

Section 4: Interviewing for School Administration Positions

Your resume has successfully resulted in an interview! Are you ready? Many people get clammy hands, nervous stomachs and dry mouths when being interviewed for a job in which they are really interested. However, with proper preparation, your interview should run smoothly and possibly boost you to a second interview or to an offer. Following are some effective strategies to use to ace that all-important interview.

Before the Interview

Much preparation can be done before the interview to help you feel confident as you speak with the hiring manager.

Appearance. Consider what the interviewer will see. Will you make a positive first impression? Will the interviewer see you fitting into the existing culture? Traditionally, men wear suits and ties and women wear dresses, suits and stockings to an interview. Some women may wear professional looking pants suits.

Some other appearance tips:

- Be sure your clothes are neat, pressed and don't have loose buttons, stray threads, torn cuffs or runs in stockings.
- Use your own judgment on what "power tie" you should wear, but avoid any silly ones with cartoon characters.
- Keep jewelry subtle. Leave clunky, noisy bracelets and flashy rings at home—they are too distracting.
- Be light on the after-shave, cologne and perfume. Too much can be a real turnoff.
- Be sure you are showered, deodorized, shaved, brushed and combed and have clean breath (don't smoke before going into an interview, for example, or even consider drinking an alcoholic beverage).
- Check your shoes. Do they look professional with a bit of polish or do they show a lot of scuff marks?

What to take. Be as prepared as possible with any documents you think may be necessary, including:

- Two copies of your resume
- List of references
- General business card, if appropriate
- Credentials portfolio containing your transcripts, licensure verification, letters of endorsement and work samples
- Driver's license and Social Security card

Two-minute commercial. If you have been on some interviews before, you know that almost always it will start with "Tell me about yourself." This gives the hiring manager some time to

observe your appearance, your body language and how articulate you are. Think about what to say during your “commercial.” What types of information would the interviewer need about you? Here are some ideas:

- Where you were born/grew up.
- The degree you earned and the university you attended.
- Why you decided to go into school administration.
- How long you have been in school administration and the positions you have held.
- Why you are in a job search and why you are interested in this position.

Rehearse your commercial and time it to see if you need to add a bit more or delete some. Anywhere between 30 seconds and two minutes is a good timeframe.

Interview Questions

Learn as much as possible about the position you are applying for, the culture of the environment, the person with whom you are interviewing and what types of questions will be asked. Also, prepare questions to ask the hiring manager to show knowledge of your field and what the job entails.

School Administrator Questions. The National Middle School Association published a list of possible questions for a school administrator (principal, assistant principal, dean of students) position (Henton, 2005). Following is an edited version.

- **Background and Experience**
 - Please explain experience you have had as it relates to this position.
 - Tell us about yourself. (Include information about high school, college, activities, honors, student teaching assignment, administrative experience. etc.)
- **How do you fit in?**
 - Why do you want to be a middle level principal/assistant principal/dean of students?
 - What do you perceive as the top priority as a school administrator? For this position?
 - Why do you feel that you are the best candidate for the position?
- **Leadership/Management style**
 - Tell us about your leadership style. How do you lead? What would we observe when watching you work with staff?
 - Describe your experience with building a master schedule.
 - What three expectations do you have of your staff?
- **Instruction/Curriculum**
 - Describe a curriculum project that you have led in your building as an administrator and your role in the process.
 - Describe your experience working with special education programs/students.
 - Describe your experience working with English language learners.
- **Staff development**
 - How do you tell someone he or she is not doing a good job?

- How do you decide what staff development is necessary?
- How do you determine what to do on staff development day?
- How do you evaluate the effectiveness of staff development?
- How would you go about developing and implementing an advisory program?
- **Dealing with staff and students**
 - How do you work with a teacher that repeatedly sends students to the office?
 - How do you work with a parent who is upset and/or angry with a teacher?
 - What steps would you follow if a teacher did not comply with your recommendations after a classroom visit?
 - How do you react when a parent calls and is upset with something one of your teachers has done?
 - How do you react when a parent calls and is upset with something you have done?
- **School Climate and Community**
 - Describe ways you contribute to or facilitate collegial support and staff morale.
 - How do you go about creating and nurturing a safe, supportive, encouraging school environment?
 - What role do parents and adult family members have in the school?
 - What do you expect of students' parents and adult family members?
- **Professional identity, care, and development**
 - What makes you well-suited to work with middle level students in this capacity?
 - What is your greatest strength? Weakness?
 - What three words would your staff use to describe you?
 - What do you read to stay current in your field?
 - What are your long-term professional goals?

