



# Oh, the Places You'll Go!

Transitioning to a new school environment is often difficult, but you can succeed if you make the change for the right reasons and embrace the learning curve

*By John George and Rachael George*



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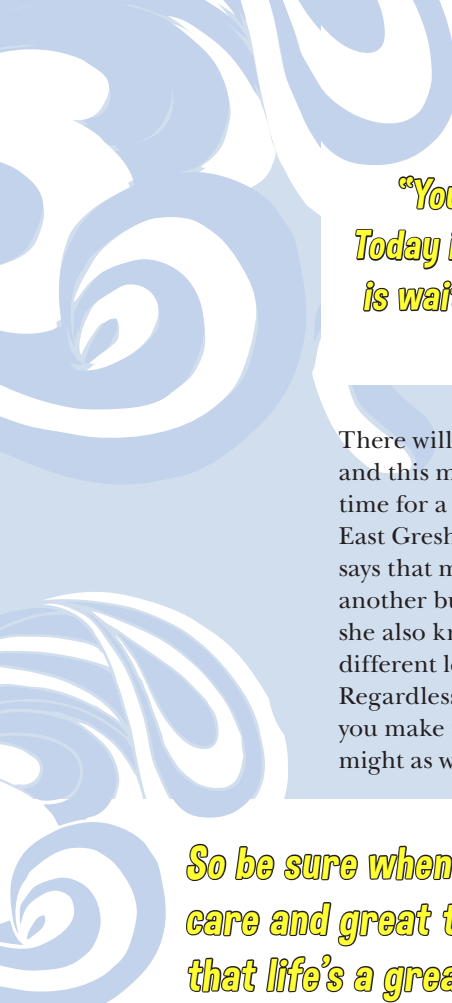
***“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who’ll decide where to go.”***

**D**r. Seuss had the right idea when it came to principals. Some of us taught at the high school level and are now principals in elementary schools, while others were once elementary principals or teachers and are now working at a middle school. You just never know where you might go, especially when NAESP’s 10-year study, “The Pre-K–8 School Leader in 2018,” reports that 40 percent of responding principals have been in their position less than four years and have an overall mean of 11 years in the principalship, with seven years in their current school.

Change and transitions are bound to occur, and when they do, they can offer challenge and growth. Our previous school communities, parents, staff, and students are like family to us, and we invest time, energy, and heart into building a culture with students at the center. We know that we are not alone in this feeling. Liz Garden, now principal at Mayo Elementary School in Holden, Massachusetts, recently tweeted a moving video from her last day of school at Florence Roche Elementary School in Groton, Connecticut, that was full of tears, laughter, hugs, and emotion.

No matter how you look at it, transitions involving a change of schools or levels are hard, but in the long run, they can offer so much potential to grow and learn as a person and professional. If you are thoughtful and reflective about your choice or change (and it needs to be your choice and your challenge—don’t take it if it isn’t), it should always be about your growth as an educator and a leader.

There will be a time for self-reflection to determine whether you are addressing your own personal and professional leadership goals. In the book *Culturized*, Jimmy Casas says it best: “You need to lead with passion.”



***"You're off to great places!  
Today is your day! Your mountain  
is waiting, so get on your way!"***

There will be times when your passion wanes, and this might be the first indicator that it's time for a change. Kimberly Miles, principal at East Gresham Elementary School in Oregon, says that making the decision to move to another building was incredibly difficult, but she also knew it was the right strategy to gain different leadership skills and experiences. Regardless of why you make the decision, once you make it, your mountain is waiting. You might as well get on your way.

***So be sure when you step, step with  
care and great tact. And remember  
that life's a great balancing act."***

Finding work-life balance is key to preventing burnout. In *Balance Like a Pirate*, Cabeen and co-authors Jessica Johnson and Sarah Johnson ask readers whether they are firefighters or fire chiefs. Do they spend their time jumping into action in support of an effort, instead of encouraging and coaching? Where our energy goes has a significant impact on burnout.

