Being invited to the initial round of interviews for a principal opening is an opportunity; preparing for it is an investment. A successful interview requires that you create a detailed plan and take specific steps.

During your initial interview, you will likely meet with a screening committee or with one or more central office administrators, possibly a principal, and sometimes a search consultant. During screening interviews, the interviewers have two general objectives: First, they want to meet the candidates who on paper appear to match their requirements. Second, they want to select a few candidates to whom they will give a more comprehensive interview and the opportunity to demonstrate their skills. It is to your advantage to be prepared to satisfactorily meet both objectives.

Reflect
Before you focus on what to do during your interview, you must have one key piece of information clearly in focus: who you are as a leader. This can be accomplished by having an honest and reflective conversation with yourself.

Think critically about your leadership skills and your professional and personal strengths and weaknesses and weigh each of them candidly. For example, consider the process you use to make leadership decisions and provide examples of the steps you use and how you involve others in decision making. Prioritize their importance and relevance to the position for which you are applying. Identify what you want to stress during your interview to highlight your strengths and be ready to discuss what you are doing to improve upon your limitations.
If you are required to make a presentation during your interview, you may need to prepare and take other materials—such as handouts, a flip chart and stand, or computer hardware—with you.

Focus on and articulate the vision you have of yourself as an education leader. Then review your leadership platform and clarify how the position for which you are applying aligns with your leadership goals and objectives. Internalize and use those two personal philosophies as the foundation for what you want to communicate in a meaningful, convincing, and concise manner during your interview.

Prepare
Following your self-reflection, concentrate on preparing for what you must do throughout your interview. Initially, this includes gathering the materials that will help you during this important meeting. Some basic but often overlooked items will serve you well. First, obtain an unobtrusive notebook and a reliable pen. Before leaving for your interview, write down the questions you want to ask. During your interview, jot down reminders about questions or comments you may wish to make later. You will also need a copy of your letter of application and your résumé to refresh and refocus your thoughts just before your interview.

You will also need some materials that will require more thought and work. Talk to the district’s contact person to obtain the names and titles of the people who will be interviewing you. Well before your interview, create a succinct and professional-looking summary portfolio that is tailored to the leadership requirements of the position you seek. Prepare enough copies to give one to each person at the conclusion of your interview. The cover should be simple, appealing, and relevant. It should also list each interviewer’s name and title. Your name and the date should be obvious, but not overstated. The contents should include a few carefully selected, recent examples that illustrate your leadership style, such as:

- Professional correspondence that you send to students, parents, staff members, colleagues, and superiors. (Be sure to omit names.)
- Complimentary news articles about your leadership or professional accomplishments.
- Recognitions, awards, or distinctions you have earned.
- Good news notes you send to students and staff members. (Omit names.)

Do not use this portfolio to propose solutions to issues or problems facing the school or school system in which you are being interviewed, and do not include anything that is not directly about you or that you did not personally write or develop. Keep in mind that your summary portfolio has three purposes:

- To showcase how you do things
- To demonstrate the quality of your work products
- To leave your interviewers with a tangible reminder of who you are.

If you are required to make a presentation during your interview, you may need to prepare and take other materials—such as handouts, a flip chart and stand, or computer hardware—with you. Do not, however, use equipment or presentation materials from your workplace. Doing so sends a negative message about you and your sense of stewardship.

Impress
The interview will probably fly by, so it is essential that you have a plan to help you remember all that you need to. The following steps will help you be seen and remembered as a viable candidate.

Dress appropriately. Wear clothing and shoes that are professional, conservative, and comfortable. Also ensure that you are neatly groomed.

Make your arrival a positive event. Never be late, but don't get there too early either. Ensure that your vehicle is clean, neat, and appropriate for the community and the school.

When you enter the building where the interview will be held, politely introduce yourself to the receptionist or the person who is there to meet you. Always acknowledge the staff members in the building with a smile and a pleasant greeting. Never forget that you are on display from the moment you arrive until you leave.
Capitalize on your introduction. Make eye contact, shake hands firmly, and acknowledge each person by name. Before you arrive, memorize the names of the people who will conduct your interview so you can connect names with faces. Remember to refer to each person by his or her courtesy title and last name throughout the interview unless you are asked to do otherwise.

