

Full Board Engagement Leads to Successful Head of School Searches

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Is the declining engagement of trustees in head of school searches contributing to the rise in failed searches and premature departures of school leaders?

While we have yet to conduct a formal longitudinal study on the matter, our extensive experience guiding head searches across the independent school landscape points to a concerning trend: when trustees cede control over key decisions in the search process—whether to the search committee, the school community, or external influences—the results can be destabilizing. Clarity of leadership, purpose, and process is essential in a head search, and that clarity must begin and end with the board of trustees.

Based on our decades of experience, we believe that boards must answer a core set of strategic questions before launching a head of school search. In this article we highlight several of those questions, along with key insights for board leaders as they prepare for this consequential work.

Who will create the position profile?

This is perhaps the most important—and frequently overlooked—question. The position profile (or opportunity statement) is not simply a job description. It is a statement of aspiration, challenge, and institutional direction.

Trustees, with strong support of the consultants, should lead the development of the sections that articulate the board's vision, the "jobs to be done" by the next head, and the leadership attributes required to meet those expectations. While the search committee—drawing from input across the school community—can help capture the school's culture and climate, it is the trustees who must frame the role's strategic imperatives. Without this clarity, candidate pools can be misaligned, and expectations may diverge early in the process.

Will the search be open or closed?

We believe in the benefits of a carefully managed open process. We know, however, that it is the board's job to set the tone regarding the transparency and confidentiality of the search process. We will consider with the board that closed searches can create trust gaps within the community, while fully open processes risk turning into popularity contests or agenda-driven campaigns. We often suggest a hybrid approach, inviting input from stakeholders early in the process and again during finalist visits. Preserving candidates' confidentiality through the semifinalist stage is a given in any process. And while some boards believe current heads will only enter confidential (i.e. closed) searches, our experience suggests that strong candidates typically welcome an open, well-managed process—particularly when it's grounded in trust and professionalism.

Who should be on the search committee?

Most search committees include a mix of trustees and community members, with trustees holding a slight majority. However, some boards may choose to constitute the search committee entirely of trustees, especially when confidentiality, governance alignment, or institutional dynamics warrant it. Whatever the structure, the board president should appoint the search chair and work collaboratively—with input from the head of school and key trustees—to identify committee members who reflect the school’s diversity of thought, experience, and perspective.

Will there be an advisory committee?

An advisory committee allows for a more inclusive process, though the process should be managed intentionally to ensure it is productive. We have found ways to put advisory committees to excellent use in the search process. These groups serve in a strictly advisory capacity, providing feedback on the school’s priorities, cultural identity, and community hopes. When advisory committees are clear in the scope of their role, it is a productive and positive part of the process.

Will internal candidates be considered?

This is a critical decision that must be made early and explicitly by the board. If internal candidates are eligible, we will ensure that the process is equitable and consistent across all candidates—whether internal or external. Questions of visibility, confidentiality, and evaluation should be addressed upfront by the board of trustees to ensure fairness and transparency.

Should the board advise the search committee on the number and diversity of the candidates who make the interview round?

Some searches have faltered—or restarted—because the board felt the search committee did not present a sufficiently strong or diverse pool of semifinalists. It is reasonable and wise for the board to provide guidance at the outset about the kind of pool it expects to see. This guidance should include a commitment to diversity in identity, background, experience, and leadership style, aligned with the school’s mission and values. Developing candidate pools of exceptional, mission-aligned leaders is a hallmark of our search practice.

Who leads compensation and contract discussions?

While search committees evaluate leadership readiness and cultural fit, trustees are responsible for setting and managing the financial and contractual parameters of the hire. Educational Directions recommends that the board establish a compensation subcommittee early in the search, charged with benchmarking competitive salaries and benefits. We encourage the search and board chairs to prepare a term sheet to share with finalists during the final interviews stage of the search.

How will trustees stay informed and engaged?

Trustees—beyond those serving on the search committee—must remain informed throughout the search. Once finalists are selected, all trustees should have access to application materials and an opportunity to meet the candidates during campus visits. Their impressions and insights, shared thoughtfully with the search committee, can offer valuable perspective without undermining the search committee’s primary responsibility. We have combined options for in person and Zoom gatherings to engage trustees in meeting the finalists.

In Closing: Governance is Not Optional

At its core, the search for a head of school is a governance responsibility. Trustees cannot—and should not—outsource the essential work of defining the leadership role, establishing the search structure, and ensuring a process that is inclusive, rigorous, and mission-aligned.

When the board steps back, ambiguity often rushes in. When trustees lead with clarity, collaboration, and a deep understanding of their role, schools are far more likely to find and retain heads who thrive in the role and lead the institution forward.

Chris co-founded Educational Directions in 1986 following a career as an administrator, teacher, coach and dorm parent in independent schools. He has served as lead consultant to 150 head of school searches at schools throughout the country. Chris is a past trustee of Cate School (California) and the Peddie School (New Jersey) as well as several non-profit organizations within his local community, including New Bedford's Alma del Mar Charter Schools.