

ASK THE STAFF

FAQs on the superintendent search process

By Thomas Leahy

Thomas Leahy, director of IASB's Executive Searches department, offers this FAQ for board members planning superintendent searches.

During a search for a superintendent, many questions are asked. In order to make sure communication between and among parties is clear, IASB offers a briefing that will answer many questions at the start of the search. In this manner, proper notification to all parties can be made early in the search so no stakeholder group is wondering "What is going on?" with the search process. The following are some common questions, and answers, about the superintendent search process.

Will staff and community members be involved in the search?

Although this is a decision ultimately made by the board of education, staff and community members may be involved in the search process in two primary ways:

- First, all staff and community members can be encouraged to complete an online survey and/or participate in focus groups during the search. This gives the board a more thorough understanding of the issues and concerns within the organization. Those survey results will help the board develop criteria that will be used to develop the announcement of vacancy, screen candidate files, develop interview questions, and ultimately appoint the next superintendent.
- Second, staff and community members may be invited to attend a meeting with the finalists for the position and provide written feedback. All written comments will be forwarded to the board for review as part of its deliberations.

How should the superintendent be involved?

It depends upon the board's preference and the current superintendent's willingness to be involved. The board needs to utilize the superintendent to gather information for the announcement of vacancy for the position. The superintendent may also offer his or her advice on the district's leadership challenges so board members can more effectively interview candidates for the position. However, it is important to note that the superintendent's involvement should be limited. The board does not want to give candidates the impression that the superintendent is substantially influencing board decisions throughout the search. Candidates may not apply for the position if they feel the next superintendent will be "hand-picked," or candidates are "lobbying" the superintendent to influence board decisions.

Are internal candidates treated differently than external candidates?

All candidates for the position should be treated exactly the same as it relates to the application process and documentation that must be submitted. With that, at the board's direction internal candidates may be treated differently than external candidates in regard to an interview. If an internal candidate advances to the final round, he or she should not tour their district but should participate in staff and community meetings. If the internal candidate does not advance beyond the first round, we encourage the president of the board to personally relay the board's decision to the candidate. Rejection letters to internal candidates, although understandable because it treats them just as any other candidate, may overlook the person's commitment to the district. Plus, internal candidates often need reassurance that they remain valued members of the organization even though the board has moved in the direction of other candidates.

Who should attend meetings related to the search?

All working meetings and candidate interviews should be attended by all board members. When the final round of interviews transpires, the process may allow for involvement of staff and community.

Who makes lunch and dinner arrangements when/if necessary?

Usually the board secretary does. The lunch is often with administrators, and the dinner is with the board of education. The cost for meals is borne by the district.

Should we be communicating with the staff and community throughout the search?

It is important that the hiring process for a superintendent employs the same best practices as any hiring decision. Clearly, the names of applicants must remain confidential. However, the board may choose to update the staff and community regarding the process; for example, the dates when major events in the search take place, such as the advertising and the application period. IASB has news release templates that can be customized and shared with all stakeholders throughout the process.

When are closed session meetings appropriate during the search process?

This question arises at all stages of the process, from criteria selection to contract negotiation to the final vote on the selection. The statute governing open meetings in Illinois applies to “all public bodies.”

The Open Meetings Act makes it clear that the policy of Illinois is to favor openness in government, and the official business of a public body may be conducted in closed sessions only during certain, statutorily defined circumstances. The closed meeting exceptions pertaining to superintendent searches include: “The appointment, employment, compensation, discipline, performance, or dismissal of specific employees of the public body.” Please refer to the Open Meetings Act or consult your board attorney for further clarification. Any discussion about specific candidates, including the actual interviews with candidates, may be conducted in closed session. The board must follow the same procedures for all closed meetings. Looking at other steps throughout the search process:

- Proposal of IASB process (open meeting);
- Identification of candidate qualifications (open);
- Announcement of vacancy development (open meeting);
- Present candidates and interview guidance (closed meeting);
- Interviews of candidates (closed meeting);
- Negotiate contract (closed meeting).

Although a public body may meet in private to discuss the qualifications of a specific candidate, the final action making the appointment must occur in open session. The board could, however decide in closed session to extend an offer to a candidate. Such an offer would not constitute the making of an appointment.

For more information about IASB’s Executive Searches department, visit www.iasb.com/executive/.