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Why would a teacher decide to leave the classroom to become a school administrator? **By Suzanne Tingley**

That is the question I ask my graduate students on the first night of their class in educational administration. Here are some typical responses I hear from teachers considering a career move:

“My principal makes the job look like fun.”

“I’m looking for another challenge.”

“The athletic director is retiring in a couple of years and I’d like to be considered for his job.”

“We’ve had three principals in the last five years. I think I could have done a better job than a couple of them did.”

“I’ve been teaching for 20 years and I’d just like to try something different.”

At some point in their career, most teachers wonder whether administration might be right for them. Some quickly reject the idea; they like what they do and don’t want to be too far removed from the children. “I enjoy the daily contact with my students,” says Nannette Baker, a veteran special education teacher in Elyria, Ohio. “I know that I can make a difference with my kids because I am connected to them and I’m invested in their success every day.”

Some teachers decide not to enter administration because they don’t want what they perceive as the additional stress or responsibility that comes with it. Instead, they may seek teacher leader positions that allow them to participate in decision-making within their

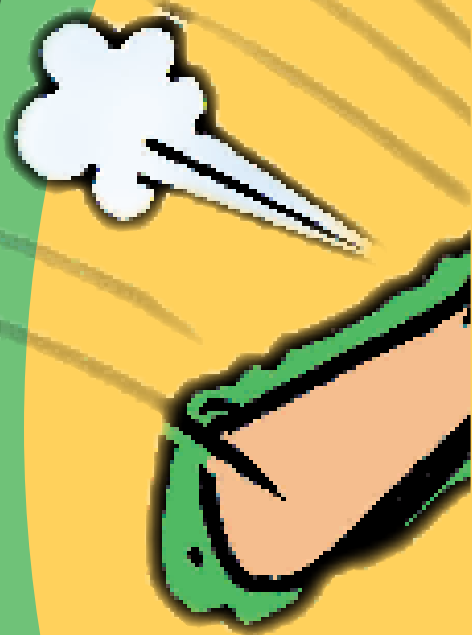
school or district. Teachers may become department chairs, head up special projects, or serve on committees. Connie Wagoner, who teaches second grade in Carthage, New York, regularly volunteers for district committees to develop curricula, choose materials, or interview teaching candidates. “I don’t want the responsibility for the final decision,” she says, “but I like to be proactive instead of reactive to programs that will directly affect me and my students.”

When teachers do decide to explore the possibility of moving from the classroom to the school office, they may enroll in courses leading to an administrative certificate or degree, depending on state requirements. As an adjunct professor with 20 years’ experience in school administration, I try to identify for my students some of the issues they may want to consider as they contemplate a different career path.

Every career has its positives and negatives. Like teaching, school administration is not for everybody, and simply succeeding at coursework doesn’t mean the job is right for you. Not everyone who graduates with a teaching degree belongs in the classroom, and not everyone with an administrative certificate belongs at the helm of a school. If you are thinking about a career move, here are some key ideas to consider.

Broader Influence

As a teacher you can make a palpable impact on a student’s life. We know



that a teacher’s influence can be felt for many years beyond the time the child spends in your classroom. This rewarding aspect of teaching cannot be denied.

Administrators can have a similar impact on the teachers they lead. Working with their faculty, they can determine not only the curriculum but the culture of the entire school. Of course, like certain action figures, they can use their powers for good or for evil, but helping an educational community work together for the benefit of children is a profoundly gratifying experience.

Greater Responsibility

Along with that opportunity for greater influence comes responsibility for the

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general success of a school. As a principal, you will probably spend more time with the reluctant scholars than with the honor students. You will also become better acquainted with irate or demanding parents. Frontline administrators must develop a high tolerance for conflict, and—for their continued mental and physical health—they must learn to leave school stresses at school. If you are a person who avoids confrontation at any cost or dwells on problems even after they have been resolved, you may have a difficult time with this aspect of the job.

