



# **SCHOOL BOARD INTERVIEW TRAINING AND PREPARATION**



MINNESOTA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

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## **EXECUTIVE SEARCH SERVICES**

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## Relevant Law

All school board meetings related to the superintendent search must be open meetings. Applicants' materials contain data that are classified as private data. The law provides that the names of applicants for employment are private, but the names of finalists are public (M.S. 13.43, Subd. 3.). Once the finalists are named, the school board can only release the following information on applicants for a position: name (only finalists), veteran status, relevant test scores, rank on eligible list, job history, education and training, and work availability. All other information about applicants is private, as are the names and information of all other applicants who are not finalists.

## Don't Ask

Both state and federal law prohibit questions regarding "protected categories." Indirect questions regarding protected categories are also a violation of the law. Some of the protected categories are listed below.

Protected Categories	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Race or color</li><li>• National origin</li><li>• Religion or creed</li><li>• Age</li><li>• Status with regard to public assistance</li><li>• Familial status</li><li>• Marital status</li><li>• Pregnancy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sexual orientation</li><li>• Disability</li><li>• Sex</li><li>• Membership or activity in a local commission</li><li>• Veteran status</li><li>• Genetic information</li><li>• U.S. Citizenship</li></ul>

What is an indirect question that may violate one or more protected categories? Some examples are provided below.

- How much longer do you plan to work before you retire? (The answer to this question may reveal information that discriminates with regard to age.)
- Do you own a home? Have you ever filed for bankruptcy? (The answers to these questions may reveal information that discriminates with regard to public assistance or disability.)
- How will you make dependent care arrangements? (The answer to this question may reveal information that discriminates with regard to marital and familial status.)

School boards should be particularly careful during follow-up questions. The school board should be cautious and agree beforehand how follow-up questions will be handled. Going "off script" increases the risk of an inappropriate question being asked. When in doubt, check with an attorney or contact MSBA.

## Interview Questions: Non-Discrimination Laws

Anti-discrimination laws affect all steps of the employee hiring process. Knowledge of the characteristics on which these laws prohibit inquiry is especially critical when conducting interviews. Sloppy interview practices can result in the appearance of discrimination or even actual discrimination.

Interviewers should avoid seeking information that is not job related. The school board should assume that a rejected applicant may believe that all information acquired during an interview will be used in the hiring decision. The school district will have the burden to explain that not all information elicited during the interview process was used – a very difficult burden when the information involves race, sex, religion, age, disability, etc. Information needed for insurance, tax, social security, or similar purposes should be obtained after employment.

The following list of protected characteristics may not be complete because of the rapidly changing nature of discrimination laws.

Protected Category	Not Permissible to Ask	Permissible to Ask
Race and color	What race are your parents?	
Alienage, ancestry, national origin, nationality, and citizen status (provided the individual is authorized to work in the U.S.)	In what country were you born? In what country were your parents born? Are you a naturalized citizen? What is your native language?	Are you legally authorized to work in the United States?  What languages do you read, speak, or write fluently? (if related to the job requirements)
Marital status	Are you married? Single? Divorced? Engaged?  Are you living with someone?  Would your spouse move with you if you got this position?  What is your maiden name?	
Gender, including parental and pregnancy status	What are your future family plans?  Are you pregnant?  Do you have children? What are their ages?	Are you available to work overtime?  (if related to the job requirements)
Sexual orientation, including actual or perceived heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, or gender-related identity	Do you have a spouse or partner – which?	What kinds of experiences have you had working with others with different backgrounds than your own?

