

Jason C. Wysong, Ed.D.

Lake Mary, FL ▪ 321-578-9243 ▪ jasoncwysong@gmail.com
Brevard Superintendent Search—Semi-Finalist Written Responses

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?

This is one of my favorite leadership topics for reflection and conversation: how do organizations, teams, and leaders select focus areas from among many competing priorities? In my application letter to the School Board, I used the term “triage” to characterize the state of public education for the past three years. As education leaders, we have been dealing with so many challenges that most days feel like a series of pivots from one issue to the next.

Although it can be easy to become overwhelmed by the weight of these obstacles, organizations that establish priorities, communicate them to all stakeholders, and create widespread buy-in can successfully navigate today’s complex landscape. For purposes of this broad question about managing priorities and time, I would propose the following filters for decision-making:

- Safety comes first. Always.
- Student outcomes identified in the School Board’s Strategic Plan are second only to safety.
- Other metrics identified in the School Board’s Strategic Plan are prioritized behind only safety and student outcomes.
- The above priorities assume that the organization is already meeting its legal and regulatory obligations. If concerns about, or evidence of, non-compliance with law or policy emerge, those items must be reported and quickly corrected.

The importance of linking the staff’s work to the School Board’s Strategic Plan cannot be overstated. The School Board, as the elected representatives of the community, sets our strategic direction, and the Superintendent is responsible for shaping the culture of the school district to align with that direction.

My personal approach to productivity has been influenced by several methodologies but perhaps none greater than the Eisenhower Matrix. Over the years, I have found that organizing lists of priorities using the lenses of *importance* and *urgency* crystallizes my focus. Thinking about this technique from the perspective of a Superintendent of Schools:

- Items that are *important and urgent* should be done immediately, with resources scaled to ensure on-time completion.
- Items that are *important but not urgent* should be scheduled so that appropriate time is available to thoughtfully complete.
- Items that are *urgent but not important* should be delegated to others to complete. My view of delegation incorporates a “trust, but verify” approach to ensure that the organization’s obligations and commitments are met. Delegation should never be confused with abdication of the responsibility.
- Items that are both *unimportant and not urgent* should be reviewed for possible abandonment, especially if the cost of the task (time, budget) exceeds the value added by completing it.

Superintendents should spend much of their time working on the *important*. The delegation suggested in the *urgent but not important* can be handled by the most appropriate subject-matter expert who can complete the work at the level of quality and speed required and then flow upward for approval, depending on the complexity or sensitivity of the item.

When there are strong prioritization and workflow management processes in place, time is optimized so that the truly *important work*—items like safety, student achievement, and Strategic Plan priorities—can remain the focus.

Jason C. Wysong, Ed.D.

Lake Mary, FL ▪ 321-578-9243 ▪ jasoncwysong@gmail.com
Brevard Superintendent Search—Semi-Finalist Written Responses

What is the role of the central office of our school district?

In high-performing school districts, the central office is often both a director of, and a servant to, its schools. This allows for co-existence of two approaches to governance and communication: top-down ('school system' provides universal expectations and creates uniform processes/procedures) and bottom-up ('system of schools' promotes empowerment of leaders and embraces variance based on student needs and school culture).

Effective system *direction* of schools includes establishing expectations, communicating values, monitoring performance, and evaluating outcomes. For example, the BPS mission statement elegantly identifies "...excellence as the standard," and the district's Strategic Plan includes clear metrics for school improvement and academic performance. Simultaneously, effective *service* to schools requires genuine feedback loops that result in action taken to address concerns as well as prompt response to school support requests. Principals should report that district office leaders are visible and accessible, assistance is readily available, and "red tape" is minimal. This is only possible when service to schools is a pillar of the culture of the district office. A talented and committed district office leadership team is a prerequisite for service excellence. Author Patrick Lencioni notes that, "every departmental silo in any company can ultimately be traced back to the leaders of those departments, who have failed to understand the interdependencies that must exist among the executive team" (*Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars*, p. 177). Horizontal and vertical coordination within the district office is critical to providing efficient service to schools.

I believe the strongest central offices also balance the principles of autonomy and accountability. School leadership teams should be empowered to operate and adapt within the guardrails established in state law, administrative code, School Board policy, and management procedures, and leaders should "own" and accept responsibility for the outcomes of their decision-making. When data identify schools and leadership teams that routinely exceed academic and operational outcome expectations, additional latitude should be granted so that teams can innovate within their own school communities—and again with the caveat that more autonomy pairs with more accountability.

There are several functions that a strong school district must centralize at the district office. For example, a robust communications strategy should be developed, executed, and monitored from the central office. Leadership development and succession planning is another function vital to organizational continuity. The central office is responsible for developing and implementing leadership development programs, with school leaders assisting by identifying and encouraging employees to pursue leadership training and professional growth. Feedback loops between schools and the central office are then used to identify opportunities to improve the district's programming.

The greatest gift that a central office can give to its schools is permission to *focus*. The late Steve Jobs told an audience at the 1997 Worldwide Developers' Conference that "Focusing is about saying no, and the result of that focus is some really great products..." The takeaway here is that some good ideas must be passed over to protect the great ones and accomplish truly exemplary work that benefits students.