



*Where School Boards Learn to Lead*





# Hiring the Right Superintendent

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### Do's and Don'ts of Hiring a Superintendent

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| DO determine the school district's needs first.                       | DON'T hire the best of the worst.  |
| DO agree to arrive at a consensus.                                    | DON'T overlook those already in the school district.                             |
| DO take enough time to conduct a thorough search.                     | DON'T let a consultant identify the best superintendent for the school district. |
| DO make certain all members of the school board share in the process. | DON'T give away the school board's right to select its next superintendent.      |

# Beginning the Search

Selecting a new superintendent is perhaps the single most important decision a school board will make. Statistics on school board member tenure show that many of them have not experienced the difficult and important task of hiring a superintendent. This booklet is intended to help school boards develop an efficient and effective hiring process.

An organized process is important to both the school board and prospective applicants. School boards at big and small school districts must define the superintendent's job, determine the qualifications of the position, screen applications, conduct interviews, and, ultimately, make the best possible selection for their school districts and communities.

Regardless of school district size, the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) believes this booklet will be helpful.

**For the search, the school board must consider:**

- A search budget,
- The search timeline,
- Whether to use consultants,
- The search process, including:
  1. announcing the vacancy, recruiting applicants, and screening applications,
  2. interviewing specifics,
  3. selecting a finalist, and
  4. communicating to the community and school district staff.

**Hiring a superintendent gives the school board a chance to review its priorities and goals.**

## The Budget

A superintendent search (search) is a time-consuming and relatively expensive process. The cost will vary depending on whether the school board conducts a national search or focuses on the region or state. The use of a consultant will also affect the school district's budget.

**Costs to consider:**

- Staff time, school board members' stipends
- A vacancy brochure describing the position
- Advertising costs
- Postage and telephone calls
- Legal fees
- Consultant fees
- Applicant expenses such as travel, lodging, and meals
- Site visit expenses for school board members, such as travel and meals

## Using a Consultant

Before the school board begins the selection process, school board members must decide whether to employ a search consultant (consultant). If the school board hires a consultant, the consultant should be involved in the planning as early as possible.

Hiring the superintendent — a school district's chief executive officer — is a time-consuming process, and, for this reason, many school boards opt to hire a consultant to guide the school board through the search from start to finish. The consultant understands the legal requirements, is well-versed in interviewing and hiring techniques, and may have connections with potential candidates. If the school board is considering a consultant, talk to school board members from other school districts who have recently used a consultant to hire their superintendents and ask about their experience with the process. School boards can also contact MSBA for information. The school board may review several proposals from consultants and interview two or three before making a decision.



## Beginning the Search

Month 1		Month 2		Month 3		Month 4	
Decide on consultant use Set search budget Establish search timeline Gather stakeholder input Develop hiring criteria Create search vacancy brochure Develop application and selection process Announce vacancy		Advertise and recruit interest in the position Field applicant questions Develop interview process Develop interview questions Screen applications		Interview finalists Conduct second interviews Plan site visits, if needed Conduct final reference checks		Make and announce selection Negotiate employment contract Develop orientation process with new superintendent	

### Sample questions for consultants:

- Are you doing other searches at this time? If so, how many?
- Who were your previous clients?
- How will you advertise and recruit for the position of superintendent in our school district?
- Will you narrow the pool to a small group of applicants? If so, how?
- Will we see all of the applications for our open position?
- When do you consider your work to be finished?

Remember, however, that the responsibility for hiring the superintendent falls squarely on the shoulders of the school board members, and the school board cannot give that responsibility away. The school board must make certain the process remains *its* process and it retains control of all hiring

practices. Don't allow anyone to set unrealistic goals or "glass ceilings."

In addition to reviewing the consultant's credentials and checking references, be sure to ask for all estimates and/or quotes in writing. Use an attorney to draft the agreement into a contract so all parties understand their responsibilities. Ask for progress reports on the search and make sure timelines are met.

## The Search Timeline

The school board should first determine when it wants the new superintendent to start, then work backward from that deadline to establish the search timeline. Generally speaking, a search will take anywhere from three to four months to complete. However, the school board should take as much time as it needs to secure the best possible person for the job.

## Beginning the Search

### Involving Stakeholders

The superintendent works for the school board. Therefore, the entire school board should be involved in the search process, and the entire school board should make the decision to hire. Of course, the superintendent is a significant player in the community as well as the school district. Everyone from school district staff to parents to members of

the business community has a stake in the outcome of the search. Input from stakeholder groups is an important part of the process. The school board should create opportunities for stakeholders to provide input on qualifications.

School board members, however, must be clear with all stakeholder groups that the final hiring decision rests with the school board, as the superintendent is, first and foremost, the school board's employee.

Sample Hiring Criteria	<i>Not Important — 1</i>	<i>Somewhat Important — 2</i>	<i>Average — 3</i>	<i>Important — 4</i>	<i>Very Important — 5</i>
1. Works cooperatively with the school board					
2. Provides educational leadership					
3. Selects, assigns, and evaluates school district staff					
4. Understands and demonstrates sound management					
5. Is experienced in curriculum and development					
6. Delegates authority while maintaining accountability					
7. Is experienced in areas of equity and access					
8. Understands Minnesota's collective bargaining process					
9. Has a progressive yet realistic educational philosophy					
10. Is familiar with state and federal education laws					
11. Has administrative experience in similar school district(s)					
12. Shows interest in broad range of community groups					
13. Has good communication skills					
14. Understands sound fiscal management procedures					
15. Understands the legislative process					
16. Develops and directs an effective leadership team					
17. Is committed to professional growth for self and staff					
18. Is both honest and ethical in dealing with community					
19. Is experienced in implementing educational priorities					
20. Has proven experience in managing transition					



## Beginning the Search



### Developing the Hiring Criteria

Every school board wants a superintendent with multiple strengths, but finding a superintendent who is 100 percent perfect in all desired skill areas is unlikely. The form on Page 3 of this booklet is one tool school boards can use to prioritize hiring criteria.

