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The vital role of the superintendency in context

ISSUE REVIEW | APRIL 2017

Executive Summary

Duval County Public Schools finds itself at a crossroads with the impending departure of Superintendent Nikolai Vitti. Following significant improvements to public education since 2012, where does Duval go from here? How will the Duval County School Board go about appointing a successor? What are some of the key factors that make for a successful superintendent search, and what are the lessons learned from previous searches?

This report reviews the background of the previous search, considerations for today's context and reviews research on what makes for a good match between school boards and superintendents. It concludes with recommendations to build on the progress Duval County has seen as a new leader is sought.

Today, Duval County finds itself at an important crossroads: Public schools have seen significant improvements, with progress seen especially among vulnerable populations of students. Duval needs a successor to Dr. Vitti that can build upon the foundation of progress that has been laid. Research indicates that identifying a successful match between school board and superintendent around the areas of shared understanding of district goals, working styles and roles. We urge the Duval County School Board to consider investing time in developing the profile of an ideal candidate, and to focus on a candidate who is committed to diverse communities and low-income schools. We also suggest prioritizing public input, continued collaboration with the community and transparency in the search process.



Background

Dr. Nikolai Vitti was appointed as Superintendent of Duval County Public Schools in November 2012. The juncture at which Dr. Vitti was appointed was a very different time in Duval County. In February 2012, the previous superintendent, Ed Pratt-Dannals, and the board mutually agreed that he would retire at the end of the year. There was broad community agreement that public education in Duval County needed significant change.¹

Recognizing this, the Duval County School Board at the time desired a rapid timeline for the search, but also committed to making community input an important part of the process. They created an “Envisioning Committee” made up of community and school representatives to be a partner in the selection process and be involved at every step. It included representatives from several community organizations (including the Jacksonville Public Education Fund), as well as teachers, principals and parents from each school board district. The school board also conducted online surveys to provide input into the process.²

The search also coincided with a campaign by the Jacksonville Public Education Fund called ONE by ONE, which consisted of small group conversations with about 1,700 people in Duval County, designed to elicit community voice around the best direction for our public education system.

It was a time of change for the school board, too. By the time of the elections in late 2012, the school board would have four new members. While Dr. Vitti was selected by the outgoing school board, they asked incoming board members to provide questions to be asked to the finalists for superintendent.

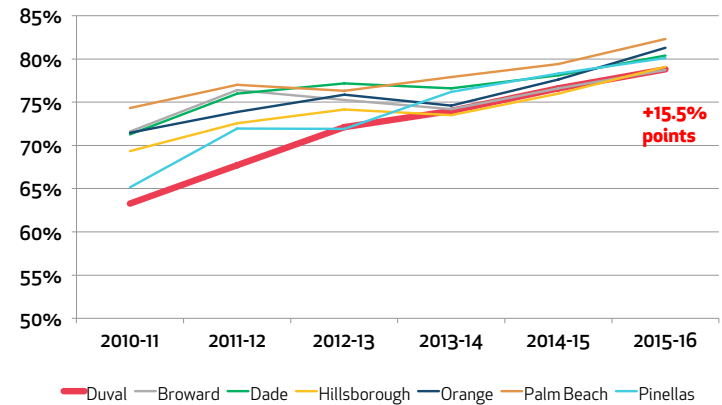
Ultimately, the board selected three finalists: Nikolai Vitti, Kriner Cash from Memphis, and Dale Robbins from Gwinnett County, Ga. From those finalists, the board in September 2012 selected Dr. Vitti with a 5-2 vote. Vitti was serving as Chief Academic Officer at Miami-Dade County Public Schools when he was appointed, having previously served as that district’s Assistant Superintendent for Education Transformation, and at Florida Department of Education.

Within six months of Dr. Vitti’s start date in November, the district had a new strategic plan that incorporated community feedback, and many changes began to get underway in Duval’s public schools.

Transitioning to a new superintendent: Opportunities and challenges

With the news that Dr. Vitti has been offered employment as superintendent in his hometown of Detroit, the Duval County School Board is faced with the need to find a successor. They

Graduation rate in Duval and other large urban school districts in Florida



will face several opportunities and challenges.

Over the last five years, Duval County has made significant strides. The graduation rate has vaulted up to 78.8 percent, no longer the lowest of Florida’s largest seven urban school districts (often known as the Big 7).³

The superintendent, the school board, community partners and philanthropists have vocally prioritized the highest-needs schools and students. From the Quality Education for All Fund, which invested \$40 million into 36 of the district’s historically highest-needs schools, to the expansion of services for overage students, to expanded mental health and arts education and results are apparent. Graduation rates among African-American students are now the highest of the Big 7. And when compared with those districts, Duval now has the lowest achievement gap between white and African-American students and between students with and without disabilities. Critically, college readiness scores in reading and math have significantly improved over the last five years, especially among minority students and students attending Title I schools. And the number of students attending public schools in Duval has gone up.

