Superintendent hiring: Advice to school boards

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A number of Kentucky school districts are looking for new superintendents.

That fact and some things we learned after Dr. Sheldon Berman was hired as the new superintendent for the Eugene, Oregon School District bring to mind some important issues Kentucky school districts would be wise to consider when looking for a new superintendent.

Some of what follows is also based on experience during the Barbara Erwin affair back in 2007 when the Kentucky Board of Education didn’t do its homework in its commissioner of education search and nearly saddled the state with a very problematic situation. Fallout for the state board included replacement and eventual resignation of the board chair.

So, local school board members – pay attention. There can be consequences for poor performance.

**Tip #1: Understand that some will hide problems – but information is out there**

There is good evidence that some people within the education system are very reluctant to ever say anything negative about anyone. Superintendent search firms don’t always do a complete job of searching both the bad with the good, either. Example: These twin issues became a real problem in the Erwin affair.

As a board member, you MUST dig deeper and not leave this responsibility totally to others.

Fortunately, there are low-cost tools available. Board members MUST spend some time in the World Wide Web, doing some common-sense searching with a search engine like Google using all possible variations of the candidates’ names. Also research the schools and districts where the candidates have worked. You might find some surprises, both good and bad.

**Tip #2: Research before hiring a search firm**

Before you hire a search firm to help you, do some research on them, as well. See what pops up in a web search, and realize that you may have to look several pages deep in a Google search to find some of the really important material.

**Tip #3: Make some phone calls yourself**

Make some phone calls. One way to start is by finding out which newspapers cover the school system where your superintendent candidates are currently located. A web search can help with that job. Find out who the local PTA president is, and give them a call. Be sure to ask if they know of any negative comments. Often, people will mention that someone does have unfavorable comments while trying to marginalize that person as unreasonable. Disregard such characterizations until you talk to the person with negative comments and form your own opinion. In the Erwin affair, people with very well developed unfavorable
opinions were ignored by the Kentucky Board of Education because someone incorrectly labeled those people as unreasonable.

Check with the local PTA. They may be reluctant to say anything bad, but if they do, you need to take the comments very seriously. See if the PTA people know of other citizens who have complaints. Track those other citizens down.

Calls to other local agencies where the candidates currently work such as chambers of commerce, law enforcement, city and county governance officials, and so forth can go a long way towards avoiding embarrassment later.

If private citizens have raised complaints, see if you can track them down and talk to them. Their complaints may be totally unreasonable, or they might just be a smoldering fire you need to know about.

**Tip #4: Check the newspapers**

Aside from using the web to locate newspapers that cover the candidates’ current job area, ask the candidates.

Certainly, a superintendent candidate who does not pay attention to local news in their current employment area would raise a red flag. Keep in mind that candidates might not want to tell you about newspapers that have written unfavorable articles.

Track down local education news reporters and ask about stories covering the candidate. Reporters can be remarkably honest. If they wrote about it, they are likely to talk about it. Reporters in Arizona certainly were forthcoming about the Erwin mess. Their news stories provided more leads to private citizens with some important information.

**Tip #5: Resumes are critical – check out everything**

Check out ALL the claims in the resume.

Keep in mind, this is a resume from a working professional for a very responsible position, a position that requires a lot of attention to detail. The resume should be only a few pages long, and the person submitting it should have gone over it with a fine tooth comb, looking for any errors, including typographical, grammatical and spelling errors.

ANY deficiencies in a resume are an automatic red flag about lack of attention to detail. After all, if the individual cannot get a few pages in a resume right, what does that say about how they will handle your multi-page budgets, tax proposals, student manuals and many other important documents?

If a search firm tries to tell you that resume errors are trivial, which happened with the Erwin affair, beware! The search firm does not know what it is talking about.
Tip #6: Beware of Secrecy

Why set yourself up to take all the blame for a bad decision?

In the Erwin incident, the state board kept the names of finalists secret too long, making a public release too late for the media and independent organizations to complete their own research and vetting. There were major problems waiting to be found, however, and problems were indeed identified. Unfortunately, the news came back too late for the state board to benefit.

Again, the board chair lost his position over this and later resigned.

In this day and age, it is not that difficult for independent researchers such as bloggers to get into the web and do some phone calling. Why not harness that energy to work for, not against, you.

Tip #7: Ask informed questions – be respectful, but understand that softball questions won’t help you

Ask these questions if the candidate currently is a principal or superintendent

1) What education reforms have the candidates successfully implemented?

