



The Entry Process

Two New York state school district leaders provide recommendations on the process of new superintendent orientation and onboarding

Ken Mitchell and Susan Elion Wollin

Every year, hundreds of school boards across the nation engage in the complex ritual of hiring a new superintendent in the hopes of finding that special someone to lead their schools. Many employ search consultants, hold community meetings to gather input for a superintendent profile, parade candidates through public forums, and put finalists through multiple interviews by various constituent groups. The process is arguably more rigorous than the one most Fortune 500 companies use to hire their CEOs.

It should be. This is the most important decision made by a school board, so they need to get it right. Simply put, the data are clear: leadership matters. Superintendent and board stability aligns with positive student achievement. There is both an ethical and pragmatic obligation to make the relationship work right from the start.

Once the search is completed, there is a critical entry period that presents a unique and strategic, yet too often short-lived, opportunity for the board and superintendent to form a strong governance team. Priorities should be focused more on fostering effective leadership to enhance learning and less on making superficial changes to the status quo or resolving local political disputes.

According to the Bard, “What’s past is prologue,” so what can we learn from the typical missteps of both superintendents and school boards during the changing of the guard? Here are four tips that we present from the perspective of Ken, an experienced superintendent, and Susan, a long-time school board president:

The process starts at the point of application

Ken: The serious candidate understands that along with his or her application, there must be a commitment to local research, not just in the identification of criticism found in blogs or the media, but in the objectively researched strengths and challenges of a district. What are the current initiatives? How were they identified and implemented? How is the district leadership defining and measuring success? What are the non-school factors that impact student progress? What are sources of revenues and how do they align with the expenditures that support student learning? How does leadership project return on investment?

Susan: It begins with asking the right questions during the interview process to determine the authenticity of the candidate. Those questions include views on learning, instruction, student achievement, goal setting, systems, processes, and metrics, to name just a few. Applicants need to be vetted to best determine their

sensitivity to the complex societal, political, economic, and future trends, and their relevance to the education of today's student. Beyond that, most boards would like to see affirmation of intellectual curiosity, collaboration, community engagement, core educational values, methods for effecting positive change, as well as how comprehensively the candidate has researched the district. Taken together, this says a lot about the candidate's level of preparedness and commitment to the search and the ability to analyze complex situations for the purpose of process and planning.

The entry process: More than a listening tour

Ken: The entry process is the opportunity for a new superintendent to gather information, build relationships, and share professional knowledge and values. It also provides an opening to establish a plan to engage the collective stakeholders to examine current priorities and identified needs in a way that enables the new leader to learn about the school-community's traditions, culture, and values. The entry process, if well-structured and defined, can serve as the basis of a "strengths and needs" scan whose results can be used for future planning. The data can be presented in subsequent public sessions with the board, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. A superintendent can share, "This is what I learned. This is what I think I heard. This is what others have said. Here is where I see alignment. Here is where I see discrepancies. This is what I believe we need to explore. What do you think? What have I missed or misunderstood?"

Susan: Boards should be wary of superintendents who enter with minimal or loosely-defined pro forma entry plans. A new superintendent might share that he is going on a listening tour. But what does that mean? Which stakeholders will he visit? How will he ensure that groups are not missed, causing them to feel marginalized? Beyond that, is the entry plan a solo flight or one built on teamwork? How will it connect to the current mission and vision of the organization? How it will relate to ongoing initiatives? How will the actions and positions of past leadership be regarded? How will short and long term goals be identified and measured?

Entry and leadership change does not mean another strategic plan

Ken: Change in "the chair" does not mean that there should be change in the work of the organization. I would often warn my board members, leaders, teachers, and parents to avoid jumping to the top of the ladder of inference when they think they have identified a problem. What seems to be apparent is not always reality. There needs to be a thoughtful analysis. Sometimes systemic root causes to issues cannot be solved by superficially imposed technical adjustments that come in the form of new initiatives imposed via district-developed strategic plans. These are often doomed from the start and fail to resolve the structural underpinnings of a problem. Superintendents need to caution their boards about rushing to change through such planning, especially if the change process comes from the top.

Susan: I agree with Ken that when the governance team -- the board members and the superintendent -- fails to research, examine, measure outcomes, and understand root causes before making decisions about change, they risk alienating staff and community members, even though they may be appeasing the desires of current special interest groups. In general, rapid and radical changes are unlikely to last and could actually disrupt the system and quality of learning. Rather, it takes time and commitment to effect deep structural changes, such as transforming a professional culture to one that values the collective efficacy of the educators and continuous learning about best instructional practice.

There is also a need to understand the ethical responsibility to continue the mission of the district, one that should have been established and built upon by generations of school boards, leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders. When special interest factions, even within the ranks of school boards, ignore this to attend to personal agendas, they risk fracturing a foundation built by a legacy of district-level leadership -- board members and superintendents -- who have served as trustees for the good of all, not as delegates for the wants of a few.

Avoiding overload

Ken: New superintendents often fall into the trap of trying to make too many changes during the period of entry and beyond. Taking the helm of a district, the new superintendent comes in with enthusiasm, new ideas, and an external lens about what is learned regarding the new district. Yet again, there is a tendency to rush to judgment with solutions that fail to consider what may have been tried or studied by those who have lived and worked in the district for an entire career.

Often, there are multiple initiatives in play or supposedly in play. Veteran educators become exhausted by additions that are accompanied by an implementation gap. Leaders have ideas and some general thoughts about ways to implement change but fail to map out details, budget for tangential costs, or project what needs to be done to sustain the work or to expand it in ways that ensure quality and depth. Such rapid change contributes to cynicism and initiative overload within the organization that often pervades districts with frequent changes in leadership.

Susan: Community members, staff, and students all share their suggestions. This is helpful and to be sure, the governance team needs to listen and understand why they want to see such changes. But as leaders and strategic long-term thinkers, it's imperative that the team put these ideas into the context of what currently exists, what has happened in the past, and how any new initiative aligns with an assessment of the overall needs of the district. This is where the superintendent's leadership and guidance come into play, working with the board and other stakeholders to create a thoughtful process that will implement practical solutions of ideas whose goal is to advance the mission of the district. This begins with a well-planned and implemented entry.

Strong start, stronger future

One of the greatest responsibilities that school boards face is hiring the superintendent. Such a change can have a profound and lasting impact on student learning. While the hiring process is critical, what happens during and after is equally important. There needs to be a thoughtful and carefully structured plan to not only avoid common missteps, but enrich the school governance relationship and the associated work that will contribute to a stronger learning environment for students and the entire school community.

Ken Mitchell (kenneth.mitchell@mville.edu) is the retired superintendent of New York's South Orangetown Central School District and associate professor of educational leadership at Manhattanville College.

Susan Elion Wollin (susan.elion.wollin@gmail.com) is past president of New York's Bedford Central School Board and past president of Westchester Putnam School Boards Association.

|

© 1940-2016 National School Boards Association