

# MOVING FROM THE SUPERINTENDENCY TO THE PROFESSORSHIP: TEN EASY STEPS TO MOVE YOUR CHEESE FOR BETTER AGING\*

James Bird

This work is produced by OpenStax-CNX and licensed under the  
Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0<sup>†</sup>

## Abstract

After serving 31 years as a school administrator, the last 16 as a superintendent, the author entered a career transformation by pursuing a tenure-track position in a research university. Following a calling to share acquired field experiences with the next cadre of school administrators, the writer outlines the process used to successfully compete for a university position. How-to preparation strategies, interview skills, and career decision-making processes are detailed. The article concludes with descriptions of differences encountered between being a prestigious superintendent and being a neophyte assistant professor. Demographics indicate that the number of retiring school executives may exceed the number of interested entering administrators. The latter need the experiential knowledge base of the former and the university seems ideally suited for such teacher/learner exchanges.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Maybe it's the persistent battles with the same couple of Board members that suddenly have gotten old. Maybe it's the fact that one now has attained full retirement benefit status. Maybe the coming years will be much like the last couple and that just isn't too exciting anymore. Maybe it's a combination of these possibilities that leads superintendents to conclude that it is time to pursue something else. What follows is one superintendent's transformation from boardroom to university lecture hall.

1. Making the Decision: It's not problem-solving, it's purpose- finding

---

\*Version 1.1: Jan 19, 2007 10:56 am -0600

<sup>†</sup><http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

Superintendents make decisions constantly. The quality of those decisions to a large degree determines how successful the superintendency will be. The same holds true for the decision to transform careers. Establishing a starting point for perspective is critical. Adopt the perspective that the decision-making process is not one of problem-solving but rather one of purpose-finding. What exactly does one wish to accomplish? One needs to carefully study why one wants to leave, and where one wants to go. A full and comprehensive self-assessment is in order. Carefully examine family needs and include them in all decisions. Bounce early plans off of a few trusted friends and colleagues. This actually begins the “public nature” of the decision.

Reducing one’s thoughts to writing might produce a clarity or exactness to one’s plans beyond that of just mental musings. Once on paper, see how well it fits. Variables to be considered include impact on family, economics, health, age, and career goals.

Everyone’s economic situation is highly personal and individualized and in the case of superintendents probably rather complicated. A session with a financial advisor to sort out the vagaries of retirement plans, insurance, contract entitlements, and investment account management is worth the fee. If not current, one’s will and estate planning might need attention from an attorney.

## 2. Getting the Paperwork Ready: Blend of electronics and parchment

Jumping into the job market may be a natural next step or it could be a giant leap depending upon how recently one has done this. The process has evolved into a dynamic mixture of electronics and parchment. Some institutions are farther along in their quest of paperless operations and applicants need to adapt to the new electronic expectations. Create or convert all documents to digital format so that they can be sent over the internet.

Investigate the current operational procedures of one’s university placement office. It is probably more electronic, template-based, and expensive than the last time it was used. Make sure there is compatibility between placement office capabilities and the requirements of the university’s application process.

Early on, assemble the cast of reference providers. Demographics are important. Balance the reference list by gender, race, and stakeholder status. Recruit knowing that each reference provider will be called upon to represent the applicant in absentia with written and verbal clarity, intensity, and commitment. Substance matters but nuances could be critical so the references have to be able to think on their feet and respond nimbly and convincingly to inquiring questions. They will (or will not) bring the candidate to life off the printed page and thus determine if the candidate moves from the application stack to the interview list.

Simply dusting off previously used materials will not suffice. Awareness of audience shift is very important. Teachers apply to human resource officers; principals apply to superintendents; superintendents apply to Board members; and future professors apply to faculty committees. The letter of introduction has weight and needs to be cloned to one’s purpose and the institution’s job description. It should concisely give the reader a sense of why one is applying, how this position fits into one’s career, and why the institution will benefit from employing the applicant. Craft the resume to show potential productivity as a future professor and not just accomplishments as a superintendent. It needs to be tilted from serving a community’s school district to serving a university’s community of learners. For example, one’s potential to produce scholarly research is much more important and valued than one’s list of passed bond issues.

