

ABE WEHMILLER

July 29, 2024

Dear Search Committee:

In nearly every initial candidate interview I've conducted in my time as a hiring manager in schools, I've started with some version of the following three-part question: Why this role? Why this school? Why now? I've found it to be a useful standardized launching point for those conversations: broad enough to get candidates speaking meaningfully about their professional history; specific enough to anchor us in the present time and place.

I've also found it to be a good set of questions for me to ask myself as I consider my own opportunities for professional movement and growth. What is it about my experiences, interests, and goals that has led me to a place where this position might be an attractive one to pursue? How might this school and its people fit with what I believe to be most important about education? To what extent would the timing of this move work—both in terms of career and life?

I've wrestled with those questions at length since first learning of your upcoming Head of School opening from Andy Watson at DRG Talent late last year. I am submitting my application today having resolved that this role is one that would both leverage my professional experiences and foster my continued professional growth; that this school and city, philosophically and geographically, present as meaningful homes for our family; and that this opportunity comes at a time when we are seeking to launch the next sustained chapter of our lives.

When I consider what it is about the three decades I have spent serving in a variety of roles across five different independent schools that has led me to explore headship, I think mostly about my affinity for building and leading teams. My two stints as a director of athletics have given me significant insight into the work of assembling and supporting highly effective groups. Those years have afforded me the opportunity to reimagine staffing models; design and execute on evaluations and professional development opportunities; launch and sunset programs; and design, fundraise for, and open new facilities—all of which helped me develop and refine my approach to leadership. The role I held immediately prior to that stretch (focused on all aspects of student life), and the role I hold currently (focused on hiring, onboarding, and developing faculty) have allowed me to consider how my leadership might translate across a broader range of school programs. Additionally, my longtime experience as a diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioner has given me insight into how leadership impacts the building of truly inclusive spaces. Intertwined with all of this has been a constant presence as a teacher, coach, advisor, and now dorm resident that has allowed me to remain firmly grounded in the daily realities of school life.

When I consider what draws me to the possibility of headship at Harley in particular, I think first about your clearly-stated philosophy of education and its deep alignment with my own. You'll see echoes of hands-on, play-based exploration and joy in learning in my enclosed educational philosophy statement, and would hopefully see those principles come to life were you to visit my classroom (or watch me in my non-fatigued moments as a parent). I am encouraged to see evidence that you are consistently and unapologetically living that philosophy, whether through your unique programming (hospice and beekeeping stand out), in your school's survey-identified strengths (being known, seen, and safe), or in the variety of post-graduation paths chosen by your students (both the range of college placements and professions represented amongst the alums on your board). I think, too, about the challenge of helping you articulate Harley's value proposition in a unique market and at a unique time

ABE WEHMILLER

for independent schools more generally. My sense is that Rochester will attract a demographic in the coming years that is interested in—or at least open to—the brand of education Harley has to offer. It also sounds like there is work to be done as the city grows to truly distinguish Harley as a community leader in a crowded landscape of quality educational opportunities.

And when I consider what draws me to this opportunity at this point in time, I land on an answer that has both professional and personal dimensions. Professionally, my current role has been somewhat of a departure from my previous career trajectory. I have stepped away from a role of managing people and programs—a move initially driven by a family relocation for my wife’s work in college admissions. That has been a much-needed and welcome break, and has allowed me to once again deeply immerse myself in many of the aspects of school life that originally drew me to this line of work; it’s also shown me clearly that the managing of people and programs is the way I can best serve a school. Personally, our family unit (myself, my wife, and our five-year-old daughter) are looking to settle in a location that supports what we have identified as both our “right now” and “next decade” needs. We’ve decided we miss our previous home (Charlotte, NC) because it was a right-sized city: big enough to offer the meaningful attractions of a major metropolis; small enough to be high on the livability scale. Rochester speaks to us for those same reasons. It also happens to be my wife’s hometown, and the pull of extended family with a young (and only) child is difficult to resist.