After identifying and prioritizing the hiring criteria that best fit their district, the school board — or its consultant — should include these in all advertising materials.

### Applications

The vacancy should be announced in a wide variety of places. As the pool of qualified superintendents shrinks, creating widespread awareness about the school district's vacancy is crucial to success.

Advertising can be costly; however, it doesn't have to be lengthy. Any advertisement should include the school district's website address where applicants can find longer job descriptions, the hiring criteria, and information about the school district and community.

#### Sample advertising sources:

- Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA)
- Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA)
- American Association of School Administrators (AASA)
- Minnesota EdPost
- Top School Jobs (Education Week)
- The school district's website

### Internal Applicants

Is the best applicant already in the school district? Perhaps. Many school districts have staff members who hold superintendent licenses and who have expressed an interest in the school district's superintendency. While these individuals may be highly experienced and have knowledge of the school districts' inner workings, school board members should not make any promises of employment as the school district's next superintendent.

School district staff can be encouraged to apply, but school board members must be careful not to imply these applicants have an advantage over external applicants because of their experience in the school district. Such implications can lead to problems later in the search process.

Remember: The school board's job is to find the best possible person for the position. By announcing the vacancy and conducting an open and transparent search, the school board can legitimately and confidently tell the public it found the best person for the job.

## Beginning the Search



## Screening the Applications

The school board should wait until after the application deadline has passed before reviewing the application materials. If the school board is using a consultant, they may conduct an initial review and weed out applicants that clearly don't meet the school district's hiring criteria. When the school board reviews the applications — or the consultant's proposed pool — all school board members should be involved.

### Legal considerations:

- **School board meetings related to the search — including meetings of a committee of the school board — are open meetings.**
- **Applicant information is private data. The names of those applicants who are identified as finalists (those applicants selected by the school board to be interviewed) are public.**

While the public is welcome to attend all school board meetings, they are not allowed to participate in the school board meetings unless the school board grants them permission to do so. The school board should establish a separate venue for public input. A school board meeting involves the school board doing its work in public; it does not mean the public should be involved in the school board's work at the school board meeting.

Prior to the finalist selection meeting, which is a public meeting, school board members individually go to the school district office to review the applicants' files. To avoid doubling up and/or creating a serial meeting, school board members should stagger the times they go to the school district office to review the applicants' files. Often times an administrative assistant will create a master application review schedule and assign each school board member a time. Also, to protect the data privacy rights of the applicants, the applicants' files must be numbered or lettered before the school board members begin their review of the files. The school board members will use the assigned numbers or letters when discussing the applicants at the finalist selection meeting. Finally, in order to avoid costly data-related redacting costs, the applicants' files should not be brought into the finalist selection meeting. The files should be left at the school district office.

## Salary: What Should the Announcement Say?

Many consultants and school board veterans advise against using the phrase, "salary negotiable," in advertisements and printed materials. Instead, they suggest indicating the minimum salary, as in "salary not less than \$105,000;" maximum salary, as in "salary will not exceed \$130,000;" or a salary range, as in "\$100,000 to \$120,000." Otherwise, applicants whom the school district can't afford may apply or other applicants may be discouraged from applying assuming the school district can't pay enough.

Worse, if the school board advertises \$100,000 and ultimately pays \$120,000, it has probably cheated itself out of many qualified applicants who would have applied if the \$95,000 to \$120,000 range had been published in the first place.

Lastly, the salary and compensation package should be negotiable commensurate with the finalists' experience and qualifications.

## Beginning the Search

### **Extra! Extra! Read All About It! The Search and the Media**

(Adapted from the National School Boards Association)

The moment the school board is faced with selecting a new superintendent, the school board will be in the midst of a media event. Local news outlets, particularly community-oriented newspapers, will want to know what is going on, and the school board should keep the selection process as open as feasible.

One of the easiest ways to positively involve the news media in the search is to fully inform them on an equal basis. If all reporters receive the same information at the same time, the school board won't find itself being accused of playing favorites.

The following additional suggestions may enhance the school board's efforts:

1. Before the search begins, appoint a designated spokesperson for the school board. Have the spokesperson host a media briefing outlining the reasons for the vacancy, the search process (including use of consultants and the projected timetable), and when information on applicants can and will become public.
2. Invite the media to publicize the school board's intent to involve the community and school district staff (i.e., surveys, question-and-answer forums, etc.).
3. Give the media a copy of the vacancy announcement and other relevant search materials.
4. Remember, the names of applicants are private data. Only the names of the finalists (the applicants selected for an interview) are public.
5. Once the school board has identified the finalists (individuals selected by the school board to be interviewed), the school board should provide the media with the names of those individuals.
6. Interviews conducted by the school board are open meetings and must be treated as such. Provide the media with search updates (i.e., when the school board expects to make a selection).
7. After the school board has reached an agreement with its final choice for superintendent and announces the new superintendent, thank the media for its assistance. Inform the media of the superintendent's start date.
8. The media may want to know details of the superintendent's employment contract — such as salary, vacation time, and other benefits. This information is public and must be provided once the employment contract is finalized.
9. What if an individual school board member's favorite candidate wasn't selected? Remember, respecting the decision of the full school board is important. Complaining to the media about the selection will only serve to undermine the new superintendent's attempts to strengthen the school district.





