

School Reform Commission

Criteria for next SDP Leader

MODERATOR REPORTS

Charter School Leaders
February 22, 2012

Group 1

Moderators: Harris Sokoloff and Ashley Brindisi

Moderator's description of the group:

The group consisted of ten charter school leaders – CEOs and board presidents, two of whom were female – and one leader from the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools. Two of the participants were African-American and one Hispanic. The conversation was rich and lively, with interesting areas of agreement and disagreement – both in terms of beliefs about how any leader of the public school district might relate to charter schools and in terms of what one might look for in a leader of the public schools.

Hopes and Fears for next leader of the SDP:

Hopes: (Note: no fears were mentioned)

- Leader is inclusive and embraces variety of schools
- Leader has common sense to lead the SDP
- Five (5) years from now the student experience is better than it is today.
- The new leader is a servant leader
- The next leader has deep familiarity and commitment to Philadelphia and its children
- Leads with vision of what excellent education should be
- Next leader is able to get the right number of students to each school so each can achieve to his/her fullest
- Is committed to empowering communities and schools in education; that the focus is on what works and empowering people to achieve it.
- Will seriously subscribe to the notion that all of this is about children
- Has a vision for public school choice.

Parts of the Framework that Make sense to participants, and why:

- Participants thought all criteria make sense individually and as a set, but are also too general and vague, and that is an overall concern with the criteria. The real issue is how

the person demonstrates all of this – first in their past record, second in the application/interview process, third once in the job.

- The issue is: “How are the criteria made real?”
- How are they prepared for and passionate for this job, for the job of leading the School District of Philadelphia. They should be passionate not for the superintendency in general but for the superintendency in Philadelphia.

1 – A commitment to education and an overall passion to ensure learning for all children.

- What matters here is the person’s track record, how that person made and described past decisions. It’s not just about making the hard decisions, but making good decisions. And we can only know that by their impact on children and children’s learning.
- Need someone tenacious and with a sense of justice (including equity and equality).
- Should be both data driven, and data proven.
- Should push limits to reach new goals.

#5 –Embraces the idea of a portfolio of schools and advocates for high-quality schools regardless of the provider (district or charter)

- Track record is also important here.
- Needs to be committed to diversity of schools and will help foster the development of diversity.
- They must show leadership to hold accountable (i.e. “remove”) those individuals and schools who are not meeting standards. Doing this for public schools that are not charters will increase the new leader’s ability to do that for public charters as well.

#6 – A relationship builder who is able to build creative partnership with numerous external stakeholders to bring resources to individual schools and groups of schools

- Building teams and relationships is crucial to getting the job done.
- These relationships (and teams) should include relationships with charter school leaders as part of the team that supports student success across schools and across types of schools.
- Ability to work through and build strong relationships to support children’s learning is important.
- Balanced focus on relationships and success is important. The balance is about being tenacious for results.
- Committed to excellence for kids – and relationships in service of that.

#7 – Ability to rethink the district’s service model, moving closer to autonomy for individual schools and decreased centralization

- Must be impatient and angry with the status quo.

Overall:

- There's a sense of strategy for the next leader (albeit not a very strong sense) as the leader who will advocate for and create increased choices for parents. Advocate for fair, equitable, transparent access to high quality choices for all parents.
- Know how to manage and lead change.

Parts of the Framework about which participants are concerned, and why:

- May be too much for one person to do the first year.
- Overall:
 - We can't evaluate the criteria until we understand the limits (fiscal, political, legal, contractual, other) imposed on the job.
 - Except for number 7, don't see criteria reflecting the urgency of the status quo.
 - Lack of a clear strategy causes the criteria to be overly general. Developing an explicit and public strategy is the next step.

1 – A commitment to education and an overall passion to ensure learning for all children.

- “Committed to education, excellence for all” is nice language, but needs to be a vision that comes with that. Otherwise this “concern” is not actionable.

#5 –Embraces the idea of a portfolio of schools and advocates for high-quality schools regardless of the provider (district or charter)

- Instead of “idea” should be about embracing a vision for uniting schools and mutual support for and from all kinds of schools.
- There's no mention of money:
 - There's a “bloated infrastructure” that gets in the way of quality for students.
 - Some argued that the District should unload some of that infrastructure (e.g., transportation, food services) to use more resources for students.
 - Others thought that very unrealistic.
 - Need an ability to handle one of the greatest fiscal crises in history and triage what's coming.
 - Need to “right size” schools based on resources available.
- No mention of the unions with represented employees in Philadelphia Schools.
 - Unless the role of the unions is redefined, that will become one of the limitations on leadership
 - Need to get the unions more focused on delivering quality instruction.

What difference it would make if the successful candidate is/is not from Philadelphia, and why:

- It doesn't matter where they are from, what matters most in that they view this job as the most important one.
 - Rooted commitment – where “rooted” means they have a sense of being/becoming rooted here; not transient, but consider this their home.

