July 1, 2019 is just around the corner! Ready to move up? Things to reflect on…

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Superintendent Insight

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By David Fonseca, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Burke County Public Schools on LinkedIn

...Ready to move up? ...Perhaps!
Applying for a new leadership job in education should not be a last minute decision. One should give serious thought to the idea that it may take up to a year to prepare for a transition. Why? Well, because of the complexities, variables, and reflection involved in anyone “moving up” in an organization. Nonetheless, and whether we know it or not, we are ALWAYS “interviewing” for the next job. In other words, your current performance, results, and relationships are already being observed.

Preparing for a new job takes about a year. If the target transition date is July 1, then the summer prior is the best time of the year for aspiring Assistant Principals (current teachers), novice Asst. Principals & Principals (entering their third year), and novice Directors (entering years 3 to 5) to reflect on and decide if they are ready to apply for and secure a new leadership role. What does this mean? Well, it means that it takes time to reflect on a few things - including accomplishments, experience, continuing education, results, reputation and our overall readiness and preparation for more complex tasks and responsibilities. When we look at it more closely, a year is not really a full year since the typical application/interview windows for positions of leadership are between March and May of each year.

While this is not a article about leadership vs. management, this is more about a few “nuggets of wisdom” for our aspiring leaders. However, it should not be misunderstood that these nuggets of wisdom are not "steps" to follow toward success - no such thing. This brief article is only to serve as friendly advice - intended only to help aspiring and/or novice education leaders – to reflect and decide if this is the best time to prepare to apply for a new position in leadership.

Here we go – in no particular order:
Do not call the superintendent to schedule a meeting to discuss your career opportunities.

Instead: Even with an “open door policy” or in a “friendly” administration environment, do not bypass your immediate supervisor. Furthermore, let your work speak for you. For example - lead parent nights, lead staff development at your school and district level, volunteer to serve on district level committees, be thoroughly prepared if you have to make presentations before the school board or parent nights. Do not attempt to develop a reputation (politics) – your reputation will be developed for you (e.g., don’t tell me, show me) by those around you. In fact, assume that you have a reputation now. You need to find out what are “you” known for - but this is not a simple task.

Assume that everyone applying for the job you are interested in has the same or more professional preparation than you.

If so: What separates you from the other candidates? Keep in mind that your professional preparation is a small portion of ‘your’ total package. In other words, your degrees don’t make you better than anyone else - just slightly more educated than some. Do you speak a foreign language? More importantly - are you known for being prepared, punctual, successful (e.g., tests and assessment data)? Also, do you have the support of your principal or supervisor – or are you “trying to leave” your current job? Are you known for your excellent customer service? Are you known as an instructional leader? Do you understand best teaching practices and strategies? Can you conduct professional development sessions? Are you known for leading and inspiring students? Are you known for arriving early and leaving late? Are you known and respected by your parents?

What is your role in the community?

What does this mean? Superintendents, Directors and Supervisors get daily phone calls and emails about teachers and staff. Are you known in the community for returning phone calls and emails? Are you known for being a problem solver? Are you known for attending and participating in meetings in a polite and collaborative manner? Do you participate in community-based efforts to improve your area? For folks in small districts – do you have a collegial relationship with your Sheriff? Do you know your county commissioners? Do you know all school board members in your district – and do they know you?

Do you understand the connection between education and economic development?

What does this mean? Are you familiar with the efforts of your local chamber of commerce? Can you carry a coherent conversation about the job opportunities in your area? Do you attend regularly Board of Education meetings? Have you discussed job development efforts with someone in your area? For small districts - …when was the last time you attended high school graduation exercises? In large school systems – when was the last time you invited your superintendent or area director to visit your school for awards day, read across America day, etc.?

