



Notes from 3/13/19 Community Forum and Expert Panel on Superintendent Search

LZ Nunn, Executive Director, Project LEARN - Introductions

William Samaras, Mayor - Opening Remarks - We need to choose someone who meets the needs of our community and students. And we should consider: what should a superintendent expect from the Lowell School Committee?

Tom Zuppa, Senior Editor of the Lowell Sun - Moderator

Panelists:

- 1. Cheryl Camacho, Special Assistant to Commissioner Riley:** Qualities that are helpful for leaders, particularly in urban districts include:
 - a. The ability to navigate through complexity confidently.
 - b. Understanding that different schools / leaders within the community have different needs. Must be able to differentiate.

The overabundance of initiatives is a big problem for principals and superintendents. Listening to the community and identifying priorities helps not only to identify what to do, but also what NOT to do.

- 2. Tom Scott, Mass Association for School Superintendents:** The perspective of a superintendent candidate is varied, but what a superintendent wants includes:
 - a. A high functioning school committee that works well together and has a clear description of roles, responsibilities and communication systems between the committee and the superintendent's office. That relationship is critical.
 - b. Parent / community that is organized and present and they can work with. Groups like Project Learn, that help organize and engage, really matters.
 - c. How long did the previous superintendent stay? Why did she/he leave?
 - d. What are the issues of this community?

It is a two way process - we are evaluating candidates, and they evaluate us.

We strongly recommend to new superintendents to spend a long time listening to the community. They should enter and lead by listening to all of the various stakeholders and not talking much at first. A new superintendent, to have success, needs to learn from these community members what the major problems are and pay attention to these, use them as a template for change.

- 3. Colleen Dawicki, School Committee, New Bedford:** Our process of hiring a superintendent was last year, also fairly quick - 3 months. We weren't totally sure that

would happen, but were able to have a transparent, inclusive process that resulted in several strong candidates. We had lots of points of entry for community members, including a selection committee like Lowell's Blue Ribbon Committee. We also conducted surveys of community members, had forums, etc. Through these types of input, you should share the community's vision and priorities with candidates.

And we ran a strong campaign to "sell" our community and its strengths, to attract strong candidates.

4. **Ben Forman, MassINC:** Accountability is something that we've traditionally looked upon the state to provide. And they basically only look at graduation rates and state testing. So if a superintendent can work with the community to craft a vision for the full district, and each school within the district creating their own, living, active strategic plan, he/she needs to hold the district and schools accountable to these goals. They need to be measurable. Community partners must be woven into that framework.

Community Questions:

- Given that for the last ten years, we have had 4-5 superintendents in Lowell, what does that mean about our school committee culture? How do we attract someone despite that?
 - Tom Scott: This turnover is a problem. The school committee has played a role in this, although it's not entirely on them. I would advise that the committee reflects deeply on where they've gone wrong. Why did they make the previous decisions that they did? What did we do or not do to help ensure success for the superintendents? I would suggest this advance work, prior to the search process. Once on board, the committee *must* invest the time to build the relationship. This **MUST** start with building norms on how to interact, especially when there is challenge, and regularly review those norms. It is worth bringing in consultants to help with this.
- What was the New Bedford community search committee like? Was it representative? And how important is it that the superintendent, school committee and staff look like the student population?
 - Ben: The research on this kind of imbalance says that having a school committee that matches the racial demographics of the school community is not just nice to have, it is a **MUST HAVE**. If that means the city must appoint some members to get to that diversity, I would advocate for that.
 - Colleen: We did have a selection committee, that was intentionally representative and inclusive. We need to demystify what it means to serve and try to engage new leaders. And we learned - don't just solve for the previous leader. In New Bedford, we have a history of over-correcting in our hiring.
 - Cheryl: I'm leading a project called Influence 100, which is about this exact issue. The DOE is working on this. Professional networks are often very racially

isolated, so this cuts out huge swaths of candidates. And there is bias at all stages of the process: screening, identifying priorities for qualifications, interview questions, etc. We can't avoid explicitly thinking about race, because candidates of color won't necessarily just happen, it takes explicit strategies.

- Tom: The new superintendent induction program has a strand on bias and diversity. Your superintendent must have a deep understanding of what your community needs.
- How do we ensure that we hire a superintendent that understands the types of disadvantages many of our students have?
 - Cheryl: I would push back on the term "disadvantage." Poverty or children who grow up in homes that are different from the standard white, middle class family is not necessarily a disadvantage, just a difference. While poverty is difficult, we need to see the resilience and language and culture diversity as an asset, not a deficit. I believe that type of view is what you want in a leader.
 - Ben: Yes, we have children who are struggling (i.e. - parents who are addicted to opioids and have other real trauma at home). A superintendent needs to see that whole picture, work with community partners to address it, and also have an assets-based viewpoint. It is also not fair in any way to measure Lowell with the same metrics as districts that have wildly different demographics.
 - Colleen: Listen carefully to how candidates talk about the community. That will tell you a lot.
- Can we do this search in this short time frame, or would you advise hiring an interim for one year to allow for a full year to get the right person?
 - Colleen: We did a quick turnaround in New Bedford. I would have preferred an interim, but we did acknowledge that if we didn't get excellent candidates, we would not hire. As long as you give yourself an out.
- I'm very supportive of the MASC help with this search. But I also hope that we seriously consider internal candidates.
 - Tom: It is tough to enter an urban environment as an outsider. Outsiders need to be given time to acclimate and get to know a community and the culture of a district and its schools. While many succeed, it is a process of acceptance, but they need support. Change is disruption, and it's good to remember that people will always push back.
 - Cheryl: Research shows that when you keep someone internal, a district is less like to experience dramatic change. External candidates tend to bring about greater change, but have shorter tenures. And you need to think about what you need, because that will affect the internal/external conversation.

- Tom Zuppa: Is the model for running a school district broken? Obsolete? Should we be considering business leaders rather than educational leaders as superintendents?
 - Tom: Because the public environment is so different than military or business, I wouldn't say that this is the model. The critical elements are: relationships, relationships, and relationships. Superintendents need to work well with school committees, principals and leadership team, first and foremost.
 - Colleen: We did not have any non-traditional candidates. We did talk a lot about adaptive leadership, and managing change through an emphasis on relationships. An adaptive leader doesn't have to be an expert in all things, they need to have a broad vision and understand how to get the right people to make the work happen.
- Do you think it's important for a superintendent to have experience in re-zoning a district? This is something that was recently proposed in Lowell and voted down, but it is apparently being considered. My first impression of our school committee has been poor in terms of transparency and professionalism. I don't want to be blindsided by changes.
 - Tom: The superintendent doesn't run the school committee and ultimately doesn't have authority to dictate policy. The superintendent is the chief educational officer. In most successful school districts, the school committee looks to this person to advise and recommend. If it functions properly, the committee would consult before making this type of decision. It would be ill-advised to make a decision like redistricting without enormous community involvement over a long period of time. This is the kind of issue that can force people out.
- What should we expect from a superintendent in terms of knowing how to work with schools in the Turnaround Process?
 - Cheryl: Just because a school has certain data points, that doesn't mean that there aren't lots of wonderful things happening there. A leader needs to work with the required metrics and other metrics too.
 - Tom: Candidates with experience and a passion for urban education should have some grounding in these issues.

Next Steps and other ways to get involved in this process

- attend one of the other focus group discussions, post a comment via google form, call school committee members and let them know your thoughts, etc.