**Sample Applicant Screening Form:** Based on the application materials provided, determine whether each applicant “Meets” or “Does Not Meet” the school board’s hiring criteria. If school board members are discussing this form in public, DO NOT use the applicants’ names or any other information that may identify the applicants. Instead, use letters or numbers as identifiers.

Name/ Identifier	Application complete	Education	Provided three references	Has superintendent experience	Licensed	Budget skills	Curriculum and instruction	Communication skills	Personnel management	Strategic planning experience	Interview
											Yes No Maybe

# The Interview

The interview phase of the hiring process may be the most interesting and most difficult. The application materials come to life: the school board finally has its chance to interact with the candidates.

Research shows interviewers form impressions of candidates within the first few minutes. While the first impression should not be discarded, school board members must keep an open mind throughout the search process.

## Planning the Interview

When interviewing is done by a full school board, it requires coordination. The school board must decide how much time to allot for the interviews and who will ask what questions.

### Before the interviews:

- **Decide what information about the job and/or school district should be given to the candidates and by whom.**
- **Discuss the topics to be covered.**
- **Anticipate any complications in the process and discuss options.**

School board members should review their established hiring criteria and develop interview questions to help measure the candidates against the hiring criteria. Remember, the school board's hiring criteria were developed to attract specific candidates and used to screen the applications. The hiring criteria clearly should be the focal point for the interview questions, and a series of questions should be developed that will elicit responses from the candidates which relate directly to the hiring criteria set by the school board.

Avoid questions that hint at a preferred answer. For example: Ask: "What do you consider the strengths and weaknesses of a four-period day or block schedule?" Don't ask: "What do you think about our school district's award-winning early childhood program?"

Each school board member should ask questions rather than delegate the responsibility to one or two members. A superintendent works with the full school board, and all school board members should be active participants.

**Questions that elicit responses related to the hiring criteria set by the school board should be asked of each candidate.**

## Getting Started

The candidate arrives, and the small talk begins. Be careful — the supposed informality of pre-interview chitchat could lead to inappropriate comments or questions. For example, a school board member may comment on one of the superintendent's previous jobs. "I see you worked in Gopherville. Do you know my friend, Joe Smith?" The implication is that the candidate's chances improve if they know Joe Smith (and that Joe Smith thinks highly of them). When it comes to small talk, stick to the weather.

### Considerations:

- **Don't spend a lot of time talking about the school district. Let the candidate do the talking.**
- **Give the candidate school district- and community-related brochures and a copy of the school district's budget.**
- **Be responsive to answers but don't share individual school board member's opinions.**
- **Use the same interview questions for all candidates and ask the interview questions in the same order.**
- **Leave plenty of time for the candidate to ask questions. Remember, the candidate is also interviewing the school board.**
- **Remember to take good notes; however, always ensure the notes are professional and appropriate.**



# **The Interview**

## **Potential Interview Questions**

The interview is an opportunity to glean information from the candidates that enables the school board members to make a good decision. Be sure to use this time to ask the candidates difficult, probing questions — soliciting information from them regarding what they have done, how they did it, and how your school district will benefit from their experience.

Look for leaders who actively participate in their school districts and seek individuals whose knowledge meets the school district's needs. What areas are most important? Curriculum development, student achievement, community relations, equity, budgeting, and negotiations are among the issues the school board might identify.

The school board will need to pick and choose which interview questions will generate appropriate information. Interview questions are typically sorted into the following categories:

- **Getting to know the candidate**
- **Working with the school district's administrative staff/team management**
- **Working with other school district staff**
- **Public relations/communications skills**
- **Student achievement and the curricular process**
- **Diversity, equity, and inclusion**
- **Budget/facilities management**
- **School board relationships**

The following list of interview questions may be used as a starting point to shape the interview. As a reminder, the interview questions should relate directly to the school board's established hiring criteria.

### **Getting to know the candidate**

- Tell us about your work experience as it relates to the hiring criteria.
- Why are you interested in the position of superintendent in this school district?
- What are your goals and how might they contribute to this school district?
- How do you utilize strategic planning in the administration of a school district?
- What types of professional development have you undergone to improve your skills as an administrator?
- In your opinion, what is the superintendent's role in student achievement?
- What are your greatest strengths as an administrator?
- Give an example of a problem you have solved and the process you used.

### **Working with school district's administrative staff/team management**

- How do you evaluate the school district's administrative staff?
- How do you help principals become more effective?
- How would you handle teacher opposition to any administrative staff?

# The Interview

## Potential Interview Questions

### **Working with other school district staff**

- How do you achieve a trusting relationship with teachers and other staff?
- What type of staff development programs have you organized?
- What methods of communicating with staff have worked most effectively for you?
- What methods have you used to build consensus among staff?
- What is the superintendent's role in building/maintaining staff morale?

### **Public relations/communications skills**

- How would you learn what school district stakeholders are thinking?
- What means have you used to effectively communicate with the community?
- How do you think members of the public in your current school district perceive you?
- What sources or methods do you use to learn what students are thinking?
- How do you handle parent complaints at inconvenient moments, such as being confronted about "high teacher salaries" when you're enjoying dinner with a friend?
- How have you boosted the level of parent and community involvement in the schools/school districts you've led?
- What is the superintendent's role in the legislative process?
- Have you recently been involved with a referendum campaign? If so, what were your key strategies?

