

## A Stepping-Stone or a Career?

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I've had three different positions in my professional career: classroom teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Such is the career path followed by most school principals. For some, assistant superintendent and superintendent become the next steps up the ladder of greater professional prestige and recognition. Many of those who aspire to district-level positions view the principalship as merely a stepping-stone, a way station on the road to the district office.

It is only recently that I myself have conquered the annual "spring fever juices" to look at district office opportunities — juices that have heretofore flowed through my veins with regularity, as I thought about applying for positions of assistant superintendent for curriculum and/or personnel. It's not that I no longer find such positions professionally attractive. The desire to meet the challenge of bringing new perspectives to another position of leadership and decision making will probably remain within me throughout my career.

Yet I can truthfully say that I no longer rush to read announcements of positions in the Sunday *New York Times*, and I no longer maintain an active placement file at my alma mater. I am very happy doing what I'm now doing as an elementary school principal, and I see no reason to seek out other positions. I am one of many who view the principalship as the legitimate top rung of a different

professional ladder.

If one looks at money and prestige as the sole indicators of career success, then certainly the assistant superintendency appears "more" important than the building principalship, with the superintendency as the "most" important level. However, for a person whose very soul lies in the classroom and whose commitment to education is rooted in the belief that individual teachers can and do make the difference, then the principalship is the "most important" position — at least in terms of where an administrator can truly have the greatest direct impact on children and learning.

To be in direct contact with children and teachers, to affect and supervise the daily teaching techniques and the implementation of curriculum, to set the building climate and atmosphere for learning — *this* is the place for an educational leader!

When a person moves to a position in the district office, salaries and responsibilities are greater, but relationships with children and teachers are greatly diminished, if present at all. This is not to say that all district administrators barricade themselves inside their own offices, for many do venture out into the schools to observe firsthand or even to conduct some supervisory and training functions. However, once you move to a district office position, you inevitably lose the daily pulse of what's happening in the school. If one feels, therefore, that maintaining this daily pulse is uppermost in importance, then this can administratively be done best from the principal's office.

Building principals, then, should be regarded as dedicated, highly motivated educators who have attained extremely responsible positions of leadership — positions that just might offer the greatest opportunities for

bringing about educational excellence for children.

One day, perhaps, I will want a district-level position. And if I ever do make such a change, I will not view it as a move to a "higher rung" on the ladder but, rather, as a move to an entirely *different* ladder — one that has its focus not on individual children, teachers, and classrooms, as the principalship does, but on more global policy issues, large student populations, organizations of employees, and school buildings.

Educational leaders in such positions can make positive improvements in the school system — changes that will eventually trickle down to the classroom teacher and the individual child. But for now, it is important for me to be where I can daily and directly observe the effects of my efforts on teachers and children — and that is most definitely as a building principal! □

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### Index to Advertisers

American Association of School Administrators .....	53
American Guidance Service .....	1
ASCD Curriculum Technology Resource Center .....	39
ASCD Human Resource Development Program .....	39
ASCD Professional Development .....	63
ASCD Video .....	85
Davidson Films, Inc. ....	67
Foundation for Critical Thinking .....	90
HarperCollins Publishers .....	73
Hunter & Joyce Publishing Co. ....	88
Fredric H. Jones and Associates, Inc. ....	48
IBM Corporation .....	84
Kissimmee-St. Cloud Convention & Visitors Center .....	92
The Master Teacher .....	C-4
McDonald's Corporation .....	83
Nes Arnold .....	52
Teachers College, Columbia University .....	62
University of Connecticut, NCR G/T .....	93
VALIC .....	96
The Video Journal of Education .....	C-2
Walden University .....	52
Zaner-Bloser .....	C-3

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