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Feature

Superintendent Searches Public or Confidential?

The Case for an Open Search process by TERRE DAVIS

Board of education members come and go, but the community remains.

Wise candidates for a superintendent position, as well as the dedicated board members involved in fulfilling this important duty, understand this and therefore want the public to be part of the superintendent search process.

In my 20 years as a search consultant to boards of education, I've witnessed dozens of superintendents find a comfortable match with a new school district when their appointment by the board has followed a largely open and public search process.



Terre Davis manages the superintendent search firm TD & Associates.

Sadly, I've also seen the superintendent-board relationship turn sour and then debilitating, not long after the completion of a search that's largely excluded meaningful public involvement.

Some school board members, owing to their election by the community, believe they must make all decisions, start to finish, effectively leaving the community in the dark about the affairs of the school district. This type of governance puts the district in a "no need to know" mode, leading to the board's decision to conduct its search for a new superintendent in secret or mostly behind closed doors. These actions promote an arrogant "we know best" attitude in the wider community by the board.

In taking the stance that it knows the community's needs better than anyone else, the board forgets that the community owns the schools and should be involved and kept fully informed regarding its investment.

A District's Profile

The community has a vested interest in the outcome of a superintendent search, and it is in the interest of both the public and the candidate to keep the community well informed of the status of the search and the leading applicants for the job. A closed-door process can lead to harmful gossip and misinformation of what is being done.

In one superintendent search not long ago, the community was aware that a certain individual had applied for the top position. When he did not appear as a finalist, the reason rumored was that the mayor was actually running the search process, and he did not want this candidate to be the next superintendent. Had the process been open to the public, this situation would not likely have happened.

A board of education should not even think about posting the open position for a superintendent until it knows what it is looking for in a candidate. Even though board members represent the community at large, few are in such close touch with the community as to know what the community is thinking when it comes to hiring a new school district leader. Community members, parents, district employees and students should be asked what they would like to see in the new superintendent — as to the professional characteristics, leadership skills and personality traits. They tend to be more in touch with the day-to-day needs than is the board.

When public comments are solicited, the school board, the candidate and the contributor must know that the input received is recorded in an honest and straightforward manner and not just as the recorder desires it to be. This can be accomplished by the contributor being able to see exactly what the recorder has written. All comments (without identification of the individual or group attached) should be made public, organized by individual comments and frequency of similar comments. At the end of the comment

period, a summary ought to be incorporated into the community's profile.

The thoroughness of this process ensures the candidates that the input is real, not just a checklist used to generate an overall idea of what the school board desires in its next district leader.

This profile then is considered as input from the community, employees and students as to what the needs are for the next superintendent. The board also gives its input as a group. The board discusses the profile and makes changes deemed necessary before it is adopted by board action and published in the board's posting of the position. The profile also represents one of the more thorough evaluations of the district the board will ever have in its hands.

This procedure is time-consuming for the search consultant/facilitator, yet how can you know what the school community's needs are if you don't ask? Community members, district employees and students generally are delighted to be consulted in the needs process and to see how their individual concerns and comments are valued.

Wise candidates will study this profile before they apply to determine whether their professional characteristics, leadership skills and personality traits meet the priority needs of the district.

Publicizing Names

Candidates for the superintendency should be aware their names and credentials are held in confidence (if they so desire) until the school board determines which candidates are to be interviewed. The candidates chosen for interviews in the open search process are informed their names and credentials are going to be made public.

Candidates who are hesitant about their names being made public once the board schedules a job interview should not apply for the position. The reason most candidates give for wanting to withhold their identity from public view is they don't want their current board of education to know they are applying elsewhere. I always ask each candidate if it would be a problem if his or her name is made public once the board chooses those it wants to interview. If the answer is affirmative, then I suggest the candidate withdraw from a search that's being conducted as an open process.

As a search consultant, I consider a request for confidentiality through the final stages to raise a serious concern, as the candidate is not being honest with the current employer. Why not let your board know? It certainly is more prudent to inform your board before your candidacy is published by the local news media or questions of referral become apparent. In some cases, the board's realization that its superintendent is a desired talent elsewhere might even lead to a pay raise if the board does not want to lose you.

