

Norfolk faces hurdles in recruiting for superintendent

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NORFOLK

The imminent departure of Superintendent Samuel King - the third Norfolk Public Schools chief to leave in five years - has community members wondering how to find a leader who sticks.

School Board members and King announced Wednesday they had a "mutual agreement" to end his contract. King will leave with a year's pay and medical benefits, just months after the board voted to extend his contract through 2018.

An interim superintendent will be named before King's last day on April 30; the board has not outlined how it will seek his permanent replacement.

"My concern is, who is going to want the job?" said Norfolk parent Vicky Manugo Greco, a founder of education advocacy group Norfolk GAINS. "Three superintendents in five years?"

Norfolk faces several recruiting challenges for its top schools spot. Approximately 70 percent of its 32,000 students live in poverty. The division ranks among the worst performing in the state according to test scores. And The Pilot has revealed problems within the division, including the forfeiture of \$1.6 million in federal funding intended to help its poorest schools and students because of missed spending deadlines.

"It's unconscionable you would have to turn away almost \$2 million in federal money," said Stephen C. Jones, former Norfolk Schools superintendent.

That sends a message to potential candidates, said former Norfolk city manager Jim Oliver - a distant relationship between the superintendent and School Board and the City Council.

A successor needs to bridge that gap, he said.

"There's going to be some potholes," Oliver said. "But sometimes when there's a crisis there's a change."

Administrative upheaval in the division's top ranks, along with political tension, can influence who applies for the job, said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools. Norfolk is a member of the Washington, D.C.-based coalition of the nation's largest school divisions.

A successful search requires School Board members to clearly state what they expect of a superintendent, he said. Candidates looking at Norfolk's top schools job will likely consider the recent run of superintendents, along with upcoming School Board elections, scheduled to begin next year.

"The main question every candidate will ask themselves is 'will I succeed here?... and if so, for how long?' " Casserly said. "Nobody wants to take a job if they don't think they'll be effective."

Another factor to consider: The Board appears to be willing to pay for talent. King's salary of \$246,750 rated above the average of \$211,000 for superintendents of divisions with fewer than 50,000 students, according to a fall 2014 report issued by the Council of the Great City Schools.

Norfolk's pay compares favorably to other urban school divisions in the state. According to news reports, Richmond City Schools hired a new superintendent at the end of 2013 for a base salary of \$225,000, with performance incentives worth another \$22,500. Richmond's schools educate about 23,000 students.

While the School Board has not said how it will search for King's successor, it used national executive search firm Ray & Associates to find him and his predecessor, Richard Bentley. Bentley left after only 15 months on the job, and Ray & Associates waived its consulting fee for the division's search to replace him. (Michael Spencer served as interim superintendent between Bentley and King and left to become headmaster at the private Williams School in Ghent.)

Greco worried that casting a wide net attracts candidates more interested in padding their resumes than building a lasting relationship with the community. When she met King, she said, he didn't know what Norfolk GAINS was.

"It doesn't have to be a Norfolk native," said Greco, a lifelong Norfolk resident. "But somebody who is all-invested in the system and buys a home."

King sent a message to the community that he didn't plan to put down roots, Jones said. Last year The Pilot reported that King lived in a Norfolk apartment despite receiving \$12,000 in his contract "to partially defray the cost of selling and buying a home." The Pilot also reported last year that King had planned to interview for the top job in the Bibb County, Ga., school system.

Jones, who served as Norfolk's superintendent for about five years and retired in June 2010, said he would have offered King his perspective on various issues - but King never asked.

Another group has urged the board to conduct a national search. But that search must include plenty of input from residents, wrote Andria McClellan, a member of Better Together Norfolk, which advocates for School Board members to be elected at-large. The group asked for public forums, questionnaires, public interviews with each candidate and for each finalist's application to be posted online for review by residents.

"We can't afford to proceed with yet another search process conducted behind closed doors," said a statement by the group. "Please ensure that this process includes all of our voices."

Jones said Norfolk has a big selling point: it's primed to do everything possible to help its superintendent and schools succeed. Jones said he chose Norfolk over offers to remain in Syracuse, N.Y.; return to Baltimore; or work in Connecticut because of the reception he received in a series of community meetings during the superintendent vetting process. He felt as if the community hired him, and the School Board simply confirmed it.

Plus, Jones said, Norfolk is near the water in an urban area full of cultural institutions. Although he left the division five years ago, Jones remained in Norfolk because he fell in love with the city.

Norfolk has advantages to offer a new superintendent, Jones said - a City Council that appears committed to improving school performance, a business community willing to assist through efforts such as pushing career and technical education, and parent groups ready to volunteer time and expertise.

All that's missing is a leader.

"I think there's a great deal of potential in the division," Jones said. "But you can't get the buy-in if there's going to be a revolving door."