

Board & Administrator

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Insight into the superintendent search process

By Dr. Peter Gorman*

When I interviewed to be the superintendent in Charlotte, I was 41 and a seasoned school administrator. I had managed schools as a principal and groups of schools as an area superintendent. I had worked in central administration in the areas of curriculum and instruction, information technology, and finance. Finally, I had been superintendent in a district — albeit one considerably smaller than Charlotte — in Tustin, California.

I was prepared to lead Charlotte, personally and professionally. I had looked at a variety of other superintendent positions all over the country. In some, I turned down the offer because it didn't feel like the right fit. In others, I had applied but not been offered the job. I learned an important lesson in this process: it's not just the jobs you don't get that matter; the jobs you turn down or decide not to pursue can matter as much or more. Put another way, a superintendent needs a tough skin to survive — and the bruises you get along the way, as well as the ones you avoid, help prepare you to be a strong leader.

The Charlotte job was one of two we seriously considered. The other was Clark County, Nevada, which includes Las Vegas. At the time, it was the fastest growing district in America.

As it happened, the interview in Las Vegas occurred first, about a month before the one in Charlotte.

The interview in Las Vegas was completely public. Everywhere we went, the press followed us. One elected official followed my wife into a bathroom and tried to talk to her over the stall door in an unorthodox but determined effort to sell the

virtues of the Las Vegas community as a great place to live and work.

But as it turned out, I did not get the Las Vegas job. I was crushed since I had grown to like the people we met there. Also, I was afraid I'd missed the only opportunity like that I was going to have. (I was wrong!)

Contributing to my disappointment was having to come back to Tustin and face all the people who'd watched my courtship with another school district. I had seriously flirted with another school district in full public view. There was no changing that or the fallout from such a public betrayal. This led to the Tustin board extending overtures to persuade me to stay there — overtures that I refused.

When I apply for a position, my wife and I start by looking at the job vacancy announcement and the desired candidate profile, if they have developed one, and by evaluating any information gleaned from watching board meetings and reading the newspapers, blogs, TV station websites, the district website, Facebook, and now Twitter. My wife read the Charlotte and Las Vegas newspapers every day.

This helps us to develop our own profile of the traits and characteristics they are looking for in a superintendent, as well as the issues and priorities they will expect the new superintendent to address.

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Role issue: Child of board member asks for job

A child asks his parent/board member to get her a job at the school. How should the parent/board member respond?

Wrong way: Assure her you'll try to get her a job. There's an opening in the English department, and you've served the district for years and feel you are "owed" for this service.

The correct way: Tell her that this would be a conflict of interest on your part and that you don't have the authority as a board member to get her a job. Tell her where she can get information about the job and an application form. The administration does the hiring, not the board. ■

Who should be in charge of decisions?

As The Board Doctor, the topic I get asked about most is the proper roles for the board and superintendent. I must confess — I don't know of any organization where the board and superintendent are completely clear on respective roles.

What this means is that the board and superintendent must continually work at determining "who is responsible for what" rather than waiting for crisis situations to ask that question.

You know the type of situations I'm talking about:

- A heating system breaks down and needs immediate repair. Should the superintendent get it fixed right away or wait for board approval of what will be a sizable bill?
- A staff member is mad at the superintendent and wants a grievance session with the board. Should the board consent or let the superintendent handle it?

Situations like these always frustrate board members and the superintendent. They want a black-and-white definition of "Who should be in charge: the board or the superintendent?"

Unfortunately, answers to "real-world" problems are seldom black and white. Let's consider the big repair bill example mentioned earlier:

The heating system in one building isn't working, and it's freezing outside. It's not an optimal situation for student learning. The superintendent can't reach any board members, so they go ahead and order the repairs.

You can't be fully prepared for every crisis that comes along. But a board can and should set policies that help you and your superintendent know how to handle crisis situations.

The board has a responsibility for planning for emergency purchases. The board should pass a policy on emergency purchases to guide the superintendent — how much can be spent and who on the board should be notified. ■

Trust-building activities for the board and superintendent

Try some of these trust boosters as a board and superintendent team:

- Hold an annual retreat away from your regular meeting room.
- Break bread together occasionally.
- Evaluate the board annually.
- Evaluate the superintendent annually. ■