



## INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS SERVICES

15 Roszel Road | PO Box 5910  
Princeton, New Jersey 08543-5910 USA

tel: 609.452.0990  
fax: 609.452.2690

[www.iss.edu](http://www.iss.edu)

### **When to Move On**

One question a director often asks him/herself after serving for four or five years is, “When should I start looking for another position?” Each directorship is filled with many good experiences, and others that we try to learn from. Most directors seem to agree it is best for all parties when the director chooses the time he/she will move on.

Schools are dynamic organizations. Some evolve slowly while others can change more rapidly, depending on a host of variables. Governing boards can change significantly over time, although elected boards tend to change more rapidly than those that are appointed or self-perpetuating. Since one of the major responsibilities of governing boards is to select the director, a change in the board’s membership, or its way of thinking, could signal a desire for change in the school’s leadership.

It is important for schools to have a strategic plan, an accreditation report, or similar long-term plan to ensure the goals of the institution remain as community-based as possible, especially at schools where there is significant board turnover. Although nothing is technically beyond the reach of the Board, it is more difficult for a board to radically change the school’s direction when a strategic or other long-term plan has been developed by a diverse group of constituents in the school community.

The needs of small schools in a developing environment can shift quickly. These schools often have low institutional inertia, meaning they can change more quickly than a large school in a more stable environment. However, the needs of all schools evolve over time, and can place demands on the director that fall outside of his/her areas of strength. When the needs of a school change to the point where they can be met more effectively by a new director with a different set of skills, it’s time for the director to move on. The challenge for both boards and directors is to recognize when this situation has developed.

It is prudent for directors to step back from time to time to evaluate their performance by asking themselves the following questions:

- Am I successful in achieving the goals and initiatives that I have supported?
- Do I enjoy the confidence and trust of the Board, school staff, and the school community?
- Do I spend a significant portion of my time on tasks that I feel are enjoyable and rewarding?

Honest answers to these questions will help directors determine if they should consider moving on.

It is natural for administrators to develop a school in their areas of strength, and to spend time and effort on tasks they enjoy. When tedious or difficult tasks begin to overshadow tasks that are

more enjoyable and rewarding, it's time for the director to evaluate his/her position to determine if the school would be better served by a different director.

When should a self-evaluation by the director take place? Certainly after three to five years, the director should assess his /her effectiveness as a school leader, determine his/her level of job satisfaction, and carefully review the board's evaluation of his/her performance.

Directors do not always recognize when their leadership style or skills are no longer able to effectively meet the school's needs. A director can become quite comfortable in a school and begin to establish priorities for decision making to ensure his/her longevity rather than what is best for the students and the school.

Boards can compound the problem by developing a mind set that the director they know – warts and all – is better in their minds than an unknown. They rationalize this by asking, “Why should we go through an exhaustive and expensive process to find a new director who might be worse than the person we currently have?”

An ominous sign I have noticed on occasion is when a director refers to a school as “my” school and not “the community’s” school. I’ve seen this happen after a director has been at a school for an extended period of time, often longer than 8-10 years. When this change in attitude takes place, the director “knows” what is best for the school, better than the teachers, parents, students, or even the board. The director can become increasingly resistant to input (we tried that six years ago and it didn’t work!), and begin to assume a more autocratic and inflexible administrative style.

If a director is unable or unwilling to see the signs that a change of leadership is necessary, the board will often initiate the change by terminating or non-renewing the director’s contract. A difficult situation can develop if a director tries to enlist the support of the faculty and/or the parent community to overturn the board’s decision. A painful departure and a split community can result.

My recommendation is for directors to evaluate their effectiveness as a school leader at least once a year after their first three years of service. I certainly do not recommend that every director should resign after five to eight years, but I do think it would be prudent for directors to objectively evaluate each year their ability to effectively meet the needs of their school. It’s always better for a director to move on when most constituent groups would like him/her to stay.

There are many other reasons why directors move on. The decision to relocate can be motivated by the director’s desire to move to a larger or more prestigious school, to a school where the salary / benefits are better, for family reasons, or simply to move to a different part of the world. These reasons and many others can be valid and important. Prerequisites for a director to move on should include:

- fulfilling his/her present contract;
- providing adequate notice for the current school to find a replacement;
- an employment record that shows reasonable stability over time.

Average stays of only 1-3 years raise a red flag to Search Committees and boards. While shorter stays during the early part of an administrator's career are acceptable and relatively common, if the pattern persists in the candidate's mid or late career, it is not viewed favorably by most Search Committees. Most boards are looking for directors who will lead the school for at least a period of 4-5 years.

I believe directors should make the decision to move on or remain where they are early in the academic year. If the decision to move on is made in September or October, directors tend to pursue the search quite aggressively. Delaying the decision until the situation becomes clear is unwise because the situation often never becomes clear enough to make a confident and stress-free decision. Resigning early in the academic year enables directors to have sufficient time to prepare their dossier, portfolio, and supporting documents thoroughly and well. They will also be able to consider virtually all positions that become available. These directors tend to pursue their job search more vigorously and are more successful than those who are only exploring their options.

*Revised 6/05*