

Becoming a Superintendent



Success in seeking a superintendent position requires both personal commitment and professional preparation. More important, it requires a dedication to improving education and helping all students achieve at their highest level.

Most superintendents begin as teachers. Following success in the classroom, they obtain an administrative credential and move to a principal or district office position. Over time, based on their knowledge, skills, and interest, they are promoted to director or assistant superintendent. Often they start studying for a doctorate in educational administration. Some even enroll in superintendent preparation programs offered by state and national superintendent organizations. Others talk with colleagues and mentors about the possibility of becoming a superintendent.

At some point, they determine that the next step in their career is to seek a superintendent position. If you make that determination, you now need to take action to achieve your goal. Begin by asking yourself some questions.

2 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Is there an ideal career track for becoming a superintendent?
- Should I attempt to find a position even if I have never worked in a district office position?
- How big a district is too big for my first superintendent position?
- How many years should I serve as an assistant superintendent before seeking a superintendent position?
- How will I know I am ready to be a superintendent?

The truth is, there is no perfect test to determine when you are ready to become a superintendent. Much of it depends on your skills, interests, and passions. Some people determine they want to become a superintendent and find a position within a year. Others take two to three years of concentrated effort to secure their first superintendent position.

GETTING READY

Before moving forward on this journey, spend time reflecting on your decision. Be certain that becoming a superintendent is really what you want to do with your career and life. Not every successful administrator wants, or even should, be a superintendent. You may contribute more to education by staying in your current position, and it may be more enjoyable for you. Ask yourself these questions.

- ✓ Am I committed to improving education for all students?
- ✓ Do I have a clear vision of educational excellence with a broad background in teaching and learning?
- ✓ Do I want to be an instructional leader?
- ✓ Do I have expertise in school finance, budget, school construction, and state and national governance issues?
- ✓ Do I have good speaking and writing skills?
- ✓ Can I live with criticism and ambiguity and succeed without external affirmation?
- ✓ Am I intellectually curious?

- ✓ Can I work on several issues at the same time?
- ✓ Am I comfortable with hard work and isolation?
- ✓ Can I make difficult decisions and take responsibility? Do I make these decisions based on a consistent set of moral and ethical values?
- ✓ Do I have sufficient confidence in my skills and abilities to take on the huge responsibilities of the superintendent position?
- ✓ Do I have a history of successful collaborative leadership?
- ✓ Do I work well with people?
- ✓ Am I successful and respected in my current position?
- ✓ Are others, including my superintendent and search consultants, urging me to become a superintendent?
- ✓ Do I have the support of my family or support group?

If the answer to most of these questions is a resounding yes, it makes sense to proceed on your journey. If the answers are no, maybe, or not sure, hold off on moving forward and reconsider. School boards look for confident, talented, dedicated, and highly accomplished candidates. You are unlikely to obtain a superintendent position if you do not possess those qualities.

Anyone with little or no administrative experience should think twice before deciding to apply for a superintendent position. Rarely do these applicants get selected for interviews. In addition, those who have a career marked with jumping from district to district and position to position will have a difficult time being selected for an interview. This is not a position you should seek simply because you are unhappy in your current role. Rather it is a position to seek if you wish to use your talents and skills to make a difference for students.

Once you decide to become a superintendent, there are important practical steps to take that will lead to your success. A number of these steps can, and ideally should, begin at least two years prior to submitting your first application.

During this time, work with a mentor or an experienced administrator with whom you have a confidential relationship, and who will be honest with you concerning your aspirations. These individuals may be former professors, your current superintendent, or colleagues. Listen to their advice.

4 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

1. Superintendent's Role and Responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of a superintendent include the following.

- ✓ Provide instructional leadership.
- ✓ Promote student learning.
- ✓ Recommend policy to the board.
- ✓ Implement board policy.
- ✓ Hire, supervise, support, and evaluate staff.
- ✓ Plan strategically.
- ✓ Set and implement goals.
- ✓ Manage district finances.
- ✓ Communicate with all constituents.
- ✓ Work effectively with employees groups.
- ✓ Understand collective bargaining.
- ✓ Implement applicable state and federal law.
- ✓ Set the tone for the district.

Learn more about what these entail through meetings, readings, and observations. Start by meeting with your superintendent to discuss your interest in becoming one. Most superintendents enjoy helping subordinates achieve their professional goals and will offer suggestions and even mentor your development. Observe your superintendent in various settings and situations. Ask yourself what you would or would not have done differently and why.

Attend board meetings in your district on a regular basis. Prior to the meeting, carefully read the board packet. Following the meeting, ask questions of your superintendent or other key staff about what occurred at the meeting.

Meet with key district office administrators, particularly assistant superintendents and directors, and ask them about their positions and responsibilities. Be attentive to how they describe their work in relation to student achievement and the support they need from the superintendent in doing this work.

Join state and national organizations that deepen your understanding of the superintendent's role. For example, the American Association of

School Administrators (AASA) is the national organization of school superintendents and provides assistance to aspirants.

Interview superintendents from other districts and gain their perspective on their roles and responsibilities. Be certain to interview superintendents from districts substantially different from your own experience. Compare and contrast what you learn from each superintendent. Assess the skills needed to lead different types of districts. Learn how the size of the district office and the amount of administrative support impact the role of the superintendent. All districts present challenges. Where can you make the most difference for students?

Observe how effective leaders set a positive tone within a district. Read about districts that have successfully done this. Examine the difference between the art and science of being a superintendent. Effective superintendents know not only what to do but when and how to do it.

Learn how superintendents in small districts, who have little or no district office support, manage their roles and provide effective leadership. Understand the role of superintendents who also serve as principals.

Of all the responsibilities of the superintendent, no matter the size of the district, the most important is that of educational leader. Effective educational leaders understand the link between high expectations for all students, high accountability, and student achievement. As superintendent you are responsible for ensuring that all students learn and improve academically each year.

Speak with superintendents and assistant superintendents in curriculum and instruction to better understand how superintendents can move the district's instructional agenda forward. Ask them how assessment data influences their decisions, how this data is used at the school sites, and what information is the most valuable to them as they make decisions about instruction. Learn how they set the instructional agenda and how they keep abreast of current research. Use this information to determine what additional classes, seminars, or books you need to pursue. This is addressed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Always follow each exploratory meeting, be it with a school board member, superintendent, or chief business official (CBO) with a thank-you note. Preferably this should be handwritten and on your own stationery, not district stationery.

2. Skills and Knowledge You Need

Broaden and deepen your knowledge and understanding of school district administration and leadership. Pay particular attention to the following.

Federal and State Student Achievement Accountability Systems and Expectations. Foremost among these is Race to the Top (RTT) and

6 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The federal government considers these critical to the improvement of student performance in schools and districts across the country.

State and Federal Laws Governing Personnel Practices. Work with your district's human resources (HR) administrator to familiarize yourself with your district's personnel policies, practices, and procedures.

State Laws Governing the Collective Bargaining Process. Speak with your HR director and superintendent about the negotiations process for teachers, support staff, and, where applicable, administration. Speak with union leaders about their perspectives.

Use of Technology. Focus on technology in classroom instruction, human resources, instructional support, finances, and communications. Almost every superintendent interview now includes questions about the use of technology for student learning.

Difference Between School District Policy and Administrative Regulations. Review your district's policies. Understand how district policy is developed and implemented. Know which district policies are mandated by state law. Understand the importance of having fewer but more significant policies and learn why too many policies may actually impede the progress of a district. Learn how board policies can affect student learning and narrow the achievement gap.

