

# **Superintendent Search and Selection Process for Great City School Boards**

## ***A PRIMER***



**Council of the Great City Schools  
2006**





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The Council of the Great City Schools is a coalition of 65 of the nation's largest urban school systems. Its Board of Directors is composed of the Superintendent of Schools and one School Board member from each member city. An Executive Committee of 24 individuals, equally divided between Superintendents and School Board members, provides oversight of the 501(c3) organization in between Board meetings. The mission of the Council is to advocate for and to assist in the improvement of public education in the nation's major cities. To meet that mission, the Council provides services to its members in the areas of legislation, research, communications, teacher recruitment, curriculum and instruction, and management. The group convenes two major conferences each year on promising practices in urban education; conducts studies on urban school conditions and trends; and operates ongoing networks of senior managers in each city with responsibility in such areas as federal programs, operations, finance, personnel, communications, research, technology, and others. The Council was founded in 1956 and incorporated in 1961, and has its headquarters in Washington, D.C.

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**Superintendent Search and Selection Process  
for  
Great City School Boards of Education:  
*A Primer***

The most important responsibility of any Board of Education is the selection of its Superintendent of Schools. The Council of the Great City Schools has compiled this document to assist its member school boards in beginning the search for a new superintendent. Many models exist for conducting a search in urban schools, but we have used a basic and generic one here. And we have arranged the text in a simple question-and-answer format to make it easier to use. If you have additional questions or need more detail, call us at (202) 393-2427.



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# Superintendent Search and Selection Process for Great City School Boards of Education:

## *A Primer*

### **1. How should we get started in the search for a new superintendent?**

The School Board should meet privately and articulate a general direction and priorities for the school system, asking itself “Are we headed in the right direction? Do we need wholesale change? Do we need to accelerate our current pace? What kinds of challenges (e.g., bond issues, court orders, budget cuts, sanctions under the No Child Left Behind law, etc.) will a new superintendent face over the next several years? Are there unmet needs that the previous superintendent was unable to address that we want the next one to heed? What kind of superintendent do we need to either continue the school system’s progress or move us in a new direction?” The answers to these questions are critical to finding a superintendent who is a good match for the board’s vision. If the board does not go through this process, it runs the risk of hiring a superintendent with his or her own vision; and the board eventually may discover that vision is at odds with its own.

The School Board should assess and inventory the general assets of the school district and the community to sell to prospective candidates.

The School Board should decide whether it prefers to use a search firm or a consultant to conduct the search, or whether it prefers to do the work itself.

The School Board needs to reach some preliminary decisions about whether to hire an interim or acting superintendent if there is a time lag between permanent superintendents. Most observers suggest that interims should not be hired for extended periods, however. The board also will need to decide whether an interim appointee will be eligible to apply for the permanent position.

The School Board might also discuss the wisdom of naming an “heir apparent” to the superintendency.

The School Board also needs to set ground rules for the participation of individual board members in the search process. Are board members free to suggest candidates? Who speaks to the press? Who will be the main liaison to the search firm? Most observers agree that individual board members should be free to propose possible candidates to the search firm, and suggest that only one member of the board (usually the president) speak with the press on behalf of the whole board and serve as liaison to the search firm.

The School Board needs to decide whether it will name a committee of the board to oversee the search process or whether the board should act as a “committee of the whole.”

## **2. Should we use a search firm and how do we find one?**

Most Great City School systems use a search firm to conduct their superintendent searches because the process is time-consuming and complicated. However, some cities choose not to do so. Over the years, city school systems also have alternated between using these firms and doing the work themselves. There is no “right” or “wrong” decision, but the choice does have implications for the board’s workload and for public perceptions about the objectivity of the search.

If you decide to use a search firm, start by developing a “Request for Proposal” (RFP) and mail it to the major search firms. (The Council has samples of RFPs, which are available to members on request.) The names and addresses of major search firms are presented later in this document.

Submit advertisements to such publications as the New York Times and Education Week, as well as to trade and professional journals and general and education media outlets.

Contact national or state organizations, such as the Council of the Great City Schools, National School Boards Association, and state school boards associations, for information, materials, and tips on the search process.

