

Open & Closed Superintendent Searches

Introduction

There has been much turnover in the superintendent position across the country, and the turnover has been accelerating. Post-pandemic stress, board turnover, and political divides are causes for much of the turnover that may not slow down for years ahead. With frequent turnover, of not only superintendents, but also school board members, utilizing the expertise of executive search firms has become the norm. At one time, smaller districts were less likely to employ search firms because of economic considerations, but the tangible and intangible costs of superintendent turnover have led to more districts seeking help to find the right leadership fit. This is true for other school leadership positions, too. There are varying approaches to finding the best leader possible.

Two contrasting methods that search firms guide school boards through are open and closed interview processes. Because superintendents play such a critical role in the education system, school boards need to carefully consider what kind of process is best for the district and candidates. An open process allows the community and district employees to participate in the selection process, while a closed process limits participation to normally just the school board members. This article explores the benefits and consequences of both open and closed superintendent hiring processes.

The superintendent position has a significant impact on the operation of the school district and has long-term implications for the community and its children (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Finnan, 2015; White, 2021). Glass (2001) notes that it is desirable to maintain continuity in the superintendent role as this positively impacts student achievement. Therefore, school boards need to focus on the selection process to ensure the best candidate is chosen.

Open and Closed Hiring Processes

The selection of a superintendent is a primary responsibility of a school board. As a matter of fact, the National School Board Association (2020a) states that the most significant role of a board member is to select and hire a superintendent. Bogen and Rieke (2018) confirm in their research that the hiring process is not a single-point decision, but a cumulative series of small decisions. The open or closed interview process decision leads to a series of other decision points about how to best involve constituents and ensure transparency.

Benefits of an Open Interview Process

An open interview process allows for greater community involvement and transparency in the hiring process. This can lead to greater buy-in and support for the new superintendent from the community. Additionally, an open process can provide a wider pool of candidates, as individuals from outside the district may be more likely to apply if they feel the process is transparent. Furthermore, an open process

can provide an opportunity for the community to provide feedback on what qualities they believe are most important for the new superintendent to possess, which can help ensure the board selects a candidate who is the best fit for the district. The open process provides transparency, increases buy-in, and allows for feedback from stakeholders.

Potential Consequences of an Open Interview Process

On the other hand, the closed process is more efficient, less disruptive to the district, and increases the chance of selecting a candidate committed to the district. One potential consequence of an open interview process is that it can be more time-consuming and expensive for the school board to manage. The board may need to hold multiple public meetings to gather input from the community, which often takes more time and can make the hiring process longer. Additionally, an open process can lead to greater public scrutiny of the board's decision-making process, which can make it more difficult to reach a consensus and can create pressure to select a candidate who is popular with the community, rather than the best candidate for the job.

Open Superintendent Search Process	
Potential Benefits	Potential Consequences
Greater stakeholder involvement	Buy in from top candidates
More transparency in the hiring process	Public scrutiny of hiring process
Greater support for new superintendent	May lose some candidates from applying
Wider pool of candidates	
More feedback to the school board	
Opportunity for candidate to meet stakeholders	
Chance for candidate to address any issues	
Opportunity to showcase your facilities	

Potential Benefits of a Closed Interview Process

A closed interview process can provide the school board with greater control over the hiring process, which can make it easier to maintain confidentiality and to manage the process efficiently. This can be particularly important if there are sensitive issues involved in the hiring process, such as concerns about an incumbent superintendent or the need to conduct background checks on potential candidates. Additionally, a closed process can allow the board to focus more on the candidate's qualifications and experience, rather than on popularity or public opinion. One of the main benefits touted by proponents of a closed process is the privacy it allows to candidates. Whereas an open interview process typically

makes finalists public and has them interact with different groups, a community's first introduction to a candidate in a closed process is likely after the hiring decision has been made. While the transparency of an open interview process is believed to result in a larger pool of candidates, some feel a closed process might attract candidates who otherwise would not apply. Many school boards that choose a closed hiring process try to frontload constituent involvement in the hiring process by getting stakeholder feedback on surveys, town hall meetings, or focus groups. In this way the community has input on desired qualifications, or a candidate profile, even if they are not involved in interviewing or providing candidate feedback.

Potential Consequences of a Closed Interview Process

One potential consequence of a closed interview process is that it can create a perception of secrecy and lack of transparency, which can lead to mistrust and lack of buy-in from the community. This can be particularly problematic if the board's decision is not well-received by the community, as it can create tension and undermine the new superintendent's ability to be effective. Additionally, a closed process may limit the pool of candidates, as individuals may be less likely to apply if they feel the process is unfair or opaque. A closed process can also provide challenges for candidates. One challenge is that they don't get to meet key stakeholders during the interview process. Another challenge is that they cannot clarify questions about their previous history, any public news articles, or qualifications that may need to be explained.

Closed Superintendent Search Process	
Potential Benefits	Potential Consequences
More efficient hiring process	More expensive (if using outside facilities)
May get better candidates (not looking)	Scrutiny of hiring process lacking transparency
Less disruptive to the school environment	Commitment from top candidates
More control over the hiring process	Buy in from the administrative team
Candidate generally prefer confidentiality	Candidates don't meet stakeholders
Safer for internal applicants	

A Blended Search Process

If a school board wants the potential benefits of both they might consider a blended search process. This type of process normally seeks to involve key district and community stakeholders while protecting the confidentiality of candidates. A blended search process can be held within district facilities or maybe held at a separate location. To protect the confidentiality of candidates, any in-person interviews are normally held off-site or after school hours.

A blended superintendent search process can be a beneficial approach for school board members to ensure they get the best candidates to apply, obtain some valuable feedback from key stakeholders, and

minimize distractions for the school district. If this is the chosen process, the school board should be proactive in seeking buy-in from a wide variety of stakeholders in what desired qualifications they want to see in the next superintendent and clear in their communication with the public about the overall search process.

A List to Identify the Best Search Process for the School Board

Search Task	Open	Blended	Closed
Stakeholder input	Survey	Focus Groups	Administrative Team
Recruiting	All Stakeholders	Administrative Team	Search Firm
Current Superintendent	Reference & Tours	Tours	Not Involved
Screening interviews	Administrative Team	School Board	No Screening
Interview questions	Interview Teams	School Board	Search Firm
Interview location	Onsite	Offsite	Zoom
Interview time	School hours	Evening	Weekend
Meal	Interview teams	School board	No meal
Candidate feedback	Interview Teams	School Board	Tour Guide
Spouse involvement	Fully Scheduled	Invited on Tour	Not Invited
Other considerations			

A Key Decision

The superintendent is a critical role in the education system, and school boards need to select the best fit candidate. The open and closed superintendent hiring processes have their advantages and disadvantages. The success of new superintendents hired through an open and closed hiring process may decide the future of the hiring process altogether. In a day and age of calls for transparency, whatever process the board decides, it is in their best interest to be as transparent about the process as possible. Not only is transparency key for the school board, but it is also important to ensure the new superintendent gets off to a good start.

Effective search firms are prepared to guide boards through decisions about the kind of interview process that will best serve the community and result in the best possible hire. In some communities it would be inconceivable not to have broad involvement and input from the community. In other locales,

such as those cited in this paper, boards may be comfortable with a closed search while still ensuring some community input. Whatever the chosen interview process, in this era of superintendent turnover, polarization, and pressure on boards and administrators, having a process that delivers the best possible fit for the district has never been more important.

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