### **Student achievement and the curricular process**

- How do you help the school board and staff use data to make decisions about curriculum and student achievement?
- What are the best ways for a school board to monitor student achievement?
- What is your most important accomplishment in terms of improving student learning?
- What efforts have been made in your current school district to better serve the needs of at-risk students?
- If the school district's math scores were declining, how would you evaluate and address the problem?
- What are the components of a good early childhood program? Elementary program? Secondary program?
- What programs have you implemented to evaluate curricular offerings in your current school district?



# The Interview

## Potential Interview Questions

### Diversity, equity, and inclusion

- How do you address the racial, social, economic, and cultural needs of a school district's diverse population?
- Provide an example of the strategies you used to create an inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of ability, race, or life experiences.
- What steps have you taken or would propose to take to provide an equitable education to all students?
- What have you found to be most effective in addressing and narrowing the achievement gap?
- Describe how you would help build public confidence in our district across all families with kids in our schools, as well as those without a direct connection to the schools?
- How has the pandemic changed your perceptions of equity issues in pre-K through 12th grade public education?

### Budget/facilities management

- What procedures do you use to monitor school district expenditures?
- In the development of a budget, what major goals and objectives do you establish?
- Describe the budget development process you prefer to use in terms of a timetable and the individuals or groups involved.
- If cutting 5 percent of the budget were necessary, how would you propose doing it?
- Describe your background in budget preparation and business administration.
- How do you determine space utilization in school facilities?
- With declining enrollment, the school district may need to close a building. What guidelines would you propose?

### School board relationships

- Describe your ideal school board/superintendent relationship.
- How do you help school board members become more effective?
- How do you communicate with school board members?
- How do you view the role of the school board?
- How do you deal with a split school board?





## The Interview

### Don't Ask!

A number of legal considerations are involved in a job interview. If a candidate volunteers information about a protected class during the interview, school board members should do the following: ignore it, do not ask follow-up questions, do not discuss it, and make sure it does not become a factor in the hiring decision. Additionally, do not write notes on the application form; rather, each school board member should use a separate school board-agreed upon interview summary form to record their evaluation of the interview based on the candidate's responses to the interview questions.

Both state and federal law prohibits questions regarding "Protected Class Categories." Indirect questions regarding protected class categories are also a violation of the law.

#### Protected class categories:

- Age
- Ancestry/national origin
- Color/race
- Disability
- Economic status/status with regard to public assistance
- Familial/marital status
- Genetic information
- Membership or activity in a local commission
- Pregnancy
- Sex
- Sexual orientation
- Veteran status

**DON'T ASK**

What is an indirect question that violates protected class status?

#### Below are some interview questions that are not appropriate:

- How will you make child care arrangements? (**Violates familial/marital status**)
- When did you graduate from college? (**Violates age status**)
- Do you own a home? Or, have you filed bankruptcy? (**Violates economic status/status with regard to public assistance**)

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



## The Interview

### The Candidate's Turn

The school board has its questions answered; now it's the candidate's turn.

Be sure to plan time in the interviews so candidates can ask questions about the school board's expectations and the school district. If a school board-superintendent relationship is akin to a "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 or 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 questions these days to help them determine whether or not they remain interested in the position.

### Potential Candidate Questions

- How do you evaluate the 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 the school board 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 the strengths and weaknesses of the school board?
- What problems exist in the school district that I should be aware of?
- What does this community expect in terms of the superintendent's involvement in the community?
- How will key administrators be selected?
- What are the most important skills the school board expects a superintendent to possess?
- How does the school board involve itself in the operation of the school district?



## The Interview

### Common Interview Mistakes

- 1. Incomplete notes.** Without notes, school board members are unlikely to remember key points of an interview — especially after talking to four or five 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.
- 2. Quick decisions.** Individuals who do not have a great deal of interviewing experience may find it difficult to avoid first impressions and quick judgments. School board members are reminded to take their time and make confident, measured decisions.
- 3. Forgetting the whole picture.** School board members may be tempted to cling to one important characteristic — such as good communication skills — at the expense of considering other weaknesses. The reverse is also true.
- 4. Violations of the “Don’t Ask” list.** If the school board breaks the law during an interview — intentionally or unintentionally — the school board could subject the school district to a lawsuit.
- 5. Poor or incomplete hiring criteria.** If the school board hasn’t carefully considered important hiring criteria, its questions won’t get to the key issues.
- 6. Topics overlap.** When a school board spends too much time on a particular topic, or the questions keep returning to a single topic, the “full picture” is lost, and important areas don’t get covered.
- 7. Vague questions, vague answers.** School board members shouldn’t be left to interpret what a candidate said or meant. Be careful about questions that invite vague responses. School board members should avoid assigning characteristics to candidates based on their own personal interpretations or biases.
- 8. Making a bad impression.** Plan ahead so the school board appears cohesive and organized. Sometimes interviewers talk too much — whether in the formal interview or informal chitchat — or the school board contradicts itself. The school board doesn’t want the best candidate to have an unfavorable opinion of the school board or school district.
- 9. 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. Dealing with a high-profile job in a public institution is not easy. Remember, the process counts. The school board should take the time it needs to conduct the search.
- 10. Failing to probe motivation.** School board members certainly want to focus on a candidate’s skills. However, learning about the candidate’s motivation and passion for the job is also important. If the candidate isn’t supportive of the school board’s goals, the lack of support will be evident in their performance. Finding the right candidate is more than learning if a candidate can do the job; the issue is *will* they do it and do it well?