Choose among the responding search firms based on price, urban experience, and responsiveness to the board’s vision and needs. The board also should ask other districts about their experiences with the applicant firms and should ask the firms about the number of searches that they will be conducting while they conduct yours. In addition, the board should ask about candidate-confidentiality policies and the board’s access to the names of all applicants. Some firms will not allow their clients to see the names until the firms have come

up with a pool of semi-finalists. Finally, the board should ask about the track record of superintendents that the firm has placed. How long have they lasted? Were their contracts renewed? Were they asked to leave before their contracts ended? If so, why?

## **3. What happens if we decide not to use a search firm?**

Some school boards decide not to use a search firm and conduct the search themselves, designating one or two board members to develop the selection criteria, RFPs, and advertisements, as well as to handle the applications and vet the candidates. Boards that are thinking about doing the work themselves should be aware of the tremendous amount of time and effort that a search entails.

Some school boards that choose not to retain a search firm will instead hire a consultant whom everyone on the boards knows and trusts. In the past, these consultants have included former school board members or superintendents, local university professors or administrators, and corporate officials.

## **4. What specific services should a search firm or consultant provide?**

To assist school boards in determining the best possible candidates for the superintendency, a search firm or consultant should—

- Interview or survey school board members and help translate the board’s vision into criteria for candidates.
- Review pertinent data about the district, its needs, and assets.



- Assist the board in developing preliminary and final selection criteria. These criteria should be based on what the board wants for the district, not on what the search firm thinks it can deliver. The draft of the final selection criteria should be revised as necessary until all are in agreement with the kind of candidate the firm will be looking for and recruiting.
- Assist the board in establishing and supporting an external Advisory Committee (if one is used) and defining its composition, roles, and tasks.
- Assist in developing a recruitment brochure. (Some major cities do not have brochures developed because their communities are so well known.)
- Place ads in national and trade publications soliciting applications.
- Assist in searching for outstanding traditional and nontraditional candidates.
- Assist in conducting confidential inquiries and preliminary screenings of the candidate pool.
- Reach out to potential candidates who have not applied.
- Provide technical assistance to the board in the selection of semi-finalists and finalists.
- Arrange interviews with the candidates by the board.
- Provide assistance to the board and the Advisory Committee if candidates are asked to come to the district for community forums and interviews. (See later section.)

- Provide assistance to the board in visits to the communities of finalists. (Many observers advise against visiting the communities of a sitting superintendent who is a candidate for the job in your city. Such visits often will scare off candidates. Community visits may be more appropriate when the candidate is a Deputy or Associate Superintendent.)
- Vet candidates and conduct background and criminal checks.
- Assist in notifying all candidates of the board's final decisions.

## **5. What kind of candidates should we be looking for?**

The School Board should look first for candidates who match the vision the board holds for the district and the direction that the board wants to take it. Some candidates, for instance, may be better at redirecting a school district than they may be in accelerating its current direction. The board should be absolutely clear about where it wants a new superintendent to lead the district.

Boards that agree on where they want the new superintendent to take the district will also sometimes look for candidates who are willing to be held explicitly accountable for meeting the goals that the board and the superintendent set.

Most school boards also seek candidates with certain years of experience and degrees; good interpersonal, communications, and political skills; leadership and management expertise; integrity and personal commitment to urban children; and a history of heading districts or organizations of similar size or characteristics.

The board, moreover, will need to decide whether it will consider “nontraditional” candidates. (See later section.)

Many boards often will make initial decisions about the length of the contract and the amount of salary and benefits that they will offer candidates initially. Some candidates will only consider multiyear contracts and salaries that are commensurate with the size of the district and the challenges it faces.

The School Board also may want to decide the scope of its search. Does the board want to limit its search for any reason to local candidates, or to those in the state, or does the board want to conduct a full-fledged national search?

Some boards also decide whether they will consider candidates from within the school system or will only be looking outside it. Most observers recommend taking both approaches.

Sometimes, the School Board will name an outside or external Advisory Committee to provide suggestions on the kind of candidate the community is seeking. (More information on outside advisors is presented later in this document.)