Protected Category	Not Permissible to Ask	Permissible to Ask
Religion or creed	What religious holidays do you celebrate?	Are you available to work "X" to "X"?
Age	When do you plan to retire? What year did you graduate? How would you feel about working for someone younger than you?	What are your long-term career goals?
Military status	Will you miss work because you are a member of a U.S. Reserve unit, such as, Army Reserve or Marine Corps Reserve, or a member of a National Guard unit?	How does your military training or experience prepare you for this job?*
Unfavorable discharge from military service	Under what circumstances were you discharged from the service?	
Arrest record	Have you ever been arrested? Spent time in jail?	
Use of lawful products during non-working hours	Do you smoke or use tobacco products during non-working hours?  Do you consume alcoholic beverages during non-working hours?	
Genetic information	What were the results of any diagnostic, predictive, or pre-symptomatic genetic testing that you've had?	See section on <i>disability</i> below.
Credit history/report, unless the Employee Credit Privacy Act permits a satisfactory credit history to be a job requirement, such as, the position's duties include custody of or unsupervised access to cash or marketable assets valued at \$2,500 or more	Unless the Employee Credit Privacy Act permits a satisfactory credit history to be a job requirement for a specific position, do not ask:  Do you have a good credit score?  Have you been denied a credit card within the last 5 years?  Have you ever filed bankruptcy?	
Salary history or current pay	What is/was your salary at your current/previous employment?	

## **Disability**

Inquiries that are likely to elicit information about a disability, before a bona fide job offer is made, are prohibited. Inquiries about the ability to perform job functions that do not ask about disabilities are permissible.

<b>Protected Category</b>	<b>Not Permissible to Ask</b>	<b>Permissible to Ask</b>
Disability	Have you had any recent illnesses or operations? Do you have AIDS? Do you have asthma? Do you have a disability which would interfere with your ability to perform the job? How many days were you sick last year? Have you ever filed for workers' compensation? Have you ever been injured on the job? How much alcohol do you drink each week? Have you ever been treated for alcohol problems? Have you ever been treated for mental health problems? What prescription drugs are you currently taking?	Can you perform the functions of this job (essential and/or marginal), with or without reasonable accommodation?  Please describe/demonstrate how you would perform these functions (essential and/or marginal).  Have you ever been disciplined (oral or written reprimand, suspension, or termination) for attendance violations or problems?  Do you have the required licenses to perform this job?

## Common Interview Mistakes

Below are ten common interview mistakes. School board members are wise to review the list prior to the interviews.

- 1. Poor or incomplete selection criteria.** If the school board hasn't carefully considered the skills and qualities needed for the position, the school board's interview questions won't get to the key issues.
- 2. Making a bad impression.** Plan ahead so the school board appears cohesive and organized. Start the interview on time and give the candidates your undivided attention. Avoid talking too much – whether it's in the formal interview or informal chitchat – the candidates should be the ones doing most of the talking. School boards don't want the best candidates to have an unfavorable opinion of the school board or school district.
- 3. Violations of the "Don't Ask" list.** Asking "Don't Ask" questions during an interview – intentionally or unintentionally – could subject the school district to a lawsuit. Remember, the "Don't Ask" questions pertain to every step of the process.
- 4. Vague questions, vague answers.** School board members shouldn't be left to interpret what a candidate said or meant. Interview questions should be open-ended but should not invite vague answers. Rather, when possible, ask the candidate to provide current and/or previous examples (i.e., How did you ...).
- 5. Forgetting the whole picture.** When the school board spends too much time on a particular topic, or the questions keep returning to a single topic, the "whole picture" is lost and important areas don't get covered. School board members also sometimes cling to one important characteristic – such as good communication skills – at the expense of considering other weaknesses. The reverse is also true.
- 6. Failure to probe motivation.** School board members certainly want to focus on a candidate's skills. However, the school board should also learn about the candidate's motivation and passion for the job. If the candidate isn't supportive of the school board's goals, the lack of support will be evident in his or her performance. Finding the right candidate is more than learning if a candidate can do the job; the issue is will he or she do it and do it well?
- 7. Treating the interview like a one-way street.** The school board must make sure the interview is a two-way conversation – the school board asks the candidates questions, yet ensures the candidates have time to ask their own questions.
- 8. Incomplete notes.** Without notes, school board members are unlikely to remember key points of each interview – especially after talking to several candidates. Good notes help ensure equal consideration of all candidates; otherwise, the first and last candidates tend to stand out and gain an unfair advantage.
- 9. Quick decisions.** Individuals without a great deal of interview experience may find it difficult to avoid first impressions and assign characteristics based on their own personal interpretations. However, school board members should take their time and make confident, measured decisions based on the pre-established selection criteria.
- 10. Accepting the wrong fit.** Being without a full-time, permanent superintendent for long is neither easy nor desirable. However, lowering the school board's standards to fill the position quickly is worse. When dealing with a high-profile job in a public institution, the process counts. Take your time.
- 11. Not checking your bias at the door.** See the following page for more information on the role Implicit Bias plays in candidate interviews.

