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SELECTING AND WORKING WITH SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH FIRMS

Selecting a superintendent is one of the most important decisions any school district's governing body can make. A superintendent who is well matched to the needs of the educators, students, families and community served often means the difference between a district's success or stagnation. That's why choosing the right leader requires a thoughtful and thorough process.

While it is not the only option, working with a search firm can add expertise and capacity to an important and time-consuming exercise. This guide outlines some key considerations for a school system that decides to work with a search firm to help make the most of that partnership in selecting the best leader for the system.

WHAT IS A SEARCH FIRM AND WHAT IS THEIR ROLE IN SUPERINTENDENT SEARCHES?

A search firm is an organization that specializes in recruitment and selection, usually for senior-level roles. When working with a firm on a superintendent search, you will negotiate the specific details of the engagement and scope of the work. But you can assume that they will help your system in a few broad areas:

- Creating and/or refining a recruitment and selection process
- Gathering information to finalize an accurate, compelling candidate profile and job description
- Advertising the opening and connecting with potential candidates
- Executing aspects of the initial screening and interview process
- Support in extending an offer and entering into contract negotiations

TYPES OF FIRMS

There are several types of entities that work with school systems on superintendent searches:

Large, national education-focused search firms

Several firms specialize in superintendent and c-level education searches.

State school board associations and superintendent associations

Superintendent search support is a service offered by some statewide member organizations. In some states, this type of organization is one of many options available. In others, the school board association typically has led all searches.

Large corporate executive search firms

These organizations may work across many sectors or focus on private-sector executive-level searches but occasionally take on searches for school-system leaders.

Nonprofit/education focused firms

Some education and nonprofit search firms do not commonly take on superintendent searches but know the K-12 sector well and often consult on director- and c-level searches in school systems.

Independent Consultants or small local firms

Some large school systems have elected to work with an individual consultant or small local consulting or search firm for their search.

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE SELECTING A FIRM

Before diving into the process of selecting a firm, the team tasked with managing the search (and, therefore, with managing the search firm) should research and consider a few essential components of the process:

Legal requirements of your state and district

Policies and regulations will vary depending on your state, district, governance model and other factors. Some of the following areas of superintendent hiring may have mandated requirements and should be reviewed by members of the team before starting the selection process:

- Professional certification
- Timeline (ex. Your jurisdiction requires the hiring of a superintendent within 180 days.)
- Process (ex. Your jurisdiction requires: the involvement of community members, school-based personnel and/or students in the hiring process; a formal public request for proposals; public transparency and sunshine laws; etc.)
- Conflict of interest
- Compensation or spending caps

Expectations for the desired profile

Part of a search firm's role will likely include compiling information to refine the candidate profile and job description. However, initial discussions between members of the school board or search committee about high-level expectations and characteristics of ideal candidates could help inform which category of search firm from the section above to focus on. These can be discussions and do not need to be decisions.

Expectations for scope and timeline of the search

Understanding the legal requirements and desired candidate profile should help set common expectations for the scope and timeline of the search. Some of the more specific factors that should be discussed early on include the following:

- Conducting a national search vs. focusing on local candidates from the same state or region
- Candidates who are career educators vs. those whose professional experience may be considered non-traditional for a superintendency
- Timeline expectations or needs
- How the local community will be engaged

Roles and responsibilities during selection of search firm

Those involved in the search process should make initial decisions about how they will evaluate firms and their proposals and who will communicate directly with them. Initial conversations should also determine how/if other stakeholder groups should be engaged in the selection of a firm. A search firm will provide guidance on community engagement in the superintendent search once you enter an engagement, but these entities may be involved before selecting a firm. Potential groups to consider include parents and community members, key civic leaders (mayor's office, community-based organizations, etc.) and current district staff members.

Budget

Board or search committee members should align on the anticipated cost to the district. Since public funds will be used, decisionmakers need to be thoughtful about what is appropriate and available to spend and what it will take to find the right leader. Different search firms have different fee schedules, and cost structures should be outlined in their proposals. But some of the decisions made by the board or search committee, such as seeking national or local candidates, will have cost implications for the search.

REQUESTS FOR PROPOSALS AND EVALUATING FIRMS

A process that includes a public Request for Proposals may be mandated in your state or district. Even when not mandated, it allows for an open, transparent bidding process and helps the board or search firm gather more information to inform its decision. Even if you are clear from the outset about what firm you want to use, an RFP can still help clarify and set expectations.

The following components are often included in an RFP:

Background on the district

This section offers key information about the district, including current enrollment and number of schools, as well as local context about the district — such as governance structures, enrollment trends, financial state, strategic plan — and community.