## **6. What process should be used to evaluate, screen, and select finalists?**

The key steps in evaluating, screening, and selecting finalists for the position of school system superintendent are to—

- Develop selection criteria based on the board’s vision and priorities.
- Accept applications from candidates.

- Screen applications, make confidential inquiries about candidates, and assess the viability of candidates against the board’s criteria.
- Report findings and recommendations to the board in executive session.
- Select three-to-five semi-finalists (typically).
- Convene community forums for semi-finalists (optional). This is most appropriate with candidates who are not sitting superintendents in other districts. Most districts do not use public forums or community interviews.
- Charge a board committee with visiting the communities of finalists—when the candidates are not sitting superintendents. Since there is no way of keeping local visits secret, it is best not to make them if they would either jeopardize the candidates’ identities or current positions.
- Report findings, observations, and evaluations about each finalist to the total board.
- Select a candidate to be offered a contract. (The consultant or search firm may advise the board and facilitate the process but does not recommend a candidate per se).

## **7. Should we have an external Advisory Committee and what role should it play?**

Some districts establish an outside Advisory Committee to help the School Board search for and select a superintendent. Districts use outside committees when they want broader community input on the school system’s direction and priorities or want ideas about the kind of superintendent the citizenry wants. However, most school

boards advise against using such committees or indicate that they are unnecessary.

If your district does decide to use such a committee, the board should understand that it cannot abdicate its responsibilities for picking a leader to the committee. The board also will need to be clear about the composition, timelines, roles, and powers of the committee and each member's responsibilities on it. If the board agrees that having an Advisory Committee would be beneficial, the board should appoint the members, ensuring that broad-based representation is achieved. For example, the committee might include representatives from the following groups:

- Students
- Support staff
- Teachers
- Administrators
- Senior citizens
- Business and industry leaders
- Organized labor
- Minority organizations
- Churches
- Parents and patrons
- Office of the Mayor

#### **The following roles are suggested for an outside Advisory Committee:**

- Members participate in discussions and forums about the direction, priorities, and future needs of the district.
- They make suggestions on the board's vision and selection criteria.

- They also express their views on each candidate and report to the board in executive session.

#### **Committees must understand that:**

- They are advisory to the board.
- The board will select the semi-finalist candidates.
- Candidate information will remain confidential.
- Committee members may express their opinion about each candidate but they do not select candidates.

#### **Following the interviews:**

- The board will gather additional information on each finalist.
- The board will select the superintendent.

### **8. What are the appropriate roles and responsibilities of the involved parties?**

The following chart presents the suggested roles and responsibilities of the School Board, the search firm or consultant, and the outside Advisory Committee.

<b>Activity or Event</b>	<b>Board</b>	<b>Search Firm or Consultant</b>	<b>Advisory Committee</b>
Board sets goals and direction for the district	X		
Requests assistance	X		
Forms advisory panel	X	Assists	
Conducts staff and community interviews	X	Assists	Participates
Develops superintendent selection criteria	X	Assists	Recommends
Writes brochure	Reviews	Develops	Advises
Conducts advertising	Advises	X	Advises
Recruits candidates	Participates	X	Advises
Makes preliminary inquiries	Receives	X	
Makes preliminary evaluations	Receives	X	Advises
Picks semi-finalists	X	Facilitates	None
Evaluates candidates	X		
Selects finalists	X		
Makes site visits	X	Facilitates	May assist
Develops contract	X		
Selects superintendent	X		
Notifies other candidates	X		

## 9. Where will we find candidates?

Most Great City School systems find their candidates in the following places—

- Superintendents from other major urban school systems.
- Superintendents from urban school systems with enrollments of between about 15,000 and 25,000 students.
- Senior line managers (e.g., chief academic officers, chief operating officers, and others) in other major city school systems.
- Nontraditional fields, including the military, university and community college systems, the legal profession, foundations, and business.

## 10. How can we interest “nontraditional” candidates?

Many Great City School systems are interested in considering “nontraditional” candidates for superintendent. Most such candidates are found in the school district’s own communities, which are often rich in corporate, military, and legal talent. Districts wanting to attract candidates from those and other nontraditional fields should—

- Ensure that the selection criteria, search brochure, personal letters, and phone contacts explicitly encourage applications from nontraditional candidates.
- Write personal letters of invitation for nominations to external organizations.