Obviously, you won't be asked all of these questions unless the interviewer has several hours devoted to filling the position. However, be prepared to answer all of these questions. The last questions for professional identity are very common in interviews, so be sure to put serious thought into your answers.

Hypothetical Questions. Many good interviewers don't just want to hear you spout your experience and traits. They want you to prove you know how to think through situations that may occur on the job. Although it is difficult to predict what hypothetical situations may be handed to you, at least be prepared to answer how you would deal with a certain situation. For example, the interviewer may ask, "If an angry parent came into your office, how would you handle it?" Think about what the interviewer is trying to discover. Do they want to know how you deal with parents in general? How you deal with pressure situations? Your interpersonal skills? In this case, it may be all three. Think a bit (no need to rush into an answer) and answer as well as you can.

Scenario questions. Interviewers may also ask if you have ever handled a certain situation before: "Have you ever had to deal with an angry parent? How did you handle it?" Be honest, but think through your answer—again don't rush.

Surprise questions. The interviewer will tailor questions to find out exactly how you would fit into the environment and fit the job requirements. Some questions may be asked based on what happened to the person who last held the position, especially if that person quit suddenly or was terminated. For example, if the last person was terminated for too frequent absenteeism and tardiness, the interviewer may inquire about your attendance records in past positions. These can be the tricky questions that may surprise you. Think about how to answer some of these surprise questions:

- Are you willing to work on weekends?
- What is your work ethic?
- How many hours did you work a week in your last position?
- What did you like best about your last position?
- What types of problems did you handle in your last position and how did you handle them?
- What was your former boss like? How did you get along?
- Why did you leave your last job?
- Why do you think you would fit into the culture here?

There really isn't a way to prepare for these types of questions in advance, but this about anything they might ask that would make you uncomfortable—perhaps about leaving your past job or why you didn't work during a certain period. Think about possible difficult questions. Devise answers that will satisfy the interviewer and not hurt your chances. Many times, a person's demeanor while handling a difficult question is just as important as the actual answer.

Illegal questions. You should also prepare answers for possible illegal questions. Some interviewers don't understand that there are some things they shouldn't ask based on state and federal laws. Although you can answer that the question is illegal, you might want to find a way to provide an appropriate response you are comfortable with. Here are some illegal questions you might get:

- Are you married, divorced, engaged?
- Do you have children? How many? What ages are they?
- Are you pregnant now or are you planning on more children?
- What nationality are you?
- What race are you?
- What sexual preference do you have?
- What religion are you?
- What are your prejudices?

The best way to answer these questions is by defining exactly what the person is trying to find out. For example, if they ask about how many children you are planning to have, you could counter with "Are you wondering if I will be absent because I'll be dealing with my children?" If

they ask for your religion, you could say, “Is my religion relevant to the job in some way?” (Perhaps it is if the school has a religious affiliation.) Again, the way you handle these questions can help or hurt your chances.

Salary requirements. We will be covering salary negotiation in another section, but one part of your interview preparation should be deciding what your desired salary range is. Many times this is asked in a pre-interview phone call so they can see if you fit into the salary level they are offering. Your first response should probably be, “What is the range for this job?” They may provide this information, but many times they will require you to give them some kind of figure first. Keep it as vague as possible. You may provide the general amount in your last position (mid-80s) or a very general figure (80s – 90s) for what salary you think the job should be based on your research. Don’t get upset about this question. It saves everyone’s time if both sides are satisfied with the salary range.

Your questions. At the end of the interview, hiring managers often ask the prospect if they have any questions. Be sure to have a few good ones to show you have put some thought into the job and what you need. Here are questions to consider asking:

- May I ask what aspects of my background attracted you to my resume?
- Why is this position open?
- How would you describe your administrative or managerial style? (If you are talking to your potential boss.)
- How would you describe the culture here?
- If I am your candidate of choice and accept the position, what are the top priorities you would want me to address during my first few months on the job?
- What is your hiring timetable?
- What specific qualities/experience/credentials are you seeking?
- What is your vision for the program? School? District?

You may have several questions you are prepared to ask, but then all of them are covered during the interview. It is fine to say, “I had several questions, but I think you’ve answered all of them!”

Many times by the time you go into the first interview, the salary range will already have been discussed. If not, there may be a reason. Keep this question to yourself until you move further into the process.