District Budget and Finances. Ask your district's CBO to assist you with this. Attend fiscal conferences and workshops. Mastering the budget is an essential skill. It should reflect the district's goals and priorities with resources allocated to implement the district goals.

Role and Function of the School Board. The board is the superintendent's employer, establishes the district's mission, and sets long-term and short-term goals. Boards hire, support, monitor, and, when needed, replace the superintendent. They set policy, approve district budgets, and generally make decisions based on the values and expectations of the community they serve. Boards only have authority when they act as a body. This appears to be an easy concept. Learn why it is difficult in practice. Gather information on this topic from your superintendent, local school board members, and state and national associations like the National School Boards Association (NSBA). Due to the importance of this topic, Chapter 6 is devoted entirely to board-superintendent relationships.

3. Academic and Professional Preparation

Based on your investigation of the areas of knowledge mentioned above, assess where you need more development. Determine what

workshops, academies, publications, and college or university courses will provide the knowledge you need and begin this work. Boards and search consultants review candidates' attendance at recent workshops. They want candidates who are current with the most recent trends. Boards also examine candidates' recent history of workshop presentations and publications to assess their teaching, writing, and research skills.

Review your recent evaluations to identify areas of growth. Ask your supervisor for feedback on your leadership and interpersonal skills. These skills are essential for the superintendent position. Ask the same of the people you directly supervise. One way to gain information on your leadership style is to conduct a *360 process*. This formal process normally involves a consultant who distributes a survey instrument that focuses on your leadership style to selected staff, parents, administrators, board members, community members, and, if appropriate, students. Anonymity is guaranteed to each respondent. The consultant then meets with you to interpret the results. This information may help you determine whether you have the leadership skills to be a superintendent or if there are areas for improvement.

Enroll in superintendent academies or preparation programs. These may be offered by your state administrative organization or local or national universities. In addition to the knowledge you gain, you will develop a network of colleagues in a similar stage of professional growth. Many of these people will become superintendents and lifelong professional colleagues. Frequently, search consultants contact program directors for the names of outstanding attendees. If funds are not available from your district for these courses, pay for them yourself. Invest in your future.

Earn the appropriate degrees needed for superintendent certification in the states in which you wish to work. Include coursework or internships relevant to school leadership positions. Focus on how to establish and assess effective teaching programs.

Pursue coursework that demonstrates academic rigor and commitment to lifelong learning. Consultants and board members review candidates' coursework and grades.

Do not assume you need a doctorate. While some boards prefer this degree, candidates are judged on the depth of their knowledge and their record of success. Boards want effective instructional leaders to run the district. Obtaining a doctorate may be appropriate if it deepens your leadership skills, confidence, and knowledge. It is important and probably essential if you plan on teaching or conducting research at a college or university during or after working as a superintendent.

8 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

Develop a broad network of colleagues who know your work and support you. Your network will grow as you proceed through your academic and work experiences. Maintain these relationships through e-mail, telephone calls, informal meetings, and conversations at conferences, courses, and meetings. Use your network to hone your professional skills and to assist in broadening your knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent position.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Applying for a superintendent position requires focus and commitment. You may apply a number of times before you are granted an interview. Each application may require different information and have a different process. It is likely that one or two application processes will overlap each other, with interview dates conflicting with your work responsibilities. It is important to balance your job-seeking activities with your other responsibilities and obligations.

Before applying, recognize that it is your responsibility to demonstrate your competence and skills. If you want to be a superintendent, present yourself in an intelligent, deliberate, and purposeful way. In some ways, you are marketing a product, and that product is *you*. Preparing for the application process takes hard work and perseverance. As one superintendent put it, “Finding a job is a job in itself.”

Continue performing at the highest level in your current position. Boards seek successful candidates. Success is measured by the impact of your work on student performance and the respect others have for you. Allowing your performance to slide while searching for a superintendent position severely limits your opportunities.

Inform your superintendent and key members of your network, who will be a part of your application effort, when you start looking for a superintendent position. But do not inform everyone you know. Maintaining confidentiality is important to you and to the districts where you are applying. The time to inform your entire universe of friends and acquaintances is when you become a superintendent.

1. Where to Apply

Use your network to learn of possible job openings, and keep your network informed about where you are applying. Seek and listen to their advice. Determine which vacancies are of interest to you. Your earlier work in exploring different types of districts is helpful here. Decide if you

are willing to move from the state in which you currently reside. If so, have the appropriate certifications.

Other considerations include your family's wants and needs; your lifestyle; your values; where you can afford to live, especially if you must sell a home before moving; and the effect on your current pension and retirement contributions. It is inappropriate to actively apply for a position and then withdraw because you determine the district is not a good fit for you. Do your homework on the district before applying.

If you are unwilling or unable to move, pull out a map of your area and determine the furthest you are willing to commute to work. List all the districts that fall within your commuting range. Focus your energies on the districts within this radius that fit your skills and knowledge.

Another strategy is to find a district that may be too far for a daily commute but where it is possible to live during the week and return home to family on weekends. Most boards want a superintendent, especially a new superintendent, to be available for community events on weekends. Still, this commuting strategy works for some, especially in small rural districts that have difficulty attracting superintendents.

The more you focus on becoming superintendent in one district, to the exclusion of others, the less likely you are to obtain that position. For example, if you want to be a superintendent in a particular, high-performing affluent district five miles from your home, you may have to wait years until the position is vacant. Even when it does become vacant, another more qualified candidate may receive the appointment.

The more mobile you are, the more opportunities you have. However, if it appears you are applying everywhere and anywhere, you hurt your chances. Boards are looking for candidates who can demonstrate a meaningful reason for their application. Saying "I want to be a superintendent," is not the same as "I want to be the superintendent of your district. I grew up three miles from here, and have always wanted to return to this area to make a difference for the students. "

Some administrators seek a small school district where they can serve as both principal and superintendent. Their goal is to leverage the superintendent title and experience into a better position in a larger district. An upside to serving in a small district is that the superintendent assumes a variety of roles as there is little or no office support. This can deepen and broaden your administrative expertise. It also provides an opportunity for closer contact with students, staff, and parents.

The down side to this approach is that, even after three or four years, it can be difficult to transition to a larger district. Boards may not consider this experience relevant to a larger district. However, if you are

10 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

more comfortable in smaller districts, this choice is an excellent one as it allows you to hone your craft while holding the title of superintendent.

Open Versus Closed Searches. Assess the impact of submitting an application in an *open* or *closed* search. An open search is one in which members of the community are involved in screening applicants and the interview process. Community members may include administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, students, and others. The role of the community is to advise the board. The board makes the final decisions.

The challenge for a candidate of an open search is loss of confidentiality. The greater the community participation, the greater the likelihood that confidentiality will be lost and your district will learn that you are seeking another position. If you do not want your district to learn of your application, it is better not to apply to districts using an open process.

Some states mandate that the entire interview process be open to the public. These are truly open searches, where all interviews are conducted in open forums, may include questions from the audience, and are frequently televised.

A closed search is one in which the public does not participate directly in the screening or interview process. In these searches the consultants typically meet with members of the community and ask for ideas concerning the strengths of the district and the challenges the new superintendent might face. The consultants also may inquire as to qualities desired in the new superintendent. A report summarizing the information is prepared and recommended to the board for approval. This information guides the selection process and takes the place of direct community participation. The role of search consultants is reviewed in depth later in this chapter.

