The First 100 Days: A Successful Beginning as a School Business Administrator

By Richard H. Weeks

Around early February, I become amused when talking to colleagues about their upcoming winter break vacations. To understand their enthusiasm, one must witness the harshness of a New England winter as it peaks by early February. For weeks, my colleagues tote dog-eared brochures picturing fun-loving vacationers, while making copious plans for only a few brief days on sunny Caribbean islands.

Beginning a new job is similar to taking a trip. Not only is it important to know your destination, it is essential to know your starting point. What follows is an example of one plan of entry into a new school administration position, a position that too many forgo planning themselves, to have others plan for them. The following daily activities should be taken as suggestions only. Administrators should personalize their own plans.

Day 1

The first day in a new position is the day the administrator accepts the job. With the interviews over and the euphoria of a successful negotiation and vote of approval by a school committee, it is time to meet your colleagues and start to gather information about the new school district. During your first 100 days on the job you’ll develop two perspectives. The first perspective is formulated from a review of perceptions that various individuals and groups within the district have of one another. It is helpful to chart the perceptions (see Table 1). The second perspective is garnered from a listing of key priorities that these individuals and groups have identified (see Table 2).

Information-Gathering Interviews

Set aside time during each of the first 100 days to interview all administrators and as many other personnel as possible. Administrators should be interviewed in their offices, which enables them to show you pertinent school-related documents and memorabilia.

Administrators and staff can be interviewed in any order. Catch them when they are available. Some interviews can be arranged by appointment and others can be drop-ins. Take notes and frequently ask whether information being offered is confidential. The questions asked should be consistent for everyone and can include the following:

- How and why did you come to the district and what were some of your career experiences beforehand?
- What have been your responsibilities and duties within the district? Within which schools have you worked or on which committees have you served?
- What do you perceive to be the key issues within your department, your administrative group, or the district?
- What would you like to see changed in the district, and why?
- Describe the most outrageous thing you have seen or heard while in the district. If it was a conflict between people and/or things, describe it in detail. How was it resolved? How would you have handled the problem?

This final question can be the most interesting. It is a Pandora’s box from which individual or organizational shortcomings are exposed. Here, you learn about many of the unresolved or unsolvable problems you have inherited from previous managers. Each person’s story will enable you to develop a clearer perspective of an event that you will undoubtedly see repeated during your tenure in the district.
Table 1
Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Former School Business Administrator's Views</th>
<th>School Committee's Views</th>
<th>Superintendent's Views</th>
<th>Other Administrators' Views</th>
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</table>
| **Of the Former School Business Administrator** | 1. Accomplished most goals of the superintendent  
2. Was well respected  
3. Was a good facilitator; mediator | 1. Did not always come to meetings prepared  
2. Did too much of the superintendent’s job | 1. Mature; respectful  
2. Too independent  
3. Didn’t keep me informed | 1. Caught between too many conflicting demands  
2. Bad temper; “lost cool”  
3. Desk always a mess; not organized |
| **Of the School Committee** | 1. Members serve for all the wrong reasons (i.e., to further their political careers)  
2. Meddles too much in administration  
3. “Flip-flops” on important decisions too often | 1. Good group with no ego problems  
2. Meetings deal too much with personnel issues  
3. No real leadership | 1. Pursues too many trivial issues  
2. Executive sessions not productive  
3. Some members lack community commitment | |
| **Of the Superintendent** | 1. Good educator  
2. Strong leader  
3. Stayed out of my way  
4. Good golf swing! | 1. Excellent leader  
2. Well-informed on all issues | |
| **Of Other Administrators** | 1. Loyal group; hard working  
2. Overpaid  
3. Jim applied for your job but was not certified or qualified | 1. We have too many principals  
2. Bill’s never around when I call | 1. Great team; I hired them  
2. Need to improve student test scores | 1. I seldom talk to the others  
2. Other principals have more money in their budgets than I do |

Add items to the tables as they are identified. As information is presented, clearer patterns will become apparent. The tables will reveal puzzling contradictions and diametrically opposite views of individuals and groups. Ambiguities often signal that information is being withheld. The table of perceptions should remain fluid. Avoid forming concrete opinions about the new district solely on initial observations and discussions. These perceptions serve merely to help you find some logic to the new workplace. When identifying key priorities, avoid making commitments. Key priorities will be most useful when preparing initial work plans, which I will discuss later.

Day 2
The second day in a new position may be a partial day of orientation prior to the first full week of work. It could extend to several days of office visits, including orientation. If there are administrators that you have not already met, ask your superintendent to introduce you to them individually in their offices. Ask your central office administrators to introduce their assistants to you.