Communicate your presence as a leader. Be conscious of the tone and volume of your voice, eye contact, facial expressions, posture, body language, and gestures. Your actions must support the information and the answers you provide. Have a mentor or a trusted friend critique you as you rehearse for your interview.

Sit appropriately. Be seated where you are shown or told and at the right time. Take your cues from the person who is facilitating your interview. If you are not told where to sit, then politely and respectfully ask. Continue to be aware of your body language, posture, and expressions. Although you do not want to be seen as anxious or restless, you don’t want to be too reserved either. Your movements add emotion and emphasis to your words; be aware of and use them to your advantage. For example, leaning forward as you respond to a question can convey interest or enthusiasm.

Recognize that the first five minutes are decisive. During this time, the interviewers will form an initial impression about you. Make it a positive one and consciously work throughout your interview to maintain it. Although you may be nervous, don’t allow your words or actions to convey it. Although you need to focus on the people and the experience, you also must pay attention to remaining composed and confident in your demeanor and expressions.

Be an active and attentive listener. Do not take a cell phone, laptop computer, or personal data device into your interview. Give your full attention to the people who invited you to meet with them.

Exude poise and confidence, but not cockiness. Be personable, polite, and professional at all times. Although your interview is a serious event, don’t forget to smile and enjoy the opportunity at hand. Use humor if you can do so appropriately and tactfully, but don’t go overboard because you do not want to be remembered as eccentric.

Give direct answers. Maintain eye contact as you listen and speak. Visually engage every person instead of focusing on one or two individuals and ignoring the others. Avoid jargon and slang. Do not provide too little information, do not elaborate too much, and do not supply extraneous information. Your answers must align with what you said in your letter of application, résumé, and any other materials you have provided or will supply. If you meet with more than one person or more than one group during your interview, be consistent in your answers.

Seek clarification. If you don’t understand a question, don’t hesitate to ask for clarification. If you don’t know an answer, say so and carefully consider whether it would be fitting to discuss a clearly similar topic or experience. If you do, you must be able to quickly draw logical and clear connections between the initial question and your alternative response. This is tricky; do so with great care.

Ask great questions. When and if you sense it is suitable and timely, ask a few questions. This should be done sparingly, though. For example, following your response to a question regarding school security and safety, you could ask about the nature of relationships between the school and the local law enforcement agencies. Toward the end of the interview, your interviewers may specifically ask whether you have any questions. You should already have some written in your notebook. Ask questions directly and intelligently. For example, you might inquire about the types of staff development activities that are available for administrators.

Make your exit as positive as your arrival. Have a short and clearly worded closing statement prepared and distribute your summary portfolio documents. Thank the interviewers for the opportunity and state that you are looking forward to hearing from them. After you have finished, go to each person,
make eye contact, shake hands, acknowledge him or her by name, and smile and say thank you. Do not linger too long or leave too abruptly. Leave the building promptly and drive away.

**Reflect.** Immediately after your interview, reflect on all that transpired from the time you arrived until you left. On the basis of what you knew before your interview and what you learned during it, list any new or unexpected information. Write down as clearly as possible the focus of the questions you were asked and how you responded. Use the information to identify specific content areas, issues, and topics that may come up in the final interview.

**Decide.** Ask yourself whether your leadership skills and abilities align with the requirements for the position as defined during the interview. List the pros and cons regarding those factors and about the people you will be working with and for. Use that list to decide whether the position is the right match for you. Make your decision promptly. If your decision is positive, prepare to be contacted and invited back as a finalist. Mail the contact person a tactfully worded professional letter of appreciation for the privilege of your interview and indicate that you are looking forward to hearing from him or her.

On the other hand, if you decide the position is not the right one, call the contact person immediately to say that you are withdrawing and thank him or her again for the opportunity. It is possible that the contact person will ask you about the reasons for your decision, so be prepared to provide a tactful and candid answer. Follow up your conversation with a concisely worded letter of withdrawal.

**Succeed**

Participating in an interview is a privilege. It is the result of your deliberate and thoughtful research, attention, and hard work. Relax a bit while you anticipate receiving a positive telephone call. When that occurs and you are invited for the final round of interviews, you should have already begun to review all that you did to plan for your initial interview. Now, use what you learned and experienced during the first interview to design a more-focused plan. This further investment of your time, energy, and effort will not only prepare you for your final interview, but also it will be an asset when you are selected as the new principal. PL