I’ll close with one last thought I believe it’s important you understand about my candidacy: I am not actively searching for opportunities to be a head of school. While many of the long-time educators in my peer group have recently or are currently moving into headships, I took myself off that trajectory some time ago. I believe I was in my second year teaching when someone first told me, “You should be a head of school someday.” And for a time, my career path pointed me in that direction. But I’ve never fully bought into the idea that leadership is about title, or that seeking a title is conducive to strong leadership. My mother, a longtime independent school teacher, administrator, and consultant, has often told me that the strongest heads she’s worked with in each of those capacities have been the ones who never wanted to be heads, but instead came to the role through a call to serve. This opportunity at Harley feels in many ways like that kind of calling: It’s the right role only because it’s in the right school, and at the right time.

Enclosed you will find my current resume; my aforementioned statement of educational philosophy, contact information for individuals who can speak to their experiences with me as a supervisor, direct report, mentor, mentee, and colleague; and samples of various work I have done over the last five years. Please let me know if there is anything else I can provide that would be helpful in evaluating my candidacy. I hope to hear back from you soon.

Sincerely,

Abe Wehmiller

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MISSION

To inspire and guide individuals, teams, institutions, and communities to discover, live, and tell their unique and authentic stories.

PROFILE

Veteran independent school educator with experience across multiple roles and areas of school life. Trained facilitator and certified executive coach.

EXPERTISE

- Athletics
 - Curriculum
 - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
 - Facility Design & Construction
 - Leadership Development
 - Professional Learning
 - Program Evaluation
 - Recruitment, Hiring, Retention
 - Strategic Planning
 - Student & Family Support
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EDUCATION

Queens University of Charlotte
McColl School of Business
Coaching Certificate (2019)

University of Washington
College of Education
Masters of Education (2008)

Duke University
Trinity College of Arts & Sciences
Bachelor of Arts (1995)
History & African-American Studies

ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

Deerfield Academy | Deerfield, MA | 2021-Present

Associate Dean of Faculty

- Responsible for overall design and execution of faculty recruitment, hiring, and retention strategy; regular tasks include development of recruitment partnerships, management of candidate selection process, and oversight of new faculty onboarding/orientation
- Partner with Dean of Faculty/Assistant Dean of Faculty on teaching evaluations and workload/housing assignments
- Collaborate with Academic Affairs team to shape and manage faculty meeting calendar/structure with focus on professional learning
- Lead various professional development workshops

Charlotte Country Day School | Charlotte, NC | 2014-2021

Director of Athletics

- Oversaw all aspects (personnel, finance, strategy, logistics) of athletics program with 70+ teams across 26 sports in grades 7-12
- Accomplishments included restructuring program staffing model, founding student-athlete leadership academy, developing athletics internship program, and coordinating design and early construction of \$34M athletics center/natatorium
- Member of school's administrative council, upper school department heads group, and upper school admissions committee

Lakeside School | Seattle, WA | 2004-2014

Athletic Director (2008-2014)

- Oversaw all aspects of athletics program with 50+ teams across 23 sports in grades 5-12
- Accomplishments included leading program-wide strategic planning process; restructuring program staffing model; and coordinating design, construction, and opening of \$22M athletics center
- Member of school's directors' group and admissions committee

Assistant Upper School Director (2004-2008)

- Managed academic and social-emotional support services; disciplinary process; course scheduling; clubs and extracurricular activities; and community assemblies for grades 9-12
- Supervised student life department personnel: two counselors, learning resources coordinator, service learning coordinator, newspaper/yearbook advisors, and family support liaison
- Member of school's directors' group

Greenhill School | Addison, TX | 2001-2004

Director of Multicultural Programs

- Oversaw development and implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in admissions, curriculum, hiring/retention, professional development, and student/family support
- Created and chaired all-school diversity committee

ABE WEHMILLER

TEACHING(+) EXPERIENCE

Deerfield Academy | Deerfield, MA | 2021-Present

- Currently teaching Exploring Race & Racism elective (Grades 11/12)
- Previously taught Campaigns & Elections elective (Grades 11/12) and United States History survey (Grade 11)
- Faculty resident for Grade 11/12 boys' dorm
- Member of Inclusion Committee
- Faculty advisor to Black Student Alliance affinity group

Lakeside School | Seattle, WA | 2004-2009

- Taught United States History survey (Grade 11)
- Head Coach (2006-2009) and Assistant Coach (2004-2005) for Varsity Boys' Basketball team

