

An Educator's Journey From Teaching to Senior School Leadership

CANDIDATE PROFILE

Bryan Smith
Head of Upper School
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ADVICE FOR ADMINISTRATORS STARTING AT A NEW SCHOOL

Use formal ways of getting to know faculty and staff such as observing classes and shadowing colleagues. Informal methods are very effective, too. Take the time to sit with someone, listen, absorb feedback and empathize. This helps foster relationships.



“The thing that really impressed me about CalWest was the attention to detail, not only in how they knew the schools, but how to match what my interests were with what the school's needs were.”

Bryan Smith

Falling into Teaching

It was the fall of 1996. Eager to inspire the history students in his first teaching assignment as a long-term substitute at Hotchkiss, a boarding school in Connecticut, Bryan Smith arrived with a positive attitude. Standing tall, wearing a jacket with patches on the elbows, he was confident the students would connect with him. He was fully prepared to change lives like Mr. Keating, the Robin Williams character in the movie *Dead Poets Society*. The only issue was, the teacher scheduled to show Bryan the ropes didn't show up. Bryan was alone and had to go into the class by himself and wing it.

“That was my introduction to teaching.” Bryan explains, “At that point I took a deep breath and said, ‘If it's going to happen, it's got to happen now.’ I did the class. I walked out and my face hurt from smiling so much. I have been teaching ever since.” He discovered the most important part of teaching was the relationship with students. The connection they all shared on their journey through the content together in the classroom was very powerful.

Bryan worked primarily in boarding schools on the East Coast for 12 years – four years at Hotchkiss and eight years at McCallie School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His life

revolved around devoting himself professionally and personally to work. He lived in the dorms, ate with students in dining halls and coached them in sports while also imparting life skills. It was invigorating. “I loved boarding schools. I thought it was something I was going to spend the rest of my life in, but when one gets married and then has a child, sometimes boarding schools end up taking a back seat to other aspects of life.”

Bryan also had an interest in transitioning into an administrative role and leading students at an institutional level. He went back to graduate school and got his Masters in Educational Leadership. Now he felt ready for the next chapter in his career.

Taking on the West Coast and Administrative Work

Teaching in boarding schools gave Bryan the experience of fully investing himself in the success of a school and its community. “I really felt a calling to help make the school better, wherever I was, because I was so committed.” Becoming an administrator was the natural progression. “I believe so much in the value of the work, and I was compelled to moving up in altitude, so to speak, being able to have a different perspective on how to make schools better. I was just drawn to that. I had reached a

point where I just was very curious as to different ways to make an impact on students, and particularly on the direction and the vision for where a school's going to go."

Bryan moved with his wife and son from the East Coast to Lakeside School in Seattle, Washington. Never having been to the Pacific Northwest before in his life, he dropped himself right into the school community. His new position was Upper School Assistant Director, overseeing all aspects of student life. His dedication in the role helped him move several years later into an Upper School Associate Director role where he was responsible for the academic program including curriculum, scheduling, and faculty evaluations.

Being a leader gave Bryan the opportunity to not only mentor students but also faculty members. After many years of learning from his colleagues, he reached a point where he realized they were coming to him for advice. He remembered, "I had reached, I'd call it this magical plane, where the younger faculty would come to me and say, 'Okay, so show me how this works.' That was really fulfilling! I felt like I was paying it forward, or backwards, however we would phrase it, but I was now repaying the favor of those who had guided me."

Living in Seattle and working in an administration role resonated with Bryan. His eight years at Lakeside were exciting and moved by very quickly. He was confident that they trained him well for the next step. It was time to seek new opportunities and he sought to become a Division Head of a school, with principal-like responsibilities for grades 9-12. Bryan knew just who to contact to assist him with his new job search.

Staying on the West Coast to Head a School

Lakeside School had engaged CalWest for certain recruiting and placement services in years past. Bryan was continually impressed with CalWest's approach. Finding a position as a division head is a major undertaking and Bryan was confident CalWest could help him find one that fit his needs.

He contemplated moving back to the East Coast but felt an affinity to the ideals and progressiveness of the West. "I chose CalWest for that reason, because I really wanted to stay in the West. I believe so strongly in the values of the people who live out here." Bryan also desired for his son to continue in independent schools through high school.

Working with CalWest and another search firm on the East Coast helped Bryan see the difference that

CalWest offered. CalWest is more connected to schools in the West. He had never interviewed for a position on this level before and felt overwhelmed at times. But frequent conversations with members of the CalWest team offered reassurance, wisdom and practical next steps. Bryan's file was sent by CalWest to the Bentley School in Oakland, CA, in the month of December for their Head of Upper School position. The CalWest team and Bryan's Recruiting Advisor gave him plenty of guidance and advice. He knew right away that Bentley could be the place for him and he was fully prepared for the interview process.

A Series of Interviews to Make the Decision

A senior leadership interview often involves making several visits. Bryan flew to Oakland for a two-day interview at the beginning of February in order to meet the faculty and learn about the community. It went well and he received a call from Chris Fleischner ("Fleisch"), the president of CalWest, to get Bryan's feedback on the school. Bryan appreciated the support. "Fleisch was going to talk with the head of school at Bentley within an hour, so he wanted to get my feedback. That meant a lot."

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Bryan was invited back to Bentley with his family for a second visit in the middle of February. During Bryan's interviews, his wife received a tour of the school and his son shadowed a class. The job offer came from Bentley the night after that visit. Bryan joyfully accepted the position and was pleasantly surprised with how smoothly everything moved. "It was fairly quick compared to some of the other searches I had been a part of." Bryan's new position, like many in administration, started in the middle of summer in July. "I left Lakeside with a tremendous amount of love and admiration for the school and the community. I realized there are moments in your life when the windows open and you have an opportunity. In finding a school like Bentley, I'm thrilled about believing that this school is the right fit for me professionally."

Putting himself out there for such a prominent leadership position was a new experience for Bryan. His job placement success depended on the guidance and support of the CalWest team. Their knowledge of the schools and personal touch helped move Bryan right into his dream position as the Upper School Head at Bentley School.