Package testing is strongly recommended. If one knows current university professors, asking them to review the set of materials assembled could generate salient tips for improvement. Their valuable insights could catch missing elements or could underscore pieces that need embellishment. They might even highlight an unknown pitfall to avoid.

Exactly how one’s documents electronically transfer is crucial. One needs to know if margins and bullets are maintained or if their formats atrophy from incompatibility between sending devices and receiving devices. Faxing materials saves time and money at the cost of crisp rendition of original copy. Paper bond and color, font size and style, and the enclosure mechanisms are all important in representing the applicant to strangers. Ubiquitous trade books and articles present the range of available possibilities. Choose the soft side of the corporate business style packages because they convey a sense of clarity and seriousness.

## 3. Scouting the Possibilities: Moving from Education Week to the Chronicle of Higher Education

Learning about vacancies at the collegiate level is parallel to learning about superintendent openings. In-

stead of listings in Education Week, many positions are posted in The Chronicle of Higher Education. Search professional association publications and placement office notices. Using one's accumulated professional networking system could be helpful also. Key data to be culled from the vacancy announcement include job description, tenure-track or non-tenure track status, full-time or part-time commitment, application deadline, and starting date. Salary is generally not posted and is usually less than one would guess.

Determining where to apply is an obviously important decision. Because this process may involve a geographic move, perhaps the last major move of one's life, careful deliberate planning needs to occur. Review retirement publications for comparative metrics on regions. Induce heavy doses of family consultations and discuss to agreement on location decisions.

The type of higher educational institution is another key decision. Research universities require scholarly publication and responsibilities generally include teaching (40%), research (40%), and university service (20%). Applicants need to know that besides teaching, they also need a burning desire to conduct original research and get the results published in peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and/or books. Peer reviewed publications are those that send submitted manuscripts out to be blindly judged by scholars in the field and are the gold standard for researchers. Non-research colleges and community colleges usually do not have the research component and the applicant would be required to teach more sections of classes. The mix of graduate or undergraduate courses will vary and the difference is significant in terms of the culture of the classroom.

Another cultural factor is the student body composition. Is the institution attended by full-time students who live on or near campus or is the institution serving commuters who have full or part-time job commitments? Websites of the institutions contain information in formats that are relatively standard and easy to retrieve for comparisons. Give serious consideration to the set of circumstances within which one wishes to work.

Timelines vary but it is not unusual for an early fall posting, first of the year interview, and decisions made in February or March for a fall academic year start. That means that applicants are gathering references and materials about nine months before handing out their first course syllabus. A good rule of thumb is about a year passing between the decision to leave the superintendency and beginning the collegiate faculty work. Baked into the timeline is the necessary ingredient of "public knowledge" of the superintendent's intention to leave. Consider contractual matters as well as the hierarchal communication sequence with one's Board, staff, and local media. The executive succession process requires careful consideration as well. All of these events affect the day-to-day operations of the leaving superintendent's school district. The extent to which the unfolding events are well-planned and effectively communicated is the extent to which the leaving has minimal negative consequences for the district. Unfortunately, the converse is also true.

#### 4. Applying for the Position: Presenting oneself in absentia

Create the application package with the goal of separating one's self from all other candidates in the stack. It must be eye-catching and perfect. Publications and conference presentations should be listed in APA format. It should be proof-read by disinterested third parties. Ensure strict compliance with all stated application requirements. Make sure there is an intertwining of what one wants to become and what the institution is seeking in a new hire. Understand the expectations and the capabilities of the hard copy or electronic storage/management system being used by the selection committee. Cues to this can be found in the application directions but one is well-advised to make a personalized phone call to the office manager. Directly discuss their procedures. For example, if materials will be photocopied and disseminated to faculty search committee members, then the submitted master copy should be paper clipped rather than stapled. If the material is sent electronically as an attachment, make sure it can be opened by a variety of playback devices.

#### 5. Prepping for the Interview: This isn't Kansas anymore

Colleges within the university and departments within the colleges usually post on the internet a great deal of information that will be useful to the candidate. Being familiar with this information and weaving it into interview responses helps one's chances. It shows that one has done his or her homework and is very serious about pursuing the opportunity at hand. It is not unusual to find degrees and programs offered, courses taught, organizational structures, and faculty profiles online. Topical white papers, mission statements, and

evaluative criteria documents are other examples of available and usable information.

