



THE SEMIFINALIST INTERVIEW

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YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A CONNECTION

Although we advise search committees that interviews are of limited value in predicting how well someone will perform as a Head of School, they are nonetheless a critically important part of the search process. No matter how strong your credentials, if you do not present yourself effectively in the interview, you are unlikely to advance to the finalist stage.

You will be judged on your performance, so you might as well put yourself in a position to impress your audience. You should prepare for the interview in the same way that you might practice for a musical recital, rehearse for a play, or study for a major exam. While we have noticed that experienced Heads of School generally tend to handle the interview setting with more aplomb than aspiring first-time Heads, it is also true that the chemistry of these group meetings is entirely unpredictable.

Our advice: Don't enter the interview room either overly anxious about making a mistake or overly eager to impress. Chances are good that you will please most of the committee members, confuse a few, and possibly annoy one or two. So, concentrate on answering the questions as openly and honestly as you can. If your responses resonate with the search committee, great! If not, remind yourself that you do not want to lead a school in which your opinions and perspectives are significantly out of step with those of the school's opinion leaders – many of whom are probably in that room.

Having facilitated thousands of semifinalist interviews since 1986, we offer the following practical suggestions:

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Before you are even invited for your first interview with a search committee, there is a great deal you can do to develop your skills.

- If possible, get yourself appointed to a search committee within your school or some other organization you serve. Participating in the interview process from the other side of the fence should provide you with valuable insights about what works and what doesn't in the interview setting.
- Arrange for a mock interview for yourself, conducted by colleagues or friends who know enough about independent schools to stage a reasonable facsimile. Ask them to critique your performance. If you're really brave, videotape the mock interview. You may be surprised to

discover that you have some mannerisms or speech habits that are off-putting but easily correctible.

- Continue to develop yourself professionally. The more you read, the more responsibilities you take on in your school, and the more you work with a trusted mentor, the better. All of these experiences will make you a more effective interviewee. More importantly, they will make you a better Head one day.

PREPARING FOR A SPECIFIC INTERVIEW

- Review any and all school materials that have been made available to you; visit the school's website as well.
- Read the Opportunity Statement carefully, paying particular attention to the section on challenges facing the next Head of School. Undoubtedly, these are the thorny issues most on the minds of the school community and the ones most likely to be reflected in the questions asked of you.
- Be aware that search committees tend to respond best to examples and anecdotes. As you anticipate questions that are likely to be asked, think about specific situations you can describe to illustrate your points and bolster your arguments. You should expect to be asked about difficult situations you have faced, so decide in advance how you can be responsive by discussing real events while observing professional boundaries and respecting the confidentiality of those at your current school.
- Develop both a brief opening statement (which some search committees will invite you to make) and a few insightful questions to ask if you are encouraged to do so at the end of the interview. Ideally, these questions will be qualitative rather than factual – designed to draw from your interviewers their views about particular challenges facing the school, their priorities for the school's future, etc. By asking thoughtful questions, you demonstrate genuine interest and give search committee members an opportunity to tell you more about the school they love. Remind yourself that the search committee may be interviewing as many as eight candidates over a marathon weekend. A strong closing statement can help you to make a lasting impression.
- On the day of your interview, dress professionally. Arrive at least 15 minutes early. And remember that everyone you meet at the school is a prospective evaluator, including those who give you a campus tour or escort you from place to place.

ANTICIPATING COMMON DISCUSSION TOPICS

While each search committee interview is unique, certain questions are almost certain to emerge. Do yourself a favor by thinking in advance about your views on these likely topics:

- *What is your leadership style?* This is not a softball question, and the search committee will use it to gauge your potential fit with the school community. Be prepared to identify the core principles

that underlie your leadership philosophy and provide specific examples that demonstrate how you have translated these principles into practice.

- *How do you manage change?* Leaders are responsible for defining a vision and then setting into motion the changes necessary to fulfill that vision. Particularly for first-time aspiring Heads, this is an area where a review of the literature might be helpful. One good place to start is the book **Leading Change** by John P. Kotter.
- *What are your views on student assessment?* Faculty members are often interested in exploring this issue, but bear in mind that your audience will include non-educators as well, so it is important to avoid jargon while clearly articulating your core beliefs on this complicated subject.
- *What are the issues and trends most likely to affect schools in the next five years?* The purpose of this question is to determine whether you are oriented to thinking about the future or simply focused on the day-to day work of school leadership. Be prepared to talk about the thought leaders who have influenced your views and your vision. On any given day, current events may also affect the direction of the interview. School violence, the deleterious effects of social media, and even geopolitical forces, for example, might be raised in the context of school leadership.
- *Why are you interested in this particular opportunity?* While this may seem basic, you would be amazed to learn how many candidates are unprepared for this question or uninspired in their responses. Bear in mind that the members of the search committee likely love the school and are seeking evidence that you recognize both the school's strengths and its potential.

A tip: Bring a notepad and pen with you. In all likelihood, one or two members of the search committee will take pride in asking complex, multipart questions. Jotting down the elements of these questions as they are being posed is easier than trying to recall them as you speak.

AVOID THESE COMMON STYLISTIC MISTAKES

Although considerably more anxiety-provoking than a typical social gathering, the interview is at its heart a group conversation. Just as the art of conversation requires you to be sensitive to communication skills and good manners, so too does the search committee interview:

- Don't pontificate or dominate the session by answering each question at great length. Every search committee member should have the opportunity to ask at least one question, with time left over for opening and closing statements. Gauge the length of your responses accordingly. In formulating your answers, be succinct and remember the acronym PREP: *Point, Reason, Example, Point*. When you have responded to the question, stop talking!
- In your eagerness to be helpful, don't interrupt search committee members in mid-question, even if you think you know what they are asking.
- Be attentive to eye contact. Don't focus on one or two people to the exclusion of others. Don't look only at the person who asked the question as you respond.

- Humor cuts both ways. While you do not want to come across as humorless, off-color or mean-spirited jokes are inappropriate.
- Be objective and direct, but tactful. Avoid being overly critical of either the school you are visiting or the one you are currently serving.
- Feel free to express your opinions, but resist entering into a debate with an interviewer with whom you might disagree. Is winning the argument worth losing the job?

Above all, remember that the invitation to be interviewed is in and of itself an affirmation of your professional success. Relax and enjoy!

Founded in 1986 by James W. Wickenden, Wickenden Associates is one of the nation's premier independent school consulting firms, specializing in Head of School and other senior leadership searches. Visit our Leadership Library (www.wickenden.com/leadership-library) for other articles in the **Advice for Aspiring Heads** series.

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