# The Interview

## Sample Interview Summary Form

Name of Finalist: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

School Board Member Completing Form: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Check the rating category you consider appropriate based on the candidate's response to the interview question asked. Do not confer with anyone before selecting rating categories for each question. Ratings categories selected should remain confidential and be shared only when all candidates have been interviewed.

**E** — Exceeds requirements

**M** — Meets requirements

**D** — Doesn't meet requirements

Interview Questions		Rating Category		
		E	M	D
1.	Tell us a bit more about your work background as it relates to hiring criteria and why you want to be "Xs" next superintendent.			
2.	Describe the process you would use to conduct ...			
3.	What is your experience ...			
4.	Describe the educational change ...			
5.	What have you done ...			
6.	Describe how you ...			
7.	Describe how you have ...			
8.	Describe how you have been involved ...			
9.	What have you done to improve ...			
10.	Describe for us ...			

# Checking References

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The school board has an impressive candidate or two. They were confident and articulate. Their answers were inspiring. The school board can picture either one of them sitting at the school board table behind the superintendent placard.

Not so fast. Checking references is a critical step in the hiring process. References are how the school board learns whether the candidate puts all those inspiring words into actions.

References may be listed in the application materials, but they also should include school board-initiated or consultant-initiated contacts with past employers and employees. No candidate lists references without knowing that the references provided will be positive. The school board has the responsibility to probe deeper. If the school board hires a consultant, the school board should make sure the consultant acknowledges this responsibility as well.

The “Don’t Ask” list applies to reference checks, too. Questions asked should be job-related only.

If the school board member conducting the reference

check is getting vague or hesitant answers, a problem may exist. If the reference won’t be specific, additional phone calls should be made until the issue is understood.

## Tips for reference checks:

- **Avoid “yes/no” questions.**
- **Ask the critical question: “If given the opportunity, would you hire the individual again? If no, why not?”**
- **Ask follow-up questions to get specifics. “How do you now this?” or “Can you give me specific examples of the skill you’re describing?”**
- **Call past employers as well. The current employer may have reasons for wanting the candidate to leave and this may distort the answers provided.**
- **Ask in what areas the candidate could use additional training or experience.**
- **Ask the reference about his or her impressions of the candidate’s relationship with other school district staff.**
- **Always check references.**

## Sample Questions to Ask References

### For school board members

- How often and under what circumstances did the candidate contact you?
- What is the candidate’s role in building the agenda for the school board meeting?
- What is the candidate’s role at a school board meeting?
- How does the candidate deal with school board members who have different agendas or points of view?
- How has the candidate shown the ability to hold school district staff accountable for results?
- How satisfied are you with the candidate’s level of communication with the school board?

### For school district staff

- How do representatives of your staff group discuss work-related issues with the candidate?
- In what way does the candidate formally or informally recognize school district staff for good work?
- Can you identify a situation that has caused the candidate to terminate the employment of, or to reprimand, staff? How was it handled?

### For citizens

- Describe the candidate’s level of involvement in the community.
- What is the community’s impression of the candidate’s ability to maintain control of school district costs?
- What is the community’s perception of the quality of education in this school district?
- How has the candidate developed support from businesses and other stakeholders?



## Checking References

### Sample Reference Check Form

This form is intended to be used as a guide and should be modified to align with the school board's hiring criteria. As a courtesy, candidates should be reminded that their references will be contacted. Use the following guidelines when conducting all telephone reference checks, whether a candidate is internal or external.

Introduce yourself, state the purpose of the call, the estimated length of the call, and confirm this is a convenient time to talk.

For example: Hi, my name is [insert name] and [insert name] is a finalist for superintendent at [insert name of school district], and I would like to ask you [insert number of questions] questions which will take approximately [insert number] minutes. Is this a good time for you to talk?

Be consistent! Ask the same questions about all final candidates and weigh the information equally. Remember, the "Don't Ask" list applies to reference checks.

---

Candidate's Name and Current Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Reference Check Conducted: \_\_\_\_\_ Position Applied For: \_\_\_\_\_

Reference's Name, Title, and Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Reference Conducted By:

1. What is/was the nature and length of your relationship with [insert name]?
2. What are/were [insert name] job title, duties, and dates of employment?
3. What are/were [insert name] most significant accomplishments as they relate to the position of superintendent?
4. What are/were [insert name] top three qualities as they relate to the position of superintendent?
5. What area(s) of development, as they relate to the position of superintendent, could [insert name] focus on?
6. Please describe [insert name]'s management style.
7. If the candidate is not already a superintendent, what indication do you have [insert name] is ready to be a superintendent?
8. If relevant, why did [insert name] leave their position?

# Making Your Choice

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With the first round of interviews and reference checks completed, the school board should be ready to narrow the finalists to two candidates (three at most). The tools in this booklet are designed to help the school board in that process.

At this point, the search has probably generated a great deal of media coverage and community discussion. School district staff are anxious about the decision, as are the candidates. The school board may be experiencing pressure from various groups regarding which candidate to hire. While stakeholder input is a valuable part of the process, remember, the superintendent will be the school board's employee and the decision rests in the school board's hands alone.

## The Final Choice

Second interviews and site visits are the last steps in making the decision. Why conduct a second interview? The school board's first impressions may not hold up during second interviews, reference checks, or site visits. Ideally, the school board has more than one outstanding candidate, and it needs another interview to build consensus around a lone final candidate. Many school board members find they need a second interview to resolve unanswered questions.

The second interview is largely focused on clarifying points from the first interview.