- Need to know the history of the community, of the School District of Philadelphia and how that history plays out today.
- Someone from Philadelphia should have an advantage, but at the end of the day, we need the best person no matter where they are from.
 - Someone ready to “roll up sleeves” and ready to work with the variety of stakeholders to be successful.
 - One criteria of success is that the district becomes so strong that the SRC is no longer necessary and the community can take back that policy control.
- As part of the interview process, they should know who they will have on their leadership team; and if not who, then at least what kind of team they will need to be successful.
 - They should value insiders as well as outsiders.
 - They need a real sense of how administration works and how to manage and lead administration.
 - Know how to hit the ground running and learning.
 - Have a sense of how they will get done what needs doing.
 - They should have a sense of how to use the SRC to move the district.

Group 2

Moderators: Ted Enoch

Moderator's description of the group:

The small group discussion this afternoon was conducted by a dynamic collection of Philadelphia Charter School principals, board chairs and board members. The group was comprised of roughly ten to twelve charter school leaders, with members representing schools from around the city. The group included African Americans, Asian Americans and Arab Americans, if not more ethnicities that may have gone unnoticed, while roughly half of the group was comprised of white men. The group really warmed to the task after moving through a bit of initial reluctance. Most saw this as a critical opportunity to dramatically improve relationships between the school district and charter schools.

Hopes and Fears for next leader of the SDP:

Hope:

- That the next leader and the district realize that we are all in this together...
- I hope s/he is a Philadelphian
- That we can find someone with passion to work with all, while continually keeping children at the center.
- That there are more than a few mere programs serving as the platform for success.
- That we can move to a "post-oppositional world;". oOne where the district and charter schools are really working together.
- That we can find a leader who is focused on children while adept at securing financial backing for the district.
- That we realize what is needed is a strong and expert team. One person cannot deliver on all areas of job description/district needs...
- That the new leader will have political courage -- strength and fortitude to make difficult decisions...
- That s/he will keep our children in mind with no other (hidden or political) agenda...
- That the district learns to collaborate (with charters and other stakeholders)...
- That the district moves to become a workplace culture of learning. That we can create an environment where we can learn, share and spread best practices...

Fear

- That s/he will have "messy expectations" that can't be realized...

Parts of the Framework that Make sense to participants, and why:

This group generally found all or most of the criteria to be thoughtful and important for future success. The group was quick, analytical and thorough as nearly all of the criteria were discussed and seen as valuable. In the end, the group started moving towards a **team, or group approach**, as they perceived the job was so vast and huge. The following are the responses to

the leadership criteria the group offered, more-or-less in the order in which the group addressed issues during our conversation:

#2 – Knowledge and capacity to run a large enterprise or organization

- Fiscal management must be explicit and more strongly stated. It cannot be inferred or assumed, and thus it is not stated strongly enough...

#1 – A commitment to education and an overall passion to ensure learning for all children,
vs.

#2 – Knowledge and capacity to run a large enterprise or organization

- One board member felt the candidate truly needed his/her strength to be centered in (1), and further, that real educational/teaching experience needed to be evidenced, not simply “commitment.”
- Some in the group echoed this concern. Others were much more interested in a manager with proven fiscal management success and that a team could address any pedagogical concerns...
- There was no consensus at this point of the conversation and the group was fairly divided.

#2 – Knowledge and capacity to run a large enterprise or organization

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#4 – A team-builder able to coordinate and motivate a diverse group of managers and educators of different types of schools in different types of settings:

- Another participant then discussed the virtues of a leader drawing strengths from and creating **results and outcomes**
- For the first of many times, both the recognition of for **clear outcomes** and the need for **multiple forms of expertise** (that no one person is likely to possess) **achieved through a team approach** began to drive and inform the conversation.
- Next, again, a hybrid of needs came forth: “We need someone who can help educate our students. They must be truly about the students,” coupled with, “s/he must be able to bring partners to the table which relates to criteria 6. They must be able to move best practices and diverse practices forward in the district.
- “They need to be in tune, in sync, with the SRC, particularly concerning criteria 5, and must have leadership to make tough decisions (related to outcomes and underperforming schools), s/he needs *political courage*. When pressed to define political courage, a description of “the need for clear and consistent evaluation, tied to clear and consistently named outcomes and expectations guiding tough decisions... Our schools and students need this... The SRC must have a clear direction that the leader can carry out and execute. This alignment is critical...The leader will have the agility to carry out and move forward the agenda... And the SRC will have to let go of ego and allow the leader to move swiftly forward with real expertise...” At this point some other characteristics of leadership, other qualities that were beyond the stated 9 criteria were described and these show up later in the report.