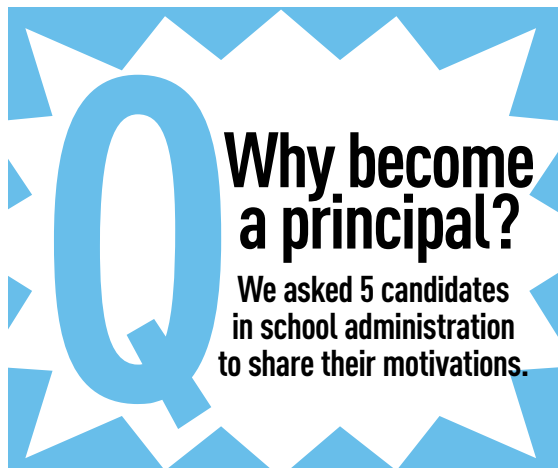
Freedom and Flexibility

Administrators generally set their own schedule. There's a phone on your desk, so you don't have to share the one in the teacher's room. You can go to the restroom whenever you need to, not just when you can get someone to cover for you. If you have to leave the building, you don't have to worry about preparing materials for a substitute and you don't have to wonder what the office will look like when you get back. On the other hand, you're on call 24/7.

Unpredictability

Administrators may get to set their own schedule, but that doesn't mean they can keep to it. You can start your day with a well-considered to-do list and find that by 4:00 you have not accomplished a single item. It only takes one unforeseen incident to disrupt your entire day.

Many administrators find this unpredictability one of the most enticing aspects of their job. Like the proverbial box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get. It's frustrating, but it can also be exciting and challenging. Of course, not getting your work done during the day means working an occasional evening or weekend to catch up.



“After a great 30 years in the classroom, it was time to see if I could serve the whole school community.”

—Bill Nygard, vocational education teacher

“I was a struggling learner. I want to make sure that other kids who struggle have a greater chance.”

—Jonah Stevens, elementary teacher

“I want to work on the big issues in education.” —Kathleen Lind, English teacher

“I love being with children every day, but I want to share with other teachers what works.”

—Elizabeth Culbertson, elementary teacher

“Becoming an administrator seemed like the next step on the career ladder.”

—Deanna Lothrop, home-school coordinator

Public Scrutiny

A teacher may be able to go into the classroom and close the door, but school administrators are often in the public eye. Even on your worst day as a teacher, it is unlikely that your local TV station will pop up unannounced to ask why only half your class turned in their homework. However, reporters may very well be in the principal's office asking her what she's going to do about poor state test scores or overcrowded classrooms. When the cameras roll, the administrator has to be articulate and confident, no matter what she's feeling inside.

“Escaping” the Classroom

If you do not like teaching, you won't like administration either. In fact, more often than not, successful administrators have been successful teachers as well. They understand kids and they understand the people who work directly with them. “You don't stop teaching when you become an administrator,” says Tina Heckman, an instructional technology specialist from Brownville, New York. “You need to care about students and empathize with the challenges teachers face every day. You teach by example.”

Salary

When the salary is spread out over the entire year, an entry-level administrator may earn less per day than a veteran teacher, especially since teachers often add to their incomes by working other jobs during the summer. For administrators, however, summer vacation becomes a fond memory.

On the other hand, if you stay in administration for several years, you will probably make more money than you would have if you had remained a teacher, especially if you move through the administrative ranks.

Time on Task

Teachers work 10 months of the year; administrators work 11 or 12. They also can have evening and even weekend commitments. Between sports events and school performances, a high school principal can expect to be out two or three nights a week. He or she also may have to work days when everybody else is off, and we've already talked about summer vacation.

For some, the time commitment is the deal breaker. Many teachers are unwilling to give up family time for new responsibilities. Those who do go ahead often say that they would not have continued without their family's support and encouragement.

Your Social Circle

Teachers often socialize with other teachers on weekends or after school. They often have a wide support network to share their problems and common work experiences with. When you become an administrator, you may no longer be asked to participate in Secret Santa or join your colleagues for lunch. Some of your friends might think (or even tell you) that you've "sold out" or "gone over to the dark side." Even with colleagues who understand and support your move, the relationship will never be the same. "It is a little lonely at the top," says Jennifer Sipe, a Williamsburg, Virginia, school psychologist who supervises interns. "When it's your job to evaluate how well someone does his job, it's just not possible to socialize as friends."

A Final Thought

While the job descriptions for teachers and administrators are different, it should be clear to everyone that successful schools need both good teachers and good administrators. Whether you choose to remain in the classroom or move to administration, the goal is the same: to create a school environment where both children and adults learn, grow, and have fun. □

Suzanne Tingley is the author of *How to Deal with Difficult Parents: A Teacher's Survival Guide* (Cottonwood Press, 2006).