



Finding the

Best and Brightest

What school districts can do to attract quality superintendent candidates



Louis J. Birchbauer, Ph.D.



Dennis E. Richards, Ph.D.

Those school board members who have searched for a superintendent within the past few years know firsthand that it's a sellers' market. No longer can you simply post a notice and watch the applications flow in. Clearly, there are fewer persons applying for the position of superintendent than was the norm a decade ago.

What can a school district do to attract quality candidates to a school district?

Our experiences as search consultants for the WASB over the past six years indicate there are a variety of actions and steps a school district can take to improve the likelihood of attracting quality candidates. Remember, candidates investigate a school district before applying. The following factors may very well impact a school district's ability to attract the largest pool of candidates possible.

■ Reputation Building

First and foremost is the reputation of the district. In this technology age, candidates are simply a click away from an Internet search that will present information about a district.

A pattern of positive news articles can paint the district as a place to

consider. Districts should maximize opportunities to present their story to the media to highlight good things happening in their district. One simple suggestion might be to have a factual update of board meetings available for distribution to avoid any slanting that might appear in blogs or news articles.

Taking time to maintain and update the district's website can go a long way in providing current information to the media, community members, and prospective employees in addition to building a positive online presence for your district.

long and arduous meetings splattered with tension and disrespect.

Board governance practices that have a role for both the board and superintendent ought to be obvious to prospective applicants. Remember decisions reached by the board are not always unanimous, nor should they be, but respect for opposing viewpoints should be maintained at the board table.

■ Time Commitments

The overall expectations for the superintendent position should be reasonable and allow the superintendent some balance in his or her life.

WASB SEARCH SERVICES

For more information on conducting a successful superintendent search, contact Louis Birchbauer or Dennis Richards via the WASB website under *Search Services* at www.wasb.org.

■ Board Practices

School board members should examine their board practices to ensure that meetings are well organized and flow in a timely fashion. No superintendent wishes to endure

Committees should be reviewed periodically to ensure they are current — meeting only as needed to conduct business, and have a focused charge. It is easy to forget that the superintendent in many



districts is expected to attend all of these meetings while maintaining high visibility at other school and community events.

During a recent search, one superintendent told us that he had eight evening meetings related to committee work in the first two weeks of every month. This kind of schedule is not attractive to candidates and may burn out good school board members.

■ Longevity

Board members frequently tell us they hope the new superintendent will “come and stay for a long period of time.” We respond by telling board members they are in the best position to make this happen.

Stable boards enhance the chances for a long-term stay by the superintendent. A history of respecting the position will quickly

become evident to prospective candidates as they consider a district.

This doesn’t mean a board must always support and “rubber stamp” the superintendent. Rather, all public interactions between the board and superintendent must present a respectful appearance to anyone observing the parties. It’s also true the family of the superintendent needs to feel welcome in the community, which is sometimes forgotten.

■ District Finances and Facilities

A well-operated district with a stable financial record is an attractive inducement to any prospective school leader. Whereas a district with history of deficit spending or a low or non-existent fund balance can present a picture of a district unable to meet its obligations and probably unable to address needed changes in technology, instructional practices, and other challenges. Boards and superintendent candidates place great importance on fiscal stability.

Failed or successful referenda also reflect on the district. A district with a history of successful referenda or, on the contrary, a pattern of failed referenda leaves an impression of how the community views the school district and its operations.

The state of the district’s facilities also sends a message to prospective applicants. Well-maintained facilities, whether new or otherwise, suggest a commitment to high standards. Let’s face it, the local community members probably rate the school district on this factor so wouldn’t an outsider draw many of the same conclusions from the state of school facilities?

■ Compensation

Salary and benefits do matter. A school board must be prepared to present a competitive financial package to attract and subsequently retain a quality superintendent.

This doesn’t mean the board must always pay at the top of its comparables, but it does mean that few, if any, good candidates will accept a con-

Our Search in Chippewa Falls

Amy Mason



After several months, our school board at the Chippewa Falls Area Unified School District completed an intense and lengthy superintendent search. We learned many things along the way, and I hope our experience will be of help to you.