Closed searches are now the norm in those states where they are permitted by law. Closed searches generate a deeper candidate pool as there is less risk of the loss of confidentiality. Candidates can move a long way through the selection process without risk of exposure in their current district. However, once finalists are selected, it is difficult to maintain absolute confidentiality, due to reference checking and site visitations.

Whether a search is open or closed, inform your superintendent if you are applying for a new position. The superintendent will determine when to tell the board president. In turn, the board president will determine if and when it is necessary to inform the full board. Do this before your first interview but no later than your return for a second interview, unless your contract includes a provision outlining when you must notify the superintendent or board. You may run some risk if you do not receive the position, but you run a larger risk of losing the respect of your current superintendent or board if you do not inform them.

Learn About the Position and the District. Learn as much as you can about the districts to which you might apply.

- Review district and individual school websites.
- Review state and national education websites for assessment, budget, and other data.
- Check local newspaper files online.
- Contact close friends or colleagues who may be familiar with the district.
- Visit the district, driving around to see the schools.
- Review the posted materials about the district and the vacancy.

Unless directed to do so through the application process, do not call the district and request information. If you need information you cannot obtain through other sources, request the information from the person heading the search.

If you know the current superintendent or the search firm recommends that you call this person, it is appropriate to do so. But do not call the current superintendent without first checking with the consultants. Most sitting superintendents are only too willing to answer questions about the district. Use this opportunity to listen and gain better insight into the district, not to try and uncover “skeletons in the closet.”

Sometimes the consultants or the board may prefer that candidates not speak with the current superintendent. There may be a number of reasons for this, including the forced resignation or retirement of the current superintendent. In these situations it is best to gather information about the district in other ways.

Compensation Considerations. Explore all aspects of superintendent compensation, including your minimum compensation needs. Compensation includes not only salary but may also include health benefits, life insurance, long-term care insurance, tax-sheltered annuities, applicable state teachers retirement payments, vacation, moving allowances, car allowance, expense allowances, and housing allowances. Boards and communities, along with local unions, look at your *total compensation*, not just the salary. It is important to understand this difference. Also note that each state treats these issues differently.

Before they post a vacancy, boards determine the range of total compensation they are willing to offer a final candidate. They do this by comparing the total compensation of superintendents in similar, nearby districts, considering the district’s financial ability to pay and community

12 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

expectations, and estimating what will attract outstanding candidates. Once the range is determined, boards prefer not to exceed it. Determine if this range meets your needs. Even if the opening lists salary and compensation as “competitive and negotiable,” the board has a range in mind. The consultant can tell you what it is.

Many candidates want to know the total compensation of the current superintendent. While superintendent salaries are considered public information in most states, obtaining that information can be challenging and even misleading. For example, the current superintendent’s total compensation may be particularly high due to outstanding performance and longevity or it may be low due to the district’s finances or the current superintendent’s performance. Also, many superintendents and boards, especially those with highly compensated superintendents or superintendents with unusual forms of compensation, are reluctant to share this information and make it difficult to obtain the information.

Competitive compensation can and does differ substantially between states and even regions within a state. Some of this is driven by the higher cost of living in urban areas and affluent suburbs. This means that a generous offer in a high-wealth suburban area may be worth much less in purchasing power than a lower offer in a less affluent part of the same state.

Also become familiar with state law as it pertains to compensation issues. In particular be aware of the types of compensation that will or will not be counted toward your retirement. For example, in some states tax-sheltered annuities provided by a board may apply toward your retirement base. The same applies for car allowances, bonuses, and other forms of nonsalary remuneration. In other states this is not so. Often it is the wording of the compensation in the contract that determines its eligibility toward retirement. You are responsible for knowing this, not the search consultant or the board.

You should address all compensation issues and needs before seeking a particular superintendent position. It is not professional to participate in a search process and then not accept a position at the last minute because the total compensation was less than you needed or more than the board was willing to pay.

2. Superintendents’ Contracts

Familiarize yourself with the issues pertaining to a superintendent’s contract. This permits you to negotiate your contract from a position of knowledge and confidence. If you are applying in different states, learn the rules that govern superintendent contracts in those states. Many states have adopted legislation limiting certain aspects of these agreements, especially

length of contracts, total retirement compensation, and payout provisions for early termination. This information can be found in a number of ways.

- ❑ Contact your state administrator organization as they may have retired superintendents or other employees who provide contract support.
- ❑ Confer with an attorney familiar with superintendent contract issues and ask to review an “ideal” superintendent contract. This may cost you an hourly fee but it is worth the cost.
- ❑ Attend annual superintendent conferences sponsored by state administrator associations as they frequently offer sessions on superintendent contracts that are presented by attorneys.
- ❑ Obtain and review sample superintendent contracts. In most states superintendent contracts are subject to public disclosure. If you cannot obtain copies from your state administrator association, contact individual school districts and request a copy of its superintendent’s contract. You may need to submit this request in writing and pay a copying and mailing fee. Avoid seeking this information from districts where you intend to apply.
- ❑ Become familiar with contract provisions. Provisions besides compensation include term, annual evaluation process, role and responsibilities including job descriptions, professional development, travel, and termination. Each contract may have these in different forms. Reading contracts helps you become familiar with the terms and legal language. The importance of this knowledge becomes evident as you negotiate a contract. This is discussed in greater length later in the chapter.

In researching superintendent contracts you may find the term *golden handcuff*. These are items placed in a contract to keep a superintendent in the district for a long period.

Example: One district provided a fully paid life-time annuity to a superintendent who agreed to stay five years and then retire from the district.

These are rarely given to first-time superintendents. In no way do these guarantee a trouble-free tenure. Sometimes superintendents even leave the district in spite of the provision. Further, unions and communities often criticize them.

3. Hiring Process

Learn as much as possible about how boards hire superintendents. All boards have a number of options to use in filling the position. They can appoint an interim for a few months until the search is completed, promote from within, or conduct a broad-based search.

Not all districts retain a search firm or search consultants to manage the search. Many smaller districts manage their own superintendent search process. Others use the county office or the state school boards association. However a district proceeds, there will be a person designated to manage the search process. This person serves as a *consultant* to the board, making certain the search goes well and there is a broad range of qualified candidates from which the board can choose.

Superintendent positions are advertised at the local, state, and national level. Many state administrative organizations include job postings. There are state and regional online posting services. National publications like *Education Week* list job postings, with an online posting as well. Some search firms also list postings on their websites.

Search consultants often contact experienced superintendents in the county or state, perhaps even your superintendent, to request names of successful administrators who are ready and interested in seeking a superintendent position. Search consultants also contact superintendents placed by their firm for recommendations. Based on this information they call to actively recruit candidates. These practices have led to search consultants being called *head hunters*.

When working with a search firm or consultants, remember they work for the district and not for you. Be professional at all times and only ask questions for which answers are not readily available elsewhere. Consultants judge your independence and competence from the moment you meet or call them.

Consultants have long memories. Even if you are not selected for one position the consultants know who you are. They may conduct a future search for which you are qualified. You want to impress them with your professionalism. Search consultants and boards expect candidates to present themselves well. Candidates who treat search consultants as their “best friend” or confidant and need substantial hand-holding are less likely to be selected for an interview.

While some search firms have a “stable” of candidates they work to place, most of them treat each vacancy individually. Most consultants will encourage a familiar candidate to apply for a position if there appears to be a good fit.