In the Interview

You are now all prepared to go into the interview. You are wearing your favorite suit, you have your resumes and other documents, you have thought through your answers to possible questions they may ask and you know how to answer the salary requirements question. What now?

Timing: First of all, be prompt for your interview; it doesn't hurt to be a bit early. Tardiness does not help that first impression. If you know you might be unavoidably late because of traffic or something, call the interviewer (be sure you make note of the phone number before you start out) and let them know your estimated arrival time.

Greeting: You may go through a receptionist and/or an administrative assistant before seeing the hiring manager. You may also be met by someone in Human Resources who wants a brief interview as well. Wear your smile, stand straight and have good eye contact for your greeting with any of these people. It's not uncommon for the hiring manager to ask for impressions from them later. For the human resources and hiring manager, be ready for a handshake whether you're greeting a man or a woman. Transfer any papers or other items from the hand you shake with to be ready. Basics of the handshake: firm but not crushing, a couple of shakes (unless they carry it out longer), warm instead of clammy hands. If you have a tendency to perspire and have wet palms, try to subtly wipe them on something before the handshake.

Introduction: The interviewer may introduce him or herself and tell you how to address them: "Hi, I'm Dr. George Jones, but just call me George, please." If they don't give you permission to use their first name, stay with the formal title: "Good to meet you, Dr. Jones." Some people prefer to keep formal names during a first meeting and some like to get casual up front. Follow the interviewer's lead.

Sitting: Wait until the interviewer asks you to sit and then sit where they indicate. Sit up straight and put your portfolio and/or other documents either next to your chair on the floor or on a table if one exists.

Body Language

Don't forget your body language. It is very possible to say something out of your mouth while saying something completely different with your body. Arms crossed may indicate you are closed off to anything the other person says. Slouching may indicate a lack of respect for the person or situation. Bad eye contact can be a sign of low self-esteem. A good interviewer will be looking at your body language as much as listening to your answers.

Interview-Secrets.com provides these excellent tips about body language during a job interview.

- Maintain eye contact when speaking to or listening to the interviewer. If you don't, you'll look disinterested. This doesn't mean you should do a deer-in-the-headlights stare at the other person, but just meet their eyes while answering questions and be sure to blink occasionally.
- Remain relaxed and calm. Avoid fidgeting in your seat because that shows low self-confidence. Don't slouch because that may indicate you are over-confident.
- Lean in a bit to show you are intently listening and interested in what the other person is saying.

- Biting your lips is often interpreted as a sign that you're unsure of what you're saying. Avoid it.
- Be aware of your hand gestures and don't use your hands to make a point. It distracts and sometimes conveys a negative impression.
- Use an open posture -- don't cross your arms over your chest. Some consider crossing legs to be a closed signal, too, but use your own judgment.
- Shrugging your shoulders in response to a question is always a no-no. If you're unsure of what to say, take a few seconds to think of a response.
- Nodding or shaking your head is okay while you're listening to something the interviewer is discussing, but if a question is asked, use verbal replies.
- Avoid yawning in front of the interviewer. Get enough sleep the previous night. Be fresh and alert at meetings.

Here are some other tips from *CareerBuilder.com*:

- A sense of humor is good, but avoid too much laughing, especially after thing *you* say. It indicates nervousness.
- If you have more than one person interviewing you at once, make sure you briefly address both people with your gaze (without looking like a tennis spectator) and return your attention to the person who has asked you a question.
- Interruptions can happen. If they do, refrain from staring at your interviewer while they address their immediate business and motion your willingness to leave if they need privacy.

Ending the interview and follow-up

Interview endings. The interviewer will usually end the interview by standing or asking for any questions. As we said previously, ask your questions, but don't draw out the time too much if you think the interviewer is getting impatient.

Before you leave:

- Get the interviewer's business card (for follow-up).
- Be sure to leave your resumes and anything else they require.
- Ask about the next step. (When are you planning to make a decision on this?).
- Give a friendly smile and handshake while thanking the interviewer for seeing you.

Follow-up. Don't think it's all over when the interview ends. Almost as important as your answers, questions and body language is how you follow up. Within 24 hours of the interview, send a follow-up letter thanking the interviewer, remarking on some parts of the discussion, and how you will follow up further ("I will call you next week to see if you have further questions.") These days it is common to also convey an immediate follow-up via email, but follow up with a letter. If you really want this job badly, consider delivering your thank you letter in person. It shows your enthusiasm for the position. Make sure, as always that the letter is typo-free and grammatical. You don't want to hurt the good impression you made in the interview.

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