University campuses are a different world than school districts on several levels. First, they operate on a different set of values than public school administration. Intellectual properties and ethereal discourse are treasured commodities. The quality and quantity of one's publications are what light up the scoreboard. Research prowess and the ability to snare grant dollars for further research are of paramount importance.

A different vocabulary exists. Starting with new labels on the organization chart like chancellor, provost, and dean continuing through evaluation terms like dossier, peer-reviewed journals, and qualitative/quantitative research distinctions, the superintendent turned faculty candidate encounters a steep learning curve. At times, English may indeed seem like a second language.

An effective strategy to navigate these new waters of values and vocabulary is to find "one of them" at one's local university and conduct a mock interview session. They can enlighten, clarify, and help discern shades of differences between district and campus. Sending this person a set of questions prior to the meeting can help focus the conversation. Solicit tips on what the faculty search committee might be seeking and what it might ask as interview questions. Ask how faculty members are evaluated en route to attaining tenure. Ask about the concept of research and its place as the real currency of campus productivity. The nuances picked up from the conversation will be as valuable as the facts and figures shared. This writer's session yielded valuable information on research agenda, teaching a class to students during the interview process, and caveats concerning tenure.

Fundamental to the preparation for the interview is a solid understanding of oneself and the rationale for seeking this change of career bearing. Reduce the rationale to writing and rehearse its presentation. The reader is cautioned to be squeaky-clean honest in creating this statement. If this career change motivation is not a "calling" to do something different with one's life then the intensity of the application will be rightfully questioned. In the case of this writer, there was sincere concern over the replacement of the nation's current cadre of school leaders. In fact, the continuation of public education seems dependent upon the next generation being successful. Thus, becoming involved with the professional preparation of the future school executive corps was compelling. If one's motivation lacks a sense of deep felt passion, it will be revealed during the interview process and other applicants will be seen as better choices. Knowing oneself and being comfortable with that knowledge is a powerful weapon and will become self-evident through the crucible of the interview process.

The inevitable questions about the candidate's research interests require advance preparation. Identify areas of interest (the superintendency) and better yet topics of interest (success factors therein) for research projects. Sources of information for this vary from that which raises questions in one's own mind to articles of published research which highlight suggested further inquiry. Specifics can be hazy at the time of the interview but the candidate needs to be conversant in the concept during the interview.

The interview committee will want to know about the applicant's teaching interests and abilities. Prepare two lists of courses. The first contains courses that one wants to teach; the second contains courses that one is capable of teaching. The cited courses should be actual courses being offered by the faculty which are more than likely posted on the university's web pages. A reasonable number is three or four in each category.

#### 6. Interview Presentation: It's show time!

Once all of the above background preparation is gathered, the candidate can focus on the interview setting. A simple hard-covered folder carried in hand is good for holding prepared notes and collecting handouts. A single page should hold in note format that which one wants the interview team to know about one's self. Quick reference glances down to one's notes ensure complete presentation. Another page should contain all questions, prepared in advance, that the candidate wants to ask.

One should dress for success and not underestimate what the campus attire might be. A safe guideline is to wear what one would wear to the Board's business meeting. If a new suit is not purchased for the event, consider a new accessory like a different tie or scarf to make one feel fresh. Personal grooming needs to be impeccable.

This writer suggests writing out and verbally practicing answers to questions that are likely to be asked. Inquiries such as personal background, professional preparation, experience, and interests are predictable.

The faculty selection committee already has answers to these questions in the application materials submitted so they are listening more to how the questions are answered than to the content of the answers. Successful candidates take advantage of this and create a comfortable, confident tone with practiced (but not staged) responses.

The interviewee is well-advised not to allow the team's questions to change his or her answers. One should not be concerned with giving the team answers it wants to hear but rather, giving the team answers describing that which one wants to become.

Candidates need to be cognizant of the non-verbal messages they are sending. How one carries one's self is noted including postures, gestures, and degree of attentiveness. One's interaction with non-participants will be noticed. Secretaries, passers-by, wait staff are all encountered during the process and each needs the candidate's attention. It is vital that one acts in a natural fashion and if that reflects a humble confidence, it is to the candidate's advantage.

