

Making the Transition

*“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”*

-Polonius' advice to his son Laertes in William Shakespeare's Hamlet

Assuming the superintendency can feel very different for an education leader, even one with a long career in the field. You suddenly become the face of the district (and even perhaps of education in general) within your community. Your words and actions immediately take on more impact. People will look even more readily to you for answers, ideas, and leadership. So how should one best enter into such a role? Here are a few ideas to consider in making the transition:



- **Listen and Learn** - As soon as you reasonably can after being hired, find out what is really important to the various stakeholders of your district community. Interviews, electronic surveys, and receptions are a few ways to pursue this key initial step, with face-to-face options preferred if time and opportunity permits.
- **Communicate Early and Often** - During your “honeymoon” period in the role, you will have a unique opportunity to tell your story and why you are interested in leading the school district. Make the most of it. Through the process, let others see that you care, that you are committed to excellence, and that you are looking to work through challenges positively and collaboratively. Once you have identified themes from your listen and learn efforts, share those with the community and what you intend to do about the themes you heard. This immediately conveys how much you value input and possess an action-orientation.
- **Be Visible** - Your presence at a multitude of events and places, especially early in your tenure, will speak volumes to others about your commitment to the entire community. It also will help build interpersonal currency early on, often before the pressure of any particular issue arises to test a given relationship.
- **Learn All You Can (Quickly) About the District's Finances** - Student achievement is your primary responsibility, but nothing can hamper your effectiveness more quickly than having school finances fail on your watch. Therefore, learn all you can about your district's finances early on and be sure your organization has the expertise it needs to manage its finances well. Your success will depend on it.
- **Secure Some Early Wins** - Momentum matters, as does credibility - and they are connected. Showing yourself early on as a leader who can get things done on issues that matter to people will build credibility and momentum -- assets that can assist in additional and larger accomplishments down the line.
- **Nurture Your Board-Superintendent Relationship** - Find out what is important to each board member and to the board as a whole. Whatever it is, it will now need to be important to some degree to you, too. Investing in board development activities early in your tenure can be a great way to build a common vocabulary, clarify and reinforce roles, and develop a growing consensus about direction for moving forward.

- ***Don't Take Things Personally*** - You are a public figure, who will need to make unpopular decisions at times. Get the best information on a particular issue that you can, communicate about the situation honestly and sensitively, then make the decision in line with your core values and move on. You were hired for such things as this.
- ***Sharpen the Saw*** - You will be no good to anybody if you don't take care of yourself. This involves the physical, emotional, and spiritual sides of who you are. And of course, it also means that your family is not an afterthought. As the old saying goes, "If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."
- ***Develop a Mentor Network*** - There will be many times when you will need the advice of a trusted colleague. Remember, it's a sign of strength (not weakness) to ask others for help, especially because, in the superintendency, those who decide to go it alone are typically destined for failure. So make sure that you have a small circle of mentors that you can turn to for help in anything.
- ***Know and Be True to Yourself*** -- Through your decisions, you will have many opportunities to test, reveal, and shape your values over time. And because you are the face of the organization, the values you reveal through your decisions will also likely become those of the organization. So most importantly, as you enter the superintendent's role, know who you are and who you want to be because that will ultimately cast a large and influential imprint upon the organization you lead.

References

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