- Ensure that position announcements, brochures, and requests for nominations go to external organizations.
- Invite people in the community who are outside the educational establishment to recruit or nominate individuals for consideration.
- Advertise in business newspapers and trade journals geared for people who are not educators.
- Contact search firms or consultants with a specialization in business or other executives.
- Contact organizations such as The Broad Foundation and the Harvard Urban Superintendents Program—both of which often have program graduates who come from nontraditional fields.

## 11. How much does a typical superintendent search cost?

Superintendent searches often will cost anywhere from about \$40,000 to more than \$100,000, depending on the kinds of services the board wants.

The question sometimes comes up about whether school boards should accept the offers of outside organizations or groups to pay for the search. Based on the Council’s knowledge of the process across the country, the answer seems to be “yes.” Local foundations or business groups have paid for searches in several cities. The cautionary note, however, is to make sure that the board does not relinquish its ultimate decision-making authority during the process.

## What is a typical timeline for selecting a superintendent?

Preliminary timeline of events or tasks: (This is only an estimate)

Month 1	Board sets goals and direction for district.
Month 1	Consultant or search firm meets with board members.
Month 1	Board holds planning meeting.
Month 1	Board meets with representative groups to explain process and invite their advisory participation: Students, Parents and Patrons, Administrators, Support staff, Churches, Senior citizens, Teachers, Civil rights groups, Organized labor, Business and industry
Month 1	Board or search firm develops preliminary draft of position description and selection criteria.
Month 2	Board selects a local Advisory Committee (if used).
Month 2	Board adopts selection criteria.
Month 2	Search firm develops and publishes a recruitment brochure.
Months 3-5	Search for outstanding candidates conducted, followed by initial screening.
Month 5	Board selects semi-finalists.
Month 5	Board holds local community forums (if desired).
Month 6	Board evaluates finalists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Receives input from local Advisory Committee</li><li>• Ranks finalists</li></ul>
Month 6	Board visits communities of finalists (if advisable).
Month 6	Board appoints superintendent.
Month 6	Board develops and approves contract.
Month 6	Board or search firm notifies all other candidates of the appointment.
Month 7	New superintendent begins work.
Month 9	Board and new superintendent hold joint seminar or retreat to clarify vision, goals, priorities and objectives; board and superintendent roles; evaluation procedures; and other matters.

## Superintendent Search and Executive Recruitment Firms

Search Firms	Addresses
<b>Baker, Parker and Associates</b>	Five Concourse Parkway, Suite 2440 Atlanta, GA 30328 Contact: Jerry Baker (770) 804-1996
<b>Bickert Group, Ltd.</b>	P.O. Box 6838 Bloomington, IN 47407 Contact: Ron Barnes (812) 856-8396
<b>Harold Webb Associates</b>	6532 Lost Horizon, Suite 201 Austin, TX 78759 Contact: Kenneth Underwood/ Nolan Estes (512) 342-9777
<b>Hamilton, Rabinovitz &amp; Alschuler</b>	6033 West Century Boulevard, Suite 890 Los Angeles, CA 90045 (310) 645-9000
<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>	1151 Waukegan Road Glenview, IL 60025 Contact: Charles Young (847) 724-8465
<b>Heidrick &amp; Struggles</b>	1750 Tysons Boulevard McLean, VA 22102 (202) 289-4450  303 Peachtree Street, NE, Suite 4300 Atlanta, GA (404) 577-2410  245 Park Avenue #3230 New York, NY 10167 (212) 867-9876  1 California Street, Suite 2400 San Francisco, CA 94111 (415) 981-2854

**Heidrick & Struggles**

One Post Office Square,  
Boston, MA 02109-0199  
(617) 423-1140

**Isaacson & Miller**

3344 Boylston Street  
Boston, MA  
(617) 262-6500

**Oldani Group**

10900 NE 4th Street, Suite 2030  
Bellevue, WA 98004  
Contact: Lee Pasquarella  
(425) 451-3938

**Korn/Ferry International**

1800 Century Park East, Suite 900  
Los Angeles, CA  
Contact: Ira Krinsky  
(310) 843-4128

Presidential Plaza  
900 19th Street, NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20006  
Contact: John Kuhnle  
(202) 822-9444