Ask your personnel director to orient you to the district, as any new employee would be oriented. This approach will give you a quick impression of the district’s operations and an opportunity to appraise the orientation procedure.

Well-organized districts appreciate smooth transitions from one business administrator to another. If the former administrator is absent from your orientation, ask that he or she be included, if possible. The former administrator...
| Table 2  | Key Priorities |
|----------|----------------|----------------|
|          | School Committee | Superintendent | Other Administrators |
| **Key Issues in Your Area** | 1. We should meet more regularly  
2. Members should be assigned specific duties  
3. School busing policies need to be updated | 1. Helping school committee develop more teamwork  
2. Beginning planning of a new elementary school  
3. Negotiating a new custodians’ contract | 1. Principals: improving student testing  
2. SPED (Special Education) Director: Finding cheaper bus contractors  
3. Foodservice Director: Getting more middle school students to eat lunch  
4. Buildings and Grounds Director: Replacing turf on fields |
| **School District Key Issues** | 1. Safety issues  
2. Improving student test scores  
3. “Getting more bang for the buck” | 1. Improving teacher evaluation tools  
2. Getting voters to increase per-pupil spending  
3. Working more closely with town officials | 1. Need more classrooms; schools are overcrowded  
2. Increasing parent involvement  
3. Need more money for computers |
| **Central Administration Key Issues** | 1. Superintendent’s evaluation is overdue  
2. Need to spend more time on the budget process  
3. Nobody ever answers the phone at Central | 1. Need to update and “cull” files  
2. Grant coordinator is not working out  
3. Getting Susan a new computer | |

Day 3

Devote the third day to a thorough overview of the district’s financials. By day’s end, you could understand them well enough for use in decision making. Unless your central office operates by the seat of its pants, requesting the following information from your financial assistants should not be too traumatic.

Begin with the previous month’s reporting statements to the school committee, including “Results of Operations.” Examine current and year-to-date income and expenses set against budget appropriations. Take a mental photograph of the favorable/unfavorable variance column.

The business office’s computer database should be tapped to provide you with an expenditure ledger, general ledger, and other programmed reports. Quickly review the expenditure ledger, noting any unfavorable balances.

Ascertain the district’s off-balance-sheet obligations. Ask your financial assistant to show you or to prepare a schedule of the current year’s obligations and those of the following 5 years and beyond. The listing should include school construction/property lease payments, computer/photocopy/furniture lease payments, retirement fund, and expected future retirement fund payments and other deferred compensation payments.

Request a list of all revolving funds, trust accounts, money market accounts, and other retained income with a current balance in each account. This is a good time to ask a few questions: Where in the district or the city or town government are these retained and who manages them? Your business office? A city treasurer?

At a later date, review the annual operating budget and quarterly enterprise account forecasts, and discuss budget methodology. By midday, ask your superintendent to inform your bank, in writing, of your check-signing privileges.

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Beware of the “Rebecca Myth”

Sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1980) described a certain workplace behavior as the “Rebecca Myth.” In Daphne du Maurier’s novel Rebecca, a young woman marries a widower and is haunted by people’s idealized memories of the first wife’s endless virtues.

It is difficult for an administrator to follow someone who was a bona fide water walker. Some central office personnel and others in the district will remember the former administrator as nearly flawless and irreplaceable. With those who continually romanticize the past, proceed slowly. Let the memory of your predecessor fade before you actively involve them in new initiatives. Establish your managerial style and start up subtly.

...and Other Pitfalls

You can make more friends in 2 months by becoming genuinely interested in other people than you can in 2 years by trying to get others interested in you (Dale Carnegie & Associates, 1993). Project the message, “I’m here, now what can I do for you?” Not, “I’m here, now what can you do for me?”

Remember that you have no personal agenda as a new administrator. Your agenda is your superintendent’s and school committee’s agendas. Do not succumb to operating values based solely on self-interest. Our private-sector business counterparts call managers who do so “corporate narcissists” (Downs, 1997).

Avoid confrontation with “sacred cows”—not people, but rather outmoded beliefs, assumptions, practices, policies, systems, or strategies, generally invisible, that inhibit change and prevent responsiveness to new opportunities (Kriegel, 1996). You can deal with them later after you have established yourself.

Does your business office have a safe? What is in it and who knows the combination? Does the district have credit cards? Who monitors credit card accounts and where are they? Start a list of all individuals in the district who have the authority to spend money and place orders. What are the limits or guidelines? Does the district use purchase orders? What is the policy for purchase order use?

As the day concludes, take note of close-down routines. Where are records stored? Does your superintendent expect an update from you regarding the day’s physical plant operations or specific financial matters? Do your subordinates expect to provide you with time-specific reports? Before you leave for the day, look under your desk blotter and in the upper right-hand desk drawer for unresolved “problems” left by your predecessor. You don’t think that there are any? Look again.