Have you identified an academic need in your school? Have you planned and implemented a data-driven solution?
Why is this important? It shows your ability to recognize an academic problem in your school, develop a data-driven plan of action, and improve for the benefit of students. Consider the following: Did you implement a morning reading program this year? What were the results? How do you grow this reading program? Will you implement a tutoring program at your school this year? Did you implement a bilingual parent night last year - how will you expand this type of event this coming year? What will you do to improve the quality of education for your students this year? Did you partner with a community organization or parent group this year? If so, what are your plans to grow this partnership?

Teachers, Asst. Principals, Principals, Directors - ...as you can see the above type of questions expands beyond performing your daily duties and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. Current Asst. Principals and principals, remember that leadership extends far beyond books, buses and discipline!

- How are you preparing for a leadership role?

What does this mean? Well, it means that if it’s true that nothing can prepare you for your first leadership job, then the question for you is; what are you doing beyond attaining a principal’s license or completing a graduate degree to enhance your understanding of a leadership role?

Reflect on the following questions… Why are you pursuing a leadership role? How are you prepared to be ready on the first day? Do you attend and participate in curriculum meetings? Do you analyze performance data for your school or school system and have you identified areas of concern? Have you shared those areas of concern with your school improvement team and with your principal or supervisor? Did you develop a data-driven plan for addressing your concerns? How do you ensure that all students learn in your classroom, school or school system? What is your level of expertise in the area of formative assessments? Teachers, what does your plan book and/or your daily lesson plans say about you as a reflective practitioner? What will your future employer find in your last three evaluations? Do you lead a student group, robotics competition, science Olympiad? What is your part in the PLC efforts of your school – is it a leadership role? How are you prepared to provide feedback after observing staff? What is your role in the STEM or STEAM initiative in your district – is it a leadership role? Finally, for teachers and novice Asst. Principals, make an effort to attend all afternoon and evening events at your school – you will get a sense of what it is to work the hours and events of your school principal school. By the way, when you attend all events, people will notice on their own - you don't have to advertise it!

- If you are a current Assistant Principal or Principal – remember that experience takes time.

How much time? As long as you need to gain experience, normally no less than three years in your current job. Why three years you ask? Well, this is why… The role of a school administrator moves with the seasons of the year. In other words, in a regular school year you have only one fall, one winter, one spring, and one summer. As such, during your first year on the job, you can only experience one hiring season in the summer, one opening of the school year for the fall, one semester break (and all the Human Resources issues that come with mid-year evaluations) in the winter, one financial cycle in the spring and summer, etc., you get the point. During your second year, you will try to remember what happened during your first year but you also tackle all new issues – hopefully by now you have learned the culture of your school and your staff and you are ready to conduct more crucial conversations with teachers and staff, parents and community. Your third year of experience allows you the opportunity to begin to see the impact of your efforts, vision, and most importantly the “continuity” being developed (by you) in your
school or office (i.e., the results of what you have implemented). Finally, year three also allows you to better understand the repercussions of your actions in the changes to the culture of your school, etc. A word of caution - DO NOT approach your supervisor in December or January of your first year to tell them that, “you are ready” to move up! It may show a complete lack of understanding on your part about the magnitude of your job as a school administrator. Furthermore, they know that you don’t know all the things that are yet to come. Instead, listen to what they observe when they walk the building with you. Contrary to what your supervisors tell you, drop (if you can) everything you are doing and spend time with them during their visit to your school. Your job at that time is to "listen" - do not come across as the "used car" sales person if you know what I mean.

**Good luck!**

Education is evolving and now more than ever school districts need school executives who can function first as instructional leaders. Building managers are important too, but schools are in the business of academics and so the above points are simply general thoughts for “you” to reflect on before applying for the assistant principal, principal or director job you have your eye on. After reading this brief article you may decide that this is not the best time for you to apply – and that’s ok! The last thing you need is to demonstrate to the world how unprepared you are to assume a leadership role -- by applying when you are not ready. Of course, “you” may have already convinced “you” that “you” are ready - …and you may be right. Either way – thank you for leading and inspiring your girls and boys, teachers and staff, parents and community on a daily basis!

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