2) Have the candidates removed bad teachers from the system? How did they identify those bad teachers?

3) Did the candidates have command and control authority for all resources, curriculum and staffing?

4) How did the candidates deal with union contracts? Did they successfully implement worthwhile changes to the contract?

5) How did they close learning gaps for student subgroups such as racial minorities and learning disabled children?

6) What goals and measures were established and achieved?

7) Did the candidates recommend changes to the legislature or state department of education to significantly improve ability to provide high quality education?

8) How do the candidates stand on the issue of accountability for results? How do results for their current school/district look? Do the candidates understand the data they are providing?

9) Did the candidates routinely do any self-assessments in troubled schools?
10) What best practices were researched and implemented in the candidate’s school/district that got measurable results?

11) Did candidates increase the learning performance while maintaining reasonable costs?

If the candidate has never served as a superintendent, then you will need to tailor the questions above depending upon the individual’s actual background. In this case, you can rephrase the questions in a what-if or how-would-you format to see how the candidate would handle situations in the new post. Pay close attention, as the individual does not have a track record and is truly an unknown, though quite possibly a diamond in the rough.

Tip #8: Never forget, this is YOUR responsibility, not a search firm’s, not the public’s

Always keep in mind your responsibility to the community that elected you and to your students and your school staff to find the very best leader you can.

A person who is a bad choice for a superintendent can just move away. Most board members cannot so easily separate themselves from the consequences of a bad decision.

So, invest the time at the head end to get the best information you can. It beats having to spend time later making excuses for what went wrong. If you want more ideas on doing a web search, check with the Bluegrass Institute. We’d be glad to help. We guarantee the Kentucky Board of Education members who hired Barbara Erwin now wish they had asked.

Tip #9: Consider other resources

The Kentucky School Boards Association advises that they offer hiring assistance to local member school boards. While the association declined to discuss the details of their tip sheet with the Bluegrass Institute, they did confirm they offer one to member school districts.

The Kentucky Department of Education also offers some assistance.

Tip #10: Other considerations

1) Past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. If a candidate hasn’t accomplished anything in a tough environment, he or she probably won’t perform better here.

2) If the candidates don’t have proven experience in tough environments, Kentucky is an awfully tough place to learn.
3) Go beyond the smooth words, academic credentials and flowery plans. Focus on proven results.

4) Even with the recent legal changes concerning superintendent participation, but not control, over principal hiring, Kentucky can still be a tough place of adjustment for superintendent candidates from other states. Ask questions that insure the candidate understands the difficult working conditions imposed by Kentucky’s awkward School Based Decision Making Council laws and how that often ties a superintendent’s hands in key areas like finance, curriculum, resource control and staffing.

5) Money is going to be tight for a long time. How would the candidates control or cut spending? Have they ever done it elsewhere?

**Tip #11: NEVER FORGET: The focus is on student preparation for college and careers**

Everything else is secondary. Anyone who thinks your schools will accomplish their mission without boosting academic performance simply does not have their eye on the ball.

1) Find out what candidates have done elsewhere to improve student learning. Under the federal [No Child Left Behind Act](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/ccr/index.html) and the Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grant programs, states are now identifying low-performing schools and districts. Does the candidate’s current system have persistently low-achieving schools? Is the district a persistent low-performer? You should do some web searching and phone calls on this one, as at least one search firm appears to have not been forthcoming about this information in one recent out-of-state hiring.

2) How have candidates dealt with adults in school systems elsewhere who wanted to maintain the status quo? Do the candidates have a track record in this area, which is highly problematic throughout Kentucky?

3) After they examine your school system, what do the candidates think needs to be done to greatly improve student learning? If they don’t spend some time to get to know your system, ask yourself why you think they would spend time on your issues if you hired them. For example, all states now have testing systems under No Child Left Behind. Did the candidates spend the time to find out how your system ranks in Kentucky? If not, why not? Keep in mind, the data is readily available from the Kentucky Department of Education’s web site.

**Addendum**

A partial listing of school districts that are searching for or have very recently hired a new superintendent assembled from various news reports include:

- [Barren County](https://www.barrensun.com/)
- Fayette County
- Grant County
- Jefferson County
- Kenton County
- Ludlow Independent (recently hired)

**See Also**

- Rewarding Failure

Note: This version correct as of 3 PM on March 28, 2011. Check freedomkentucky.org for updates and additions.