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Hiring the Superintendent

Making the Right Choice

A STORY

At the conclusion of the evening’s study session, Dr. Francis—the superintendent of schools—reminds the board members to remain for the closed session. The session was posted on the meeting notice, so school board member Vaughn Hester has not given it much thought. She assumes that the superintendent will use the time to update the board on the two teacher-dismissal cases that have been in dispute.

Sharing Unexpected News

After the staff leaves, Superintendent Francis begins her remarks by once again thanking the school board for its tireless commitment to the community. She also indicates that the news she is about to share is going to require the board to work for many more hours over the next several months than they are normally asked to devote to board work. She tells them that after 5 years of serving as their superintendent and more than 30 years of serving in the school system, it is time to plan for her transition into retirement. While she is not in a hurry to leave, she also recognizes that after board members announce a search for a new superintendent, her leadership and expectations will carry less weight. She feels that with the conclusion of state testing, now is a good time to begin the transition process. She believes the school board will have many wonderful candidates because the school system has a strong tax base and significant community

support. She recognizes that the board members now have much to talk about, including the role they want her to play in assisting them with this process. She leaves them to begin their conversations.

Determining Next Steps

There is silence in the room for a few minutes. It's not as if this news is unexpected; however, the board members still need time to absorb the superintendent's words. Board president Syd Fults reminds the board that they had been talking about Superintendent Francis's pending retirement for some time. Fults also says that the superintendent had informed her earlier in the day of her decision to make an official retirement announcement this evening. Fults assures the board members that she has confidence in their ability to select the next superintendent for their school system. She reminds them that this is the single most important responsibility that can be given to the school board, and she looks forward to sharing it with them. She also indicates that the board must make a few initial decisions and that scheduling several meeting times now is essential to get the process moving ahead. Fults details some of the initial decisions the board will need to make: What role does the board want the superintendent to play in the search? How much money is available to support a search? How should the board inform the public and school staff of its decision? Should the board hire a search firm to lead the process?

Everyone agrees to meet in 3 days to begin the planning process. They recognize that having another closed session so close to the current one may cause people to ask questions, but they vow to keep private the nature of their conversations until they determine they know what they want to share.

On the drive home, thoughts are swirling through Hester's head. She recognizes that this is the most important responsibility she has as a school board member, and she wants to do everything possible to get it right. She wonders about all the decisions the board will have to make in the next several weeks and how she can best contribute. As a former educator herself, she recognizes she may have additional insight into how the news will impact many of her former colleagues and others throughout the school system. She wants to make sure the board finds a way to mitigate that impact and keep everyone focused on what's most important: educating students. She also wants to make sure that the superintendent is duly recognized for all she has contributed to the school system.

Recapping the Superintendent's Contributions

Vaughn Hester reflects for a moment on Dr. Francis's characteristics and actions that have contributed to her success as a superintendent. She

recalls how Superintendent Francis led the school system through a strategic-planning process that resulted in a compelling and powerful vision for the system. Dr. Francis introduced continuous improvement tools and strategies that all staff used to advance their efforts and produce greater success for students. She created a culture that embraced change and was constantly conducting environmental scans, and she introduced new programs only after they had been thoroughly studied and even piloted to ensure their applicability to the school system. She openly modeled her own commitment to professional learning, led weekly study sessions with her executive team and weekly instructional rounds with different groups of principals, and monitored the regularly scheduled team learning sessions in schools. All of these efforts have contributed to outstanding academic performance among students and countless instances of recognition for staff and schools.

Planning Ahead

Having observed the superintendent-selection process as an employee, Hester knows that a key step is developing a profile for the new superintendent. She considers what characteristics and experiences are necessary for a candidate to continue the success of the current superintendent. She decides to make preliminary notes for that important discussion.

A CONVERSATION

After a long career in the school system, Superintendent Francis has informed the school board of her intention to retire. She delayed her announcement until after the completion of state testing, and she feels the school board can now focus on facilitating a process that will lead to selecting a good candidate. After sharing her news, Dr. Francis leaves the board alone, recognizing that they will have many immediate and longer-term decisions to make. After airing their initial reactions to the news, the school board selects a date to initiate planning for the superintendent-selection/search process.

