Leadership at a Crossroads:
Duval County's search for a new superintendent

Background

Public education in Duval County, Florida is at a pivotal crossroads. Over the next six to nine months, a new path will be defined for Duval County Public Schools, the 21st largest school district in the nation.

The Duval County School Board will make its most important decision of the decade when it chooses a new leader to chart a course forward for the 125,000 students in public schools — as well as the parents, educators and community members who depend on their academic success more now than ever before.

Interest in improving the public school system in Duval County is high, with residents repeatedly mentioning it as a top civic issue in polling.[1] And over the past seven years, private philanthropy has aligned around strategies for improving public education. Business leaders, too, are beginning to see that having a high-quality public school system is no longer optional in the hunt to attract growth in Jacksonville's economic engines such as logistics, health and technology — and to create a highly-skilled workforce to fill those jobs. By 2018, 60 percent of jobs in Florida will require post-secondary training.[2]

With a strong community focus on increasing the number of students who graduate from Duval County Public Schools career and college ready, there have been positive but incremental changes during the seven years that Ed Pratt-Dannals served as Superintendent. The graduation rate increased in 2011 to 71.2 percent, up from 59.8 five years prior. Math performance in the

> ### *AT A GLANCE: RECOMMENDATIONS*
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> • Prioritize track record of turning around low-performing schools.
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> • Focus on academic achievement and commit to data-driven decision making.
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> • Look for willingness to embark on collaboration with the community.
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> • Value sensitivity to needs of diverse communities.
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> • Hire someone who understands the political nature of the job.
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> Full recommendations are on pages 6-7.

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[1] The Community Foundation in Jacksonville. (2011) Quality Education For All Survey of Adult Duval County Residents. Jacksonville, FL. goo.gl/2nq29

[2] The Lumina Foundation. (2012) A stronger nation through higher education. Indianapolis, IN. goo.gl/HHlTk

district has increased substantially, and advanced course offerings and technical education programs are available to more students.

Despite these improvements, Duval has significant disparities between the graduation rates of African American students and White students, and of economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students — patterns mirrored in other measures of achievement. In a recent state ranking of student achievement, Duval County Public Schools came in at 50th out of 67 school districts in Florida.

When it comes to reading performance on the FCAT, Duval does not do as well as other urban districts in Florida, some of which have higher poverty and greater proportions of students learning English.[3]

Challenges and opportunities

The next superintendent faces substantial challenges — but will also come in to a community where there are growing opportunities for collaboration and success.

One of those opportunities is the greater public will among Duval County residents to make changes in public education. With residents saying education is an important issue, and with growing business, nonprofit and philanthropic collaboration and alignment around improving public schools in Duval County, the time is right for major positive changes. Substantial private investment has already raised more than $40 million for public education over the past seven years, and even greater investment is likely to come to the table when a new administration arrives with a clear plan.

With the help of the Jacksonville Public Education Fund's ONE by ONE community mobilization initiative, there will also be greater support among residents for excellent public schools. Through a series of small roundtables with more than 1,500 people in Duval County ongoing through August 2012, there will emerge in the fall a clear picture of priorities supported by a community that has become more informed and engaged in public education through the process of participating in ONE by ONE.

In polling, Duval County residents say education is a top civic issue.

More than half of urban superintendents cite competing demands from a fragmented public as a problem and 96 percent see coordinated community support as helpful.[4] A community that is mobilized around a unified set of priorities will be an asset to support a new superintendent in making the necessary — and sometimes difficult — decisions to bring

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[3] Florida Department of Education. (2011) Florida Public High School Graduation and Dropout Rates. Tallahassee, FL. goo.gl/cfphV
[4] Center on Reinventing Public Education. (2003) An Impossible Job? The View from the Urban Superintendent's Chair. goo.gl/n37ur

about major improvements in public education. And this leader will arrive already equipped with a clear sense as to what reforms the community is ready to embrace.

That support is critical, because the challenges the next public school leader faces are significant. Schools in Duval County and across the state now must grapple with preparing students for an ever more complex world and increasingly rigorous standardized tests with the new, more stringent *FCAT 2.0* and the transition to Common Core standards. Because of raised state accountability requirements, the number of F-graded schools could double or even triple from the current 6.

Not only that, but the next superintendent will face continued pressure from the community and the state to close the achievement gap. It continues to be a challenge for Duval County and nearly every school district in the country, leaving skill in that area in shortest supply among urban district superintendents nation-wide, according to a Wallace Foundation-funded study from the Center on Reinventing Public Education.[5]

Too, this difficult task must be done with limited and often-inflexible funding that is largely controlled by a state Legislature in a state with a long history of under-funding public schools. In a policy briefing published last fall, the Jacksonville Public Education Fund found that unfunded state mandates cost Duval County Public Schools more than $50 million per year.[6] And a comprehensive resource analysis performed by the national nonprofit Education Resource Strategies (ERS) found that Duval County was one of the lowest-funded districts it had ever studied.[7]

Any new leader coming into Duval County will feel intense pressure to tackle these issues quickly, especially with a School Board and community anxious for dramatic improvement.