## WHAT IS BIAS?

First, it's important to understand what bias is and why we all have biases.

Bias is often regarded negatively. For the purpose of this discussion, we consider bias in the context of partiality, preconceived notion and predisposition. The reality is that biases naturally come from our brains' use of schemas. A schema can be described as a template of knowledge. We use schemas to process the information that bombards our senses every moment of every day. This is simply a way for us to sort information into categories that make sense to us. We have schemas about objects, processes and other human beings.

For example, our brain uses a schema to assign the category of "chair" to an object based on its flat seat, back and legs, even though the chair might be plain wood or lavishly upholstered. We may have a negative bias about plain wood chairs because we have had the uncomfortable experience of sitting in one for an extended period of time. We have a schema for the process of ordering food at a restaurant. We know what it means when a smiling person hands us a laminated document with descriptions of various dishes and prices. And, by observing assorted traits, we use schemas to naturally assign people into categories such as age, gender, race and role.

There are two types of bias, explicit and implicit. Both types of bias include stereotypes and attitudes.

**STEREOTYPES** are traits that we associate with a category. These associations may arise from direct personal experience or they might be relayed to us through stories, media and culture. "Elderly people are frail" is an example of a stereotype.

**ATTITUDES** are overall evaluative feelings that are positive or negative. If we meet someone who graduated from the same university, we tend to feel more at ease with that person.

## WHAT IS IMPLICIT BIAS?

**Implicit biases are those we carry without awareness or conscious direction.** It is the result of our human brains using schemas to organize information into categories. Most of the work our brains do occurs on the unconscious level. Implicit bias does not mean that we hide our prejudices. We are unaware of these biases and they are generally not an indication of our beliefs and values.

This is important for interviewers to understand because without awareness we cannot know if we are acting on hidden biases. Implicit bias is also referred to as hidden or unconscious bias.

## WHAT IS EXPLICIT BIAS?

**In contrast, explicit bias means that we are aware that we have a particular thought or feeling.** It sometimes means we understand the source of that thought or feeling. If you have an explicitly positive attitude toward chocolate, you consciously endorse and celebrate that preference.



## Deliberation Scenarios

In preparation for deliberating in public, it can be helpful to discuss possible scenarios and plan in advance how the board might handle them. Below are some examples of what can occur during the deliberation process. Although these types of situations are rare, please discuss how your board might manage these scenarios in order to conduct open, honest, and positive deliberations regarding your district's candidates.

1. The Board is deadlocked regarding two finalists. As each side digs in, they drill deeper and deeper into the reasons they want their candidate. These reasons could be because they think the candidate will move to the area, or are young and vital and will therefore be visible and energetic, or because the candidate "looks like a superintendent." In remembering our conversation about the role that bias plays in the interview process, how could your board manage that discussion?
2. The debate regarding who should be offered the job is heated and begins to unravel. It reaches a point where comments are becoming personal from board member to board member, or even questioning the chair's intentions and character. What could you do, or how could you respond to keep the discussion collaborative and professional?
3. During deliberations on the final candidates, one board member states they have information from "credible sources" that one candidate has issues in their background that the rest of the board does not know about and that is why they won't support their candidacy. Do you ask them to share this information publicly, and if not, how else could you respond instead?

Again, these situations are rare; however, should they arise what can your board agree upon as fundamental principles to help keep the deliberations as respectful as possible? Please list them below.

## The Candidate's Turn

The school board has its questions answered; now it's the candidate's turn. The school board plans time in the interviews so candidates can ask questions about the school board's expectations and the school district. If the school board-superintendent relationship is akin to "marriage," then both parties need to understand the other before making a commitment. The superintendent wants the school district to be a good fit for him/her as much as the school board wants the superintendent to be a good fit for the school district.

With a small pool of qualified candidates and a highly competitive environment, school board members should be prepared to explain why their school district is a good place to work, while acknowledging the challenges they face.

School board members should be aware that candidates, especially those who consider themselves finalists, are asking tougher and tougher questions.

