



Philosophy, Preparation, Practice: Preparing for the Administrative Interview

Anyone who has taken a speech class in high school knows that making a presentation in front of an audience, whether small or large, can be a challenging, rewarding, enjoyable, and sometimes anxiety-producing experience. Interviewing for an administrative position can prove to be a similar experience. As with a speech, there is no substitute for knowing what you believe, preparing in advance, and practicing, whether it is the first interview by a teacher for an administrative position or an incumbent administrator interviewing for a promotion or other administrative position. The interview is crucial in the application process, and often is the single most influencing factor in selection for a position. The interview should be approached with confidence and a command of the topics to be covered.

It is important to note that a successful interview does not necessarily secure a position. In the overall application process, if a candidate clears the paper screening, is advanced to the final three or four to be interviewed, and is confident that he/she did his/her very best in the final interview, and presented himself/herself as knowledgeable, poised, and articulate, then the candidate has done all that he/she could. The final selection becomes a matter of the interviewing team determining the appropriate match for the position from among the finalists.

The following model is thorough and has proven successful for several administrative candidates. This model was developed to ensure that an applicant could converse knowledgeably and confidently on a variety of topics. When followed, it will work to reduce the tension and nervousness that is the inevitable result of anticipating an interview. The process does this by instilling the confidence that comes from preparation. It will result in a comprehensive awareness of administrative issues and questions and instill a sense of security that the applicant can respond effectively to any question or situation by connecting personal knowledge and beliefs to that question or situation in an interview setting.

Philosophy

“To thine own self be true,” Polonius advises his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. While this is good advice in all situations, it is particularly applicable to preparing for an interview. The implication here is that one DOES know oneself and is in touch with his or her individual philosophy in regard to children, education, teachers, teaching, and learning.

The first step in preparing for an interview is to know and be able to articulate what you believe. In order to ensure that this can be done, an applicant should write out (yes, write out) his or her statements of belief about education. These statements should cover several areas including children, teaching and learning, education and its role in the community and society, standards, reform, assessment, and an educator’s relationships with the legal and other educational and societal communities. Beyond writing these statements, the applicant should be able to elaborate on these beliefs in a manner that communicates commitment and sincerity. These beliefs should be second nature and so internalized that they guide everything that follows.



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Once the applicant is confident that he/she can articulate a personal philosophy, the applicant should reduce that set of beliefs down to a series of simple and brief (5 words or less) tenets. This makes it easier to communicate the belief system in any interview situation. From these tenets the applicant should select **ONE TENET**. This tenet should be firmly in mind and heart, as all situations in the interview may be framed around this simple, but profound belief. Once internalized, this concept can be applied to any situation, question or hypothetical example – to any question that may take the applicant by surprise; to a topic where the applicant’s background and knowledge may not be as strong; to a time when the applicant simply needs more time to think and process information into a response. Each applicant should choose the one tenet that works best for him or her. Some examples are: what is best for kids; academic achievement through developmentally appropriate practices (be able to cite some of these practices); the whole child; differentiation; reading as the common denominator; and, equality of opportunity and services. There are many, many tenets that can be used in this way, however, the applicant must choose the one that works best for and is a core value for him/her.

With a belief system firmly in mind and heart and a single tenet serving as a common denominator for all topics and situations, the applicant is ready for the next step in preparing for the interview.

Preparation

Ideally, a candidate’s philosophy will need only fine tuning. This next step in the process may not be thoroughly in place and will require some time and effort, especially if this is a first time interview or an interview for a new position. Applicants with extensive background will have little trouble with these next two sections, preparation and practice. Other applicants will have things to learn in order to be thoroughly versed and prepared for the interview – and the job. The applicant must trust that putting the time into this front-end work will pay off throughout the process. This work should begin two or more weeks in advance, especially when it is applied for the first time. Here are the steps:

- Write down (yes, write) every question you can think of regarding the position for which you are applying in the areas of educational issues and educational content. Some topical examples might be instructional leadership, high stakes testing in balance with teaching the whole child, staff supervision, data-based school improvement, relations with parents and the community, specific issues related to grade levels and schools (middle school concepts and programs, high school reform and scheduling options, elementary looping and blended classes, reading programs at the elementary level) – the list goes on and on. Don’t be deterred by how long your list of questions and issues becomes and don’t feel it must be completed at one sitting. New questions will occur to you as you think through your list. Initiate conversations with other administrators and colleagues with questions like, “What are the significant educational issues of today?” in order to stimulate the introduction of additional topics to your list. Be exhaustive.



