

# Board & Administrator

FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

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## Welcome union input during superintendent search

Union members' involvement in the search for a new district superintendent can prove invaluable. They are important district stakeholders; they know firsthand what is important to schools, parents, students, and the community. Encourage transparency during the superintendent search by inviting union representatives to executive sessions that focus on the search process. Collecting and considering input from these stakeholders may result in recruiting a better candidate.

The Trenton (NJ) Board of Education's announcement that it planned to interview superintendent candidates in executive sessions came as a surprise to the staff unions, according to Trenton Education Association President Talitha Duncan. She said that the board's decision was short-sighted and didn't recognize the value of the union's input. Duncan suggested that it would be beneficial to consider union input to prevent a "revolving door" of superintendents. She pointed out that the last time union members participated in the process, the board hired a committed superintendent who led the district for eight years.

"The board has been secretive during this latest search, not disclosing any of the candidates' names or including any of the staff unions in interviews," Duncan wrote in a media release. She explained that the public won't be included in the candidate interviews since they will be conducted in executive sessions, and a public comment session will be held only after the closed interviews.

Nina Esposito-Visgitis, president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, said that the union is not invited to participate in the superintendent search, and she wished they were. "[The union] has such valuable and insightful information to offer because we are careful to keep our fingers on the pulse of teachers' feelings, and we work so closely with educators and other locals across the Commonwealth and even across the nation." "For the first time ever, when the BOE did a search for a superintendent five years ago, they held community forums in different parts of the city (in schools) so that stakeholders could provide input into what they were looking for in a superintendent," Esposito-Visgitis said.

Carol Gale, president of Hartford (CT) Federation of Teachers said there isn't any transparency into the search process in her district. "The public school staff have historically heard things on the news before hearing it from our superintendent," she said. "This is an area we have sought to change since taking office, and it has improved. Now we are working on having the unions get information before staff and families do, but that is a work in progress," Gale added.

The Hartford union's only involvement in the recent search was the organizing of a community interview, said Gale. The two finalists were asked a series of questions put together by a search committee and based on input from community stakeholders. Then, the audience, including union representatives, was invited to ask the candidates questions from the floor.

## Qualities unions value

Gale explained that if her district were engaged in the superintendent search, the union would certainly provide input on what qualifications and experience are important for a new superintendent. “[That] might include working with labor leaders, support for educational personnel, listening to staff, giving labor a seat at the table, and a willingness to analyze and revise policies for equity,” she said.

Esposito-Visgitis described the following important qualities of a superintendent candidate: a working knowledge and familiarity of educational systems (and not just a “business model”); a background knowledge of unions and how to work with them, appreciate them, not be intimidated by them; and the ability to work collaboratively and to realize that, most times, what is good for educators is good for students.

“It is good to have a proven record of empowering teachers and lifting up teacher and parent voices,” Esposito-Visgitis said.

It’s important to know what the community values in a superintendent. For example, the Trenton union doesn’t necessarily believe that hiring a candidate with a business background is the best fit, said Duncan. “A proven record of success in elevating students of color” is more important, she remarked. “School finances are difficult to manage which is why school districts hire a business administrator or a chief financial officer,” she explained.

Gale shared some strategies to collaborate with the school board during the hiring process. “The key to working well together is developing relationships and lines of communication. We’ve encouraged members to speak out at BOE meetings. ... We encouraged members to email the board and share their concerns privately.” ■

## Take steps to bring interim board member up to speed

While most school board members serve until the end of their term and subsequently seek reelection, there have been instances where a board member can no longer fulfill her duties and the board must appoint an interim board member.

On March 12, 2021, for example, Virginia Bradley resigned from her position on the school board of Summit (Colo.) School District. The board reported that it would, at its next meeting, appoint an interim board member to fill the vacancy until Bradley’s seat goes to public vote in November.

If this happens in your district, the board president and other board members should facilitate the transition process and ensure the interim board member hits the ground running. Consider these four tips:

**1. Meet with the interim board member one-on-one.** Although the interim board member is filling a temporary vacancy, it is still important for the board president to get acquainted and develop rapport with the interim board member to ensure a positive working relationship. This is especially true if school board elections will not occur for several months.

**2. Offer training, orientation on board procedures.** Even if the interim board member is an

experienced educator or administrator, she may not be familiar with board procedures. To ensure the interim board member is an active and productive participant during board meetings, schedule an orientation or training session to teach her procedures for drafting and approving resolutions and reviewing, adopting, and revising board policies.

**3. Review important projects, goals.** Hold a working session, or multiple, to review important projects and events with the interim board member. For example, the board president may help the interim board member by reviewing details about the district’s current budget and answering questions about ongoing district projects or initiatives. At the same time, another veteran board member can assist the interim board member by clarifying information on board goals and strategies.

**4. Hold a board retreat if possible.** The arrival of an interim board member may sometimes disrupt the synergy of the existing school board, especially if the departing board member had a close bond with her colleagues. To develop healthy teamwork once the interim board member is sworn in, consider scheduling a board retreat to welcome the interim board member even if the retreat takes place earlier in the year than usual. ■