

# FUTURE EDUCATORS MONTH: A Tap on the Shoulder

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## PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Improving Instruction, Managing Resources*



**"Give 'Em Your Keys" this February for  
Future Educators Month!**

*Learn more at  
[www.awsp.org/FEM](http://www.awsp.org/FEM).*

For the second year in a row, AWSP is declaring February **Future Educators Month** in Washington state. In honor of this promotion, we are bringing back a popular article from our winter 2015 issue of *Washington Principal*. Written by Don Larson and Joseph Hunter of Western Washington University, with commentary from principals James Everett, Tarra Patrick, and Kristen Sheridan, this article speaks to the importance of that "Tap on the Shoulder" to encourage future leaders to take the next steps in their education career. The titles next to the authors' names are current and the titles in the parentheses are their titles at the time the article was published in 2015.

AWSP is offering a Future School Leaders Day Workshop on Feb. 26 at the Four Points by Sheraton, Seattle Airport South. We hope that you will encourage a student or teacher to attend this valuable session on the field of education.

Learn more about our Future Educators Month promotion and Future School Leaders Day workshop at [www.awsp.org/FEM](http://www.awsp.org/FEM).

## There was a time

— not many years ago — when a district, upon announcing a principal vacancy, might expect to receive inquiries from dozens of eager, well-qualified applicants. In the second decade of the 21st century, after conducting a nationwide search, a district may receive a handful of applications. In some cases — particularly where a high school principal's position is open — the district may open and re-open the search two or three times before a satisfactory pool of applicants can be assembled.

So, in the current school climate that includes demands and mandates not imagined a generation ago, what might prompt an otherwise happy, fulfilled, successful teacher or ESA to make a transition to school administration?

Many of us who are principals or assistant principals, whether we have been in an administrative role for 20 years or two years, may recall a tap

on the shoulder from our principal or superintendent, giving us gentle encouragement to consider pursuing an educational administration program that would lead to principal certification. We might also recall that, until that moment, we had not contemplated such a career move; in fact, we may have bristled at the very thought of accepting a role on the "dark side" of the profession.

The principalship is, without a doubt, one of the most noble roles to which a professional educator can aspire. Research shows that the principal is the single greatest influence in shaping a school in which students flourish. As goes the principal, so goes the school.

## THREE PRINCIPALS REFLECT ON DEVELOPING LEADERS

We invited three Washington principals to reflect on what motivated them to seek a leadership

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role in education. While all three offered insights about the upside aspects of the principalship, they also contemplated why a Washington principal might not offer the catalytic “tap on the shoulder.”



**James Everett,**  
*Superintendent,  
Meridian SD,  
(Formerly  
Principal at  
Meridian High)*

Upon completion of his principal

preparation program, James moved from assistant principal to principal in less than a year at Meridian High. His transition into school leadership was not the result of a sudden epiphany. Instead, over a period of time, while he remained in a classroom position, he had multiple opportunities to develop his leadership capacity while he kept the prospect of becoming a principal at arm’s length.

For James, the grain-of-sand-in-the-oyster moment that crystalized his aspirations came as a nudge from his superintendent.

“Five years into my teaching career, my then-superintendent had the ‘what are your long-term plans’ conversation with me in his office. He mentioned seeing promise in me and wanted me to know he would support me if I made a decision to pursue administration.”

Because he enjoyed the opportunities he found as a teacher and in other roles in his district, 10 years would elapse before James explored his options as a school administrator.

“I fought the urge for four or five years,” James recalls. “I was coaching. I was heavily involved in teaching adult technology courses in Washington and other states. I had a young family with two elementary-aged children. My time was limited, and I didn’t think there would be any flexibility to squeeze in an administration program, much less be able to afford it.”

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Pushing James toward administration was a growing sense that, while he was enjoying success in the classroom, there might be a broader, more influential role in his future. He wanted to make a difference. “I had gotten to a point where I wanted to positively impact the educational system — and that still drives me today.”

James takes his responsibility to pay forward seriously in his role as principal. He is alert to those teachers who show the requisite spark of aptitude for leadership. Yet not everyone who aspires to become a principal is driven by motives to lead, inspire, and shape an effective teaching and learning community.

“I am wary of those seeking administration for a jump in salary — or who lack the desire to lead, fail to express interest in students and service, or rarely demonstrate a willingness to seek opportunities to grow programs and increase student achievement. I would encourage them to seek a different path. The future in educational administration must be filled by those who exhibit passion, desire, and leadership.”

James harbors no illusions about the challenges that inhabit the principal’s office. Mandates such as TPEP and Common Core require an administrator’s engagement. Over the past three years, he has overseen construction of a new high school on the same site where Meridian High School has stood since 1911. “There is no doubt about how demanding a building administrator’s role has become. In fact, it’s been challenging role for a long time, and yet incredibly satisfying.”

“There is not a lot of talk about the exciting, fulfilling parts of being a building administrator. They exist in the everyday, rewarding work with our students, families, and communities — but we are too often consumed with the fast pace of the here and now — while also preparing for what is coming next. We don’t take the time to reflect or share our successes — though doing so could help create a positive perception of the principalship.”

What responsibility does the principal hold for shaping the future of school administration? “The truth is that this work is too important to promote those who aren’t prepared or willing to put in the time and energy to lead well,” James said.

