

Superintendent Search Process

BEFORE THE SEARCH PROCESS

Separate from the formal process of searching for a superintendent is a basic observation: if you stay ready, you don't have to get ready. In that spirit, it is recommended that boards are constantly improving their attractiveness as a place for highly effective people to serve students and paying attention to who talented individuals are. One never knows when these individuals may need to be called on to serve as interim superintendents or be great candidates for the permanent role.

Complete Transition Process

- <http://tinyurl.com/SOFG-Supt-Transition-Process>

Attraction

- Purpose: How do we attract highly effective staff?
- Length: never ending
- Partners: board coach
- Description: The more disciplined the school board is in distinguishing between governance and management, and the more effective the school board is at governing, the more attractive it makes the district to potential staff. Key activities include clearly articulating the vision and values of the community in the form of goals and guardrails; identifying optimal governing practices and rigorously holding themselves accountable for their implementation; and clearly articulating how the superintendent will be evaluated — ideally in a manner that is in alignment with the community's vision and values.
- Deliverables: board adopted goals & guardrails, board self evaluation, superintendent evaluation

Preparation

- Purpose: Who might be a great fit?
- Length: never ending
- Partners: board coach; external law firm
- Description: **Never stop being on the lookout for talent.** Ever. You never know when a superintendent will win the lottery and leave, so always be searching for talent. When a search is imminent, it might be helpful for either board members or an external law firm to reach out to connect with potential candidates to gauge any interest in participating in the pending search. A benefit of using external legal for such tasks is that it can lessen the likelihood of a breach of confidentiality.
- Deliverables: a constantly refreshed list of 1-3 potential interim/permanent superintendents

Pre Search Expectations

- Purpose: Clarify in-bounds and out-of-bounds behaviors during the search
- Length: 1 to 3 days (prior to public announcement)
- Partners: board coach
- Description: In the midst of a power vacuum, expect people to descend into silly season. Expect board members to lose their minds and start taking advantage of the vacuum to hang out in school and school district offices telling people what to do. Expect the outgoing superintendent to do absolutely nothing -- and maybe even ghost entirely. Expect cabinet members to start lobbying their "favorite" board member for support with either their pet projects or with a path to the superintendency. Even high functioning board members often get sucked into the vortex. To address this, have a conversation with the full board outlining appropriate and inappropriate behaviors during the search. Share these expectations with the interim superintendent and ask them to have the same conversation with the cabinet. Or go the

full distance and adopt the expectations into board policy to heighten the consequences of their violation.

- Deliverables: behavior memo (or policy update)
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CREATING THE SEARCH PROCESS

Once a board has determined that a superintendent search is necessary, the following steps offer guidance for developing the search process.

Planning

- Purpose: How will we conduct the search?
- Length: 1 week to 1 month
- Partners: board coach; external law firm
- Description: Once it is clear that a search is necessary, engage competent legal counsel familiar with laws surrounding human resources, open meetings, and who have experience with supporting superintendent searches. Board leadership should meet with external legal to draft the phases of the search process (ie: this document), draft a search timeline, and make plans for when to have the full board review and approve of the search process and search timeline. A detailed search process should clarify what, if any, roles the community will play in the process. This phase is complete once the full board has agreed to the process and timeline.
- Deliverables: detailed search process with timeline

Criteria

- Purpose: Who are we not looking for?
- Length: 2 weeks to 2 months
- Partners: community leaders; board coach; public engagement consultant; not a search firm
- Description: Common wisdom is to leave this to a search firm. But the board is responsible for representing the vision and values of the community — a function within which the superintendent plays a central role — so it's no more recommended to outsource this role than it would be advisable to outsource goal setting. That said, there are many approaches to this. Some boards form committees and rely on the committee to be a filter for community input. Some host a series of community listening opportunities. Some do a combination. What's most important during this phase is what you're listening for: who are we NOT looking for? What search firms most commonly do is go out and collect feedback during a variety of community-facing sessions. Then they'll provide a summary of the characteristics the community most wants to see. The problem is twofold: first, that list tends to be super generic and feels like it could be copy and pasted into any community (ie: "we want a good communicator and someone who cares about children"), and then second, no matter how good the feel good list is, it doesn't help you meaningfully narrow the field. These services are simply not worth paying for. A better approach is for board members — in teams of two or three, but never solo — to use a script that directly solicits exclusionary criteria and potential interview questions from community members. During this listening process, board members should be certain to hear from students, families, staff, and other community members. After community feedback has been solicited, it's important to provide a copy of the raw feedback and a document that describes how the board used the feedback.
- The most important building block of the criteria is the board's adopted goals and guardrails. No candidate should be considered who cannot evidence a history of leading a system in the direction of accomplishing the board's adopted goals. If implementation of the guardrails or other major decisions

are pending (bond election, boundary realignment, school closings, etc) it might also be helpful to inquire about experience leading similar initiatives.

