

# Superintendents need more freedom in picking principals

Donna Hargens, Special to The Courier-Journal 11:40 a.m. EST February 25, 2015



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I believe every child can learn and excel in the right environment. With few exceptions, a struggling school needs an experienced principal to boost achievement; a principal who knows how to lead and develop teachers, as well as engage parents and the wider community to foster a culture of success.

There are many distinguished principals who would take on a new challenge. But they are understandably reluctant to apply in a process that by law should be but is often not confidential. That's why I believe the superintendent needs more authority to intervene in selecting principals and I urge every citizen and Kentucky legislator to support Senate Bill 132, which soon heads to the Kentucky House of Representatives for a vote.

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I wish to express my gratitude to Kentucky Sen. Dan Seum for sponsoring SB 132. He understands the importance of attracting seasoned leaders to improve schools that are failing our kids.

As a business owner, Sen. Seum echoes what I hear from business leaders throughout our city: They think of the superintendent as the CEO of a large corporation and principals as part of the senior executive team. Both the superintendent and the CEO are held accountable for results. If a division of a large company performs poorly, the CEO has the authority to hire a new senior executive to turn the ship around.

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Under Kentucky law, the superintendent can only pick a new principal for schools ranked at the bottom 5 percent of achievement. This is unacceptable. If SB 132 passes, the superintendent's authority would expand to fill principal vacancies among the bottom 25 percent of struggling schools. This will prevent many more schools from falling off the academic cliff.

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 was a remarkable piece of legislation with notable checks and balances to protect students from biased hiring by superintendents. KERA gives site-based decision making councils the authority to select principals.

Unfortunately, the names of the finalists are often exposed by word of mouth and in local news reports. Meanwhile the applicants not selected return to their schools where everyone wants to know, "Why would you want to leave us?" It is difficult for a principal to resume leadership while focusing on rebuilding trust and repairing strained relationships. This not only hurts careers, it hurts kids. Experienced principals don't want to take the risk so they don't apply.

If Senate Bill 132 passes, the superintendent could reach out directly and confidentially to the district's most accomplished principals when there is a vacancy at a struggling school. The superintendent would also consult with the site-based decision making council and community stakeholders. This worked well at JCPS in the selection of former Fern Creek Principal Houston Barber to lead the Academy at Shawnee and Fernley Middle School Principal Rob Stephenson to lead Valley High School and the Valley Prep Academy. But I was only able step in because Shawnee and Valley were in the bottom 5 percent in the state.

There are thousands of other students falling far behind at schools doing better than the bottom 5 percent, but better is not nearly good enough.

We need a law that enables our school superintendents to give our at-risk students the leaders they deserve to succeed in school and throughout life. That's why Kentucky needs SB 132.

*Donna M. Hargens Ed.D. is superintendent of Jefferson County Public Schools.*