In one case I'm aware of, when the school board learned its superintendent was one of the finalists for a desirable position elsewhere, the board called a special meeting where it increased its superintendent's pay and length of contract to keep him. The candidate withdrew from the search and stayed with his current school district.

For the candidate, the greatest liability in being upfront about one's finalist status comes if you interview three or four times in an open search process and don't land the position. In those cases, the current board members and community may question the superintendent's commitment to his or her current responsibilities and may wonder whether the multiple rejections mean no one else wants the person running their district.

One advantage of the open search process is that the new superintendent will be working with district employees and community members long after most of the board members leave office. It is important to know how you might fit with the prevailing conditions and the key stakeholders before the board makes the most important personnel appointment under its control.

Public Interviews

Public interviews are more of a concern for board members than anyone else. Often school board members feel intimidated or uncomfortable interviewing someone they don't know in open view of the public and the news media. They generally don't like criticism, and they believe the media publishes only the negative aspects of any board activity.

Before the board interviews its superintendent finalists, it should participate in an in-service session to discuss the questions to be asked by the board members and the guidelines to be used during the interview process.

The board must be professional in its procedures and must know the protocol (legally appropriate questions and the number of questions) when soliciting questions for the candidate from the public. The board president should handle all questions from the public, which should be submitted in written form. On-the-spot verbal questions should never be allowed from the public to avoid inappropriate, illegal or embarrassing questions.

In one search that I managed, an excellent candidate had an ex-wife who would follow him to any interview he had and attempt to sabotage his candidacy by asking embarrassing questions. The use of questions submitted in writing by the public prevented her from hurting the candidate.

Public interviews allow the community, parents, district employees and students to listen to the candidate's answers to the board's questions and to gauge the candidate's interest in and commitment to the district. The public must understand that the school board makes the final selection of the superintendent and the board seeks comments, not endorsements, from the various stakeholders.

In the open search process, the community will be informed of the names of the candidate finalists, their current positions and districts, time, date and location of each interview. Candidates should visit the school district before the interview. A central-office employee should be responsible for setting up a schedule as requested by the candidate that includes a tour of the district, the opportunity to review key materials — budget, curriculum, and board minutes — and meeting with various groups.

Members of the public and school district need to be involved in the final stages of the search as the interaction gives the candidate finalists a peek at the makeup of the community and staff. The impression the stakeholders make can be a turning point for the candidate in determining the fit.

The candidate needs to know as much about the district as possible before the interview to determine whether the position is a good fit. The pre-interview visit requires the candidate to interact with various groups in different settings.

The last step, of course, is the interview with the board of education. Candidates should know something about the background of board members and the working relationship with the current superintendent. Once the interview is completed, the candidate can determine if the post is a reasonable fit with his or her needs. If the fit isn't favorable, the candidate needs to respectfully withdraw before the board continues any debate regarding his/her candidacy.

As the board's search consultant, I always escort the candidate out of the room after the interview and ask one question: "Are you still a candidate?" I want assurance the candidate believes the position would be a good fit. In one case, the candidate had a less than satisfactory interview and told me on his way out he felt it would not be a good fit and that he wanted to withdraw from candidacy. It was a positive move, as the following month he interviewed with another school district and landed the superintendency.

No superintendent should apply for a job that he or she may not want — for that is the one you may be offered! The fit with a prospective school district is as important to the candidate's family as it is to the candidate. The new position, its expected time commitment and community involvement must be supported by the family. The candidate and family should visit the community during the application process to discover whether it provides those amenities that the family believes are important in their lives.

For example, a desirable school community in northern Michigan received a large number of applications for its superintendent vacancy a few years ago. In contacting the candidates, I asked whether a family visit had taken place, and several candidates indicated they had never been in the area. I suggested a visit be scheduled by those candidates. A short time later, the applicant pool saw a significant drop in numbers. I learned that the site visits led one family to discover there wasn't a shopping mall within an hour's drive of the place. As I told the school board, best they find out now rather than later.

The family also should be invited to attend the interview. Sometimes the family may stay through its entirety; others remain only for the introduction. Family presence, in any form, shows support for the candidate and the position being sought.

Site Visits

Once the interviews have concluded, the school board recesses, which allows individual board members to ask those individuals who have attended the interviews their opinions regarding the candidates. This activity enables a transfer of feedback from the community, district staff and students to the board. Board members should get as much

information about what the community wants as they possibly can, and it is an excellent process for all persons desiring involvement. Once again, it ensures the community, employees and students that their individual opinions, thoughts and ideas are valued and appreciated.