#5 - Embraces the idea of a portfolio of schools and advocates for high-quality schools regardless of the provider (district or charter)

- At this point of the conversation, talk about a divided and fractured history/relationship within the district as to criteria 5 emerged... Concern about leadership – overt or covert – that was still opposed to this direction was shared by several members of the group...
- “There’s no going back from centralization...” In the past “not all leaders were bought into 5 and 7...”
- We must work together...” Harmony with 5 and 7 is critical. We must forge a productive relationship...
- How can we get beyond the media (and sometimes district’s story) about charter schools taking money from the district? Why can’t the charter schools be seen as an academic resource?
- Again, we should be appreciative of what everyone is doing... Simple accountability for those schools that aren’t working. All systems are tied together. The number of seats in our schools will be appropriately tied to educational outcomes.
- In the past, it is clear that the district did not see charter schools as a viable alternative. Just look at the office of charter schools in the district. What, are there one or two staff members there working now? Nearly 25% of our students are in charter schools and we have one (or two) people working in that office? This clearly shows that the district has not taken charter schools seriously in the past.
- Though some said there are signs that it is getting better, but improved clarity is key. Clarity on expectations and outcomes is key. Do what you say you will do. It’s simple. If you say you will do something, just do it... Things have been far too foggy for far too long...
- Create fair and simple accountability with transparency related to outcomes and goals. Resources tied to clearly stated outcomes... District understands this. Schools understand this. Community understands this.
- A consistent and clear effort needs to be made to evaluate charter schools that remains consistent and evenly applied. No surprises please. An endless series of surprise hoops to jump through is not serving anyone.
- How can the district become a learning environment? How can we move best practices forward for schools, classrooms and teachers?
- The conversation then again moved to a clear, productive relationship with the SRC and charter schools, one that was clear, aligned and results oriented...
- Then, again, the question came forth about whether the leader/superintendent needs to have had practical teaching/school leadership experience to drive and achieve results. Some felt the practical experience was “paramount.”
- Others talked about the clarity of a shared system, where the leader is a great communicator as key.
- Others saw the need to be a great educator and communicator.
- And again, the team concept came forth as a way to meet solve these competing needs...
- Then the need to really understand Philadelphia, our district, schools, neighborhoods and political systems came forth. That a professional, working understanding of Philadelphia is critical for success...

- And again, the need for an “aligned system, one based on clarity and outcomes is critical. We need to achieve trust, where we can rely on what is said and done in the district. This is not present now...”
- Though several in the group saw a reason to be optimistic with this new direction for the district at the moment.

#8 - Ability to influence the public, business community, higher education community, and legislative leaders on the value of public education and the commitments necessary to achieve notable progress

- Many saw the resource scarcity as a key issue facing the district, and that talent and results need to connect to this area of securing resources, and then again, resources being allocated through clear results and expectations is needed.

Parts of the Framework about which participants are concerned, and why:

- Leader must be knowledgeable, familiar, and sensitive to our various, diverse communities and students.
- Safety has to be a key issue for our schools.
- Where is the attention to ethics in this document? We just had a large scale, cheating scandal relating to our standardized testing. This is critical.
- We need a vibrant, excited, positive, social and visible leader who embraces Philadelphia and our schools. “A Michael Nutter type” leader who is everywhere, who believes that this is the best place and best job ever.
- Must be politically savvy and effective.
- Can we name sports, arts and extra-curricular activities as part of excellence in education and as part of the clear results we are looking for? These experiences help build better young people.
- If we achieve results across schools throughout the district, meeting our outcomes and expectations, the superintendent should not be bonused. This is his/her job.
- The leader and his/her team must be able to deal with all of these issues.
- How can our leader be a true teacher/educator and help others in the district to grow and meet all of these criteria?

Other important ideas:

- Outcome, outcomes, outcomes!
- ***Characteristics critical for success:***
 - A quick learner, with a sponge for a brain...
 - A real listener and great communicator...
 - Passionate, excited leader...
 - Track record of being a team player, of getting expertise from key team members like their CFO...
 - We need someone with humility.

- Success for our schools is one of the key building blocks for success for our city. Good schools will bring good companies and jobs to the region.
- Leadership really begins at the top. Our school/system requires a world-class leader.

Summary reflection:

A real and powerful need emerged during the conversations, a need that over and over again called to get beyond oppositional methods and communications (between Charters Schools and the District) to a relationship of accord and clear, consistent communications, particularly communications, decisions and policies that were tied to **consistently named and applied outcomes**. This theme of the need for clearly stated outcomes come up over and over again during our 90-minute conversation. In the end, many were able to reach at least some form of “cautious” optimism if not outright hope. Many found this tied to the two following characteristics being identified as crucial leadership criteria for the next superintendent: **(5) Embraces the idea of a portfolio of schools and advocates for high-quality schools regardless of the provider (district or charter); and (7) Ability to rethink the district’s service model, moving closer to autonomy for individual schools and decreased centralization:**