**McKenzie Group**

1101 17th Street, NW, Suite 1200  
Washington, DC 20036  
Contact: Floretta McKenzie  
(202) 466-1111

**Minority Search, Inc.**

P.O. Box 764241  
Dallas, TX 75376-4241  
Contact: Billy Allen  
(214) 948-6116

**Paul Ray Berndtson**

22 Ross Ave, Suite 4500 W  
Dallas, TX 75201  
Contact: Linus Wright  
(214) 969-7620



**PNR Associates**

P.O. Box 765  
Springfield, OR 97477  
Contact: Paul Plath/John Halgren  
(541) 747-3967

**ProACT**

126 North Jefferson Street, Suite 360  
Milwaukee, WI  
Contact: Nancy Noeske  
(414) 347-0200

**Ray and Associates, Inc.**

4403 1st Ave., SE, Suite 407  
Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52402-3221  
Contact: Gary Ray  
(319) 393-3115

**RBL Enterprises, LTD**

1300 Clay Street, Suite 600  
Oakland, CA  
Contact: Ruth Love  
(510) 622-7707

**Russell Reynolds Associates**

1701 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, D.C. 20006-4709  
Contact: Eric L. Vautour  
(202) 628-2150

**Sockwell and Associates**

227 West Trade Street, Suite 1930  
Charlotte, NC 28202  
Contact: Susan N. Jernigan  
(704) 372-1865

**Wilson Riles & Associates, Inc.**

1140 Chargene Way  
Sacramento, CA 95822  
(916) 448-0600

## Cities and Most Recent Search Firms

City	Search Firm or Group
Albuquerque	(In-house)
Anchorage	(Promoted internally)
Austin	Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates
Birmingham	(Promoted internally)
Boston	Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Alschuler
Buffalo	Heidrick & Struggles
Charleston	South Carolina School Boards Association
Charlotte-Mecklenburg	(Promoted internally)
Chicago	(Mayoral appointment)
Cincinnati	ProAct
Clark County (Las Vegas)	Hazard, Young & Attea
Cleveland	(Mayoral appointment)
Columbus	(Promoted internally)
Dallas	RBL Associates

<b>Dayton</b>	<b>Lovett &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Denver</b>	<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Des Moines</b>	<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Detroit</b>	<b>Hollins Group (from Atlanta)</b>
<b>Duval County</b>	<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Fort Worth</b>	<b>Ray &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Fresno</b>	<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Guilford County</b>	<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Hillsborough County (Tampa)</b>	<b>ProAct</b>
<b>Jackson</b>	<b>University of Mississippi</b>
<b>Los Angeles</b>	<b>Hamilton, Rabinovitz &amp; Alschuler</b>
<b>Louisville</b>	<b>Sockwell &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Miami-Dade County</b>	<b>Korn/Ferry</b>
<b>Milwaukee</b>	<b>(Promoted internally)</b>
<b>Minneapolis</b>	<b>Hamilton, Rabinovitz &amp; Alschuler</b>

<b>Nashville</b>	<b>Cascade Consulting</b>
<b>New York City</b>	<b>(Mayoral appointment)</b>
<b>Norfolk</b>	<b>ProAct</b>
<b>Oakland</b>	<b>ProAct</b>
<b>Orange County (Orlando)</b>	<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Portland</b>	<b>KAR Consulting and ProACT</b>
<b>Rochester</b>	<b>Hazard, Young, Attea &amp; Associates</b>
<b>Salt Lake City</b>	<b>PNR Associates</b>
<b>San Diego</b>	<b>Korn Ferry</b>
<b>San Francisco</b>	<b>California School Boards Association</b>
<b>Seattle</b>	<b>ProAct</b>
<b>Shreveport</b>	<b>(In-house)</b>
<b>St. Louis</b>	<b>ProAct</b>
<b>St. Paul</b>	<b>Korn/Ferry</b>
<b>Toledo</b>	<b>ProACT</b>
<b>Tucson</b>	<b>ProACT</b>

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