

EDUCATION WEEK

COMMENTARY

How to Hire a Superintendent Who Will Stick Around

Five pitfalls in hiring district leaders and how to avoid them

By Cathy Mincberg

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The average superintendent tenure is approximately three years in urban districts and six years in suburban districts, according to a 2014 Council of the Great City Schools survey, and those time spans make it hard to develop and institute significant improvements. While some factors shortening superintendent tenure are beyond control, many other factors are manageable. Here are some common pitfalls your local school board must circumnavigate when choosing new district leadership:

1. A mismatch between district and leader.

Too often, boards hire based solely on interviews, with little deep knowledge about the candidate. It is easy to confuse confidence for competence in any work setting. And sometimes superintendents commit to leading districts without a true understanding of the dynamics of their new bosses, the members of the school board. Visions may differ, but there is real danger in conflicting expectations for management styles, priorities, and the governance working relationship.

Solution: During the interviewing phase of the hiring process, the board and the prospective superintendent should develop a joint set of agreements. The dialogue around these questions will be very revealing for both parties.

For example, how will the superintendent communicate with and inform the board? How should constituent concerns be handled? How should school visitation by board members be handled? How are requests for information handled? How are district priorities to be set, and what are they?

2. Poor understanding of the candidate.

Candidates and boards don't know each other. Resumes are not very revealing, and search firms tend to seek out points of agreement, not areas of potential conflict. Boards should demand search and hiring processes that truly reveal the personalities of candidates and the often-hidden priorities of the board.

Solution: In addition to the search firm, the school board should hire someone with investigative skills (possibly the district's HR leader) to conduct a comprehensive review of the candidates. It should rely on real experiences of the candidate to understand management style, handling of successes and failures, quality of people the candidate has hired, personal quirks, and treatment of employees and the community.

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In turn, the superintendent candidate should look for examples of how the board handles conflict, community controversy, priority setting, and relationships.

All candidates have strengths and weaknesses, but the current hiring process tends to highlight the strengths.

3. Reliance on the interview to make a selection.

Most superintendent selection processes rely heavily, if not entirely, on interviews. Often, follow-up and probing questions are discouraged. In the end, the board has heard a couple of canned statements that give a very superficial impression and reveal little more than who is the slickest talker in the candidate pool. During these brief and high-stress interviews, there is no time to establish rapport between the candidate and the board.

Solution: Instead of prioritizing interviews, the board should first rely on the investigations of past behaviors by the candidates, as past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. In addition, it should initiate a series of interactions between the candidates and the board members in a variety of settings where interaction ranges from casual to structured.



—Getty

"Many superintendents are not prepared to properly involve school boards in the work for the district."

4. Superintendents arriving with a 100-day plan.

Boards want action—fast. Even superintendents hired from within the district learn that the view from the top within the local context is different.

The board, staff, and community are left out of the discussion of problems and solutions when superintendents arrive with all the answers. These already-baked plans are a problem and may well pit the board or the community against the superintendent immediately.

Solution: New superintendents should arrive and spend 30 to 90 days on a listening tour of the district and the community. During this time, they can find good information on the real condition of the district, not the propaganda on the website or the bashing in the newspaper. The superintendent can also educate the board and the community on the tough choices ahead.

5. Lack of continuous training and facilitation to help with the rough patches.

Most boards aren't clear on their job duties. Boards tend to behave in the way the prior board behaved. In addition, many superintendents are not prepared to properly involve school boards in the work for the district. Because the roles and responsibilities are not mutually agreed upon, conflict arises when expectations aren't met. Missteps and confused expectations create tension, frustration, and anger.

Solution: Savvy superintendents and board presidents see that a neutral training partner can be a bit of a buffer, clarifier, tough-message deliverer, and confidant that helps the governance team get through the bumpy first year. A regular training program with dates set a year in advance gives the governance team a place to reach mutual understanding and safely air concerns.

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The constant churn of superintendents in a district has a significant negative impact on the district. Everything from student achievement to staff stability is affected. It is true that turnover is sometimes unavoidable, but many times a savvy school board-superintendent team can create an environment for longer tenures for superintendents. It is both important and possible. Just like maintaining an effective governance team, slowing down superintendent turnover is a partnership activity.

Cathy Minberg is the president and CEO for the Center for Reform of School Systems, which provides training to school boards and superintendents across the country. Formerly, she served as a Houston school board member; the chief operating officer for the Houston and Portland, Ore., school districts; and a biology teacher.

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