Planning for Your Own Succession

BY DONALD R. MCADAMS

One of life's great truths is that we are all transitional. All superintendencies eventually end. Superintendents have a personal responsibility to themselves and their families to plan for their future, whether for a more challenging superintendency or for retirement. Along with their governing boards, superintendents also have a responsibility to plan for the future of their school districts. Yet few do so.

The thought of departure, even amicable departure, is difficult. Discussions with board members can be awkward and risk sending the wrong signal, and action steps can be challenging. Rather than face this discomfort, most superintendents let the subject slide, putting the district's future and their own legacy at risk.

Keeping Momentum
Why is succession planning important? For the board, continuity is critical. Few events are more disruptive than a change of superintendents, especially when the new superintendent wants to move the school district in a new direction.

A school board happy with the reform trajectory of its district will want to maintain the course and speed, even as it welcomes the fresh energy and unique leadership style of a new superintendent. In these circumstances, the superintendent owes it to the board to have one or more in-house candidates qualified to be among the board's list of finalists.

For superintendents, succession planning is important because the superintendent is honor bound to act in the best interest of the school district, and it is in the district's best interest to be spared the lost momentum of a temporary office holder or an abrupt change of direction.

In addition, a superintendent should care about his or her legacy. After years of labor to lead a district along a chosen reform path, why would a superintendent not prefer a successor from his or her own team with a stake in continuity over an outsider with an incentive to chart a new course? Sadly, as Rick Hess, author of Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform, and Paul Hill, in It Takes a City: Getting Serious About Urban School Reform, have pointed out, the latter is all too often exactly what happens.

Open Discussion
So given a commitment to succession planning, what should superintendents do and when should they do it?

A lot depends on circumstances. A superintendent on shaky ground with his or her board would be wise to avoid the subject. But assuming a firm foundation of trust, superintendents should begin the conversation following their first annual evaluation. Let the school board know as early as possible that you wish to build a team that will last.

The place to start is with the leadership team. Yes, senior executives need to be selected for their specialized job skills, but whenever possible superintendents should select direct reports who have the potential to be a superintendent. Then they should make certain these deputies are broadly exposed to districtwide issues, given different job responsibilities over time and positioned so the board can see their work.

And it is not inappropriate for the superintendent, from time to time, to share with board leaders comments on the growth and potential of selected deputies. Superintendents should of course be careful to never by action, word or wink suggest an heir apparent. This could undermine their leadership and divide the management team. In any case, when the time comes, this decision belongs to the board of education.

Succession planning is not just for the superintendent. It is for all senior positions, including principals. In fact, succession planning should be built into a school district's processes and culture. Administrators at every level should be trained to look for employees with growth potential. And when talent is spotted, those with talent should be given opportunities for growth, including broad exposure to the district. For key positions, superintendents should have a mental list of potential replacements should incumbents suddenly depart.

Bringing in new blood from time to time stimulates innovation, but promotion from within is less disruptive, sustains reform momentum and builds employee morale. Promotion from within should be the prevailing paradigm. And effective promotion from within to build organizational strength requires succession planning. Great companies manage human resources to spot and develop talent, promote from within and plan for succession. So should school districts.

A Common Goal
Though superintendent succession planning can be delicate work, it should not cause stress. Boards, because they have continuing responsibility for the district, and superintendents, because they have a legacy to protect, have a common goal — a successor superintendent who will, in his or her own unique way, continue leading the district up the same reform path.

For other key positions, every superintendent should seek to build succession planning into the culture of his or her district. What better way to assure top-quality leadership at every level of the organization?

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