Greenhill School | Addison, TX | 1998-2004

- Taught Atlantic Experience I & II (European/United States History, Grades 10/11)
- Created and taught two History/Social Science electives: African American Experience and Introduction To Sociology (Grade 12)
- Assistant Coach for Varsity Boys' Basketball and Varsity Boys' & Girls' Crew teams
- Faculty sponsor for upper school student diversity awareness group

The Bullis School | Potomac, MD | 1995-1998

- Taught United States History survey (Grade 11), World Geography (Grade 7), and Introduction to United States History (Grade 6)
- Head or Assistant Coach for various Boys' Basketball and Boys' Soccer teams (Junior Varsity, 9th Grade, Middle School)

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Straight A's Podcast

Co-founder, co-producer, co-host (2018-Present)

National Association of Independent Schools People of Color Conference
Facilitator/panelist/presenter (2005, 2009, 2018, 2019, 2022, 2023)

North Carolina Independent Schools Athletic Association
Regional representative to board of advisors (2019-2021)

The Dalton School & Latin School of Chicago
Visiting evaluation team member (2015)

National Association of Independent Schools Summer Diversity Institute
Faculty member (2003-2006)

*Additional workshop presentations, authored articles, consulting engagements, committee work available upon request

CONTACT

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The first time someone asked me to articulate my educational philosophy, I wrote a piece that centered on my experience at Media Providence Friends School, the small K-8 school I attended from kindergarten through sixth grade. I talked in that piece about how MPFS created an environment that allowed me to form meaningful connections with my teachers and close relationships with my peers, making it what I referred to as my “home away from home.” It represented for me the pinnacle of what schools should be.

I’ve looked back on that first stab at a philosophy many times as I’ve progressed through my 30-year journey as a teacher, coach, and school administrator. And while I’ve evolved considerably in my work, I’ve also recognized that the core of what I value in school settings has remained unchanged. What I now realize I was trying to express in that piece is the importance of teachers and schools deeply and broadly knowing their students, and using that deep and broad knowledge to inform and direct their educational practices.

The first dimension of “knowing” of students that I have come to recognize as critically important involves knowing them as learners—what they want and need to learn, how they can best learn it, and how they might apply it in future endeavors. Over the years, I’ve moved my own teaching from a model of providing students with pre-determined content towards a goal of offering them an array of foundational resources, helping them ask effective questions about those resources, and being nimble enough to follow their questions in unplanned directions. I aspire to this approach in service of self-discovery and individualized, authentic learning. I believe our teachers (and, by extension, our schools) should strive for what I recently heard educator and author, Brittany Packnett Cunningham, describe as “making room for the if’s, the and’s, the but’s, the instead of’s... and the adventure.”

The second dimension of knowing I hold in high regard is that of knowing our students as people. Their learning is informed, enhanced, and sometimes inhibited by their lives, their passions, and their identities. Our knowing them in that larger context helps us create spaces for them to be and leverage their fullest selves. My growth in this area has been informed by Dr. John Bennett, a professor in the executive coaching program I completed five years ago, who emphasized the principle of intentional and active listening in our practice. It’s been accelerated by my current experience as an administrator, classroom teacher, and dormitory resident in a boarding school—an environment that allows for opportunities to know students across a wide range of settings. And it’s continued recently as I’ve explored author David Brooks’ model of listening, learning, and knowing that he likens to musical accompaniment.

As my roles in schools have moved into administrative and leadership realms, I’ve thought as much about how to support faculties in this knowing work as I have about how to do it myself. That thinking has become increasingly important as challenges to student well-being have necessitated more support from adults, and the intensification of student support has made the well-being of educators an issue in and of itself. As school leaders, we’re constantly navigating a balance between pushing our teachers to do this important work and stretching them beyond their capacity to manage it. And we’re doing that at a time when many are deciding the work is simply too hard, and choosing to leave the profession.

I believe we can make this challenging ask in this challenging time by simultaneously positioning our faculties for high-impact engagements with students based on their demonstrated strengths; providing them with opportunities for continual learning to develop a broader array of strengths; and creating regular mechanisms for their professional and personal renewal. Michael Spencer, Head of School at Oregon Episcopal School, recently described this approach the “pentagon of the professional educator”—his variation on the traditional “triple threat” model of teaching, coaching and advising that adds to that triad a supporting base of professional development and attention to personal time.