

EDITORIAL

Walsh's search for schools chief requires greater clarity, vision

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MAYOR WALSH is sending mixed signals about his search for a new school superintendent. During his inaugural address, he promised a national search for a “proven urban education leader.” The very next day, he told WBUR he might favor a local candidate who understands the “lay of the land.”

Walsh isn't doing the city any favors by hinting that he might prefer a local candidate. Atlanta, Baltimore, Sacramento, and other major cities are also searching for new school superintendents. Walsh could scare off good candidates by giving any indication that he is looking for anyone other than the person best capable of closing the academic achievement gap and managing a complex system, no matter where that person currently resides.

Walsh and the Boston School Committee face the immediate goal of naming a search committee capable of identifying both professional educators and nontraditional candidates, such as nonprofit heads, business leaders, and former military officials. But the administration is still in the process of finalizing the school system's objectives and priorities. At this pace, it seems unlikely that a new schools chief will be in place for the start of the next school year.

If anything, Boston should enjoy a competitive advantage in this search, according to Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools. Stability is a key reason. Boston retains superintendents for at least twice as long as the national average of three years. That's due, in part, to smooth working relations with a mayorally appointed school board and a supportive business community.

“You've got a plum position,” said Casserly. “It ought to attract the best talent in the country.”

Walsh has stated his eagerness to diversify his cabinet. He may find, however, that the pool of minority candidates — and candidates in general — is not as deep as it was a decade or so ago. In the past, said Casserly, a

superintendent search might draw as many as

150 “reasonably viable candidates.” Today, it’s more like 30. That’s all the more reason for the Walsh administration to pick up the pace — and maximize the pool.

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About 20 percent of the 66 superintendents in the Council of the Great City Schools are drawn from fields other than education. By citing the need for a “proven urban education leader,” Walsh sounds like he is ruling out a nontraditional candidate. That would be a mistake. A leader from business or another field with proven skills in labor negotiations, personnel evaluations, and managing budgets during a down economy could be best suited to the job. By including executives from other fields, the search committee could also expand the universe of minority candidates.

The Boston school department is in good hands with interim superintendent John McDonough. But that is no reason to plod along. Little was accomplished, for example, during the transition period between Walsh’s election and swearing-in. A greater sense of urgency is required to find the next leader of the Boston schools.