But just like a contractor preparing to remodel a house, a new superintendent must plan carefully to ensure that the needed changes are made while keeping the system stable. Research shows that it can take five years for a new superintendent to implement successful large-scale school reforms. Yet the average length of stay for an urban superintendent is 3.6 years, often far too short to achieve long-term reforms.[8]

Selecting the right candidate means taking into account specific board and community traits.

What constitutes a successful superintendent candidate?

There is no research that outlines the exact characteristics of an effective superintendent — rather, the available literature

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[5] *Ibid*.
[6] Jacksonville Public Education Fund. (2011) Demystifying School Funding. Jacksonville, FL. goo.gl/umbSt
[7] Education Resource Strategies. (2011) Realigning Resources for District Success. Jacksonville, FL. goo.gl/Eh2w5
[8] Council on Great City Schools. (2010) Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Salary and Tenure. Washington, D.C. goo.gl/hJnnR

points clearly to the fact that there is no singular profile.

Instead, it is important to define what traits would make an effective superintendent for working here, in this community, with this School Board.

A comprehensive review of existing literature indicates that identifying a successful "match" between the superintendent candidate and board of education is most important factor in increasing likelihood of a successful hire and working partnership to lead the district. Elements of "match" include:

- Shared understanding and agreement of district vision and 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.[9]

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, other working relationship characteristics desired in a superintendent. Boards tend to spend most of the time in the search process, as opposed to assessing the district's needs and the board's expectations. 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.[10]

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.[11]

Common selection tools such as years of experience often do not indicate whether a candidate will be successful.

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[9] Anderson, B. G. (2006). Best practices in superintendent search and selection: A discrepancy analysis of superintendents, search consultants, and the boards of education they serve. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

The Duval County School Board is currently working to develop the profile of an ideal candidate. It has received training from the Center for Reform of School Systems on how to determine that profile, and has established an Envisioning Committee made up of parents, students, teachers, administrators and representatives of community organizations (including the Jacksonville Public Education Fund) 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 is advice they have received from CRSS.

Does it matter who the superintendent is?

Yes. District-level leadership matters, and studies have found a statistically significant correlation between district 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.

Leadership matters: Research shows that district-level leadership has an impact on student achievement.

McREL also found five 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.[12]

Given this, while the School Board should develop some key focus areas to use in searching for the right candidate, it should also consider waiting to have the new superintendent on

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[12] Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. (2006). School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement. Denver, CO. goo.gl/ohfEI

board before developing these specific goals in conjunction with this person. In addition to the need for collaboration, there is a high probability that the new superintendent will come from outside Duval County. This person will bring new experiences, practices and ideas about improving public education, and these should be considered.

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. That means these next few months may well be the most important when it comes to the selection process.

The board has already issued a request for proposals from national search firms, and has received pre-search governance training from the Center for the Reform of School Systems. It has pledged to hold community forums to garner input and has established an Envisioning Committee made up of representatives from the community. These are all very positive first steps. But there is much work to be done.

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

Dedicate adequate time now to articulating a desired leadership profile and defining roles between the board and superintendent. The board has received advice on clearly defining the type of leader they are looking for — now they must commit to doing that before beginning to look at candidates. This process should include setting an evaluation rubric for candidates, deciding whether to conduct personality assessments on candidates and asking themselves key questions. 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 Washington State School Directors' Association has a comprehensive handbook with recommended questions for boards to ask themselves. (See Appendix.)

Focus on academic achievement and commit to data-driven decision-making. The School Board should ensure that anyone who is the next leader of our public schools informs him- or herself using data, sets goals and makes decisions based on it — and holds him- or herself accountable using it. This person should also set measurable objectives for staff and hold them accountable for progress toward those goals. The next superintendent should make the use of research-based instructional strategies non-negotiable. The School Board must support this person by making these same commitments.

Look for a candidate willing to embark upon true collaboration with the community. This is more than occasional presentations and request for school-level donations. In Jacksonville, initiatives that make substantial progress for the city entail significant joint ownership and investment, and buy-in from all sectors of the community — government,

nonprofits, businesses and residents. Among the nearly 700 participants in ONE by ONE conversations so far, the need for greater community involvement in public schools is in the top three themes, and is consistently voiced in conversations from every demographic and neighborhood. And community support is essential to making any district initiatives are successful.

Prioritize the selection of a superintendent with a proven track record in addressing the needs of low-performing schools. With a disproportionate number of state-designated "intervene" schools, Duval County faces the difficult task of bringing these schools — which face tremendous challenges — up to par or risk being forced to close them or take other drastic measures. With the state accountability standards getting tougher, there will be more schools that receive this designation, making it an even greater issue in coming years.