Contact search firms active in your area and ask for an exploratory interview. Send an up-to-date copy of your resume. Use this interview to

gain insights as to what the search firms look for and how they conduct a search. Following the interview, send the consultant a thank-you note. Occasionally, write or e-mail the consultant about your current job status and professional work. Search consultants assess your readiness and professional competence in all interactions. You want to make a positive impression.

4. Completing the Application

Before you start filling out applications, obtain and review sample applications. Do this through your state administrator association or by requesting applications for specific vacancies from districts and search firms. Avoid asking for applications from districts where you intend to submit an application. While each application varies in the information it wants, there are some materials and information that most require. Use your review of applications to prepare this information. It will make it easier when you start to fill out applications.

A Resume. Review and revise your resume. Structure it to emphasize your leadership qualifications and experiences. Provide a detailed record of your professional history and education. Include professional publications, workshops, and honors. Make sure it is up to date.

References. Identify those who can serve as references. They should be respected in their field or your community, familiar with your experience and leadership qualities, and supportive of your aspirations.

A Letter or Written Statement. While not required for most online applications, this is an important component of many application procedures. The letter is an opportunity to provide information that differs from information normally included in an application and resume. These letters are challenging to write and should be modified to address the expectations of each specific district. Having a prepared statement of why you are interested in becoming a superintendent and why you believe you are qualified will assist you.

You are now prepared to move to the next step in your journey: filling out applications. Obtain the application for each position in which you are interested. Request it from the person, district, or group that is identified in the advertisement for the position. Do not contact the district directly unless specifically directed to do so. Some search firms use an online, Web-based application process. These firms provide technical support to assist you with this.

When you call to obtain an application, or if you are called about applying for a position, there are a number of questions you may wish to ask. These questions should be directed to the search consultant. Following are some questions search consultants are prepared to answer.

Questions to Ask Search Consultants

- What is the board like?
- When do the board members' terms expire?
- Why is the current superintendent leaving?
- Is there an inside candidate?
- Is this a confidential (closed) search process?
- How will the process be conducted and what is the timeline?
- What is the proposed compensation range?
- What are the major challenges facing the district?

Gather Information. Before you start filling out the application, read what is required and gather the information you need. Frequently, districts provide a listing of board-approved qualifications and criteria for the position. Some districts provide a brochure with this information while others post the information on the district or search firm websites. Carefully analyze what the district is seeking in relation to your background, experience, skills, and knowledge. Prepare an outline of what you want to communicate about yourself to the district through the application process. You may use your introductory letter, resume, and application to convey this information.

The application also may require responses to open-ended questions. Examples of such questions follow.

- Why are you interested in serving as superintendent in this district?
- How would you describe your leadership qualities and accomplishments?
- What do you believe are the major issues facing K–12 education today?
- How would you address these issues?

Adjust your open-ended responses based on the specific questions asked in each application.

Select References. Determine which references you wish to use for the application. Contact each one, preferably by phone, and let all of them know you are applying for a position. Ask permission to include their names as references on the application. Let them know they may be contacted by the search consultant.

If the application requires it, ask your references to write a letter of recommendation. Usually the application provides room for an extensive

list of references while requiring only three to five written reference letters. Offer to send all your potential references your resume and any other information you believe would assist them or that they request.

It is appropriate to inform your references if you would like them to address some aspect of your background or performance in a letter. For example, if the posting references technology expertise in teaching and learning and you have expertise in this area, ask a reference to address this in the letter.

As most professionals are busy, provide substantial advance notice of what you need. Inform your references of the due date. Where appropriate, provide preaddressed envelopes with the proper postage. As the application deadline approaches, contact your references to ensure their letters are sent in time.

Search consultants should let you know when they start contacting your listed references. This usually occurs prior to the first interview. They also may call as references people you have not listed. This usually occurs between the first and second interview. The consultant should inform you when these reference calls begin.

This deeper reference checking is a routine part of the search process for most reputable firms. The additional references they call may be members of your school board, union leaders or administrators with whom you previously worked, or even community members. This is a reminder of how important it is to build your career on a continuing foundation of hard work, integrity, and strong interpersonal relationships. You never know who will be called by a prospective employer to provide an overview of your competence and integrity.

The Final Steps for Completion and Common Errors. Complete the entire application as requested. This is very important. Many candidates are eliminated from consideration because they fail to follow directions or fail to realize the importance of accuracy and style. The following are major errors to avoid.

1. *Failing to demonstrate that you have met the listed district criteria or qualifications.* It is appropriate to ask a trusted colleague or mentor to review your material to determine whether you have communicated your qualifications in a manner that will interest the board. Take full advantage of the application process to sell yourself.
2. *Stating "see resume" when asked to complete information on an application form.* This conveys either arrogance or laziness on your part. This is the district's application process. Meet their expectations as stated.

18 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

3. *Listing your work address, e-mail, phone number, or cell phone number as your primary contacts instead of your private, home information.* It is not appropriate to use district resources for your private purposes. Using district resources risks a breakdown in confidentiality. If you do not have a home e-mail address, obtain one prior to starting the application process. Use this for all application communications.
4. *Submitting a photocopied letter where it is evident you simply inserted the name of the district.* Again, this conveys laziness or arrogance.
5. *Using district letterhead or stationary from your current position.* This is using district resources for your own private purposes.
6. *Providing insufficient or sketchy responses to open-ended questions.* These questions provide you the opportunity to market your achievements, skills, and character. Use the opportunity wisely, as other candidates certainly will do so.
7. *Completing applications at the last minute.* A well-prepared and thought out application requires a substantial commitment of time and effort to complete. Work on your application over a period of several days. This permits a full review of all requirements and questions with ample time for editing and proofreading.
8. *Submitting a poorly prepared letter of application.* Online applications do not usually require a letter of application, but traditional, paper applications do. An application letter is an opportunity to introduce yourself to the board and demonstrate how you and your skills fit the district's needs. The letter must be well-written and interesting to read. Use a conversational but professional tone. Letters may be two or three pages single spaced. You want the board to know your success and experience in the areas of required expertise.
9. *Failing to proofread for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.* While spell check and grammar check may be helpful word-processing tools, you are responsible for all errors. You are an educator and expected to model good writing skills. An application with many errors is not likely to reach the board.

Example

Earlier in her career, a search consultant was a high school English teacher. She uses a red pencil to identify spelling, grammar, and word-use errors. Applications with many red pencil marks rarely reach the board.

10. *Failing to properly address issues or problems from your past that could influence the board's decision to hire you.* In this day of instant communications, there is no such thing as privacy. Prior to submitting your name to the board for consideration, the search consultants will search the Internet for your name to learn as much as possible about you. Board members will Google you as soon as the search consultant recommends your application. If you are hired, your entire school community will do so as well.

In addition to their informal “sleuthing,” boards retain private companies to conduct formal due diligence background checks on the final candidate prior to having that person sign the contract. These reports verify what is on the finalist’s application. Every degree, honor, award, job, or membership you list on your resume is verified. This is an appropriate safeguard for the community as far too many candidates are not truthful about their education, certification, and previous positions.

If there is negative information about you in the public domain or if other problems are likely to become known at some future date, contact the search consultant and seek advice as to the best way to communicate this information to the board. Examples may include a substance abuse problem, a less than honorable discharge from the armed forces, a DUI, a misdemeanor, an outstanding lawsuit, or a dismissal or forced resignation from a previous position. Boards vary in their response to these issues, depending on the severity of the problem, how recently it occurred, how the problem was resolved, and local values, tradition, and culture. An issue that is a “deal breaker” in one district may not be of much concern in another. It is always best to address these concerns as early as possible in the process and demonstrate your honesty and integrity to the search consultant and the board.

