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Schools are tested by lack of managers

Superintendent openings frustrate many districts

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December 2, 2007

In Barrington, a new school superintendent is trying to learn the ropes while standing up to a tide of e-mails, meetings and 12-hour-plus days.

Down the road in Elgin, a school board searches for a chief to lead the state's second-largest district, while in Niles, the superintendent wraps up his third and final year as he grooms his successor.

In Illinois, 25 districts, including Elgin, have interim superintendents this year. Of the state's 871 districts, 159 have new leaders, compared with about 80 a decade ago, officials said.

Experts expect another 100 or more new openings will be filled next year.

Across the nation, school boards face increasingly shorter lists of interested candidates for current openings, and districts must pay more for top-tier superintendents because they are in such high demand.

Generous early-retirement packages are partly to blame, but many professionals say the crushing demands of the job -- from harassing calls from parents to pressure to meet federal education mandates -- have become a major deterrent and have led to turnover.

A job opening in Illinois or nearly anywhere else in the country might have generated 100 or more applicants a decade or two ago, search consultants said. Now, that same job, paying six figures, might draw two dozen candidates.

The immediate future doesn't necessarily promise a flood of new candidates either. The average age of superintendents continues to increase, hovering at 55, the highest ever, according to a national study released in September by the American Association of School Administrators.

More than 39 percent said they expect to retire in five years, the study found; they also reported higher levels of stress.

"The job is, in many ways, not as attractive as it once was," AASA Executive Director Paul D. Houston said.

In Illinois, the high turnover rate means that nearly all of the state's superintendents have moved or retired since



2000 and may do so again within the next several years, said Brent Clark, director of the Illinois Association of School Administrators. Such change, he said, can have a direct effect on students.

"I think any time that you have leadership turnover at the rate we're having it, you have continuity broken, consistency broken," Clark said. "When you have that constant turnover, you never have a grounded operation."

New, bigger challenges

Superintendents have always put in 60 to 80 hours weekly.

They must not only run tornado drills, but also practice lockdowns in an age of random campus violence. There is also a greater demand to be involved in the community, with more people, from bloggers to community groups, second-guessing their decisions.

Today's academic environment is more competitive than in years past, and initiatives such as the federal No Child Left Behind law have put an even greater premium on high test scores and achievement.

Now, superintendents are viewed almost like coaches who are blamed, rightly or wrongly, for their team's success or failure, said Chris Koch, superintendent of the State Board of Education.

More are new to the job

Proviso Township High School District 209, with low-performing schools in Maywood and Hillside, has had three superintendents since 2000. Robert Libka, the district's current chief, served as interim superintendent in 2005 and came back to the top role this year on a one-year contract. Proviso Board President Chris Welch has watched the candidate pool grow shallow, causing more districts to choose internal candidates or first-time chiefs. Of this year's crop of new superintendents, 101 are first-timers.

"The lack of qualified candidates for superintendent means pickings are very slim," Welch said. "In this day and age, when school districts are struggling, superintendents are getting blamed for things in their control and not in their control."

The search for a new superintendent in Elgin-based School District U-46 has just begun, but the shortage affected the last search, in 2001, when the board advertised a salary of about \$180,000, board member Karen Carney said. No one applied so the board boosted the pay to \$200,000; a few resumes trickled in.

Board members interviewed 13 applicants over nine months. Two candidates accepted and then turned down the offer before Connie Neale accepted the post for \$200,000 to start in 2002.

After negotiating a salary increase to about \$262,000 this year, Neale went on sick leave in the fall and will retire in February. Her salary and benefits, including health care and insurance, now total more than \$405,000.

The new superintendent can expect plenty of public scrutiny in the wake of Neale's negotiations, Carney said.

Despite being in the public spotlight, many who hold the job say they feel isolated. "You are the bottom line, and it's a very lonely position," said Mary Jayne Broncato, the Elgin district's interim superintendent.

Ken Arndt of Carpentersville-based Community Unit School District 300 knows how a school administrator can instantly become the center of a national controversy. In 1999, while Arndt served as superintendent in Decatur, his school board expelled several black students for a fight at a football game, a move that generated

demonstrations and a visit by Rev. Jesse Jackson.

Controversy takes toll

Arndt said he struggled as the controversy raged on for more than a year, even after a judge upheld the school board's decision. His doctor put him on blood-pressure medication, which he still takes.

To cope with stress, Arndt works out regularly -- always before school board meetings. He also makes a point to spend time in the classroom.

"If you sit in the office all day long, answering people who complain, you are going to get a very cynical view of life," he said.

Assistant superintendents or top administrators within large districts often resist moving up because of the potential headaches, many said.

Nanciann Gatta, 35, assistant superintendent of human resources in Niles Township District 219, is among those who think the job is worthwhile. She will receive a \$28,000 increase in salary when she replaces Supt. Neil Codell, 55, who retires at the end of this year.

"It's an obligation for you to step up to the plate and take your turn," Gatta said. "I think we need to give back what we preach to our students, which is community leadership."

Mentoring programs growing

School districts are addressing the shortage of superintendents with mentoring programs and by hiring qualified leaders from the military and other occupations. Search firms also report they're tracking potential candidates more aggressively. States such as Ohio allow retired superintendents and teachers to return to school full time without the typical cap on the number of days they can work.

About half of the first-time superintendents in Illinois are enrolled in an ongoing mentoring program, established in July through the state administrators association in response to the shortage and high turnover. The program offers lessons on topics such as school finances, podcasting and public relations.

Tom Leonard, in his first year as superintendent of Barrington-based Community Unit School District 220, said the state program and another based in Lake County have given him invaluable practical advice.

Predawn jogging and a recent lunch with 2nd-graders help too.

"It's uplifting," Leonard said of time with students. "It's cheap therapy."

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