Place a high value on finding a leader attuned to the needs of diverse communities. Jacksonville has a long history of racial segregation and inequalities in education. For many residents of Duval County, this history continues to inform the narrative about the current situations that our schools face. The next superintendent will need to take this into consideration when making important decisions and launching initiatives. This person also should be willing to spend time learning about Duval County and meet with key stakeholders before making major changes.

Hire someone who understands the political nature of an urban superintendency. Being an effective urban superintendent requires a leader who can deal with the highly public and politicized nature of the job. Transparency and better communication are frequently mentioned themes in the ONE by ONE conversations that have taken place to date. The next superintendent should understand that building a positive image and developing a proactive communications strategy are key to ensuring the success of district initiatives and ultimate students themselves.

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, visit the Jacksonville Public Education Fund online at www.jaxpef.org.

Appendix 2 (A)

Sample Worksheet on Assessing a Leadership Profile — Qualifications

The worksheet below may help in suggesting the kinds of skills and abilities typically felt desirable in a superintendent. This form or something similar could also provide a tool for helping differentiate between a variety of suggested traits.

1. Communications/Community Relations

a. Has been successfully involved in public and press relations.
b. Has excellent speaking skills with large and small groups; articulate.
c. Has experience in bringing diverse special interest groups together.
d. Has skill in facilitating group activities.
e. Has successful experience or training in conflict resolution.
f. Has successfully demonstrated experience dealing with parents and staff "one on one" — a good listener.
g. Positively influences and involves community groups in selected school issues and activities.
h. Possesses excellent writing skills (memos, policies, newsletters, etc.)

6. Leadership Skills

a. Has experience evaluating and reorganizing staff, revising procedures, and implementing policy changes to improve efficiency.
b. Has experience motivating staff and students, bolstering morale and generating enthusiasm.
c. Has motivated others to assume leadership roles.
d. Has successfully effected change in spite of some reluctance on the part of staff.
e. Has used innovative means or has ideas of ways to solve problems without new resources — creative.
f. Successfully delegates authority and responsibility and holds staff accountable.
g. Uses effective ways to regain authority or control where management has lost influence.

7. Decision-Making Skills

a. Can "live with" decisions regardless of how difficult they were to make.
b. Can describe decisions in which the board should participate — provides evidence of a decision-making style that places emphasis on board involvement.
c. Can integrate research data into the decision-making (policy) process.
d. Has established a strong and effective management team — coordinates decision making with other administrators.
e. Has successfully involved staff and community in decision making. Uses participatory decision-making processes where appropriate.
f. Recognizes situations that call for independent judgment and quick thinking and reacts positively.

8. Board-Superintendent Relations

a. Can motivate the board to maintain its leadership role as the body responsible for education in the community.
b. Can outline a program of board-district goal setting and long range planning.
c. Demonstrates willingness to assume the lead in decision making while keeping the board informed.
d. Discriminates successfully between board policy and administrative procedure.
e. Provides options and recommendations for the board and accepts board directives and implements them.
f. Uses a variety of ways to keep the board informed — can outline a program for board development.
g. Works effectively with the board chairman between meetings. Has a willingness to coordinate decisions with chairman.

9. Operations, Support Services and Facilities

a. Has efficiently managed the operation of a school facility.
b. Has managed an effective program for supervision of buildings and grounds maintenance.
c. Knows how to organize and operate an effective, efficient transportation program.
d. Knows how to organize and operate an effective, efficient, break-even food services program.
e. Knows how to plan for energy conservation, asbestos removal and other facility programs.
f. Knows procedures for assessing and improving district operations in all support service areas.
g. Knows the steps involved in planning new or remodeled facilities and/or dealing with school construction.
h. Supports cooperative inter-district programs for support services.

10. Personnel Management

a. Can coordinate contract negotiations and administer the bargaining agreements.
b. Has demonstrated skill in supervising employees at all levels.
c. Has developed a program for staff evaluation and corrective action.
d. Has experience developing and coordinating staff professional development programs.
e. Has experience handling grievances.
f. Has used a process for recruiting and selecting effective staff.
g. Knows the components of effective personnel policies, procedures and practices.
h. Knowledgeable about non-discrimination regulations at the state and federal level.

11. Budget and Finance

a. Can describe how to supervise purchasing, payroll and other fiscal matters.
b. Can describe ways to restore financial stability to a district with financial problems.
c. Can explain how to develop and implement budgeting and accounting control procedures.
d. Can explain how to establish recommendations for appropriate levy or bond issues.
e. Can forecast revenue shortfalls and enrollment changes.
f. Can review a budget printout and note irregularities and areas of potential future concern.
g. Can speak knowledgeably on general aspects of school district budgeting and knows where to go for advice and assistance.

