

SELECTING A SUPERINTENDENT IN A TIGHT MARKET: HOW THE CURRENT SUPERINTENDENT CAN HELP*

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Abstract

Selecting a new district leader is always a challenge for school board members. A poor decision can lead to difficulties for everyone associated with the school district including the newly appointed superintendent. By relying on the wisdom and experience of the current superintendent, boards of education enhance their chances of selecting the right leader for their district even in a tight candidate market. This publication aligns with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLCC) Standard 3: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment."



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1 Introduction

Recent educational research documents just how critical effective administrative leadership is in school improvement and increased student achievement (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Murphy, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Some would argue that no one is more critical to the success of the district than the superintendent who plays a pivotal role in

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every aspect of the school district's operation from establishing strategic initiatives to cultivating a district culture to creating the district's leadership team. Given the impact a superintendent has on the district, one of the most important decisions school board members make is selecting their superintendent of schools. Some school board members and other district stakeholders know too well the long-term negative impact the employment of an ineffective superintendent can have on the function and success of the school district (Kamler, 2007). This reality raises an important question which school board members should ask. When our superintendent leaves, will we be able to successfully recruit and employ a highly effective district leader?

Employment market data suggest that this could be a challenge for many school districts, particularly since approximately 2000 superintendent vacancies need to be filled annually throughout the United States (Hahn, 2008). Market indicators point to a shortage of administrative candidates. For example, the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) projects school administrator employment growth of 12% between 2006 and 2016. Meanwhile, in its annual supply and demand study, the American Association for Employment in Education (AAEE) (2008) reports a nationwide shortage of superintendents particularly in Alaska, the Great Lakes, Northeast, and Rocky Mountains regions. Samuels (2008) also documented a similar trend for state school superintendents, noting that state boards of education often compete for candidates from a limited talent pool.

2 Market Factors

What are the key factors driving demand for superintendents and contributing to the declining candidate pool? A primary factor is a perception among many teachers and administrators that the role of the superintendent is just too problem-laden, political, and insecure to be attractive. A substantial number of those who have the background and talent to be successful superintendents are often choosing to remain in other administrative roles which are more manageable, satisfying, and secure (Kamler, 2007). This finding is supported by the American Association of School Administrators (2008) which found in a recent study that a lack of adequate school funding, personal sacrifices, and challenges related to working with school board members were the most significant disincentives for those who might otherwise aspire to the superintendency.

Another factor is the large number of superintendents expected to retire over the next few years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008; Kamler, 2007). As superintendents reach retirement age, often in their mid-50s to early 60s, and qualify for defined benefit pensions, many are choosing to retire at an early age rather than work additional years. Attractive retirement plan benefits, such as those offered in Illinois where superintendents can retire with lifelong pensions equivalent to 75% of the average salary of their last four years with as few as 33 years of full-time service, are difficult to pass up.

Exacerbating the retirement effect is the reality that the typical superintendent today is older than even a few years ago. Consequently, the number of superintendents nearing retirement age is increasing. Glass and Franceschini (2006) found that 74.1% of superintendents were 50 years of age or older. Interesting, they also noted that the average age of a superintendent is 55 which is an historic high.

Anticipated retirements and the average age of superintendents are not the only factors. A much more subtle but real factor contributing to a smaller pool of experienced superintendent candidates is increased job satisfaction. Although 59% of superintendents reported feeling considerable or very great stress in their positions, 93% of the same superintendents said they had good or very good relationships with their boards of education. When asked how satisfied they were in their positions, 89.6% of the superintendents rated themselves as satisfied or very satisfied (Glass & Franceschini, 2006). Such a high satisfaction level provides little incentive for sitting superintendents, especially the most effective, to seek new positions.

These factors are contributing to an overall shrinking pool of superintendent candidates as well as a decrease in the number of experienced superintendents willing to change positions. Consequently, school boards are finding fewer candidates to interview and are giving increased consideration to less experienced candidates such as assistant superintendents or even principals.