### Sample Candidate Questions

- How do you evaluate your superintendent?
- What are the strengths of the school district?
- What are the school board's short- and long-term goals? What is the school district's vision?
- What are the school district's biggest challenges?
- How would you describe the relationship between the administration and teachers?
- What is the school district's financial condition?
- What does the school board see as its role? What about the superintendent's role?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses as a school board?
- Does the school district have any problems of which I should be aware?
- What does your community expect in terms of my involvement in the community?
- How will key administrators be selected?
- What are the most important skills you expect a superintendent to possess?
- How does the school board involve itself in the operation of the school district?

## Sample Reference Check Questions

Remember, the reference check questions asked should relate both to the candidate's work and the school board's established hiring criteria. Some sample questions to ask references are provided below.

### Questions to Ask School Board Members

- How often and under what circumstances did XXX contact you?
- What is XXX's role in building the agenda for the school board meeting?
- What is XXX's role at a school board meeting?
- How does XXX deal with school board members who have different agendas or points of view?
- Has XXX shown the ability to hold employees accountable for results?

### Questions to Ask School District Employees

- Does XXX know your name?
- How do representatives of your employee group discuss work-related issues with XXX?
- Does XXX formally or informally recognize employees for good work?
- Can you identify a situation that has caused XXX to terminate the employment of, or to reprimand, an employee? How was it handled?

### Questions to Ask Citizens

- What is the community's perception of the quality of education in your school district?
- What is the community's impression of XXX's fiscal responsibility?
- How has XXX developed support from businesses and other stakeholders?
- What is most needed in your school district?

## Tips for Conducting Reference Checks

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Always</i> check references.</li><li>• Do not ask "Don't Ask" questions.</li><li>• Avoid asking "yes/no" questions.</li><li>• Ask about the candidate's working relationship with other administrators and staff.</li><li>• Ask follow-up questions to get specifics. "Can you provide me a specific example?"</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask in what areas the candidate could use additional training or experience.</li><li>• Ask the critical questions: "Would you rehire the individual? If no, why?"</li><li>• Call past employers as well. The current employer may have reasons for wanting the candidate to leave, and this may distort the answers you received.</li></ul> |
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## Deliberating in Public

The most difficult part of the superintendent search typically involves the final step: debating which finalist best meets the school district's needs.

The debate is public. Many school board members struggle to balance meeting the spirit of the Open Meeting Law with the logistics of an open, honest discussion about the candidates' attributes. How can school board members ensure they don't offend any of the candidates? After all, what will happen if the top candidate declines the position and the school board has alienated its second or third choice?

While these concerns are legitimate, the school board must remember that it is analyzing the candidates because the candidates "voluntarily" sought the position. Candidates for a high-profile public position, such as the superintendency, know they will be judged on criteria set by the school board and/or community and that they will be judged against other candidates. As professionals, they willingly put themselves in that position in order to seek out opportunities in other school districts.

However, school board members should not launch into the process until they are prepared. School board members are reminded to treat the candidates fairly and with respect by emphasizing the candidates' positive attributes instead of pointing out negative ones. This approach will call attention to a school board's professionalism. If questions arise, school board members should seek advice from an MSBA search consultant.

If the school board has determined the qualifications it wants and carefully constructs the interview questions, the debate will follow logically. Do not, as individuals, go off on "fact-finding" missions. Do not entertain the demands of one self-interest group while ignoring others. Remember, the school board is trying to find someone to lead the entire school district, and the school board must try to match that individual's skills with the individuals already employed by the school district.

School boards that plan ahead, abide by the law, and treat people with respect seldom have difficulty in finding new leadership for their school districts. By conducting a quality search, school boards will help usher in new leadership and elevate their stature as quality school boards with a quality educational product.

Do:	Don't:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on the positive attributes of candidates during public discussion rather than negative ones.</li><li>• Judge candidates based on the school board's pre-established criteria.</li><li>• Treat the candidates the way you would want to be treated.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Go on individual fact-finding missions.</li><li>• Let a special interest group shape the process.</li><li>• Alienate any of the finalists.</li><li>• Discuss the candidates in between interviews – save that discussion until you've completed the interviews for that round.</li></ul>

## This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal blue or grey lines across the entire width of the page, typical of notebook paper. There are no margins, text, or other markings present.



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