Rutgers University

From the SelectedWorks of Arthur Lang

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Interview with Business Administrator

Arthur Lang
I interviewed Ivy Brown, Assistant Business Administrator for Lakewood Township public schools.

Ms. Brown has been in her position since July of last year. She held a previous position in a smaller district in New Jersey, although she went to Lakewood High School. She has a degree in accounting. The State requires all business administrators to complete several courses offered by the New Jersey School Board Association. She told me that the state aid plan for all districts can be found at: http://www.state.nj.us/education/sff/. She is currently taking those courses. Her most difficult problems are transportation, facilities, payroll and food services. Although Lakewood is a unique district, with 16,000 children in private schools compared to 5,500 in the public schools, the only difference between Lakewood and her previous job is the shear size of the system and budget and the non-public school services, such as special education and transportation. I asked her about that. She said that non-public special education was costing $40,000 per student. The State reimburses the district one million dollars but all the services cost two million. That means, as a matter of policy, the board is spending more on special education private school students than the IDEIA requires. As for transportation, about 5,000 non-public school students use buses compared to 3,000 public school students. The state only reimburses the district for public school students. The district budgets a grant allocation to each private school for transportation, textbooks and technology. In turn, the district applies to the state for money to cover some of the costs.

I asked her about our current budget crises. The 1.05 million dollars deficit is from the 2006-2007 year. The 7 million dollar deficit is this operating year. She said it was not typical for any district to have deficits while we have them two years in a row, and had a three million dollar shortfall a few years back. So how did it happen? We submitted a budget of 107 million in April. But then people made purchase orders without limit. People had authority to buy without limitation. Also, transportation required extra students to be bused. There were extra tuitions for students to receive services out of district. We have little control in the business office, she said. Powerful people, with the support of the board, are demanding certain services and purchases without knowledge of business administration and budgeting. By law, if there is no purchase order, we do not have to pay. However, people just show us an invoice and we pay. There was just a case in which a private school ordered more textbooks than we allocated them. The textbook company called, Ms. Brown up for payment. She told the company to go to the private school for payment since they exceeded their allocation. That was not done before. We would just pay out without regard to limits. We had no computer program that set limits.

We just hired a new Business Administrator who begins February 1. I asked Ms. Brown what she would like to see change. She wants to see us stay within limits. WE have to learn how to say “no.” We need more staff in the business office. We have only two
people in accounts payable and one in payroll. We need four for accounts payable and three for payroll. I asked her why the board does not hire more people. She said that they wither do not care or do not know. But the public blames them for all the failures. They then just pass the blame on to the business office.

Why was the $1.05 million deficit of 2006 just revealed now? She said that the audit was just completed. Every year, districts go through an audit. It usually is done by November, but we were late. The treasurer of schools reconciles the accounts. He looks at his own records and the business office records. They found that the budgets and the actually spending did not match. And 2007 is going to be off by seven million dollars. At the time of the interview, Ms. Brown was matching bank statements to the board secretary report. All monies have to go through the board secretary’s report. That is what ultimately must match the treasurer’s report. The cash flow is produced on a monthly basis. So money spent now might be for purchases last year, but it comes out of today’s cash flow. Ultimately the books have to even out. That is where our problem is. I asked her about our superintendent. He was a math teacher and told our faculty that he was going to be on top of the finances. Ms. Brown told me that superintendent’s rarely become involved in the finances. They usually leave the job to the business office. The assistant superintendent, who is now acting superintendent, is becoming more actively involved in finances. I recently email him suggesting that we do cohort studies of the entire population to help us forecast future enrollment in private schools. Even though those students are not enrolled in the public schools, the board is providing services. We cannot just rely on information given to us on an ad hoc basis. If we have difficulty turning down services, we can make a better effort to gather data on the numbers we should be anticipating.

Out of about 20,000 school age children in Lakewood, only 5,500 attend public schools. The rest attend independent religious schools. Lakewood CDP, according to the 2000 census has a population of 36,065 of which 44.1% or 15,918 are children. The township as a whole has a population of 60,352 of which 35.3% or 21,328 are children. I estimate the present population to be closer to 100,000. For the last five years, the town had relatively fixed numbers of children in the public schools. Public school numbers are not increasing. We do not have to increase our professional staff.

However, the master Plan of Lakewood Township estimates that the Lakewood independent schools are growing at an annual rate of 18%. Lakewood School Board provides students in the independent schools with busing, textbooks, and special education services. Since the board is paying for 20,000 children while the State only counts 5,500, State aid to Lakewood is lower than any other district in New Jersey. Our budget is 110 million while the State provides only 20 million. The board just found out that it was short by 1.05 million dollars and fired 30 employees including some teachers. Next year the state will increase our aid to 24 million, but we just found out that we will still be short 7 million based on our current tax revenues. We will have to raise taxes by another seven million or make more cuts.
Cohort Population and other techniques would not indicate any useful data for Lakewood to gain true projections of school board expenses. We need accurate and detailed data for the rate of increase in the private schools. This includes birth rate and people moving to town. Public school children will continue to keep the same numbers. With regards to the independent schools, it seems that the district is running on an ad hoc basis. Thousands of parents fill out forms for busing, scores of private schools make requests for textbooks and services, and we already have 205 requests for pre-school special education next year.