On her drive home, school board member Vaughn Hester reflects on the many successes of the current superintendent. The school system has thrived under her leadership. Hester understands that selecting the next superintendent is the most important decision she will make as a school board member. She wants to ensure her community attracts great applicants and hires the very best candidate. She decides to begin writing down thoughts about the superintendent profile she expects the board will develop, as well as questions to ask future applicants.

Take time to discuss your responses to the following questions and their implications for your own school system:

What Do You Think?

- What key issues do school boards consider when selecting new superintendents?
- How does your own school board approach this task?
- What interview questions might provide insights into whether a potential superintendent candidate possesses the necessary attributes, experiences, or knowledge?
- What questions enable you to gather insights regarding the candidate's position on professional learning?
- What resources might the school board access to assist with this important decision?
- How does the issue of professional learning relate to this story?

A POINT OF VIEW

"Above all else, a school board is responsible for hiring the superintendent," wrote author and former New York City school board member Gene Maeroff (2010, p. 65). "Everything else flows from this decision, the most important one that a school board can make." In public education, many would agree. A school board is responsible for setting the agenda for the school system and for providing the vision and goals, but it is the superintendent who must translate the vision and goals into reality. The superintendent is at the apex of the school system's personnel structure, with day-to-day responsibility for organizing, leading, and managing all employees to implement the school board's policies. The importance of hiring a new superintendent—what the National School Boards Association calls the "ultimate exercise in delegation" (Hutton, 2007, p. 7)—has increased not only because the role of school boards has developed toward goal setting and oversight but also because a strong, positive correlation exists between the actions taken by school system leadership and the achievement of students (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Those actions, which reflect the topics discussed in subsequent chapters of this book, include (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) creating board alignment with and in support of school system goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and (e) allocating resources in support of achievement and instruction goals. Among school system leaders, which include local school boards, the superintendent plays a pivotal role.

The role of superintendent involves a myriad of other tasks, which include teaching and learning, budgeting, administration, and community relations. As with leaders of all organizations, it is not easy to find a person with a balance of all the skills needed for the superintendent role. In addition, today's superintendent must relate to and get along with a wider array of constituents than ever before—teachers, staff, students, parents, labor unions, citizens, community members, school board members, and elected officials.

It's not surprising that in this climate, the average tenure of a superintendent is about 5 years, with that in urban school systems being closer to 3 years. Because of the relatively short average tenure of superintendents today, many school board members will have the opportunity to participate in selecting a new superintendent. This occasion is an exciting time, involving both hope and apprehension. Schools represent the best hopes and the future of a community, and the superintendent, more than any other one person, becomes the representative face of those hopes and dreams.

Managing Community Expectations

The pulse around selecting a new superintendent is somewhat dependent on how the last one has performed. School boards always hope a new leader will bring the school system more success and achievement than it has had before. There may be a sense of unease if a previous superintendent did not meet the community's expectations or had a tenure that ended in controversy or failure. The search may be equally difficult if the previous superintendent served a long and successful tenure and became a legend. How do you get that lucky again?

One of the first tasks for a school board is to determine the qualities it is seeking in a superintendent. Typically, school boards want candidates who have broad experience in public education, a record of accomplishment in previous posts, an unblemished reputation for honesty and integrity, and the basic skill set every superintendent needs to be successful. Beyond those things, school boards will likely be influenced by the general health of the school system. If there have been major controversies, the board may seek a superintendent who can quiet the waters and restore calm. If there has been fiscal mismanagement, the board may search for a superintendent with recognized financial ability. If test scores and other achievement indicators have fallen, the board will want a superintendent with a strong instructional background. In a democratic society, school boards should be responsive to the concerns of their constituencies, so that factor also becomes one of the variables that shape the process. School boards usually want to provide a stable system of public schools and may

not want to bring in a leader who will make changes that would upset the community. Some boards prefer a safe candidate with the potential to improve the schools without upsetting constituencies.

