

Considerations in Superintendent Search Criteria and Selection

There is no off-the-shelf checklist for the profile of the “perfect” superintendent or school system leader, largely because context and community matter. While credentials, skills, and achievements are, of course, significant, the art of superintendent selection is in the match to context and community. With that in mind, it is not only the content of the candidate profile that matters, but also the process of developing it. Thinking about superintendent characteristics just as a task for the governing body alone is a missed opportunity. It is also a chance to engage stakeholders in the school system and larger community in conversation (via survey, focus groups, town hall meetings, one-to-one conversations, and more) about what’s working, what isn’t, and what has to change. In addition to helping to guide and frame the position description for a new leader, it also provides baseline information on which to build meaningful engagement and a realistic transition plan once a new leader is selected.

This may be a difficult task to undertake for a school board or governing body alone, but search firms, community partners, philanthropic organizations, public policy groups, unions and community-based organizations can partner in the process.

In terms of superintendent search criteria, some characteristics and qualities consistent with AFT’s four pillars of powerful, purposeful public education (promoting children’s well-being; supporting powerful learning; building capacity; and fostering collaboration) are as follows. This is an illustrative, not inclusive list:

- Commitment to and respect for educator voice, as demonstrated by engaging teachers and school staff in the development and design stages of new initiatives—not just the implementation stage.
- Understanding of teaching and learning processes and experience with supervision of instruction.
- Demonstrated understanding that school and system improvement is not just a technical/academic effort, but also a social, cultural and political one.
- Demonstrated respect for student, family, and community voice and commitment to engage with these public school stakeholders rather than just inform them.
- Ability and willingness to listen; collaborative, relationship, and team-building skills.
- Public school teaching experience.
- Cultural competence and demonstrated knowledge of place, combined with willingness to learn.
- Deep commitment to and advocacy for public education as an engine of democracy and propeller of economy.
- Ability to manage complex systems, including financial, with the recognition that equal distribution and equitable access to services are often not the same thing.
- Disposition to approach public schooling from the mindset of student well-being and development, including strategies such as community schools and career pathways.

- Focus on collective capacity building at all levels of the system, including creation of structures and time for educator, staff, and administrator collaboration and learning in support of student learning.

AFT Educational Issues, June 2019