If given an opportunity to teach a class, one should find out as much as possible about the setting of the class ahead of time. Data such as number of students, level of course (graduate or undergraduate), availability of technology, length of time for session, are all important factors. If given the choice, choose a topic within one's area of expertise that will be of interest to the students as well. Prepare handout materials, a presentation period, and a question/answer session. A good organizer which doubles as a presentation aid is the PowerPoint format. Be sure to have the contents in several forms such as on a carried laptop, on a compact disk, and on a USB device. This creates the flexibility of then producing a slide show, handouts, or transparencies. Seize this opportunity to learn more about the university and the department from the students. What are their goals? Are they progressing towards their goals? Are they proud of their institution? What do they look for in faculty? What are the strengths and challenges of their experiences? These are all good topics through which one can learn the culture of the university from the students' perspective. If faculty members happen to sit in on the class, be mindful that they are one's audience even more so than the students for this occasion.

The entire interview process may contain multiple components. A typical agenda might include an arrival dinner with a few faculty members; breakfast with other faculty; teaching a class; lunch with still other faculty; the team interview; a meeting with the department chair; and a session with the college dean. Such a series of encounters can be very tiring and the candidate must be able to endure the interactions both physically and mentally.

Somehow with all this going on in rapid succession, the candidate needs to keep track of what was said to whom to avoid redundancy and to maintain the appearance of freshness. Personal and individualized thank-you notes to all involved are a nice expression of one's appreciation of their consideration.

#### 7. Deciding on the Close: Careful for what you wish

Following completion of the interview process, it is important to jot down impressions, anecdotes, and other pertinent information. The airport wait and the flight home offer good opportunity to do so. Pack to allow access to notes, materials, and writing instruments.

It is vitally important to make an objective assessment of what the career opportunity looks like on paper. Add to that what the interview process has revealed about future colleagues. Attention needs to be paid to the questions: "Does it feel right?"; "Is this how I want to spend the next several years?"; and, "Do I want to work with these people?" This is a multi-year commitment on both sides and neither side can afford to make a mistake. Share this data with family and carefully debate whether there is a personal and professional match in this career possibility.

#### 8. Leaving the Old: You don't own these jobs, you rent them

Timelines need to be established for the public announcement of leaving, termination date, and role (if any) in the selection/succession process of the new superintendent. Depending on the communication systems already established, work out specifics with the Board president then share with the entire Board, central staff, administrators, faculty, staff, and community. Word spreads quickly and it is difficult to sequentially manage the emerging news.

While the announcement of one's leaving is hot news, the establishment and implementation of transitional activities will have a more enduring impact. Create such activities for staff, parental organizations, and

community relationships. Give care to assure completion of commitments before leaving office. Anticipate a number of staff members requesting letters of reference for their personnel files and plan sufficient time to complete those. All of these details allow the leaving superintendent to go out graciously and improve the chances of the in-coming superintendent's start-up success.

Termination activities extend beyond the job as well. There are a myriad of tasks which need to be done with personal matters at home. Spousal teamwork is essential and may be the most important planning sessions attended. Time must be carved out of one's calendar to get these matters resolved.

Steel one's self for the psychological impact of such drastic changes in one's personal and professional life. There will be a new top gun in town handling the reins of leadership. Organizational allegiances will shift away from the leaving superintendent and towards the newcomer. The inevitable lame-duck management milieu will surface during the final months. Different people on staff will respond differently to all of this in unpredictable fashion. One should be ready for surprises and strive not to take negative reactions personally.

Afford the new superintendent full support and an offer of unending help. Subsequent follow-up calls should be initiated by the new person. Stay away from the district and allow the new person to emerge as the new leader. This is especially true concerning interaction with Board members and key staff personnel.

An old adage seems appropriate to sum up the transition period. Whenever one feels indispensable, one should stick their forefinger into a beaker of water and notice the hole that's there when one pulls their finger out. In other words, life goes on and if one has done a good job, the organization will survive and thrive despite one's departure. That does not negate the fact, however, that the leaving will heavily tax both head and heart. Prepare oneself for this internal turmoil.

