

From SBM to Headship – Why not?

Despite the fact that School Business Managers (SBM) have a range of skills, qualifications and experience gained from the business world at their disposal, very few of them move on to become Headteachers. Andrew Whitaker is one exception.

One parallel that can be drawn between the worlds of business and education is that the role of Managing Director has many similarities to the one of Headteacher. The transference of skills from business to education presents a real opportunity for SBMs to advance into Headship roles.

Andrew Whitaker successfully made the transition, working as Acting Headteacher at Todmorden High School (Calderdale LA) and Vice Principal at Greenacre School (Barnsley LA). Andrew is a determined man with an absolute passion for education. “My father was a miner and I grew up on a pit estate in Leeds. I failed miserably at school and when I left I was going nowhere. That is what drives me – I don’t want any student to fail school as I did.”

In 2005, Andrew became the first SBM at Greenacre School, one of the largest special schools in the UK, educating almost 300 young people, aged from 3-19, with complex needs.

“The main challenge of a special school,” continues Andrew, “is that you have to be focussed on every individual student in order to help them succeed, irrespective of their disability or their learning ability.”

When the Deputy Head retired in 2010, Andrew was promoted to the role of Deputising Function and in this new role he led the school in the absence of the Headteacher. Then, in September 2012, as part of a new staffing structure, he became Vice Principal. This was an expanded role in which he led all the operational areas of the School, plus the curriculum areas of Work Related Learning and Work Experience. With an annual budget of £4.5 million, the school employs more than 200 staff, with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) comprising of a Principal, a Vice Principal, and five Assistant Headteachers. Andrew leads a Support Team of more than 70 staff. >



The National College

¹NPQH – The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) is a National College course for anyone aspiring to be a Headteacher or Principal. It aims to develop talented leaders from all backgrounds who can deliver high-quality outcomes for pupils and students. There are approximately 20 SBMs who have currently completed The NPQH. The numbers of those who have then gone on to become Headteachers is yet to be assessed.

For more information including application guidance, competency frameworks and the latest application round information visit: www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/npqh.

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Prior to working at Greenacre School, Andrew, who is a qualified accountant, worked in the University sector for 10 years in a range of roles including Associate Senior Lecturer in Project Management and Finance.

Andrew is the first to express how fortunate he has been working in a very forward-thinking and innovative school. This was demonstrated in early 2012 when his Principal, Susan Hayter, encouraged him to undertake the National Professional Qualification for Headship¹ (NPQH) course and train as a Headteacher.

As part of his NPQH studies, he spent 12 days at the Gorse Academies Trust in Leeds, a time that Andrew found to be truly inspirational and which deepened his desire to become a Headteacher. “The inspiration came from being in an outstanding environment. They had real socio-economic challenges in the area but were still managing to educate their students to become the best in the country. That really motivated me. It doesn't matter where the students come from, they can all succeed.”

John Townsley, Executive Principal of the Gorse Academies Trust, became a personal mentor and cheerleader and has been a hugely influential figure in Andrew's career. “I completed my NPQH in December 2012 and shortly afterwards John – who is also a National Leader of Education – approached me about becoming the Acting Headteacher at Todmorden High School (THS). I began this role in January 2013, spending Monday to Thursday at THS and then returning to my role as Vice Principal at Greenacre School on Fridays.”

In September 2013, Andrew was appointed to the Headship of Todmorden High School, relinquishing his responsibilities as Vice Principal at Greenacre School.

It's evident that Andrew came into the Headteacher role as a very experienced operational leader, but he has no illusions as to the reality of teaching. “The classroom is the heartbeat of any school. Just as the trained teacher needs to get to grips with whole school leadership and operational issues, I constantly have to get to grips with the practice of teaching.”

During his time as a Headteacher, Andrew has realised that anyone with the ambition to become a Headteacher needs to



be a confident decision-maker who is capable of dealing with a variety of leadership challenges. They must also be comfortable with finance. But for Andrew, the most important attribute of all has to be a personal passion for education, regardless of your working background. “I've been fortunate that my Principal at Greenacre School and my mentor are of the mindset that if you are good enough to be a Headteacher, your background shouldn't really matter.”

Andrew believes that people from non-traditional routes can be very successful in a school. However, unfortunately, the main challenge for any SBM wanting to become a Headteacher will always be finding a Governing Body that is prepared to take a risk with someone who is not from a traditional teaching background.

Maybe Andrew's success will start to change the status quo. ■



Andrew Whitaker is a member of various professional bodies and he is an Associate Expert for the Ten Group, a private company that advises Governing Bodies and SLTs on strategic, operational and leadership issues and projects.

He has a BA in Business Management, an MSc in Business

Technology and holds the ACCA Diploma in Financial Management. Andrew also has a number of qualifications with the National College including the CSBM, ADSBM and NPQH. He undertook all these qualifications whilst working full time from 1996 to 2012.

In his spare time, Andrew reads business books and autobiographies “...to find out what makes successful people tick.”