11. *Failing to explain obvious gaps in your work history or background.* If your background is idiosyncratic, it is important to communicate why in the application. A prime example of this is a gap in your work history. A search consultant will want to know what happened to you or what you were doing for any unaccounted-for periods. Or, if you were enrolled in a doctoral program but did not complete it, explain why.
12. *Failing to stay in any one position for more than one or two years.* Districts do not want to go through an extensive search process to hire a superintendent only to repeat the process twelve to

eighteen months later. If you have had a number of positions in quick succession due to a spouse's or partner's job relocation or working for armed services schools abroad, state as much. Also explain how this will not be an issue in the future.

13. *Failing to meet all deadlines.* Search consultants expect candidates to possess sufficient discipline to meet all expectations of the search process. If there is some unavoidable reason why you cannot meet a deadline, contact the search consultant and make an alternative arrangement. Consultants want to find the best candidates and are willing to work with candidates to meet their needs in unexpected or unavoidable situations.

All materials you submit with an application and the manner in which you submit them should paint a clear picture of you as a professional and a person. To ensure your application does this, have a trusted colleague review your application materials. Taking the time to do it right pays off in the long run.

Some search firms include a preliminary screening interview with one or two consultants as part of the application process. As many as twelve top candidates may be invited to a thirty-minute conversation. While these interviews may appear informal they are an integral component of the search process. These interviews provide an opportunity to demonstrate your interest and knowledge of the district as well as your ability to ask good questions and listen. These interviews give the search consultants an opportunity to assess your personality and style against your written application materials before deciding which candidates should precede to the next level.

INTERVIEWS

The next step in becoming a superintendent is your first interview. While many capable and experienced people may apply for a superintendent position, not everyone will be asked to interview. The application and screening process is designed to *screen out*, not *screen in*, candidates. Your job as a candidate is to have the background, skills, and application materials that will screen you *in*. The search consultant's job is to review the applications, letters of introduction, resumes, and reference letters and personally contact some references. The consultant then identifies the candidates most qualified and most likely to match the district's and the board's needs and expectations. These fortunate individuals are then invited to interview.

1. Preparation

As with any step in the application process, planning is essential for success. Know what to expect and prepare in advance. When you are informed that you have been selected for an interview, learn as much as you can about the process from the search consultant.

Questions to Ask About the Interview Process

- What are the steps in the interview process?
- What is the membership of the committees?
- What are the dates for the next steps in the process? If you cannot meet any of these dates, inform the search consultant immediately.
- Where will the interviews take place?
- How long are the interviews?
- How many candidates will be interviewed?

Most search processes include two or more interviews. In a closed search, the candidates meet only with the consultants and the board. In an open search, there also will be community interviews.

Appearance. Search consultants, committee members, and school board members pay close attention to a candidate's appearance. First impressions are powerful indicators of success. Be appropriately dressed for all interview events, even those that may be deemed business casual. Boards and committee members expect you to look professional.

Planning is essential. Do not leave matters of appearance to the last minute. This is not the time to experiment with a new hairstyle or new makeup. Dress as you would for a board meeting. Appearing at your interview with no tie, a baggy out-of-style ill-fitting suit, a gauzy skirt, tennis shoes, a plunging neckline, a tie with stains, or a wrinkled blouse is not the way to make a good impression.

As an experienced professional, prepare your interview wardrobe well in advance of submitting your first application. You need several outfits that look good on you and are appropriate for interviews. If you are unsure how to dress, most major department stores have personal shoppers who will assist you with this at no cost. Err on the side of conservative dress. It is better to be more formally dressed than less formally dressed.

Example

A candidate from the deep South showed up to an interview in the Pacific Northwest in a white suit in the middle of January. When it came time to discuss the candidates, all the board remembered of this candidate was his “ice cream” suit. Needless to say he did not receive the position. Another candidate wore short, bright-colored argyle socks to his interview—everyone remembered him as the “guy with the funny socks.”

Practicing. Interviewing is a skill. It can improve with practice. Practicing is particularly important if you have been in your current position for a long time and your last interview is a distant memory. While every committee assumes that a candidate will be a little nervous, first impressions are extremely important. Successful candidates master their nervousness and interview anxieties long before the first interview takes place.

One way to practice for the interview is to stand in front of a mirror and ask yourself challenging questions. Another is to ask a trusted colleague to conduct a mock interview with you. Use a superintendent’s job description as the basis for the questions. Turn each duty into a question and respond to it. The purpose of these practices sessions is not to develop pat answers. Rather it is to practice responding to questions in a thoughtful and professional manner. As you practice, do not be afraid to use a little humor.

We all sound brilliant when talking to ourselves, but speaking out loud is more of a challenge. The more you prepare by practicing out loud, the stronger your responses at the actual interviews.

The first interview with the board or selection committee is usually formal, with the same questions asked of each candidate. These questions are based on information the search consultants received from the board and the community during the information-gathering process. The questions will reflect the issues and characteristics identified in the brochure or position posting. Be prepared to address the following.

- Your Professional Background
- Why You Are Interested in Becoming Superintendent
- Your Strengths and Weaknesses
- How You Use Your Strengths and Address Your Weaknesses
- Your Knowledge of the District and Its Issues

Other important questions will focus on teaching and learning; curriculum and program development; instructional practice, assessment strategies, and accountability; professional development; and use of technology or strategies for closing the achievement gap. Other areas of focus

may include finance, facilities, communications, community relationships, and collective bargaining.

In some searches the consultants sit in on every interview. In others, the consultants prepare the board or committees for the interviews, assist in developing questions, and debrief with them after the interviews are over. This approach is designed to increase the responsibility of the board for independent decision making and to not distract either the candidates or the board members. In most states, candidate interviews are conducted in confidential sessions with the public excluded.

2. First Interview

All of your preparation up to this point will serve you in good stead as you interview. Your success in your current position, the time you spent learning about the position, the additional courses and workshops, the network of leaders who assisted you, the research you did on the district, the application you submitted, and the practice interviews now come into play.

Prepare psychologically for the interview process. Think of an interview as an opportunity to demonstrate one of the most important skills a superintendent needs, the ability to respond to questions and provide information in a pressured situation. An interview is no different than a board meeting at which an animated public “wants answers.” Present yourself as the confident, grounded, and mature professional you are.

Frequently, superintendent interviews are scheduled in locations in the community that ensure candidate confidentiality. This means that one candidate can leave the building while the next candidate enters from another direction. Pay close attention to the instructions given by the district. Scout the interview location prior to the interview to make certain you know exactly where you are going. Getting lost on the way to your interview and arriving late is not a successful interview strategy.

Stay calm as you approach the interview. Take a deep breath, leave your car, and head on in to the interview. Usually someone will meet you as you enter. It may be the consultant or the superintendent’s assistant. This person will take you to a holding area and offer to get you water or coffee. Be warm and gracious. At the end of all the interviews, board members may ask whomever greeted the candidates for an opinion of them.

The board chair or consultant will come out to meet you when it is time to start the interview. Before the start of the interview, the chair will let you know the number of questions that will be asked and how much time you have for the interview. First interviews can range from ninety minutes to two hours with as many as fifteen questions asked.