#### 9. Beginning the New: Getting your feet wet one toe at a time

Assuming survival of the real estate component (sale of old, purchase of new, movers, moving, new licensure) one emerges into a whole new world which must be learned. For starters, one is at the exact opposite end of the status continuum. A superintendent has lots of status stripes as he or she travels around the school district and its community. A new assistant professor has none. The latter exists in a state of anonymity. No one knows or pays attention to a new faculty member walking across campus. Concomitantly, one's responsibility scope has diminished exponentially. As superintendent, any and all problems/mistakes are the superintendent's to solve or get solved. As a new faculty member, anything and everything wrong on campus is owned by someone else. The 24/7 personal data assistant device is no longer welded to one's hip.

Going to meetings is interesting. First of all, someone else is chairing the meeting and someone else is trying to get the group to do something. Most of one's new colleagues will be much younger and many will have already established themselves within the value system of the university. Orientation meetings on a wide variety of subjects will overwhelm the neophyte.

The newcomer has established no history and therefore, has no cushion of context. For example, no one knows about one's excellent attendance record and if one happens to get sick early on, questions about their health might arise. Same goes with sense of humor, style of dress, office hours, productivity, and the list continues. All of the above can raise anxieties to detrimental levels and some good advice would be to get a grip on one's emotions. The reality is probably that no one else notices. Self-confidence and self-patience are good skills to practice at these times.

There are other aspects of campus life which are very different from a superintendent's previous life. Parking issues are foremost. On most campuses, parking is king because it is a scarce commodity. Hierarchical pecking orders become readily apparent as gradients of class are displayed on windshields in different colored badges.

The salary and benefit packages are much less for starting faculty. One's faculty office space will be in all likelihood about half the size of a superintendent's secretary's space. It will certainly not contain enough wall space to display all of which has been earned in one's previous work. On the plus side, Friday nights no longer include whistles and one has almost complete control over one's calendar. The university gives general guidelines of work time allotments but the actual implementation is left to the individual's self-directed work ethic. After plotting class meeting time and office hours, the rest of the week is used for one's research and service responsibilities and these hours are completely self-governed.

#### 10. Office Survival: Julie, could you please . . .

A final note on job transition revolves around the fact that one no longer has a secretarial staff. (The same goes for custodial, maintenance, technology, security, etc. Those services exist but no one knows the new person like everyone knew the superintendent. Filing work order request sheets is a lot different from casually mentioning something and seeing it appear momentarily.) One has to create from scratch an effective filing system, address book, and calendar. That becomes evident the first time the stack of papers falls, one tries to make a phone call, and one misses a meeting. The next legal pad, envelope, or paper clip might be waiting in the nearest Office Max. No helpful, efficient assistant is hovering, anticipating what will be needed next, prompting appointments, or giving friendly reminders of timelines. It is at that point that one truly understands, appreciates, and misses that which one once had.

#### Is It Worth It? Cut to the chase

In this writer's experience, the ability to smoothly move the household eight hundred miles; the ease of selling/buying real estate; and, the adaptability to change for card-carrying AARP'ers was over-estimated. The time required to move the family; the complexity of the move; the logistics that get techno-bureaucratically messed up; the costs of transition; the physical and emotional strain of the move; and, the cultural shift of moving to a new part of the country was under-estimated.

The stress is different. Stress which once came from both external and internal forces is now mostly internally-based stress. The potential for personal growth is limitless. The job satisfiers come from oneself, from one's students, and from a colleague or two. One's sense of accomplishment and scope of impact might have more frequent deposits as a faculty member. Setbacks and chaotic moments might also be smaller and less frequent than in the superintendency position.

On a broader or societal scale, demographics seem to indicate that the number of retiring school executives may exceed the number of entering administrators. The latter need the experiential knowledge base of the former and the university seems ideally suited for such teacher/learner exchanges. Just because one is ready to leave the grind of the superintendency does not necessarily mean that one is ready for the rocking chair on the porch along the shore. Contributing to the growth of the next generation of leaders is an attractive and rewarding alternative.

The simple answer to the question of whether it was a smart move or not is an unqualified, yes, it was the thing to do. Scholarly research demands well defined and discreet dependent and independent variables. Metrics are a real challenge in the social sciences. Was the change in one's career from district to campus worth it? Here is some data: the alarm clock is used infrequently, the spouse is quilting more, and the more frequently-exercised dog is happier.