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One of the authors of this piece is an ex-speech teacher and debate coach, and states, "I cannot overstate the reality that confidence arises from thorough preparation." It is better to know too much for an interview rather than too little. Even if something for which you have prepared is not a part of the interview, it will be part of carrying out the responsibilities of the position.

- After you have developed your list of questions, write (yes, write) the answers. As if it were an essay test, write down everything you know about each question on your list. Do so using complete sentences. This begins the reinforcement and recall of your already considerable knowledge base, and begins to prompt you into placing that information in complete sentences. After all, that is how you will have to communicate in the interview.
- Once you have responded in writing to your questions, you will be able to pinpoint topics for which you need more information. Some of your questions may contain topics for which your experience and background is limited. Research these topics. Contact the State Department. Read articles on these topics. Search the Internet. Contact a colleague, mentor, or specialist. Use whatever methods are available to you. Don't just hope they won't be a part of your interview. Inevitably they will pop up, OR you will worry that they might. Remember, the purpose is to reduce anxiety, not to create new situations that generate anxiety.
- When you have completed your research, go back to your written answers and read them against this newly acquired information. Incorporate that new information into your answers where it applies. Write answers to any questions that you left blank. At this point, you should have a written answer to all questions on your list from step #1.
- Read your answers over until you are sure of the content. You will begin to anticipate the answers as soon as you read the question, and the information and response will become second nature to you.
- Condense all the information in your answers onto a single 8 1/2" x 11" page. Use blocks to isolate ideas. Highlight phrases and key words. Draw arrows. Do whatever makes sense to you, but condense the information.

Practice

- Once you have all the information on one sheet, keep it handy. Throughout the days that follow take out your sheet and glance at it, or shut your eyes and place your finger on a random spot, selecting a topic for practice. When you have identified a topic, practice reciting the answer both in your head and out loud – in complete sentences.



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- At least 50% of your practice should be out loud and a part of that “out loud” time should be in front of a mirror. You may even want to videotape yourself. Things are different when you speak and hear them than when you merely think them. Speaking is slower for one thing – it takes longer to talk than to think. Get used to hearing how you phrase sentences, how you sound and react when something happens causing you to hesitate on a sentence or a word. It is reassuring to know how you sound and react, so that if something happens in the interview you do not become distracted by your performance and/or lose your chain of thought. Having practiced in front of a mirror, you will know how you look when speaking, when searching for a word, or when pausing to think through a question to formulate a thoughtful response. This prepares you to adapt to anything distracting and allows you to focus on the interview team or person.
- As much as possible, respond directly to any question using your preparation information. Do not use one question as the springboard to recite everything you know. Be thorough, knowledgeable, and to the point. Sometimes in an interview a question will be asked or a hypothetical situation will be presented for which you have not directly prepared, or that needs some additional clarification, definition, or direction. In that case . . .
- Think back to the **single tenet** concept in the philosophy section. Ask yourself some questions and don’t use your carefully planned preparation in answering them. Pretend you don’t know the answer and respond to the question having framed it around your single tenet. Repeat the question incorporating your belief. Rephrase it, moving it into the terminology and concept of the belief. Do this out loud taking the time to settle into a response using information from another answer, or describing how your philosophy might guide your approach to responding to a hypothetical example. Practice this approach and technique until you feel comfortable with it.

This step is critical to approaching an interview situation with a sense of security and confidence. When thoroughly prepared nothing that might happen in the interview will confuse or stymie you.

- Now, reduce all your 8 1/2" x 11" information onto a single note card. These are your last refresher notes. By this time, the interview will be a day or two away and you will have written, rewritten, and practiced your responses to an exhaustive list of questions and topics. Your command of the knowledge from your answers will be secure through your writing, researching, thinking, and speaking. You will have reinforced the information as you have had to condense it. This last refresher note is simply something at which to glance and refer to as you make final preparations for the interview and will, along with your confidence in referring ANY issue to your tenet, provide a sense of confidence that you can handle anything in your interview.



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Following the steps in the model described above produces two results. First, by preparing thoroughly for the interview, a candidate can place himself/herself in the best possible position to secure the job for which he/she is applying. The candidate who prepares does so, in part, by developing confidence through an understanding of the content and requirements of an administrative position. Second, once an applicant is successful in obtaining the administrative position for which he/she strives, they then have to successfully do the job. By preparing thoroughly for the interview, the applicant is also undergoing a thorough and relevant preparation for the position itself.

One last note. That refresher sheet – the single 8 1/2" x 11" page with your condensed information – Save it. With any administrative position comes a myriad of speeches, both formal and informal. This handy framework can be used to shape speeches or presentations that come your way. Or, you never know, you may be faced with another interview sometime in the future and this sheet can work as the starting point in your preparation.

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