Arthur Lang
Assignment: Practicing Principal Interview
EDLD 6368
Dr. Benavides

I interviewed Jan Andersen, one of the assistant principals at Lakewood High School.

Mrs. Andersen became a teacher of Home Economics in 1976. After she became department chair, she earned her Masters degree in 1981. She became an assistant principal at the high school in 1990 but transferred to the middle school two years later when her husband, Mr. Andersen became the high school principal. She transferred back to the high school in 2005 when Lakewood High School got a new principal and Mr. Andersen became assistant superintendent.

How is the high school different than the middle school?

The middle school is smaller. It has only 800 students (the high school has over 1400). That makes it more personable, closer with the students. It is highly regimented. Students arrive in the morning and must sit in the cafeteria. During lunch, they must stay seated, the teachers on duty have a microphone, they make the students line up before leaving, and a study hall teacher arrives to escort them out. Here (in the high school), we give 45 minutes for lunch. That’s a long time for kids coming out of the middle school.

Also, we have team teaching in the middle school. There are four academic teachers, English, Math, Science, and Social Studies, assigned to a group of students. This way the four teachers all share the same students.

What are some of the challenges we face in the high school?

Apathy. We need the get the students to buy into the educational program. You know that the community college has a program that provides free education for poor students. Even some universities are looking for students such as ours that can show some achievement. Unfortunately, that is not in the plans for a lot of our students.

Sometimes, we teachers feel that our students are not coming to high school adequately prepared. Why do they lack so many skills?
We are dealing with a struggling population. There is a lot of apathy.

*Why?*

The kids don’t feel they have control over their lives. They are passive. Their parents might not have finished high school and they don’t value education. And now with the ESL students, the parents are intimidated to be involved because they do not speak English.

*But are teachers in the middle school or elementary schools teaching the math?*

The problem is not in the system. They have a very good program.

*What do you know now that you did not know when you started as an assistant principal?*

Age. Things don’t bother me anymore. I don’t get angry about anything.

*What consumes the most time?*

In the middle school it is discipline. In the high school, it is day-to-day management.

*What advice would you give future administrators?*

If you come to school expecting the unexpected, you will not be disappointed.

*That sounds like management. Would you consider yourself primarily a manager or leader?*

You saw all my responsibilities (see list in conclusion). But leadership is important. I need to help new teachers develop classroom management. I need to be visible. I have to help students get to class. I need to visit classrooms and stay informed. I need to pay attention to club activities. A lot goes on at the high school. It is not like the middle school.

*What are some of the leadership issues?*

We are trying to develop the concept of “small schools,” also known as the “School Reform Initiative.” We want to divide up our building into five academies. That’s like the team teaching we have in the middle school. Each group of teachers will be assigned a group of students who have common interests and build a curriculum around that interest. Say someone wants to be a doctor. Then all students with interest in medicine would be grouped together to take math, science, and their core curriculum subjects in a program with the same teachers built around that interest.

*What do you look for during an observation?*
A well-structured lesson plan from beginning, to middle, to end. I look for student participation, that they are engaged in learning. I look at how questions are asked and answered and whether the teacher asks questions that go beyond the level of material that was presented. I want students to think to the next step. I look at the relationship between students and teachers. Also classroom management is important.

What do you want to see the students to learn more than anything else?

I want to see them learn to become respectable citizens. I want them to be in charge of their lives. I want them to love learning. I don’t want life to rule them, but they should rule life. They’re too passive; they should take charge.

Conclusions

We have a Technical Curriculum. Our primary goal is to increase our scores on the State test. Time on task and clear objectives are stressed. Mr. Andersen is trying to increase individualized instruction through the district. But there is no community support for our public school in Lakewood. The vast majority of taxpayers participates in private religious schools and do not even know any students attending public schools. The parents of the public school students are apathetic. The administrator must fill in the gap. This calls for a great deal of leadership on top of the enormous management responsibilities.

I found the comparison between the middle school and high school very interesting. The middle school is leading the way with team teaching. The well regimented and structured culture could provide the feeling of belonging that our high school students need. The academies might provide the structure that our students need and the exploratory curriculum that all students need.

Mrs. Andersen’s responsibilities include organizing the following: Activities and Clubs, Attendance, Freshmen Orientation, Grants, Intervention and Referral Committee, Missing Items, Advisor’s Handbook, ESL, Discipline over Grades 11 and 12, Health Office, Open School Night, Assemblies, Graduation, and Honor Roll Breakfast. Her observation duties are in the Fine Arts, Language Arts, Mathematics, and World Languages.