While the second interview may feel more personal, the "Don't Ask" list still applies. Many candidates, however, have shared information about their families at this point. Again, as a reminder, the school board should not ask follow-up questions regarding this information, discuss the information, or use the information as a factor in the hiring decision.

**The focus in second interviews:**

- **Dig deeper on topics of significance to the district.**
- **Ask the candidate to react to specific areas in which school board members may have doubts.**
- **Seek confirmation of a candidate's sincere interest in the position.**

## Site Visits

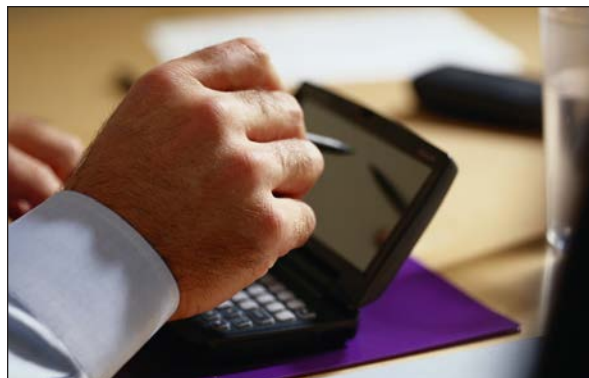
Site visits are becoming increasingly rare in superintendent searches; however, they can provide an excellent opportunity for gauging a superintendent's effectiveness and support levels.

Having the candidate support the visit and help arrange meetings with administrators, school board members, teachers and other staff, students, community leaders, and members of the local media is best. However, the school board should also seek out individuals not scheduled to be interviewed by the candidate.

The school board should prepare a list of questions prior to the site visit. All questions asked should be job-related, and the "Don't Ask" list applies to questions asked during site visits also.

Ideally, two or three school board members visit the community of the top candidate. If the school board decides to visit more than one candidate, the school board involves the same school board members in all site visits as opposed to having some school board members going to one community and others visiting the second community.

Regardless of the number of school board members involved, the site visit should be treated like a meeting under the Open Meeting Law and should be appropriately posted.



## Making Your Choice

### Sample Site Visit Questions

The following sample site visit questions are intended to be used as a guide and should be modified to align with the school board's hiring criteria. Remember: The "Don't Ask" list applies to questions asked during site visits.

#### **For school board members**

- How did [insert name] help you be an effective and cohesive school board, particularly during difficult times?
- Do you feel [insert name] kept you adequately informed in a timely manner? How did [insert name] keep you informed?
- How does [insert name] handle conflict? Provide an example.
- How has [insert name] dealt with setbacks or decisions that didn't work well?
- Has your school district experienced major financial difficulties? If so, how did [insert name] handle those situations?
- How has [insert name] involved the school board in decision-making? Describe a major problem or decision and how [insert name] involved the school board.
- How has [insert name] kept the school board focused on improving student achievement?
- Tell me how [insert name] has used data to help the school board make decisions and monitor progress.

#### **For school district administrators**

- Describe decisions that were difficult but handled effectively by [insert name].
- How does [insert name] include you in the decision-making process? Provide an example.
- Does [insert name] build leadership and encourage risks? Provide an example.
- What is your perception of how [insert name] is viewed by the community? The staff?

#### **For citizens**

- Tell me how [insert name] obtains stakeholder input for decisions/issues.
- Do you feel you can talk with [insert name] and they will really listen? Provide an example.
- How has [insert name] handled decisions that some community members did not support?
- Is [insert name] respected in this community? What leads you to that conclusion?
- How has [insert name] made a difference in your schools?

#### **For school district teachers**

- What are the strengths of [insert name] as an administrator?
- How does [insert name] provide teachers with opportunities for input before decisions are made?
- How does [insert name] handle situations in which teachers disagree with administration and/or the school board?
- What are [insert name]'s most significant accomplishments in this school district?
- Describe the relationship between [insert name] and the bargaining unit.

#### **For others who worked with the superintendent**

- How would you describe your working relationship with [insert name]?
- What are [insert name]'s greatest strengths?
- What is your perception of the relationship [insert name] has with staff? Parents? The community?

*If the opportunity arises, don't pass up talking with students. They probably can't answer questions about the superintendent's financial skills, but they certainly can tell if students are treated with respect.*

## Making Your Choice

### Deliberating in Public

Whether school board members have used a consultant or conducted the search themselves, the most difficult part of the search typically involves the final step: discussing which candidate best meets the school district's needs.

The discussion, of course, is a public one.

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 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.

During your board's deliberations, it will be important to emphasize the positive attributes of candidates instead of pointing out negative ones. This approach will call attention to a school board's professionalism.

School board members also should not launch into the process until they are prepared. Seek advice from MSBA or an attorney if questions arise. Think ahead and always treat the candidates fairly and with respect.

Do not, as individual school board members, go off on "fact-finding missions." Do not entertain the demands of one self-interest group while ignoring others. If the school board has determined the hiring criteria it wants and carefully constructed the questions, the discussion will unfold logically.

School boards that plan ahead, abide by the law, and treat people with respect seldom have difficulty 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.

**Candidates for a high-profile public position, such as the superintendency, know they will be judged on criteria set by the school board and the community, and that they will be judged against other candidates.**

#### **Don't:**

- **Go on individual fact-finding missions.**
- **Let a special interest group shape the process.**
- **Alienate any of the finalists.**

#### **Do:**

- **Focus on the positive attributes of candidates during public discussion rather than negative points.**
- **Judge candidates based on the hiring criteria established by the school board.**



# The Employment Contract and Retention

Developing a good employment contract is a major step in establishing a positive working relationship between the school board and superintendent so the terms and conditions of employment need to be clear and concise. The school board and new superintendent should make certain that they agree on the intent of the language and write it clearly so future school boards can discern the elements of the employment contract.

