



It's easy to make mistakes when you're searching for a new superintendent, but most missteps can be avoided

Why Searches Go Wrong

By George A. Goens and Louis J. Esparo

Leadership at the top is essential if a school district is to prosper, so selecting a new superintendent is one of your school board's most important responsibilities. A mistake in the selection process can lead to disaster.

As search consultants, we've seen mistakes that seem minor create long-term havoc or inertia. Here are a baker's dozen mistakes ... and how to avoid them:

1. Trying to beat the clock. Don't let the calendar dictate your search—rushing things can be disastrous. It takes time to recruit good candidates, conduct comprehensive interviews, and perform due diligence on background checks. If candidates are not a good fit for your district, take more time and reopen the search. The task is not just filling the position; it's finding and hiring the right person to lead your schools.

2. The "any old consultant" syndrome. Not all consultants are the same. Before you hire a consultant, be sure to examine credentials and compare services and contracts. Some consultants provide full service from the beginning of the search to the final hiring. Others don't.

Another critical question is whether the consultant really knows the work involved in the superintendency—or just the lingo. Consultants who know the job can tell the difference between candidates with high verbal ability but low performance and those who have a full understanding of leadership and management and a valid record of achievement to show for it. Anyone can place an ad. But not everyone can help your board launch a serious search, differentiate between candidates, and

make wise decisions using a comprehensive, legal, and ethical process.

3. Participative decision making. Every virtue has a dark side. Generally, it's wise to have those who know the most about an issue participate in making decisions about it. But few people in a district understand the complexities and subtleties of the superintendency—or the pressures on the superintendent and the intangible qualities that make someone successful in the position. It can be a mistake to give too much credence to the opinions or speculations of anyone who doesn't really understand the superintendent's role.

4. Abdication of responsibility. It's wise to have some participation in the selection process, of course, but don't let your commitment to involving others compromise your board's authority. Pressure can come from special interest groups inside the system or from the community at large. But just because voices are loud, that doesn't mean they can help guide a sensitive decision about leadership and the qualities required in a new superintendent.

5. Administrative influence. District administrators have a vested interest in the selection of a superintendent—who, after all, will be in a position to make judgments about the goals, direction, and talent of the administrative team. But sometimes that vested interest can work against needed change.

No matter why the current superintendent is leaving, he or she should not be involved in the selection process. Letting

your superintendent choose a successor is just bad practice. It's not sound practice to let district administrators select their new boss either—they might favor someone whose goals don't mesh with your board's and don't meet the schools' needs. Instead of having assistant superintendents and principals sit in on interviews, look for other ways to solicit their input.

6. Speculation. During the interviews, people will inevitably guess at candidates' motivation and intent. Such speculation is not fact, and it could be notoriously wrong. Speculating shortchanges candidates by making unwarranted assumptions. It can discriminate against candidates in subtle ways by raising doubt in the minds of board members or other interviewers. Speculation has no place—it tells you more about the speculator than the candidate. A rule of thumb is to ask the candidate and clarify the issue.

7. Short term vs. long term. Faced with an immediate problem—a major construction project, for example—some boards concentrate their search on candidates who can help them through that specific situation. The new superintendent might be the best qualified to handle the construction project but may lack expertise in the many other issues the district will face in the years to come. Short-term gain, in other words, can result in long-term pain.

8. Jargon, jargon, jargon. Some candidates try to impress interviewers by using all the latest buzzwords. But is there substance behind the jargon? Do the candidates really understand collaborative decision making? Can they cite the upsides and downsides of the standards movement? Do they have a comprehensive accountability plan? Explaining complex issues concisely and in terms people can understand takes more than glibness and jargon. Thoughtfully structured interviews can help you discriminate between candidates who pay lip service to important matters and those who have the knowledge and experience to back up their words.

9. Believing everything you hear. Just as you sometimes chafe at what's written about your board in the local newspaper, superintendents sometimes are victims of hearsay or sensationalized stories. News stories may include allegations and opinions that are not true. A comprehensive analysis of candidates' work records will produce a more accurate picture of their background and performance.

References can be misleading as well. In one case we know of, board members received a negative recommendation on their top candidate and decided not to hire her. What the person making the reference failed to say, however, was that the candidate had fired her husband. The firing was appropriate, ethical, and legal. The superintendent did her job, but that negative reference cost the school board and the candidate a potentially beneficial relationship.

10. Data and measurement. "Not everything that counts can be counted," Einstein once said, "and not everything that can be counted counts." That is certainly true for leadership. It's not easy to find hard data to measure a leader's impact. Should candidates be assessed on the rise or fall of test scores?

That might work in some communities, but comparing test data for candidates from poor districts with those from wealthy suburbs is dubious at best.

Leadership is more than advanced degrees and efficient processes. Such intangibles as credibility, compassion, inspiration, creativity, imagination, and integrity can't be measured, but without them, you don't have leadership. Without them, people won't coalesce around a common purpose. People can feel these intangibles even if they can't see or measure them.

11. Relationships matter. Relationships are at the core of leadership. Some candidates are good at processes, management, or analysis. But they may not be good at building credible relationships that are professionally fulfilling and rewarding for the people with whom they work. Leaders must develop and nourish talent, and that requires relationships that are credible, authentic, and empowering.

12. Dancing in the dark. Some candidates want the selection process to be shielded from the light of public scrutiny, but that's not good public policy. The community has a vested interest in the outcome. At times the process requires appropriate and ethical confidentiality. At other times, it is in the interest of the public and the candidate to keep the community informed of the status of the search and the candidates involved.

We've seen news accounts of candidates registered by number, not name, at hotels and arriving for interviews hiding their identity under umbrellas. Not only is such secrecy undignified, but it chips away at the board's integrity and compromises the credibility of the selected candidate. A superintendent who is hired through this kind of search will have to answer uncomfortable questions about the selection. This process also raises the question of whether district business is done in the open.

13. Is it really over? Conducting an executive search is serious business, and it's reasonable to expect a successful outcome. But sometimes the process unravels. The successful candidate is offered a contract and accepts, news releases announce the selection, good-bye dinners and welcome parties are held—and then the newly appointed leader has a change of heart.

No one can predict with absolute certainty what will happen. But it is the responsibility of the search consultant to minimize the chances that things will go badly wrong. In addition to gauging whether a candidate is a good fit for a district, the consultant must assess the depth of candidates' interest in the position—and help them understand the impact on themselves and their families of making a move.

The superintendency is a wonderful calling, a great opportunity to provide leadership that enriches children's lives. Your board has the obligation of stewardship to act for the common good and select the best leader possible for your schools.

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