24 • Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents

After entering the interview room, approach each person, look at them directly, and introduce yourself with a firm handshake and a warm smile. If you have very sweaty hands, dry them off before entering the room. If there are too many people in the room for a personal introduction, provide a warm hello and look around the room to engage as many people as possible. Take your seat and make yourself comfortable. Normally, water is provided, as well as a pen and paper.

Be gracious and considerate throughout the interview. When leaving the interview, even if you believe you did poorly or discovered you were no longer interested in the position, thank everyone for the time spent with you. If appropriate, again shake hands. It is good manners and you never know when you may see these people again.

Maintain a confident and professional demeanor during the interview. You want the board or committee members to see you as thoughtful, attentive, and responsive.

Helpful Interview Dos and Don'ts

- Do look people in the eye when addressing questions. Do move your head around to include everyone in the room. Don't address every answer to the board president or search consultant, if the consultant is in the room.
- Do ask the person asking the question to repeat the full question or part of the question if you did not hear or understand it. Don't ask that every question be repeated.
- Do listen carefully to the question and answer it completely. Don't be long-winded or lecture the committee.
- Don't respond to a question you feel is legally impermissible. For example, if asked, "Are you planning on having a family?" respond by saying, "I consider all my students my family."
- Do be mindful of your time. Do spend less time on the next question if you spent too long answering the previous question.
- Don't look at your watch. Do look at a wall clock if easily visible from your seat. Or take your watch off at the start of the interview and place it where you can occasionally glance at the time.
- Do take brief notes if a question has a number of parts. Don't write down the entire question. It indicates you have difficulty remembering questions and thinking on your feet, skills superintendents need.
- If any of the interviews involve a meal, do use your best table manners. Don't drink alcohol even if others do, and don't offer to pick up the check.

Example

A candidate was invited to a dinner with the board prior to his second interview. Nervous, he drank four large glasses of wine, greatly impressing the board. He was not offered the position.

After the interviews are over, the board or the committee will meet with the search advisor for a debriefing process. Consultants vary as to how they go about debriefing the committee. However, the outcome is the same, to determine the finalists who will move on to the second interview. Usually there are two or three finalists.

Once the decision is made, the consultant contacts the successful candidates and provides information about the next steps in the interview process. The consultants continue checking references between the first and second interviews, focusing in on areas of concern identified during the debriefing process.

After the first interview, take time to reflect on what you have learned about this position. In some instances candidates realize they are not ready or no longer interested in the position. If you decide to withdraw from the search, inform the consultant as soon as possible. Do not wait until the consultant contacts you. It is best to withdraw after the first interview rather than to wait until after the second as you are taking up the spot of another potential candidate. If you do withdraw, provide a clear and understandable explanation, as you want the board and the consultant to respect you and your decision. Send the board a note thanking them for the opportunity to interview.

The Concept of “Fit.” If you are invited to the final interview, congratulate yourself on a job well-done. Reaching the “finals” means that you have credible credentials, interview well, and are considered exceptional by the board. It means that in this board’s opinion you have the background, skills, and talent to serve as its superintendent. All that stands in the way of reaching your goal is something called *fit*.

Fit is the elusive chemistry between the board and the final candidate. Fit is the board’s determination that you are the person, out of the two or three equally competent and accomplished final candidates, who will best meet the district’s needs over the next five or more years. It is very difficult for finalists or even search consultants to fully know or anticipate what a board will decide in the final debriefing. Simply be prepared and be yourself.

Fit works both ways. At the end of the final interview you may decide you do not fit with this board or the needs of this district. Trust your

instincts. Do not allow your desire to be a superintendent to override your common sense. If the fit is right you will feel comfortable and excited about working with this board.

3. Second Interview

Prepare for the second or final interview by carefully assessing what happened at the first interview. Reflect on the questions asked and the suitability of your responses. Make a list of points you wished you had made and what you want to do better. You now have a better understanding of the issues facing the district. If you believe you failed to adequately respond to some questions in the first interview, bolster your knowledge in these areas before the second. As with all aspects of the search process, preparation is essential.

Second interviews are usually conducted with the board in closed session. They are far less formal, with questions developed with the assistance of the search consultant. Questions may differ for each candidate. They probe areas where your first interview responses were not clear or sufficient. They also cover areas of particular interest to the board. Pay close attention to nuances, as they provide insight into the board's real priorities.

Example

In one district, one of the main criteria listed in the vacancy brochure was improving student achievement. However, all finalists were asked a set of questions about the building of a high school gymnasium. These questions stemmed from the recent passing of a bond. What none of the finalists, nor the search consultant, knew was that three of the five board members wanted a high school gym built as quickly as possible. The person selected was the candidate with the most knowledge about building them. The board rejected the finalist with a proven track record in improving minority student achievement and bond management.

Some second interview processes will include a tour of the district with two board members; others include a dinner with the board. Your spouse or partner may or may not be invited on the tour or to the dinner. These events require a set of skills different from an interview. You must be professional at all times, yet warm, approachable, and engaging company.

Some districts also schedule a final meeting with the board president and a second board member the day after the final interview. This is a time to discuss contract and compensation needs or other issues that may have

arisen during the previous interviews. In other districts, this final step is done with the whole board. In these situations the search consultant will brief you on the board's expectations.

4. After the Final Interview

The next step is for the search consultant to meet with the board to debrief the interviews and determine the final, preferred candidate. When the board is in agreement, the board chair or the consultant will contact the preferred candidate and offer the position. The consultant may then contact the unsuccessful candidates or wait until it is clear that the district does have a new superintendent. While this may seem cold and unfriendly, there are good reasons for this approach.

Sometimes during a search, a board does not appreciate a candidate until it comes to the very end of the process. It then realizes the best candidate was eliminated earlier. Or, a preferred candidate turns down the position once it is offered and the board wants to look again at all the candidates. As a result you may be called back for another interview. Boards need to keep all options open. So be patient.

If you are applying for more than one position and the final interviews are overlapping, inform the search consultants. Ask when the board is likely to make a decision. Do not use this as an opportunity to play one district against another. You might get two job offers or you may get none. Throughout, you want to be viewed as a professional who respects the process in each district. Unprofessional behavior may come back to haunt you.

It is to your advantage to know why the board wants to hire you. It may not be for the reasons you think. For example, a powerful board accustomed to micromanaging may hire an inexperienced superintendent so it can continue to micromanage. Other times a board will hire a strong superintendent to "clean up" the district or move it forward. Boards want the superintendent they choose to be successful, as it is a reflection on their judgment. The clearer you are on why you were selected the better you will be at working with the board.

If you are offered the position but have concerns about the district or the board, you should request an additional meeting with the board. The board may request the same if they have similar concerns about you. These additional meetings are important as neither party wants to make an error in judgment.

If you are not selected to move forward in the process, be gracious and express your appreciation for the opportunity to interview. While you may not have been successful in this district, you want the consultant and the board to think highly of you so you will be considered for future and

perhaps more suitable openings. Send the board and the search consultant a note of appreciation. Write *personal and confidential* on the envelope so the note does not become public information. Take time to reflect back on your experience and identify what you did well and what you may do differently the next time around.

Call the search consultant and ask for feedback. Some search consultants will, if asked, provide nonconfidential information about your reference check and interviews. Others just offer advice about general areas of concern. Use this information to guide your preparation for future applications and interviews. This is also good information for your professional development. Send the consultant a thank-you note.

SITE VISITS

If you are the selected candidate, the final step in the selection process may be a visit to your district by the board. Depending on circumstances, one or all the board members may participate. Only agree to a site visit if the board formally offers you the position. This offer may be verbal over the phone or may involve a brief written agreement. Usually the offer is contingent on working out the final contract language and compensation details, a successful site visit, and a positive due diligence report.

