

Austin Independent School District

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Testimony to the Texas Senate Committee on Education On Senate Bill 503 by Senator Kevin Eltife

*Relating to the required public notice of the name of each finalist for the position of superintendent
of a public school district.*

March 3, 2009

Good morning Madam Chair and members of the Committee, my name is Mark Williams, and I serve as President of the Board of Trustees of the Austin Independent School District. I am here today to testify on Senate Bill 503 and serve as a resource to you based on my District's very recent experience with the superintendent search process.

As you know, the single most important job that any school board trustee is elected to perform is that of hiring, monitoring, and sometimes firing the district superintendent. Public input into the selection process is guaranteed by the very nature of having a publicly elected board hire superintendents.

Relationship between Superintendent, Board, and Community

While school districts are certainly part of the public sector, we need to run them like a business to some degree. The superintendent is the Chief Executive Officer of a school district. In Austin ISD, this individual is responsible for overseeing almost a billion dollar business with a staff of over 11,000 individuals, over 83,000 students, 115 district campuses and facilities, and a complex transportation system, just to name a few. If a corporation of this size and caliber were seeking a new CEO or another senior level executive, they would not necessarily communicate to the public or their shareholders all candidates. This becomes even more complex in a school district. While many CEOs answer to a board of directors, school superintendents also answer to the expectations of their communities. If that community and board learned that their superintendent had applied for a job elsewhere, it would compromise the trust they had in that individual and cause them to question that individual's commitment to the students in that community.

Further, if the staff in your existing district thinks you are looking for a job or are not long for that district, there can be less motivation to follow the superintendent's direction, since there may be a feeling of just waiting them out until their likely

departure. In addition, grantors or foundations may be less likely to provide external support to a district if they think that the superintendent may be leaving. Going back to your home district if you turn out to be the “loser” in a superintendent search in another district can undermine your authority. So often, a superintendent is not only trying to protect their existing position, but also trying to protect their district and the programs and initiatives underway in that district.

To belabor this point a moment, I have had the opportunity to visit with many folks over the last few weeks who indicated that they didn’t necessarily tell their employer when they decided to interview for a different job. I don’t know if any of the members of this committee have ever changed jobs in the private sector, but I personally have found this to be true.

Quality of Candidates

A board’s top priority is to attract the most qualified pool of candidates possible for the position of district superintendent. A strong, diverse pool of applicants is undoubtedly the best way to hire a leader of the highest caliber. The role of the superintendent requires a specific set of skills and expertise that by nature limit those who are qualified to hold such a position.

Requiring that individuals who may not ultimately be selected for the position of superintendent to disclose their names and candidacy, particularly if that person is a sitting superintendent in another district, will discourage many of the most qualified from applying in the first place. Due to the potential risk to the delicate relationship with their current board and community, they simply may not apply, or may withdraw their name from consideration if it might be made public too soon.

In the public sector, I do believe that our default position should be open and transparent government. It seems many desire for the public to know who the candidates for superintendent might be. It is natural that the public and media speculate and are curious. However, I don’t believe that in this unique particular case it is conducive to hiring the very best superintendent for the process to be too transparent. If the transparency causes the quality of the talent pool to be diluted, I think we are doing a disservice to the students in our district.

Public Input and Accountability

Some proponents for a more open and transparent superintendent hiring process have pointed out that police and fire chiefs are often hired through a very open process that allows for public input on several specific candidates. The difference with police chiefs

and fire chiefs are that those positions are hired by a city manager, not a publicly elected board. And most likely, the candidates for such a position report to the City Manager or another high level professional, not a publicly elected board.

The public should, and does, hold its school board accountable through public elections. If members of community are unhappy with the choices that a school board makes or the process that was used, they can hold us accountable on Election Day.

In Austin, we solicited a large amount of public input on the front end of the process as the community helped us craft a job description and candidate profile so that the Board knew exactly what qualities to look for in a candidate. Nine community forums were conducted, along with 18 specific focus groups, and over 20 individual interviews with stakeholders. We learned through this process that members of the public were looking for a multitude of qualities to exist in the next superintendent. In addition, as a board, we knew that there were some additional attributes, not heavily mentioned by public, that were also essential. A superintendent has to have the character, integrity, core beliefs and values to make decisions in situations that we cannot yet even anticipate or imagine. Also, due to the nature of school board governance, there has to be chemistry between board members and the superintendent.

One key characteristic that was often mentioned was that the complexity of Austin ISD required an individual with meaningful superintendent experience. The superintendency is a unique position of leadership, and local school boards are elected to serve as the governing body for a school district. Limiting local control and a board's ability to conduct the search and hiring process in the manner that best suits their particular district would be detrimental to our ability to perform the job we were elected to do.