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Conducting a Successful Superintendent Search

*Hiring your next school leader takes time, energy,
and a willingness to listen to your community*

By Gary Brinkman

In the summer of 2004, our school board in Avon, Ind., was faced with the need to hold a school superintendent search. Our superintendent had been selected to become the president of a state university. As board president, I had the responsibility of leading our board through the superintendent search process.

As I approached the onset of this search, I was reminded by our state school board association that this was the most important action taken by any school board. The board's selection process would likely take a path of compromise, reflection, focus, and review of the community's value perspectives and comments. It was the ultimate goal for the board to find common ground together as we proceeded through the search, concluding in a unanimous vote for the selected candidate.

It is important to maintain an awareness of the impact of this search process on your candidate and their family, as well as your community. This decision impacts your school district for years. It is the most important function a school board performs for your community, and it is important to reflect your awareness of this fact throughout the selection process.

Foundation for the search

The board needs to first come to an agreement on the initial direction to follow as it moves forward. Typically, the initial step could be to seek guidance from others who have recently been through the process.

Local state universities or state school boards associations have services that offer valuable information to get a board up to speed to begin its search. Also, professional organizations exist to assist a board with the decision process. Our board used our state universities, and our alliance with the Indiana School Board Association to assist us in outlining and structuring our school superintendent search. These steps were outlined for our board to follow and were noted for reference throughout the process.

The board should solicit opinions from parents, school principals, central office administrators, union leaders, teachers, and community members. This input can be obtained directly by the board or by university representatives that can also act as a conduit for the community. Ultimately, this should lead to the formation of the board's Superintendent Qualities.

These qualities can be broken into three levels. Level 1 is the nonnegotiable skills and traits that a superintendent candidate must have. Level 2 is preferred skills and traits, and Level 3 is desired skills and trait.

Throughout the selection process, these benchmarks were referenced by the board. This allowed us to remain focused, while remembering our community and staff's comments as time passed in our search.

Working with staff and the community

Thirty days following the announcement of the vacancy, our administrators were returning for preparation of the new school year.

The board felt it should have two priorities: naming an interim superintendent and setting a timeline for the entire search process.

Soon after the superintendent's announcement, a board colleague and I met with each administrator individually and reviewed the process with them. They encouraged the board to select an interim superintendent internally rather than someone outside the district. This request was made with the understanding the process took no more than six months. They desired the board to make a timely but not hurried decision on the new superintendent. Also during these individual meetings with our administrators, we asked them to share their opinions outlining qualities that our new superintendent should possess.

We asked each of them if they were interested in the position. The consultants advised the board that if any present administrator expressed interest in applying for the position as the new superintendent, they should not serve as the interim superintendent. This would show all interested parties that it was an open search, and would not expose any internal candidate to being evaluated favorably or unfavorably prior to being offered the position. We also wanted the administration to be comfortable knowing that all relevant search information would be shared with them prior to being made public. The board wanted to assure our administrators that, while they were not part of the search team, they were highly valued professionals.

The board named an assistant superintendent to the interim position.

August 1 was the building principals' first day back to school, and a senior board member and I met with them. I heard some concern about the search process and was questioned if the board was up to the task. I announced the name of our interim superintendent and the deadline for the conclusion of the search. I also gave a brief outline of the process, and discussed the importance of their leadership in our schools during this time of transition. That meeting with our building leadership was valuable, I later found out, and served as a visible demonstration of the board's resolve.

I had underestimated how much we would be affected by the departure of a 14-year superintendent. At this point, I understood the importance of always acting with confidence publicly when discussing any aspect of our search. Stating the board's plan and the anticipated timeframe to its conclusion seemed to satisfy inquiring personnel.

Mechanics of the search

The board established a post office box for all superintendent applicants to use for their confidentiality. The board also notified applicants on receipt of their application. This kept any responses from being mailed to the district administration office.