Never agree to a site visit if the board wants to visit the district of a second candidate before making a final decision. This undermines your current position if the board offers the job to the other candidate. If you are asked to do this, politely decline. The board can visit the district of the other candidate. If it is not satisfied, it then can make you a formal offer and schedule a site visit.

Site visits place demands on you and your current district's board, staff, parents, and community members. A site visit means the loss of any confidentiality you may have maintained. Everyone in your current district will hear that you are a finalist for another position. Your superintendent and board will be anxious. They realize they may soon have to address your departure and fill your position.

Some boards do not conduct site visits. They are concerned they may not get an accurate picture in one visit and so rely on extensive reference checking and due diligence. They also may be concerned about cost.

Site visits provide an opportunity for board members to validate their decision and to get to know further their new superintendent. The board can demonstrate to its community that it has done full due diligence. This may be particularly important in closed searches where the public has limited opportunities to participate or questioned the use of an outside consulting firm.

The particulars of the site visit will depend on what board members wish to see and with whom they wish to meet. Work with your new board chair and put together a tentative schedule for this visit. Normally, your new board will want to meet with your superintendent, board members, district and site-level administrators, union leadership, parent and community leaders, and even students.

Arrange for appropriate meeting rooms and tours of your district. Provide a printed itinerary for each member of the visiting team. Have refreshments available. Work to make the visit run smoothly and showcase your ability to organize and meet expressed needs of your new board. If appropriate, start or end the day with the board meeting your spouse or partner. While the visiting board is responsible for its travel and housing expenses, you are personally responsible for any expenditures incurred by your current district for this site visit.

On rare occasions a board will complete the site visit and change its mind about a candidate. This is likely to occur when consultants have not conducted a thorough reference check beyond the three or four names offered by the candidate. Or, board members may become aware of a huge discrepancy between the size, culture, values, and standards of the candidate's current district and their own. They then have doubts that the candidate can make the transition successfully. Should this occur, maintain a professional stance. Thank the board for its interest and focus your energies on your current position and continue your job search. You will impress not only your current employer but also the search firm.

THE FINAL STEP: YOUR CONTRACT

After the board has made you a formal offer of employment, you will begin the last and oftentimes most challenging aspect of the selection process: finalizing your first contract and agreeing on a compensation package. How you negotiate your contract is your first leadership act with your new board. Throughout this process maintain a positive, friendly, and professional demeanor.

Contracts are one of the greatest sources of disagreement between superintendents and boards. Even seasoned superintendents sometimes find themselves at odds with their board over differing interpretations of their contract language. Your contract is a binding agreement in which the actual words prevail, not what you thought or wanted the words to mean. This is why it is critical for you to learn as much as possible about superintendent contracts, including state and local laws governing contracts, before you start applying for positions. It is very difficult to gain that

expertise between the time your new board offers you the position and the signing of the contract.

Your first contract with a new district serves as a foundation for future contracts in that district and future ones in which you may be superintendent. Many superintendents believe their first contract with a district is their best with that district. They want a contract in place that is fair to them and the district and that does not need to be revisited annually for major changes. This allows them to concentrate on the work of the district and reduces public and staff scrutiny of the contract.

You want the contract to meet your needs but you need to be realistic. The board just selected you to be its superintendent. It is likely to make some concessions, just as you should. Few first-time superintendents, or any superintendents, get all they want in their contracts. Avoid holding out for a specific provision or benefit if the board is not interested or willing to provide it unless it is a deal breaker. This should rarely happen as you should have discussed issues like this with the search consultant prior to accepting the position.

Problems between superintendents and boards are more likely to occur when the contract is signed without a real understanding and respect for the compensation package or contract provisions. Or, if either party feels slighted by the other. If you are familiar with contract language, compensation issues, and the recent financial history of your new district, you are more likely to avoid the more common pitfalls of contract negotiations. Never sign a contract without advice or counsel. Mistakes made in negotiating your first contract can be substantial and, in many cases, irreversible.

Do not make the common mistake of signing the contract put in front of you by the district's legal counsel, thinking you will simply change it next year. Circumstances may change during the year. New members may come onto the board, the district may face an unforeseen financial crisis, or union negotiations may prove difficult, all issues that may limit the board's ability or even desire to strengthen your contract. This is why the first contract is so important.

Also, do not make the mistake of feeling that negotiating a contract with your new board is unseemly or unprofessional. First-time superintendents rarely have contract negotiations experience and feel awkward asking for things. If you feel this way, use a consultant or attorney to represent your interests. Even if you are comfortable negotiating your contract, it is well worth the cost to have an attorney review it.

Attorneys understand complex language and know that no provisions are "harmless" in any contract. Every provision is important and *of consequence* to you. Competent education attorneys also know what compensation

will and will not apply to your retirement or be taxable. State administrators' associations have lists of attorneys qualified to do superintendents' contracts. Do not ask the search consultant to assist you with your contract. The consultant works for the board, not for you.

1. Contract Provisions

Your new board will ask its attorney to prepare a draft of a contract for you to review. Occasionally the search consultant may assist in this process. Usually the first version of the contract is written to protect and promote the interests of the district. It will not be written to protect you. Once you receive the district's contract, carefully review it with a personal consultant or attorney familiar with your state's contract laws. Your proposed contract will have many standard provisions, including some particular to your district.

Common Contract Provisions

- Superintendent's Role and Responsibilities
- Annual Evaluation Process
- Term
- Vacation Days
- Sick Days
- Salary
- Benefits
- Expense Reimbursement
- Professional Development
- Contract Renewal Procedures
- Termination

These are all important and should be considered carefully. For example, you will need to determine whether you want a traditional work-year calendar or a positive work-year calendar. Each provides the same number of workdays, but in the traditional model you start with more workdays and subtract vacation and holidays from them. In the positive work year model, you simply work a specified number of days with all others viewed as nonworkdays. There are no vacation days or holidays; those come out of your nonworkdays. There are pros and cons to each model and both have retirement and compensation implications. You need to be aware of these as you work with your board, as well as to be aware of the traditions that exist in the district.

Particular provisions you may wish to focus on as a new superintendent are the delineation of your roles and responsibilities, and those of the

board, along with your annual performance evaluation. The evaluation process should be based on your job description, the district's mission, and the setting of annual performance goals. If the district has a strategic plan, the implementation of that plan should be included in your goals.

If your district has no superintendent job description or evaluation process, insist that a provision be included in your contract. This provision would state that within sixty to ninety days of your signing the contract, you and the board would mutually agree on a job description and annual evaluation process. Having a clear set of performance expectations and a clearly defined evaluation process provides you a much higher level of support and will guard against arbitrary termination.

Another common provision may be the requirement to schedule yearly physicals, with a follow-up written statement from the doctor that you are healthy enough to perform your duties. Work closely with your counsel or advisor before including such a provision in your contract. These can involve complicated legal issues, particularly if you have a chronic health issue.

Another key provision in the contract is the delineation of your total compensation. As discussed earlier, total compensation is not the same as your salary. Salary refers to how much you will be paid annually for your services. Total compensation includes salary and all other forms of remuneration that are discretionary. For example, the board does not have to pay you a yearly tax-sheltered annuity or provide you a life insurance policy, but it may agree to do so as part of your total compensation package.

