

Board & Administrator

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Insights into the superintendent search process, part 2

By Dr. Peter Gorman*

When applying for a position, my wife and I start by looking at the job vacancy announcement and desired candidate profile, as well as by evaluating any information gleaned from watching board meetings and reading the newspapers, blogs, etc.. This helps us to develop our own profile, as well as to identify the issues and priorities they will expect the new superintendent to address.

My wife Sue and I started doing our homework well in advance, tracking both the Nevada and North Carolina school districts we were considering for almost a year.

As a first stage in the search process, many districts and search firms use a rubric or profile to evaluate the applicants and determine who moves on to the next round. I use this concept to customize my cover letter and resume for the search and prepare for the interview process making my own rubric to compare against.

My cover letters addressed four areas:

- My specific interest in the position.
- My career goals, and how they matched the position.
- Transferable leadership skills, experiences, and successes in my history that matched items listed in the position announcement, job profile, or known district needs.
- Why I am the right choice for the district and the job.

Most cover letters I read are aspirational and do not show a track record of successfully addressing

challenges similar to those that you will face if you are selected for the position. "I will" is just not as strong as "I have" supported by data.

Similarly, my resume is results-focused, emphasizing what I have accomplished that is aligned to what the district is looking for in their next leader. I list what I did and the results — using numbers. As an example:

- Increased the number of schools making high growth in the state accountability system from 16 to 108 (2006-2010).
- Secured \$766 million for facilities construction and renovations, with 68 percent of voters passing a \$516 million bond referendum in 2007 and obtaining \$250 million in Certificates of Participation funding.

I also made sure that I had appropriate references lined up covering any area that could provide support for my application.

My reference list was not on my resume but instead was a separate document that I did not submit until it was specifically requested. When references were requested, I notified my references of my application, covered areas that I specifically wanted them to emphasize, and indicated the importance of confidentiality.

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Etiquette reminder emphasizes respect

The Confederation of Oregon School Administrators adds this helpful reminder about school board etiquette to its operating agreements:

“Board members will remind one another in a respectful manner when a member is violating one

of these agreements,” said COSA.

For information, <https://www.cosa.k12.or.us/content/role-superintendent-school-board-and-superintendent-agreements-materials>. ■

What went wrong here?

Jim is an active school board member. When his neighbor asks him about the “problem” at the school, he reacts with concern. There is a rumor that a very popular principal is about to be fired by the superintendent for failure to follow a directive.

Jim is well known for his ability to take charge of a situation and confront problems. He conducts his own investigation. He talks to every staff member close to the situation and the superintendent. Then he asks the board president to call a special meeting.

Jim presents the facts he’s gathered and announces his support for the superinten-

dent’s decision. The principal, invited by Jim to attend the meeting, protests and offers his resignation. Instead of being grateful for Jim’s support, the superintendent also announces his resignation.

What went wrong here? The problem was not a staff problem — it was a board role problem. The superintendent thought Jim was infringing on his management responsibilities. “The board hired me to manage staffing responsibilities,” the superintendent said when announcing his resignation. “That’s my responsibility — not theirs.” ■

Don’t overlook advocacy

How often do you hear board colleagues grouching about the ways that things “ought to be” if only the state legislature or the federal government would provide funding?

How will legislators ever know your dissatisfaction if you don’t rattle their cages from time to time? This is where lobbying comes in.

Unfortunately, many board members shy away from lobbying because they believe it’s only for skilled professionals who represent a special interest.

Believe me, a board member has much more sway with a politician because you represent a constituency and are a volunteer who gives his or her time to make a difference.

Lobbying can take several forms. A simple method is a personal phone call to arrange a visit, lunch, or discussion in the lawmaker’s office. Lobbying can also mean writing letters to the editors of newspapers or giving interviews

on television or radio. To be effective, keep these points in mind:

1. Show that your goals match the goals of those you are lobbying. Saving taxpayers’ money or a more efficient approach to delivering an education are good places to start.
2. Identify decision-makers who have the most influence and concentrate there. One-on-one advocacy is always the most effective.
3. Make lobbying a long-term activity rather than just a stopgap in times of crisis. Try pairing a board member with a lawmaker for the entire length of the board member’s term. This is a sound strategy for developing a personal relationship between the two.

You can discuss goings on at the capitol, and when an issue comes up that affects your district the board member can contact the legislator without fear because of the relationship that has been developed. ■