

EducationBoardPartners

great boards. great schools.

Succession Planning

Creating a Plan for Leadership Transitions

Overview

School/district leadership transitions are inevitable and pivotal points in a school's/district's life cycle. Leaders burn out, move, and change careers. On occasion, they leave abruptly in the midst of a school year. Sometimes boards must proactively replace the leader—either for poor performance or because the fit is no longer optimal. Succession plans are critical to a board's effectiveness in leading communities through leadership transitions. Despite their importance, CEO/Superintendent succession plans are about as common as a mid-summer snowstorm, but this shouldn't be the case.

A survey of 400 charter school leaders found that 71 percent planned to leave their school within five years.¹ *Are you listening, board members? Chances are your school leader is planning to leave in the next 60 months!* Nevertheless, just half of school leaders reported that their boards have prepared school leader succession plans. Most boards prioritize other responsibilities and continue on as if their school leader will never leave, avoiding the conversation completely.² But boards must prepare for this occurrence, as it *will* happen.

What Is a Succession Plan Exactly?

Succession plans are written instructions outlining the steps a charter school or district will take to address a change in leadership. While there are many frameworks for creating a succession plan, they generally include two main components:

1. Emergency succession strategy: Action plan used when the leader is suddenly unable to perform their job

¹Christine Campbell, "You're Leaving? Succession and Sustainability in Charter Schools," National Charter School Research Project, University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education, Nov. 2010, http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_ICs_Succession_Nov10_web_0.pdf.

² Ibid.

EducationBoardPartners

great boards. great schools.

2. Planned succession strategy: Action plan used when boards have advance notice of the upcoming transition

Once a plan is created, it should be revisited regularly for updating and familiarity, not packed away until needed (which could be several years after creation).

Contents of a Succession Plan

Specifically, succession plans document how to:

- Identify a strong applicant pool
- Maintain the school's/district's day-to-day operations
- Identify an interim leader
- Create a job description
- Conduct the new CEO/Superintendent search
- Communicate the change
- Set the stage for the new leader's success
- Link to the strategic plan

Identify a Strong Applicant Pool

Successful leaders take deliberate steps to develop the next leader, who is often a member of their leadership team. The succession plan should briefly outline the current strategy for grooming potential future school/district leaders to create a "pipeline" to the CEO/Superintendent role.

The leader should share their recommendations for a successor with the board in the event of a leadership emergency. Additionally, the leader should communicate this recommendation to the designated successor so that they are not taken by surprise, and this potential successor can prepare to interview with the board for that leadership role.

Some experts warn against recording a potential successor's name as—with the passage of time and circumstance—another unnamed candidate may be better suited for the role when

EducationBoardPartners

great boards. great schools.

the need arises. To guard against this conflict, the board should be vigilant in updating the plan regularly to reflect its latest thinking, minimizing this risk. The CEO/Superintendent should update their board on his/her recommendation for succession as this recommendation evolves.

Maintain the School's/District's Day-to-Day Operations

Districts and charter schools must maintain a steady state of operations at all times—even when the leader is suddenly unable to perform their job. Succession plans inform boards on how to “keep the trains running” so student learning is uninterrupted. To that end, the succession plan should include the leader’s instructions on the district’s/school’s daily operations. As much as possible, the leader should document the information they rely on in their post, including who has access to bank accounts, who holds passcodes and other confidential information, and who can keep the district/school running smoothly.

Many districts/schools have a master reference file or binder that stores this information in one place. Review EBP’s sample template that details information your school board may need for reference.

Identify an Interim Leader

In the event of an emergency, boards will need to identify an interim leader until either the leader returns to their post or a more in-depth search process can be launched to permanently replace the position. The succession plan should outline the course of action boards will pursue to identify that interim leader—most likely tapping the district’s/school’s leadership pipeline—and include a job description for the interim leader.

Communicate this part of the plan to the district/school leadership team before there is an emergency. If there is a leadership emergency, the team will know there is a plan, minimizing uncertainty amongst the staff.

Create a Job Description

Leadership transitions are valuable opportunities to think carefully and strategically about the skills and experience the board is seeking for in the next leader. Charter schools are often founded by leaders who are incredible visionaries that break down barriers and build initial structures that operationalize the mission of the school. However, as a school becomes more stable, it may need a leader with expertise in sustainability and expansion.

EducationBoardPartners

great boards. great schools.

As in any industry, no one leader has all of the right skills for the full lifecycle of the organization. School boards should continue to track current school performance relative to the school's long-term goals. Creating a job description that reflects these goals helps boards to recruit leaders with the skills necessary to guide schools and students to the highest levels.

Conduct the New CEO/Superintendent Search

The board must decide who of its members will spearhead the search for a new leader and whether a committee or a search firm will conduct the actual exploration. Be sure to include answers to the following questions in your succession plan:

- How will the full board be involved in the search?
- Who on the board will lead the search?
- Will there be a search committee? If so, what is the specific charge of that committee and who will join it?
- Will the board need to engage a search firm?
- What is the plan for reviewing internal candidates?
- What is the strategy for negotiating the compensation package?

Communicate the Change

Communicating effectively with key staff, students, parents, charter authorizers, funders, partners, and the community about this change in leadership is extremely important. Identify what kinds of communication (e.g., press releases, personal calls) are best for each constituency, which persons or groups should be contacted first, and who within the district/school or on the board executes the communication strategy. The type of message will depend on whether this is a sudden or planned transition, but in either case, laying out the details to be shared and considering all that are affected by the situation will help avoid unnecessary and distracting mishaps or mistakes.

EducationBoardPartners

great boards. great schools.

“Leadership succession planning is an ongoing practice that is focused on defining an organization’s strategic vision, identifying the leadership and managerial skills necessary to carry out that vision, and recruiting, developing, and retaining talented individuals who have or can develop those skills.” The Greater Milwaukee Foundation

Set the Stage for the New Leader’s Success

The board should outline the systems and supports it plans to use to ensure the new leader’s success. Include the commitment to the CEO/Superintendent having to have goals, an effective evaluation process, opportunities for professional development, and open lines of communication with the board.

Link to the Strategic Plan

Finally, a succession plan must be a part of the district’s/school’s ongoing strategic planning process to ensure that a leadership change keeps the district/school on track to reach its long-term goals.