FIRST STEP

Our very first step in the process was to decide what qualities and attributes we wanted our next educational leader to possess. This step was important as it saved time later when going through resumes and helped us come to consensus. We hired a locally based facilitator to assist us with this first step.

CONSULTANT OR NO CONSULTANT?

Initially, there was much discussion about whether we should hire a consultant or conduct the search ourselves. Ultimately, we did hire a consultant. I have absolutely no regrets, and I think the majority of our board would agree. We knew some of our stakeholders would question the cost of a consultant, but most of us felt that we did not have enough expertise since many of us were relatively new to the board.

A committee of board members vetted a number of firms and selected three for the entire board to choose from. The board went with the WASB Search Services. Dennis Richards, a consultant with the

WASB, was willing to be flexible and could cater the search to our district’s needs. Looking back, I don’t think we would’ve have been able to do the extensive and comprehensive job that Dennis did. I believe it was money well spent, and I wouldn’t hesitate making that recommendation to board members from other districts.

Our board president, Jim Dimock, said that another reason to consider hiring a consultant is “search firms have instant access to networks for advertising; they have knowledge of available candidates,

Stable boards enhance the chances for a long-term stay by the superintendent.

tract that is significantly below what colleagues are paid for a similar position. School districts want to avoid being a training ground for superintendents by not considering all aspects of the compensation package and work atmosphere.

As consultants, we provide a comprehensive list of salary and fringe benefits comparables for the board to review. In addition, we encourage board members to discuss salary and fringe benefits early in the superintendent search process, regardless of whether or not we are engaged to assist with the search.

Expectations

Finally, a board should have a good sense of what it expects from a superintendent.

Candidates frequently ask board

members during an interview to outline what they expect from their new superintendent. Boards that can answer this question make a good first impression. This understanding enhances the probability that the board will regularly communicate its expectations to the superintendent and conduct a mutually beneficial performance evaluation at least annually.

Good Luck!

As consultants, we believe a district can take steps to enhance the probability of attracting good candidates to the district whether now or in the future by practicing the tips provided. The suggestions we offer in this article should be practiced year-round, long before your district is looking for a superintendent.

Just as in real estate sales, much of this process is location, location, location. In this sense, it means superintendents are trying to locate a district with the qualities, traits, and atmosphere that he or she deems are necessary for success, both personally and for the students he or she will serve. ■

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 has served as superintendent for nearly 30 consecutive years in 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 also served as president of WASDA and the WIAA.

including their history of success (and failures).” Dimock said there is another advantage in hiring a consultant is that “it brings credibility to the process in the eyes of the staff and community.”

COMMUNITY AND STAFF INPUT

Our consultant provided us a framework of the process, and we chose to customize it to best fit our needs. One of the most important steps during this process was to have input and participation from our staff and community. We wanted these groups to be included and contribute to the selection of the superintendent.

We included our staff and community in a variety of ways. Our consultant facilitated focus groups that several of our employees and

community members were invited to participate. These groups answered questions provided by the consultant that identified what was important to them in the next superintendent.

After our two finalists were selected, we asked representatives from our employee groups to meet with the candidates and ask them questions. Our consultant also facilitated public forums for staff and community members to meet the candidates and ask questions in a public setting. This was a great opportunity for our board to see how the candidates interacted with these groups.

TRUST THE PROCESS

If I had to pick one piece of advice that we heard and said frequently, it would be to trust the process.

At times, the process may seem never-ending, but it’s worth it.

Staihs Buchner, our board’s treasurer, said the systematic approach was very good, because it created a large pool of qualified candidates, “The step-by-step system with the inclusion of sample interview questions was especially helpful.”

While the process may seem daunting, choose to look at your search as an opportunity for you and your colleagues to handpick the CEO of your district. I and other members of our board are very pleased with the final outcome and believe we hired an outstanding person to lead our district. □

Mason is vice president of the Chippewa Falls Area Unified School Board.