

Board & Administrator

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More insight into the superintendent hiring process: The interview

By Dr. Peter Gorman*

When I applied to be the Superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the board had been struggling to work cooperatively, and board meetings were often disruptive. My first interview with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools took place at the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport and was held in secret. Interest was high; local reporters bought plane tickets so they could pass through security and follow the Board of Education members.

Members of the board were waiting in the conference room. We were introduced, and they interviewed me for about two hours. I had prepared opening and closing statements customized for Charlotte in advance and could deliver them with a fluency that (I hoped) didn't sound slick.

In my opening statement, I told them that I was interviewing them as much as they were interviewing me because, from everything I read, I needed to be very careful about coming to work with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education. They all laughed nervously, as if they knew what I said was true.

I had reviewed the job vacancy announcement, standards for the job, evaluation tool, outdated strategic plan, and other district documents to identify potential questions or areas of focus for the interview. I had also looked at similar job vacancy announcements. From this, I compiled 30 pages of practice interview questions and answers that I committed to memory. As I have said in each of my last two columns, it's OK to not get the job because

you are not the best choice, but it is unacceptable to miss out because you are not prepared!

I had also developed six to eight all-purpose, broad scenarios that could be used to answer a variety of questions. These turned out to be most helpful. All of them described complex projects I had completed that had directly impacted teaching and learning in a positive way. All of them were linked to increasing student achievement, closing achievement gaps, and increasing the graduation rate. These prepared responses were examples that I'd already thought through, and they were coherent and on point for questions ranging from communication to community involvement and working with the board.

I had spent a lot of time preparing for that two-hour interview, and it paid off. Nothing caught me off guard, and I felt a strong connection with the board members overall.

Shortly after that first interview, I was notified that I was one of three finalists and was invited to come back to Charlotte with my wife, Sue. I was pleased to have her included. Sue is my partner in everything I do, and she needed to be on board for the move to be possible. In addition, she turned out to be a career asset; she favorably impressed everybody she met.

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The board has four responsibilities to the district

While the definition of a board as policy-maker is certainly correct and makes a very important point, it tells you little about what you actually do as a board member. Within your policy-making role, there are four specific areas of responsibility that you will oversee. They are...

1. The board hires, supervises, evaluates, and, if necessary, fires the superintendent.

The board's first responsibility, and some say its most important one, is to hire a competent administrator to run the district by managing all aspects of its day-to-day affairs. The superintendent works for the board of education, while all other district employees work for the superintendent.

By hiring a superintendent, you are adding a competent education professional to your board team.

Most board members have little inclination, not to mention the time necessary, to manage the day-to-day business of the district. By hiring and then supporting a professional who keeps things running smoothly, you ensure that the district is well managed and in a position to fulfill its mission.

2. The board is responsible for the school district's future. Because the board delegates the management of the district to the superintendent, it frees itself up for giving the district a strategic direction that ensures its future is a healthy one.

Strategic, long-range planning is a key board responsibility. Social, regulatory, and economic changes mean that boards must anticipate and

plan for what the future will bring.

Once the board approves a strategic plan for the district, it should monitor the progress the superintendent makes toward meeting the plan's goals and objectives. Short-term operational planning is necessary to achieve your plan, and this is the administrator's responsibility.

3. The board monitors and evaluates. A board cannot watch every detail and every activity that takes place in the school district, nor should it. That's called micromanagement, and it is interfering with the superintendent's responsibility

But a board must monitor and evaluate bottom-line results.

You should monitor the district's performance in two key areas: financial health; and progress toward the board's strategic, long-range educational plan for the district.

4. The board serves as an advocate. Because you are an elected official, you are in a unique position to advocate for your school system.

You're not being paid for your service, and you have a higher motive: service to the community at large. This gives you credibility, which is the key to any advocate's success.

As an advocate, you might lobby local, state, and federal lawmakers, or communicate your district's goals to constituents and the community.

Hiring a superintendent, planning, monitoring, and advocating are the four primary responsibilities of the board. ■

Checklist to ensure the board stays on top of school finance

Use this checklist to ensure the board stays on top of district finances:

- The board has policies which ensure efficient methods for purchasing supplies and equipment.
- The board has policies which ensure proper bookkeeping procedures.
- The board has policies which ensure adequate insurance coverage.
- The board has policies which cover appropri-

ate investment of school funds.

- The board requires and encourages the superintendent to actively seek alternative funding sources, such as grants.
- The community is kept aware of the financial status of the district.
- Long-term financial planning considers building sites, functional use of school buildings and equipment, and furniture and plant maintenance. ■