While successful administrators are good delegators, they retain work that maintains or sharpens their analytical, verbal, and writing skills.

Day 4

By the fourth day, it is important to establish a routine that helps everyone understand who you are and why you are in the district. Exactly who are you and what do you do? This may sound silly to some of you. Consider, however, that many school business administrative positions are in states of transition. Some are being upgraded with increased authority and responsibility. Others are being eliminated or merged with nonbusiness administrative duties.

Effective administrators plan their time wisely. Many set aside specific times of day for specific tasks: work in the office from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., meet with the superintendent at 10:00 a.m., conduct interviews and school visits during midday, and sign purchase orders in the late afternoon.

Arrive early before most key personnel and leave late. Identify yourself as a marathon manager: be available, always. Notice the employees’ work habits. Ask your colleagues to identify the “star” employees. Who can you really depend on to help out in a crisis? They are the ones you want to retain at nearly any cost and promote if possible.

Be sensitive to performing tasks that your superintendent regards as unnecessary or as a waste of time when performed by your predecessor. Can you delegate these tasks elsewhere or eliminate them? Do you need to educate your superintendent about their importance? While successful administrators are good delegators, they retain work that maintains or sharpens their analytical, verbal, and writing skills.

Day 5

Renew or apply for membership with your local ASBO affiliate. Ask about your affiliate’s mentorship program and request that you be assigned to an ASBO mentor.

In the private sector, many companies invest heavily in management development. In what are often called “onboarding” programs, new hires are paired with seasoned coaches and spend weeks or months working in a variety of
company positions. When they eventually settle in their permanent slots, they have a thorough understanding of the company’s culture and operations. They know their duties and how to get things done in the organization.

Mentoring refers to relationships between juniors and seniors (in terms of age or experience) that exist, primarily, to support the personal and career development of the junior person (Jones, 1992). School business administrator mentors provide career bridges for their juniors in the following ways:

- **Technical assistance**—teaching about the cycle of duties, tasks, documents, and reports to be performed or prepared for the district and government agencies
- **Coaching**—giving positive and negative feedback to improve performance and potential
- **Counseling**—building self-esteem, self-confidence, and professional identity
- **Sponsorship**—opening doors; having connections that will support the junior’s career advancement
- **Protection**—providing support in high-risk situations; acting as a buffer when necessary

Having a mentor is a good way for a new administrator to learn the nuances of school business administration. Mentoring relationships enable both individuals to build new skills, prepare for advancement and other growth opportunities, and adapt to changing school organizational circumstances.

**Day 6**

Meet the labor leaders within your district. Most school districts have four or more separate and disparate labor organizations representing the majority of district employees. Ask the shop stewards and president of the teachers’ association to update you on their version of current labor affairs.

When was the last contract settled? What were the key issues resolved in favor of the union? What were the perceived key issues resolved in favor of the school committee? Encourage the unions to maintain an ongoing dialogue with you in informal meetings. Effective administrators manage labor relations so that issues rarely become grievances.

Become familiar with the district’s information systems, including computer hardware and software resources and telecommunications equipment. Interview the manager of information systems to gain an overview of the instructional and administrative networks. Ask for an inventory, by location, of all hardware and software and to whom they are assigned. Who is specifically responsible for maintaining and supervising this equipment? What are the standard operating procedures? Ask for lists of individuals who have access to student records, central administrative files, and payroll and pension accounts. What are the security measures for the systems? Are backup copies of critical records made on a regular schedule and are they stored off-site?

**Effective administrators manage labor relations so that issues rarely become grievances.**

**Day 7**

Most school business administrators manage their districts’ busing operations. It is highly likely that you will be involved in a busing matter long before Day 7. Busing issues are usually waiting for you on Day 1. Bus operation problems are generally the first problems you will encounter, and they are frequently the most contentious. Unlike problem resolution in all other aspects of the business administrator’s job, whereby a “win-win” outcome can usually be achieved, most busing problems have a “win-lose” outcome. In the event that you must terminate a bus driver for inefficiency, the school district wins and the bus driver loses. If a student is suspended from riding the bus because of bad behavior, you win and the student’s parents lose. A mentor once reminded me that I couldn’t possibly have the wisdom of Solomon. I do, however, attempt to have the patience of Job and maintain the hide of a rhinoceros.

