

SecEd

Guide to...

Stepping up to senior leadership



Key content

- How to secure your first senior leadership position
- Tips and guidance on ensuring your job applications are effective
- How the free Ahead network can help
- Surviving the interview day – advice on how to prepare, what to do and what to avoid
- An experienced headteacher gives her insights into what she looks for when it comes to appointing senior leaders

In association with

ASCL Association
of School and
College Leaders



GUIDE TO...

Stepping up to senior leadership

The step from middle to senior leadership can seem like a huge leap. So how do you know when you are ready to begin applying, and what should you do to achieve your promotion?

Knowing you are ready for promotion

When you are comfortable in your middle leadership role, have taken on additional responsibilities such as a particular whole-school project, and feel a need to broaden your professional perspectives, then it might be time to consider senior leadership.

One of the big differences between middle and senior leadership is that you will be managing a particular area of school life, such as the curriculum, or behaviour and attendance, rather than a team of people as head of department or year.

Your suitability for a promotion might be something you can discuss with a member of your school's senior leadership team, who will be able to guide and support you with taking the next step.

If you do plan to apply for a new post, it would be appropriate to inform your headteacher of your intentions.

Applying for posts

Applying for internal or external promotion is not that wildly different, except that if you want to remain in your own school then your aptitudes, strengths and weaknesses will already be known to colleagues.

Every school will want to find the right person for the job, so if you are applying from within you should not assume you will automatically be successful, even if you are the only internal candidate.

Most schools still use application forms, although you should check with the advertisement to find out how you should apply. Some schools may just request a CV and covering letter in the first instance.

How you complete your application form is crucial in getting yourself in front of an interview

panel. It always sounds obvious, but spelling, grammar and punctuation should be checked and double-checked to ensure it is correct. Mistakes will reflect badly on you. Make sure that all the information you give is up-to-date, accurate and correct.

Write what you think the issues and the challenges are, and how you would deal with them

You will almost certainly be asked to provide a covering letter, in which you may need to address a question set by the headteacher or governors. This will usually be related to an aspect of the role that you are applying for. In the case of an assistant or deputy head, you might be asked to write about curriculum development, as an example, and how you might take on this task in the light of current education policy.

Richard Fawcett, an ASCL consultant who works with schools on recruiting senior managers, explained: "Whatever the topic you have been asked to write about, ensure you answer it fully. Stick to that subject and don't stray into other areas.

"Amazingly, we still see application forms and letters that are generic in nature, that fail to address the question the school has set, and which have clearly not been written with that particular post in mind.

"Write what you think the issues and the challenges are, and how you would deal with them.

You can refer to the school's Ofsted report, for example, as this shows you have read it. But be positive, and don't write anything derogatory about the school if its last inspection fell short.

"For example, 'I am not surprised this school is in special measures, because...' is not appropriate. However, you can say that you are aware there are challenges and outline how you would help to address them.

A running theme through the whole application process is giving examples of the impact you have had in your existing role. Even if this didn't always work, it shows you are learning from the experience and are willing to be flexible and proactive in your role

"You have to start from scratch with every application you make. Do not take short cuts by cutting and pasting from previous applications because this stands out a mile. I have seen letters with the name of another school at the top because the applicant has forgotten to change it."

Lay out information in the way you are asked to, for example by providing details of your most recent post first and working down. Make sure you sign and date the form.

If the advertisement states that the application should be sent to the head, or the chair of governors, ensure it goes to that person and not just to the care of the school. Use special delivery to be sure that the application arrives and on time. Call the school to check that it has arrived.

Mr Fawcett continued: "The most important thing to remember is that it is clearly laid out and well-presented and that it is accurate and truthful.

Explain any gaps in service which need to be explained, so that the school does not jump to conclusions.

"Most people who get turned down at the application stage do so because their application is a mess or inaccurate, and not necessarily because they are unsuited and unqualified for the role."

Chris Holmwood, the senior deputy head and principal of the Leadership and Training Centre at Shenley Brook End School in Milton Keynes, which runs middle and senior leadership training courses, said it was worth finding out about the school before application, and certainly prior to interview.

"If you are to leave your school for a promotion then it is important you go somewhere where you will flourish, and where your educational philosophy will be shared and valued," he said. "This information will be most important in the run-up to interview."

Attending the interview

Your application was impressive and you have been selected for interview. Selection days can be demanding on your energy and enthusiasm. Everything you do once you arrive at the school counts towards whether or not you will get the job.

Start the day well by arriving on time and being properly turned out. Many schools are now relaxed about teachers' attire during a working day, but you will be expected to set a standard at interview. Be polite to whoever you meet and turn off your mobile phone.

If you have applied for an assistant or deputy head's role, then you can expect an interview panel made up of the head and/or another senior leader, a representative from the governing body and possibly from the local authority too. Try to remember who is who and address them appropriately.

Your answers to the panel's questions should be succinct and aimed at the person who asked it. Try to back up your answers with evidence of your own experience in this area. If you don't understand a question don't be afraid to ask the interviewer for clarification.

Mr Holmwood continued: "An interview is a two-way process and an opportunity for you to demonstrate what you can do, but also to explore if the school is right for you. Show you are aware of the

wider educational landscape and how that affects the school and has an impact on leadership, and what opportunities it presents.

“A running theme through the whole application process is giving examples of the impact you have had in your existing role. Even if this didn’t always work, it shows you are learning from the experience and are willing to be flexible and proactive in your role.

“If there is something significant you need to discuss, but it appears not to form part of the structure of the interview, then politely ask if you can talk about this issue.”

Do not deprecate your existing or previous school or colleagues, and use humour carefully. Be constructively critical about the school you are applying to if asked how you would change something. Be careful, too, of becoming aggressive if the questions are uncomfortable or difficult to answer. If you can’t answer a question straight away, ask to come back to it later.

