



Planning for the Future

Questions to ask your superintendent candidates
about succession planning

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Succession planning offers many benefits for districts and district leaders, according to AASA, The School Superintendents Association's American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study. Succession planning increases the number of capable and experienced leaders in the district and lessens financial commitments to conducting external searches. It also increases the likelihood of attracting more qualified candidates to all the district's ranks and decreases the likelihood of losing aspiring leaders to other districts.

Succession planning, or "proactive filling," is an extremely effective way to build a future supply of leaders by both anticipating district needs and activating talent already in your district. Unfortunately, many school boards and district administrators do not have succession plans for their top leadership positions. Identifying and cultivating leaders among district staff—central office staff, building leaders, and teachers—takes intentional work. The superintendent leads the efforts by example and by developing succession initiatives.

Superintendent candidates are rarely asked about succession planning in their interviews with the school board. The following two questions reveal candidates' knowledge and experience with succession planning.

Question 1: The school leadership pipeline is clearly in trouble. Nearly 80% of superintendents reported their districts have not created a plan for leadership succession. What initiatives have you personally worked on in the past to promote sustainability in the top post?

What to listen for: Leadership transitions are hard. Planning for the future is a significant challenge but a surmountable goal and should be the first goal of the next superintendent. When answering this question, regardless of their administrative experience, candidates should address the following key points:

- Ongoing and effective succession planning requires an appraisal of anticipated district needs. Candidates should discuss the need to speak with all district stakeholders to determine the small number of key initiatives they will address in their first year. Professional associations supporting the position of the superintendent frequently advise new district leaders to make no changes during the first year in the position. While this practice may provide district leaders with a deeper understanding of the state of the district, the reality is district progress is halted during this transition year. With the average tenure of a superintendent just north of three years, this year represents valuable progress time lost.
- Internal candidates will have an advantage in this area as they are already aware of the specific challenges their district is facing. If leaders at every level in your district have been prepared and coached, which is the corner-

stone of succession planning, progress will come about more quickly. Candidates should share examples of their past successes with leadership cultivation.

- Succession planning requires a clearly outlined plan with measurable objectives and a set of standardized evaluative criteria. Candidates who discuss this type of plan show they have and know how to execute a mental model for how the district will operate. The best candidates will have this knowledge even in the absence of district leadership or administrative experience because they aren't wasting time complaining about the problems in their district; they are planning how to solve them.

Question 2: Considering the high rate of superintendent turnover, superintendents should identify and nurture aspiring leaders. This would provide aspiring superintendents with the invaluable opportunity of observing a quality leader addressing problems in their own district. As superintendent, what leadership opportunities will you put in place for our educators and administrators?

What to listen for: Research reveals that leadership preparation in contextual settings and encouraging career growth and development at all levels produces effective, motivated leaders. Question 2 provides candidates the opportunity to discuss their experience promoting distributive leadership. Look for the following points in their responses:

- Effective succession planning addresses an inverted superintendent pipeline and makes the position more attractive and less intimidating to aspiring district leaders. For this reason, proper succession planning practices will draw more qualified internal applicants to the position. When candidates answer this question, they should discuss their experience creating opportunities for aspiring leaders to build their skills and demonstrate their capabilities.
- Planning leadership development processes are a part of formal succession planning, so exceptional candidates will have experience creating opportunities for teachers and even students. The best candidate will be a person of collective action who will describe how they have activated the talent in their district.

As the job description of the superintendent expands, so does the need for more leaders. Internal efforts must address the shallow applicant pool by identifying, encouraging, and preparing internal candidates for the position.

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