Familiarize yourself with your district’s busing policies, procedures, and history of problem resolution as quickly as is possible. Get to know the drivers on a first-name basis and review the bus routes. Stop by the bus garage, unannounced, and visit with the mechanic. Are the buses clean and marked on each side with their numbers and the name of your school district? Ask to see the annual state/province inspection report for each bus. As you drive throughout the district, take note of your bus drivers’ driving skills, and signage alerting the public to bus turnarounds and posted speed limits. At the end of the day, are signs that say, “This bus is empty,” prominently posted in the rear windows of the parked buses?

**Day 8**

Join ASBO International if you are not already a member. Order several publications from ASBO that can provide you with a quick resource on matters pertaining to your new job. Two major books that should be part of your library are Principles of School Business Management (Wood, Thompson, Picus, Tharp, 1995) and Financial and Managerial Accounting for School Administrators (Everett, Lows, Johnson, 1996). Both are

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available from ASBO.

In Principles of School Business Management, read chapter 1 to gain a comprehensive overview of your position and to learn about the relative importance of your daily responsibilities. Read chapter 22 to better understand your school lunch program. Be aware that federal regulations and requirements may have changed since this book was written. However, the sections that pertain to program organization and administration are very relevant. Most school business administrators are unaware that they oversee the biggest restaurants in their communities. How many other local restaurant executives oversee serving 2,500 or more lunches, within the tight time frame of 60 minutes, at numerous sites on a daily basis?

Having come from the private sector, those of you new to school business administration will find Financial and Managerial Accounting for School Administrators helpful. This book is designed to orient you quickly to nonprofit, government financial and managerial accounting. For those of you with little or no accounting training, it provides you with a knowledge base of school fund accounting. Chapter 14 concerns debt service funds for bonds issued on new school construction and explains how these transactions are recorded and reported. Chapter 17 will teach you about enterprise funds and the method of preparing profit/loss statements for divisions or departments that operate as small businesses within your district.

Most school business administrators are unaware that they oversee the biggest restaurants in their communities.

Day 9
Review your district’s emergency response program with town and city officials. The magnitude of loss and confusion created by natural disasters and school shootings reinforces the importance of emergency planning. What are the plans for training personnel in safety procedures, for establishing alternative means of operation in advance of major work disruption, for making claims for insurance coverage for catastrophic loss, for protecting the district’s automated systems, and for safeguarding student and personnel files and records? Which of your schools are used as shelters during natural disasters, such as ice storms and hurricanes? To whom do you apply for reimbursements to the district for use of the facilities and food commodities?

Day 10 and Beyond
Translate identified priorities into work plans and evolve your position from one of observation to one of active participation. Contrary to much contemporary business mythology, most of any administrator’s job is about 1% creativity and 99% hard work. A work plan for an identified priority, as in Table 3, can outline and clarify the scope of the priority that now becomes a project.

Even in the smoothest of transitions, it is not unusual for a new administrator to face a multitude of unfinished projects from his or her predecessor. Work plans for each project will help define the task; indicate its priority; identify the key steps, dates, and people who should be involved in the project; and specify the outcome.

Many of your initial work plans will be for projects that you may handle yourself. If the plan is to be assigned to an assistant, ask him or her to review a draft of the plan and add his or her own insights since he or she may have handled the matter before. Review the work plans with your superintendent to clarify priorities. You may find the work plan format in Table 3 helpful for most projects throughout your tenure as administrator.

Day 100
In any position, Day 100 is always an important milestone. For school business administrators, the honeymoon is generally over. Endeavors new to both the administrator and the district are under way. They are planned and executed alongside the expected day-to-day managerial duties.

It is important that your superintendent give you a frank appraisal of your work to date. Both commendations and recommendations should be expressed. Some superiors state their expectations and priorities explicitly and in detail. However, many do not. The burden may fall to you to take the initiative in getting your boss’ expectations clarified on an ongoing basis. What are your superintendent’s top priorities in terms of problems and activities? What does your boss see as your role? Your continued success depends
Table 3
Sample Work Plan

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project: Renewal application of district liability insurance policy</th>
<th>Assigned to: Assistant Business Manager (ABM)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition of Task</strong></td>
<td><strong>Priority</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. To renew the district’s present liability insurance policy or purchase one from another carrier</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To reassess the terms, limits, and provisions of a new policy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. To secure financing for a 1-year premium</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>H = high</em>&lt;br&gt; <em>M = medium</em>&lt;br&gt; <em>L = low</em></td>
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on developing a set of mutual expectations and a working relationship with your superintendent that accommodates the needs and styles of both of you.
Always keep your mind open to change. Welcome it. Court it. It is only by examining and reexamining your opinions and ideas that you can progress (Dale Carnegie & Associates, 1993). □

References


Bibliography

Richard H. Weeks is the business manager for Grafton (Massachusetts) Public Schools.