- Deliverables: Lists of the following:
 - Board's adopted goals and guardrails
 - Exclusionary criteria ("don't select anyone who has lost their license before")
 - Questions with exclusionary rubrics ("ask each candidate for a list of their top three priorities in the first 100 days; exclude candidates for whom visiting with parents and students isn't one of those top three priorities")

Screens

- Purpose: What information do we need from candidates?
- Length: 1 week to 1 month
- Partners: search firm; external law firm; district HR leader; board coach
- Description: With all potential criteria in hand, the board should collaboratively develop the candidate application. It is advised that the board seek insights from search firms, external legal counsel, and district HR leadership, but it is not advised that boards defer this vital responsibility to them. Professionals advise, but board members choose. The ideal application is demanding enough that it provides the necessary data for decision making, but not so intense that few applicants choose to complete it. The function of the application should be to provide enough details to clearly screen out 50-80% of applicants. Once the application is complete, interview questions and activities should be developed along with rubrics to help score them. Rubrics are most effective when the people using them have spent time calibrating together in the use of the rubrics; the board should build time into its process for this calibration process and consider doing one or more mock interviews with high performing, highly aligned superintendents/education leaders who are not applicants.
- Resource: [sample questions](#) with rubric
- Deliverables:
 - candidate application with screening rubric
 - first interview questions with screening rubric
 - inbox activity with screening rubric
 - final interview questions with screening rubric

Recruitment

- Purpose: Who do we need to share the opportunity with?
- Length: 1 to 3 months (until finalists are identified)
- Partners: search firm; external law firm; state school board association
- Description: Never allow in-house people to lead a superintendent search. It's problematic for several reasons. That, and no one is as good at the recruitment game as organizations that regularly conduct searches. The key activities include posting the position in appropriate places locally and nationally; fielding questions from applicants; receiving completed applications; disqualifying applicants using the application screening rubric. Throughout this process, board members should be actively reaching out to potential candidates, encouraging them into the process, and passing their contact information on to whomever is running the application process.
- Deliverables: a list of the top scoring candidates who are still eligible

Interviews

- Purpose: Who doesn't fit our criteria?
- Length: 3 days to 2 weeks
- Partners: search firm; external law firm; board coach

- Description: While application screening should be left exclusively to whomever is accepting the applications — either a search firm or external law firm — all additional screening should be conducted by the board itself using the previously crafted screening instruments. This screening by the school board members should utilize completely sanitized and anonymized information about the candidates -- no names, no race, no age, no dates of graduation or service, no gender, no photos, no fraternity/sorority indicators. Nothing but the previously agreed upon screening-relevant information and a letter or number to indicate them. Once the board members have determined whom to interview, then -- and only then -- the school board should receive all of the appropriate information about the candidates whom they have agreed to interview. Ideally no more than ten candidates are included in the first round of interviews. Ideally no more than three candidates are included in the final round of interviews. It's also at this stage that background checks should be conducted and references should be contacted.
- Resource: See more details about the [interview process](#)
- Deliverables: a list of 1 to 10 candidates

Selection

- Purpose: Who will we choose?
- Length: 1 to 2 weeks
- Partners: search firm; external law firm; board coach; district communications leader
- Description: Once the board has narrowed to a single candidate, preliminary negotiations with the candidate must be conducted, deep “opposition research”-style background searches must be conducted utilizing all available web tools and databases, and calls to individuals not listed as references should be made — including prior employers and employees. In addition, the board should develop a plan for how it will introduce its lone finalist to the community, which includes developing a call list of everyone who needs to receive a personal call in the first 24hrs. The exact order of who the lone finalist will meet with and in what quantities (1-on-1's, small group meetings, public forums) are important details to consider.
- Deliverables: a lone finalist; introduction plan; call list

Negotiation

- Purpose: How will we structure the superintendent's contract?
- Length: 1 to 2 weeks
- Partners: new superintendent; board coach; external law firm; political research firm
- Description: Contract negotiations take many forms but for a board that intends to be intensely focused on improving student outcomes, a few non-negotiables are a consistent part of the process. The description of duties to be performed should be as minimalistic as possible so that words don't get in the way of clarity and so that the board's intention doesn't get diluted. Similarly, issues around compensation should be clear, direct, and exactly aligned with the board's priorities. I prefer simplicity:
 - The board will provide the superintendent with the adopted goals and guardrails at least 12 months prior to using the goals and guardrails to evaluate the superintendent's performance. Unless a state of emergency is declared, the board may not rely on any other means of superintendent evaluation other than accomplishment of the board's adopted goals and honoring of the board's adopted guardrails.
 - The superintendent's duties are inclusive of all operational authority delegated to the superintendent by the school board with the intention being that the superintendent ensures accomplishment of the board's adopted goals while ensuring honoring of the board's adopted guardrails.

- The superintendent's salary shall be \$X per year. The superintendent is not eligible for bonus compensation unless the district exceeds its intended goals. The superintendent is not eligible for raises -- due to merit, cost of living adjustments, or any other reason -- unless the district meets at least Y% of its goals and guardrails.

While negotiations are in process, a political opposition research firm should be hired to do a very deep dive into the candidate to identify anything that might be disqualifying or that the board will need to be aware of so that it can engage in messaging around.

- Deliverables: superintendent contract, opposition research dossier

Onboarding

- Purpose: How will we set them up for success?
- Length: 1 to 3 months
- Partners: new superintendent; district communication leader; board coach
- Description: Once the new superintendent has been voted on by the board, in the eyes of the community their first 90 days begins, even if they do not plan for their first day on the job to begin for several months. The board and superintendent are wise to plan accordingly, even if it requires the future superintendent to be on a consulting agreement while the interim superintendent continues running the district (this is especially common in cases where the future superintendent wants to finish out the school year at the current district). While the superintendent's 90 day plan is the superintendent's to create, not the boards, they should still consult with board members in its creation and present it to the board when it is sufficiently complete (it will definitely be revised multiple times throughout the first 90 days). In addition, the board and superintendent should schedule a governance team building and norming retreat as quickly as possible. It may be wise for the board to develop its own 90 day plan for how it will support the superintendent's entry into the role (and, if it's the case, the community). The less daylight there is between the board's expectations and the superintendent's understanding of those expectations, the better.
- Deliverables: superintendent's 90 day plan, board's 90 day plan, governance team retreat agenda