It is apparent that this is a complex process that involves many potentially conflicting issues, interests, and requirements. Personal chemistry between a candidate and individual school board members, as well as between the board as a whole and the community, is also a critical ingredient. While a search firm may help a school board reach consensus about the qualities it is seeking in a leader, each board member will have his or her own ideas about what is most important. This means that it is critical for the school board to work together throughout the process to reach consensus on the right candidate and to understand that the decision will require some compromise.

As school boards determine the qualities they seek in a superintendent, they have one of the greatest of all opportunities for community engagement. Parents and citizens have strong feelings about the role of the superintendent of schools and the person who carries out that role. This is especially true in those communities that highly value their public schools. The position of superintendent still carries honor and is elevated to a high place in the community. In addition, community members who understand the challenges of public schools and the students they educate are aware that the school system needs a strong leader who can manage the role with its many expectations.

At the appropriate time in a superintendent search, school boards have the chance to bring together parents and other stakeholders and to listen to the qualities they value in a superintendent. This will be effective only if school boards work to honor the public's input and incorporate it into their process. Sometimes, surveys can be used in addition to public meetings to discuss the superintendent search. However soliciting community input is done, it is a critical component of the process, and if done well and with integrity, it will contribute positively to the selection and support of a new superintendent.

Connecting Professional Development to the Process

In most superintendent searches, increasing student achievement is a priority. If student performance is to improve, then the performance of educators must improve as well. The primary way to improve the performance of current teachers and administrators is for them to engage in more effective professional learning and to use what they learn to raise the performance levels of their students. If school boards understand this, they will want to make sure the superintendents they hire are committed to increasing the effectiveness of professional development as a means to

increasing student achievement. Moreover, school boards will seek a superintendent whose actions will create conditions for teaching and learning to occur for adults and students alike.

While school boards will have several priorities, establishing a focus on professional development is really about learning; it is making a statement about the centrality of learning. If a candidate suggests that he or she regards professional development as only a minor activity, the applicant probably won't strategically use professional learning to leverage increases in student achievement. Integrating issues related to professional development throughout the search process will enable the school board to ascertain whether they have found the candidate who recognizes this key pathway toward success for staff and students.

Establishing the Selection Process

Many school boards retain a consultant or a professional search firm to help manage the search for a new superintendent. Holly Claghorn (2007) of the Texas Association of School Boards pointed out that a board that uses a search firm will want to ensure that the board complies with relevant procurement and bidding requirements; that the contract with the search firm clearly describes services, conditions of payment, and the firm's obligations in case of an unsuccessful search; and that the board understands the impact of open-meetings laws on third-party consultants. For example, she says, "State law may require the board to conduct its deliberations on the selection of the search firm and the terms of the consultant contract in open session" (p. 7).

The firm or person that the board chooses to assist with the search process can vary in background and experience, but the more professional of these people or firms provide a board with lessons learned from their previous searches, assist the board in clarifying its priorities, and otherwise usually play a neutral role in managing the search process. However, some consultants exert strong points of view that may unduly influence a school board. In choosing a firm or individual to assist with the search process, the school board or its individual members will want to learn the person's or firm's point of view about issues that the board views as important, including professional development. The board should be confident that the consultant understands that he or she is working for the school board, not vice versa.

A search consultant will likely assist the school board in developing a position description that provides basic information about the school system, the board's priorities, and the characteristics and experiences that qualified applicants for superintendent should possess. Candidates' applications should be responsive to the issues stated by the school board in the

position description. The board may authorize the consultant or search firm to screen candidates' applications and recommend further consideration for those candidates who seem most promising. Some boards, on the other hand, may want to review all applications themselves. If the board has indicated that professional development is one of its priorities, applications should provide some evidence of candidates' views regarding this topic. If candidates ignore this issue or any other pertinent issue, the board should question whether they are a good fit for the superintendent position.

