

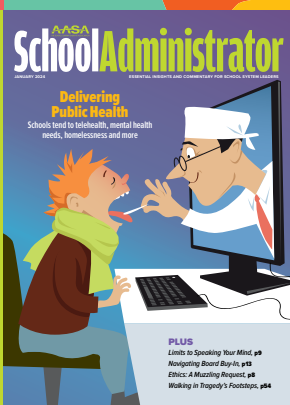
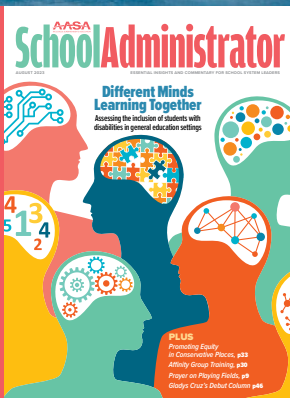
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ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS



Our Best 2023-24



The New Realities of Landing a Superintendency

A veteran search executive says instructional know-how and operational expertise have been supplanted as leading factors when school boards are hiring

BY GLENN W. “MAX” MCGEE

As shifting of tectonic plates forever alters the earth’s surface, the tectonic shifts of COVID-19 and political divisiveness have forever shifted the landscape of both landing and keeping a superintendency. While one may long for the nostalgic “normal” days of instructional leadership, an equity lens, and operational expertise to land a job, today’s harsh new realities dictate a changed approach.

Having facilitated numerous searches and a handful of strategic plans as well as commiserating with countless sitting and aspiring superintendents, I am finding that a “new normal” defies description due to the uniqueness of boards of education and school districts. However, several new realities are impacting all candidates seeking a superintendent’s job. These are the top five.