3 Current Superintendent's Role in the Selection Process

Although school boards typically rely heavily on state school board associations or private search firms for assistance in the recruitment and selection of their superintendents, current superintendents can play an important role in the selection process if their school board members choose to include them. Board members need to understand that with a more limited and less experienced candidate pool, the inclusion of the current superintendent in the selection process may be more important than ever. However, the reality is that boards of education which are satisfied with the direction of the district are more likely to include their superintendents in the process. If the board is seeking a change, they are more likely to seek advice elsewhere. Therefore, superintendents may want to pose this issue to their boards as part of the initial succession discussion. Then, if invited into the process, superintendents can serve their boards of education well by helping them make an independent decision about their successor.

Given this reality, a question school board members should consider is – In what ways can our superintendent facilitate our selection process and help us employ the most effective leader? Since boards of education members are volunteers and neither generally experienced in educational hiring nor knowledgeable about the day-to-day responsibilities of the superintendent, they need to recognize that their outgoing superintendent is in the best position to assist them through various stages of the selection process.

One way the superintendent can play a key role is helping the board of education recognize the importance of considering qualified internal candidates. Some board members automatically assume that they must initiate a complex or even nationwide search in order to appear independent of the administration and transparent to the staff and community. Although this approach may be important in some school districts, it may be less so in others. If a highly skilled internal candidate is interested in the position, the outgoing superintendent can assist the board of education members by helping them recognize the importance of considering internal candidates prior to conducting a full search. School board members need to understand that they are in the unique position to interview their internal candidate before other school boards have the opportunity. If not selected, a strong internal candidate will likely leave for a position in another district.

Another pivotal role of the superintendent is ensuring a well organized and managed selection process. Search consultants usually request that the school board designate one individual as the district liaison. As the present district leader, the superintendent is in the best position to manage the detailed work of the selection process. Board members would be well advised to invite the superintendent to be part the search planning process and to serve as the contract person responsible for the organization and management of all phases of the interview process.

Also, although boards of education usually conduct the actual superintendent contract negotiations, the superintendent can be an excellent resource to board members by guiding them through the contract process. Since superintendents generally have access to salary and benefit market data, know which contract components are typical in the area, and recognize what provisions will likely be important to candidates, they are in a position to help ensure smoother, less contentious contract negotiations process. At the same time, the superintendents should reinforce the role of the school district attorney and work with the attorney and school board to ensure the contract is a fair and equitable to both the new superintendent and the board of education. Ultimately, this will benefit both the board of education and the new superintendent who will each emerge from the selection process excited and ready to work together as a team.

Finally, when new superintendents assume their positions, one challenge they face is working effectively with their boards of education. This can be an awkward period where boards of education and their superintendents not only are getting to know each other personally and professionally, but trying to learn to function as a team. During this period, it is particularly important that board members work together to contribute significantly to the collaborative process. For some districts, this process can be relatively simple and almost transparent. For others, outside assistance may prove beneficial. Outgoing superintendents can assist their successors and the board of education by pointing out available board development resources available from either state school board associations or private consultants. These are typically designed to help build effective internal board member collaboration and sound school board/superintendents relationships while assisting the board and superintendent in the establishment of immediate common priorities.

4 Pitfalls of Superintendent Involvement

Although the inclusion of outgoing superintendents in the successor selection process is generally very helpful, there are instances when it can be detrimental. Superintendents must recognize that the selection of the new superintendent is an independent decision made by the board of education alone. If superintendents are too involved, stakeholders may question the openness of the process which may create a sense of distrust. Also, outgoing superintendents must remove their egos from the selection process and make sure they do not attempt to unduly influence the board. Those who attempt to control the selection decision or even worse, maintain ongoing contact with board members and district employees after they leave, only undermine the effectiveness of their successor. The key is that they recognize that they are helping the board make an independent decision not controlling the selection.

5 Closing Thoughts

Selecting a new district leader is always a challenge for school board members. A poor decision can lead to difficulties for everyone associated with the school district including the newly appointed superintendent. By relying on the wisdom and experience of the current superintendent, boards of education enhance their chances of selecting the right leader for their district even in a tight candidate market.

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