The school board should review the new superintendent's proposals carefully to assure that they are legal. Calculate the financial terms so the school board understands the long-term impact of every item in the employment contract. The school board should contact MSBA or its attorney when appropriate.

MSBA, in cooperation with MASA, has developed a model superintendent employment contract (model) for school boards and superintendents to use as a starting point. The model provides school boards with an excellent basis from which to develop an employment contract with new superintendents. The model is analyzed each year by MSBA's legal counsel and should be used as the foundation for all superintendent employment contracts. The model can be found on MSBA's website at <https://mnmsba.org>.

## Evaluations

Evaluating the superintendent's performance and its own performance are two of the school board's most important duties. Whether the school board is evaluating its own performance or the performance of its superintendent, the evaluation can be a powerful tool for growth and professional development. In addition, having a positive working relationship between school board members and

**School boards should calculate the financial terms of the employment contract so they understand the long-term impact of every item in the employment contract. Contact the school board's attorney or MSBA when appropriate.**

the school board and its superintendent are critical to accomplishing a school district's mission and priorities. One way to develop this relationship is by having an effective, constructive evaluation process and procedure that helps drive school district improvement efforts.

Although no evaluation technique is guaranteed to be free of conflict, a formal, well-constructed process, such as the one referenced in the "Goals- and Standards-Based Superintendent Evaluation" booklet (booklet), will help clarify expectations, remind both parties of their roles, and improve professional development. The process launches a dialogue about those expectations and provides an outlet for resolving conflict. The booklet can be found on MSBA's website.

Evaluations should be conducted at least annually unless the school board and superintendent determine more frequent evaluations are appropriate.

Minnesota law allows school boards to close the portion of the board meeting during which they evaluate the performance of the superintendent. However, the school board must provide a summary of its conclusions to the public at its next open meeting.





# The Employment Contract and Retention

## Foundations for a Good School Board-Superintendent Relationship

### 1. Written mission, beliefs, and vision statements.

The school board and the superintendent work together to assess the condition of the school district, often referred to as an environmental scan. They reflect on the purpose of the school district, identify shared beliefs, and develop a shared vision for the school district in written form commonly termed mission, beliefs, and vision statements. The mission, beliefs, and vision statements should be reviewed annually.

### 2. School board policy and administrative procedures handbook.

The school board policy manual contains clear written policy statements which clarify the school board's expectations with respect to specific operations of the school district. The policy manual should include policies that specify the general roles and responsibilities of the school board and the superintendent. The administrative procedures handbook should contain administrative procedures that clarify to the school board how the superintendent intends to carry out the school board's policies. The school board needs to establish a system for reviewing existing policies and procedures and developing new policies and procedures, when appropriate.

### 3. Superintendent employment contract.

The superintendent's employment contract is a written agreement between the school board and the superintendent and consists of the terms and conditions of the superintendent's employment. The superintendent's employment contract must be approved by the school board at a public meeting. A model employment contract, which has been approved by the boards of MSBA and Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA), can be found on MSBA's website at <https://mnmsba.org>.

### 4. Superintendent job description.

The superintendent's job description is a written explanation of the specific expectations the school board has of the superintendent, provided through their leadership in guiding the school district. How specific the job description is may vary; however, the superintendent's job description should be the basis for evaluating the performance of the superintendent, along with any school board approved performance goals and/or professional development goals. The job description should be referenced regularly and be updated after completing the current performance evaluation. A sample job description can be found on MSBA's website at <https://mnmsba.org>.



## The Employment Contract and Retention

### Foundations for a Good School Board-Superintendent Relationship (continued)

#### 5. Superintendent performance evaluation system.

The superintendent should be evaluated by the school board at least annually. The superintendent performance evaluation should allow for periodic or ongoing feedback opportunities throughout the year and a summative performance evaluation for the entire year. The performance evaluation should be tied directly to the superintendent's job description, annual school district goals, and professional development goals. Based on the evaluation feedback, the superintendent should know clearly whether they are meeting the school board's collective expectations. If not, prescriptive statements should be included which tell the superintendent what they must do to fulfill these expectations. For more information, download a copy of the "Goals- and Standards-Based Superintendent Evaluation" booklet from MSBA's website at <https://mnmsba.org>.

**6. School district strategic plan.** The school board and the superintendent should work together to develop a strategic plan which involves gathering input from various stakeholders. The strategic plan sets the direction to guide the school district for the next three to five years. In Minnesota, the strategic plan is required and must be reviewed annually.\* The strategic plan "comes to life" through an action plan that spells out timelines, resources, responsibilities, etc.

\* See *Minnesota Statute 120B.11, Subd. 5.*

**7. School board self-evaluation.** The school board needs to establish a performance evaluation system which periodically evaluates how well it is performing its roles and responsibilities as a school board. This evaluation, at times, may be informal; however, a formal written procedure to measure the school board's effectiveness and prescribe ways in which it might become more effective should be done also. If the school board deals with difficult issues and rapid turnover of school board members, the school board self-evaluation is particularly important.

**8. Training and learning opportunities.** The school board should have a written policy which spells out the need and opportunity for school board training and learning opportunities. Due to the volume and speed of change, the need for school board members and superintendents to have opportunities for training and skills development is greater than ever. Training and learning opportunities vary and include in-district training among the superintendent, other school district professionals, and the school board, or training may be via their respective regional, state, or national organizations.



