



Finding the Right Fit

The WASB Superintendent Search Services can help districts in their search

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School board members face a myriad of issues. Often these challenges are predictable and appear on a regular cycle from year to year. One challenge is different — the selection of a new superintendent.

Many school board members serve and leave their local board of education without facing the critically important task of hiring a new chief educational leader – superintendent of schools/district administrator.

When deciding how to replace a departing superintendent, board members must decide whether to “go it alone” or to employ an outside search firm to assist in their search for a new superintendent of their school system.

Factors to Consider

Several factors must be considered when making the decision to replace a superintendent. First and foremost, a school board must determine if it has the skills and experience required to undertake the task. Hiring a superintendent involves much more than simply posting the vacancy and interviewing candidates for the vacant position.

A comprehensive search requires input from staff and community, the

development of a candidate profile, the development of interview questions and strategies, background checks, as well as some hidden issues that will surface during the search process.

Related to these factors is the time needed to adequately complete a search. A superintendent search requires significant time and effort. Board members must be willing to commit many hours over the course of several months to conduct a search. Use of the WASB Search Services can reduce stress on board members, freeing them to conduct their normal board business and personal lives.

A final consideration often involves cost of an outside organization. Board members sometimes fear

the public's perspective on spending money to hire a search firm to assist with a search. A WASB search is an investment for the school district and starts building a future relationship.

Remember, even an in-house search has costs to the school district. School personnel are pulled away from their regular duties or board members must give more time to the completion and accomplishment of the search tasks.

What Can the WASB Do for You?

What can the WASB Search Services provide to a school district? Well, there are many items and not the least of which is organization and structure aimed at keeping the search process on task and within a planned timeframe.

The WASB assists a district with the development of a schedule that is tested and proven to allow the necessary components of a search to be completed within three to five months.

The WASB search consultants will help the board gain input from the public using focus groups and use this feedback to create a candidate profile. Importantly, the WASB Search Services will assist the board in the development of an attractive vacancy notice that will promote the district at multiple sites viewed by potential applicants.

The Search Process

Once posted, the WASB consultants will contact individuals who have expressed interest in seeking a new position and will interact with applicants to answer questions as they complete the application materials. This is a key area that is difficult to address without the help of a consultant and would otherwise fall on the shoulders of a board member or may not get done, which discourages candidates for the position.



The Search Process

A look at how the WASB Superintendent Search Services team guides districts through the search process



PLANNING

The first planning meeting involves: determining the extent and the type of community and student involvement in the process, budget and schedule of activities, existing board policy, and commitments of individual board members. A subsequent planning meeting entails choosing five or six candidates for the first interview round and reviewing interview questions and procedures.



PROFILE

The consultant assists the board in arriving at the profile of the desired person based on information from focus groups and the school board.



ADVERTISING

Advertising is usually done through the internet on WASB, WASDA, AWSA and Wisconsin websites. Search staff consistently find new websites that offer free advertising. Print advertising is optional.



INTERNAL REVIEW

An internal review can be done by a district committee as approved by the board. The WASB Search staff provides a rating form.



FIRST INTERVIEWS

The WASB schedules interviews, provides an interview script and an orientation for conducting a productive interview. This orientation includes tips on the traps to avoid and what to listen for in the interview. One or two finalist(s) and an alternate are chosen.



FURTHER SAFEGUARDS

The consultant coaches board members on effective reference checking techniques. The WASB verifies licensure and conducts an extensive criminal and credit background check. If the finalist(s) pass these steps, they move to the second interview.



SECOND INTERVIEWS

The school board and the consultant plan the second round of interviews including who will be involved and the day's schedule. There may be feedback to the board from those participating in the process. The board prioritizes their choices.



BOARD VISIT TO THE FINALIST'S DISTRICT

Board members decide who will visit the district of their first choice finalist.



CONTRACT

The school board or its designee negotiates a contract with the final candidate.



THE NEW SUPERINTENDENT

The WASB may assist the district with announcing the new superintendent to the public and the media. Transition services are available during and after the search process is completed. Some transition services may be team building between the board and the new superintendent and a review of the focus group data to help establish the district's future direction. □

School boards must strive to create the atmosphere and opportunities to facilitate a smooth transition from the outgoing to the incoming superintendent.



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Another important part of any search is the receipt of applications and the subsequent review of the candidates. The WASB consultants are in the field everyday and know many of the candidates seeking a position. This insight is helpful as board members read application materials, many of which look very similar in content.



In addition, the WASB consultants can answer questions about candidates and react to responses provided by the applicants to the required written essay questions that are part of the completed application. This service is invaluable and can protect the board from a questionable hire.

Once the pool of candidates is narrowed, the consultant will assist the school board to develop interview questions and the procedures used to complete at least two rounds of interviews. The consultant will schedule all interviews, make interview arrangements with the applicants, and prepare the school board for the interviews.

Between the initial and final interviews, the WASB Search Services will conduct criminal, financial, and educational background checks.

These background checks protect the district from an applicant with a less than stellar background. Without the help of a search firm, this task would need to be completed by the school board.

After the final interview, the consultant can assist the board, assess the candidates, and offer input into the final selection. It is important to stress that the WASB consultant does not select the new superintendent; this is clearly the school board's responsibility and decision — no one else should make this decision for the school board.

Finally, the WASB strongly recommends that prior to offering employment, the school board should travel to the finalist's current school district to conduct a site visit.

Comprehensive Service

The WASB provides additional assistance throughout the search process. For example, a comprehensive reference guide is provided to each board member early in the process. The guide includes information on how to conduct interviews, offers tips for conducting reference checks, presents legal advice concerning search activities, provides a list of sample interview questions, provides copies of all documents used in the search and a comprehensive list of salary and fringe benefit comparables that can be used to develop a contact with the new superintendent.

It is clear that a search for a new superintendent is unlike almost any other activity facing a school board. The impact of the school board's decision is hard to underestimate and therefore should be given the highest priority.

The WASB Search Services team is comprised of experienced superintendents who possess extensive knowledge about the position and

understand the skill set needed to be successful. Their day-to-day interaction with applicants and school boards across the state provide insight that is hard to match and cannot be duplicated using an internal search process.

After the Selection

A quality search does not end with the selection of a new superintendent. School boards must strive to create the atmosphere and opportunities to facilitate a smooth transition from the outgoing to the incoming superintendent. The WASB consultants can play an important role in this transition.

Using the WASB Search Services does not end with the search. As the school board's membership organization, the new superintendent and the school board will have regular interactions with the association. The WASB strives to make the new relationship successful.

Yes, a superintendent search is time-consuming and may be stressful. However, the WASB Search Services are structured to provide professional guidance to the search while leaving the key decisions in the hands of the school board. A quality superintendent search can ensure a successful outcome for the school board and the students, staff, and community. ■

Louis Birchbauer and Dennis Richards are consultants with the WASB Search Services.

Dr. Birchbauer has dedicated 35 years to working with Wisconsin public school districts. He holds a Ph.D. from the UW-Madison and has served as superintendent for nearly 30 consecutive years including the Cambria-Friesland, Mosinee, Germantown, and Greenfield school districts.

Dr. Richards has devoted 36 years to working with Wisconsin school districts, including serving as superintendent in Washington-Caldwell, Albany, and Black River Falls. He has a Ph.D. in Educational Administration from the UW-Madison. He also served as president of WASDA and the WIAA.