Scope of the services expected

Any expectations for the roles and responsibilities of the search firm, whether mandated or decided by the search committee, should be clearly outlined. Otherwise, this can be a set of general descriptions of the categories of work expected.

Qualifications of firm

This should outline your minimum expectations for the selected firm (ex. has worked on at least X national searches for districts with a minimum enrollment of Y) or request a profile of the bidder to offer insight into the firm's capacity, philosophy, history and other relevant information.

Outline of process and work plan

Request a narrative outlining the firm's approach to this particular search, including a timeline, step-by-step process, their expectations of the search committee and strategies for role advertising, candidate recruitment, engaging stakeholder groups and interviewing and evaluating candidates.

Staffing background

Bidding firms should identify the individual(s) directly managing your search, including a resume or profile of the person's experience and accounting of similar searches they have led.

References and examples of demonstrated effectiveness

Bidders should be required to submit examples of past searches they have led, including the selected candidate and any publicly-released list of finalists as well as names of board members or others who can serve as references about their work with the bidding firm. You may also request additional data, such as the tenure length of hired candidates from searches they have conducted.

Cost outline

Bidders should be required to provide budget estimates and outline assumptions and calculations.

Proposal evaluation process and criteria

Include the criteria by which you will be evaluating proposals and any critical dates in your process, such as a questioning period for finalists.

Deadline and instructions for submitting

Provide specific details here, including the process and expected format for proposal submission. Other district- or state-mandated forms, such as conflict of interest or evidence of independent-contractor status, should be included with instructions on how to submit bids.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

Some factors listed below could be helpful in evaluating a search firm's fit for your project. These could be included in the RFP process or may be opportunities for follow-up with finalist firms:

Communication strategy

Your local media will likely cover the search extensively. Outline a communications plan with the search committee and the search firm. Develop clear expectations about who should communicate with the media, when and how. Identify a key spokesperson from the search committee for communicating with the search firm. Ask firms how they have successfully handled communication in past searches and ask their references to corroborate.

Broadening the talent pool

Ask for details about bidding firms' recruitment and advertising strategies to help determine if they have a history of attracting candidates that fit your candidate profile. Many of the same names come up for national searches and obvious names of local leaders will emerge, so this is your opportunity to better understand how a firm will add additional value and broaden the list of qualified leaders. If bidders are unable to provide names of past finalist candidate pools, ask them to submit demographic statistics, such as the number of current superintendents, former superintendents, people of color, women, and candidates with local community roots. If they can provide names, compare the characteristics of those individuals to the expectations for your next superintendent.

Getting the best value

In the cost outline of their proposal, ask firms for a budget range rather than an estimate. Request detail on each element of the search and the range of each cost. Ask what comes "standard" in their package or process and what can be customized or added, as well as the cost implications for each. Depending on district and state policies, you may be able to negotiate the final cost with bidding firms.

Align on timing

In proposals, ask for a timeline and anticipated benchmarks for progress updates, status reports and decisions to be made on candidates. Revisit and realign once the search begins and at each benchmark in the timeline.

Contingency planning

Some search contracts stipulate that the search firm will conduct another search if a candidate is hired but leaves the job, for any reason, within the first year. In addition, make sure you understand the firm's process and criteria for conducting reference and background checks of candidates to ensure initial reference and background checks are run by the search firm rather than being informally delegated to someone on the district's search committee. Search firms should have the expertise, resources and legal capacity to conduct reference and background checks of your candidates.

MANAGING THE SEARCH

Once a firm is selected, the board or search committee should establish clear expectations with the consultant. Aligning on these factors ahead of time will help everyone understand divisions of labor and responsibility to ensure everyone is operating under common expectations of the contract with the firm and state and local guidelines.

Identify point person/people

Establish which search committee member(s) should be communicating with the search firm.

Format of updates

Set clear expectations with the search firm for the format and frequency of updates throughout the life of the search.

What information is shared

Make it known what information will be shared with the board or committee for the duration of the search and what information will be shared with the public as the search progresses.

Giving feedback

Identify how and when the board or search committee will be able to provide feedback, particularly if things are not going as planned.

Communicating with potential candidates

Define how board members may recommend candidates as well as the rules for engagement with potential candidates or outside constituents who want to recommend candidates.

Releasing information about candidates

If not already established by state or local laws, the search committee should decide if candidates' names will be made public and, if so, at what stage(s) of the process.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Context unique to your school system and community will likely add additional considerations not captured here, but addressing the points above should help you find, select and work with a strong partner in your search.

As you pursue relationships with superintendent search firms, we welcome your insights, and we will continue to share our own as we learn more. Feel free to send your ideas, questions and feedback to us at tbctalent@broadcenter.org.