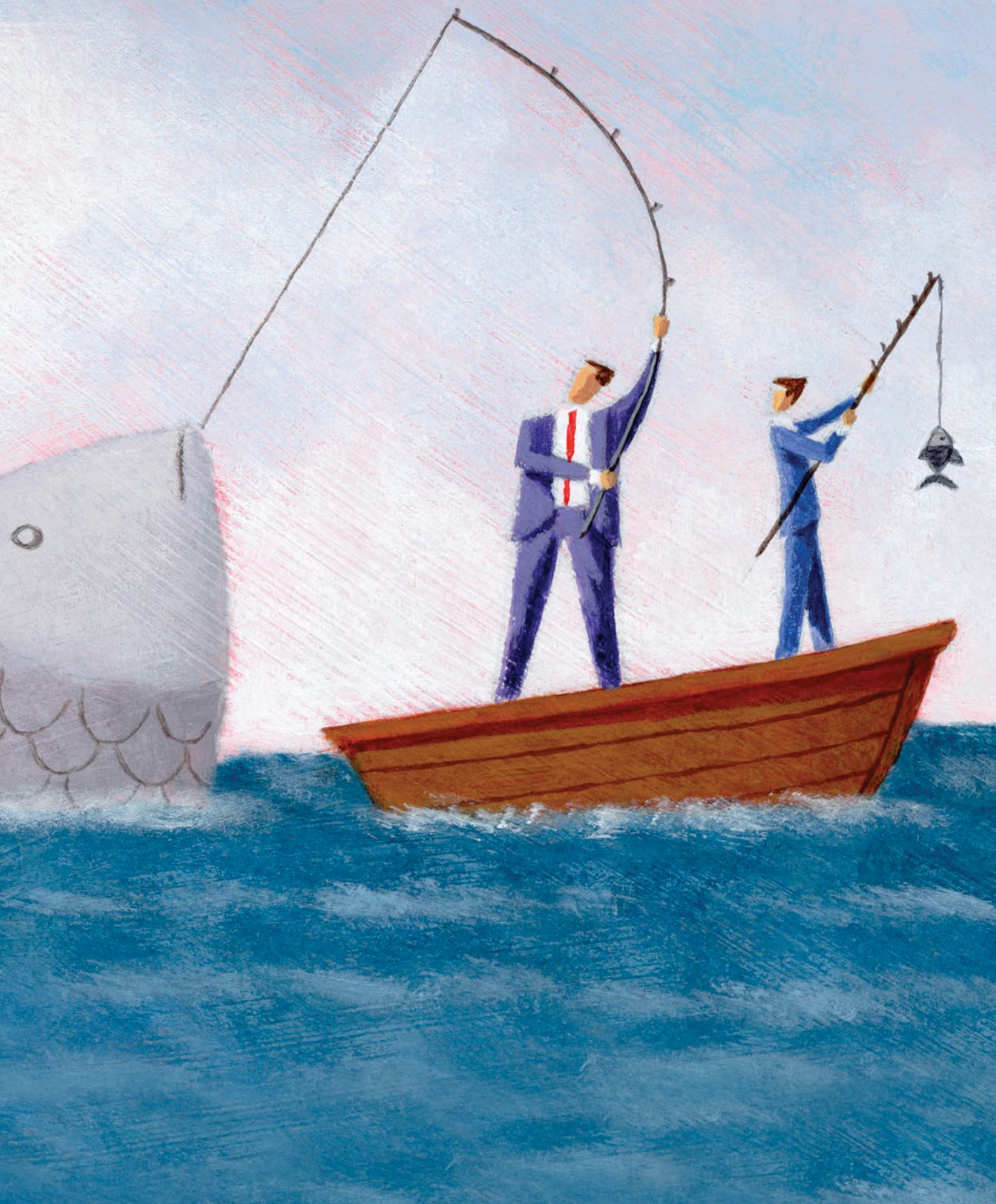
► **Communicator in chief.**

Large or small, rural, urban or suburban, blue state or red state, the No. 1 prerequisite of landing a superintendent’s job today is com-

munication. One has to be an expert communicator: a dynamic, inspiring speaker; a clear and persuasive writer; a social media master; a humble listener; a compelling presenter; an adept conversationalist; a culturally astute presence; and an extraordinary room-reader with the non-verbal communication skills of Marcel Marceau.

The new reality is that with the lightning speed of internet communication and the ability of any stakeholder to blast misinformation, aspiring and current leaders must know how to use social media to create a positive presence, spread good news and counter adverse posts. Boards need a leader to combat and stand above social media tirades and ensure the school district’s brands remain positive. Moreover, boards want superintendents who are not just skilled in messaging but also who excel at listening to multiple sides of controversial issues and navigating a path forward that validates all voices while ultimately leading to decisions that are best for students and staff.

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In response to this new reality, applicants with a marketing and communication background have a strong advantage as their presentation materials offer compelling narratives, complete with hyperlinks and QR codes that allow search committees to know them and their work far more deeply than the typical applicant. In fact, a high-profile suburban district in Texas had a highly competitive candidate slate with experienced superintendents and ended up selecting the applicant with the least amount of superintendent experience but the best communication skills, perhaps due partly to the individual's education and early career experience in public relations, communications and marketing.

► **DEI may be DOA.**

The desire for equity-driven superintendents has diminished rapidly. That's due to the larger presence of fiercely conservative political action groups and outside funding sources supporting school board candidates with an "anti-woke" agenda; the rise of vocal, oppositional "parent rights" groups; the ongoing political incivility; and the wide media coverage of attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Whereas a few years ago superintendency candidates needed recent and relevant experiences in successfully advancing DEI initiatives, closing opportunity gaps and raising student achieve-

ment, being authentically culturally responsive and ideally being bilingual or multicultural, some search committees now actually screen out candidates they deem too "woke" or "progressive." Other districts have contended they wanted a candidate from a multicultural background with an equity lens and someone preferably bilingual, but when down to three finalists, they chose the most traditional candidate, likely fearing backlash from vocal stakeholder groups.

That said, DEI-driven superintendents and aspiring superintendents still will find numerous urban and suburban districts, large and small, seeking their leadership. But the applicants must be more selective. The candidate must do deep dives into the culture of the district, the politics of individual board members and the community's desires and needs before applying. Watching school board meetings on livestream, reading and viewing media reports on the district, consulting with search firm associates facilitating the search, and reaching out to folks in the district are more important than ever, given this new reality.

For example, highly qualified applicants interested in an extremely desirable position must be astute enough to opt out of the search before applying. As one candidate from Massachusetts told us as we were recruiting him to apply for a job in Texas, "It's a great job and looks like a wonderful district, but there are two reasons I am not applying: Abbott and Cruz. Their supporters will ensure my failure."

Another applicant for the top district post in a deeply red Midwestern state told us that, given her "progressive" background, if she were selected to lead the district on a 4-3 or 5-2 vote given the results of a recent board election, she could not go into a job with partial support.

The new reality may be that while it could be exaggerating a bit to pronounce diversity, equity and inclusion "dead on arrival," the "anti-woke" factionism can be a powerful force suppressing applicant pools and deterring candidates who have the potential to be exceptional leaders for all children in that school community.

► **Adverse social media.**

With the ease of internet research, every school board member has become remarkably adept at finding anything anywhere about candidates. The most vulnerable to adverse media are sitting superintendents because, as we all know, it is not a matter of *if* someone somewhere skewers them on social media but *when*.

Boards have become exceptionally skittish about hiring anyone with any adverse media



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attention because they fear backlash from parents and taxpayers, even if it's just a vocal few. This skittishness is understandable, and boards' own super sleuthing is due, in part, to the fact their voters, their teachers and their students will find whatever they or a search firm misses. Few superintendents have a squeaky clean internet profile, and consequently they may be disqualified without even an interview.

That said, adverse social or traditional media can be overcome and countered before and during the interview process. Reference letters from the current school board chair and teacher union president and a one-page written explanation to the search consultants will go a long way in balancing negative press. However, in this new reality of prevalent adverse social media, the interview is the most crucial component.