In the Jacksonville Public Education Fund’s 2016-2017 Public Education Perceptions Poll, confidence in district leadership (more than half of respondents rate them effective) and teachers (more than three-quarters rate them effective) has remained high.⁴

The annual poll also found that 48.6 percent of respondents believe that the district usually considers public opinion when making decisions, a significant increase from previous years.⁵ And support in the public is also strong for funding improvement in public education, with 74 percent saying they would support a small increase in taxes for public education.⁶

Despite all this progress, much remains to be done to ensure

that Duval County Public Schools, the 20th largest school district in the nation⁷, achieves excellence for all of its 128,000 students.

Like districts across Florida, Duval faces ongoing challenges in implementing the Florida Standards and rigorously preparing students to graduate ready to be successful in college and career. Duval's public school buildings are the oldest in the state⁸, and capital funding is currently not adequate to keep up with needed repairs, replacement buildings and new school construction in high growth areas. And too few Duval students are reading at or above grade level, with significant achievement gaps persisting. For example, in 2015-2016, just 30 percent of African-American male third graders scored at or above grade level in reading, compared with 40 percent of African-American female students, and more than 60 percent of white third graders.⁹

Improving outcomes for Duval's public school students means a brighter and more vibrant future for our city. And a strong leader for our public school system is a vital component of that. In a successor to Dr. Vitti, the school board will need to find someone who can build on the foundation of the past five years, and accelerate the trend of progress.

What the research says about superintendent characteristics

The research on what makes an effective superintendent is limited due to the small population of large-district superintendents and the vastly different contexts in which they often work. The available evidence suggests that there is a dynamic set of factors, rather than concrete characteristics, involved in setting up a superintendent, school board and key stakeholders for success in working together towards common goals.

In fact, common selection tools such as years of experience, resume and references have only minimal positive correlation when validated with job performance as compared with more advanced screening and selection methods such as cognitive ability measures, integrity and personality tests, structured interviews and work samples. Yet the research has found that several of the tools used with the highest effects are seldom, if ever, used in the selection for a school superintendent.¹⁰

A comprehensive review of existing literature indicates that identifying a successful "match" between the superintendent candidate and school board is one of the most important factors in increasing likelihood of a successful hire and working partnership to lead the district.¹¹

Elements of "match" include:

- Shared understanding and agreement of district vision and

There is no research that outlines the exact characteristics of an effective superintendent — rather, the available literature points clearly to the fact that there is no singular profile.

- goals, including prioritized, measurable goals for success.
- Shared understanding and agreement of board's preferred working and leadership styles, both internally between board and superintendent and externally-facing to the public.
- Clear demarcation of and agreement upon roles, responsibilities and authority between the board and superintendent, preferably written-down and public.
- Clear understanding and agreement on the objective, measurable performance goals on which the superintendent will be evaluated.¹²

This study concludes that in order to identify a successful match, the board needs to spend significant time prior to the search and selection process analyzing their own expectations and preferences for leadership style, communication style and other working relationship characteristics desired in a superintendent. The past 50 years of literature about school superintendents identifies the chief cause of superintendent termination not as lack of effectiveness, but an inability to develop and maintain a workable relationship with the board.¹³

During the last search, the Duval County School Board spent significant time developing the profile of an ideal candidate to address the current state of the district at that time. The school board received training from the Center for Reform of School Systems on how to determine that profile, and established the aforementioned Envisioning Committee made up of parents, students, teachers, administrators and representatives of community organizations to help guide the search process and determine the profile. Research indicates that taking the time to determine what the Board and community desire in a superintendent is the most important first step in the search, and this was advice they received from CRSS. This is an important step that will have to be repeated with an eye toward the district's current status.

A 2014 study by the Council of the Great City Schools found that the average tenure of superintendents leading urban school districts across the country is 3.2 years.¹⁴ At four and a half years, Dr. Vitti's tenure bested that average, albeit not by much.

Why leadership matters

Studies have found a statistically significant correlation between district-level leadership and student achievement.

A meta-analysis of 27 studies conducted by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) in Denver found that not only does leadership at the district level affect student achievement, but that there is a positive relationship between the stability of district leadership and student achievement, something that begins to manifest itself as early as two years.

That's not to say that tenure alone means good outcomes — but that a good match between school board and superintendent leads to stability, which leads to positive results, a cycle that builds upon itself. This simply reinforces the need to set up positive discussions in the early stages of the search about desired leadership style and expectations.

McREL also found elements of effective leadership that correlate with student achievement, all of which relate to keeping districts focused on teaching and learning goals. They include:

- Setting goals collaboratively by including all stakeholders.
- Setting achievement targets for schools and students and ensuring the use of research-based instructional strategies — and making the set goals non-negotiable.
- Continuously monitoring goals.
- Focusing the use of resources — time, money, personnel and materials — on the goals, even if it means cutting non-aligned programs.¹⁵

Given this, while the School Board should consider develop some key focus areas to use in deciding on the right candidate, it should also consider working with the new superintendent on developing specific goals. With the current strategic plan having been approved in 2013, it is likely that the district will be in need of a new strategic plan soon, which is something that should be developed in conjunction with the new superintendent and the Jacksonville community.