Once the school board identifies a group of finalists, the next step is personal interviews. This is another opportunity for professional development to surface as an issue that merits the candidate's and school board's attention. If the board has not agreed to ask questions about professional development, an individual board member may still have an opportunity to do so. Any candidate who reaches the interview stage will probably be prepared to discuss issues identified by the school board during the application process. A candidate cannot be knowledgeable about every subject that might arise during the interview, but a serious applicant should have made an effort to study the issues he or she believes are important to the school board. Some candidates may talk about professional development in general terms, while others may be prepared to go deeper. This is a distinction that the board should note.

Some questions the school board might ask during the interview that are directed specifically at the issue of professional development include the following:

- What are your views regarding the links between professional development and student achievement? What do you think are reasonable expectations we should have for the impact professional development will have on the performance levels of educators and their students?
- How do you think our school system should more effectively use professional development to improve the performance of our teachers and administrators?
- What are your thoughts about how the school board can gain a better understanding of the costs and benefits of our educators' specific professional development experiences, as well as the school system's overall approach to professional development?

Making the Best Decision

Responses to these and other questions should provide useful insights into candidates' understanding of major professional development issues and how candidates would address those issues. At the same time, substantive

questions like these will alert candidates to the fact that the school board has more than a passing interest in professional development and that the board wants it to be the foundation upon which student success is built.

Quality superintendent candidates will not want to come to a school system knowing they are not in concert with what the school board is looking for. Strong school boards will not want to hire a superintendent who is not on board with the kind of leadership they are looking for. School boards know that in the past few years, average superintendent tenure has decreased. Superintendents face a tough job, and again, to be successful, they must relate to a variety of constituents—students, teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, parents, the community, businesses, civic groups, elected officials, government agencies, and the school board itself. Finding a candidate who is the right match for both the superintendent position and for the school system is crucial, and only if the board finds such a candidate does the new superintendent have a chance to succeed.

The hiring of a superintendent doesn't come with guarantees. Even candidates who have all the "right" credentials and can persuasively answer questions raised by the school board may not, once hired, be able to meet the school board's expectations. On the other hand, they may simply fall victim to circumstances no one could foresee. The reason to focus the school board and applicants on professional development is to encourage serious thought and reflection on this often neglected dimension of the school system's operations and to significantly improve it. This may be more difficult than it seems because many incorrect assumptions and much misinformation about professional development result in its ineffective use. A new superintendent can implement successful professional development but only if the school board supports his or her efforts to do so.

Hiring the right superintendent—one who will lead the school system to increased success and be embraced by the community—is one of the highest achievements of a school board. By the same token, hiring a superintendent with lackluster or even disastrous results is the ultimate nightmare for a school board. The process can be approached in such a way that the right candidate will be chosen. Finding the right candidate takes preparation, teamwork, time, and integrity, but the results are always worth it!

REFERENCES

- Claghorn, H. (2007, November). Legal issues in recruiting and hiring a superintendent. *Leadership Insider: Practical Perspectives on School Law & Policy*, 7–8. Retrieved from <http://www.nsba.org/Board-Leadership/Governance/Policies/Newsletters/LeadershipInsiderNovember2007.pdf>

Hutton, T. (2007, November). The school board's most important task. *Leadership Insider: Practical Perspectives on School Law & Policy*, 7. Retrieved from <http://www.nsba.org/Board-Leadership/Governance/Policies/Newsletters/LeadershipInsiderNovember2007.pdf>

Maeroff, G. I. (2010). *School boards in America: A flawed exercise in democracy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Marzano, R. J., & Waters, T. (2009). *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

ACTIVITY 1.0

Outcome

Participants will develop greater consensus on their view of the superintendent's role as it relates to professional learning.

Overview

During the search process, participants will discuss reasons for seeking candidates' views on professional learning and will develop indicators of acceptable answers.