The interview panel is likely to tell you on the day whether or not you were successful.

I got the job!

Congratulations. However, wait until you receive a firm offer in writing, with details of your salary and contractual arrangements, and the terms and conditions of the role. You will also now need to tell your school that you plan to leave and take up a new post. There are three windows of opportunity for resignation every academic year for senior leaders, which fall roughly at the end of each term.

I didn’t get the job

As disappointing as it can be not to get a much-coveted job, the experience offers an opportunity for reflection for the future. Most interview panels will give feedback on your performance at some point afterwards. Leave it a few days if possible so you are feeling less raw and do not take any comments the

wrong way. If your appointment was to be internal, and a colleague got the job, be magnanimous despite your disappointment. You will have to continue working with them, for the time being at least.

Your answers to the panel’s questions should be succinct and aimed at the person who asked it. Try to back up your answers with evidence of your own experience

Also, take time to consider who is providing your references and whether they will be entirely supportive of your promotion.

It is important to realise that you cannot be successful on every occasion, and disappointment now could lead to better opportunities in the future. For the time being, consider the whole experience as a useful learning curve and practice for your next interview.

The Ahead network

ASCL’s Ahead network is building a community where future leaders can begin to share ideas and experiences outside of their own schools and colleges. Membership is free to any middle leader who is keen to develop his or her leadership skills. For more details, see the back page of this Guide.

CPD for aspiring senior leaders

- Friday and Saturday, January 30 and 31 (residential): Heading for senior leadership, Kenilworth.

This Guide To... has been produced by SecEd with support from the Association of School and College Leaders, the only professional association and trade union to speak exclusively for secondary school and college senior leaders. ASCL membership is now more than 18,000 and growing. Its members receive legal cover and support, an advice hotline, guidance and resource materials, updates on the latest education news, and commercial discounts. Visit www.ascl.org.uk

What are heads looking for?

Interview day is no less nerve-wracking for a prospective senior leader than an NQT going for their first job. But the stress and uncertainty can be alleviated by knowing what to expect and what qualities and attributes the headteacher and interview panel will be looking for.

Carolyn Roberts, head of Thomas Tallis School in Greenwich, has interviewed candidates for a total of 45 middle or senior leadership posts during her 15 years as a headteacher (of three different secondary schools).

Experience is, of course, a crucial aspect when looking at a candidate's suitability for such a role. However, Ms Roberts also looks at an applicant's qualifications, even when they have had many years in the profession. And as her school has a large 6th form, experience of working in a 6th form environment is also crucial.

A well-structured letter of application that answers whatever questions the applicant has been set is vital to getting called to interview. Ms Roberts explained: "The question would obviously be relevant to the post being applied for and I would want to see a clear answer to the question. I don't want applicants telling me how marvellous they are, but what they have learned through their experience. Nor would I be interested in educational jargon – for example, a candidate telling me that they are a collegiate leader."

On interview day, candidates can expect to be met by the head and told what structure the day will take. This will be the head's first impression, so the applicant should ensure they arrive in plenty of time and look the part.

The first half of the day is likely to involve a number of tasks and activities, which will almost certainly include teaching a class. Ms Roberts added: "We would expect a senior leader regularly to deliver outstanding lessons, though we would not necessarily be looking for this during the 30-minutes we observe them. But they will need to show they are capable and demonstrate that they can form a working relationship with young people very quickly."

Another task might be an in-tray exercise, where candidates are presented with a list of 10 things that have happened unexpectedly in school that morning that they need to put in order of priority. Here, they will be expected to demonstrate their delegating skills as well as how they might deal with urgent situations themselves.

There may also be a data-recording test, where candidates are given a print-out of aspects of the school's performance, which they are expected to analyse. Applicants who do not perform well in these activities are unlikely to progress to the interview.

The interview process itself will be a discussion on a number of issues. How well the applicant taught their lesson will feature, as well as a discussion about issues relating to school leadership, such as how to deal with difficult colleagues, the applicant's organisational skills, and how to lead by example.

"We would also be looking at whether candidates had bothered looking at the school's website and read the latest Ofsted report," said Ms Roberts. "It might seem obvious but it's amazing how many applicants turn up not knowing what our ethos is or what the school's priorities are."

Further questions might include safe-guarding, and finding out more about the candidate: "Safe-guarding is obviously crucial, so I'd want to know when they last did any training in this, rather than how they would deal with certain situations. And for me it's important to know about the person. I want to know what gets them excited about their subject – so if I'm recruiting a history specialist I might ask which period of history interests them most. I also always ask what they're reading. The only wrong answer to this question is 'nothing' or that they don't have time. I want to strike up a conversation about the recent book or article they've read. I don't want to know about educational reports or blogs. That's work, and it isn't going to help me get under their skin and find out what motivates them as a person."



Ahead: ASCL's **free** support network for ambitious middle leaders

Enthusiastic and ambitious middle leaders are the future of our education system. Are you thinking about taking that next step into senior leadership? If so, let ASCL help you to achieve your goal. Join ASCL's **free** support network especially created for middle leaders and let us help you on your journey to senior leadership.

Membership to the network includes:

- access to dedicated web pages consisting of advice, guidance and resources
- a monthly email newsletter
- useful ASCL publications, including our flagship member magazine – *Leader*
- early notice of relevant ASCL Professional Development courses
- a free place at the spring middle leaders seminar
- opportunities for networking with colleagues

ASCL also provides support for schools that may want their middle leaders to engage in a programme of bespoke professional development. To register on the network or to find out more about our package for schools, see online at www.ascl.org.uk/ahead