Successful candidates who have adverse media attention are able to (1) be proactive in explaining the media prior to being asked about it in the interview, and (2) make their explanation crystal clear and especially concise. The adage "less is more" holds true in these explanations, and our recommended source for guidance is the Axios publication *Smart Brevity: The Power of Saying More With Less*.

Within the last two years, we have seen far too many great superintendents talk themselves out of jobs by rambling on about adverse social

media or challenges with past school boards and becoming clearly emotional and defensive. In fact, in one recent search, the most qualified candidate lost the job by perseverating on bad press dating back eight years. While the board initially didn't worry too much about the old media coverage, when reviewing the candidate, they agreed that due to the length, detail and defensiveness he provided in describing the incident, there "could be much more there," so they hit the reject button.

On the other hand, a candidate who had been out of the superintendency for a year and had returned to a principalship after a controversial incident was able to land a superintendent's job through her clear, straightforward, candid and brief accounting of what happened from her perspective. Additionally, she offered a public relations resource at her expense to assist the board with any communication regarding her hiring if she were selected. The board hired her and without any outside PR help were able to fashion a press release welcoming her to the district. As for stakeholder objections, they amounted to just a voice or two and the new superintendent is now off and running to a terrific start of the new school year.

► **Short supply and high demand.**

A promising new reality for sitting superintendents seeking a new position is the current prefer-



ence for experienced superintendents. In most of our searches, applicants without previous experience outnumber those with experience by at least 3 to 1. Yet nearly every school board rates superintendent experience as “strongly preferred.”

Of the six semifinalists in a recent West Coast search, just two had experience as superintendents. One took a job in a nearby district, and the other got the job despite an interview that arguably was the weakest of the six. Of course, this is not the case in every district, and we have seen aspiring superintendents selected over sitting superintendents primarily because they out-prepared them and they have yet to be in the limelight and subject to adverse social media.

Because of this new reality in which sitting superintendent applicants are in such short supply and there is such demand for them, they have a distinct advantage provided they adequately prepare for the position and present themselves to be, as one Colorado school board member put it, “hungry, humble and smart.”

The less-promising side of the supply-and-demand reality is the teacher shortage, especially for urban and rural districts. As we conduct our engagement interviews, focus groups and forums, and administer and analyze thousands of online surveys, the ability to “recruit high-quality staff and retain our excellent teachers” is always one of the top three desired characteristics of the next superintendent.

The need for leaders with the proven ability to recruit and especially retain great teachers and principals has eclipsed the desire for leaders who have closed opportunity and achievement gaps, led successful bond issues and put the district’s finances in the black. Having data to demonstrate a candidate’s successful retention and hiring of excellent teachers — especially teachers of color — is a powerful difference maker and almost guarantees a spot on a slate.

Boards seem to listen especially closely when candidates describe how they have reached out personally to recruits, how they have taken definitive action to support staff mental health and wellness, the extent to which they have created teacher leader pathways and what they have done to engage boards and parents to authentically value the district’s employees.

► Trauma-informed leadership.

The need for school leadership attuned to trauma never has been greater. This stems from the horrendous impact of school shootings and neighborhood gun violence; the relentless attacks on public education teachers, librarians and curriculums;

and the growing problem of student and staff depression, self-harm and death by suicide.

While school board members in many districts have been aware of the importance of trauma-informed teaching and learning, the new reality is they are clamoring for trauma-informed leaders. They are looking for leaders whose actions and behaviors speak far louder than their words. Although we have seen numerous candidates who are able to talk about being trauma-sensitive leaders or servant leaders, few demonstrate it. Most share how many safety drills they have conducted and security systems they have implemented, but few share actual stories of their compassionate leadership following a traumatic event or what they actually are doing personally to serve students and staff.

One of the most telling screens we advise search teams to use is to accompany candidates on school tours and simply observe interactions with staff, students and parents. The successful candidates take time to greet parents and staff, ask their names, share a story, exhibit humor and humility, listen closely and display warmth, caring and curiosity. Likewise, they engage with students as people, literally kneeling or crouching down to the preschoolers’ level and shaking hands or fist bumping with the older ones all while listening intently to them.

As we were debriefing with the board and representatives from an advisory committee, one of the committee members exclaimed, “On the tour, she was so real, and it was obvious she cared about us. I just met her but feel like we have known each other for ever. We can trust her with our kids.” Needless to say, she was hired.

Feelings Foremost

While these five new realities may be soon supplanted just as instructional leadership and operational expertise have been, for now, applicants are well-advised to take them into account when seeking a new job. And finally, despite these current conditions, these wise words still matter most: “People may soon forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

The successful applicants are those who are exceptionally well-prepared on paper and in person and, during their interview, they personally connect with the search team, share narratives that trump numbers and recount stories of their personal impact on the lives of children. ■

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