The board established with our central office administration that we were always open to any comments or observations they had about our search process. However, throughout the superintendent search, the board would be leaving central office administration out of all

communication. They would have no responsibility in the search, and the board had no expectation from them. Later, I was told by our administrators that they greatly appreciated being left out of the process. They said several times during this period various individuals would ask questions, assuming they knew details about the search. Questions like, “Who are the candidates?” and “How many people have applied?” were typical. Administrators told me it was nice to not know and be able to say that the process was in the board’s hands. They were not involved, and they appreciated it.

The newspapers called me, trying to obtain information on our search. They wanted to write articles on our superintendent search process as time progressed. Off the record, I asked them to please report on the timeline, but not continue to search for storylines. I expressed to them that this was a very important process, and would appreciate their help and assistance. I said I could tell them very little at the moment and committed to tell them what I could when I could. I also said they would be the first to know when a decision was made and promised they would have an opportunity to have an interview with our new superintendent immediately.

The newspaper reporters honored my requests, and so did I.

The search

Candidates were contacted and a series of planned questions were prepared by the board. During the series of interviews, the board requested that members ask the same questions of each candidate in an attempt to duplicate each interview. This would later be used as a comparison reference and tool for the board. This was an attempt to keep these sessions within the bounds of what we were legally allowed to inquire.

As the interviews progressed and candidates were called for further interviews, the candidates’ spouses were included in meetings. Board members included their own spouses to make this experience less formal, and for conversation purposes. As a secondary benefit, this gave the board an opportunity to receive objective input, and any perspectives they might have on the candidates.

These sessions were less structured and more informal. Questions typically became more specific and directed to define each candidate’s strengths and demeanor. As the process of the selection of our new superintendent reached the final stages, I kept in close contact with our legal counsel. I communicated with them on our process, thus enabling them to be prepared to swiftly “close the deal” contractually with a selected candidate.

The decision

Once the interviews have concluded, decision rests with the board. Our university consultants recommended the board start this decision by the process of elimination of candidates that were not good fits for the district. Then the desired conclusion was reached by referencing the Level 1, 2, and 3 identified traits that were derived from staff, community, and board members’ input. The board can move forward on a “finalist candidate” by using these reference tools. This allows for the optimum environment for a new superintendent to be successful.

Closing the sale

When the board works through this finalist stage of the process, it is important to move swiftly to a possible conclusion. This person needs to feel the excitement from the board for their serving in

this new capacity and in your community. First, we immediately contacted our finalist superintendent candidate to make arrangements to get confirmation for a meeting in a few days with the candidate's present school district. The goal of this visit and meeting with the other school personnel was to get insight on the selected finalist. We met with board members, parent groups, booster groups, teachers, and union leadership. We wanted confirmation of our previous findings at this point in our search. We were looking for any "red flags." Making this call to this individual by the board enables him or her to notify appropriate personnel of the changes in their present school's leadership. Following this conversation, you need to make phone calls to the unsuccessful semi-finalist candidates. These are difficult calls to make, but they are important and necessary.

As quickly as possible, you need to hold a public meeting to vote on the superintendent selection. Make arrangements for the announcement of the new superintendent following the boards' vote, to the district and the community. The selected candidate is invited to attend the meeting. It would also be very appropriate for the spouse of the superintendent to be introduced formally at the board meeting, thereby welcoming them into your school community. Make your new superintendent part of the community as soon as possible, by promoting visibility through booster groups, clubs, dinners, and local community leadership. It is important to show the superintendent appropriate enthusiasm and support throughout this leadership transition.

The final business for the board is to keep the search paperwork on file for one year.

In the end

As happy as the school board is to have made their superintendent selection, completing the process will feel like a let down. As the board president, the daily scheduling and pressures during the selection process had developed into a routine. It can be difficult to back away and just be a functional typical board again.

As board president during this search, I have new respect for each of my fellow board members. I felt pride in the process and a job well done, but few people could ever understand the burdens of this experience, as well as the extent of time and involvement that it required. I did not realize how much I was involved in the activity of the school corporation. Then suddenly the flurry of activity was over and the days roll back into a routine for everyone in the district, except for me, the board president.

However, as I reflect through the process and put things in their proper perspective, I believe as a board we answered the call, and functioned satisfactorily in the single most critical situation brought before a school board.

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