



# Taking a Leap of Faith

Our journey from principal to professor

By Wendy Schoolmeester and Sonya Vierstraete

**W**hile attending NAESP conferences or other conferences with elementary principals, we are frequently asked by our principal pals what they would need to do to get to where we are professionally. You see, we are elementary principals turned professors of education.

When we took that step of faith to journey away from K–12 education, we were fearful that we would lose

touch with the reason we originally started this career—the kids. With a little reflection, we soon understood the impact of “leaving,” and we changed the meaning of leaving to “reaching”—reaching learners in many more ways than we thought possible. What we have learned from our teaching and administrative days in K–12, we have learned twofold from our change in career path.

## From Principal to Professor

Our heartfelt advice to principals who would like to take that same leap of faith and become a professor of education: *Just do it!* The time may not be right, but it rarely ever is when change happens. Here are some steps to take for our aspiring professor pals:

Go for your doctorate. If we can make it through the rigor, you can,

too! In order to be tenured and promoted in higher education, you must have your terminal degree—an Ed.D. or a Ph.D. While taking classes, observe your professors closely. You will learn much from this observation. For instance, do the profs show up for class? Are they prepared? Do they seem to genuinely care about students? This last one may seem trivial, but it makes all the difference in the world to a learner.

Becoming a professor will be a new experience. You will be out of your comfort zone, and the learning curve is straight up. However, that climb is achievable. If you have the opportunity to become an adjunct professor, go for it. Try it out to see if it fits you.

**Whether a principal or a professor, our goals remain unchanged—to serve and support others and help them grow to become better people than they were yesterday.**

#### **Perks of the Professorship**

Flexibility and freedom are perks of being a professor. The rigid principal schedule no longer controls you. You do not need to send out an email to your staff when you are going to use the restroom just in case they need to find you in an emergency.

If there is a major snowstorm and you are unable to make it to campus, you have the flexibility to facilitate your class online. Sounds easy, right? Actually, online preparations are more in-depth and take

some time; however, being safe in your home is a bonus.

Professional development and scholarship become more of a priority in higher education. We are encouraged to belong to professional organizations such as NAESP. These memberships allow for conference attendance and the ability to network with professionals. What's even better? We actually get to *be there*. We don't need to answer emails or emergency phone calls while trying to listen to the keynote speaker. From these memberships in professional organizations, we continue to hone skills from practitioners and share this valuable knowledge.

#### **Drawbacks of the Professorship**

Initially, the pay for a professor of education is not close to what a principal earns. In fact, while in the doctoral program, one adviser highly recommended seeking K–12 Educational Administration because “there is more money in the principalship.” True at times—especially at the beginning. Like all professions, experience and years will help this issue.

#### **Similarities Between the Roles**

Making connections and networking with *all* educators is a huge bonus of being a professor. We stay in contact with teachers, principals, superintendents, and sometimes even school board members. In addition to all these networks, we stay connected with the best of the best educators through Twitter, Voxer, and other social media platforms.

Serving as the instructional leader was one of our favorite parts of our principalship. As professors, we still get to be involved with this. Professors get to teach and model instructional best practices. We also evaluate our teacher candidates. It is imperative to stay abreast of what is currently being used by principals in these areas.

Searching for, hiring, and retaining top-notch teachers is just one


very important responsibility of the principal. Professors are still very much a part of this process at the university level. We are expected to be on search committees to find new professors, new presidents, or new office administration.

Student growth is of great significance at both levels. Academic achievement is always our goal, as it is for the principal. Finding ways to help our students succeed is mandatory. Whether principal or professor, our goals are to help others reach their goals.

School and community involvement is also a priority for both principals and professors. It is expected for both parties to be visible and connected. Both principals and professors support positive growth in the school and greater community.

#### **Differences Between the Roles**

As professors, we see more classrooms and more schools. We are impacting more schools by training future teachers. Principals impact one school, while a professor impacts many schools, locally and nationally. We also impact more students. Principals may have 300–1,500 students in their buildings. We teach about 50–75 teacher candidates in a year, and then those candidates go out and teach 25 students each.

Whether a principal or a professor, our goals remain unchanged—to serve and support others and help them grow to become better people than they were yesterday. We encourage all our principal pals who are interested in becoming a professor to *Just do it!* It is rewarding and flexible, and it keeps you in contact with many different stakeholders in education. 

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