Weighing the benefits and risks of an internal vs. external search

The board could choose to look inside Duval County Public Schools for a successor to Dr. Vitti, or it could conduct a broader search that includes both internal and external candidates. There are benefits and drawbacks to each approach.

An internal search would be faster, and more likely to ensure stability and the continuation of the district's current trajectory of progress. It could lead to less turnover in key cabinet and administrative positions. However, it would yield a much smaller and less broad pool of possible candidates.

An external search would yield a much broader pool of candidates, offering the opportunity to consider both internal and external candidates simultaneously. It would be slower and

Spending significant time prior to the search and selection process analyzing their own expectations and preferences for leadership style, communication style and other working relationship characteristics desired in a superintendent could help the school board.

take longer, which would make it easier to get public input. But an external search could increase the potential for disruption, both in terms of time, wherein someone from outside the district works to learn the district, and might be more inclined to make destabilizing changes.

If the board chooses to move forward with an external search, they would need to select an interim superintendent to lead the district for the better part of a year, and be clear about whether and how s/he would be able to apply for the permanent role.

Recommendations

The research indicates that one of the keys to a successful superintendent search is spending adequate time on the front end thinking through the traits, experience and skills desired in a new superintendent.

The good news is that the school board already has a successful model for how to engage in such a conversation and two experienced members who were on the board when the previous process took place.

Given what we know about Duval County, the Jacksonville Public Education Fund urges the School Board and community to consider these recommendations:

Work with Dr. Vitti to ensure he stays in place through the end of the school year. Having the superintendent in place until the end of the school year will avoid destabilizing schools during testing and give time for Dr. Vitti and whoever will be appointed interim superintendent to plan and coordinate.

Invest adequate time now to articulate a desired leadership profile that will keep current progress moving in the right direction. The school board, while needing to move rapidly to find a replacement, should focus first on defining the type of leader they are looking for — a step that was mentioned as a success factor in the research we reviewed. This process could include setting an evaluation rubric for candidates, deciding whether to conduct personality assessments on candidates and asking themselves key questions. The Washington State School Directors' Association has a comprehensive handbook with recommended questions for boards to ask themselves.¹⁶

Move quickly, but deliberately. Times of transition, particularly in school districts, can be destabilizing for staff, students and families alike. The biggest risk for Duval County Public Schools is for the process to drag out and for the district to lose its current momentum, or even begin to slide backwards. A close second is losing key staff to other districts over the short term. At the same time, making decisions too quickly, without clear reasoning, can also create its own negative impact. Finding a deliberate balance and sharing that timeline with the public is vital.

Build on existing momentum. Whether the board looks internally or externally for the right candidate to succeed Dr. Vitti, it will be vital for the next superintendent to carry forward existing programs and policies that are having a positive impact on student achievement.

Commit to making public input a key component. Fully including the community should be a part of this process, to ensure that the public is invested in the new superintendent from day one. The community was included in the last search, and Dr. Vitti has himself engaged with the community significantly over his time in office.

Look for a candidate with a focus on diverse communities and low-performing schools. It is vital that no matter who the next superintendent is, s/he remain committed to equity and prioritizing the students with the highest needs. Under the current administration, high-needs schools have received an unprecedented level of attention, funding and prioritization. This must continue so that all students can reach their full potential.

Prioritize continued collaboration. A successful candidate for superintendent must be dedicated to continuing a strong partnership with the community at large and with organizations who are providing resources to support student success, from afterschool providers to direct-service organizations. These relationships keep crucial resources flowing toward students.

Be clear, consistent and transparent in communications about decision-making. There will be a lot of decisions made throughout the superintendent selection process, and it is important for the reasoning behind each decision to be communicated clearly and transparently to the public. Without such clear communication, rumors abound and instability increases. The board should consider setting up a dedicated portion of the DCPS website as a repository for these communications and creating a weekly email update to interested community members about the status of the process. Should the board move forward with an external search, it is imperative that the school board employs a highly-regarded search firm to assist with the process.

Strong, stable district leadership is essential to ensure the city and all of its students continue to benefit from a progressive and forward-moving public education.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

To find more information, links to the research that informed this paper and regular updates on the search for a new superintendent for Duval County Public Schools, go to www.jaxpef.org/superintendent.

ENDNOTES

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- 4 - Jacksonville Public Education Fund, 2016-2017 Public Education Perceptions Poll, published January 2017, retrieved from <http://www.jaxpef.org/news/new-poll-shows-high-community-and-parent-confidence-in-public-school-teachers/>
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