When the board returns to its public session, deliberations should be open, honest and, for the most part, positive. The person facilitating the search — whether a professional consultant or a member of the community — should assist board members in keeping their public remarks from becoming negative assessments of individual candidates. The latter serve no valuable purpose other than to fuel lively news media coverage.

This entire process leads to the determination of the fit of the candidate to the district. The better the fit, the more support will be shown in the public session with the board committed to a successful working relationship with the new superintendent.

As a finalist in a superintendent search, you and your current district can expect a site visit from a team of individuals. Site visits are typically coordinated by the search consultant, who develops guidelines for the board team and the candidate and his/her current district. Those participating in the site visits with board members function as an ad hoc committee and have absolutely no say over whom the board appoints as the new superintendent. They serve as extra feet, eyes and ears to assist the board in gathering on-the-ground information to make a responsible decision.

Site visits are extremely important as the school board will see the candidate in his or her current workplace and have a chance to verify what was shared in the job interview and validate what is stated in the candidate's file. The board will see the candidate on home turf and view the uncut and unfiltered version of who this person really is.

More than once I have seen where the individual the board thinks is the No. 1 contender turns out to be someone totally different when viewed in his or her own surroundings. If the site visit team only hears positive things during the site visit, usually one of two things may be happening: The district is eager to get rid of the superintendent or the superintendent has never made a tough decision.

Once the board gathers the information it deems necessary to make an informed decision, it may offer the position to a candidate. That candidate may accept the offer but then reconsider by deciding not to accept the position. (This may happen in either an open search or a closed search.) If this occurs, I advise the board never to offer the superintendency to the runner-up as that person always will be viewed as the board's second best. The second-choice label will be used against the board of education and superintendent in future decisions.

I have seen it happen — next-day newspaper headlines reading, "Board Appoints Second Choice." Every time something of a controversial nature subsequently arises, someone from the community raises the line that "The board didn't get the best." That is not a way to start on the road to success. The board should employ an interim and start the process over.

Sunshine or Darkness?

Having the community, parents, school district employees and students involved in the superintendent search process provides support for the board of education, leads to more favorable public perceptions and builds trust. For the candidate, the open process lends a support base from the start in the new position.

Searches conducted behind closed doors promote the new superintendent as the board's superintendent, not the community's superintendent. As a friend shared with me a long time ago: "Doing a search in a closed atmosphere is not good public policy and is like dancing in the dark." When a search is played out in an open atmosphere, the community, the district staff and students feel appreciated to have been consulted in the selection process and inclined to commit themselves to getting the new superintendent off to a successful start. Success at the top tends to spread throughout the school district as a whole.

In every superintendent search I conduct for a school board, I remind the members and the finalists of this: The candidate must fit the community. The candidate must not expect the community to fit him or her.

Terre Davis, a former superintendent, runs TD & Associates in Westcliffe, Colo. She is the author of *Seeking New Possibilities? Be a Search Consultant!* E-mail: terredavis@aol.com (mailto:terredavis@aol.com)

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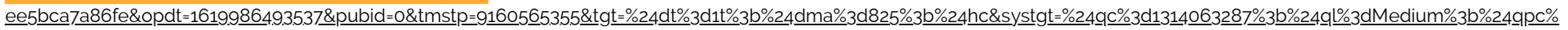
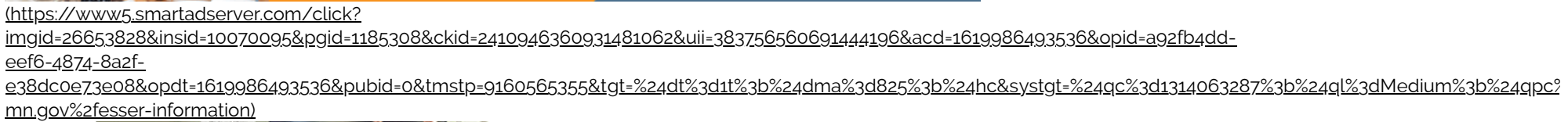
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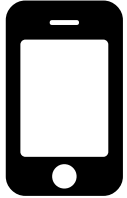


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