# Appendix A — Sample Vacancy Announcement

Superintendent of Schools  
Independent School District No. [insert number], Any Town, Minnesota [insert Zip Code]

The [insert Name] School Board is seeking qualified applicants for the position of superintendent. The anticipated start date is [insert date].

## **The Community** [insert a brief overview of the community]

The School District is located in [insert name of county], which is located between [insert town] and [insert town name]. The business climate is [insert information]. The community also [insert information about the community].

## **The School District** [insert a brief overview of the School District] Mission statement: [insert mission statement]

Highlights:

- Total student enrollment (pre-kindergarten through 12th grade);
- Total number of employees (licensed and non-licensed);
- Names of buildings maintained by the school district and number of students/grade configuration for each school district-owned building;
- School district budget;
- School district website address.

## **Qualifications**

The School Board has established the following qualifications for the next superintendent:

- has a solid understanding of school finance;
- has demonstrated personnel management skills;
- has a strong academic background with successful experience in curriculum;
- has previous school district administrative experience.

## **Salary and Contract**

A regionally competitive compensation package, with an annual salary of not less than [insert amount or range], will be negotiated commensurate with experience and qualifications. The contract length is negotiable as provided in Minnesota statute.

## **Application Procedure**

To be considered for this position, an applicant's completed file must be received by [insert time] on [insert date and year], and must include the following documents:

- a cover letter;
- legal proof or other evidence (i.e., certificate/license) showing the applicant's qualification to be a superintendent in the state of Minnesota;
- A set of up-to-date credentials, which includes an application, current resume, at least three letters of recommendation, and a copy of the applicant's official transcript(s).

Completed applications should be submitted to the [insert name and title (for example: School Board Chair, Human Resources Director, Superintendent)], [insert address].

The [insert name of School District] is an equal opportunity employer.

# Appendix A — Sample Vacancy Announcement

Superintendent of Schools  
Independent School District No. [insert number], Any Town, Minnesota [insert Zip Code]

The [insert Name] School Board is seeking qualified applicants for the position of superintendent. The anticipated start date is [insert date].

Applicants should be able to demonstrate a proven record of excellence in exceptional leadership with the following additional qualifications:

- has a solid understanding of school finance;
- has demonstrated personnel management skills;
- has a strong academic background with successful experience in curriculum;
- has previous school district administrative experience.

## **Salary, Start Date, and Contract**

The salary for the new superintendent will be [insert amount or range], plus a regionally competitive compensation package will be negotiated commensurate with experience and qualifications. The contract length is negotiable as provided in Minnesota statute.

## **Application Procedure**

To be considered for this position, an applicant's completed file must be received by [insert time], on [insert date], and must include the following documents:

- a cover letter;
- legal proof or other evidence (i.e., certificate/license) showing the applicant's qualification to be a superintendent in the state of Minnesota;
- a set of up-to-date credentials, which includes an application, current resume, at least three letters of recommendation, and a copy of the applicant's official transcript(s).

Completed applications should be submitted to the [insert name and title (for example: School Board Chair, Human Resources Director, Superintendent)], [insert address].

The [insert name of School District] is an equal opportunity employer.





# Appendix B — Application for Employment

## PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

Degree	Institution/Location	Major/Minor

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENTS [Publications, fellowships, honors, involvement in professional organizations, consulting, community honors.]

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REFERENCES [List one past school board member and two employers/supervisors.]

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SPECIAL NOTES [Comment on the most significant contributions you believe you have made in your present position.]

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Indicate what you consider to be your most important qualifications that equip you to perform as superintendent of schools in ISD [insert school district number].

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I have requested that my credentials be forwarded from \_\_\_\_\_

Having read the hiring criteria, indicate how you meet the hiring criteria for the position in ISD [insert school district name]

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[Insert the Certification, Consent, Notice, and Release of Information.\*]

\*NOTE: The school board should work with its legal counsel to develop a Superintendent Employment Certification, Consent, Notice, and Release of Information.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signed \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix C - Sample Letters

NOTE: The following sample letters are intended to be used as guide, and should be modified to meet the specific needs of the school board.

## **Letter To Acknowledge Receipt of Application**

Date

Name Title Address

City, State, Zip

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

On behalf of the [insert school district name] School Board, I am writing to acknowledge that we have received your letter of application and other supporting documents for the position of superintendent of our school district.

We appreciate your interest in our school district. If you are selected for an interview, you can expect a phone call from [insert name] the week of [insert date].

Thank you, again, for your interest in our school district. We do appreciate the time you invested in this application.

Sincerely,

Name

Title

Initials

# Appendix C - Sample Letters

## “No Interview” Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

This letter is in reply to your application for the position of superintendent at [insert school district name].

We regret to inform you that you were not selected for an interview. We appreciate your interest in the position. Best of luck to you as you pursue your professional goals.

Sincerely,

Name  
Title  
Initials

\*\*\*

## Interview Confirmation Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

As discussed during our conversation, I am writing to confirm your interview for the position of superintendent of [insert school district name]. The interview will take place on [date] at [time] in the [location] and will last approximately [amount of time].

We look forward to seeing you on [insert date]. If you have any questions, please contact [insert name] at [insert contact information].

Sincerely,

Name  
Title

# Appendix D - Sample Interview Schedule

## Schedule of First Interviews

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

## Schedule of Second Interviews

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date/time/place \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix E - Notes

Notes