

## **Strategic Search: Designing and Executing Senior Administrative Searches with Intention**

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Each time a school initiates a search for a senior administrator—whether a division head, CFO, academic dean, or enrollment leader—there is an opportunity to do more than fill a position. A well-designed search process can be a moment of strategic alignment, community engagement, and institutional growth. Too often, though, these searches are reactive or rushed, missing the chance to bring clarity, coherence, and care to one of the most critical decisions a head of school will make.

As search consultants, we've seen firsthand that a strategic, well-executed process can yield more than a great hire. It can strengthen the leadership team, clarify roles and responsibilities, elevate the school's profile among educators nationwide, and build trust across the community. Below are some essential practices and guiding principles for schools looking to make the most of their next senior administrative search.

### **Start with Structure: Define Roles and Responsibilities**

The most effective searches begin with clarity about who owns the decision and how input will be gathered. In independent schools, the hiring decision for senior administrators typically rests with the head of school. That must be explicitly named from the outset.

At the same time, an advisory committee can play a vital role in shaping the process, surfacing community needs, and providing insight during the evaluation of candidates. This group—ideally composed of trusted faculty and staff, a parent or trustee when appropriate, and at least one current administrator—should be diverse in role, perspective, and lived experience. The advisory committee's purpose is not to reach consensus or vote, but to serve as informed advisors who enrich the head's understanding.

### **Begin with Inquiry: Understand the Needs, the Role, and the Team**

Before posting a job description, schools should take time to assess the needs of the community, the scope of the role, and the composition and dynamics of the leadership team. What are the jobs to be done in this position? What's changing in the school, and what challenges or opportunities will the next leader face?

This period of inquiry may include listening sessions with faculty, staff, and parents; a review of current and aspirational organizational charts; and candid conversation with the head and board about strategic priorities. In our experience, it is not unusual to discover that what was once a dean of faculty might now be better designed as a director of professional learning and organizational growth. Role clarity, aligned with school needs, is the foundation of a successful search.

## **Cast a Wide and Inclusive Net**

Building a strong and diverse candidate pool requires more than a well-written posting. It requires a proactive approach to outreach. That includes advertising across a range of networks—including those that specifically reach leaders of color, LGBTQ+ educators, and others historically underrepresented in independent school leadership—and personal outreach to talented educators who may not be actively looking.

Strong candidates often come through relationships and referrals, so it's worth investing time in making calls, sending personalized messages, and leveraging both institutional and consultant networks. And when a school has a compelling story to tell—about its mission, values, team, and hopes for the future—candidates are more likely to take interest.

### **Design a Rigorous and Equitable Evaluation Process**

Too often, schools rely on gut feeling or unstructured interviews to evaluate candidates. A more effective and equitable process includes:

- A clear and transparent process timeline with defined stages: screening, interviews, finalist visits, and decision.
- Behavioral interview techniques that ask candidates to share specific examples of past leadership experiences, rather than hypothetical answers.
- Consistent, criterion-based evaluation tools aligned to the needs identified earlier in the process. These can guide note-taking and feedback from interviewers.
- Reference checks that go beyond the listed references, including backchannel conversations that provide a fuller picture of a candidate's leadership style and impact.
- Bias awareness and mitigation, including a conversation or training session for the advisory committee about common evaluation biases and how to recognize and interrupt them.

## **Make Finalist Visits Meaningful—for Candidates and the Community**

Finalist visits are about more than evaluation—they're also about mutual discernment and setting the candidate up for success. Candidates should leave with a clear sense of the school's culture, challenges, and aspirations. Faculty, staff, and community members should feel they were able to engage meaningfully and share their feedback with care.

### **Schedule visits that allow for substantive interaction, not just whirlwind tours.**

Include time with potential peers, with affinity group representatives if appropriate, and with students. And make sure someone is designated to support the candidate throughout the visit—navigating logistics, offering context, and being a genuine host.

## **Guide Discernment and Support a Strong Start**

Once the finalist interviews conclude, the head—often in consultation with trusted advisors—must make a decision grounded in the school's needs and future direction.



Feedback from the advisory committee and broader community should inform, but not override, this decision.

Once the hire is made, the work is not over. A strong onboarding and transition plan is critical. That includes role clarity, early wins, relationship-building, and honest conversation about what success in the first year looks like. It also includes support for the head and leadership team as they integrate a new leader into the group.

### **Closing Thoughts**

When done well, a senior administrative search is not just a staffing move—it's a strategic act. With clarity, structure, and care, schools can ensure that their search process strengthens the institution, not just the team. And in a time when leadership matters more than ever, that's an opportunity worth embracing.

*Trained in Biomedical Engineering at Brown University), Meera quickly realized she was more excited about having an impact in the classroom than at the lab bench and began her career in independent schools—and hasn't looked back since. Meera's approach to search work combines her beliefs in the centrality of relationships with the value of well-designed systems. With Educational Directions, Meera partners with schools on senior administrative searches where the focus is on strategic improvement and leadership that makes a difference.*