12. Educational Programs

a. Is familiar with and/or has successful experience with education reform requirements in another district.
b. Can describe a process for developing curriculum that is consistent with reform requirements, local requirements and that will genuinely meet student needs.
c. Can describe the role of assessment on local, state and national levels.
d. Has experience in a building or district where student achievement has been increasing and can describe the role that the superintendent must play in that process.

Appendix 2 (B)
Sample Worksheet on Assessing a Leadership Profile — Personal Qualities

The following qualities have been identified in various contexts including superintendent searches. They are in the minds of many people associated with successful superintendents. The list is arranged in alphabetical order and of course is arbitrary; a local district may add or delete items as the local situation indicates.

- Confident: Demonstrates confidence in his or her abilities, but is open to the thoughts and ideas of others. Instills confidence in the public, staff and students.
- Cooperative: Works well with people who represent opposing views — is tolerant. Mediates disputes to reasonable solution.
- Courageous: Willing to take a stand, make a decision that is unpopular, take a risk if necessary.
- Decisive: Takes a stand when necessary — uses a decision-making process that is thorough and open to input.
- Enthusiastic and Persistent: Shows interest and enthusiasm in work and people. Has a record of a high level of energy. Demonstrates initiative and persistence in spite of setbacks.
- Ethical: Exemplifies the highest moral, ethical and professional behavior.
- Flexible: Adjusts to new situations and responds effectively to sudden changes in conditions.
- Honest: Is consistently tactful, straightforward and honest even under difficult circumstances.
- Humor: Uses humor effectively, can laugh at himself or herself, can see humor in life.
- Innovative: Finds creative ways to resolve difficult problems and is aware of new developments in the field of education.
- Insightful: Is alert and sensitive to issues and concerns before they become major problems. Sees the "big picture" while understanding the details. Anticipates future developments and the outcomes of decisions.
- Judgment: Displays good judgment: Uses common sense and good judgment. Offers wise and thoughtful advice.
- Knowledgeable: Understands school district management as well as educational programs. Reads widely and keeps up with current events. Knowledgeable about state and federal laws pertaining to education.
- Leadership: Creates a feeling of unity and enthusiasm in the district. Decisions and ideas are respected — encourages people to want to do their best. Has an administrative style based on positive human relations, is easy to converse with and is visibly accessible to staff and citizens.
- Motivated: Takes initiative and has the capability and desire to carry projects through to completion.
- Open: Accepts criticism and new ideas without defensiveness.
- Respectful: Demonstrates consideration for and sincerity toward all district patrons, students, staff and board members.
- Responsible: Follows through on commitments, accepts responsibility for successes and failures — doesn't blame others.
- Responsive: Takes action without undue delay, follows through on questions, calls, requests, problems.
- Steady: Thinks quickly, soundly under stress.
- Supportive: Endorses and openly supports policies, procedures and philosophy of the board, supports staff and students. Actively supports community activities and functions; is seen as a community/educational leader.
- Trustworthy: Deals fairly with people and creates feelings of trust and belief. Establishes respect for the school district, supports human development.

Appendix 2 (C)
Identifying the Challenges

This worksheet or something like it could be used with individuals and groups in gathering information as to what challenges are seen for the school district. The data, once gathered, could be analyzed by the board along with other perspectives to create a picture of some issues for the future.

Please rate the following topics in terms of how critical you think them to be in the school district.

	Critical	Important	Unimportant
1. Facilities	❐	❐	❐
2. Enrollment Issues (Choice, Running Start Declining Enrollment)	❐	❐	❐
3. District-Community Relations	❐	❐	❐
4. Curriculum/Instructional Materials	❐	❐	❐
5. Levy and/or Bond Issues	❐	❐	❐
6. Drug and Alcohol Abuse	❐	❐	❐
7. Collective Bargaining	❐	❐	❐
8. Student Achievement	❐	❐	❐
9. Assessment of Student Learning, Testing	❐	❐	❐
10. Support Services (Transportation, Food Services, Maintenance)	❐	❐	❐
11. Class Size	❐	❐	❐
12. Superintendent/Community Relations	❐	❐	❐
13. Budget/Finances	❐	❐	❐
14. District Goals/Strategic Planning	❐	❐	❐
15. Education Reform	❐	❐	❐
16. Efficiency of Operations	❐	❐	❐
17. Co-curricular Activities, Athletics	❐	❐	❐
18. Special Interest Groups	❐	❐	❐
19. At-Risk Students	❐	❐	❐
20. Student Violence/Safety	❐	❐	❐
21. Special Education	❐	❐	❐
22. Site-based Decision Making	❐	❐	❐
23. _____	❐	❐	❐
24. _____	❐	❐	❐

Additional comments or elaboration on items marked "Critical" may be added on the reverse side of this form.

THANK YOU