If possible, have a formula for yearly salary increases built into your contract. This will relieve you of the burden of discussing your compensation every year following your evaluation. Know what you would like to have as an increase each year, as well as what you are willing to accept. As you discuss this, be sensitive to what the district can afford and what other staff receive. It may be necessary or prudent in difficult financial times to reject any pay increase, even if it was built into your contract.

Negotiating your first compensation package is always a challenge. You want the best possible package for yourself, one that will include a significant increase in compensation from your current position. You believe you deserve a raise and have worked hard to obtain your new position. You want to be paid as much as superintendents in comparable districts. You want your new board to view you as decisive and thoughtful, not aggressive or stubborn.

In turn, the board wants to provide what you want, need, and deserve. However, it wants to stay within its predetermined compensation parameters so it can justify your contract with staff and the community. Boards want you to view them as receptive, wise, and determined, not obstinate or resistant. In the end, a satisfactory compromise is almost always

reached, balancing the needs of the new superintendent and the needs of the board and the community.

Contracts also include the length of service and provisions for adding to this. Typically initial contracts are for three or four years. Some have *evergreen* provisions that permit the contract to roll over an additional year each year based on performance. Some states do not allow for any extensions beyond the initial length of time. New contracts are needed to add additional years. Know your state law and the wording that is acceptable for extending contracts.

Once all provisions have been reviewed, return the contract with your recommended changes. It is important to take whatever time is needed to reach agreement on contract terms and language. Do not let the board rush you because of self-imposed district deadlines. You may need to go back and forth several times with the district until a mutual agreement is reached.

2. Contract Addenda

Addenda are side agreements that address specific issues related to your becoming superintendent in the district. For example, there should be an addendum for your transition period specifying the number of days you will work between signing the contract and officially starting as superintendent. It outlines the work to be done, expected outcomes, and how you are to be compensated. The transition itself is covered in detail in Chapter 2.

Other examples of the need for addenda include moving costs, temporary housing costs, and home loans. Of these, perhaps housing allowances and home loans are the most common and controversial. If you cannot afford to move to your new district or within a reasonable commute, you may seek housing support during your contract negotiations with the board. This support may include a housing stipend above and beyond your salary or a long-term loan to help with your down payment. Boards in high cost of living areas use these incentives to hire outstanding superintendents. Less affluent communities may perceive this support as unusual or inappropriate.

Financial support for housing can become a political issue for you or the board, especially as a first-year superintendent. Unions often view this as “padding” the new superintendent’s salary. You will hear from unions that, “Our members are paid far less than you and receive no assistance with their housing.”

A housing allowance is considered compensation by the IRS. It is taxable but may not count toward the base for your retirement pension. For this reason many superintendents prefer to have the allowance rolled into

their compensation. It is best to do this when first hired. When granted later it appears as though you are receiving a huge pay increase. This can have political consequences for you and your board.

Long-term loans to help finance your mortgage have downsides. They too are perceived as padding. The community may not appreciate the board taking funds from reserves for this purpose, especially in difficult financial times. An advantage to the district is that your home serves as collateral for the loan. Districts structure these loans so they have little risk of a loss of capital. These loans are taxable. You need to work with your tax accountant to determine exact liability. They do not count toward retirement.

Loan agreements are complicated. The loan agreement may be mentioned in your contract but due to its complexity a separate addendum, spelling out the provisions of the home loan, is necessary. Before entering into a loan agreement, consult with an attorney who has substantial experience in these matters. The agreement should address all eventualities. For example, what happens if your home depreciates during your tenure or you decide to leave the district before the end of your employment contract?

Example

One superintendent in an affluent district received a substantial home loan from the district. Within eighteen months the local housing market dropped by 10 percent. This superintendent then owed more to the district than the home was worth.

The language in these addenda is as important as your contract language. They actually are part of your contract. It is recommended you have counsel assist you with these.

3. Ratification

Ratification of your contract takes place in either closed or open session, depending on the laws in your state. In most states the superintendent's contract is a public document. Soon the provisions of your contract will be described in detail in the local newspaper or online editions of the news.

Often your total compensation is higher than the previous superintendent's. Do not be surprised if some staff or community members criticize what you are receiving. This is common. It is up to the board to respond in an open and positive manner to inquiries about your compensation.

This public review and scrutiny is one reason why it is important to negotiate a sound, well-thought-out contract when you are first hired

and to include provisions for evaluation and future compensation increases. You want to avoid having your contract become an annual conversation in the community. You also want to avoid having a unique contract provision or unreasonably high compensation become the focus of the public's view of you and your work.

Example

One superintendent sends his contract to the union leaders and local media every time it is revised by the board. He does this to guarantee transparency. It has also earned him good will.

Boards carefully orchestrate the final public ratification of the superintendent's contract and the introduction of the new superintendent to the public. The board sends out announcements to the press, staff, and the public providing the date, time, and location of the special board meeting to announce the hiring of the new district superintendent. Everyone, including the press, is invited. The board will ask you for information to prepare a detailed press release.

The night of the announcement, most boards meet in closed session for a final review of your contract. Some boards also schedule a brief meeting for you to meet with key district office administrators while in the closed session.

Afterward, the board moves to public session to approve your contract. It then formally introduces you to the community. In most districts the vote will be unanimous. Even with a unanimous vote, some board members may have preferred another candidate. Frequently boards provide a unanimous vote to demonstrate solidarity for the community. Substantial time may pass before you become aware of the board's differences in perception and preferences. This issue is covered in Chapter 6.

At the board meeting you will be called on to make a few, brief comments. Express appreciation for your selection and how much you are looking forward to working in the district. These comments should be presented without notes or script. If appropriate, have your spouse and family or partner present to be introduced. An informal reception usually follows, providing the opportunity for you to meet and greet the people in the audience.

In the days immediately following your contract ratification, some boards want you to meet with selected staff, parents, community members, or school groups. At these so-called meet-and-greets, be brief, continually express your delight in being selected, as well as your desire to get to know the community. Above all, listen. Also be prepared to speak with

the press. Avoid discussing or voicing your opinion on controversial issues. Be mindful you are not yet the superintendent.

Officially you become the superintendent on the start date agreed upon in your contract. You now enter your transition period, which is discussed in depth in the following chapter. Enjoy this special time. You have been successful in obtaining a position as superintendent of schools. This is a new opportunity to work with a board, staff, and community to continually improve the quality of education for the young people in your district.

SUMMARY

This chapter focused on how to become a school superintendent. Following are the major points covered. They are posed in terms of work you need to complete in order to be a successful candidate.

- Reflect on why you want to become a superintendent. Make sure this is the job where your interests, knowledge, and talents can best be put to use.
- Learn about the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent. Take time to talk with superintendents and board members in different types of districts.
- Use a variety of methods to develop the skills and knowledge you need to be a superintendent.
- Develop a professional network of colleagues who can assist you in learning more about being a superintendent, as well as in finding suitable openings.
- Maintain the highest level of performance in your current position.
- Learn how to effectively complete applications so you can be selected as a finalist.
- Learn the role of search consultants.
- Know what must be included in each application.
- Prepare for interviews.
- Understand the importance of the site visit to the board.
- Prepare yourself to be thoroughly screened.
- Understand the process for finalizing a contract.
- Know what is involved in the contract ratification process.

The above points and the material in the chapter provide a framework and a process for you to use in your search to become a superintendent. Following this process requires discipline, knowledge, time, and commitment. As mentioned earlier, “Finding a job is a job.” We cannot emphasize enough: only do this if it is the right career path for you and the way for you to make the most positive difference for students.