“As practicing building principals, we have a vital responsibility to endorse and sponsor those who demonstrate promise in this field — and to encourage those who may be seeking an administrative role for inappropriate reasons to consider another avenue.”



**Tarra Patrick,**  
*Principal, Roxhill  
Elementary,  
Seattle PS,  
(Formerly  
Principal at  
Totem Middle in  
Marysville SD)*

While many in our profession follow a career trajectory from undergraduate education to the classroom to the principalship, Tarra’s leadership journey began in the U.S. military. Yet education and educational leadership were deeply rooted in her thinking and aspirations, having been

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influenced by her mother, whose career in education included several leadership roles.

“My goal coming into education was always to work toward administration,” Tarra recalls. One of her early opportunities for leadership grew out of her role as a teacher on special assignment — a math TOSA. In her TOSA position, she was supporting teachers in all her district’s secondary schools. “I began to see the work of educating our students on a more global level; I started to see myself as being able to do the work of an administrator.” Finding the right “fit” was part of Tarra’s objective in becoming a school leader. “In order to have peace within, you have to have a job that allows you to work in alignment with your thinking.”

Like James, Tarra is not convinced that every good teacher should be encouraged to transition from the classroom to the principal’s office.

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teacher relationship as adversarial, or is only looking for the pay increase.”

But Tarra does not see being a gatekeeper as an appropriate role for the principal. “No one has the right to decide for someone else when they are ‘ready.’” Although there may be scenarios in which she would choose not to write a letter of reference for someone she believes has the wrong motivation or skill set to become a principal, “I would never position myself as a barrier to that person’s progress.”

Tarra acknowledges that there are “inside” and “outside” conversations about her role as principal.

“When I speak to people outside of administration, I talk about the positive aspects of the principal’s role. When I speak to fellow administrators or those who have been administrators, I talk about all the wacky situations, unhappy adults, and struggles of the job. I think we do this because, when we get together, we are often looking for support for the difficult work. We are looking to commiserate over the things we can’t share with other groups of people. Talking with successful administrators who have more experience shows me that these individual situations are not the sum of this experience.”

Tarra feels that a key role for the principal is to provide leadership opportunities for teachers, and to be available to support teachers as their skills as leaders emerge. In her estimation, though, the low-hanging fruit in principal development is likely to be found among assistant principals who are ready to make the next transition. “Most importantly, principals have a great duty to help APs become principals. It is our responsibility as principals that we create an environment where APs have the opportunity to develop building leadership skills.”



**Kristen Sheridan,**  
*Director, Early Learning, Olympic ESD, (Formerly Principal at Sand Hill Elementary in North Mason SD)*

Kristen’s passion for the classroom and effective pedagogy permeates her thoughts about school administration.

Before she seriously contemplated becoming a principal, she had opportunities as a teacher to take on leadership roles. “It felt good being able to make global and systemic changes to our school system,” she recalls. Like James, she was passionate about implementing strong, effective pedagogical practices in her own classroom, and she enjoyed sharing her successes and challenges with colleagues. However, she felt that her reach beyond her own classroom was limited. “I found that in an instructional leadership role I could make an impact on instructional practices beyond my classroom.”

Having a strong mentor to model effective leadership may be the ideal context in which an aspiring principal might develop the chops to embrace an expanded role in school leadership. But with several years’ experience in the principalship, Kristen is not naïve about survival in the role and the need to maintain a sense of balance. Reflecting on Dr. Seuss’s admonition that “life’s a great balancing act,” Kristen says, “The current demands of the principal’s role are quite large.”

She adds, “Balance is what you must do as a principal or assistant principal: balance the instructional leadership role with the management components of the job; balance the emotions of the staff, students, and parents; balance the schedule, the interventions, the extensions; balance implementation of curriculum,

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instruction, and assessment; and the list continues.”

The administrator’s job is fraught with demands that, Kristen believes, can be turned into exciting and fulfilling components of a principal’s role. “The grass is green where you water it. Although our roles are demanding, we must find those fulfilling moments.”

Do principals and assistant principals have a duty to encourage and mentor new leaders into the profession?

“Absolutely,” Kristen says. “Just as I was provided opportunities to take on leadership roles, it is equally my job to provide those opportunities to staff within my building.” Kristen welcomes the prospect that she might support a colleague who,

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like her, feels that pull toward the principalship.

### THE CHALLENGE

Each of these principals — James, Tarra, and Kristen — offers a different perspective on the role of the principal in identifying and supporting future educational leaders. A common thread emerges: as building administrators, we have a duty to encourage and support those who show promise as tomorrow’s Washington principals and assistant principals. They are not immune to the challenges that accompany their work, not least of

which are mandates from the state and national levels; but they — and you — are also in the best position to connect the dots between the budding leadership attributes a teacher or ESA may show and the door to the principalship that might be opened.

Who in your building is ready for that tap on the shoulder from you? ■



# FUTURE SCHOOL LEADERS DAY

*Exploring Your Future in Education*

## February 26, 2020 | SeaTac

AWSP’s Future School Leaders Day workshop lets teachers explore options for taking their career to the next level, and gives high school and college students information about the field of education. Attendees will hear from principals and teachers on why they chose the profession.

Learn more at [www.awsp.org/FSLD](http://www.awsp.org/FSLD)