Materials

- A copy of chapter 1 for each participant
- A copy of Protocol 1A: Superintendent Search Steps for each participant
- A copy of Protocol 1B: Superintendent Search Questions for each participant

Optional Materials

The following may serve as good reference materials for school boards that are less familiar with the connection between student performance and professional learning.

Cohen, J. (2009, January). *School boards and school climate: Where are we now and where do we need to go?* Presentation at the NSBA Leadership Conference, Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www.nsba.org/Board-Leadership/Governance/KeyWork/Climate-Resources/school-boards-and-school-climate.pdf>. (Explore other resources at <http://www.nsba.org/Board-Leadership/Governance/KeyWork/Climate-Resources/> as well.)

Mountford, M. (2008). Historical and current tensions among board/superintendent teams: Symptoms or cause? In T. L. Alsbury (Ed.), *The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Rice, R., Delagardelle, M., Buckton, M., Jons, C., Lueders, W., Vens, M. J., . . . Weathersby, J. (2001, April). *The Lighthouse Inquiry: School board/superintendent team behaviors in school districts with extreme differences in student achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA. Retrieved from <http://www.ia-sb.org/assets/FADDF72-BE9D-48D7-8CF9-19B823F0CDA1.pdf>

Time

1–2 hours, depending on the number of activities chosen

Learning Structure

Full-board group conversations. May benefit from facilitation by external technical assistance provider.

Directions	Time
<p>1. Read and discuss the following statement: “As critical as professional development is, it may be a challenge to get this issue on the board’s search agenda. Since professional development has a low-visibility status and there is little documentation about its effects, boards may tend not to focus on it.”</p> <p>Do you agree or disagree with the statement? How would you rate the importance of focusing on professional learning during a superintendent search process?</p>	10–15 minutes
<p>2. Consider the typical steps in the superintendent search process. Determine how the issue of professional learning is relevant to each step. Refer to Protocol 1A: Superintendent Search Steps.</p>	10–15 minutes
<p>3. Consider inviting the current superintendent to read your responses to Protocol 1A and react to them.</p>	10 minutes
<p>4. If the school board members agree that it is important to select a superintendent whose views on professional learning are similar to theirs, use Protocol 1B: Superintendent Search Questions as the basis for identifying questions to ask your candidates and for identifying key components of the answers you desire from your candidates.</p>	30–45 minutes
<p>5. Identify the three to five points you will share with the superintendent search firm as a result of this conversation.</p>	10 minutes

Protocol 1A: Superintendent Search Steps

Typical Steps	Implications: Is there a role for professional development at this step in the process?
1. Select the search firm.	
2. Prepare the profile for the search firm.	
3. Develop the criteria for application screening.	
4. Write the questions for the phone interviews.	
5. Write the questions for the face-to-face interviews.	
6. Develop criteria for answers the board is seeking.	
7. Check references.	

Protocol 1B: Superintendent Search Questions

Interview Questions	Components of Successful Answers
What are your views regarding the links between professional development and student achievement?	
What do you think are reasonable expectations we should have for the impact professional development will have on the performance levels of educators and their students?	
How do you think our school system should more effectively use professional development to improve the performance of our teachers and administrators?	
Some superintendents believe a school system's central office administrators should determine the major learning needs of educators and provide appropriate professional development. Other superintendents believe that school-level teachers, coaches, and administrators should identify educators' professional development needs and meet those needs through the work of school-based, facilitated learning teams. What is your view?	

Interview Questions	Components of Successful Answers
Some people believe that an analysis of student performance data and a better understanding of students' learning problems should determine the focus and content of professional development and who engages in it. What do you think about that?	
Our school system clearly needs to organize opportunities for professional development that are more relevant to teachers' daily classroom challenges and, at the same time, are more intensive, engaging, and useful. Given our resource limitations, what are your thoughts about how we can do this?	
Our school system has very little data about how professional development impacts the performance of educators who engage in it. How would you propose the school system collect and use data to improve professional development and understand its outcomes?	
What are your thoughts about how the school board can gain a better understanding of the costs and benefits of our educators' specific professional development experiences, as well as the school system's overall approach to professional development?	