broaden your professional reading so as to be a resource for other educators, and to avoid drawing a blank when asked an interview question about some recent educational fad or technique, such as “Flipped Classrooms.” You need to be well read, professional and knowledgeable in your own field. Journals such as *Education Week*, *The Kappan*, and *Principal* magazine should be among your professional reading.

Read your community’s daily newspaper; there are many stories, positive and negative, about local schools in local newspapers. You should know about them. Periodically peruse your own district’s webpage. Budget information, recent hires, job openings and resignations, school board minutes, and award recipients are just some of the information routinely listed on school district webpages.

Join at Least One Professional Organization

Join at least one professional organization such as the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA), Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), Phi Delta Kappa, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), The National Alliance of Black School Administrators, The Association of American School Administrators (AASA), The Association of Hispanic School Administrators or others. Attorneys, physicians and other professionals belong to professional organizations. Educators, especially those striving to become administrators, need to join professional organizations as well. And yes, it looks good on a résumé and could surface in a job interview.

Become a Special Education and/or English Language Learner Resource

Many principals would welcome help from an assistant principal in directing a strong and effective program for special education students and monitoring the same. With the great amount of inclusion of special education students into regular education classrooms, and with the large numbers of Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meetings that need to be scheduled and run,

an assistant who is knowledgeable and enthusiastic about special education students and services may be the person who gets a job offer.

Even if you are not trained as a special education teacher, a knowledge of basic special education law and regulations and a positive attitude toward special education can make you stand out. Further, an ability to work with regular education teachers on designing effective educational experiences while providing required modifications for included special education students can make you a valuable person on a campus. Add the ability to communicate with parents of special education students as well as the skill to run an effective IEP meeting and you may be getting your first administrative job offer.

In a similar manner, many schools in the U.S. now have a significant percentage of students who are English Language Learners (ELLs). Aspiring administrators who understand language acquisition, have practical recommendations ready to offer to teachers of ELLs, and have a proven record of success working with ELL students and their families increase an aspiring administrator's chances of being offered a position.

Participate in Committees

Aspiring administrators should join key committees, either on the campus or district level. Joining committees helps you gain visibility on your campus and/or district. You may learn something new. And close attention to how committees function can help you hone your own administrative skills.

Ask your principal if you can be on a key committee or two on campus.

The site based decision committee has a good title for a résumé and may be one where you learn more about the governance of the school. A related committee that requires teacher participation is the district level decision making committee; see if you can become a part of it.

Volunteer to be on committees interviewing teachers

or administrators, on your own campus or on the district level. Interviewing administrative applicants is an invaluable experience for a teacher who wants to become an administrator. Note the questions that are asked and privately keep a record of them. Note how applicants shine and prosper or go down in flames! Pay close attention, for your time to be interviewed for an administrative position could be coming soon.

Seek Out “Back Door” Ways into Administration

Ask your principal if he or she needs administrative help running summer school, afterschool, or Saturday programs. Such temporary positions often do not require administrative certification and may be secured with a minimum of paperwork and/or interviews. Further, such jobs generate added income, provide valuable administrative experience, and help make a résumé stand out.

Present at Workshops

Most school districts have staff development departments that offer year-round workshops with a peak period in the summer for

teachers. Here is your chance to take that successful teaching or motivational technique you have been using with your students and share it with colleagues. Get to know your school district's full time staff developers and apply

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to present in your own district. From the district's point of view, district teachers are a known entity who usually have instant credibility with colleagues, can be hired at reasonable rates, and can easily be brought back numerous times if their workshop is a hit. The prospective administrator gets the experience of presenting to professionals, sharing his or favorite methods and successes, earning some extra money, and being able to add an attention-getting line or two to a résumé.

Write Curriculum

Many districts hire teachers to periodically update or write new curriculum. This can include activities such as previewing educational software and other educational materials and then recommending whether fellow teachers in the district use it or not. Go for it; apply to be a curriculum writer or reviewer for your district. Note: these temporary jobs are often offered during summer months.

Blog

Many professional organizations have ongoing blogs with teacher

participants. This is another vehicle by which you can spread your ideas and influence. Your blogging experience in professional organizations can set you apart from the typical teacher applicant for an assistant principal, supervisor or coordinator position.

Get Published Professionally and/or Present at Conferences

Writing professionally for educational journals is a rewarding

activity that relatively few teachers or administrators do. Write and try to get published in an educational professional journal. Getting published in your field looks terrific on a résumé and can be a strong factor in getting selected for an interview for administrative positions.

Local, state and national professional organizations are continually hosting conferences

at various locations around the the country. Whether it be for your state organization's annual conference or a conference on a particular educational topic, apply to present at a professional organization's conference. If selected to be a presenter, your school district almost certainly will fund your expenses for the trip. The presenting experience can be the deciding factor in getting you selected for an administrative interview.

Appendix One

Common Questions Asked at Assistant Principal or Educational Supervisor Interviews

- Tell us about yourself.
- Describe any leadership responsibilities that you have had in your career.
- Tell us about the academic performance of the students you have taught.
- How would you build relationships with (students/teachers/parents/other staff).
- Explain your philosophy and views about student and classroom management.
- Any of a variety of "What would you do if...?" questions, including:
 - ▶ A student exhibits behaviors such as fighting or bringing a knife to school.
 - ▶ A student refuses to listen to you and cusses at you.
 - ▶ A teacher is often late.
 - ▶ A teacher often does not show up for assigned duties.
- How would you help new teachers?
- How would you help new teachers have effective classroom management?
- How would you work to have good morale in the school?
- How do you communicate with parents? Angry parents?
- What is your experience with and knowledge about special education law and students?
- How would you help our school achieve good test scores?
- Describe a problem with (students/parents/other staff) that you solved.
- What are your strengths/areas where you could grow?
- If we contacted your current principal, what would he/she say about you?
- What were your latest evaluation results from your job?
- What kind of professional development would you recommend for our staff? Why?
- What are your technology skills? Describe a use of technology that worked/did not work for you and why.
- Why should we hire you? Do you have any questions for us?

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Shine in Your Internship Assignment

Most educational leadership Master's degrees and certification programs include an internship experience that requires graduate students to log many hours of administrative activities and to take the lead in directing a major project or two at his or her school. Projects may include designing staff development programs, updating curriculum, modifying and improving dismissal procedures at a school, coordinating the testing program for a grade level or a school, and a myriad of other possibilities.

Such activities provide a prospective administrator a superb opportunity to showcase his or her administrative talents. Take advantage of it! Your campus administrators and others are watching how you handle these leadership assignments; this is your chance to shine, to impress and to get people thinking of you as a future administrator.

Learn Some Spanish

Many schools and school districts in the U.S. have a high percentage

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Preparing to be an Administrator

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of students and parents whose first language is Spanish. Your chances of obtaining an administrative position in a school with many Spanish speaking parents and children certainly increase if you learn some basic conversational Spanish.

Appearance

Dare we go here? We dare. Appearance counts. Whiten your teeth, get a good haircut and dress like a successful administrator at work and especially at interviews. You are spending thousands of dollars to take courses and the tests to become certified as a school administrator; spending a little more on your dress and appearance as you prepare for interviews makes sense.

Keep Good Records

Keep a record of all job search activities including telephone calls made, emails sent, meetings held with administrators and jobs for which you apply. Once you get serious about looking for your first administrative position, there will be much to record; do not depend on your memory alone. Keep information about positions applied for, interviews that you were offered, those you accepted and what you heard back. Use your records to touch base with key contacts every four to six weeks. See Appendix One on page 10 for a checklist of actions to take that increase your odds of becoming an administrator.



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