

1. With so many high priority items, how do you determine which are the first ones to address? How do you determine which ones you personally oversee and which ones you delegate?

The challenge of leading a large organization such as Brevard Public Schools will inherently bring with it a myriad of competing priorities – daily. The ability to sort through and prioritize these competing priorities is a key to success. I use what is commonly referred to as the Eisenhower method. In short, you categorize the competing priorities between what is *urgent* and what is *important*. Urgent items are usually driven by deadlines, but also can be a reaction to a critical incident, and these must be handled first. Important items are just that: tasks or projects that are important but the completion of which is not imminent. Urgent items rise to the top of the list.

However, you cannot effectively lead if you are always in a reactive mode – just responding to items when they become urgent. You must be proactive. Being able to put out fires is part of the job, but being able to prevent the fire is even more desirable. You need to look ahead and identify the work that is coming and develop a plan of action while the task is still categorized as important, but not yet urgent. We will follow the principles of project management. Identify a plan of action, with work to be completed in segments or stages, and with progress checks along the way to completion. The budget process is a good example of a high priority item that if tackled in stages, will always remain *important*, but should be completed without becoming *urgent*. You lay out a budgeting calendar with completion points along the way. You hold the team members accountable for meeting the timelines and the budget is prepared, advertised, and approved without incident.

The ability and willingness to delegate is critical. First, you simply cannot do everything yourself; this job is too big. Second, and probably as important, is that by delegating responsibility to a member of the team, you are giving that person the opportunity to learn and grow. Now, you must have staff members on your team who are able to meet the moment and handle the responsibility. The members of the team must also feel a sense of trust and independence to go about the work and know that they will receive support to complete the task.

To determine which high priority items to delegate, I look at gravity or impact. Is this item something that warrants specific action by the superintendent? Or is this something that can be completed by a member of the team, with my support? The specific actions of the superintendent show what is important, what is valued. To be sure, there are certain items that the superintendent must have their hands on, to be actively engaged with, and immersed in.

Finally, all the work is driven by goals and objectives identified in coordination with the school board and found in the strategic plan.

2. What is the role of the central office in our district?

The role of the central office, and everybody in it, is to support the people who are doing the work at the schools. A former superintendent in Georgia, Alvin Wilbanks, said it best:

*“There are two types of people in this district. Those who teach, and those who support those who teach.”*

That declaration should be the philosophy of everyone in Brevard Public Schools. The flashpoint is the work done in the classroom. Everyone who is not a classroom teacher should be able to articulate how their role supports the work in the classroom. We should be able to walk in to any office or cubicle in the central office and ask each employee how their efforts support the classroom. For example, a buyer in procurement could say, “My goal is to find the highest quality materials, at the best value, so that our classroom teachers have what they need to teach.” Perhaps a member of the professional development team might say, “My job is to develop training for teachers that will help them understand new curriculum and give them a new set of instructional strategies.”

You might think I am suggesting that the goal is to make the classroom teacher’s job easier. I’m not sure that is really possible. The task of teaching students in the classroom is one of the most difficult there is. I don’t think you can really make the job easier. The effort should be focused on assistance. Provide teachers with what they need to be successful. And, to be sure, definitely do not do anything to make the job harder. We cannot add more to the classroom teacher’s plate. In the end, this focus on support of the classroom teacher creates conditions favorable to teaching. Students will benefit, and academic achievement will improve.

In the Army, I learned that if you are not at the front line then your job is to support the soldier at the front line. I don’t want anyone to think I am comparing a teacher to a soldier. The classroom is not the same as a battlefield. But the concept that all of our actions must support the people “in the trenches” rings true.

As the superintendent in Indian River County, I took the approach that every decision we made and every action that we took at the central office impacted the classroom. These decisions, these actions, needed to impact the classroom in a positive manner. We must constantly ask ourselves three questions: How can we give the teacher the tools they need to succeed? How can we structure their working conditions so that they can be their best? What distraction or hurdle can we remove so that they have the time, energy, and effort they need to devote to their students? It is imperative that the leaders at the central office view every decision through this lens, with the focus on supporting the classroom teacher.