Regardless of what building you wind up in or what level you're at, remember to have fun and create an awesome school culture. "We want to create a school where students, staff, and parents are beating down the doors to get in—not out," says Beth Houf, principal of Fulton (Missouri) Middle School.

At first glance, you might think that what helps create an awesome school culture at the middle school level is different from what it takes at an elementary school, but what works at one level or building can work in another. The culture-building strategies you'll use to create pride and unity within a building are the same, regardless of where you're at. Sure, they might need to be modified slightly, but high fives, smiles, and relationship-building never go out of style, no matter how old your students are.



#### READ MORE

*The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter* by Michael Watkins outlines the common pitfalls leaders encounter when taking on new roles and offers strategies that can help avoid them.

#### Different Schools, Different Cultures

Jessica Cabeen, Minnesota's 2017 National Distinguished Principal, moved from the Woodson Kindergarten Center in Austin, Minnesota, to be the principal of Ellis Middle School last year. One thing Cabeen learned early in the transition is not to compare the type of leader she was at Woodson to the one she is now at Ellis.

Different schools have different cultures that require leaders to reflect and learn before executing new plans and ideas. Cabeen's advice is to give yourself a grace period and recognize that you have a learning curve. Being aware of this helps set yourself up for success, instead of setting the bar at a height you'll never be able to reach.

It's also important to have work-life balance during times of transition, since the typical principal works an average of 61 hours a week, according to "The Pre-K–8 School Leader in 2018." The hours one works during a transition are often higher, because one is trying to get up to speed with one's new position.

***"Out there things can happen, and  
frequently do, to people as brainy  
and footsy as you."***

#### Transitions Take Time

Transitions aren't always smooth. There will be obstacles you didn't see coming. During moments like these, slow down and take the time you need to understand the transition.

Feedback can be hard to take at times, especially in moments of transition, as we are trying to prove ourselves and our abilities to lead those around us. It is in these moments that our response to challenges and feedback is scrutinized even more closely. Feedback can have an impact even when it is off-base, unfair, poorly delivered, or poorly received.

It's also important to take the time to get to know your school community. Each location has its own history, traditions, and

values. This needs to be understood and shared before making major changes. In situations in which the need for change and improvement is an immediate imperative to affect performance, you can still slow down and get to know most of the stakeholders and their perspectives.

“[My] changes had a steep learning curve and required me to really draw on my strengths and accept my deficits and be willing to learn fast from those around me,” says Katie Schweitzer, who served as a high school assistant principal and elementary principal before becoming the director of student services for the Oregon Trail School District in Gresham, Oregon.

Listening and observing take time, regardless of how you break it down; there is no short-changing this step in the transition process. When folks skip this step, it often results in a significant amount of distrust and dysfunction down the road. People will not be on board with changes, and the changes made might not be in alignment with student or school needs.

“Ideally, you have a good team around you and walk into a stable setting, but that is not always the case,” Schweitzer says. “I think being cautious about quickly implementing sweeping changes and being open to learning as much as you can about the building, the people, and the structures is the key to making any big change successfully. Being humble and open about your gaps in knowledge and willingness to learn is also crucial. If people know you are invested in the role and dedicated to working with the staff, they are more willing to work with you.”

***“I’m sorry to say so, but sadly, it’s true that bang-ups and hang-ups can happen to you.”***

Finally, don’t take things personally. Just as change is hard for you as you adjust to your new setting, it is also hard for those with whom you are now working. They have a new supervisor and new expectations, creating unknown variables and stress, no matter how much you try to communicate. **P**

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## Transition Tips

- **Build community** by hosting a cookout, ice cream social, or other gathering to meet families and students before school starts.
- **Connect with staff** one-on-one to get to know them personally and professionally, asking what makes them proud of the school and what they might change.
- **Be present** in classrooms and around the school as often as possible to see where and how the magic happens.
- **Take care of yourself** during the transition, and **lean on a friend** or support network when challenges arise to maintain a positive attitude.